

Editorial

Beginning a new dance

The artistic imagination and the progressive imagination

Gerry Hassan

1. Society cannot be arranged for the benefits of artists;
2. Without artists civilisation perishes.

I have never yet seen this dilemma solved (there must be a solution), and it is not often that it is honestly discussed.

George Orwell, *Tribune*, 1944 (quoted in Anderson, 2006, 186)

Arts and culture in Britain are blossoming. Gallery attendances have hit new highs. Museums are enjoying new levels of popularity aided by free admissions in England and Wales. Art fairs are popping up all over the country reflected by a new desire on a part of the populace to appreciate and collect art. Cultural festivals are everywhere with every serious place wanting to have one or more. Live music is undergoing a renaissance at a time when the 'music industry' is feeling sorry for itself, while book festivals have replaced the town hall meeting as the place *Guardian* and *Independent* readers go to get their intellectual views challenged or reinforced.

Arts and culture is seen as vital to the economy and the nation's well-being. According to recent estimates the 'creative industries' account for 7.3 per cent of GDP, employ 1.8 million people, constitute the largest creative sector in the EU and relative to GDP probably the largest in the world (Hutton et al, 2007). Arts and culture are also viewed as increasingly central to how a nation sees itself and how the UK is presented by tourist and cultural agencies. So with arts and culture everywhere, and doing record business, isn't it time to celebrate this and New Labour's achievements in putting arts and culture centre-stage?

Culture shifts: what is culture?

The words 'culture' and 'cultivation', derive from the Latin word *cultura*, originally meant caring, tending, growing, gardening and how we shape and interact with nature. 'Culture' had all sorts of associations with an organic view of the world and how we husband and are responsible for planting, feeding and nurturing.

In the seventeenth century 'culture' began to refer to how individuals might 'develop or improve themselves' through 'the training of the body' or the mind. After this it shifted

from the nourishment of individuals to that of society – becoming associated with ‘a general process of social improvement’ (Bennett, 2005, 65). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ‘culture’ became interchangeable with ‘civilisation’ and the idea of ‘progress’. This is linked to not just a set of ideas, but to cultural institutions: libraries, museums, concert halls, art galleries, which are held to be custodians, transmuting a certain set of civilising cultural values.

This is the first issue of *Renewal* devoted to the arts and culture in our fifteen-year existence: both a cause for celebration and for caution. In an age where culture seems to be everywhere and central to how we see ourselves, our definitions have shifted significantly over the short period of post-war Britain – aided by a shift in leisure, consumption and entertainment. A previous era of working-class politics and culture sustained by trade unions, the Workers Educational Association and self-help groups, a plethora of activities such as reading and writing groups, libraries and theatre and film groups – no longer exists and has been largely forgotten (Rose, 2001).

Arts and culture in ‘the knowledge economy’

Speaking of arts and culture today is impossible without placing it in a wider social and economic context. This involves looking at the way government and policy-makers have framed arts and culture – namely in ‘the knowledge economy’ – which sounded bright, sexy and liberating when it was first introduced, freed from those old certainties and shibboleths. On a recent trip to the Transcaucas Republic of Georgia, speaking to a group of artists and designers I mentioned the concept of ‘the knowledge economy’ – and gave a short, neutral description of it claiming to be a ‘new form of capitalism’. Before I went on to cover what was problematic, one of the group, a young Georgian designer, showed her enthusiasm for the concept I had so far described, commenting that ‘this sounds very attractive’.

This in part explains its appeal. Advanced by a range of people in the run into and immediately after the 1997 election, but most consistently by Demos and Charlie Leadbeater (1999), the term ‘knowledge economy’ was embraced in a tale of the power of ‘groupthink’ by a range of government and public agencies such as the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), the Design Council, enterprise boards, urban and cultural regeneration agencies, to symbolise the ‘newness’ of the regime and a language and mindset which denoted that they were part of an ‘in crowd’.

