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Cultural Democracy: An Ecological and Capabilities Approach

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Cultural Democracy: An Ecological and Capabilities Approach

In recent years there has been sustained critique of the conceptual and normative foundations of UK cultural policy - the paternalism of ‘excellence and access’ and the neoliberal logic of ‘creative industries’. Whilst these critiques are well-established, there is little work offering alternative foundations. This paper makes a contribution to this task. It does so in three ways. Firstly, by identifying ‘cultural democracy’ as a key discourse offering a counter-formulation of what the aims of cultural policy could and should be, and analysing uses of this term, it highlights the need to more effectively conceptualize *cultural opportunity*. Secondly, drawing on research with one UK-based initiative, Get Creative, the paper identifies a particularly consequential aspect of cultural opportunity: its *ecological* nature. Thirdly, it shows that the capabilities approach to human development provides ideas with the potential to help build new conceptual and normative foundations for cultural policy. Proposing a distinctive account of cultural democracy characterised by systemic support for *cultural capabilities*, the paper concludes by indicating the implications this may have for research, policy and practice.

Keywords: capabilities approach, cultural democracy, cultural ecosystems, creative industries, participation.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a sustained critique of the prevailing conceptual and normative foundations of cultural policy in the UK. Two discursive frameworks are currently operating together. The first of these, the focus on ‘excellence and access’ (Street 2011), has operated as the basis for cultural policy – or, rather, arts policy – since the Arts Council of Great Britain was formed in 1946. This has been widely criticized as a ‘deficit model’ (Miles and Sullivan 2012; Jancovich and Bianchini 2013; Stevenson, Balling, and Kann-Rasmussen 2017). According to this critique, it is implicit within prevailing policy frameworks that those who do not participate in publicly funded arts should do, and are in deficit. Alongside ‘excellence and access’, a more recent discourse, emerging during the 1990s, widens the scope beyond the arts to cultural policy more broadly conceived – identifying the ‘creative industries’ as a key sector of post-industrial economies, a primary site of the UK’s competitive advantage, and an increasingly important area for policymaking (Hewison 2014). This framing has also received sustained criticism: with claims that creative industries discourses are characteristic of the wider neoliberalisation of public policy (McGuigan 2005),¹ and that – via their celebration of the supposed autonomy and pleasure of creative work – they play a key role in enabling the pernicious transformation of the economy as a whole, towards conditions of weakened labour rights, diminished solidarity, and increased precarity (McRobbie 2016).

Whilst these critiques are now well-established, the range of work to develop alternative conceptual and normative foundations for UK cultural policy is very limited. There is a small but generative body of work that is beginning to speak to this: addressing possibilities for substantive normative accounts of creative justice (Banks 2017), the creative economy in terms of moral economy (Hesmondhalgh 2017), the role

of art and culture in sustainable prosperity (Oakley, Ball, and Cunningham 2018), and ‘voice’ as a basis for ‘culture and politics beyond neoliberalism’ (Couldry 2010).

Taking account of this recent work, this paper makes three distinctive contributions.

Firstly, we identify ‘cultural democracy’ as a key counter-formulation of what cultural practice and policy should seek to achieve, and examine this cluster of previous articulations of alternative normative bases for cultural policy. In doing so, we highlight the need to explicitly address, and better understand, the nature of *cultural opportunity*.

Secondly, drawing on our empirical research with one particular initiative in the UK, the Get Creative campaign, we highlight a key characteristic of cultural opportunity – its *ecological* nature. Thirdly, we show that a project of establishing new directions for cultural policy beyond the discourses of excellence and access and the creative industries has much to benefit from an engagement with the *capabilities approach* to human development (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2011; Robeyns 2017).

This paper thereby provides a new account of cultural democracy, characterised by cultural capability, which builds upon previous attempts to conceptualize cultural democracy as the expansion or redistribution of the means of cultural production. In doing so, we make a contribution to developing alternative conceptual and normative frameworks for cultural policy: ones that recognise the current and potential diversity of cultural activity and value – including the plethora of cultural activity that has no direct interest in, or connection to, the state – without disavowing shared or public responsibility for cultural opportunity. We conclude by indicating the implications this particular conceptualization of cultural democracy may have for future research, policy and practice. Hadley and Belfiore (2018) suggest that ‘An historically informed yet present- and future-oriented theoretical elaboration of cultural democracy for twenty-first century British culture and society would need to revise, regenerate and re-fashion

a conceptual understanding of what “cultural democracy” might mean and look like in the present historical moment.’ (2018, 221-2) This paper offers one version of just such an elaboration.

Versions of Cultural Democracy

For those practitioners and researchers opposed to the paternalistic tendencies of state-supported cultural activity in the UK, a key distinction is drawn between the democratization of culture and cultural democracy (Evrard 1997). The democratization of culture is the ‘excellence and access’ model, which continues to provide the primary framework for cultural policy in the UK, as per Arts Council England’s 2010-20 strategy ‘Great Art for Everyone’ (ACE 2013). The alternative, cultural democracy, has been articulated in a number of related versions (Simpson 1976; Braden 1978; Bersson 1981, 1984; Kelly 1984; Kelly, Lock, and Merkel 1986; Evrard 1997; Bilton 1997; Gripsrud 2000; Cultural Policy Collective 2004; Graves 2005; Adams and Goldfarb 2005; Zorba 2009; Hope 2011; Looseley, 2011, 2012; Gattinger 2012; Juncker and Balling 2016; Jeffers and Moriarti 2017; Rasmussen 2017; Movement for Cultural Democracy 2018). Each of these articulations of cultural democracy is in some way concerned with widening or redistributing the means of cultural production – the resources and powers of self-expression, voice and culture-making.

