# APPROXIMATE PROJECTIONS: MAPPING CULTURAL POLICY AND GOVERNANCE

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This lecture was originally given at the University of Antwerp, in Belgium, on 26 March 2012. It relates to British government structures and cultural policy as they were in 2012 based on data current at the time. To that extent, it is a historical snapshot, which it is neither possible nor useful to update. The political crisis that has engulfed the UK since its decision in June 2016 to leave the European Union has destabilised everything, including the government's idea of culture. Since then, there have been nine Secretaries of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, none of whom showed conspicuous interest in or understanding of their responsibilities. Two have been contestants in the reality TV programme, 'I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here', while sitting Members of Parliament, helping render the difference between government and entertainment meaningless to many.

Since the lecture is concerned not with cultural data but with what it is imagined to be and represent, I trust that it remains of interest, despite the passage of years. But sadly, what strikes me as I revise it today, is the cynicism and carelessness with which successive Conservative governments have undermined the social norms and cultural institutions they once claimed to defend.

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As an area of conscious policy, culture has never been more important to democratic states than it is today. Its importance grew throughout the 20th century as rapidly growing and changing mass media pushed governments to control or restrain its influence. In the past, patronage and repression had been crude but sufficient mechanisms for rulers to extend cultural influence. But in large, democratic, industrial societies, the complexity of cultural activity demanded more sophisticated responses. In Western Europe, where the ideological force of both politics and religion has declined greatly, culture has filled the vacuum, responding to people's continuing need to find meaning and transcendence in their lives. Cultural policy now touches, in different

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ways and degrees, not just the obvious domains of art and heritage but also the economy, education, social cohesion, health care and many other fields. Indeed, so pervasive is culture in modern life and so complex is the operation of modern nation states, that important parts of cultural policy may not be recognised as such at all.

As states have ventured further into the still unfamiliar terrain of culture, they have also sought to chart the landscape they wish to govern, if not control. So they have a conceptual image—a map—of the demands and responsibilities of contemporary cultural policy. What is the territory of cultural activity? How far does it extend? What are its principal features and where are its perils? Human beings love maps, which give them a god-like view of their world, and rulers, more liable to mistake themselves for gods than most, like maps very much indeed. To plan, you need a plan: the dual meaning of this word is not coincidental.

A map is a text to be read, the graphical representation of physical reality. But a map is not reality. Since it translates the curved surface of the globe into a plane, a map is always an approximation. This reduction of three dimensions to two is called a projection, since it was originally created by projecting lines. It is also a good word for how mapmakers project their own view of the world onto their maps. Abraham Ortelius' Atlas is as much a projection of his concept of the world as of his geographical knowledge. It is a site of land and imagination. For the archaeologist Matthew Johnson:

> Maps purport to embody an objective description of the landscape, but actually represent 'reality' selectively and are anything but objective, a point made most obviously in the way that traditional projections of the globe onto a flat surface have habitually prioritized the 'West' over other areas.[1]

The distortions of maps increase with scale: a map of Belgium is necessarily less accurate than a map of Antwerp. Jorge Luis Borges once imagined an ancient people so obsessed with cartographical accuracy that they created a full-scale map of the empire, which it entirely and uselessly covered.[2] It is an absurd, unforgettable image and a warning that all maps are simplifications of infinitely complex reality. Cartography is an art of selection. Every map is a narrative that tells the story its maker has looked for or wished to tell. The geographer Mark Monmonier explains that:

> Because abstract representations of data can distort almost as readily as they can reveal, analytical tools are also rhetorical instruments fully capable of 'lying' in the hands of malevolent, naive, or sloppily expedient authors.[3]

Despite these unavoidable distortions, maps remain immensely valuable. They help us understand the world and our situation in it—and then they help us communicate that understanding to other people. In this they resemble art.

