Wasting our powers away

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A review of:

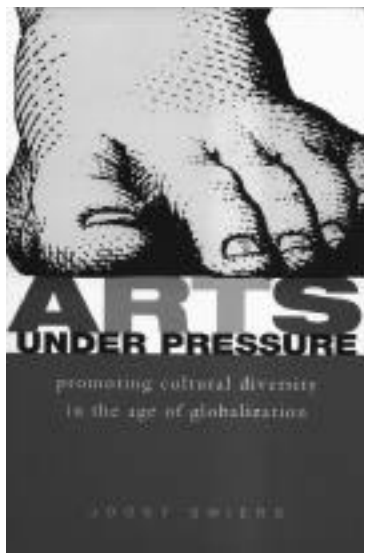
Mark W. Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated:Museums, Artists, and Corporate Sponsorships*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002)

JoostSmiers, *Arts Under Pressure:Promoting Cultural Diversity in the Age of Globalization*, (London and New York: Zed Books Ltd.,2003)

Chin-tao Wu, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, (London and New York: Verso, 2002)

Spectrality may be an overwrought trope for the left today, but it is hard to ignore its resonance. Even in its safest havens the haunting of capital takes on more exuberant forms and the links between different kinds of question are made manifest. For the millions in Europe who marched against the war in Iraq over the past year, their engagement owed at least something to an adjacent sense of diminishing freedoms on home territory. There might, after all, be some relation between the violent and illegal stripping of Iraqi public assets on behalf of (mostly) American corporations and, say, the morning crush on suburban commuter trains.[1]

It is now nearly three decades since a Labour administration first publicly capitulated to monetarist 'realism'. Under pressure from financial markets and the International Monetary Fund, James Callaghan subjected the welfare state to £5 billion of spending cuts before Margaret Thatcher's redoubled assault on the public sector from 1979. Since then our common wealth has steadily been eroded, with the global restructuring of capital forcing the logic of market forces into every aspect of public policy.[2] Today, the resulting social crisis extends profoundly, marked by escalating global inequality, the collapse of our ecosystem, and the failure of social democratic politics to staunch the influence—not least in the media sphere—of powerfully anti-democratic forces. With the waning legitimacy of the Blair regime,privatisation more clearly marks out the terrain of domestic opposition, although the capacity of trade union leaders to capitulate means that the weight of British dissent has proved slight compared with Italy, France and most recently Germany. In cultural terms, too, we are living out what Cornelius Castoriadis once described as a 'protracted agony for the existing institution of society'.[3]



These texts attempt to anatomise that agony, each analysing in detail the encroachment of private interests into the public domain of culture over the last three decades. They constitute a new wave of academic critique, exceeding the more ambivalent response to privatisation that followed from the collapse of the Soviet system after 1989.[4] Each has a different disciplinary and descriptive optic: Wu examines empirically the partial takeover of public high art institutions by private capital in Britain and the United States since the early 1980s, whilst Rectanus engages more with the politics of representation underpinning corporate cultural interests in America and Germany. Smiers' book is global in its scope and is most closely connected to a body of cultural policy, namely Unesco's strategies for protecting artistic diversity developed during the 1990s. Taken together they perform a valuable,indeed,shocking diagnosis, although none promises much in terms of steps towards meaningful political transformation.

Since the rise of mass-mediated societies during the inter-war period, capitalism has shown scant interest in promoting cultural democracy. The tendency of Western states since 1945 has been to 'democratise' culture from above,devoting the majority of public expenditure to high art forms and centralised professional bodies. Popular culture has, on the whole, been left to the marketplace and grassroots arts programmes have suffered a precarious existence. The historic inequalities of cultural provision are seen most dramatically in the media sphere.Beyond the parochialism of community radio and television, no Western nation has fostered an expanded realm of interactive and democratically-controlled mass communication.[5]

Whatever the inequalities of cultural stratification,post-war public funding offered, for a select few, a degree of creative autonomy. It is the decline of that margin of freedom over the last quarter century that these histories interrogate. This is already to hint at their limitations (the post-war cultural compact they appear to defend was always structured in dominance), but in their own terms they provide a useful contribution to cultural workers' understanding of their contemporary agency. In the arts sector, as well as in higher education, the scope of that agency is rapidly diminishing. Caught between the spectacularising pressures of commercial incorporation and the controlling logic of social inclusion policy, the autonomy—and hence creative and critical capacity—of cultural workers is being fast eroded.

