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Is there something special about cultural policy?

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The concept of culture is very tricky and hard to handle in various ways. That is well known. But what about the concept and area of *cultural policy*? Is it possible in democratic nations to manage it in a similar way as other political areas? Or is there a certain matter, or essence, that distinguishes the area in a special way? Other scholars have also asked this question. Clive Gray takes this problematic as a point of departure in order to map the way in which different academic disciplines analyse cultural policy. Given that the concept of culture is “essentially contested” he asks himself if this implies that this central word “assumes an importance that may not be so evident for other policy areas such as defence, taxation or industrial policy” (*International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 2, p. 218). The definition itself is obviously a hardship everyone has to manage, but may there be other aspects that add to the issue and make it even more cumbersome? The aim of this paper is to try and shed some light on these issues by discussing three dimensions involved.

In a way, it may be sufficient just to cast an eye on the composition of the word. Are the elements compatible, at all? Does not culture, and art, have an intrinsic claim and quest for total liberty, to transcend boundaries, question rules and norms and completely fall back on the power of imagination? How is it even possible to combine with administration and politics that are distinctly marked by negotiations and compromises, the setting of rules and routines, predictability and sharp boundaries? I shall here try and examine this problematic issue, and I think the analysis may split up in, at least, three aspects that characterize the area. These three aspects in various ways overlap and contradict each other: the notion about the *autonomy* of art and culture; the concept of *quality*; the *democratic* claims that so often are launched in the context of cultural policy.

These questions have of course, from different starting points, been abundantly discussed in cultural policy research. The focus of this discussion has predominantly been on the *relation* between the state,

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or the political system more broadly taken, and the individual citizens as those who, in the last analysis, take part in, or consume, the cultural activities. The ideal typical models developed by the Canadian cultural economists Harry Hillman-Chartrand and Claire McCaughey are famous (Hillman-Chartrand & McCaughey 1989). Their typologisation of this relation can in many ways serve as a first step in a closer analysis, which has gathered many successors. One of the latest examples is the theme issue of *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 2012, which is wholly dedicated to the relation between cultural policy and democracy. But also here it is the relation *between* the entities that is put under scrutiny. My angle is another; I wish to identify possible specific features or ideas about the cultural area *per se* that may give rise to the noted difficulties.

Autonomy

One of the most important reasons to the problems with cultural policy is the notion about the autonomy of the arts and culture. The concept of autonomy as such has long linages and goes back to Ancient Greece and the city states that were established there, some 2500 years ago. The word in itself roughly means “to decide your own laws”, which was done by each city state independently from other states. The concept is obviously very useful for political science where it is employed for the analysis of inter-state relations as well as of relations between the national government and regional or municipal authorities and relations between the state and its citizens. In the cultural policy research field the word has perhaps been most commonly use in connection with the last mentioned relation (e g van Maanen 2008 or Vestheim 2009).

What is interesting for us now, is another aspect of the concept of autonomy. It is precisely that art and culture is claimed to take up a certain position in society and to be the owner of a special independence. Philosophically and theoretically this idea goes back the differentiation of society into separate spheres. This is a historical process that started with the downfall of the absolutist state and the beginning of capitalism and democracy. The American and French revolutions are emblematic events, as is the contemporary industrial revolution during the 18th century. The new historical epoch, the modernity, which then made its entrance carried a characteristic feature in that different societal activities no longer were subordinated one and the same authority. Instead, they tended to develop according to their own laws. Philosophers and social scientists have conceptualized this process – the differentiation of society – in many different terms.

The philosopher, whose work has been most influential when it comes to the thinking about the place of culture in relation to the rest of society, is the German Immanuel Kant. He was coeval with the initial phase of this historical process. His philosophy was totally contained within the world of thinking so he dressed this process entirely in idealistic categories. The object for his interest was the human faculty of knowledge. This ability, he claimed, was founded on “two kinds of concepts [...]those *of nature* and that *of freedom*”. From that he derived the division of philosophy into “two parts, quite distinct in their principles – a theoretical, as *Philosophy of Nature*, and a practical, as *Philosophy of Morals*” (Kant 1790/1952, p. 8). Somewhat simplified, the theoretical one is, according to Kant, dealing with the preconditions for scientific knowledge, while the practical one is reflecting on practical, ethical and political issues. Between those two realms of concepts “there is a great gulf fixed”, that anyhow, according to Kant, *should* be able to bridge. What made this bridging, or “transition from the faculty of pure knowledge, i.e. from the realm of concepts of nature, to that of the concept of freedom”, was the critique of judgement (Ibid. p. 8-18). This so called “third critique”, is about the judgement of taste, or the aesthetic aspects of life.

