COMMON GROUND:
CULTURAL ACTION AS A ROUTE TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Cultural action has been used to promote community development for at least forty years in the UK, often with good results. During that period, the theories, values, and approaches of professionals have varied and evolved, but there has been a noticeable shift in focus – particularly in cultural policy – from collective to individual outcomes, in line with the growing individualization of policy since the 1980s. Yet the potential of cultural action to bring people together and to build a foundation for lasting community development work remains important.

This article considers the processes by which arts-based community projects can lead to the development of both informal and formal collective organization, and their potential in empowerment. Central to this process, it is argued, is culture's focus on people's capacities and interests, rather than on externally defined problems. The paper draws on two contrasting examples to show the continuing importance of cultural action in very different social and economic situations: my research into voluntary arts development in rural England and Wales, and my experience of community cultural projects in south east Europe.

Introduction: the recent history of community arts

European ideas about the social function of art, which can be traced back to Classical Greece, form an intellectual history that says as much about how people have viewed society as about their concepts of art (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). That is particularly clear today, when the arts have acquired an unusually prominent position in public policy. They are proposed as a means of promoting urban regeneration (Gateshead), tourism (Bilbao), and the creative economy (Singapore); they have also been seen, particularly in Western Europe, as a way of achieving various social objectives.

In Britain, the latest version of this approach was sparked by social, cultural, and political changes in the 1960s, and led to the emergence of new forms of socially-engaged theatre and community arts. While the latter was, and remains, a highly varied field of practice, in the 1970s and early 1980s an important strand was concerned with community development. Practitioners sought to strengthen community activism and organization with the aim of enabling disenfranchised groups to represent their interests to those in power, especially local government. Characteristic forms at the time included murals (inspired by work in Chicago and Mexico), print shops like Paddington, See Red and Basement (Kenna, 1986), and community festivals (Crummy, 1992). Some projects became involved in campaigns: Corby Community Arts supported resistance to closure of the town's steelworks, and others were involved in work around the 1984–85 miners' strike. But by the end of the 1980s, such direct political involvement (that had, in any case, been one approach among several) was waning, along with direct engagement with community development practice. There were, and remain, exceptions to this trend, such as the disability arts movement that has continued to use arts practice to articulate group perspectives and political positions (Hevey, 1992).

The individualization of community arts in the 1990s

Although the sector grew steadily throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it depended less on Arts Council funding than on a range of other sources, among which local government was pre-eminent. These funds often came from youth, education, and regeneration budgets with a range of overt, if vague, social objectives which, while compatible with community arts practice, focused on personal rather than community outcomes. Health and social care similarly emphasized the needs of individuals rather than the collective interests of groups, so arts projects funded through these sources tended to be drawn away from broader concerns; as ever, there were exceptions, such as the health promotion work of Gateshead Council community arts team or East Midlands Shape's work with mental health service users on care in the community (Cullen, 1991). Since funding was usually granted on a project basis – a trend that increased with the arrival of National Lottery funding in the 1990s – it was often difficult to sustain it and to work on longer-term community objectives.

It is arguable that these changes were underpinned, even made necessary, by a shift in British public policy over 25 years from the collective towards the individual. The privatization

of responsibility for change has affected community arts practice, as it has other sectors. Thus, although there has been significant investment in community-based arts activity since 1997, not least through increases in funding to Arts Council England, policy expectations of the work centre around a range of personal outcomes such as the acquisition of transferable skills and confidence-building (ACE, 2005). Its artistic purpose and value gets inadequate attention even from arts funding agencies. Innovative policy work on the arts and social inclusion was undertaken in the early years of the new Labour Government (DCMS, 1999), but its implementation has tended to fall back on simplistic concepts of practice and personal change that are of doubtful lasting value and questionable ethical intent.

These changes are to some degree symbolized by the gradual abandonment of the term 'community arts' in favour of more seemingly neutral alternatives such as 'community-based arts' or 'participatory arts'. The word empowerment is rarely used and appears to be regarded by many, perhaps unaware of the concept's place in community development, as naive or suspicious. Today, although some artists in Britain are using new approaches to collective issues in a contemporary parallel to the practice described above, the sector is more generally characterized by a concern with individual rather than community development (Matarasso 2013).

Community development practice and arts touring in rural England

Spiers and Boden at Calverton Miner's Welfare 2003

Two things are notable about rural touring in the present context: how they work and the However, the use of the arts and cultural action to support community development remains a valid practice and the ideas that emerged from the British community arts sector

from the late 1960s onwards have been a source of influence and inspiration to artists working in many different contexts in Britain and abroad. The development of rural touring networks illustrates how the community arts movement's values and practice have shaped work in seemingly very different fields.

