

## **Self-Definition, Name Calling, and the Limits of Language: Examining the Economics of Arts Council England, 1996/97-2012/13**

By Joe Mcloughlin

### **Introduction**

This article will examine the thinking that surrounds and informs the spending of Arts Council England (ACE) over the last twenty years. In this respect, it is very much an economic endeavour. Yet, the methods used to explore this topic will not be strictly economic. There will be no detailed equations written below and no scrutinising of figures. The analysis developed here will be the product of a different approach. Deploying a linguistic study within a historical frame that moves from 1996/97 to 2012/13, I will focus on the words used in several annual reviews and identify key changes in language and the rise to prominence of particular phrases. Then, working through these instances, this essay will unpack the rhetoric operating behind state spending on the arts and tease out some of its implications. This method of discourse analysis is useful as such close and comparative reading enables me to locate trends in the organisational vocabulary on spending and interrogate those trends, both, on a larger scale and at particular turning points. The value of this is that, whilst New Labour's and the Coalition Government's interest in financial returns from arts funding is commonly acknowledged and has been explored elsewhere, this analysis can begin to show *how* the interest in financial returns developed over time and what its developing implications were or, now, are.

Explicitly, I will be arguing that from 1997 to 2013 the Arts Council moved from a protective, alternative or even anti-market position to a more returns oriented, explicitly capital-

ist one and that this shift had a number of negative implications. Working towards this argument, this essay will have a twofold impact. One, as a demonstration of method, it will highlight an under researched area of cultural economics that recognises that ‘the words used [by arts funding bodies] must be subject to some degree of critical scrutiny’ and begin to demonstrate the efficacy of such scrutiny (Smith, *Cooler Climate*, 8). Two, by teasing out some the implications of organisational rhetoric, this essay will provide an improved conceptual- rather than numerical- understanding of how the economic aspect of state support of the arts has developed over the last two decades whilst also improving the understanding of how it works contemporarily.

### **Setting the Scene**

Tony Blair’s New Labour Government was elected on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1997, claiming 418 of 650 Ministerial seats. This resounding victory came after 18 years of Conservative rule, including 11 years of Thatcherism. One of the apparent reasons for this success, to quote former Culture Minister Chris Smith, was ‘a very simple realisation by the British people [...] that there *is* such thing as society’, that, as a population, there is shared and common ground and that New Labour was the party that acknowledged and supported that (Smith, *Creative Britain*, 15). One of the means through which New Labour offered its support was through increased funding to the arts. From 1997 to 2010 the grant-in-aid to the Arts Council rose from £193 to £625 million.

This increased expenditure was utilised in a number of ways. Theatre in England was pulled ‘back from the brink of crisis’ at the turn of the millennium (*Reviews 01*, 5). *decibel*, an initiative to ‘raise the voice of the culturally diverse arts in Britain’ (*Review 02*, 20), operated between 2003-2008. And in July 2007 the first

ever Arts in Parliament took place, bringing artists to Westminster (see *Review 08*, 30 and <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/arts-in-parliament/>). This list is not exhaustive. From official perspectives, this period was viewed as a golden age for the state supported arts. There is certainly a case to be made in this direction but it is important to remember that money was not given without qualification. New Labour's time in office can be marked by the rise of evidence based policy making. An approach that, in theory, does not accede to ideologies of the left or right but uses evidence to establish what "works" and formulates policies in response. From 1997 onwards, this approach led to the notable growth in socially instrumental thinking (exemplified by Francois Matarasso's *Use or Ornament*) and 'creative industries' discourses that prioritised the economic potential of the arts (Harvie, *Staging the UK*, 23).

This latter concern occupied an increasingly prominent position in the writings and aims of ACE after the credit crunch and crash of 2007-08 and growing questions over indebted public finances. This positioning is still apparent today. The Coalition Government of David Cameron and Nick Clegg have pursued a dual approach of funding cuts and reworked cultural policies from the Thatcher era to encourage (or pressure) ACE and the work it supports to offer returns on investment, maintain economic sustainability, nurture private partnerships and become economically 'accountable for the decisions' they make (Cameron, *Brown and Cameron Clash on Economy*).

This brings this short historical account will be bolstered by more specific information throughout, deployed where necessary, but hopefully it provides a working knowledge of the period and can be borne in mind to effectively, if sketchily, contextualise the analysis developed below.