Each is a powerful system for creating meaning. A map has several advantages over a written text. Like all pictures, they can be taken in almost instantly, even if it requires hours or years to explore them fully. They are also good at representing relationships, such as the relative size and, by association, the importance of different features. And if we remember that they are projections of the mapmaker as well as representations of reality, we can start to understand not just how things are but how they are being seen.

So what maps of the cultural sector do democratic states use to guide their policies? How do they draw up their plans for governance? If all projections involve distortion, which distortions do they accept and which do they avoid? And, in doing so, what do they put at the centre—where early European cartographers once placed Jerusalem—and what do they consign to the margins? What do they omit entirely?

The creation of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 1992 (as the Department of National Heritage) was a key sign of culture's growing political importance in Britain. Although the DCMS has some powers in the other nations in the UK's present devolved system of government, most of its work concerns England alone so that is what will be discussed here, though there are parallels with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as there are with other European countries. In 2012, the Department's responsibilities were set out on its website and included the following areas:

- 2012 Olympic games & Paralympic games
- Architecture and design
- Alcohol & entertainment
- Arts
- Broadcasting
- Communities and local government
- Creative industries
- Cultural property
- Gambling and racing
- Government art collection
- Historic environment
- Honours and ceremonials
- International
- Libraries
- Media mergers
- Museums and galleries
- National lottery
- Research and statistics
- Sport
- Telecoms and online
- Tourism[4]

It is certainly an eclectic list, less the map of a cohesive nation than that of an empire built by acquisition over time, which of course it is. Some of the Department's functions represent an idea of what culture is; it has other responsibilities for political or pragmatic reasons. Tourism, for example, could as well be a responsibility of the Department for Business.

So a better place to look for the Department's map of culture might be in the statistical data it produces about cultural activity. This has grown enormously in the past 20 years, both because of how information technology has changed data handling and because of political rhetoric about evidence-based

policy, though that idea has rather fallen out of fashion in recent years. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport publishes an annual survey about cultural activity in England, under the title *Taking Part*, and based on interviews with about 29,000 people.[5] The first *Taking Part* report was published in May 2007 and the survey continues today, providing useful data about people's participation in culture. But what interests me here is not the data itself, but which activities government selects for the survey. In the 2007 release, the map of culture looks fairly conventional, one might even say classical; the report included the following chapters:

> Cross-sector; Historic Environment; Museums and Galleries; Libraries; Archives; Arts Opportunities; Active Sport, Gambling; and Broadcasting.[6]

The 2011 Taking Part report contains the following chapters:

> Free time activities; Child engagement; The influence of childhood participation on adult participation; Sport and active recreation; Attitudes to the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games; Digital engagement; The big society; Cycling and swimming proficiency; Archives; Participation in culture; Looking ahead.[7]

The difference is partly accounted for by the change of government in 2010, from the Labour party to a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition and while there are debates to be had about policy, it is the image that government presents of the cultural sector, and by extension, of itself that is of immediate interest. It is highly unstable—less a map than a traveller's tale of distant lands that alters according to the teller and the audience. There are consistent landmarks—sport, museums, heritage, libraries and the arts—but they change shape in different tellings and their relative importance varies according to which other features, from cycling to gambling, are added to the map.

There are several reasons why the nature and dimensions of the cultural sector looks so unstable to the British government. One might suggest the disputed theorisation of culture itself, the relatively recent political engagement with cultural policy, or the rapidly changing nature of arts and cultural practice in post-millennial Britain. But there is one factor which is quite particular to the UK and which goes to the heart of the question of cultural governance and management. Whether we look at the 2007 or the 2011 map of the cultural landscape, what is consistent is that government controls almost none of it.

