Artists as Executive, Executive as Artist
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Cultural policy is marked by certain contradictions which are at the heart of our definition of culture. One of these contradictions is between, on one hand, the belief in creativity as a certain indefinable je ne sais quoi that is the property of the active, exemplary individuals (which cannot really be fostered by policy or even arts education) – and on the other hand, the imperative of policy to manage collective entities such as cities, regions or populations (such as, for example, how culture was historically positioned in relation to public health or a unified regional or national identity).1

These contradictory dynamics have existed for a long time, at least since the 19th century. In The Field of Cultural Production, Pierre Bourdieu describes what he calls the “charismatic ideology”, which directs attention to “the apparent producer, the painter, writer or composer”, allowing the “cultural businessman” to “consecrate a product which he has ‘discovered’ and which would otherwise remain a mere natural resource.”2 In other words, the authenticity of the unique genius must exist in order to be ‘discovered’ and promoted. Nor has this dynamic fundamentally changed through the industrialisation of culture in the twentieth century. Written in 1989, Bernard Miège’s The Capitalisation of Cultural Production is one of the earliest analyses of cultural production as at the heart of fundamental changes in the management of labour in Western capitalist societies. Miège cites a 1983 speech by Jean-François Mitterand (then-Prime Minister of France) made almost fifteen years before the election of Tony Blair: “creativity is defined as “the acquired and useful abilities of all mankind” and as such as a key property of unique, exemplary individuals (which is then extended to social phenomena”).

According to Miège, the capitalisation of cultural production does not really disrupt the genius myth or the figure of the artist as a representation of authenticity, as this myth provides some continuity between more traditional definitions of the arts and modern-day celebrity culture. This is why, according to Miège, the industrialisation and commercialisation of professionalisation & association of culture with aspiration & employment skills, regimes of professionalisation & managerialism, & the charismatic leader of management theory ... is seen as the cure to all problems neoliberalism’s “application of an economic grid to social phenomena”. An obvious question is what happens to skills or abilities that are not seen as economically useful, and the people who have dedicated their lives to learning them? What about other forms of learning that do not immediately lead to jobs, and what happens to the arguments to justify them, or (more accurately) the willingness of others to listen to them? If the ‘human capital’ concept serves as one of the underpinnings of neoliberal policy, then a related discourse that has more explicitly marked recent cultural policy is ‘social exclusion’. In The Inclusive Society: Social Exclusion and New Labour, Ruth Leavit describes how social exclusion discourse erases the power relations that produce inequality, so that terms like ‘inequality’ and ‘exploitation’ terms that suggest a systemic critique, particularly that someone might be responsible for exploitation and might even benefit from it) start to disappear. One is not exploited but simply excluded from a seemingly homogeneous and harmonious majority; as Levitas says, “poverty and unemployment are seen to be residual rather than endemic problems”. It is an individualising discourse, being excluded is at one’s own fault – for having the wrong skill set, the wrong character traits or the wrong kind of family life. Social exclusion discourse originated in 1960s British critical social policy (which saw inequality as not only social but also cultural), 1980s US right-wing discourse which popularised the term ‘underclass’ (applied, in particular, to unemployed young men and lone mothers) and which stigmatised benefits recipients; and French welfare reform which equated paid employment with participation in society with paid work, which then became influential on EU social policy. As Ruth Lister has described, ‘social exclusion’ discourse was central to New Labour’s shift from “equality to equality of opportunity”3, in other words, away from protecting benefits and income redistribution, and towards education and training, and obligations of paid work. Social Exclusion Unit was set up in 1997, as was the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion or CASE. At the launch of CASE, Harriet Harman made a speech containing the following text (which actually presents paid employment as therapeutic): “We hear a lot about the non-wage costs of work. But very little about the non-wage motivation for work. Work helps fulfil our aspirations – it is the key to independence, self-respect and opportunities and advancement... Work brings with it a sense of control that is missing from the lives of many unemployed young men”.

Social exclusion policy places artists in a contradictory position in several different ways. The first issue is that, in its narrow focus on the virtues of paid employment, social exclusion does not perceive unpaid labour as real work and “undermines the legitimacy of non-participation in work”.4 As cultural production can involve, in many cases, activities outside of the ‘day job’ and even identifying with them more than with one’s paid employment, this starts to pose a problem. The irony of course is that the dedication and willingness to work for free on non-commercial artists, but also others in the cultural and voluntary sectors, are practically celebrated at the same time as the support structures that facilitate this kind of work are withdrawn – as in the case of welfare Reform bill which serves to stigmatisate benefits even further.

Another issue is that artists are positioned as the agents of social cohesion, usually through community arts commissions where artists are expected to involve marginalised groups in large scale projects. There have been many critiques of this: Munira Mirza has called these policies fundamentally “therapeutic”5. The Cultural Policy Collective (CPC) critiqued the top-down nature of their implementation, whereby they “recruit willing representatives from targeted zones without considering the non-participation of far wider sections of their population”, proposing a “a parochial sphere of action that is almost wholly dependent on professionalised community organisations”6. This kind of client relationship provides very little scope for communities to determine their own needs and act in their own interests. This is similar in certain ways to the depoliticising tendencies of development NGOs, which positions those in the global South as continually needing the help of trained experts, and in some cases, multinational corporations.

