

Why is Change So Hard? The Persistence of Inequality in the Cultural Sector

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Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor, *Culture is Bad for You*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020, paperback £11.99, pp. 361

Mark O'Neill and Glenn Hooper (eds), *Connecting Museums*, Routledge, 2021, paperback £36.99, pp. 296

As Mark O'Neill writes in the 'Introduction' to *Connecting Museums*, despite the many changes made to museums in the last forty years, popular media can still perceive them to be 'old, dusty, boring and barely relevant' (1). This thought was in the back of my mind when reading both O'Neill's edited volume, and Brook, O'Brien and Taylor's provocatively titled *Culture is Bad for You*. Since the 1980s, there has been a raft of initiatives to make UK museums more relevant, including *Renaissance in the Regions*,¹ *Inspiring Learning for All*,² *Museums Change Lives*,³ and the *Happy Museum Project*⁴ to name a few, each providing advice, tools and case studies. Yet, the idea of arts and culture as an elitist, rarefied space, which only appeals to a certain type of individual or group, is an enduring one. It exists implicitly in both these books as a concept which those in the field are trying to escape but never quite manage it. *Why* this might be, and the solution to it, is the theme which, for me, connects these two books together.

On the surface, the two books provide very different perspectives. *Culture is Bad for You* sets out a pessimistic view that despite all the grand claims made for the value of culture – that it 'will help keep you fit and healthy... bring communities together... improve your education... get you higher wages' (1) – not everyone benefits equally from these claims. These inequalities are embedded deeply into the very fabric of art and culture, which is, according to the authors, mainly an elitist endeavour. This matters because culture 'does so much to shape who we are, and what our world can and might be' (283). It also demolishes many of the stereotypes about the cultural industry, for example that it is a meritocracy where anyone who is determined, and hardworking enough, can make their voice heard. As 'Henna',⁵ a South Asian woman who works in film and television, memorably says:

It doesn't matter if you're intelligent or well-qualified... What matters is who you know and who you've worked with... They would much rather hire the White dude and they feel more comfortable with the White dude than the bolshy brown woman (3).

The strongest aspect of this work is the evidence from individuals who work in the cultural sector. It really strikes home the different experiences that individuals can have, based on their backgrounds, and ruthlessly challenges the idea that the creative industries are edgy, risk-taking, even creative in the strict sense of the word (e.g. producing imaginative and original ideas). 'Thomas', a White, Oxbridge-educated man who works in publishing, demonstrates this when he says, 'we can talk about diversity all we like, and we can mean it until our hearts are breaking, but in the end, when you've got one post to fill, you really don't want to fuck it up' (269). He also proves 'Henna's' earlier point.

One of the biggest barriers to working in the cultural sector is the way in which these jobs are framed, both by those who work in the sector and by wider society. The arts and cultural sector is often portrayed as 'good work' in terms of being 'fulfilling, offering chances for self-expression, freedom... a source of joy and love' (140). However, many cultural workers have

to cope with poorly paid, even unpaid, work to break into their chosen profession. It exposes the duality of workers feeling (or being told) that they are 'lucky' to be working in a creative occupation that defies the grind of the typical 'nine to five' office job, whilst struggling to justify the precariousness and lack of a decent wage. Those who do not have the resources to do unpaid work face additional hurdles to gaining employment in arts or culture, because most organizations expect it. For example, 'John', a young man from a working class background trying to break into film and television, said, 'This isn't actually a career. It's just a glorified hobby because everyone else is managing to do it for free or doing it for cheap' (158). As the authors suggest, 'People have access to different sorts of resources, or capital, as they struggle for success. The way these capitals interact is key' (201).

To develop their narrative, the authors draw on two research projects carried out in 2015 and 2018, which involved 2,487 survey responses and 237 interviews with individuals in the sector. They also draw on an analysis of nationally representative datasets including the UK Census, Taking Part and national Labour Force Survey. The authors are very clear about their focus and admit that some aspects of inequality are not covered in depth in the study (including disability and LGBT+). At times, I found the book very dense, although the structure makes it possible to dip in and out. The evidence certainly helps to explain '... the failure to change the structures of cultural occupations by many inclusion, diversity and career development policies. Individuals may benefit, while the problems remain' (281).

By allowing individuals a voice, it also clearly shows where the problems lie in terms of the workforce. 'Thomas' is only one of many senior managers and cultural leaders who '... recognise, and regret, the inequalities in and exclusions from their industries. At the same time, they fail to recognise the processes that contribute to these inequalities as they play out in their careers' (272). Unfortunately, the lack of a ready solution to these persistent inequalities is reflected in the relatively short conclusion (273-83).