England has the oldest charity law in the world, dating back to the Reformation when the dissolution of the Catholic monasteries which provided education, health, social care and refuge for the poor, necessitated a new legal mechanism through which their social work could be continued by others. The 1601 Charitable Uses Act defined the purposes of a charity as being the relief of poverty, the advancement of education or the promotion of religion,

and those concepts have underpinned all subsequent charity law, in Britain and in much of its erstwhile Empire where legal concepts remain an influential part of its legacy. Four hundred years later, those purposes still underpin the 2006 Charities Act though it adds ideals, such as the advancement of human rights, which could not have been imagined in Shakespeare's day. In 2012, there were 161,995 main charities in England and Wales, with a combined income of £53.2 billion.[8] What David Cameron called 'The Big Society'[9] has existed in Britain for centuries, with millions of people giving time, skill and money to support a huge range of independent altruistic organisations. For example, government calculates that 73% of all adults have volunteered at least once in the past year, and 48% do so at least once a month.[10]

Whilst the majority of charities are concerned with helping the poor and sick, the purpose of education has enabled many cultural organisations to register as charities and benefit from the distinct social and legal status of these non-profit bodies. The Tate Gallery, the Royal Opera House and the National Theatre are all charities, as are thousands of other arts facilities, heritage centres, museums and cultural groups—to say nothing of the expensive private schools, like Eton, which educate so much of our governing class. It is therefore worth saying something about the governance of charities and thus about the governance of cultural organisations.

Charities are legally constituted, independent corporate bodies, like companies, but governed by a distinct body of law. Each charity is owned by its trustees—typically between six and twelve people, though the number varies—who are legally prevented from benefiting personally from the work of the charity. The trustee therefore holds the assets of the charity—which in larger cases may be many millions of pounds—on behalf of those whom it is intended to benefit, whether that is a group defined by geography or social status or, in the case of cultural organisations, the public as a whole. The sector is regulated by the Charity Commission, which sets clear and demanding standards of conduct for governance.

Trustees have and must accept ultimate responsibility for directing the affairs of a charity, and ensuring that it is solvent, well-run, and delivering the charitable outcomes for the benefit of the public for which it has been set up.

This general statement is amplified in detailed guidance about a trustee's responsibility to ensure legal and regulatory compliance, their duty of prudence in safeguarding the charity's assets, work and reputation, and their duty of care to use their skill, knowledge and experience in their work. Trustees may be personally liable for a charity's debts or actions, in the same way as company directors, unless they can show that they have reasonably fulfilled these duties and acted collectively. Given the burdens and the absence of financial reward it is remarkable that 900,000 people serve as charity trustees

today. Their enacted belief that one person can be trusted to do something without personal gain for the benefit of another is an admirable and powerful idea, and one to which I shall return, because it is now under serious threat in Britain. For now, though, the critical point is that charities make up a very large part of the non-commercial cultural sector in Britain and that their autonomy is both guaranteed and required by legislation.

These cultural organisations, which range in scale from national museums such as Tate to small community arts groups, are governed by their trustees who have overall legal and fiduciary responsibility. They are run by paid staff, so there is the distinction between executive and non-executive roles familiar in business, though charity trustees cannot normally receive any personal reward in return for their work.

Mostly, the system works well and both sides understand their respective roles and powers. In my experience, however, there is a consistent weakness among the trustees of arts organisations who are often more inclined to defer to the expertise of their staff than their counterparts in other charities. Trustees generally have expertise in law, public service, business or the arts, but they can still find it difficult to challenge a charismatic and admired artistic director whose vision they feel they are there to support. When cultural organisations have got into serious financial and other difficulties, the underlying cause has often been a failure of the trustees to hold the executive to account. Over the years, there have been several initiatives to strengthen the governance of cultural institutions and standards have slowly risen. But the core problem remains under-appreciated. It does not matter how expert and informed they are, nor how clear is the code of conduct under which they work, if trustees lack the confidence to challenge the executive.

Policy and governance in this context require a distinctive approach, which becomes clearer if we imagine a map of the cultural sector, based on forms of organisation rather than forms of culture. This has several advantages, including simplicity, clear boundaries and compatibility with other aspects of policy and administration. Conventionally, this division identifies three sectors: public, private and not-for-profit organisations. (This map ignores informal and individual activity, as cultural policy often does.) But in England, at least, the position is a little more complicated than that because what can properly be called the public sector is very small.