### **The Power of Self-Definition**

ACE cast itself in a number of roles between the late-1990s and the second decade of the new century. These shifting identities can be evidenced in a number of ways. The selection of Chairs provides one way to gain insight into how ACE, and its sponsors in government, perceived it in this period. The Chair is a government appointment, presided over by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Looking back to the late 1990s, it is not coincidental that former Culture Secretary Chris Smith, who professed that New Labour's interest in cultural activity was part of 'a serious attempt to do what government legitimately can do in order to support a major economic force', appointed Gerry Robinson as chair in 1998 (Smith, *Creative Britain*, 5). Robinson self-defines 'as a businessman' and his career trajectory, prior to his tenure at ACE, incorporated work for Matchbox Toys, Coca-Cola and Chairmanship of the Granada television company (Robinson, *Annual Review 03*, 3). This combination of personal history, including television work that sits at the meeting ground between cultural activity and profitable industry, and self-awareness strongly compliments Smith's thinking. Consequently, Robinson's appointment indicates the significance that New Labour placed on the ability of the arts to turn a profit and the expectations they had on ACE to nurture this ability in this period.

Elsewhere, the annual reviews—which will be the focus for the remainder of this article—can be read with interest. These documents offer the reader a perspective on the previous twelve month period by incorporating numerous elements. They are all opened by the Chair and Chief Executive's personal accounts, within which the former usually addresses the wider social, political and cultural context, whilst the latter, generally discusses the practical and administrative issues that the organisation faces. Both will also

nod to some artistic highlights from the past year. Beyond this, the formatting and the content of each review are slightly different, though patterns do emerge over time.

Each review will state how much money ACE is distributing. This may be recognised through formal breakdown (in the late 1990s) or through initiatives and policy focus and onto Regularly Funded or National Portfolio Organisations (as in 2012/13). Reviews will also focus on the work artists and list some highlights from the foregoing year. This may be done through case studies of individuals (see *Review 08*). It may be done through the construction of a monthly calendar of highlights or it may be done through letting ACE staff voice their experiences. Various policy initiatives of ACE are frequently articulated also. In 2001, serving as an exemplar of New Labour considerations at the time, there was significant outline of ACE efforts to gather evidence and work towards social goals (*Review 01*, 10-15). As mentioned earlier *decibel* appears throughout the mid-noughties and recently *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*, the current overarching policy, has been reported on since 2009. Finally, a concern for the creative economy often informs and appears through a number of these other discussions. Indeed, ACE Reviews have engaged with the economic potential of the arts more explicitly since 2003, to the extent that, by 2012/13, this financial concern occupied the opening double page spread of the review, ahead of any more conventionally artistic information.

Turning to some of these reviews in more detail, it is interesting to note that in 2001, in a section dedicated to the artist, ACE described itself as a 'support' giving organisation (*Review 01*, 6). In 2004 things had been reconfigured along seemingly more romantic, but actually more economic, lines, with former chair Christopher Frayling dubbing the organisation a 'matchmaker' between the public and private realms in his opening comments

(Frayling, *Review 04*, 3). In 2007, the organisation's remit appears to have expanded. The tasks of 'developing and sustaining the creative economy', investing in innovative work, and stimulating the relationship between the public and the private arts are singled out in an explicitly economic section that appears just behind discussions of artistic quality, access and social outreach (*Review 07*, 27-33). Two years later, things appear to have become more focused, with ACE narrowing its remit but increasing its efforts, vowing to consistently lobby the government *through* economic reasoning *in pursuit of* economic goals in response to the economic downturn. As former Chair Liz Forgan outlined in her opening comments, the organisation will act as a 'champion [for the] cause of sustained investment in the arts and never let government lose sight of the role of the arts in recovery from recession' (Forgan, *Review 09*, 3). Recently, in 2013, in the opening of the introductory Creative Economy section noted earlier, a similar sense of financial importance dominates, with ACE considering itself a driver of 'world class creative innovation and support[er] of the creative economy' (*Review 13*, 4).

