

Re-thinking Cultural Policy: Critical Approaches in the Era of Privatization

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Long established practices of cultural policy are rapidly changing throughout the world. Indeed, it might not be overstating the issue to say that we are approaching the end of an era in which nation-states played the central role in managing the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural products. Where once cultural policies were developed to serve a broadly defined 'public interest,' today we are witnessing the introduction of policies that are primarily geared to serve *private* accumulation. Throughout the entire global cultural sector, the private market, not the state, is now being promoted as the preferred mode for the allocation of cultural resources. Thus, as Garnham (1992:362-363) notes, cultural products today are viewed less as a public good than as a privately appropriable commodity.

What forces are underlying this dramatic shift? While researchers may debate the extent and the speed by which changes are taking place, it is generally agreed that cultural policy is under pressure from four broad fronts: 1) *technological*—such as the development of alternative distribution systems in broadcasting; 2) *economic*—the creation of a 'global market' in

response to rising production costs and the need to expand markets; 3) *political*—assaults on the legitimacy of the social democratic state and the rise of a neo-liberal agenda; and 4) *socio-cultural*—demands from various constituencies for cultural institutions that serve not just a ‘mass public,’ but supply a wider range of views and tastes which respond to a ‘cultural pluralism’ that postmodern theorists have long stressed.

These forces and pressures have been particularly evident in Canada. While cultural policy was until recently implemented to serve a national or ‘nation-building’ agenda (Clarkson, 1991), contemporary state policies, on the contrary, appear to be contributing to the progressive destruction of national publicly-funded cultural institutions. Canada’s trade agreement with the United States and Mexico seems to take yet more powers away from national state agencies and place them under the auspices of international regulatory bodies that are controlled by transnational businesses. The post-Meech era has dramatically exposed the illusion of any univocal myth of ‘nationhood’ as provinces, regions, and social movements all vie for constitutional representation. Finally, the recent emergence of populist and regional politics suggests a fundamental realignment of traditional political alliances and class forces. In this climate, unifying themes traditionally employed in cultural policy—such as ‘nationalism,’ ‘the public,’ and even ‘sovereignty’—seem to be losing their force.

122 What are the implications of these developments for those of us working within a critical tradition of policy studies? Does our current theoretical framework allow us to adequately assess these changes and confront these problems? Or is there a need to re-think the terrain upon which our traditional lines of analysis have been drawn? If so, how do we begin to ‘re-theorize’ critical policy studies in light of the profound realignments that are taking place?

It is clear that any answers to these questions will at best be contingent and provisional given the rapidly shifting balance of forces and political struggles currently being waged. With that caveat in mind, however, it is our view that traditional frameworks do not seem able to adequately assess the

complexity of the current forces at play, nor do they offer any effective alternative model that might aid in the construction of a more democratic and pluralistic cultural order. Responses to current problems have continued to be posed in terms of what we view as a simple dichotomy of the 'free market' versus 'state control,' a division that has long dominated much research in the area. It is our belief, on the contrary, that both the oligopolistic capitalist market and the interventionist welfare state threaten the development and expansion of a democratic cultural order. As critical researchers, therefore, we need to avoid the prevailing tendency to retreat to a 'Left Keynesian' or 'Statist' position whereby we end up defending the very institutions and practices that not so long ago we soundly criticized as devilish instruments of 'social control.' While we recognize that state intervention, often at the behest of social movements, has many positive and even 'emancipatory' benefits, it is also the case that these interventions are limited and can even be potentially detrimental for democratic cultural expression. Welfare state intervention, in Habermas's (1987) sense, can lead to the "colonization of the lifeworld"—the bureaucratization and normalization of public culture that undercuts community-based self-expression and solidarity. In other ways, state agencies can actively censor public expression. As Keane (1991) has demonstrated in the case of public broadcasting, the democratic state can take on Leviathan colours by influencing the range of media output through appointments, funding, the granting or with-holding of state advertising contracts, and the establishment of 'policy guidelines.'

In our current research, we want to explore these issues by outlining the pressures that are guiding cultural policy-making today and by suggesting alternatives that might lead toward a more democratic cultural order. While we remain absolutely convinced that state intervention in the broadly-defined 'public interest' remains an important vehicle by which benefits can be had by a wide population, we also recognize that the state should not be the *only* instrument in this goal. In pursuing options for the democratization of cultural production, critical research must also look beyond the market/state dichotomy and toward the creation of institutions within civil society, insulated

from both the market and the state, that will help ensure democratic accountability in an era of increasing concentrations of transnational corporate power.

THE SHIFTING TIDE OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION IN CANADA

Within the federal arena, the era of mandating cultural agencies with a nation-building agenda appears to be drawing to a close. While the removal of the 'national unity' clause from the CBC's mandate is perhaps the most dramatic indication of this, it is simply illustrative of a general erosion in support for a state-driven cultural policy. In its absence, market forces have come to dominate the allocation of cultural resources.