With the completion of the three works, *The critique of pure reason* (1781), *The critique of practical reason* (1788) and *The critique of judgement* (1790), Kant claimed to have covered and explained all areas of the human faculty of knowledge. The ways in which we reasoned and gained knowledge were fundamentally different if it was about science, politics or aesthetics. Within those three spheres of thinking, three different “faculties of the soul”.

The most interesting one for us is the third one; The critique of judgement. Here Kant developed the thought that judgements of taste, i.e. utterances about what makes a certain thing beautiful, consist of four moments. The first moment says that beautiful is what is estimated delightfully “*apart from any interest*”. According to the second moment, the beautiful is an “object of *universal delight*”. Thirdly, “beauty is the form of *finality* in an object, so far as perceived in it *apart from the representation of an end*”. Finally, the fourth moment states that the beautiful is “object of a *necessary delight*” (Ibid. Book I).

By this he meant that when it came to aesthetic judgments there could be nothing outside the object that could give a hint about its aesthetic value. According to Kant, it was ineffectual to try to submit the beautiful to any kind of instrumental aims or any purpose that lied beyond just representing beauty. A person giving an aesthetic judgment could neither have any interest in the object apart from the aesthetic context. An object of art must be judged by itself. In that manner, aesthetics could be dissociated to a particular societal sphere of its own. In short: the aesthetics became autonomous.

This is a line of thought that much later translates into politics and provides the philosophical underpinning for the common motto within cultural policy that the state should “support, but not exert influence on” the actual cultural activities. In Britain it was operationalized as “arm’s length”, an expression that now is used more or less everywhere, both in politics and academia.

But autonomy is not only about philosophy or ideas. It does also have a material and institutional fundament in the capitalistic economy that grew in Europe towards the end on the 18th century. Gradually, a market for art, music, literature and theatre emerged (Hauser 1968[1962]). The rise of the market allowed the artists to liberate themselves from the immediate dependence on patrons of the arts (usually rich bourgeoisie or gentry) in order to create their art on their own conditions. Of course, this freedom was to a large extent illusory. If “the market” – whatever it looked like – did not estimate the creative impulses of the individual free author or artist, his or her situation could easily become precarious. But the *notion* and the *possibility* had absolutely been formed. The French poet Charles Baudelaire coined the expression “*l’art pour l’art*” and an abundance of romantic ideas about the artistic genius and the worldly misery as a precondition for path-breaking artistic endeavours were born.

As Geir Vestheim has pointed out, also the emerging cultural institutions connected to the rising bourgeois national states in the late 19th century came to invoke the autonomy of the arts (Vestheim 2009). Artists and representatives from the institutions gathered around the sacred value of artistic autonomy. With the notion of “arm’s length”, also (cultural)politicians, on their side, eventually endorsed a similar principle. Thereby, the idea that cultural policy is a very special area became deeply rooted on either side.

Closely connected with the idea about the autonomy of culture is a circumstance that possibly is most easily caught in a word like “the unruliness” of culture. Artistic and cultural activity is very often targeted on testing and challenging established views, rules and boundaries encircling the existing art.

We often hear from artists that the art that is really serious is the one that does not accept the given, but wants to challenge it, transcend borders and boundaries, turn the accustomed upside down, critically examine cultural and political truths etc. Some of the most intense cultural debates in Sweden during the last couple of years have been about artistic works that almost over explicitly tried to break the limits around very sensitive issues.

One debate was about a multimedia installation where the artist pretended to be psychically ill in a public space. She was taken to hospital, where she, after some time, disclosed that the whole thing was an artistic performance. Much of the public reaction was negative, claiming that the artist had gone too far and surpassed the limits of the arts and rather moved into taking unlawful advantage of public health services.

Another example shows how very sensitive the relation between politics and culture is. At a publicly sponsored art exhibition one artist contributed with a work that consisted of a heap of four tons of white powder. He hinted at that the heap might contain drugs – every year about four tons of cocaine is consumed in Sweden. This installation caused the responsible local cultural politician to call for a policy of an ethical examination of all cultural projects applying for municipal financial support.