This changing vocabulary, appearing frequently in the concerns of Chairs and in prominent, large and titled sections, makes two things immediately apparent. First, ACE increasingly framed and expressed itself in economic terms, positioning itself as an institution with financial clout that had the ability to bring forth other economically fruitful relationships. It can't be ignored that other discourses also influenced ACE's position throughout this period, the discussions of artistic quality in *The McMaster Review* and the socially instrumental claims of Francois Matarasso are powerful sources that come to mind quickly. But even so, it should be acknowledge that the policies developing from the work of these authors were often permeated by or in thrall to more prominent

economic reasoning.

Second, in line with this increasingly dominant economic framing, ACE's writings reveal a changing expectation of what the money they distributed would do. Over the course of these examples, ACE becomes more and more an institution that wants a financial return or, more accurately, an institution that expects to create a positive financial impact through its funding choices. It abandons its position as a supporter and becomes, instead, an investor who provides money for work that has the potential to attract a private audience. The spending of whom would help sustain the creative economy which, in turn, could nurture the growth and, later, recovery of the national economy. Taking this second idea as a starting point, a direct comparison of the meanings of support (from 2001) and investment (from 2009), illuminates the extent of this shift to a more returns oriented, explicitly capitalist position in more detail and is a useful way to better draw out the implications of the shift sketched above.

Support means to '1. Bear all or part of the weight of. 2. Give help, encouragement or approval to. [...]. 4. Provide with a home and the necessities of life. 5. Provide enough food and water for life to exist. 6. Confirm or back up: *the studies support our findings*' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 733) . These five facets of the definition indicate that in 2001 ACE positioned and understood itself as a weight bearing institution that performed a double task. It provided help and encouragement to artists at an emotional or intellectual level. It also granted them the necessary resources to live and create work. Nothing in the word support alludes to a tit for tat rationale and, linguistically at least, there is no concern for finances. Support, it seems, is not about returns on investment.

Such a comprehensive understanding of the organisation, derived from an analysis of one word, is not necessarily accurate

and there is evidence to suggest that ACE was certainly interested in economic impact in 2001. The appointment of businessman Gerry Robinson is a clear indicator of this as is the industrious title of the 2000 annual review, *Working for the Arts*, which utilises language that appeals to commonly understood rhetorics of labour and fiscal reward. Equally, it is interesting to note that the ‘Labour Party’s front bench [here at the end of their first term] has avowedly banned the word “subsidy” by 2001, instead favouring more positive, profit oriented descriptions of state support of the arts (Smith, *Towards Plan A*, 23).

Nevertheless, when it is considered that investment, the term used in 2009, means to ‘1. Put money into financial schemes, shares or property with the expectation of making a profit. 2. Devote time or energy to an undertaking with the expectation of a worthwhile result. 3. Buy something whose usefulness will repay the cost. 4. Provide something with an added quality. 5. Give a rank or office to’, it becomes very clear that the economic aspects of ACE’s role and, crucially, their capitalist perspective had grown in prominence to a position of dominance (OED, 383). In support of this idea of a post-millennial surge in money making rhetoric it should also be more explicitly acknowledged that, beginning in 2003, economic goals became part of ACE’s aims. They were literally added to the core script of reviews, written into the inside of the front cover. ‘Encouraging growth’ came first and a concern for ‘the creative economy’ followed in 2006 (*Review 03 & 06*, 1). This goal persists to this day and, as mentioned above, is the focus for a lot of organisational attention.

This combination of close reading and wider evidence supports and is concisely expressed by Jen Harvie’s suggestion that there was a developing ‘recognition- or mobilisation’ of the arts toward achieving economic goals under New Labour (*Fair Play*,



64). Thus, whilst it may not be entirely convincing to pitch ACE of 2001 as a disinterested, benevolent supporter of the arts it is a strong and defensible claim to say that, eight years later, any notion of support had disappeared. In its place was an interested, profit oriented organisation with an investment rhetoric that promoted the arts as a powerful instrument for rebuilding the economy in the wake of financial collapse. This shift, to reiterate, changed ACE. It was no longer a supporter of the arts that also recognised their ability to make money; it was now a distributor of government funds, mobilised in pursuit of sustainable investments.