Hesmondhalgh et al. (2015b) explain that the democratizing culture / cultural democracy distinction names two tendencies within specifically social democratic approaches to cultural policy. ‘There are important instances in many countries in which features of both tendencies or traditions have been brought together. Nevertheless, the two tendencies can act as organising principles for understanding historical tensions in social democratic parties over the politics of culture.’ (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015b, 20)

Whilst often set in opposition, what divides and unites the two is their divergent approaches to pursuing the same overarching social democratic ambition: to address, via state action, the damaging effects of capitalism – ‘especially regarding inequality, freedom and identity’. (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015b, 184)

In the UK, the notion of cultural democracy is most closely associated with the community arts movement, which had its heyday between the late-1960s and the mid-1980s. That period saw the proliferation of ‘artists’ working with communities, with a commitment to the *voices* of those communities. This movement was both a success and a failure. By the mid-1980s, it had established itself as a major part of the UK cultural landscape. In doing so it changed wider practice and discourse. One notable critic of the community arts movement, Roy Shaw, in making a defence of the excellence and access model, explained that ‘We are all democrats now – provided you don’t ask us to define democracy’ (Shaw 1987, 77). This, then, is a central issue in disentangling these discursive webs. If *democracy* is a commitment on all sides – encompassing both cultural democracy and the democratizing of culture – what does ‘cultural democracy’ signify as a specific value, commitment or policy?

The language of cultural democracy has been employed in relation to a range of national contexts, and explicit links between cultural democracy and broader political processes is present within many such articulations. Educational theorist Rachel DuBois, writing in the 1940s, gave an account of cultural democracy as a necessary third strand of America’s democratic project, alongside political and economic democracy. (See Graves 2005, 10-16) Art and culture-making can have important roles to play within activism (Love and Mattern 2013; Serafini 2018). But their roles within political democracy may extend far beyond this. In *Cultural Democracy: The Arts, Community & the Public Purpose*, James Bau Graves suggests that ‘Democracy is a

sham unless everyone has an equal opportunity to be heard, and the contributions of many are needed to find democratic solutions.’ (Graves 2005, 16) For Graves, ‘At the point where these two concepts – culture and democracy – intersect, we would experience fair, equitable, and proportional attention to each other’s cultural aspirations.’ (Graves 2005, 17) Furthermore, such a condition would have implications for political democracy *tout court*, offering ‘a system of support for the cultures of our diverse communities that [...] gives voice to the many who have been historically excluded from the public domain, and that makes no claims of superiority, or special status. It assumes a fundamental acceptance of difference.’ (Graves 2005, 17)

Owen Kelly’s widely read account of community arts in the UK (1984) highlighted the need for the ‘movement’ to address its own history, and provide a clearer theoretical underpinning for its practice. Otherwise, he warned, its radically-intentioned practices would continue to undergo processes of co-option and political defeat. Kelly anticipated that his book on the community arts movement would be the first of many. Instead, it remains one of the few monographs on the subject, and it’s only with the publication of Jeffers and Moriarti’s (2017) volume on the history of the movement that the thread of that historiography has been taken up concertededly. The present paper responds to Kelly’s challenge, more than 30 years on, to provide a historically-informed theorization of cultural democracy.

A key part of the debates related to cultural democracy concern the value, visibility and material support given to popular culture, amateur arts and ‘everyday creativity’ (Gauntlett 2011; 64 Million Artists 2016). David Looseley explains how these came to be excluded from the ambitions of the Arts Council of Great Britain in the post-war period, having enjoyed significant government support during World War Two, under the purview of CEMA (Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the

Arts) (Looseley 2011, 368-9). He shows how the subsequent positioning of arts policy in the post-war period further removed it from the centre of politics. Whilst a part of the post-war consensus of the newly created welfare state, cultural policy was relegated to the position of a minor policy concern. It was placed under the stewardship of elite decision-makers, and even within the democratization of culture model, 'access' was given far less weight than 'excellence'. (Looseley 2011, 369) Notwithstanding Jenny Lee's more ambitious and progressive policy for the arts (Lee 1965), and the emergence of the community arts movement soon after, the question of the fundamental aims of UK cultural policy was suppressed anew in the latter part of the 1980s, by a putative reconciliation of the key opposing positions. Under Thatcher and then Major, 'the polarisation of democratisation and cultural democracy was assumed to be rendered obsolete by the supposedly more forward looking notion of consumer sovereignty.' (Looseley 2011, 371) In other words, the market was now taken to be an effective mechanism for 'democratically' distributing cultural goods and resources.

