Book Reviews

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Justin Lewis, *Art, Culture and Enterprise: The Politics of Art and the Cultural Industries* (Routledge, London, 1990) 164 pp. Paperback £10.99

The 'politics of art' is an open-ended subject which might admit consideration of any of a number of difficult and exciting issues, from the role of politics in the construction of art to the role of art as a political tool in the construction of the individual or nation, from the possibilities of art as a mechanism of political resistance or social change, to questions of international relations concerning cultural colonisation or the exploitation and appropriation of cultural products. At a more mundane level, there are political questions of whether the arts are to be encouraged by national governments, and if so to what extent and by what mechanisms the arts can and should be promoted. In *Art, Culture and Enterprise*, Lewis is concerned primarily with these latter questions of arts funding policy in the United Kingdom, and while the issues are somewhat parochial, they are certainly no less complex than the broader sociological or international questions.

Art, Culture and Enterprise is both a descriptive and normative analysis of arts funding in the United Kingdom. A critical analysis of existing mechanisms is interwoven with a political agenda for the 'cultural regeneration of Britain' (p. 128). Rather than revealing the existing political interests that underpin current arts funding, this is a political manifesto advocating a new policy for the arts operable within existing mixed-market economy and cultural conditions. It draws on some successful examples from existing practices to suggest methods for the effective formulation and implementation of a specific arts funding policy. It argues for 'a major reorganization of resources, based ... on a complete change in approach, using different definitions of cultural value' — a self-proclaimed 'cultural revolution' (p. 152). In this respect the book makes a valuable contribution to current debates on arts funding, a subject which is topical in the light of the recent establishment of a Secretary of State for National Heritage in the United Kingdom.

The first chapters meld together a description and critique of existing arts funding in the

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United Kingdom – an examination of how much public money is distributed by whom and who benefits from the funding. Lewis criticises these existing practices because they are based upon traditional notions of 'art': views which, Lewis argues, are no longer theoretically accepted (p. 14). More specifically, he asserts that:

> '[a]rtistic value is an arbitrary aesthetic system. It is based upon and inscribed within social positions. It is not an essence that lurks within an artistic object, to be discovered by those who somehow naturally recognise it.'[1]

What is worse than the absence of an objective basis for the funding of particular arts, notes Lewis, is that the selection is, in fact, elitist. Drawing upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Lewis argues that the arts which are funded require an investment of 'cultural capital' in order to be appreciated. Appreciation of the 'high arts' is dependent on having 'cultural competence' which is acquired through education; appreciation of art is thus only open to a small segment of society. Thus, the funding is drawn from the population in general, but ends up subsidizing the leisure activities of the wealthy. The current system takes from the poor to give to the rich.

While there is much to be said for the general tenor of the critique, Lewis has chosen a narrow definition of support for the arts to use as the basis for his argument. Lewis is interested in the distribution of money by bodies such as the Arts Council (whose budget for 1985–6 amounted to £100 million) and has omitted consideration of other forms of government support for the arts which may spread the bias away from the high arts. For example, he does not discuss the nature and operation of tax exemptions or other policies. These can work directly to promote cultural activity, or can simply be made more flexible to accommodate the variable income of 'artists'. Furthermore, taxation policies may promote investment from private sources in the arts – especially by encouraging charitable donation. Beyond these, many of the cultural industries which might at first glance appear to operate in the 'free market' in fact depend on other forms of public subsidy. For example, most commercial culture – films, publishing, popular music – is subsidized by way of the 'monopoly profits' which copyright law facilitates. Such indirect public funding spreads beyond the elite arts – in fact, these forms of funding are intended to be available irrespective of any consideration of 'artistic quality'.

In order to rectify what Lewis sees as the elitist bias of current arts funding, he suggests that the existing narrow definition of art be replaced with a broader one and then proposes a series of values to assist him in deciding which of these arts should be funded (p. 5). For Lewis, art is 'a cultural practice that involves the creation of a specific and definable object – a play, video or

piece of music for example. The function of that object is as self conscious, personal or collective expression of something' (p. 5). It is possible to take issue with this definition of art and, in particular, to ask in what ways it is better or 'more democratic' than traditional conceptions. While this new definition certainly has the potential to spread funding wider, the requirements that art be a 'cultural practice', 'creative' and 'expression' inevitably appeal to socially constructed and arguably elitist practices concerning what is considered cultural or expressive. While Lewis is happy to exclude the practice of building model aeroplanes from the category of art because it is 'non-expressive' (p. 7), one could easily imagine such a mechanism being used to exclude cultural activities (such as crochet or embroidery) that draw heavily from tradition, which are directed to practical rather than expressive ends or which are simply seen as being uncreative because the producers are primarily women.