All three texts document similar transitions since the late 1970s: the reduction of state funding and the expanded intrusion of private capital into the public realm; the introduction of tax subsidies for the culture of the rich (including corporate propaganda), enhancing its mystification; the rise of a promotional 'event' culture and the shift from a philanthropic engagement in the arts to the more aggressive marketing of corporate identity; the wielding of corporate censorship and institutional self-censorship of critical projects; the maintenance, and in some cases bolstering, of nepotistic systems of institutional governance; the conglomeration of media ownership and a sharp decline in the diversity of distribution outlets; the use of public sector institutions more explicitly for maintaining capitalist social reproduction (not least through social inclusion policy); the murder of critical reason by consumer sovereignty (seen in the rising influence,amongst other symptoms, of the celebrity critic); the collaboration of the press in the market-driven seduction, rather than critical engagement, of public opinion; and an increasing uniformity in the content of acquisitions and displays (the rise of the 'blockbuster' exhibition). The incursion of the logic of accumulation into the cultural 'lifeworld' advances globally with increasingly detrimental consequences.

As Wu in particular points out, British governments since the 1980s—often in direct collaboration with commercial interests—have been keen to promote these processes at a time when various forms of anti-capitalist politics pose a mounting threat to neoliberal legitimacy. From Philip Morris, to Armani, to American Express and Absolut vodka,there is nothing disinterested about today's corporate sponsorship. What is striking about all these books is their empirical density: under sheer weight of evidence, it seems, the liberal self-congratulation of the early 1990s has

mutated into a clear-headed understanding that the capturing of public culture for private interests undermines democracy. Facing mounting commercial pressures,curators and artists become uncritical brokers of consumption-led identities, further flattening the political contours of social inequality. Managerialism and the corporate wooing of the 'scholarly business manager' place limits on the ability of organisations to stimulate critical questioning vital to the wellbeing of democracy. Public discourse is delimited by institutional branding and artists are recruited to various vacuous conceptions of creative 'entrepreneurship'. As Rectanus puts it, 'corporate cultural programming frequently diverts attention from a more rigorous and critical examination of its own institutional interests in local and global public policies' (p. 97).

Whether cultural democracy is a situation to be grasped now, or a condition to struggle towards,is a question of political strategy these books—with the partial exception of Smiers—carefully avoid. To this extent their contribution to the immediate repositioning of cultural policy is limited. Certainly, the tendency of recent years to regenerate urban areas by erecting cultural institutions has been dominated by anti-democratic policies that could be reversed politically to immediate collective gain. The most striking example of this is the expansionism of the Samuel R. Guggenheim Foundation, a private trust with a base in New York and six satellite museums across Europe and America. Buying into the Guggenheim brand has certainly cost taxpayers dear. As Rectanus points out, its Bilbao museum deprived local and regional governments of $100 million in construction payments, not to mention unknown ongoing operational and administrative expenses; $50 million for a new Spanish and Basque art collection for the museum; and $20 million in the form of a tax free 'donation' to the Foundation as a 'rental fee' (p. 178). This prodigious gerrymandering of collective resources, outwith the normal paraphernalia of public accountability, has little to do with cultural democracy, although doubtless it attracts the tourist euros and taste-seeking sensationalism of the managerial class. The destructive social implications of such regeneration projects—including in many cases the expulsion of the poor to the city's margins—demand a more politicised engagement with urban and cultural policy than these writers, for the most part, are able to supply.

Similarly, Wu's careful history of the corrupt, self-selecting committees that comprise the governing bodies of some of America's and Britain's major art galleries is not matched by any effort to describe how they could be reformed,or, indeed, whether current institutional structures are reformable. Although she mentions democratic

cultural agendas in passing, the position from which any progressive transition might be achieved is never considered. Whatever their descriptive strengths, all these texts lack any workable sense of political strategy or collective agency. Rectanus' rendition of a sociological poetics of simultaneous incorporation and resistance amounts to practically no resistance at all, whilst Smiers' main proposal—the global abolition of copyright imposed by international treaty—vastly underestimates the interest of capital in maintaining intellectual property relations, not to mention its ability to do so. Wu's book, with its New Left credentials,suffers from no properly theorised framework and little effort to link the shift from public provision to private sector enterprise with a wider political economy. To this extent all three books can only add to a growing litany of supposedly radical diagnoses premised on the continuing retreat from working-class agency.[6] This is not to posit some simplistic socialist alternative—any collective agency in the cultural field will be complexly constituted and must build from a position of considerable weakness.However, it is to suggest that cultural workers need to be much more concerned with rethinking the limits of contemporary cultural policy in order to articulate a strategic politics of resistance.