Both these incidents raised fundamental cultural policy issues. What type of art and artistic content can have a place within public cultural policy? Are there any limits to how artistic expressions can be framed? In Sweden, the freedom of expression has been a very celebrated goal within cultural policy, even if it lately been somewhat downgraded. The sum total of the two cases cited was, however, that the freedom of the arts and the freedom of expression were prioritized and prevailed. This time. The debate will come up again, for sure.

Quality

Another circumstance that in a substantial way contributes to the notion of art and culture as a tricky and awkward area is to do with the concept of quality. What does it mean that a piece of art, a book, a theatre performance or a film is of high quality? For Kant, this question was part of a discourse that was played out entirely within the realm of the aesthetics. Beauty could surely be discussed, but for him there was no doubting the possibility of rendering absolute judgment regarding the beauty of an object, and that you could argue for one thing being objectively more beautiful than another. How to respond to the same question nowadays, in the 21st century, is, however, not at all so unequivocal. This whole problematic has undergone a fundamental change, not least since when politicians and governments in Europe started to discuss the possibility of establishing a policy directed towards the cultural field. Fifty to sixty years ago, there was a widespread and implicit understanding among the political and cultural elites in the society that there existed an absolute yardstick against which you measured artistic endeavours. In the early days of cultural policy, it was the art that performed well in this measuring that was to be publicly supported and disseminated. “Fine arts to the people” as the slogan ran in Sweden.

Today, the situation is completely different. We need not go into any deeper analysis on why a change has occurred. It is sufficient to conclude that the concept of quality now is being both questioned and relativized. What quality is, is now being debated from many and diverse points of departure. I shall try and shed some light on the issue with the help of a couple of examples from a Swedish context.

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A recent Swedish anthology, whose title in English translation is *The unmeasurable quality*, provides such an example. In one of the articles, Ingrid Elam, literature historian, refers to how the American poet Emily Dickinson once responded to a question about how to know when you read a good poem: “When I read a poem and my hair rise in my neck, then I know that this poem is good” (Elam 2013). For Dickinson there was no other way; without hesitation she took the stand of subjectivism. It is the judgment of the individual subject that is the only reasonable one. Against that position you usually put the objectivist stand. It claims the opposite; the quality of art is objective, independent of certain individuals or experiences, but is eternal and absolute and can be determined if the judgment is built on the right knowledge and competence. A third position, the most common these days, is relativism. Here it is acknowledged that value judgments always are situated in a certain cultural and historical context, why they never can claim any objectivity. The value relativism does, however, distance itself from sheer subjectivism. If you, like Dickinson, as told by Elam, considered the questions of quality as nothing but a private matter, it becomes meaningless. As soon as it is put in the public realm it is obviously inserted into a certain context and gets political, as Elam underscores (Ibid.). The question of quality should therefore be part and parcel of the cultural policy discourse – and be continuously debated. But this is not the case. Elam claims that it is only when the concept of quality ceases to be self-evident that the discussion begins. And, seen in a bigger picture, that is how it has been in the Swedish case.

If you just examine the official reports on cultural policy, this is rather obvious. The treatment of the concept of quality has varied through the years. In the beginning it was non-existent, but was included in the discourse in the 1990s. The last report, from 2009, wanted to dispose of the word, because it “hitherto had not been adequately defined” (SOU 2009:16). But the parliamentary discussion ended otherwise and the concept was kept in the new goal formulations that were decided. The question about quality is debated. In one way or another it must be handled. If you are to allocate public financing for writers and artists you have to make decisions.

In the literature policy we can see what happens. Linnéa Lindsköld, ph. d. in library and information science, made a thorough discourse analysis of the public debate about the Swedish state support to new, Swedish fiction between 1975 and 2009. Her conclusion is that the concept of quality all the time has been in the centre of the discussion. But the content and meaning is not the same over the years. On the contrary, there is a clear line in how the concept has changed. When the support scheme was installed in the 1970s there was an obvious and implicit understanding of what quality meant that was shared among the members of the group that took the decisions. Quality was negatively defined in so far that some genres were straightforwardly excluded: “trivial fiction, mass market literature and pornography” (Lindsköld 2013). No further discussion was needed.

