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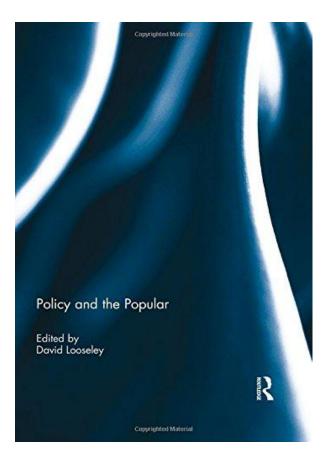THE STUDY OF CULTURE

BOOK REVIEW

Policy and the Popular

David Looseley (ed)

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Policy and the Popular. **Edited by David Looseley. London, Routledge. 2012**

A collection of essays resulting from a collaboration between the Popular Cultures Research Network (PCRN) - an interdisciplinary and international research cluster based at the University of Leeds - and the Centre for Cultural Studies at the University of Warwick, this volume contains a broad array of sites of research held together by a consistency of approaches drawn from political science and cultural studies. The subjects of the essays range widely, with four articles addressing the activities of politicians involved in the making of policy in Britain and France, one essay examining policies surrounding live music, and one devoted to the study of policy in religious institutions. As the product of a collaborative research cluster, the collection does not have a particular organizing principle, but it is clear that each piece falls within a general thematic that pertains to the way policy and culture mutually shape one another.

David Looseley's introduction informs us that rather than agreeing upon a specific concept of the popular or a definition of popular culture to foreground their work, participants in the PCRN collaboration looked into specific instances in which cultural policy actively promoted broader public participation, and this approach generated a "diversity of perspectives" on the concept of the popular (2012: 1). The fact that the popular is a shifting construct that eludes conclusive definition emerges throughout this volume, revealing affinities with other efforts to draw out the complexity of the relationship between a people and its culture, most notably Raymond Williams's *Keywords*, which itself contains an entry for "popular" that in fact presages some of the insights of *Policy and the Popular* (1985: 237). Taken as a whole, this collection of essays offers relatively few incisive observations on the terms of popular culture, but is instead a snapshot of a growing interdisciplinary field of cultural policy research that is producing and testing its own analytical models as it probes intersections of politics with culture in cross-national contexts.

Looseley's essay, "Notions of the Popular in Cultural Policy: A Comparative History of France and Britain", leads the collection and reiterates current theoretical debates in studies of cultural policy. Looseley points out that "as an object of historical enquiry, cultural policy is always polysemic" (2012: 7). As such, his methodology encompasses both public policy documents that engage directly the question of social value, as well as sources which are less commonly studied in the field of public policy, including anecdotal and informal statements on cultural issues, such as taste, drawn from interviews and speeches of policymakers. He states that this approach is well suited to public policy analysis as it stems from a "need to study discourses about values because they are themselves a form of practice" (2012: 7).

Looseley traces the history of organizations within the French and British governments devoted to arts patronage from after 1945 to the present day along these lines. The study moves from policies that promoted cultural works linked to older forms of elitism within the developing welfare state, to what Looseley describes as the contemporary embrace of market-oriented principles for national cultural industries by governments seeking a vindication for cutting state assistance. Looking at developments in both countries since the mid-1990s, Looseley finds a pattern of what he terms "convergence-within-divergence", in which "the two countries cultural policies have been converging (…) even while their social and economic circumstance have grown apart" (2012: 6-7). He notes an earlier legitimatization of broader definitions of culture under the François Mitterrand government in France, wherein popular art previously neglected by cultural policy was now presented by the government as a "valorization of the cultural industries as an economic reality capable of reviving France's economy" (2012: 12). Looseley contends that Britain, under the New Labour government, looked to these developments in France as they justified funding for the arts on the basis of their importance in the British economy and as part of a contemporary society in which consumerism itself plays a cultural role. Looseley regards this as an instance of convergence in the cultural policies of both countries during the Tony Blair years, but notes that under the Gordon Brown government policy decisions continued and extended neo-liberal policies that "instrumentalize" the arts in the British context (2012: 14). Although the study is confined to an analysis of textual evidence demonstrating conflicting government conceptions of public need and public good, Looseley gestures toward the necessity of a more radical critique near the conclusion of his essay, as he identifies disparities in class and wealth as "the grain of sand in the oyster (…) the irritant that has driven policy formation forward" (2012: 17). However, instead of creating an intervention into the discursive production of the concept of the popular and related systems of social value, Looseley focuses on interpreting the way that public policy texts and related public statements demonstrate a shifting concept of popular culture through which institutions legitimate larger ideological goals.