In very briefly sketching the history of these ideas, the approach to culture under the GLC, during the 1980s, needs its place, as 'Not unlike the cultural democrats of the 1970s, the GLC's ambition was to transcend narrow 'arts' policy towards a more expansive 'cultural' policy in which alternative creativities were supported so that marginalised communities might have a voice' (Looseley 2011, 372) As Looseley further explains, 'This short-lived experience in London proved influential beyond its years, not only on other local authorities but also on the national Labour Party, though without the radical ideology.' (Looseley 2011, 373) Looseley suggests that the New Labour cultural policy project was in a sense a continuation of the account in which excellence and access are fully compatible, but this was taken a step further, in part, through 'the rechristening of the cultural industries as the 'creative' industries, in order

to embrace in a seamless continuum a wide gamut of creative practices, from the popular, commercial and economically or socially useful, to the classically high.’ (Looseley 2011, 374) Looseley argues that this supposed reconciliation of access and excellence is both central and under-theorized within UK cultural policy, a discursive slight-of-hand he calls a ‘tactical populism’.

Vestheim (2012, 495) makes the obvious but nonetheless important point that the political commitments of cultural policy need not necessarily be ‘democratic’. Any number of non-democratic regimes have taken a good deal of interest in culture and developed policies to serve authoritarian ends. Yet, whilst cultural policy may serve non-democratic goals, we may have more reasons than ever to consider the ways in which it can. Jeremy Gilbert has recently written about the potential significance of cultural practices as part of the development of alternatives beyond neoliberalism. For Gilbert ‘history suggests that political and social change on the scale we seek must be accompanied by extensive cultural innovation. [...] What new forms of expression may emerge in the years ahead, nobody can predict. It seems certain, however, that the struggle against neoliberalism and authoritarian conservatism will still require forms of culture that are collectivist without being conformist, liberating without simply breaking social ties.’ (Gilbert 2017, n.p.)

What Vestheim and Gilbert both indicate is that whilst cultural policy may serve many political values and ambitions, for anyone concerned to affect change, culture-making – and cultural policy – may have an important role to play. We can discern this premise, in fact, in all articulations of cultural democracy. However, exactly what change is being sought, and how, varies considerably. Recognizing the multiple invocations of cultural democracy and democratizing culture, Sophie Hope observes that ‘both have their roots in the notion that involvement in art is connected to

emancipation, liberation and empowerment, but of course the political and economic frameworks of these terms vary dramatically depending on the agendas of who is using them.’ (Hope 2011, 39) One of the aims of this paper, precisely, is to help cut through the tangle of claims of emancipation, liberation and empowerment that are being made at the confluence of culture and democracy – and to offer a specific conceptual framework that enables researchers and policymakers to step beyond this thicket of terms, causal claims and normative uncertainties. We do this, in part, by foregrounding the notion of *cultural opportunity*. The key argument of this first section of the paper is that the various articulations of cultural democracy (and the frameworks they critique) each contain an implicit account of cultural opportunity, and that, as part of the process of developing new conceptual and normative foundations for cultural policy, these accounts need to be made explicit, and contested.

As will be elaborated further below, in this article we are proposing a specific account of cultural opportunity as the freedom people have, or lack, to (co-)create culture (see Wilson, Gross, and Bull 2017). More specifically, we suggest cultural opportunity can be understood as *the substantive freedom to give form and value to our experiences*. We recognise that this formulation begs further questions regarding what exactly is meant by ‘culture’. This is a consequential issue that faces everyone working on cultural policy, but it is too often glossed over. For now, suffice it to say that we are using ‘culture’ broadly and inclusively, framed along the following lines: *culture is emergent from, constituted by, but irreducible to all those socio-economic phenomena² that are reproduced and/or transformed through people giving form and value to their experiences*. Under this working definition it should be observed that the structures and institutions that act to motivate, enable, and constrain people’s cultural opportunities – thus (re)producing both possibilities and inequalities – are themselves part of what

culture *is*, rather than acting externally upon something we call ‘culture’.³ In this regard, it’s helpful to note Christian Smith’s view that:

human persons are free to use their manifold capacities for representation, belief formation, language, memory, creativity, identity development, and so on variously to shape the meanings and structures of their social existence together. The result is the immense variety, richness, and complexity of human cultures and subcultural meaning systems evident in history and the world today. (Smith 2010, 119)

In this paper, by identifying the need to more effectively analyse the nature of cultural opportunity, we are proposing, precisely, that this is a crucial step in understanding the socio-economic and always-political ways in which persons are – and are not – *free* to ‘shape the meanings and structures of their social existence together.’⁴ In the next two sections, we make the case for a pair of analytical perspectives through which to understand cultural opportunity – the first of which is *ecological*.

Cultural Opportunity: An Ecological Phenomenon

Alongside the rising criticism of the deficit model and creative industries discourse, the UK has in recent years seen a number of initiatives concerned with amateur practice and what has been termed ‘everyday creativity’. Some organizations, such as Voluntary Arts, have been actively supporting amateur practice for many years. Others have been formed more recently – such as 64 Million Artists, with its commitment to ‘unlocking the creativity’ of everyone in the UK, and Fun Palaces, which revived the unrealized project of Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price under the banner ‘Everyone an Artist,

Everyone a Scientist'. The Get Creative campaign, launched in 2015, represents a coming together of critiques of the deficit model with initiatives of this kind. The Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value (Neelands et al. 2015) recommended a national campaign to draw attention to the wide range of cultural activity taking place across the UK. In doing so, it was responding, in part, to the statistic produced by Mark Taylor through his analysis of DCMS's Taking Part survey, that there is 8.7% of the English population that makes the most voracious use of publicly funded cultural activity, and that this small minority is disproportionately white, wealthy and formally educated. (Taylor 2016)

Get Creative was originally intended to operate as a year-long campaign, but is now a rolling programme of activity. Its *modus operandi* has two primary elements. The first is to provide a website, nested within BBC Arts, in which people can share examples of their creative activities and outputs. The second is to recruit several hundred Get Creative Champions – organizations or individuals who put on Get Creative events, in which people have the opportunity to 'have a go' at a creative activity. We conducted research with Get Creative, as both evaluators of the initiative, producing internal evaluation reports, and as researchers treating Get Creative as a prism through which to address wider questions of cultural participation and policy.