Having provided a definition of art, Lewis goes on to define a set of values which address 'the shortcomings of the free market' and are a 'necessary cornerstone for building a new cultural strategy.' Briefly, Lewis believes that an arts policy should promote diversity, encourage innovation, increase the role of art in the environment, provide social pleasure, increase opportunities for creative expression, and possibly have positive economic effects. These values should be available to everyone, regardless of income or education. Lewis rejects the use of cultural policy to achieve other goals – in particular, the social targeting of 'underserved' groups.

A number of questions arise concerning Lewis' selection of the goals of arts funding. Do his goals make sense? Do those goals need funding? Is it right to exclude other goals? Are the goals realistic? While the list of values Lewis subscribes to are, as he tells us (p. 31), not particularly controversial, they appear to the reader to be a somewhat incoherent list of vague generalities. The first two, 'diversity' and 'innovation', are values to be promoted because the free market fails to provide for them. The assertion that the free market fails to provide incentives for the production of new and different cultural forms relies on a rather crude conception of the market and ignores other important factors such as the role played by intellectual property law in that process. The third value, that of 'art in the environment', assumes that culture is valuable in certain locations. The value of art in the environment must depend, however, on whose conception of art we are considering (pp. 102–3). The other values which Lewis proposes derive from activity – social pleasure from interacting with others and creative expression from involvement in the production of art (pp. 110–11). It is not clear whether there is anything peculiar about social pleasure in an artistic context, and thus why such activities should be funded when non-artistic activities such

as football, which also give social pleasure, are not supported.

A second questionable aspect of the new values Lewis proposes concerns the values which he does not consider – in particular the use of arts funding to promote other, less obvious, goals. According to one ('elitist') definition, the primary characteristic of art is that it changes one's experience of reality. In this sense, art is closely tied to some of the goals of education. While Lewis explicitly refers to the failure of arts projects aimed at achieving social goals, a closer examination of the sense in which such projects have failed and the causes of such failure is required before such approaches are to be rejected. It is self-evident that use of the arts in such contexts will never of itself cure social deprivation, but the role of arts in alerting minorities to their conditions of existence and building links between minority groups seems extremely valuable. Further, the direction of arts funding to minority groups can also play an important part in alerting other sectors of society to the particular needs of such groups. Perhaps Lewis has reasons for believing that such explicitly political uses of art forms are inappropriate or simply unfeasible in the UK at present. If so, it would have been useful if he had discussed such problems.

Lewis is concerned with national cultural policy and this itself raises awkward issues. Certainly, to talk of national policy reflects the fact that arts funding is governed primarily on a national level (the role of UNESCO being an example of an exception). Furthermore, there is no doubt that an arts policy will (and, according to Lewis, should) reflect the traditions and conditions of the nation (p. 23). However, if the goal of cultural policy is the promotion of national culture, two further sets of issues need to be addressed. First, there are issues relating to the idea of a national culture in a multi-cultural society. Secondly, there is a need for consideration of the interaction of British culture with the cultures of other nations.

The idea of a 'national' cultural policy raises questions concerning concepts of nationhood and the role of culture in (re-) generating such conceptions. It is necessary to decide what is 'national culture' and the extent to which the emphasis of an arts policy is to reflect and maintain traditional conceptions of national culture, or to promote the development of new or imported culture. For example, in the case of national museums, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the exhibits and collections should now reflect the traditions and cultures of recent immigrant groups. Lewis does not address such issues, but is clearly tied to a 'democratic' arts policy, presumably aimed at reflecting the cultures of all groups. However, a 'democratic' policy for 'national' arts funding raises a whole host of questions concerning the representation and entitlements of groups within that society. While some of these problems may be ad-

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dressed indirectly in the discussion of the geographical allocation of arts funding, there is much more to national culture than mere geographic spread.