As time went on the concept was attacked from various quarters. Lindsköld identifies a “liberal subject position” that meant that it was up to the consumers at the book market to decide, and the official report from 2009 also questioned the concept, and wanted to complement the basis on which to decide with new criteria; the need for economic support and cultural policy priority. This kind of attacks triggered a definitional work within the Arts Council’s working group, which resulted in what Lindsköld designates “the professional concept of quality”. This is based on the “[i]ntensity, complexity, renewal, originality and ability to transcend genre expectations” of the work, and requires knowledge and competence as well as discussion in order to be appropriately implemented (ibid.). From the negative definition of quality we have, in this specific context of literature policy, moved to a rather sharply formulated positive definition that tells us what literary quality *should* mean.

There are two reflections to be made here. One is about the concept of quality in connection with politics. When the official investigation committee wanted add their two criteria, the protests were plenty and strong. The suggestion was apprehended as a “bureaucratization” and “politicization” of the support scheme. Elam claimed that the question of quality becomes political as soon as it ceases to be self-evident. But in her analysis, Lindsköld can disclose the paradox involved here. When the concept is challenged in this way – from the political side so to say – those who defend it want to put it in contrast to political evaluations and the consequence is that “it is not seen as a political concept in the discourse” (ibid.).

This leads over to the other reflection. Quality is obviously a property of a literary work that is discernible only for certain professional experts, an elite group if you wish. Even though this operationalization of the attitude is not introduced until after the millennium, Lindsköld is able to show how “a dominating understanding of aesthetic quality has persisted in the debate on the literature support scheme” ever since it was introduced (ibid.).

Thereby, the discourse on cultural policy has forced a clarification and decision about what is meant by literary quality, which is a conclusion that contradicts several prevalent political and academic discourses. When quality is coming under debate in the political sphere, the apolitical content of the concept is safeguarded by the literary field. And when critics and literary scholars question the possibility of defining the concept at all, the professional field launches a very specific definition.

But it is not only in public policy contexts that reaching an economic decision is needed. If a private film company or a publishing house is going to spend money on a certain production it has to decide on the basis of judgments. No one can anticipate what will be a commercial success. A discussion needs to be held; a discussion where different views and opinions regarding relevant criteria have to be aired. So, in short, with some necessity a number of ways to talk about quality and taste have evolved.

In another article in the above mentioned anthology where the attitudes among the staff at a film company is analyzed, this becomes evident; they talk predominantly about taste, not quality. The author, film scholar Jenny Lantz, writes that two principally different attitudes can be discerned in the kind of company she has examined (Lantz 2013). On one hand there is a position close to “the economic pole”. There the “professional attitude towards taste” is predominant, which means that the representatives claim to be able to “step out of their personal taste” and interpret the wishes of the market in an “objective” and “non-neurotic” way. This position discards subjectivity and builds its views on instrumental rationality and economic logic (ibid.).

The opposite pole Lantz designates “the cultural pole”. Here you find two slightly different attitudes. One that strongly emphasizes the aesthetic values. Inspired by Bourdieu Lantz calls it “distinctive taste”. This position is, however rather weak and is outdone by an attitude that strives to “balance taste and market potential”. The two obviously share some similarities, but the second one is much closer to the market through its accent on experience in the business (ibid.).

The different poles display opposite feelings about “quality”. At the economic pole the whole issue is “irrelevant”, while it is seen as a “crucial matter” at the cultural pole. How do you go about to reach common decisions under those circumstances? In Lantz’s analysis this is done via the mechanism of “taste management”. That the market and the economic interests are salient at the economic pole is self-understood, but Lantz claims that such aspects as market knowledge are lifted at the cultural pole as well. According to Lantz, the taste management in this case is an expression on how modernity subsumes value judgments (taste) under an instrumental rationality.

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You can push the analysis further, but the point I want to stress here is that the actors within the fields of culture as well as cultural policy find modes of talking about what “hitherto had not been adequately defined”. But in neither of the discourses (literature policy or film company) you have really reached any final solution. The dependence on a host of underlying factors concerning the sex, age, education, cultural and ethnic background etc. are still there, and they influence the judgments made. But the most important thing is – which a temporary member of the last cultural policy investigation committee remarked – that the issue is constantly discussed (Karlsson 2009).