The research we conducted involved a range of methods, including semi-structured interviews with members of the Get Creative Steering Group; focus groups, questionnaires and interviews with Get Creative Champions; focus groups with chapters of the What Next? network; and four ethnographic studies at sites of everyday creativity. In selecting our ethnographic sites, we deliberately chose two Get Creative Champions and two sites that were outside of the Get Creative initiative – to work with

a diversity of cultural activities, including people with no direct relationship to the campaign.

In undertaking this research we were repeatedly posed with the question of what this wide range of cultural organizations and initiatives were trying to achieve through their collaboration. What are the underlying aims of Get Creative? Are they the same for each of the diverse range of Get Creative Champions – are they all looking to accomplish the same things through their work, and their involvement in this campaign? Many of these organizations and individuals articulated a strong commitment to the people they work with. A range of terminology circulated through the fieldwork, spanning ‘varieties of participation’ (Gross and Pitts 2016). In some cases, organizations offered clear articulations of their commitment to participant *agency*. In other cases, fairly traditional audience development approaches were in operation, seeking to attract and sustain new attenders. Each of the organizations involved was implicitly committed to the expansion of *cultural opportunity*. However, exactly what this consisted of varied considerably, raising the question of how cultural opportunity can and should be understood.

It was in fact via one of the ethnographies outside of the framework of Get Creative itself that some of the most illuminating data was generated. At the time of the research, break-dancers made use of the Stratford Shopping Centre in East London. The ethnography began with an interview with one of these dancers. He explained some of the factors that enable and constrain him in his dancing. One of these was the simple fact that the shopping centre authorities did not move dancers on from making use of this space. He and his fellow dancers are always on the lookout for good spaces in which to dance together – ideally public spaces with suitable floors. In many cases, they

find good locations, only to be moved on. In fact, some months after the research was completed, dancers and skaters were banned from making use of the shopping centre.

This interviewee also explained that on Tuesday evenings he dances in a church hall a few miles away in Hackney. This is because a friend of his teaches breakin' to primary school children in that church, and as part of his payment he has access to the room, to dance after the lessons, and he invites friends and acquaintances to dance with him. We therefore visited this church as part of the fieldwork, and interviewed a number of dancers. Two of these explained that their route into breakin' had come via school, where a dance teacher had been brought in to run a weekly lunchtime session. They enjoyed it so much that they asked where else they could dance, and were directed to the Stratford Circus Arts Centre, where Newham Council was funding free breakin' lessons for young men on Saturday mornings. Developing their skills there, these two young men continued to enjoy dancing, and the teacher let them know that if they wanted to practice informally with more experienced dancers, they could go to a church in Hackney on a Tuesday night.

Here, then, we see a cultural *ecosystem* in operation: a developing set of interconnections and interdependencies between a shopping centre, a church, a children's theatre group, a secondary school, a freelance dance teacher, a National Portfolio Organisation, a local authority, and a network of young men who dance. This example indicates that cultural opportunity needs to be understood not as located within single organizations or spaces, but through the interconnections and interdependencies between cultural resources of many kinds. The key point of this second part of the paper is that if cultural organizations and policymakers are committed to the cultural opportunity of the publics they serve, recognizing its *ecological* nature has hugely important implications for future policy and practice.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century there has been an increase in the use of ecological language within the UK cultural sector (Holden 2015) and internationally, but without consistency of meaning. Some research into arts-led community development makes use of the phrase ‘cultural ecosystem’ (for example, Cohen-Cruz 2015; Scott Tate 2015), but without explicitly unpacking the quintessentially *systemic* features of ecosystems: the interrelationships and interdependencies between different organisms (or actors) within an environment (Holden 2015, 2016; Markusen et al. 2011). Scholars in the field of creative economy have enthusiastically employed ecological language in proposing more networked approaches to cultural management, suggesting that a cultural ecosystem is something to be ‘implemented’ (Borin and Donato 2015), or an ‘approach to managing networks’ (Dovey et al. 2016, 100); whilst one prominent commentator uses ‘creative ecology’ to refer to a mature and desirable stage of economic development - only achieved when ‘creative economies’ are characterised by sufficiently high levels of diversity, change, learning and adaptation (Howkins 2010).

By contrast, our view is that, wherever there are humans, cultural ecosystems *always-already exist* - deliberately stewarded to greater or lesser extents. (For further discussion of our approach to ‘managed cultural ecosystems’, see Wilson and Gross 2017). Moreover, in contrast to the sometimes casual use of ecological language to refer to culture-in-place, our research with Get Creative highlights the need to develop genuinely systemic analysis. Such analyses will be characterised, precisely, by examination of the interdependencies between cultural resources of different kinds, and how such ecosystems - and the opportunities they afford - both precede attempts to manage them *and* are amenable to active stewardship.⁵ So doing, this approach raises

key political questions: who does the stewarding, and according to what aims and values?

