



Raymond Williams on Culture & Society: Essential Writings

State Culture and Beyond (1984)

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State Culture and Beyond (1984)

Raymond Williams's keen interest in issues of cultural policy is illustrated here in a talk that he gave at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. He makes a crucial distinction between what can be called cultural policy as display, exemplified by policies of national aggrandisement and economic reductionism; and cultural policy proper, that is, public patronage of the arts, media regulation and negotiated constructions of cultural identity, in effect, what have more recently been referred to as 'cultural rights' (see McGuigan, *Rethinking Cultural Policy*, (2004), for further explication).

We can perhaps distinguish five senses of the State in relation to this argument. It may be important to do so because we are often reduced to a rather simple polar contrast between a monopoly State and a market with the State as a friend. In reality the situation is more complex. There is one aspect of the State in relation to culture which is almost always forgotten because we absorb it so very early that we can hardly recognize it as cultural policy at all. It is worth remembering that the State has always had this double sense: it is not only the central organ of power, but of *display* – indeed often specifically the public pomp of a particular social order. You don't have to look far in any particular society to see a culture which is not recognized as a cultural policy or an arts policy specifically, but which is culturally concerned with display.

There are some interesting overlaps here with what Bagehot called the theatrical element of the constitution. It is genuinely difficult watching the state opening of Parliament not to realize that one is in the presence of performance. The fact of an overlap between performance, which in a sense is quite analogous to theatre, and the actual display of certain aspects of state power, is there. Now, one may be very conscious of some of the eccentricities of the British constitution in this respect but in fact most States have this kind of public panoply – their changing of the guards. There is usually a public performance of power, often in form residual from much earlier periods; a great occasion for producing costumes, for presenting a version of the national heritage. Quite quickly (and one should not forget this historically) elements of the arts are consciously involved in this, over and above the actual state rituals. Thus there is a *state* sense of cultural policy. Indeed at times, in its more reproductive forms, it is a kind of lying-in-state of the national heritage, in which the version of the culture that is intended to be offered to the public has, so to say, been officially consecrated.

I think it would be quite wrong to overlook this as a cultural policy because you can then make a move toward a second sense of the State, in which, although you're now moving into a much more modern and active and practical world, the attitude towards the arts as embellishing either the public power or the preferred orthodox idea of the nation is extended to areas of genuine artistic practice. I'm surprised how often in arguments about public funding of the arts people mention tourism rather early. Now it is not an irrelevant consideration; it is a wholly relevant one, for example, to the survival of the London theatre. But it's a very curious thing to introduce it first. Because it does mean that one is thinking in terms of the shape of a contemporary public power which is that of a nation-state, which has business and tourism, which has commercial interests, which has international interests in exchanges of visits with other nation-states and their representatives. And elements in the arts, particularly within the great metropolitan institutions, are quite quickly involved in that kind of version of the State. Indeed not only in the extension to the arts as tourism, but very specifically now, the arts as business entertainment; this is a very conscious policy in the greater metropolitan institutions. And it's a significant overlap, with some versions of sponsorship of the arts by the larger private companies. Indeed, in this sense an arts policy of a certain kind turns out when examined to be not a policy for the arts but a policy for embellishing, representing, making more effective a particular social order or certain preferred features in it.

That distinction has to be insisted upon because a policy for the arts should be (I'm going to argue) primarily a policy *for the arts*, in relation to a whole and very diverse life, rather than the representation (which has happened through many different social orders) of the arts as purveyors of the most evident delights as attachments to these quite other purposes. And this happens especially in arguments about the representation of a particular national culture to other national cultures, in which quite clearly a cultural policy can be an aspect of foreign policy, and determined by such. Alternatively a cultural exchange policy can be that more

equal sharing of cultural experiences which all peoples need and benefit from.

Now I mention those two senses of the State because they are often overlooked before real argument of a professional kind starts. That real argument now is between a version of the State as patron and a version of the State as the promoter of an active cultural policy.

The State as Patron

Of the State as patron there is much to say. When the first approaches were made to the British State, early in the war, for the immense sum of £35,000 to encourage the arts, they got an enthusiastic response from the then President of the Board of Education. I can't resist quoting it; he had 'Venetian visions of a post-war Lord Mayor's show on the Thames in which the Board of Education led the arts in triumph from Whitehall to Greenwich in magnificent barges and gorgeous gondolas, orchestras, madrigal singers, Shakespeare from the Old Vic, ballet from Sadler's Wells, shining canvasses from the Royal Academy, folk dances from village greens, in fact a Merrie England.' Now that first approach eventually led to what Keynes called a half-baked state patronage. But it was almost immediately assimilated to my first sense of State: the Lord Mayor's show. One has only to imagine the Royal Ballet on those barges, or the canvasses in those gondolas, to realize that what was thought of as happening was a vision, however retrospective

The patronage version, as Keynes put it forward, was an idea of encouraging people who were already operating. That is to say, he did not, in his first thinking about the matter, foresee an active policy of *promotion* of the arts. People would engage as individuals and as companies in artistic events and the State would then move out and sensibly encourage them. But then, and this is where it begins to move into the fourth sense of the State in cultural policy, there should be attempts to improve public access to things which were already happening.