The first rural touring networks were established in Lincolnshire, Hampshire, and South East Wales in 1980, with the intention of improving access by people living in rural areas to professional arts performance (Matarasso, 2004). The work grew slowly at first, with six schemes established by 1989 and 12 by 1994. Since then, however, there has been a rapid expansion, partly assisted by the creation of the National Rural Touring Forum (NRTF) in 1997. By 2007, there were about 40 such schemes in England, mostly organized on a county basis, a national scheme in Wales, and three in Scotland.[1] The model also exists in other countries, including France, New Zealand, Australia, and Ireland (O'Leary 2006).

Rural Touring audience in Lincolnshire, 2003

In the UK, despite variations of practice and vision, the schemes essentially follow the same approach, acting as a link between (mostly) rural communities and professional theatre companies, musicians, and other performers. As a result, tens of thousands of people have access to art events in community venues. In 2003, the English touring schemes supported 3168 performances and 588 workshops for a combined audience of nearly 195,000 people,

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[1]   In 2017, there are 25 schemes in England, four in Scotland and one in Wales, as a result of cost-saving mergers and cutbacks in public funding. See http://www.ruraltouring.org/members (accessed 14.03.2017)

at a total cost of £2.3 million (Matarasso, 2004).[2] The schemes themselves are financed by local government and the Arts Councils in England, Scotland, and Wales and so are able to offer volunteer promoters shows at reduced rates. In 2003, 1664 promoters put on shows. Most are constituted community groups – typically, the village hall committee – with perhaps one in 10 promoters being an individual working with informal support.

results they obtain. Each event is a partnership between the artist, the scheme as agent, and the volunteer promoters, which evenly distributes power, risk, and reward. Promoters are offered a selection of work to choose from and the groups treat this process carefully and democratically, often deciding by majority vote. Once the booking is made promoters take on responsibilities ranging from marketing the event to hosting the artists and paying an agreed fee at the end of the night. This can be financially risky since the venue may not accommodate large numbers while a strong commitment to inclusion keeps ticket prices low. Promoters sometimes lose money but, if they do well, they will make a surplus that offsets past losses or helps with village hall running costs. There is also a significant social risk, since some shows – which the promoters will have publicly endorsed – may be disliked or provoke controversy. However, the essential point is that this model gives community groups a high degree of control of what they do and how it is financed: it effectively places decisions about the use of public subsidy in their hands.

The importance of this for community development should not be underestimated. Apart from their own value as social and cultural events, putting on these performances demands weeks of planning and local cooperation. Afterwards, the memory of shared experiences is key to community cohesion. There is a genuine equality between the partners – artists, agency, and promoters – that is far from the patrician roots of most state cultural provision. The effects of that empowerment can be seen in those communities that have gone on to promote other performances independently (e.g. Lowdham, Nottinghamshire) and, more unusually, those that have developed other cultural and social activities as a result of the experience, confidence, and skills gained through rural touring (Ashbrittle, Somerset; Bergh Apton, Norfolk; or Terrington, North Yorkshire) (Matarasso, 2004).

Community development and cultural activism in south-east Europe

Rural England faces complex problems, but it is relatively well-endowed in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital. Can community arts practice be as effective in more disadvantaged situations? Experience in some of the poorest rural communities of south east Europe suggests that it is indeed transferable to these very different situations. In 1999, I

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[2]　　Despite cutbacks in local authority funding, between 2004 and 2015, the number of promoting groups in England increased by 44% to 2,407. Audiences rose by 43% and now number 278,000. The proportion of available tickets sold has risen from 67% to 76%, and there has been a 15% real-terms increase in box office income over the period. (Matarasso 2015: 23).

was commissioned by the King Baudouin Foundation (Belgium) to help develop a new pro-gramme aimed at supporting community development through local cultural projects. The 'Living Heritage' programme was to be delivered in south-east Europe where the foundation was already active in child protection and ethnic relations work. Based on research into community-based heritage work in the UK, Ireland, Sweden and Belgium, as well as British community arts practice, a series of principles were developed to guide the programme:

- Demonstrating local benefit;
- Sustainable economic development;
- Supporting voluntary commitment;
- An incremental approach;
- Flexibility and responsiveness;

- Leadership and a clear vision;
- Accessible management;
- Openness and honesty;
- Making friends with the media; and
- 'Dig where you stand'.