Commenting on a number of policy developments in the 1970s, Su Braden identified and critiqued an approach to cultural democracy which, in effect, identified it as a domain of inclusive cultural activity located outside of high art. 'It is far less challenging, but easier to place the search for "cultural democracy" firmly to one side of the main stream of "high culture".' (Braden 1978, 14). Today a key question remains: can (and should) a policy framework encompass and embrace the many different domains of cultural production and consumption? Drawing on the ecological insights of our Get Creative research, this paper answers, 'yes'. Concurring with Braden's comments, this is to argue that if cultural democracy is to be realised, it has to be understood as a *system*, rather than as a discrete set of 'inclusive' cultural activities that leave the foundational concepts and commitments of the policy status quo untouched.

In presenting this 'ecological' approach, two final points of clarification need to be made. An aspect of the recent wave of critiques of the deficit model has been to highlight the range of cultural activities that take place in everyday life (Ebrey 2016) with no obvious connection to publicly supported provision. This is one of the key insights of the AHRC project, Understanding Everyday Participation (Miles and Gibson 2016). But recognising the range of everyday cultural activities does not, in itself, mean disregarding the many ways in which cultural infrastructures supported by public investment do – and could further – constitute a crucial part of the overall environment enabling people's cultural opportunity. Similarly, calling for cultural democracy does not necessitate facing off (active) production versus (passive) consumption. Graves makes a poorly theorized distinction between 'things people do, rather than passively consume', (Graves 2005, 3) with the former being his preference, as 'the kind of

cultural activities that actually engage Americans' (Graves 2005, 3). Cultural participation exists in many varieties, from being an audience member, to a workshop participant, volunteer, or a creative citizen (Hargreaves and Hartley 2016; Wilson, Gross, and Bull 2017). This variety is a continuum, not a dichotomy. Given the underlying concern in the literature on cultural participation and cultural democracy to reject paternalism, it is striking that implicit preferences (and rejections) of particular modes of participation sometimes operate within them, unchecked.

In the first part of this paper we argued that both prevailing and insurgent discourses of cultural policy (including the various articulations of 'cultural democracy') operate competing accounts of *cultural opportunity* - a key but under-theorized notion. In this second section we have shown the need to understand cultural opportunity *ecologically*. In the next and final part, we suggest an analytical approach that, in combination with this ecological perspective, can help lay new conceptual and normative foundations for a non-paternalistic cultural policy: one that neither imposes its cultural tastes, nor disavows the responsibility of both the state and civil society to support cultural opportunity.

Cultural Capability

To develop new frameworks for cultural policy beyond the deficit and creative industries models, we need to build a conceptually stronger and more encompassing account of cultural opportunity. The capabilities approach to human development provides powerful insights with which to meet this challenge.

What is the capabilities approach?

The capabilities approach⁶ was developed as an alternative to – and critique of – prevailing models of international development, which focused primarily on GDP. In their place, it offers an account of development as *freedom* (Sen 1999). In the years since Amartya Sen first formulated the approach in the 1980s, there have been significant conceptual developments and its application to research and policymaking has proliferated. However, in all its various manifestations and uses, the capabilities approach asks, ‘*What are people really able to do and what kind of person are they able to be?*’ (Robeyns 2017, 9, italics in original.) This approach to development offers an account of quality of life that does not use income as the primary indicator, nor reduces achieved quality of life to subjective states. Instead, it provides an account of wellbeing in terms of a person’s substantive freedom to do and be what they have reason to value (Sen 1999). In a widely cited paper, Ingrid Robeyns explains that:

The capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society. Its main characteristics are its highly interdisciplinary character, and the focus on the plural or multidimensional aspects of well-being (Robeyns 2005, 93)

In this view of development, the capabilities approach gives a specific account of freedom in terms of the real opportunity (capability) to choose between different functionings – realized beings and doings. It thereby provides tools with which to approach policy development and evaluation in ways that hold together human agency and ‘opportunity structure’ (Kleine 2013, 27) without collapsing one into the other. Within this approach, the aim of development is to ‘expand the portfolio of the

capabilities that form the shape of an individual's freedom of choice.' (Kleine 2013, 23). It is important to make clear that the key role of 'choice' within the capabilities approach fundamentally contrasts with the uncritical valorisation of choice within consumer capitalism (Lewis 2013; Salecl 2011) and neoliberalism (Couldry 2010). Choice within the capabilities approach needs to be understood as 'a field of contestation' and 'represents a crystallization of power relations in people's lives, reflecting their relative freedom and unfreedom' (Kleine 2013, 34).