Democracy

The third circumstance that contributes to the special relationship between culture and policy in cultural policy is the question around the real role of democracy in this context. In Swedish cultural policy (as well as in many other countries’) there is a fundamental belief that democracy, culture and cultural policy are closely connected and in some way are able to promote and strengthen one another. In large parts of the discourse on cultural policy you can, through the decades, find such an underlying thought. Together with the welfare argument it was very foundational when the Swedish cultural policy was established in the 1960s. The idea was that if the citizens are provided with easy access to take part in cultural life they were somehow to develop a stronger democratic sense. What is referred to in this context is that culture is supposed to have some sort of *substantial* essence that promotes democratic thinking, acting and behaving. From the *formal* point of view it may be totally different. The extent to which Swedish cultural policy is, after all, democratic has been called in question e g by political scientist Roger Blomgren, who maintain that “democracy in its classical sense has never played any vital part of Swedish cultural policy” (Blomgren 2012). On the whole, the interest that cultural policy research has directed towards the issues of democracy, has, not surprisingly, circled around issues of governance; how is the steering of cultural policy shaped? Much of that research is really very rewarding but my concern here is another. I wish to focus on the alleged intrinsic values of culture and the effects they are supposed to have.

An earlier report from a Swedish public investigation committee provides an excellent example. It was published in 1999, with the thrilling title *Aesthetics of democracy*. In one of the articles literary critic and scholar Tomas Forser discussed the issue in a very thought provoking way. The fundamental question he poses, and around which the whole article circles is if “democracy is as useful for the arts as the arts are for democracy” (Forser 1999). He takes as his point of departure that the discussion on culture and democracy to such a high degree has come to concern aspects of governance and participation. Consequentially, the concept of democracy involved in this debate has, according to Forser, “counted on quantity more than on quality” (ibid.). The egalitarian ambition that is highly valued in the Swedish cultural policy may have potentially negative effects on the artistic quality itself, he holds. It runs a risk of falling into “the black hole of cultural policy”, as he phrases it (ibid.). In effect, he poses the distribution perspective of cultural policy against what you may call the development perspective of art and culture, meaning that it, rightly, can be detached, questioning, norm-breaking and sometimes seemingly incomprehensible. Forser writes warmly about aesthetic quality incorporating “negation, opposition, sabotage and nihilism” against the established order (ibid.). If the art of theatre is to evolve, rise to new forms and levels of creativity, it is doubtful whether such a cultural policy biased towards quantity and equality really does any good. Forser is not at all sure. It is obviously something positive that popular participation in the world of art and culture is on the rise, but

we also need an art that contradicts all this exemplariness. An art that chooses aristocratic attitudes, shuns participation, makes an argument for inequality and puts a question mark after democracy. Truth need not be democratic and often it is not. Art is not a commons but a place for the particular, the obstinate and the personal (ibid.).

This bold plaidoyer for an elitist perspective of course raises the question whether it is at all appropriate or possible to discuss culture and democracy in that manner. Do they really have anything to do with one another? Are they not incompatible entities in the sense that the content and quality of culture never can be the object of voting, be subjected to demands on equality or representation, things that are indispensable in a democratic system? Forser himself is leaning towards that stand and the response he implicitly gives on his own question implies that art is more important for democracy than vice versa. And exactly there lies the very essential achievement of cultural policy, because “the realm of art supplies arenas for such exclusive, concrete, avant-gardist perspectives and it is the duty of cultural policy to guarantee their existence. For the sake of democracy (ibid.).

If any conclusions may be drawn I guess that it would be that the area of concern for cultural policy, art and culture, is a messy and evasive business. Most areas that government policy has to manage can of course be characterized as problematic in one sense or another. The possibilities of economic policy to predict and govern the economic development are obviously no straightforward activity. You may say the same about health policy or migration policy. But still I want to maintain that it is not only a matter of degree in how troublesome it is, but a matter of sorts. The substance itself that cultural policy has to handle does have intrinsic properties that more or less per definition refuses to conform to predetermined structures and struggles to stand free in the regard that is perceived as the most important; the artistic range.

On the other side are the politicians, who, as much as they want, dare not to intervene into this artistic and aesthetic “essence” of culture. In another political area such an attitude might be considered weak. For the minister of migration or the minister of employment it is of utmost importance exactly to suggest and implement reforms that have an effect on the very contents of the activities his/her department has to assume responsibility for. That is absolutely impossible for the minister of culture who wants to appear as a democrat. In most democratic societies it would be very disadvantageous for a further political career to ignore the arm’s length principle.

So there we are. Arts and culture are recalcitrant and unmanageable entities making up an inertia within the field that, in my view, is one the most important reasons to why cultural policy (at least in Sweden) is so slowly changed.

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