The last principle was borrowed from the Living Archive Project in Milton Keynes (UK). It was intended to convey that every community has heritage or cultural resources that are important to them, and in respect of which they have unique expertise. Living Heritage took a very broad view of what constitutes heritage: folklore, buildings, oral history, the natural environment, contemporary arts, music and dance traditions, festivals, food culture, muse-ums and community events were all considered valid. Over time, it became clear that the essential criterion was that the people proposing the project cared about it and could demonstrate a similar commitment in the wider community.

Living Heritage Group in Byala Cherkva, Bulgaria 2004

The principles provided guidance about action that should not just lead to successful outcomes, but do so through a process of capacity and confidence building that equipped participants to undertake further self-directed work. They were concerned as much with clarifying values and ways of working as with technical aspects of project delivery. Above all, the principles were intended to guide, not to prescribe – a tool for thinking through situations and ideas. In specific circumstances, one or more would not be appropriate or relevant: what mattered was that people had thought about and discussed the issues and knew why something did or did not apply to them.

Park restoration project, Kratovo, Living Heritage Macedonia 2003

The Living Heritage programme was launched in March 2001 in Skopje (Macedonia), and subsequently developed in Bulgaria, Romania, and Bosnia Herzegovina (Matarasso, 2005). Over the next four years, 140 community heritage projects were supported, mostly in small, often remote rural communities (though urban projects also took place in Sofia, Brasov, Bitola, Sarajevo and elsewhere). In each country, local partners managed the grant programme and provided training, technical support, and other resources with help from external specialists. Between 2001 and 2005, about €2.2 million was invested in the Living Heritage programme by the King Baudouin Foundation and its financial partners, notably the Soros Foundation. The programme methodology had a number of distinctive aspects.

First, Living Heritage was not open to applications from existing organizations. Because it aimed to support marginalized and disempowered communities without the capacity to compete in such a process, projects were identified through fieldwork and meetings with communities to discuss local needs and ideas. As a result, many projects were led by teams with no previous experience of project development or sometimes of working together.

They became organizations, formally and informally constituted, through the Living Heritage process. Even where the projects were led by existing voluntary organizations, like the *chitalishte* that form a unique cultural infrastructure in Bulgaria, the programme was able to reach communities who had not previously had external funding or support. This contributed to a very high success rate, both in the number of successful applicants, and in the proportion that achieved their objectives. Just 7% of the projects failed to deliver their mutually agreed goals; of the, 93% which did, many exceeded their best expectations.

Secondly, the programme provided very substantial non-financial support. Some of this was formal training: every project team participated in two residential workshops, about six months apart, before receiving their grants. But informal support was equally important. Site visits, specialist assistance through local experts, support in negotiating with public bodies, even simply being able to phone a project manager in a crisis, were all essential to helping project teams build skills, confidence and experience.

Thirdly, the grants offered were generally small. Indeed, as the programme developed, they got smaller, so that the average grant in 2005 was just under €6,000. Since future local grant aid was unlikely, it was essential to avoid creating financial dependency. Living Heritage grants had to enable a process of local capacity building and organizational development that would leave each community better able to work collectively towards shared goals.

A final notable aspect of the programme was its capacity to foster a huge diversity of work. Projects included major building restoration (Bitola, Byala Cherkva), environmental campaigns (Ipoteşti, Tusnad), oral history (Cherni Vit, Ivanovo), crafts (Tetovo, Šipovo), theatre (Darjiu, Satu Mare), festivals (Catici), folklore (Oresh), video (Lagera), and much more. Working with people's interests usually meant that they had expertise in the subject and reduced dependence on external advisors. The programme's respect for, and readiness to invest in, what the community thought important was a vital step towards empowerment.

That investment was wholehearted. Though there were grant conditions, they applied to project management, not its central purpose. In this respect, Living Heritage operated unlike most community arts practice, since it did not depend on professionals with artistic or cultural expertise. The support of local and other experts was largely confined to generic matters of project management and community development practice. Where project teams needed support on artistic or related issues, they had the funds to contract their own advisors. Like the rural touring promoters, they remained in control of their work and in several cases demonstrated their authority by rejecting professional advice. By accepting people's culture at their own estimation, Living Heritage avoided some of the prejudices of much arts funding. It did not, for example, privilege contemporary over traditional art or new technology over craft skills. It accepted that what was meaningful to the beneficiaries was more important than what was valued by foundation staff or cultural experts.