The idea of national cultural policy also raises questions of international cultural relations. For example, should the policy of British museums be merely to exhibit British art and culture (whatever that may be)? Museums act as repositories for existing products reflecting the greatness of the nation, as resources from which artists can draw so that art can continue to flourish, and further to assist in the education of the population so that it can learn to appreciate art. At least in some respects, then, the continuation of diversity and innovation in culture could benefit from the 'importation' of foreign works. But in what circumstances is it right for us to import other cultures – that is to appropriate other national cultural products? What are the international consequences of Lewis' hoped-for regeneration of the arts in the UK? We need to think more about how culture operates internationally in order to decide whether the cultural regeneration of the UK is as desirable as it at first might seem. Lewis's failure to address these issues highlights the general lack of historical or comparative analysis in the work.

In order to demonstrate that the values which he proposes are realistic, Lewis cites examples from current arts funding where such goals have been promoted successfully. This is the realm in which the book excels. Lewis discusses distributional and organisational aspects of effecting the policy. To some degree this is the crucial part of 'democratisation', concerned as it is with access to the arts and to the funds. Lewis focuses very much on the public as a consumer of art and argues for the use of techniques of marketing and distribution normally associated with private enterprise. Thus in Chapter 4, Lewis advocates the funding of the commercial cultural industries to promote diversity and innovation where the free-market fails. These art forms – broadcasting, video, radio, popular music and cinema – have distributional characteristics which make them particularly appropriate channels through which cultural support can be made more 'democratic.' In Chapter 5 Lewis argues that it is crucial that the cultural forms which are currently publicly funded – theatre, visual art, photography – are organised and marketed with the same professionalism as operates in relation to cultural forms which are not normally publicly funded – i. e., commercial culture. The emphasis on professionalism and marketing continues in Chapter 6, where the focus of democratisation moves from the public as consumers of art to producers of art. Throughout this discussion Lewis supports his arguments with a catalogue of anecdotal material, drawing from a wide range of cultural activities and geographical locations.

In Chapter 8, Lewis further examines the mechanisms through which the arts are funded and how these mechanisms can be altered to facilitate the execution of the proposed policy. He suggests a three-tier system at national, regional and local levels which would rationalise existing divisions and minimise overlaps. Further he advocates changes in the methods of allocation of grants (from reactive to proactive) and the types of grant awarded (from a 'loss-guarantee' to a 'cost centre' approach). One of the proposals – the rationalisation of cultural powers within national government – has already been effected by the creation of the Secretary of State for National Heritage in the United Kingdom.

While Lewis demonstrates that his policies are realisable, inasmuch as examples of such arts funding exist and therefore might be imitated, he spends very little time (pp. 87–9) addressing the question of whether it is realistic to expect that a political party to adopt his agenda for 'cultural revolution.' In order for an arts policy to be an attractive political commitment, that policy should look convincing, reflect well on the government and be designed so as not to alienate significant political constituencies. Two crucial aspects that require further consideration are the vested interests in existing arts funding, and the general disinterest of the public and government in support for the arts.

First, when the government provides arts funding, the sector to which it responds is a relatively powerful sector in a democratic society: namely, those working in the media (in a broad sense) by which both cultural and political messages are conveyed. It is in the government's interest to exert influence and control over the media, and such control comes partially through funding of the arts. At one level funding engenders the goodwill of those in the media, at another it makes many of them dependent on the government. If the government's interest in the arts is partially to sustain the government's own position, it probably cannot afford to alienate these groups. This means that the only feasible route to a 'more democratic' arts policy, is by expanding support for the arts. Whether this is in the government's interest is likely to be seen as depending on how much the expansion would cost.

The second, and perhaps the most difficult problem with effecting changes in arts funding policy is the general lack of interest in the (non-commercial) arts themselves. The fact is that for most people arts funding is a pretty low priority. In order to stimulate public interest, changes in arts policy would have to be extremely well presented. However, while Lewis presents reasonable arguments for the promotion of certain values to democratise art, *Art, Culture and Enterprise* is hardly a rabble-rousing work. In fact, the values which he proposes to be used as the basis for arts funding

are somewhat vague and incoherent. In a sense, these aspects of the book are symptomatic of the uneasiness with which western capitalist nations have with arts funding. This uneasiness is a product not only of the innate dislike of the use of public funding in general, but also reflects an uncertainty as to what is good about the arts other than the economic benefits that they may confer. To change attitudes to arts funding necessitates consideration of the origins of British political culture and the formulation of a policy to change that culture.

Notes

1 p. 11; but contrast the analysis of good and bad public art, pp. 102–4.

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