This can also be seen as part of a wider tendency to associate culture with an aspirational narrative, often Government led, not just through arts funding schemes: that the presence of certain types of cultural activities (art galleries for example) will...
give people a taste of a middle class lifestyle, and in doing so, raise their expectations and lead them to participate in mainstream society. Consistent with social exclusion discourse, the only way to improve one's lot is through (individual) participation, achievement and success in mainstream society, (through training and paid employment). Within this context, alternative, and more importantly, collective models for dealing with one's personal situation (workplace or community organising, grassroots campaigns, etc.) become inconceivable. In a larger sense, what is politically dangerous about social exclusion discourse is that it creates a kind of inarguable hegemonic logic – to disagree with these schemes is to be 'against aspiration', to be recalibrating against change, to want to keep people (or one's self) in the ghetto.

We can see both these concepts of 'human capital' and 'social exclusion' in recent cultural policy, particularly that of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in their Strategy Documents on education, including various partnerships between schools and cultural institutions. What is significant is that 'Culture and Creativity: the Next Ten Years' links the arts, or, more disturbingly, cultural democracy to discourses of 'innovation' associated with science, technology and business; creativity is seen as 'at the centre of successful economic life in an advanced knowledge-based economy'.

Written seven years later, 'Creative Britain: New Talents for the New Economy' begins with the argument that the creative industries are a growth sector, expanding at twice the rate of the economy as a whole, but the UK faces competition from other countries (the report does not specify which countries). National competition for comparative advantage within the global economy, in fact, shapes much of the document. The other dominant argument is that many lack the necessary skills to succeed in the creative industries, particularly those from what are seen to be marginalised communities. Exclusion from them, is not about not going to museums – it's about not having enough employable skills, particularly in technology; by not having enough skills, one is not employable or adaptable enough within a post-industrial economy. 'Creative Britain' focuses primarily on skills training and on business development; the arts, when not connected to these two, tend to vanish. Proposals include: 1) the creation of 5,000 formal apprenticeships a year, with a variety of arts organisations; 2) research to promote a "more diverse workforce" (although 'diversity' here means skills ability, not diversity in terms of race, gender or class); 3) closer links between academia and industry, specifically centres in computer games, design, animation and "haute couture"; 4) legislation against filesharing; 5) the development of mixed media centres and live music venues; 6) the development of various funds, programmes and networks for business development.

These sorts of developments: where creativity becomes defined in terms of human capital, particularly those skills (such as IT) seen as marketable within a (pre-crash) post-industrial economy, should also be seen within the context of the raft of management literature on the 'creative', from Tom Peters (known for phrases such as "thinking outside the box") to Daniel Pink (author of "A Whole New Mind"), to John Howkins to urban theorist-cum-regeneration consultants such as Richard Florida, who famously suggested that the old class structure was being replaced by a new meritocracy of knowledge and talent.

What is significant about this sort of literature is how certain qualities associated with the Romantic genius are brought into management culture and in some cases projected onto the figure of the manager. In 'The Organisation of Culture Between Bureaucracy and Technocracy', Paola Merli mentions that post-bureaucratic theories of management discuss the need for charismatic leaders displaying qualities such as 'vision', giving their organisation a 'mission', and being sources of 'inspiration' for their subordinates – though, crucially, not presenting an alternative worldview.

According to Jim McGuigan, management literature began to become popular with the Labour Party in the 1980s and 1990s, in connection with a turn to economic pragmatism, following the 1983 defeat. This meant, among other strategies, the adoption of business lingo, which provoked Simon Frith to ask why the Labour Party was using terms such as "market niche" and "corporate image". The result of these influences on UK policy was that, in addition to privatisation, many publicly-funded organisations were increasingly required to re-organise and run themselves as though they were the private sector. This was also a common pattern in many European countries – organisations were not directly privatised, but were required to operate like businesses. McGuigan uses the term "managerialism" to characterise this shift in organisational structure and purpose.

A synthesis of the tendencies I have mentioned so far (the genius myth, individualism, an association of culture with aspiration and employment skills, regimes of professionalisation and managerialism, and the charismatic leader of management theory) can be found in recent policy initiatives towards fostering 'cultural leadership'. These initiatives formalise connections between management discourses and the arts, through a variety of professional development programmes set up to train arts management, and in some cases artists, in leadership skills. It is notable that all these initiatives propose professionalisation and skills training as a response to a perceived organisational crisis. In 2002, the Clore Programme was set up in order to offer fellowships to "exceptional individuals who have the potential to take on significant leadership roles". The programme was started in response to what was perceived as a skills gap in arts management and a “crisis in cultural leadership” in the UK, based on a 2002 study commissioned by the Clore Duffield Foundation. The organisation does state that “cultural leadership is distinct...