The ‘knowledge economy’ still has its adherents over a decade later, with a Work Foundation study commissioned by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on the performance of the creative industries stating that we are seeing ‘a subtle evolution from former conceptions of economic growth founded in organising the three “factors of production” – land, labour and capital’. Their study makes the claim that ‘the interaction of technology, in particular ICT, and digitalisation, with more demanding consumers [is] creating an emergent economy with a significantly higher reliance on the creation and transmission of knowledge’ (Hutton et al, 2007, 64).

The success of this paradigm has to be seen in relation to the demise of political economy in Labour and progressive thinking (Thomson, 2002). This has had huge consequences as the Blair-Brown government attempted to go with the grain of disorganised

capitalism, the power of finance capital, the City of London and deregulation (Elliott and Atkinson, 2007). In his counterblast to 'the knowledge economy' advocates, Paul Thompson wrote of this idea:

Underpowered and over-hyped, it has a status as myth – an imaginary, yet heroic story ... What has emerged is a marriage of convenience between policymakers with an enduring need to believe an optimistic story that legitimises smaller government in an age of globalisation and low taxes. (Thompson, 2004, 51)

The reality of 'the knowledge economy' has been very different from its rhetoric, acting as the modern version of Wilson's 'white heat of the technological revolution', covering the inequalities and structural dysfunctions of the British economy.

Alongside this there is the constant invoking of 'creativity' and 'innovation' which, as James Heartfield and Neil Mulholland explore, comes within a narrow and prescriptive framework. 'Creativity' and 'innovation', if we take the Cox Review's definitions of the former as the origination of new ideas, and the latter as the successful application of new ideas, are clearly used in ways which are misnomers debasing their basic meaning (Cox, 2005). The constant incantation and evoking of 'creativity' and 'innovation' is used to disguise that this is actually an age of deep conformity and lack of challenging fundamental assumptions.

The rise of 'the rise of the creative class' associated with American guru Richard Florida is only one factor amongst many in this. His thesis is that the emergence of a new 'creative class' is particularly relevant to how cities and places rethink and redevelop themselves. Florida identified the fostering of 'the three Ts' as critical to creative places: technology, talent and tolerance (Florida, 2002) – in short, an evocation of the worldview of the global winners into a policy prospectus. The 'creative class' thesis was on the back of 'the knowledge economy' important in telling a group of people what they wanted to hear: that they were new, exciting and completely different from those toiling, muscled men of labour of yore. 'Creativity' was the ideology of this 'new class' and its mission to create a go-getting, buzzing world where change and speed were mantras. Creativity in this became something else: orthodox and unexciting, appropriated for the higher call of competitive edge and advantage (Heartfield, 2005).

It is in this picture that the arts and culture have to be seen under New Labour. Some welcome moves – increased investment for the public sector – alongside an erosion of any sense of public ethos and public good, and an opening to the mindset of acquisitive wealth and privilege.

The unbalanced nature of the UK economy and the rise of the super rich has had huge consequences for everything in this country: for how we conduct our politics, our media, and for arts and culture. Take the example of the debate on the 'non-doms'. In the arts world this quickly became framed around the philanthropy and gifting from this narrow group to prestigious arts institutions and how this could be jeopardised by tax changes. Paul Ruddick, chairman of the V&A (and a hedge fund manager) commented that the renovation of three of the V&A's most important galleries in the last three years had been the product of the benevolence of non-doms and this could be threatened in future by government policy. He commented: 'As we embark on the next phase of our programme, we are

concerned that our ability to raise money will be severely affected by the proposed legislation' (*Daily Telegraph*, 13.02.2008).

Art as a playground: 'I see, I love, I buy'

This corrosive approach does not just have consequences for the practicalities of featherbedding the non-doms but spreads to our wider cultural environment. Economic liberalism begets cultural neo-liberalism begets personal neo-liberalism.