Since the early 1980s, the Canadian economy has been increasingly subject to the pressures of transnational capital accumulation. These competitive pressures have radically transformed the economic landscape of the country as capital has shifted to take advantage of international wage differentials and new trading opportunities. While the federal government has claimed that the cultural sector has been exempt from trade agreements, Canadian media markets have nevertheless been pressured into taking on commercial and transnational flavours in the wake of these deals (Mosco, 1990). Driven by the promise of greater economies of scale, the state, which once pursued policies that encouraged small and diverse nationally-oriented units of production, has now developed policies that favour the concentration of ownership and transnational marketing opportunities. Other symptoms of this regulatory shift include the market-directed expansion of new TV delivery services (such as video cassettes and cable) on an international basis, the progressive deregulation of national telecommunications monopolies, the 'rationalization' of cultural agencies to conform with commercial imperatives, and the growing tendency, as reflected in new international copyright laws, to treat information and cultural resources as a privately appropriable commodity (Schiller, 1994).

The effect of these changes on policy initiatives has been dramatic. In the publishing sector, for instance, the withdrawal of the postal subsidy and

the imposition of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) has reinforced distribution inequities between national and transnational producers, thus eroding the already marginal profitability of Canadian book and magazine publishers. While the film industry has experienced some success with both international co-productions and Hollywood branch-plant productions, national production remains underdeveloped in the face of transnational strangleholds on distribution and exhibition. As their markets fragment and revenues shrink, radio broadcasters are turning to programming formats that minimize production costs and maximize advertising revenue at local levels. Television broadcasters, threatened by direct-broadcasting satellites and the proliferation of cable channels and video cassettes, are moving to develop regional markets and patterns of ownership concentration that extract as much as possible from their economies of scale. And in the newspaper industry, plummeting readership and lost advertising revenues are forcing concentration of ownership between daily and weekly newspaper producers.

Accompanying these political and economic changes, the 'politics of difference' and 'place' have swept through the social fabric of the nation and fractured the political spectrum. As the Charlottetown Accord defeat signalled, 'new' social movements based on regional, ethnic, racial, gender, and environmental concerns have challenged the very possibility of constructing a univocal 'national culture.' These 'new' political forces have greatly influenced the field of cultural policy. Provinces and regions are seeking stronger regional representation in formulating policy. The Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the federal regulatory broadcasting agency, has been challenged by a number of minority groups who have disagreed with recent licensing decisions. Television networks are also under pressure to better balance gender and ethnic representation within programming. Finally, public funding agencies are being asked to improve representation on their juries and in their granting patterns.

The combination of such forces—technological, economic, political, and socio-cultural—may be read, on one level, as the emergence of a 'new

pluralism' in cultural politics. The breaking up of state monopolies and the fracturing of the 'mass' audience into segmented niches has been seen, by commentators from both the Left and the Right, as evidence of an increase in consumer power and a proliferation of cultural difference and choice.² Such optimism, however, appears to be premature, if not misguided. With declining state-sponsored support of the cultural industries, oligopolistic transnational commercial interests are increasingly governing the operation of cultural production. Despite the promises of a '500 channel universe,' audience demands and interests that are not commercially viable will continue to find it difficult to have their voices heard.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FIELD

The new directions being pursued in the structure of cultural markets bring into focus some of the difficulties that critical policy analysis faces in forwarding progressive interventions. The changes noted above render many traditional terms of reference within the field incomplete and inadequate.

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The long cherished principle of 'cultural nationalism'—the state-driven promotion of a shared and indigenous form of cultural production—appears caught between the demands of a fractured public and the transnationalization of capital. As a policy-guiding creed, it appears to have been put to rest.

For many critics, the response to this untimely death has been muted at best. There are many reasons for this apparent lack of mourning. In Québec, the repressive tendencies of a pan-Canadian national culture have long given the idea little currency (Raboy, 1992). In English Canada, mainstream critics have traditionally viewed the idea of 'cultural nationalism' with suspicion, reading within it the protection and promotion of a narrow élite culture at the expense of consumer sovereignty and choice (Globerman, 1983; Woodcock, 1985). For neo-marxists, on the other hand, the concept of nationalism has sparked little interest outside of its relationship to questions of ownership of the cultural industries (Clement, 1975; Smythe, 1981).

Similarly, the terms 'public' and 'public interest' which have been at the heart of policy debates are proving problematic. A new generation of

'postmodernists' have argued that the 'public interest' is little more than a stand-in for the interests of white, male, urban, middle-class Canadians. In creating an imagined community of the 'public,' postmodernists suggest, traditional cultural policy has effectively neutralized identities and collectivities based on gender, class, and ethnicity (Lee, 1992:406).

