


Not a neutral zone: The political effects of assertions of intrinsic value



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Introduction: Recent work on Value:

- As a invited participant in an AHRC funded series of workshops on 'The Consequences of Instrumental Museum and Gallery Policy':
Gibson, L., 2008, 'In Defense of Instrumentality', *Cultural Trends*, 17, 4; and,
- As Principal Investigator of a EPSRC, AHRC, ESRC 'Preserving Our Past' funding programme series of workshops on 'Valuing Historic Environments':
Gibson, L., 2009, 'Cultural Landscapes and Identity', and,
Gibson, L. and Pendlebury, J., 2009, 'Valuing Historic Environments', in *Valuing Historic Environments*, Gibson, L. and Pendlebury, J. (eds.), Ashgate.

Introduction: Structure of Remarks:

1. Culture, cultural policy and 'instrumental' and 'intrinsic' value,
2. Not a neutral zone: The political effects of assertions of intrinsic value,
3. What does this mean for cultural policy?

1. Culture, cultural policy and ‘instrumental’ and ‘intrinsic’ value

□ Introduction

- I start from basis that culture is tied to the work of identity construction but this is not reducible to ‘private value’ because identity is constructed, performed, maintained and managed in a relational cultural, economic, and social context
- following from this cultural support therefore has effects beyond the production of cultural artefacts or activities for the private pleasure of individuals, rather cultural support has effects which are political in the sense that they effect the organisation and working of the body politic

□ Definitional issues

□ History

2. Not a neutral zone: The political effects of assertions of intrinsic value

- Despite the assertion of an individual construction of value there is still embedded within attempts to rescue 'intrinsic' value an assumption that it's possible to engage with culture in its own right, i.e., unfettered by relations with other fields- economy, social, political.
- Sociological research tells us this is not so (e.g. recent UK research, Bennett et al 2009).

3. What does this mean for cultural policy?

- The assumption by those that believe that socially inclusive cultural programming is a threat to cultural practice is not born out by funding statistics which show that funding for access and participatory programmes is still comparatively limited.
- Cultural policy mechanisms (e.g. EH, *Conservation Principles* or McMaster Report) are for the most part still driven by discursive constructions of cultural value which position expertise as the primary source for the definition of value. Such mechanisms will always be fettered in their ability to facilitate pluralistic cultural value.

PPT1 Not a neutral zone: The political effects of assertions of intrinsic value

PPT2 Introduction: cultural policy academic, worked in Australia, the US and the UK, located at the Department of Museum Studies at the University Leicester. Understanding concepts of value- social, political, and cultural - in cultural programmes and policy has been a central part of my work for the last 15 years. In these brief remarks I will be drawing particularly on work done for two projects I have recently been part of which have been concerned with value:

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PPT3 My remarks here will be organised in the following way:

1. I want to talk about some of the discussion around the terms instrumental and intrinsic, my argument here will be to reject the utility of these terms in relation to the discussion of culture and cultural policy
 - o Problem with language, discussion in the lit. 1. Reduction to simplistic binary concepts of value not useful for plural contemp. Britain, 2. loaded nature of the terms- why use them?

- Cultural policy history- instrumentality not a threat to culture as has been claimed, and upon which basis ‘intrinsic value’ is being recovered
- I start from basis that culture is tied to the work of identity construction but that this is not reducible to ‘private value’ because identity is constructed, performed, maintained and managed in a relational cultural, economic, and social context
- Further, and following from that cultural support therefore has effects beyond the production of cultural artefacts or activities for the private pleasure of individuals, rather cultural support has effects which are political in the sense that they effect the organisation and working of the body politic

2. Despite the assertion of this individual construction of value there is still embedded within this document and any other document that tries to rescue a notion of ‘intrinsic’ value an assumption that it’s possible to engage with culture in its own right, rather the consumption of culture is fettered by relations with other fields- economy, social, political

3. What does this mean for cultural policy- challenge the position that socially inclusive cultural programming is a. dominant and b. a threat to creativity **PPT4**

1. Culture, cultural policy and ‘instrumental’ and ‘intrinsic’ value

Over the last eight years or so the cultural policy, museum and heritage studies literatures have contained a great deal of discussion of the so called ‘instrumentalisation’ of cultural institutions and programmes which is described as emerging over the last thirty or so years. This perception of cultures’ so called ‘instrumentalisation’ seems to be widespread and is primarily perceived as a ‘threat’. However, in these deconstructions, primarily aimed at the poor impact

studies and overblown claims made for the arts by some there is little to guide us towards a way of thinking about cultural policy which is both critical and constructive. One of the reasons for this is that the terms of the debate which proposes that we can think of value as binary- intrinsic and instrumental- are so general as to be unhelpful for the discussion of particular cultural and policy contexts.