Take the Frieze Art Fair, set up in 2003 by Matthew Slotover and Amanda Sharp, following on from the success of *frieze* magazine. It brings together around 150 of the world's major contemporary art galleries in a climate of supposed 'glamour', 'fun' and 'chicness'. The inaugural Fair was described by Adrian Searle: 'At an art fair everything is reduced to the level of commodity, Fairs may be slightly grotesque, but they are also, in their way fun' (*The Guardian*, 20.10.2003). This is one of the defining narratives of Frieze in the media – as *The Times* put it: 'it's great fun, as long as you don't take it too seriously. Treat it like some glamorous jumble sale' (12.10.2006).

This seems a defensive and contradictory portrayal of Frieze, and one which implicitly acknowledges that something unedifying is at play. For Frieze is more than about fun, but serious trade, transactions and money. It is a playground for adults where many of the deals done are international and where institutional monies like hedge funds have found a new prominence and patronage.

Frieze has champagne breakfasts, lavish, opulent receptions for collectors, celebrities and corporates, exclusive viewings and more much more. This is the artsworld entering into a very different world: a place which offers a mirror image of the narrow, narcissistic, selfish and asocial individualism of the City of London and finance capitalism.

This is the age of art under the patronage of celebrity whether it is Madonna or Elton John as the arbiters of taste. 'I see, I love, I buy' said the wife of a former investment banker (*Daily Telegraph*, 5.01.2005). This is buying art as a commodity and product, of the search for the ultimate pick-me up purchase, of art as a validation of self and ego, of art as status signifiers and getting the approval, or more accurately envy, of your friends. It is no wonder that (without wanting to get into 'style wars') such a culture produces so much 'bad' and 'second rate' art, as the global corporate class and rich want to be validated and believe they are exquisite connoisseurs of taste.

Such an approach is not restricted to Frieze Art Fair or London, but can be seen in the UK and further afield in how private galleries and dealers woo the rich and powerful. Artists throughout history have sought the patronage of the rich, from the Medici of Renaissance Florence to Victorian Britain, so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. However, that does not mean we need to find the spectacle edifying or ignore the way in which the grotesque amounts of wealth and income disfigure art and culture, as they do so many other areas of life.

Art as social practice

There are alternatives to such an approach, even within the context of a UK economy which has been disfigured by the Thatcher and Blair years. One alternative is Glasgow

international (Gi) – a visual arts festival that evolved from a branding exercise to become a citywide, Scottish and international initiative supported by Glasgow City Council and a range of partners. Now in its third festival and biennial, Gi has morphed this year into something unique, democratic, disparate and about a very different kind of art and view of society to that of Frieze.

Gi inhabited and utilised all kinds of public spaces during its festival to showcase public art and did so in a way far removed from the usual Festival bandwagon. There was a distinct feel of DIY culture – of adaptation, imagination and ingenuity being used in how public art was being commissioned, curated and produced. This was aligned with a genuine sense of local engagement with an international remit and reach. Local artists and campaigners mixed with musicians, designers, academics and students to bring together a diverse group of people far removed from a sense of a cultural elite or ‘in crowd’.

Events took place in spaces which had long been part of Glasgow’s post-industrial heritage: empty warehouses and shops, cafes and bars, and which were in numerous cases far removed from the throb of the city centre. This led in some productions – such as Lowsalt’s production of Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, which wound and weaved its way through some of the city’s back lanes and streets – to the audience becoming active participants in the production, and passers-by becoming part of a wider audience.

This seems to point to two wider observations. Gi presented itself as a ‘cultural safari’ – with some similarity to the French idea of the *derive* – the unplanned journey championed by the situationists. The idea behind this was to transgress the numerous boundaries and barriers which exist spatially in a city: between neighbourhoods, streets and communities. This is a noble aim in a city such as Glasgow which, for all its mythical stories as an egalitarian, democratic, welcoming city, contains within it significant exclusions – of religion, football, health and ethnicity to name a few.