Since the 1980s, especially in the wake of the abolition of the Greater London Council, left cultural policy has been overwhelming pragmatic, abandoning hard fought theoretical positions from the 1960s and realigning around progressively weakened social democratic forces. Left intellectual resources for action—Gramsci, Freire,Brecht, Benjamin—have been displaced in favour of a liberal articulation of Habermas and Foucault.[7] Although the dangerously anti-democratic growth of monopolistic corporate media continues to receive scrutiny, campaigners have failed to mobilise much beyond the conservative vested interests of the trade unions.[8] Doubtless the influence of cultural studies is partly to blame—pragmatism, as John Roberts has recently argued,constitutes its political unconscious—and Francis Mulhern is surely right to suggest that the logic of culturalism—the idea that culture encompasses the political—leads to the dissolution of politics.[9] This crisis of cultural policy is exacerbated in Britain by the undue influence of private consultancies (and increasingly academic departments) whose vested interests exclude the conduct of critical research. Faced with the dialectics of commercial expansion and social exclusion, the much vaunted 'democracy' of the cultural includers turns out, in the absence of a socialist politics, to be precious little democracy at all.

The catastrophe of the world at large continues to bear in on culture in all its forms and these books convincingly describe how, within our lifetimes, the margins of creative freedom have been diminished. One way for cultural workers to respond is to extend their activity beyond the production of critical artworks and fight to renew cultural policy, to become involved, in other words,in gaining power. This means combating commercial vested interests within institutions, mobilising through trade unions, building cultural programmes around political issues, and obstructing state agencies in their efforts to use cultural institutions to recompose the social relations of production (social inclusion policy is a key target here). All these strategies imply moving beyond institutionally-defined artistic prerogatives in order to develop a broader cultural praxis within the public sector. In this way, cultural democracy could become a powerful tool for action, premised on the importance of critical communication (and the autonomy that sustains it) for a healthy polity.

As the ongoing capitulation of the Blair government to neoliberal forces confirms, the forward march of social democracy is irrevocably halted.[10] In the face of increasingly frequent and violent global crises, it is above all a rejuvenated sense of political agency that will allow cultural producers to sustain their critical and creative energies in opposition to the dehumanising and totalising logic of today's promotional industries.

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Notes

1 This plundering has not passed uncontested.See Naomi Klein,'Of course the White House fears free elections in Iraq', *Guardian*, 24 January 2004, p. 18.

2 Colin Leys, *Market-driven Politics: Neoliberal Democracy and the Public Interest*, (London: Verso, 2001).

3 'The crisis of culture and the state',in *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, (Oxford: OUP, 1991),pp. 219-42.

4 See Peter B. Boorsma et.al.(eds.), *Privatization and Culture: Experiences in the Arts,Heritage and Cultural Industries in Europe*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998).

5 See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Constituents of a theory of the media',in his *Critical Essays*, (New York: Continuum, 1982),pp. 46-76.

6 For a typical example see George Monbiot, *The Age of Consent*, (London: Flamingo, 2003).

7 For a useful account of this process,see Jim McGuigan, *Culture and the Public Sphere*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

8 See especially the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom at http://www.cpbf.org.uk.

9 'Beyond metaculture', *New Left Review*, 16, July/August 2002, pp. 86-104.

10 For recent discussions of this question,see Susan Watkins, 'A weightless hegemony: New Labour's role in the neoliberal order', *New Left Review*, 25, January/February 2004,pp. 5—33, and Minqi Li, 'After neoliberalism: empire, social democracy or socialism?', *Monthly Review*, January 2004,pp. 21-36. available at http://www.monthlyreview.org/0104li.htm