### **Name Calling**

Parallel to this changing understanding of itself, there is the concern over how ACE understood and cast those who it gave money to in this period. What does this second use of language reveal about the trends and ideas operating behind funding practice and does it corroborate the argument that state support of the arts moved to a more returns oriented, explicitly capitalist position? In former Secretary General Mary Allen's comments, artists began this period, in 1997, as the 'subsidised' (Allen, *Report 96/97*, 8). That is, those in receipt of a 'sum of money granted to support an undertaking that is in the public interest' (*OED*, 727). At this point, similar to the preceding discussion of support, there is no linguistic indication that they are expected to make money, nor are they described in terms that would comfortably appear in any discussion of free market economics. This distance from market parlance holds, to some degree, to 2001. In that report, a section entitled *Focusing on the Artist*, makes clear that ACE 'are doing more and more to support artists' careers, circumstances and livelihoods so that they are *freer* to concentrate on their creative work'[my emphasis] (*Review 01*, 6). This allusion to support as liberator and artists as wards of ACE

indicates that in 2001 the organisation's economic policy acted, to some degree, as an insulating barrier against market practices, rather than as a catalyst for those forces.

By 2006 this protective, statist vocabulary had been replaced by more market-friendly expressions, particularly in ACE's report 'against our *official commitments*' (*Review 06*, 30; my emphasis). Funded arts organisations were described as 'customers', utilising the services of the organisation and being asked to fill out satisfaction surveys (*Review 06*, 30). Two years later, in an introduction that focused on the effects of the comprehensive spending review, Sir Christopher Frayling declared that ACE 'must support the progression from talent to jobs' and constantly remind the public of the deep connections between the state-supported arts and the for-profit creative industries (Frayling, *Review 08*, 3). In 2009, the understanding of those who receive funding shifted again, with featured artists/customers describing themselves as 'contenders' (Whitehouse, *Review 09*, 37). This final move highlighted that arts organisations not only utilised the services of t ACE but, increasingly, had to compete against others—refining their applications, developing more successful practices, effectively sharpening their ask and offer—in a struggle to achieve outlay from a limited pot.

Similar to the previous section, there is a noticeable alteration in language over time, as those who receive state support are increasingly defined in market exchange terms by ACE leaders, in official organisation terminology and by those artists it celebrates. These artists are no longer recipients of subsidy; they are customers. They are no longer supported organisms in the arts ecology; they are profitable success stories making valuable contributions to national employment. At the most extreme, they are no longer a community of artists; they are contenders competing for investment.

This last move is the most significant and, arguably, the most troubling because it is the clearest representation of the extent of institutional shift. Indeed, ACE's interest has been reconfigured so that state support of the arts is no longer a bulwark against market failure, as it appeared in 2001 and has been argued historically. Rather, it has become its own market in which pseudo-Darwinian logics hold sway and the desire for return is the driver for increasingly competitive relationships that must, inevitably, see some arts organisations "win" (repeatedly securing funds and going on to occupy commanding positions in this new marketplace) and others "lose" (securing little to no funding).

### **Commercial and Public Relations**

Read in combination, these developing vocabularies indicate that the period of governance under New Labour and onto the Conservative-Liberal coalition was marked by a breaking down of barriers between the subsidised and commercial arts sectors and a growing dominance of the values of the latter. It is interesting to ask what the effect of this new relationship might be beyond the initial, but no less important, establishment of a climate of winners and losers.

Looking again at the 2009 annual review, it is apparent that this altered relationship has done two things. Primarily, it has established the importance of money making for arts organisations and also cemented positive economic performance as the clearest measure of success for the arts. As the report attests, at the opening of the first ever discussion of *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*, 'the arts are an important part of life in this country—something beyond economic well-being *but just as important*' [my emphasis](*Review 09*, 10). This quote makes clear that though art has other qualities that are significant, these qualities are ambigu-

ous and difficult to measure. They might be aesthetic beauty. They might be social impact. In either case, their value is not specified and they remain something beyond, immeasurable. In response to this dilemma, and to clarify the value of the arts in more easily understandable terms, the review suggests that these intangible qualities are just as important as (but do not surpass) the more quantifiable economic impact that the arts have on society. By making this connection between the two values, and scaling them so, with economic well-being the only quality mentioned specifically, this quote locates economic success as the dominant indicator and measure of the arts contribution to life in this country. Opting for such an approach is, perhaps, easy to understand. Economic success is easily evidenced and provides a clear indicator of the social impact of tax spending.