The idea of a ‘cultural safari’ still has within it the danger of still being a ‘safari’ – of the tourists travelling into the magnificent outback and staring at the local savages and beasts. What Gi was trying to find a way of navigating here was what former director of the National Theatre Richard Eyre has called the emerging ‘cultural apartheid’ (*The Observer*, 2.12.2007) that exists in British society, and articulate a different kind of ‘voice’ and notion of ‘the public’. This is not about art as a commodity or plaything of the rich. Instead, it locates art in a very democratic conversation (at a time when the Scottish SNP-led Government is having its ‘national conversation’ about Scotland’s constitutional status), which is about social context, practice and interaction. The public agencies in the city and nationally are to be applauded for allowing such an ‘outfield’ idea to take root and grow, and it will be interesting in the future to see how receptive they are to nurture such boldness and originality.

Is there a British story to all this?

Fundamental to all this is the question of what place and territory we inhabit. This has relevance to the changing nature of the UK post-devolution, the divergent politics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the nature of the UK state and Labour’s consistent and

historic lack of understanding or coherent critique of it, alongside issues of multi-culturalism, immigration and identity.

Is there a British story left to tell? Or are there only stories in Britain? Is there such a thing as a 'British culture' or merely 'cultures' in Britain? At the end of the Second World War, there still was a British story, although to many it was mislabelled as an 'English' story. AJP Taylor, that doyen of British historians, caught this when he said of the end of the war: 'Few even sang *England Arise*. England had arisen all the same' (Taylor, 1965, 600). While such Whig pageantry might seem dated now, such sentiments are not too far removed from mainstream discussions about the UK today often led by 'North Britons'.

For example, Andrew Marr in his complacent study of post-war political Britain takes us through a landscape of familiar relics: Wilson's devaluation, the IMF crisis, 'the winter of discontent', and develops a story of each which is informed by an uncritical understanding of politics, divorced from any understanding of power and economics (Marr, 2007). This is an account which is more understated than Taylor, but is despite all the disappointments of recent years, still a modern version of the same story: the forward march of Britain continuing as a force for good and enlightenment. This is in Marr's account a land blessed by creativity, diversity, embracing change, cosmopolitanism, unprecedented opportunity and adapting its governance to the needs of the Scots, the Welsh, Northern Irish, and trying to do so with new migrants. It is clearly a world which meets with Marr's approval and is close to 'the official story' of the UK told by government.

This matters significantly to how we understand our politics and the nations of these isles, and influences how our culture is shaped. The British story has significantly weakened and diluted, while the British state and polity is now in crisis in terms of its reputation and legitimacy. What role is there for an over-arching British culture or narrative? Or does the UK now have a *potpourri* of cultures and identities of its people which reflects its multi-national, multi-cultural nature?

To the political classes of the UK – the politicians, commentators like Marr and the civil service – the UK story is still one with all its qualifications shaped by one central narrative and an over-arching national culture – which has adapted and appropriated all sorts of sub-cultures, and thus proving its diversity and vitality. The adherence and belief of the political elites in the British story is partly due to their lack of understanding at the character of the UK, and part a product of collective self-denial. The reality of the UK, as a state, polity and culturally, is far removed from their perceptions, and fast moving in terms of its atrophy and decline.

Borrowing your enemy's arrows

The Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang's recent exhibition 'I Want To Believe' at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, has an installation entitled 'Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows'. This is inspired by an ancient Chinese story for the third century AD about the 'Battle of Red Cliffs' where the General Zhuge Liang, facing an imminent attack from an enemy with greater resources manages to outwit and defeat them. Liang tricked his enemy by sailing across the Yangtze river through a thick dawn mist with an army made of straw figures in boats. The enemy upon seeing this launched a hail of arrows which hit the boats and figures which were

then retrieved by Liang and then used to launch an attack and win a famous victory with his replenished supply.

'Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows' has a deep resonance in Chinese philosophy as well as the actions of the current Chinese Government. It also has relevance to the state of progressive thinking and opinion in the UK and the West in the early twenty-first century, and the place and nature of arts and culture.

The centre-left across the West has been in retreat for the last thirty years – faced with an onslaught from the forces of neo-liberalism – which most of the progressive parties have embraced, acquiesced or been compromised by. It is no accident that the two leading supposedly centre-left leaders of recent times, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, bent and contorted their politics to the forces of neo-liberalism.

While we all know this analysis, to rectify it we have to recognise that the forces of the New Right and neo-liberalism in terms of their ideals and values are not completely forces of darkness. Instead, in their ideals, these forces have addressed some of the most fundamental human characteristics more effectively than the centre-left. Thus such concepts as encouraging entrepreneurship and people seeking their life's ambitions through setting up their own business, questioning the power and motivation of bureaucracy, seeing the state and government as a 'vested interest' not a neutral agent, the need for individual autonomy versus the collective – all of these are powerful *leitmotivs* which have the capacity to attract people and win support. Taking the analogy of 'Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows', any centre-left renewal has to begin – not with the Blair/Clinton appeasement strategy – but by sending out our boats and recognising the potency of the New Right agenda in its values.

A centre-left politics which begins to explore this terrain needs to break with the dominant perspective of progressives shaped by the Enlightenment and its prioritisation of reason and rationalism above the ideas of superstition and irrationalism. The left's pursuit of rationalism continues to this day in such works as Al Gore's *Assault on Reason* (2007), Eric Hobsbawm's *Politics for a Rational Left* (1989), and the interventions of Noam Chomsky, to take three examples.

Such approaches by posing reason versus emotion and seeing them as opposites, leaves the power of emotions, intuition, allegory and folklore to our opponents. This is an argument made by Drew Westen in his recent book *The Political Brain* (reviewed by Jonathan Rutherford in *Renewal* 16.1), where upon studying recent US Presidential elections he came to the conclusion that Democratic Presidential candidates concentrated on framing arguments in terms of policy, facts and figures, whereas Republican candidates talked of stories, folklore and metaphor, and were more likely to win partly as a result (Westen, 2007).

The rationalist approach has taken the centre-left down the road of intellectual and popular stasis and lack of dynamism, allowing itself to be outmanoeuvred by its opponents. This is a world where the left has tended to think in terms of policy literalism and sclerosis: of programmatic demands and shopping lists.

Once upon a time an earlier left was inspired to dare and dream of different worlds, to use imagination, joy, play, humour and story. Some of the early socialist pioneers such as Edward Carpenter and William Morris understood this argument, and reflected in their politics and writings the importance of a vibrant democracy, ecology and the power of

the arts, aesthetics and craft. This is where we need to return to as Stephen Duncombe says in his persuasive book, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (2007). Barbara Ehrenreich has written of the need for 'collective joy' (2007). If such a clarion call is not a euphemism for what the centre-left should be about I don't know what is.

A new language of the arts and culture is required which challenges the dominant approach of the last decade and more which acknowledges the arts as an agent of economic and social incorporation and capture, with the panglossian hype and platitudes of the 'knowledge economy', 'creativity' and the constant chatter of 'change'. Instead, a more organic language is needed which talks of an 'ecology' and 'gardening' of the arts. This has relevance to Zygmunt Bauman's observation that we have shifted from 'the age of the gardener' as a metaphor for the modernist age to that of 'the hunter' whose motivation is to 'hunt', 'pursue' and 'kill' (Bauman, 2006). Bauman's 'night of the hunter' is the Thatcherite-Blairite dreamland which progressives need to expose and challenge and requires that a whole new mindset and language to do so.

In this process, the progressive imagination has much to learn from the world of arts and its cultural imagineers and pioneers, and similarly, the artistic imagination has much to learn from the centre-left. It is an appropriate time to begin the dance.

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