The capabilities approach has been subject to criticism that it is excessively individualistic. These criticisms are unjustified. Whilst there is an ethical individualism within the approach, it is ontologically and methodologically highly relational (Robeyns 2005). Sen makes clear that 'Individual freedom is quintessentially a social product' (Sen 1999, 31), and as the approach continues to be applied and developed, this combination of ethical individualism with methodological and ontological relationality becomes increasingly evident, as demonstrated within the emerging interest in the relationship between capabilities and community (Tonon 2018). Robeyns suggests that the capabilities approach emerged as a critical perspective within the liberal school of political philosophy, with its focus on, but distinctive account of, individual freedom (2005, 95). We suggest that the capabilities approach can be generatively combined with, and provide resources for, intellectual and policy projects that draw on a wide range of political traditions and commitments – including the typically redistributive concerns of writers and practitioners working with discourses of cultural democracy. We also suggest it can be fruitfully combined with *relational ethics of care* (see, for example, Tronto 2013), a confluence we are actively developing (Wilson and Gross 2017; Wilson 2018).

It is true that the capabilities approach does not, in and of itself, provide a full set of tools for analysing operations of power. This should not be seen as a shortcoming. It is an *approach*, a conceptual and normative paradigm that reframes analysis of development in terms of substantive freedom. It ‘delivers neither a theory of the social world nor a methodology to research it’, but rather a ‘base for producing new approaches towards the analysis and facilitation of the ‘good life’ of persons’ (Schafer and Otto 2014, 6). Sen never set out to provide a ‘total’ theory, and he is quite clear that the openness of the approach is one of its key strengths. This means that it can – and must – be combined with other methodological and theoretical tools: not least, in undertaking analysis of how social, political, economic and other factors enable and constrain capabilities in specific contexts.

How has it been used?

The capabilities approach has now been applied to many fields and disciplines (see Robeyns 2017). The domain in which it has already achieved the most clear and substantial effect is in the literature regarding the ‘very idea of what development is’ (Robeyns 2017, 16), and it is ‘arguably the currently most recognised heterodox development approach’ (Kleine 2013, 36). However, there is only very limited application of these ideas to the analysis of cultural policy. Within the field of communication studies there is a small but growing engagement. Garnham (1997) has indicated the potential of the approach for reassessing the aims of media policy. Couldry’s work on the sociology of ‘voice’ draws on Sen, identifying the significance of Sen’s work in its reconnection of ‘economic discourse to ethical questions about the ends of human life’ (Couldry 2010, 16). More recently, Hesmondhalgh (2017) has discussed the need to develop normative accounts of the cultural and media industries,

invoking the capabilities approach and traditions of ‘moral economy’. For Hesmondhalgh, the capabilities approach is the best understanding of human flourishing available. This is because it is ‘objectivist and pluralist, and takes into account both our individual needs and our needs for affiliation with others. In its attention to social justice, it also valuably suggests the need to consider what social arrangements are needed to allow humans to flourish’ (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 20-21). Hesmondhalgh explains that the concept of capabilities serves to ground the notion of wellbeing, and to ‘make it more pragmatically applicable to political action and to debates about public policy.’ (Hesmondhalgh 2017, 215) Overall, however, cultural policy scholars – and researchers working on related debates regarding cultural value and cultural participation – have yet to draw deeply on these conceptual resources. This paper highlights the value of doing so, and indicates where the opportunities and challenges may lie.

How is it useful?

Garnham’s invocation of the capabilities approach indicates its pertinence to more recent debates within cultural practice and policy, as he argues that applying it to communication policy ‘leads to the conclusion that it is not access [to media] in a crude sense that is crucial, but the distribution of social resources which make access usable.’ (Garnham 1997, 25) The capabilities approach helps us to ask what a full range of cultural resources might consist of, and what wider conditions (‘conversion factors’, in the technical language of the capabilities approach) enable and constrain people from making real choices with regards to whether and how to employ these opportunities (capabilities) to achieve realized beings and doings (functionings). The capabilities approach provides a normative and conceptual framework which much more effectively

meets the challenge of avoiding (or at least minimizing) paternalism, whilst not disavowing the responsibility of public policy to address and support cultural opportunity. Moreover, the capabilities approach helps us to analyse cultural opportunity *systemically*, rather than from the all-too-narrow perspective of particular types of cultural ‘providers’, such as the currently existing National Portfolio of Arts Council funded organisations. With the capability approach’s radical pluralism – a focus on individual freedom that keeps tight hold on the structural conditions that enable and constrain that freedom – we can begin to develop much fuller understandings of how cultural opportunity actually operates, and how it can be enabled to expand.

What next?

We need analyses of how current practices of cultural production and consumption produce and reproduce inequalities and injustices, and there is a growing literature addressing this. However, we also need to better understand the value of culture (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016) and of cultural opportunity. Hesmondhalgh has observed that, within critical accounts of the arts and cultural industries, there is at times a cognitive dissonance, in which researchers continue to actively enjoy the products of the cultural industries whilst seemingly ‘unable or unwilling in what they write and say to provide an account of how art, culture, entertainment and knowledge might enhance people’s lives more generally, and why these domains might need defending’ (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 4). Whilst keenly aware of the role that music (and other cultural forms) may serve in processes of domination, Hesmondhalgh makes the case for the political roles that such practices can play. His position is that ‘music’s most significant effects on the world are not directly political, in the sense of contributing to forms of

publicness that involve deliberation, or that advance political struggle, but instead relate to the sustenance of public sociability, which keeps alive feelings of solidarity and community.’ (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 10). An important part of Sen’s foundational account of the capabilities approach is that different kinds of freedom are interconnected, and nourish one another (Sen 1999). Within the openness of the capabilities approach, we can pose the question of how specifically *cultural* capabilities – what we suggest calling *the substantive freedoms to give form and value to our experiences* – may in turn nurture and nourish other capabilities. How might the freedoms to make and experience music (and other cultural products and processes) together enable agency within other domains? How does this vary across different conditions and contexts of culture-making? And what role might policymakers play in cultivating conditions conducive to these cross-fertilizing effects? Drawing on the capabilities approach as a lens through which to examine cultural opportunity can help us articulate and address these questions.