Every project was monitored and evaluated by local management partners with support from the programme team. The results were consistently impressive. People had gathered

local support, securing contributions in cash, kind, and voluntary work. They had learnt to plan, organise, and manage complex projects. They had developed contacts with local government, businesses, other NGOs, and professional bodies, often for the first time. They had delivered a wide range of activities, workshop programmes, training, and public events, and attracted very good attendances. In most cases they had earned income, and in some there was lasting economic benefit through increased visitor numbers.[3] But perhaps the most important outcome was the strengthening of existing community associations and the development of new ones. These had different structures and interests, from environmental protection or youth work to traditional art and tourism, but most had the capacity to build on the development initiated by the programme. The experience of the early projects showed that a high proportion continued to work independently after the end of the funds.[4]

Women's needlework group, Living Heritage Macedonia, 2003

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[3]   The Living Heritage project in Smolare (Novo Selo, Macedonia) created a safe path to a 45 metre waterfall, of historic cultural significance to the village. In the first year it attracted national media attention and visitors, and that has been sustained over the subsequent decade.

[4]   Living Heritage in Bulgaria has been sustained as a programme since 2005 by the Workshop for Civic Initiatives. See http://zhivonasledstvo.bg/main (in Bulgarian only).

The success of these projects was dependent on many factors that there is no space to consider here. However, one issue deserves particular attention, because it parallels the experiences of rural arts development already described. Living Heritage gave funds directly to the communities it was working with, rather than to intermediary agencies or arts organizations. This required trust on both sides, especially when the group concerned did not have an existing bank account or constitution: in the event, there was no instance of fraud among the 140 projects. Being trusted with money was a genuinely empowering experience that built confidence and encouraged people to show what they could achieve.

Conclusions: cultural action as a route to community development

The experiences of both rural touring and Living Heritage highlight some crucial lessons. First, effective community cultural projects produce a wide range of developmental outcomes, alongside their intrinsic cultural value. They can develop people's skills in many areas, from performance, construction or IT to competencies like teamwork or project management, according to their roles in a project. Those skills bring confidence founded on actual achievement, recognized by others. Projects also build social capital in the form of relationships of trust with others, including those outwith people's usual networks, such as politicians and professionals in public services. These developments can in turn support the creation and growth of community organizations from informal associations to social enterprises, which give individuals the power to take collective action towards shared goals. Even if the original cultural project is not continued, individually and collectively, the community gains capacities that leave it stronger.

Secondly, self-managed cultural projects are within people's existing means. Precisely because such projects are often of little interest to outsiders, and particularly to government, they are left to local initiative. They tend to focus on things in which local people have real expertise and to demand skills and resources that are within their reach. With appropriate support, they therefore have a high chance of success. They require the development of generic and transferable practical, organizational, and cooperative skills that are resources for future action.

Thirdly, the people involved, the intended beneficiaries of so much development effort, do not necessarily regard culture as a secondary issue to be addressed after other problems have been solved. Often, they see it as a way to understand and address their problems from within. One Macedonian Living Heritage project took place in a community that had already done a project through the King Baudouin Foundation's 'interethnic relations' programme. The heritage project proved to be more successful in engaging all sections of a very diverse community, partly because it did not announce improving ethnic relations as its goal. Unlike many developmental initiatives, cultural action focuses on community assets not problems. It deals with traditions, natural heritage, local landmarks, food culture, oral history, contemporary art and numerous other things identified and cherished by participants themselves. Where problems are part of the equation, they are identified internally

and from experience, rather than by outside experts. Community cultural projects are effective when they centre on action that people care about and are developmental rather than remedial in conception.

Finally, cultural projects give people access to a means of self-expression, even of self-definition, that few other forms of collective action offer. Culture is above all how humans create and articulate their values. It allows internal meanings to be externalized and shared. In a democratic context, cultural expression is a fundamental human right because it allows individuals and groups to define themselves and their beliefs, and not only be defined by others. This is obvious in projects like the Living Heritage Roma Theatre project (Ilijaš, Bosnia Herzegovina), which aimed to improve understanding of Roma people's culture and lives by presenting new plays to a range of audiences. But the affirmation of personal and shared cultural values is no less important in the development of a traditional costume workshop in Velešta (Macedonia), the restoration of a local pageant in Satu Mare (Romania), or the social and cultural evenings offered through British rural touring schemes. In each case, cultural action enables people to place themselves as legitimate actors within the broader life of their society. It lays the foundations of empowerment.

Neither art nor or the community activism it can nurture are final responses to the challenges that face disadvantaged or disempowered communities. The economic, social, and other forces confronted today by many marginalized groups cannot be overcome be such action alone. But the arts have the potential to define and symbolize alternative realities, while working through them can build people's capacity for and interest in shared enterprise. They can form a nucleus of self-determination, even of resistance.

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