John Street's essay "The Popular, The Diverse and the Excellent: Political Values and UK Cultural Policy" looks closely at two papers in cultural policy authored by two British Secretaries of State for Culture, Media and Sport that were briefly addressed by Looseley in the preceding essay, namely Tessa Jowell's *Government and the Value of Culture* (2004) and Brian McMaster's *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement* (2008). In order to understand the values that inform the promotion of cultural policy in the arts, Street

organizes his study around three important questions: "How, in a democracy, is the case made for excellence in culture? Does such a position inevitably result in elitism? Does diversity represent a legitimate political alternative to excellence or a cynical route to avoiding awkward political choices?" (2012: 21). Street thus investigates the politics behind value judgments associated with concepts of diversity, excellence or popularity as central aims for policies in the arts. As such, his study describes cultural policy as a terrain in which political ideology meets political practice as leaders negotiate between competing understandings of culture as either an aesthetic formation or as democratic process. After critically assessing the promotion of "excellence" in both policy papers building on other philosophers and political theorists, including Brian Barry (2001), Bhikhu Parekh (2002) and Ronald Dworkin (1985), Street contingently accepts Ronald Dworkin's conclusions that supporting excellence in the arts is not at odds with the goals of liberal democracy. Dworkin's argument rests upon the idea that supporting art projects seen as elitist - he gives opera performances as an example - ultimately benefits a society both economically and socially as the reputation of a national artistic culture as a whole is thereby advanced. Unfortunately, Street is convinced by a component of Dworkin's argument that revives the logic of structuralist thinkers, one which lacks explanatory power insofar as it is the product of weak analogical reasoning. Street paraphrases Dworkin by claiming that "what is true for language is true for culture" (2012: 32) and this putative fact leads to the conclusion that investing public funds in elitist artistic projects has an effect of enhancing the totality of the culture. Dworkin's assertion - one that maintains that culture operates like a language and all speakers gain from any investment into it - and Street's agreement with it, are especially troublesome in that such a connection is devoid of any empirical basis in either linguistics or sociology. Moreover, lacking a methodological practice which would delve into the processes that produce national culture as a heterogeneous and uneven formation, Street's contention that building policies around the objective of "excellence" has the unforeseen consequence of enriching the culture of a whole nation founders because, in his essay, culture is only understood as a unified, abstract quality that is possessed by every nation state.

In the essay "Lowbrow Culture and French Cultural Policy: The Socio-political Logics of a Changing and Paradoxical Relationship", Vincent Dubois begins by arguing that cultural categories of high and low are "products and symbols" of the process of establishing class hierarchies (2012: 34). His analysis is thus built upon an understanding of the ways in which discursive constructs often regarded by policy makers as arbitrary categories have continued to