Apart from the Corps of Army Music (the largest employer of musicians in the country[11]) public libraries are the only cultural service directly controlled by the British state, albeit through local government.[12] In 2008/09 the UK supported about 4,500 public libraries with 35 million members at a cost of £1.2 billion: almost three times the budget of Arts Council England.[13] The rest of the public cultural sector—including major state institutions like the British

Library or the British Museum—is made up of what are called non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) or quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (QUANGOs). Most are also charities whose trustees have a legal duty to act only in its best interests to advance the objects of the charity. The most important effect of this independence is that neither the Culture Secretary nor the department can direct any of these organisations to act in any particular way. They cannot appoint staff, require changes to programming or direct any other aspect of their work. They can appoint some trustees of NDPBs, typically the chairs, but even this has been until recently an uncertain power. In 2012, the Culture Secretary's 2012 decision to end the term of Liz Forgan as chair of Arts Council England, who was seen within and beyond the cultural sector as effective, was criticised as political.[14] Ten years later, that looks like the precursor of a far more politicized environment in which government packs boards with trustees who are active supporters, in defiance of established principle.

The British government has three principal tools with which to influence cultural activity: first, by providing or withholding finance (and even there, except for the largest NDPBs such as Tate or the Arts Council, grants to individual cultural organisations are not under ministerial control); secondly, by changing the legislative or regulatory frameworks, though this can be slow, complicated and produce unintended consequences; and thirdly, by setting broad policy and sometimes narrow targets that the organisations it funds are expected to meet.

So, for example, the Coalition government was committed to increasing private philanthropy in culture, partly to offset its own spending cuts. In 2010, in his letter setting out budgets for the arts between 2012 and 2015, the Culture Secretary required Arts Council England, the NDPB that distributes the money to all those independent arts charities, to take action to encourage philanthropy. New programmes were created, to which arts organisations could apply for funds to support their work in this field. But did it have the effect intended by government? No: the big organisations already attracting philanthropic gifts and sponsorship did well, while most of the rest invested scarce resources pursuing unattainable rewards. The main point is that very little here can be commanded, and what can is capable only of influencing the actions of the thousands of independent organisations who between them comprise the cultural sector in Britain.

Why is this? Why have British politicians adopted such a self-denying ordinance in respect of their relationship with culture? The answer lies in ideas and beliefs that have shaped British history for centuries, among them an ideological commitment to free speech and market forces and a suspicion of state power. As a result, government developed distinctive responses to the

expansion of mass culture, within an overall system of administration that might be described generously as pragmatic or less kindly as incoherent.

Theatre, a form of performing arts that long predated British democracy, did not free itself from direct government censorship through the Lord Chamberlain's office until 1968. By then more modern regulatory systems had been developed for the emerging popular art forms of the early 20th century: cinema, radio and television. The arrival of cinema presented new challenges, since picture houses, unlike theatres, were licenced by local rather than national government. The British Board of Film Censors—since renamed as the more innocuous-sounding British Board of Film Classification—was established as early as 1912 and paid for by the film industry as a means of providing guidance on the suitability of films for different audiences. There have been controversies over the years, as public tastes have changed, but the BBFC celebrates its centenary this year, testament to the durability of this form of self-regulation.

It was a characteristically British solution to the problem of balancing free markets, freedom of expression and the need for basic protections, an issue that remains central to cultural policy today as new media, including the Internet, smartphones and videogames test the boundaries of acceptability. The representation of sex and violence, the expression of radical politics and now, in a more consciously diverse world, the articulation of religious or racial views remain potentially explosive subjects at the heart of democratic discourse. The solution found in 1912 has since been extended to other parts of the cultural sector and is now known as the 'arm's length principle', an idea that is supposed to indicate a difference in responsibilities between the state and independent bodies.

