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Eleonora Belfiore

The social impacts of the arts – A matter of values¹

Nowadays we expect a lot from the subsidised arts. From urban regeneration to health promotion, from fighting the poverty of aspiration that apparently afflicts our youth to changing perception about one's own run down neighbourhood - the claims made in the name of participation in the arts are, in fact, extraordinary. As if the pressure of such inflated demands were not enough, in the context of the government's proclaimed belief that "what counts is what works" - and the resulting axiom that "what works ought to be counted" – the public cultural sector has been under increasing pressure to provide 'evidence' for its claimed socio-economic impacts. That the quality of this evidence has been found to be often questionable and unsatisfactory doesn't seem to have affected the popularity of the arguments, so that we seem more preoccupied with finding 'proof' of the impacts of the arts than with trying to understand them. Yet, what do we actually mean when we refer to the 'social impacts of the arts'? Do the arts really have transformative powers? And, if they do, is it not possible that the transformations they cause may have negative as well as positive consequences?

Attempting to explore these questions has been central to a 3-year research project currently underway at the Centre for Cultural Policy at Warwick University², which aims to rethink the social impacts of the arts, questioning the hidden assumptions behind the official rhetoric around the transformative effects of the arts and exploring ways in which the interaction between the individual and the arts might be better understood and assessed. The starting point for our enquiry was the observation of the loaded nature of the notion of 'impact' in the debates around public funding of the arts. In particular, we were fascinated by the extent to which the belief in the positive impacts of the arts seems to be entrenched in a shared consciousness, even though – if asked – very few people seemed able to provide a convincing explanation for the

¹ This short paper is based on a book-length paper entitled *Rethinking the Social Impacts of the Arts: A critical historical review*, which is available to download, free of charge from the Centre for Cultural Policy Studies' web site: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/theatre_s/cp/publications/centrepubs/.

² The project is led by Prof. Oliver Bennett and co-funded by the AHRC and ACE.

causes and mechanisms through which the arts might be able to induce such transformations on people. This observation inspired us to ask some fundamental questions: Where do commonly held beliefs about how the arts affect people and society come from? How have they become institutionalised in the British arts funding system and how are they reflected in the rhetoric that accompanies contemporary cultural policy-making?

A TAXONOMY OF IMPACTS

In order to tackle these questions we decided to adopt a critical-historical approach. We attempted to trace the intellectual origin of a kernel of basic beliefs and theories about the ways in which the arts can affect human beings, observing how they have changed over the centuries and in accordance with the political, cultural and intellectual climates of the time. We reviewed the writings of more than 150 writers, poets, philosophers, artists, political thinkers and scientists, covering a time span from Classical Greece to the present day. Our aim was to produce, inductively, a taxonomy of the many claims made, over time, for the powers of the arts to bring about changes - both positive *and* negative - in individuals and society.

The picture that began to emerge as we started delving into the material was one of rich complexity and controversy. The categories of impact we identified range from notions of the arts as a corrupting agent to ideas of the arts as a formative, civilising force in society; over time, the arts have been represented as both, among other things, a tool of ruthless political propaganda and a means of progressive social change or political emancipation. Many of the key themes discussed in today's public debate over the value of the arts to society have a resonance with claims made centuries, even millennia ago. Similarly, references to the impacts of the arts as a marker of the *value* of the arts (or lack thereof) have always been part and parcel of this long intellectual history. It soon became clear, however, that contemporary public debates around arts advocacy and funding give only a partial reflection of this rich body of ideas.

WHY A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE?

A historical approach to a better understanding of contemporary issues might appear questionable, and yet, there is a lot that can be learned by looking back at the points in time when ideas have crystallised into canonical views. This is not because history ought to be seen as the source of unquestionable insights or 'Truth'. In fact, the distinctive advantage of a historical approach to the understanding of the impacts of the arts is precisely that it brings to light the complex nature of the intellectual disputes that have taken place in the past around the arts and their effects. As such, it can help us problematize commonly (and often a-critically) accepted assumptions, challenge orthodox views of the effects of the interaction between people and the arts, and bring to light and examine problematic issues, which are rarely subjected to scrutiny in present-day policy debates.

For instance, our research shows that the rhetoric of the civilising powers of the arts was systematically employed, in XIX century Europe, to provide a moral justification for the colonial enterprise. The image of the torch-bearing European imperial powers spreading the light of civilization overseas recurs regularly in the literature of this period. Similarly, the idea that the arts can help shape people's beliefs and sense of identity - which is central to contemporary debates about the impacts of the arts³ - has had a central place in the development of the arts and culture for propaganda and indoctrination purposes in non-democratic and totalitarian political systems throughout history. Therefore, adopting a historical perspective to illuminate contemporary debates seems to offer the opportunity for developing an awareness of their complexity and political sensitivity and for highlighting the darker side of the 'arts are good for you' rhetoric.

A QUESTION OF VALUES

One of the most interesting findings to emerge from the work we have carried out so far is that the versions of the civilising, humanising, healing and educational powers of the arts that have been ratified in policy documents

³ See, for example, ACE's *Ambitions for the Arts 2003-6*, page 3.

over the last twenty years seem to have become detached from the rich intellectual traditions that gave rise to them. As a consequence, they seem to have lost any awareness of their own philosophical origins, the social and political context in which they were elaborated and their later developments and, most crucially, the values they represent.

Indeed, the most useful contribution to cultural policy debates that this research might make is precisely to reveal that arguments about the effects and role of the arts in society are based on values and beliefs. Arguments comparable for in their logical stringency, coherence and intellectual sophistication have been made equally for the contrasting views that the arts might be 'good' or 'bad' for us and our society. Whichever position we decide to side with has little to do with 'evidence' and a lot more to do with our beliefs and the value system that we subscribe to. Similarly, whether as a society we decide to put in place means of administrative and financial support for the creation and the enjoyment of the arts, has to do with our values, our political beliefs and our notion of the type of society we would like to live in. We might have to resign ourselves to the fact that arts funding, the place of the arts in contemporary society, and the relationship between the arts and the state are intrinsically controversial areas, and that consensus might not be a realistic (or even desirable) option. No amounts of 'evidence' (whether robust or otherwise) can change this. Cultural policy is inevitably bound up with matters of values, and cultural policy discourse ought to reflect this.