The premise of *Connecting Museums* is much more positive, although many of the same issues arise. This edited volume brings together fifteen contributions from museum practitioners and academics, exploring ways in which museums can go beyond one-off contributions to society and develop relationships with communities which are dynamic, relevant and vital to community health, wellbeing and inclusion. It provides a mixture of approaches from practical examples, including Janice Lane and Nia Williams' section about 'Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales and the Journey towards Cultural Democracy' (66-79), to the theoretical, such as Helen Graham's exploration of 'Breaking out of the Museum Core: Conservation as Participatory Ontology and Systematic Action Inquiry' (80-94). There are familiar themes, such as Mark O'Neill, Pete Seaman and Duncan Dornan's piece on 'Thinking through Museums and Health in Glasgow' (95-111), and some surprises, such as Graham Black and Stuart Warburton's assessment of the closure of Snibston Discovery Museum in Coalville, Leicestershire (152-69). This explores the local community's response to the closure: '[I]nstead of passively accepting its loss, the town has experimented with new ways of promoting both Coalville's heritage and local pride in it' (152). The idea that grassroots arts and culture can provide a valuable alternative to an 'elitist' mainstream is one that is not explored in *Culture is Bad for You*, and it opens up questions of what is ultimately more meaningful to communities. The value of *Connecting Museums*, therefore, lies in the breadth of contributions and the placing of museums within a much wider framework, from global (Cooke: 216-32), to large-scale museum services such as Amgueddfa Cymru and Glasgow Museums, to community-inspired projects such as the tiny 1845 Methodist chapel on the Beara Peninsula, Ireland, converted into the Allihies Copper Mining Museum (Hooper: 170-85). There are many positive examples of how museums are reaching out to diverse audiences, and demonstrating their social impact in the process, both physically and virtually (Murphy: 203-15).

Yet the same themes that haunt Brook, O'Brien and Taylor are present: are museums doing enough? Are they really inclusive of the range and depth of voices that characterize contemporary society? The answer is that some are trying hard to be. Nuala Morse's insightful overview of 'The Social Role of Museums: From Social Inclusion to Health and Wellbeing' (48-65) suggests that whilst museums are subject to the whims of funders, museum workers are

not entirely passive in the face of new initiatives. They can actively shape and interpret these depending on their own, and the organization's, values. Hence, the impact of such initiatives is often patchy. Mike Benson and Kathy Cremin (17-32) likewise detail the challenges they have faced in trying to encourage the museum sector to work with communities in a way where everyone can 'speak and think freely and to act independently' (17). Despite a positive response from the sector, their approach has never translated into long-term funding, and Benson and Cremin conclude that too many museums continue to accept mediocrity: 'to have a non-diverse workforce, continue with a linear structure and emphasise certain expertise over others' (32). Bernadette Lynch's long-running work in museums also uncovers the ways in which museums exercise their power and control over the communities they work with (33-47), in ways that often go unacknowledged. Participants are often 'subtly coerced and compromised by their partnership, no matter how "honourable" the museum's intentions may have been. The ability to exert real influence... is left out – without which the "partners" are left with very little at all' (35).

Two valuable books, then, that shed light on the ways in which museums, and the wider cultural sector, can both perpetuate, and challenge, structures of power that create exclusion for particular voices and experiences. How can we escape these ways of thinking? Both works point to these issues of power being deeply embedded, propped up by the very society in which these organizations exist. Drawing conclusions, it is difficult not to feel dispirited. Both works imply that whilst inroads can be made by those with the will and determination, overall, without radical change – including senior leaders and funders who are willing to take risks and give their support to new voices and experiences, and a new perspective on cultural jobs that takes them seriously as life-long career choices – these power structures, and the inequality it creates, may be here to stay.

Notes

- 1 Re:source, 'Renaissance in the Regions: A New Vision for England's Museums', undated. https://archive-media.museumsassociation.org/policy_renaissanceintheregions.pdf, accessed 17 August 2022.
- 2 Arts Council England, 'Inspiring Learning For All', 2022. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/measuring-outcomes/generic-learning-outcomes#section-1>, accessed 17 August 2022.
- 3 Museums Association, 'Museums Change Lives', 2022. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/museums-change-lives/>, accessed 17 August 2022.
- 4 Happy Museum, 'The Happy Museum: Home', undated. <https://happymuseumproject.org>, accessed 17 August 2022.
- 5 Real names are not used in the research.

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