Like many things in cultural policy, the arm's length principle is more complex in reality than in theory. The theory, rooted in contract law, is intended to ensure that one party does not gain advantage from unfair and unacknowledged influence over another. In British cultural policy it is invoked to ensure that the state can set a broad legal framework of conduct but not control the development and expression of culture. Three examples will suffice to illustrate the diversity of what this means in practice.

The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) was established in 1922 as a commercial enterprise. After the General Strike of 1926, government moved to wind up the company and replace it with a de facto state broadcaster. However, the new British Broadcasting Corporation was an independent body with a Royal Charter, financed by a dedicated licence fee and governed by its own board of trustees. The government, which does not finance the BBC through taxation, has not been able to dictate policy or programming decisions, though the relationship between the two has often been tense, and the BBC,

like the Arts Council often does what it understands the government wants without being asked, in the belief, mistaken in my view, that the arm's length principle is best protected by never testing it.

The British press, which is known for both its liveliness and its ferocity, has also regularly been in conflict with government, which has each time accepted self-regulation in preference to state control. In 1953 a General Council was established following the first Royal Commission on the Press to ensure that good standards would be maintained by the industry itself. There have since been many reform initiatives, including two further Royal Commissions and two successor bodies, the Press Council and the Press Complaints Commission. But none has managed to prevent unethical and illegal behaviour, so a public inquiry into the 'culture, practices and ethics of the press' was conducted under Lord Justice Leveson between 2011 and 2012.[15] The effect of its findings on press conduct has been as insignificant as its predecessors.

The third and in some ways the most widely recognised example of the arm's length principle is the Arts Council itself. It was established in 1946, again by Royal Charter, at a time when the value of the wartime Council for Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) was widely appreciated and a Labour government was laying the foundations of the post-war welfare state. The Arts Council of Great Britain soon adopted more patrician tastes than its popular predecessor, for instance in an early decision not to support the work of amateurs, and established itself as the principal mechanism for government subsidy of the arts. Like the BBC, it is governed by a body of independent trustees whose chair is appointed by the Secretary of State for Culture. Unlike the BBC, however, it is funded directly by government through general taxation and, since 1994, through the National Lottery. Arts Council England, as it is now called after various stages of devolution, is informed of its funding every three years in a letter from the Secretary of State which sets out the government's broad policy expectations, for instance in encouraging philanthropy, and sometimes specific targets. The short tenure of Nadine Dorries as Secretary of State for Culture between 2021 and 2022 may prove to be unusually consequential, since she directed the Arts Council to move funding from the capital to underserved regions, the so-called Levelling Up for Culture Places.[16] So, although decisions about individual grants are made independently of the state, the Arts Council certainly feels the minister's breath on the back of its neck.

It will be evident, even from this limited survey of arm's length bodies in the British cultural sector that the principle is applied with wide variations in different sectors and cases. Where there is consistency, however, is the increasing tension in these arrangements.

The underlying cause of this tension is the increasing presence and influence of culture in all our lives. No longer confined to theatres, newspapers and a few television channels, art and culture takes a huge part of our attention. With the Internet and 5G smartphones there are now few places or times when people are entirely removed from what are now called the creative industries, and the art on which they depend. The amount of money invested into culture by government has also grown hugely, both in the form of direct subsidy from the Department for Culture, and from other public sources such as education, health, economic development and more. In 1994, the National Lottery was created to draw more money for the arts, sport and heritage and its success—raising £27 billion by 2011—has brought more political attention to culture as ticket buyers have become interested in how the profit from their gambling is spent. Politicians must be frustrated to see so much money spent on things they neither control nor gain political credit from.