The capabilities approach is very much directed towards action and towards the policymaking process. Sen makes clear that, amongst its advantages, the approach forces clarity with regards to judgments of value, necessitating ‘substantial debates on the particular functionings that should be included in [any] list of important achievements and the corresponding capabilities. [...] [O]ne of the main merits of the approach is the need to address these judgmental questions in an explicit way, rather than hiding them in some implicit framework.’ (Sen 1999, 75) Within the context of UK cultural policy struggling to break out of the twin logics of paternalism (the deficit model) and the market (creative industries), the capabilities approach not only enables clarification of underpinning notions of cultural opportunity – refocusing on people’s substantive (cultural) freedoms: it has the potential to enable policy processes within

which judgements of value can be made with greater conceptual and normative clarity, beyond the opacity of judgements of artistic ‘excellence’, and the false transparency of the market as an aggregator of preferences.

Nonetheless, there are major challenges facing the capabilities approach in terms of its operation. These include, not least, the difficulties of assessing the presence or absence of capabilities – rather than falling back on the study of realized functionings, which are often used as a proxy (Robeyns 2005; Kleine 2013). This is an important conundrum, as one of the fundamental attractions of the capabilities approach is precisely its ability to shift focus from the paternalism of policy approaches that prescribe specific functionings to beneficiaries (Jancic 2014, 19). Whilst highlighting this as a key challenge for the capability approach, Kleine indicates that effective solutions can be developed, offering her own ‘choice framework’ for putting the approach into practice (Kleine 2013).

An important next step within the specific context of cultural policy research will be to explore possibilities for operationalizing the capabilities approach. This may involve its application to specific fieldwork sites, including, for example, the analysis of particular cultural ecosystems (Wilson and Gross 2017). It may also be applied to the analysis of particular cultural policies or programmes. In turn, such studies could be used to feed back into theoretical accounts of cultural capability, and of capabilities more broadly. In turn, research of this kind has the potential to inform the development of *cultural capability indexes*, which could be employed at different scales to evaluate the effectiveness of specific programmes or policies, and to inform their future development.

Further questions

Sen and Nussbaum famously take different views on the merits of drawing up a list of core capabilities. Sen resists requests to provide such a list, arguing that the identification of key capabilities needs to relate to specific policy or research contexts, and that such lists of capabilities need to be written by the people in question themselves. We don't have room here to explore these issues in detail. But we introduce them to indicate that the capabilities approach – with its clear conceptual and normative basis, combined with methodological and theoretical promiscuity – helps to re-articulate and re-frame key questions for cultural policy studies: where does responsibility lie for ensuring cultural opportunity (cultural capabilities)? What practices, programmes, and policies are most efficacious in supporting cultural opportunity (cultural capabilities) in what contexts?

Beyond the deficit model, if a shift from 'access' to 'capabilities' helps address the problematic paternalism of the past 70 years of UK cultural policy, to what extent should future cultural policy nonetheless be committed to ensuring particular cultural functionings – particularly in the case of children? It would be hard to argue against the position that even within a general policy framework underpinned by a commitment to the normative position of the capabilities approach, there are a good deal of basic functionings that the state would want to ensure for its children and young people, including key aspects of physical health, literacy and numeracy. What range of 'cultural' functionings need to be included in this list? By adopting a capabilities approach, not only can we employ a critical lens to cultural policy that has the great benefits of conceptual and normative clarity, radical pluralism, systemic analysis, and a balancing of anti-paternalism with collective responsibility; we are also in a position to more effectively address cultural policy's relationships with neighbouring policy

domains, such as education, health, housing and communities, that too often operate in parallel, rather than in partnership.

Conclusion

In this paper we have made three contributions. Firstly, to show that accounts of cultural democracy – a prominent counter-formulation of the aims of cultural policy – are linked by their commitment to the expansion or redistribution of the means of cultural production. There are implicit accounts of *cultural opportunity* embedded within each of these versions of cultural democracy, and developing more explicit and effective analyses of cultural opportunity is crucial. Drawing on our empirical work with Get Creative, we have then made one key point about the nature of cultural opportunity: that it is *ecological* in nature. Finally, we have suggested that in seeking to provide new conceptual foundations for cultural policy, the capabilities approach provides very useful tools. It is a normative framework which commits itself to maximizing people's substantive freedom – what they can do and be that they have reason to value – an account of human flourishing that is neither subjectivist nor paternalistic. We offer an initial account of *cultural capability*, drawing on this approach, as the potential basis for a new framework for cultural policy, to be explored and developed further.