Finally, the concept of 'cultural sovereignty' also appears to be losing its efficacy. At the policy level, this principle had been traditionally expressed in state commitments to providing the necessary infrastructure to support indigenous cultural production. Policies governing telecommunications monopolies, media content regulations, and the simultaneous substitution of Canadian broadcast signals over cable have been enacted and defended according to the principle of 'cultural sovereignty.' However, the decline of the nation-building mandate coupled with newly emerging communication technologies and transnational pressures are making such interventions difficult to maintain.

While the principles of 'nationalism,' the 'public interest,' and 'cultural sovereignty' have in all cases been rightly criticized, it is also important to recognize the uneven and contradictory nature of such terms. Despite their problems, policies enacted under these banners have also served the purpose of providing a rallying point around which disparate social groups have been able to coalesce their interests and demands. Consequently, the collapse of such 'meta-narratives' signals important changes in the dynamics of cultural policy. If the idea of 'cultural nationalism' no longer carries currency, if we can no longer speak confidently of the 'public interest,' and if the principle of 'cultural sovereignty' has been eclipsed by new forces and interests, then what analytic frames of reference are we as critical researchers left with?

Some critics have faced this dilemma by retrenching and defending old principles and state forms of intervention. Others have been content to abandon the field of culture to the logic of transnational capital accumulation. In our view neither approach will do. Instead, we propose that research aimed at progressive interventions must more thoroughly engage with what Bennett (1992:25) notes are "the institutional conditions which regulate different

fields of culture.” This involves a recognition that policy and governmental processes informing cultural practices give rise to specific political relations that regulate access to symbolic forms. In other words, how do specific cultural policies and structures—within both the market and the state—work to systematically exclude/include particular social interests at the expense of others.

On the one hand, these exclusionary/inclusionary practices can be defined as *discursive*—forms of exclusion or inclusion that arise from the normative agenda embedded within particular cultural policies. For instance, how do policy distinctions between private and public, commercial and non-profit cultural institutions regulate access to cultural practices? How do such distinctions define what is legitimate and what is not?

On the other hand, *structural* forms of exclusion and inclusion can be identified. These refer to the broad social pressures and limits that influence the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural products. In Canada, such structural factors to be considered include technology, economies of scale, market size, and ownership patterns. In the case of technology, for instance, little research has been done that examines how the new relations of technology in the cultural sector might actually influence the structure of symbolic forms and to whom they are made available (Garnham, 1990:11).

Discursive and structural practices, as fields that regulate access to cultural resources, are interdependent. Historically, discursive forms have impacted upon the structure of the market, and vice versa. These practices, moreover, are both enabling and constraining. Principles of ‘nation-building,’ for instance, enabled some social groups to organize to advocate forms of intervention in the name of the ‘public,’ yet in the process other social interests were excluded.

An analysis of this kind paves the way for a renewed interrogation of how state practices structure the field of cultural production. As such, this research will allow us to propose progressive interventions aimed at expanding the cultural field to include more voices and interests. At one level, this involves, in Bennett’s (1992:32) terms, ‘talking to’ and ‘working with’ what

used to be pejoratively called the 'Ideological State Apparatus.' Rather than simply writing off the state as a repressive instrument of control, we need to think about more strategic interventions, addressing specific cultural institutions in order to openly engage with the policy-making process.

At another level, however, we need to be aware of the limitations of state administration, its propensities to alienate certain constituencies and 'police' cultural activities. In an era when nation-states are increasingly ceding power to unelected transnational bodies, the political benefit of relying solely on state-sponsored cultural support is also suspect. While we cannot ignore the nation-state, we must nevertheless seek out new social spaces in which cultural practices can be developed and insulated from the tyranny of the market.

The need to find such 'spaces' is critical given the rapid commodification of contemporary culture. Information and cultural products that were once readily accessible through public libraries and other institutions, are increasingly privatized and inaccessible (Schiller, 1989). In the current climate, how can we ensure that developments within the cultural industries do not exacerbate differential access to symbolic forms? To answer this question, as Melody (1990:17) notes, requires that we develop a renewed definition of the 'public interest.' One potentially fruitful way to approach this, without falling back to some repressive normative and totalizing vision of the 'public,' is to think about the kinds of cultural goods various constituencies or 'publics' need in order for their members to participate as full and active citizens within the larger community. The goal of cultural policy studies then is to think about these basic citizenship needs and to propose progressive interventions that can ensure that these needs are met. Without such interventions, as Mosco (1993:22) suggests, a great many people are in danger of becoming 'culturally-illiterate.'

NOTES

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2. For discussions of the 'cultural politics of consumption,' see Mort (1989) and McRobbie (1990).

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