Over the same period, successive British governments have sought to reform, in their word, public services by bringing in ideas and practices from the private sector, sometimes referred to under the general term 'New Public Management'. The introduction of management theories used in large commercial companies to health and education has transformed the British public sector in the past 30 years, with very mixed results. Contracting, service level agreements, private finance initiatives and similar practices have become the norm, bringing in their train new systems of monitoring and evaluation. It is these as much as anything that have encouraged the Department for Culture's interest in data, sometimes leading it to set unrealisable targets for the NDPBs it funds. Thus the last Labour government set the Arts Council a target of raising participation in the arts by 3% in three years. This idea was based on a deeply flawed map of arts activity that took no account of many aspects of people's artistic lives. Furthermore, since the 900 arts organisations the Arts Council then subsidised comprised only one quite small and independent part of Britain's artistic life, its ability to bring about that change was negligible. A government without control over cultural activity was imposing a contractual obligation on a public body with only slightly more control. The target was quietly forgotten.

What was missing here, what is missing throughout British public services and governance, is trust, the word at the heart of the concept of the trustee. Without trust in a shared commitment to the common good, or in people's willingness to put that good before their personal enrichment, conduct must be contracted, monitored and reported on. But, as the philosopher Onora O'Neill argued in her critique of the erosion of trust for the 2002 BBC Reith Lectures,

> The intrusive methods we have taken to stem a supposed crisis of trust may even, if things go badly, fuel a crisis of trustworthiness, and so may lead to a genuine crisis of trust.[17]

Which is a more complicated way of saying what Seneca wrote to his friend Lucilius nearly 2000 years ago: you will make someone loyal if you treat him as such.[18] The erosion of trust in British public life during the past three decades is both a cause and a symptom of changing political ideology and wider societal values. It has produced scandals across public life involving at different times and in varying combinations, members of parliament, the press, the security services, the banking industry, broadcasters, the police and others. Each crisis has simultaneously eroded public trust and encouraged more legislation, regulation and monitoring.

Some of these scandals have produced valiant attempts to clean up public life, including the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which was set up in 1994 following the discovery that some MPs had been bribed to raise questions in parliament. This led to the Nolan Principles which are supposed to govern conduct in public life and which require people, such as the trustees that govern most cultural organisations, to demonstrate Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership.

In 2011, six members of parliament were sentenced to prison for theft as a result of the MPs expenses scandal. But who can honestly say that the Nolan Principles are evident in the politicians who have run Britain in recent years, from Boris Johnson down? Little wonder that politicians scored badly in the 2021 Ipsos MORI survey of trust in the professions: just 19% of the public trust them to tell the truth.[19]

But it is only necessary to remember the 900,000 charity trustees and the 50% of the population that volunteers to counter any easy cynicism either this survey or the scandals might encourage. Trust remains a very powerful force in society, enabling people to do things much more efficiently and effectively because they do not have to be constantly monitored or monitoring others. This altruism, a willingness to do something for others, even unknown others, at personal cost to oneself, is a profound force for good and the basis of human society and development. We cannot afford to lose confidence in it. Nor can we afford to take it for granted.

The importance of trust and altruism in cultural policy and governance should be evident, especially where politicians have or seek to gain more direct control over cultural institutions. Where political control is weak or constrained, cultural policy makers must proceed by building trust, understanding and, as far as possible, common purpose for the common good.

This is not naïve idealism. The success of the thousands of independent arts and culture charities in the UK demonstrates the power of trust and

altruism. But even if it were, the alternative approaches now favoured by successive British governments, which impose commercial practices on people who work for non-commercial reasons in sectors such as health, education and culture, are ineffective and counterproductive. To turn every relationship into a transaction is the real corruption because it undermines the values that make us not just human but happy to be so.

Trust is hard to see or to mark on a map. But it is foolish to believe only in what we can see. And only fools, like ancient map makers, see dragons and sea monsters in those parts of the world they do not know or understand. We need maps of the cultural landscape to guide policy and governance. But we need good maps and even then, we must remember that they are wrong, because some of the most important features will remain beyond description.

## Notes

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