Yet, thinking more critically, by arguing in this way, the quote reveals that arts' other qualities are now in thrall to this dominant economic valuation. Yes they are different and yes they may be important but they will never surpass any economic value created. Worse, the idea of equal valuation suggested by *just as important* is, I suggest, a harmful fallacy that serves to veil economic dominance. Indeed, the idea that a method of valuation or a quality that is not clearly defined (*something beyond*) is on the same level as a method of valuation that is clearly specified (*economic well-being*) is hard to accept. If only because, when talking of arts value or its social contribution, a commentator might, for nothing other than ease of communication, opt to use a clearly defined and known language. In this case, it is the economic language. Thus, despite all the talk of equality, if the other values of the arts are not getting mentioned, simply because there are no words to clearly do so, then the market language of capitalist economics again comes to dominate. The overarching implication of all this

is that by entrenching economic valuation as a dominant measure ACE has narrowed the ways in which it chooses to value the arts and any social contribution they may make.

The second thing that the overlap of commercial and public achieved was the complete instrumentalisation of the arts for economic ends. By 2009, the economic register was not only the dominant gauge of value, but it was also the goal to which the state supported arts were now explicitly directed. In her opening remarks for the review of that year, Forgan suggests that, though the recession has proven difficult to weather, it has ‘also been a heartening time, full of forward thinking about how the arts can contribute to recovery’ (Forgan, *Annual Review 09*, 2). She goes on to say that she and ACE will ‘never let government lose sight of the role of the arts in recovery from recession’ (Forgan, *Review 09*, 3). The directness of these statements, and the consolation they draw from economic potential, is fascinating as it is an inversion of the recognition and mobilisation discussed earlier. Here, it is not the case that the government is pressuring ACE to serve the creative industries and wider economy. Rather, it is the leader of ACE telling the government that the organisation is a proven economic force that can be called on, especially, in fiscally tight times.

The reasons behind Forgan’s suggestions could be diverse. She may be writing pragmatically, identifying a pressing social concern and working to ameliorate it through the pursuit of one of arts many benefits. Perhaps she is writing with a high level of political savvy, recognising that funding arrangements under New Labour—at the best of times—were couched in economic arguments and evidence based policy making and that this is unlikely to change in more stringent circumstances. It is even possible that after years of increasing pressure to show returns on government

investment, ACE, with Forgan at their head, have fully embraced more market friendly ideas and instrumentalised their approach accordingly. It could be a combination of all three or something else entirely.

Regardless, this commercial rhetoric permeates Forgan's comments, manifests throughout the wider review and effectively places the subsidised arts ecology in the service of the creative industries which, in turn, contribute to the wider economy. This is a striking hierarchy that acknowledges but, crucially, moves beyond earlier conceptions of the arts as having *the potential* to make money by directly reconfiguring them to this purpose. With the effect that, by 2009, the potential for art to foster moments of aesthetic stimulation and communal interaction (amidst other more conventional benefits) has been thoroughly subjugated to an economically oriented instrumental rhetoric.

### **Final Thoughts & Next Steps**

The enunciation of this troubling finding offers a good place to round up this essay. Through a linguistic analysis of various annual reviews this essay has bolstered the claim that arts policy in England was increasingly dominated by financial concerns over the last twenty years. Specifically, by revealing particular examples of change and examining this trend in action this work made clear that the language of the leading arts funding body has celebrated and increasingly occupied a more returns oriented, explicitly capitalist position from 1997-2013. The implications of which are manifold. ACE has established a climate of winners and losers. It has shrunk the way we discuss the value of art. It has rendered the variety of arts' potential impacts less visible and, in its final effect, it has instrumentalised the arts into a position of willing economic subservience. All of which is a pretty damning

indictment of a funding body that claims developing aesthetic excellence and increasing public access as the goals of its *cultural* policy.

Some powerful critical arguments and alternatives may be developed off of the back of these findings. Of particular interest are the linguistic possibilities opened up by this analysis. Namely, if this study unearthed the negative potentials of language, a fruitful follow up might ask: how can we change the language of policy to avoid such negative implications and, perhaps, alter the underlying ideology in the future? Unfortunately, there is little space available to begin exploring these possibilities here, but by reaching this question, and by demonstrating its necessity through the articulation of the foregoing conclusions, I hope that this essay can serve as a prompt for such work in the future.

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