Definitional Issues:

A close analysis of the literature from the last 5 years which has discussed intrinsic and instrumental value in cultural policy, demonstrates that there is a great deal of variability in what some authors describe ‘instrumental’ value and others constitute as ‘intrinsic’ value. **PPT5** For instance, some literatures describe education as an instrumental quality whereas others describe it as intrinsic. Clive Gray proposes that we can understand museum policy as being driven by ‘endogenous and exogenous motors of policy change and development’ (Gray, 2008). His identification of the intrinsic or ‘endogenous’ parts of the museums sector comprises ‘curatorship, education, entertainment and the infra-structural management of resources’ (ibid). ‘Instrumentality’ according to Gray,

would mean a shift away from these ... towards other policy intentions. This would mean that internal matters of policy emphasis concerned with the sector’s core... would become replaced by a concern for externally derived objectives or policy priorities, such as, social inclusion or community regeneration (ibid.).

However, the examples Gray gives of ‘externally derived objectives’– social inclusion and community regeneration– are considered by many museum professionals to be a central part of the museums role. Indeed, it is the drive to extend collections to be representative of contemporary Britain that is a defining feature of the modern museum and in Gray’s terms a

‘core’ function, thus, these so called ‘instrumental’ programmes which aim to facilitate social inclusion are also productive of culture.

John Holden’s so called ‘new language’ for ‘cultural value’ proposes a division where the instrumental benefits of culture include learning and individual well-being. I was present at the 2007 British Museum Association conference where Holden had to defend his list of ‘instrumental’ and ‘intrinsic’ from very robust critique from a number of senior museum professionals who interpreted his categorisation of ‘learning’ as an instrumental quality as an elitist attack on the Herculean efforts which have been made in the museum sector especially over the last twenty years to make museums more accessible and relevant to a wider cross section of the taxpaying public. This ‘new museology’ has been most associated with the development of education programmes which aim to be inclusive both by bringing new material culture into museums, as well as new people. The Director of my local museum in Leicester is motivated to extend the collections to include Somali cultural artefacts not because DCMS says he must be socially inclusive, but because a substantial section of his prospective audience, in the inner city of Leicester, is Somali.

The general nature of the instrumental v intrinsic language for discussing cultural value is not useful for detailed and constructive discussion of cultural policy and programmes. One of the points I want to make here is the importance of discussing cultural policy contexts in a way which engages with the specifics of the cultural sector concerned and does not seek to short cut the associated complexities by replacing detailed policy and contextual analysis with simplistic models.

History:

A brief schematic outline of a couple of key historical moments of cultural programmes and policy makes the point that there is nothing remotely new about instrumentalism. In fact, if we consider the history of the modern public museum, for instance, we find that it is in fact *constitutively instrumental* as has been well established in various histories (e.g. Bennett, 1995 & 1998; Gibson, 1999 & 2001). New Labour was not the first to use cultural programmes to affect a population's well being. Famously Henry Cole, the architect of the South Kensington Museum system, justified public expenditure on the gas lighting of the museum in order to enable evening opening and thus provide a healthy alternative to the gin palaces in late 19th century Britain. The use of cultural programmes to affect national economic or trade goals is not an innovation of the Thatcher government in the UK. Before the 'rational recreation' ethos which came to dominate museum discourse in the late nineteenth century, the argument for public expenditure on the development of the South Kensington museum and the national Schools of Design was economic. Specifically, these cultural programmes were to provide an education in good design to lace workers in an attempt to improve the flagging British lace industry which was losing out to better designed product from Italy (Gibson, 1999). In both of these historical examples, and I could have gone on, cultural programmes and policies have quite specific 'instrumental' aims which are productive of culture rather than a threat to creativity.

It is not that the absence of history from some discussions of contemporary cultural policy which allows them to understand instrumentalism as a recent 'threat' to the 'intrinsic' value of culture is merely a question of semantics, far from it. The key point here is that lack of historical context means that cultural organisations can be presented as being outside history, as having an unchanging or intrinsic essence which is now under attack. The discussions of instrumentality in the recent cultural policy literature are a case in point. Despite the excellent

work done deconstructing the overblown claims made by some arts and heritage advocates, to conclude from this that instrumentalism per se is a ‘threat’ is to hand over rationales for arts management to those who believe that arts funding and management need no justification and should not be accounted for because certain people ‘just know’ what is worthy. One of the problem’s with this recent open season attack on, so called, ‘instrumentalisation’ is that in the absence of analyses which seek to follow up these deconstructions with alternative proposals, the field is left open for a return to the kinds of elite, exclusionary policies which have characterised cultural administration in the past, and in many cases still does. **PPT6** As Mark O’Neill, Head of Museums and Galleries for Glasgow City Council, has commented

Targets and measurements can be refined, but what can be done about the profound sense amongst... groups of entitlement—entitlement to having their cultural recreations funded without being troubled by the values of a wider society based on democracy, accountability, equity and fairness? (2005, 124).