But the great difficulty was – and one could spend a great deal of time on this – that there is a major problem of defining the arts if one has simply this version of patronage. Indeed the first constitution of the Arts Council was very strict; it said 'the fine arts exclusively'. That's a very difficult definition because music and the visual arts (visual arts in the old sense: painting, sculpture) are included. Theatre is rather curiously included, curiously because there is a sense in which theatre has always both been and not been a fine art. Literature however, is typically excluded, partly on the grounds that it is already covered by public libraries. But beyond all these there were the new arts, already with a half a century of achievement behind them: cinema; new work in broadcasting including work which was not just transmission of earlier forms; photography; television. And it's still an intense argument within any arts body whether these, which are undoubtedly by this stage of the twentieth century major arts, should be regarded as parts of an arts policy or fine arts policy. What this exclusive definition can very quickly become is an abstraction of certain traditional arts from what is otherwise seen, and contentedly seen, as a cultural market. It is assumed that the contemporary arts will make their way in the cultural market but that the traditional arts must be in some sense preserved from it. In that sense only the State acts as patron.

Now there are substantial theoretical objections to that, but there are also I think very severe practical objections. It can set up relationships between the public body and practising artists which skew actual practice towards received and traditional things. Moreover very quickly it meshes with the notion that the metropolitan institutions of the traditional arts are where excellence occurs, so that within this form of thinking one can assume in advance that a play at the National Theatre is a more significant and excellent event than a new play by an unknown company in a road show somewhere in the North. Under the influence of this traditional notion of art, the arguments about photography, for example, that I heard when I was on the Arts Council had to be heard to be believed. A quite unproblematic acceptance of a certain kind of theatre as art was very suddenly withdrawn when it came to contemporary arts which were often as or more creative and significant.

So the problem of patronage has always been the identification of that special area which is to be the object of patronage, and the most significant element has been a degree of preservation from the cultural market.

But what I think has made that position, even in the attractive form in which Keynes first put it forward, impossible to hold is that overwhelmingly in the second half of the twentieth century, whatever else has happened, the prime distributors of all kinds of artistic activity have been the new media. And in those new media there have to be public policies of a different kind from patronage. Yet the way in which they too relate to the market creates its problems. It is there, in the most significant sense, that there can be a shift to a positive cultural policy as distinct from patronage and limited intervention.

That is where the experience of many different countries in Western Europe has been interesting because you can have this policy in a hard state version which is most evident in Eastern Europe, in which there is a very conscious and heavily funded cultural policy, admirable in many ways in its degree of extension of access, but carrying quite unmistakable and unacceptably negative features in which the policy includes a preliminary definition – often from outside the arts – of what kinds and styles of art are to be promoted. Often we recognize this sense of the State only in the hard version. In the soft versions, especially since the rise of broadcasting, the creation of any cultural policy must, if we are serious about it, involve some public body and within state terms typically some central body. This body makes choices which are all too often disguised behind counters of argument which are very difficult to specify. I mean vague terms like ‘standards’ and ‘excellence’ which much more often than not function as ways of deflecting the argument rather than having it, especially when you think of the hangover from distinctions between traditional and new kinds of art.

Towards a Future Policy

My own view is that we have to move beyond all these notions of state cultural policy, just as we have to move beyond the notions of patronage and market protection. It happens now that in Britain we have a fight on our hands even to preserve the minimum definitions. But the best way to preserve them may be to outline a policy which can move beyond state cultural policy and its evident dangers whether in the hard or the soft versions. Now while I can't go into detail on this I would just like to put two emphases on it.

First, that now in some ways the nation-state, for all sorts of purposes, is both too large and too small. It is too small, particularly in the world of the media as they are now developing, to be able to sustain genuine national cultural policies. It may do so in certain protected areas but at the effective level, where the big public is participating, the nation-state is beginning to lose the powers of direction and policy, however enlightened, that it has previously tried to exercise. At the same time it is too big to be able to promote the diversity of cultural policy which ought to occur even within a relatively homogeneous culture like the British.

I think there are two things of a hopeful kind that one can now see emerging. The first undoubtedly is the European dimension. There is a possible European cultural dimension which would take us beyond certain of the limitations of a nation-state policy. But there is also the *civic* tradition, which in terms of European history has a much finer record in cultural policy than that of any State. It is in fact the great cities of Europe which have been the most successful promoters of cultural policy. This again is a contemporary fight to preserve the necessary powers of cities, but it is one in which there is the possibility of relating a cultural policy to an actual community rather than to a relatively abstract and centralized state.

What emphases then follow? First, that the management of arts enterprises is best left to self-managing companies of artists where they are in any sense collective art, or to co-operative arrangements where there is the practice of individual artists. The relation of that to a civic-level policy seems to me very much easier to devise. Second, there is still a role for the kind of public power, whether it's at civic or national level, which has the prime responsibility of keeping the means of production in art publicly available, not allowing them to be available for auction and yet not tempted either to appropriate them to its own kind of organization and to its own definition of interests. I believe there is a possibility of defining a principle of holding the artistic means of production in public trust, but then of leasing them by a variety of possible arrangements to self-managing groups of artists of all kinds, who will get the use of those means of production in relation to a stated policy,

under lease, and subject to review and renewal. It is in that direction that – with the civic emphasis and with a broadening European emphasis – we should begin to move. We shall then be moving, as we would, farthest away from the two kinds of state policy that I, at least, most oppose. Not only the hard version of state cultural policy which we have to oppose in view of its controlling record, but also from the often unnoticed state policy with which I began, the State as a public power which merely enhances itself with the arts, which engages in its own reproduction using the arts and culture for its decoration and imagery, and not really for the development of the arts themselves.

Reference

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- cultural policy
- patronage
- art
- state policy
- fine arts
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- artists

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