Enough is Enough!

Esther Leslie


Cultural policy—we get word of it frequently: in the bar of Santa's Ghetto, the post-punk-comix art gallery that popped up on London's Charing Cross Road in December, stuffed with artists discussing arts council funding; on TV’s Ceefax, when the announcement that scrapping museum entrance charges has led to a 75% increase in visitor admissions. Cultural policy effects various actions, from library opening hours in the UK, to the destruction of Buddhist monsters ‘cultural policy’ has bred, most such as the touring Degenerate Art Exhibition, before being destroyed or sold for hard cash abroad. Both books under review here remind us of the certain languages, for example, pre-dated the rise of the modern state—but along with the rise of the state comes the establishment of bureaucratic institutions able to recommend and even enforce cultural policies. Miller and Yudice cite as instances: governments, trade unions, judicial systems, schools and colleges, arts organisations, community groups, foundations, charities and businesses. These bodies, which make or deliver cultural policy, instrumentalise culture, seeing it as the medium through which appropriate behaviours can be encouraged. And so, for example, in Matthew Arnold’s Victorian vision, through education, the self is harmonised with the national bloc and its aims, and through theatre and novels, the liberal, reasonable individual is created who repudiates anarchy and populist excess. In their introduction Miller and Yudice trace this moulding operation into the current day. Their arguments swell and muddy as they briefly outlining the history of cultural policy institutionally”. (p34) But they don’t mean a Leninist seizure of the state, as first stage in abolishing it. This is infiltration and gentle reformism directed by a politics of identity. Hence their approving quotation of U2’s Bono on how the glamour of barricades palls besides the resistance at an administrative level is the real business of sitting with briefcase-carrying men in suits and sorting out the world. (p385) “Resistance goes nowhere”, they pronounce, “unless it takes hold institutionally”. (p34) But they don’t mean a Leninist seizure of the state, as first stage in abolishing it. This is infiltration and gentle reformism directed by a politics of identity. Hence their approving quotation of U2’s Bono on how the glamour of barricades palls besides the real business of sitting with briefcase-carrying men in suits and sorting out the world. (p385) Hopeful reform at an administrative level is the remedy. ‘The world can be made good, if we just get our identities bureaucratically represented’, would seem to be the vain cry. Miller and Yudice

VARIANT • VOLUME 1 NUMBER 22 • SPRING 2005 • PAGE 33
acknowledge the compulsions of commerce and the exigencies of the free market, but again and again they return to fashionably political rather than economic categories, insisting on work on "cultural citizenship" and identity, democratic representation in cultural policy, global citizen and worker rights, and 'renegotiations of the citizen-consumer couplet'. For all their well-meaningness, they have succumbed to a language that is familiar in cultural policy wherever it manifests itself, including in its most pernicious market-friendly forms.

McGuigan's expository textbook (including a useful glossary of jargon terms) is more cogently suspicious of the ends of cultural policy—dividing it into three types, state (now superseded, in the main, in the west), market (the prevalent model) and, the oppositional variant, 'civilizational'.

In contrast to Miller and Yúdice, McGuigan discerns a tangible impulse behind the dominant contemporary trend of cultural policy making: the economic, or more specifically economic policy. McGuigan's book sets cultural policymaking firmly within the efforts towards neo-liberalism or privatization of the economy over the last twenty years. More generally, Rethinking Cultural Policy sets itself within a world altered by globalisation and the 'NICI', the new international division of cultural labour, and subjected to criticism by anti-capitalists (the book's motto is 'Ya Basta!', the Zapatista slogan of 'enough is enough').

McGuigan stridently dissects and historically specifies the terrain of cultural policy. He attacks the 'governmentality' model, accusing it of insufficient distinction between the state and the market, politics and economics. For governmentality, all government is the same shade, and government, through the administrative functions of the state, is the driving force of modernity. Capitalism and the economy are written out of the equation. The governmentality model, McGuigan claims, in an insensitivity to political and economic distinctions, e.g. that the welfare state was a real gain—by organised labour, and public funding of the arts was a democratic achievement, even if it also imposed certain cultural models deemed to be beneficial to individuals. McGuigan returns to something more akin to a Marxist framework, as parsed through Raymond Williams. This entails a shift from modernism to a rhetoric of much cultural policy as just so much ideological hot air or consolatory compensation, at best, and, at worst, partner to the economic in the sphere of culture as elsewhere. Where once cultural value was deemed sufficient justification for art-oriented activities, now cultural value is subsumed into economic value. Everyone has to justify culture's marketability—culture becomes valuable only because, as Cultural Studies gurus such as Angela McRobbie have gleefully announced, in the guise of 'cultural industries' it contributes to the (UK) economy. McGuigan's efforts to rethink cultural policy are useful in that they allow a novice into the discourses and lay out the arguments with some vigour and in a combative tone. The book suffers occasionally from its textbooky and academic vigour and in a combative tone. The book suffers explicitly critical and political drive comes to the fore, and McGuigan's trademark bitchiness lashes out satisfyingly at points. If we have to have cultural policy—which it seems currently we do, for where would all the artists and galleries and magazines be without their lovely lottery money—then McGuigan is a good historian and judge of its priorities.

The motor of the book takes its cue from a significant discussion document on 'desetakatization', a French term which translates as 'privatization' or 'autonomization'. This document stems from a round table discussion on museums in Amsterdam in the late 1990s. Here, principles of privatization relevant to public-sector culture were drawn up. They included 'd'istituzione' (selling off public property), free transfer of property rights (giving it away), the change of state organisation into a more independent organisation, the agency model, internally more discrete power to the public manager, contracting-out of work such as cleaning and catering, use of volunteers, private funding, individual patronage and corporate sponsorship.

Just as in other sectors of the state (health, utilities), the shift in cultural policy amounts to sundering cultural institutions from the state and attracting private money. For McGuigan, such development is contradictory, involving a mix of privatization (a bad thing) and a devolving of power (which might give more power and accountability to local managers or audiences). But the essential drive of the desetakatization policy is economic in the sphere of culture as elsewhere. Where for Miller and Yúdice everything has become a cultural question in a post-capitalist cultural world of signs and codes, McGuigan's sense is that even culture, or at least cultural policy, has less to do with culture in these neoliberal times and more to do with economics. Where once cultural value was deemed sufficient justification for art-oriented activities, now cultural value is subsumed into economic value. Everyone has to justify culture's marketability—culture becomes valuable only because, as Cultural Studies gurus such as Angela McRobbie have gleefully announced, in the guise of 'cultural industries' it contributes to the (UK) economy. McGuigan's efforts to rethink cultural policy are useful in that they allow a novice into the discourses and lay out the arguments with some vigour and in a combative tone. The book suffers explicitly critical and political drive comes to the fore, and McGuigan's trademark bitchiness lashes out satisfyingly at points. If we have to have cultural policy—which it seems currently we do, for where would all the artists and galleries and magazines be without their lovely lottery money—then McGuigan is a good historian and judge of its priorities. But, despite the efforts of these books concerning an area that Cultural Studies has deemed a necessary part of the curriculum, a feeling lingers: culture happens despite policy work, even in the most hostile circumstances. And any culture that assumes or bids for its representation in cultural policy, global citizen and identity, democratic representation in cultural policy, global citizen and worker rights, and 'renergations of the citizen-consumer couplet'. For all their well-meaningness, they have succumbed to a language that is familiar in cultural policy wherever it manifests itself, including in its most pernicious market-friendly forms.