Arguably the ‘McMaster report’, *Supporting Excellence in the Arts*, is a direct result of this overt criticism of ‘instrumentalism’ in relation to the arts (2008). It’s an excellent example of the types of policy proscriptions which result from a return to an intrinsic value discourse, which proposes programmes based on the notion that ‘provide excellence and people will come’, most notoriously in its proposal to open high cultural institutions to the general public for free for a week every year (2008, 17). Such simplistic ‘access’ measures take no account of the myriad of research which shows that access and participation is influenced by a range of complex factors and is not simply a matter of reducing the entrance fee. For instance, despite the introduction of free entry to British national museums in 2001, MORI have shown that ‘the profile of a typical “population” of museum and gallery visitors have remained stable, and firmly biased in favour of

the “traditional” visitor groups’ (2003, 4). In other words, when the national museums in England dropped their entrance fees this did not broaden the audience for museums but rather meant that the already existing primarily middle class audience went more often. **PPT7** Speaking of class

2. Not a neutral zone: The political effects of assertions of intrinsic value

Since French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu completed his influential study *La Distinction* in the 1960s in France we have known that the consumption of particular kinds of culture has effects on social mobility and therefore on economic capital. Subsequently sociological studies by the likes of Paul DiMaggio in the United States, Tony Bennett and John Frow in Australia and most recently a group of academics led by Tony Bennett (2009) in the UK have demonstrated that Bourdieu’s finding was not specific to French society. In the largest study of its kind in the UK, Bennett et al have described in great detail a picture of the UK’s consumption of culture and its relationship to socio-economic status and cultural capital- defined primarily by levels of education. As other studies have found so to this study finds that the more cultural capital or education an individual possesses the more they participate in culture across the forms. This study investigated the consumption of and participation in both the subsidised arts and the commercial media forms. What is new and very interesting about this study is that they found a section of the population who participate in very limited ways with neither the subsidised arts nor commercial media forms. At a crude level there were two different kinds of characteristics to these populations. One the one hand, there are the individuals who watched 10 and 12 hrs of TV a day, and it is interesting to note that the more cultural capital accruing to an individual the less TV they watched. On the other hand, there were certain parts of the ethnic boost sample who reported very low levels of participation in the cultural activities listed by the survey, but who in

focus groups and interviews proved to have very rich cultural lives but in forms of cultural participation and consumption which are not generally subsidised or the subject of commercial investment.

3. What does this mean for cultural policy? PPT8

I want to query whether in modern Britain reintroducing the language of ‘intrinsic value’ to cultural policy will assist British cultural institutions and programmes to be better able to extend their collections, interpret them in ways that appeal to diverse audiences, support cultural activities which have hitherto been unsupported. In general how will ‘intrinsic value’ help British cultural programmes become more pluralistic, because this surely is the primary challenge for contemporary cultural policy and management? There is an assumption by those that believe that socially inclusive cultural programming is a threat to cultural practice and that funding for social inclusion is hegemonic but this is not borne out by funding statistics which show that funding for access and participatory programmes is still comparatively limited. The HLF spent a lot more purchasing the *Madonna of the Pinks* than the National Gallery spent on touring it to regional areas and on its programme to give so called ‘excluded’ audiences access to it. And when the teenage single mothers in the Rhonda Valley were less than overwhelmed with the painting and described baby Jesus as looking like Chucky from the horror movie *Child’s Play*, it was seen to be evidence of their lack, and not a lack in the programme.

I offer this illustration to make the point that even when cultural institutions and programmes are seeking to engage with more plural audiences, in many cases, like in the McMaster report, this is couched in a limited understanding of cultural value which militates against recognising and

facilitating the cultural values which are important to other people and communities. This can be so even when the rhetoric of community engagement is central.

I've argued that the general nature of the instrumental v intrinsic language for discussing cultural value is not useful for detailed and constructive discussion of cultural policy and programmes.

I've argued that we need to discuss cultural policy contexts in a way which engages with the specifics of the cultural sector concerned. The challenges of taking seriously plural cultural value are significant for the cultural sector certainly for the museums and heritage sectors that I am most familiar with. But the rewards of sophisticated and creative engagement with the challenge will be a more exciting and plural cultural offer. Take the example of Leicester, what does the historic 'listed' environment look like if we talk to the inner city Pakistani, Somali and Caribbean communities about the places and spaces they value, currently their histories are absent from the formally listed historic environment.

It's been recognised that partnerships between cultural institutions', programmes and communities is a way of developing audiences, but this is most often through access to a culture mediated by expertise and dictated by that expertise. Taking seriously a pluralised notion of cultural value might involve going one step further and removing the mediation, such that cultural institutions and programmes can be more open to extending their collections, or the historic environment, or supporting activities which are new, without the reductive categorisation of these activities as either instrumental or intrinsic.