We suggest that this approach both invites, and demands, engagement with *multiple scales*. Attention must be paid to how macro-conditions of political economy enable and constrain cultural capabilities, but also to the meso and micro environments and processes that shape communal and individual lives, and how they can be lived. This represents a methodological challenge – and opportunity – for researchers and policymakers. It is a challenge our work is beginning to address (Wilson and Gross 2017). Ecosystem studies have the potential to open up understandings of the nested

nature of cultural capability – conditioned by aspects of political economy, national policy, municipal governance, neighbourhood dynamics, family histories and individual trajectories. Engaging with all these levels, and more, may enable us to identify approaches to cultural policymaking that commit themselves to holding open cultural opportunity as widely as possible, for as many as possible – and doing so through the powers and responsibilities available to actors at different locations within cultural ecosystems, including the international, national, regional, municipal and the local.

Looseley makes the following suggestion for one aspect of what policy practice should look like in the future, in support of cultural democracy:

what needs to be devised are divergent, responsive ways of addressing the newer, often more disconcerting, more multidisciplinary creative forms issuing from mixed urban communities, such as hip hop, street arts and other forms of ‘emergent cultures’, where the artist, the performance space and even the art form are not always straightforwardly or conventionally identifiable. (Looseley 2012, 590)

As does our own fieldwork with young people in the London Borough of Harrow (Wilson & Gross 2017), Loosely’s proposal raises the question of *democratic knowledge production*. How can we effectively know what cultural capabilities are present – and which are absent, or need to be supported and developed – on an ongoing and democratic basis? This is a central question for future research and policymaking in moving beyond the deficit model and creative industries discourses. Cultural democracy will always be in the making – not least, in respect of the need to co-produce knowledge of cultural ecosystems on an ongoing basis. Cultural democracy is in this sense

characterised, in part, by arrangements of co-produced knowledge, pluralist processes of valuation, and shared decision-making. This is what cultural democracy looks like: *a sustained but evolving system of governance for substantive cultural freedom*.

Whilst our research documents diverse practices of creative citizenship and everyday creativity (Wilson, Gross, and Bull 2017; Wilson and Gross 2017), indicating the great unseen depths beneath the visible surfaces of publicly funded and profit-making culture, our fieldwork also highlights the need to avoid over-simplifying any distinction between the institutional and the non-institutional. Instead, the interdependencies and interconnections between cultural resources of many kinds are key to understanding the ever-emergent conditions of cultural opportunity. Unlike some, such as Graves (2005), we are holding together a maximally wide range of cultural domains and locations within our account of cultural democracy, characterised by a commitment to cultural capability. Our work indicates the need to analyse and support cultural opportunity across the boundaries of everyday creativity, the profit-making creative industries and the publicly funded arts. Many subsequent questions for empirical inquiry then follow: for example, how do processes of recruitment and hiring within the UK creative industries, as currently constituted, inhibit (and enable) cultural capability? Or, how does the current system of secondary education enable and constrain cultural capability? In each such case, we can address specific questions of *structural inequality* – asking what works, for whom, under what circumstances – and answering these questions through multi-scaler analyses.

Finally, we see this account of cultural democracy, characterised by cultural capability, as making one small contribution to re-imagining the relation between citizen and state (and the role of public policy) for post-neoliberal times. For all the critiques of the discourses of access and excellence and creative industries, with their

mixture of post-war paternalism and neoliberal market logic, there is yet to be developed a clear alternative path or framework for UK cultural policy. We make this contribution for others to respond to, and perhaps work with. This account of cultural democracy as cultural capability, offering a new conceptualisation of cultural opportunity, is intended to be both critical and, ultimately, practical. In addition to further conceptual and empirical inquiry, next steps could include the investigation of the ways in which the idea of cultural capability can be operationalised: exploring its implications for policy and practice at multiple scales, including government departments, arts funding agencies, and cultural education partnerships, to name just three.

Notes

¹ Hesmondhalgh et al. (2015a) rightly point out that ‘neoliberal’ is too crude a label with which to characterize the multiple aspects of recent UK cultural policy, whilst recognising that McGuigan’s (2005) polemical use of the term is valuable in its provocation to explore ‘the consequences of cultural policies that were profoundly shaped by economistic conceptions of the good.’ (2015a, 110).

² ‘Socio-economic phenomena’ is an umbrella term used by Fleetwood (2016) to embrace a wide range of ‘structures’ and ‘institutions’, including, *inter alia*, agreements, codes, conventions, customs, directives, guidelines, institutions, laws, mores, networks, norms, obligations, precedents, procedures, regulations, responsibilities, rituals, rules, routines, scripts, social structures, standards and templates.

³ ‘High’, ‘popular’, ‘common’, ‘sub-’ culture etc., are all then to be understood in terms of the choices people make in the light of the freedoms they enjoy (or not) to give form and value to their experiences, and together comprise ‘culture’, writ large.

⁴ Moreover, ‘cultural participation’ needs to be extended to embrace how individuals and groups of people decide what cultural objects and events are supported. In this sense, ‘participation’ - understood as a devolved form of decision-making process concerning ‘who decides’ and ‘what is decided’ (Alkire 2002, 127) - should also be seen as part of what culture *is*.

⁵ We are currently undertaking research of this kind, examining cultural ecosystems in the context of Arts Council England’s Creative People and Places scheme. Drawing on that research (see, also, Wilson and Gross 2017), we are in the process of developing publications specifically addressing the implications of ecological perspectives for the development - and evaluation - of the many ‘place-based’ approaches to cultural policy currently emerging in the UK and internationally.

⁶ Sometimes referred to as the ‘capability approach’

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