be confirmed, utilized and reproduced in the making of public policy concerning culture. Dubois turns his attention specifically to the definition of popular culture (*cultures populaires*), a phrase that for French speakers already contains numerous layers of meaning: from practices of specific social groups in everyday life, to more specific references to the historic political movements of the working class. Dubois notes that this problem of definition itself signals the complexity of questions associated with culture for policy makers, for example: "how is culture in general to be defined, and who has the authority to define it? And then: What deserves public support?" (2012: 36). Dubois explains that because of traditional concentration of symbolic cultural power in Paris and the historically active role of the French Ministry of Culture (to which Dubois only briefly alludes, but which he describes as wielding great influence in national policy), as well as due to the key role that Parisian public intellectuals have had in cultural debates, the work of policy makers in the capital has long been influential in legitimating culture as a single concept that pertains to the nation as a whole. In Dubois's words, "cultural policies in France play an important symbolic role in the social representations of culture" (2012: 37). In terms of the creation of specific policies regarding what is viewed as low culture, Dubois outlines basic attitudes that continue to undergird the making of cultural policy, ranging from neglect to what he terms "museification" (2012: 40). Throughout the text, in what is one of the strongest theoretical conceptions of culture in the volume, Dubois maintains a reflexive stance on the putative divisions between high and low culture as he examines the paradoxical construction of low or popular culture by way of the legitimist vantage of policy makers representing high culture.

Martin Cloonan's essay stands apart from the others in the collection in that a portion of it consists of a practice-led study of the urban cultural context of live music performance, informed both by Cloonan's own activities as a manager of a Glasgow-based pop band, as well as by his own interviews of anonymous sources who work in the live music industry in several cities in the United Kingdom's popular music scene. Although Cloonan's study is undertaken through post-positivist discourse analysis, his methodology borders on an oral history at times as he reconstructs developments in a little-documented subculture through sources that only he has access to as an industry insider. In "Researching Live Music: Some Thoughts on Policy Implications", Cloonan contends that live music study is a tremendously under-researched area of cultural policy studies. He stresses that due to this neglect live music represents a rich field for those working to understand legislation and regulation in settings where live music is an active component of urban culture. Cloonan investigates regulation in the live music industry

through several approaches, including a comparison with regulatory conventions in the recording sector, as well as the impact of local and national policies specifically pertaining to licensing and oversight of venues. Cloonan describes the world of live music as one which is "altogether highly regulated and *un*-regulated at one and the same time" (2012: 51), with regulatory policies coming from the highest levels of government to intervene in issues such as licensing for large events, and regulation nearly completely absent from smaller live performances. Cloonan's essay only briefly touches on the numerous ways that alternative economies form within the idiosyncratic conditions of regulation present in live music in the United Kingdom, but it makes the case that further research has the potential to yield even deeper theoretical insights than research into policy regarding recorded music. In one provocative example which has not yet been resolved, he mentions the 2007 discussions between the New Labour Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell and ticket selling companies, in which the status of tickets to live music as a form of property that could be exchanged in a market-based economy was the subject of government debate (he compares this to the relatively simple determination of property rights for recorded music shared on peer-to-peer networks). As Cloonan states, the essay was designed to provide evidence of the "neglect of live music as an area of both cultural and business policy" (2012: 57) and reflects this as a condensed summary of potential directions for research in a new area, rather than a comprehensive study that contributes to debates in an already established field.

Jeremy Ahearne's essay "Designs on the Popular: Framings of General, Universal and Common Culture in French Educational Policy" is a study of the ways in which the development of educational policies in France has had an impact on popular culture, as well as how these policies have produced and intensified patterns of social interaction tied to hierarchies of social class. In order to distinguish more sharply how this has occurred as a process for creating and legitimating what he calls "cultural-educational programmes", he articulates the term "popular" with several closely-related concepts which are used whether alongside or in place of the term, including "universal", the "general", and the "common" (2012: 62). In positioning these terms in relation to one another and describing their connection to different historical contexts, Ahearne's essay offers the only critical examination of the term popular in this volume. Such an approach allows his analysis to consider the creation of educational policies in their historical and cultural context, in a way that goes beyond the mere collection and description of relevant policy measures that form the majority of the essays by Looseley, Street and even Cloonan, to the degree that after considering interviewed sources he also moves on to a survey of policies.

Ahearne thus looks at the way that educational policies in France were originally derived from and maintained by "universal" authorities which upheld certain "universal truths" (first by the Catholic Church and then by republican philosophical ideals making claims to universal truths for liberal governance). Ahearne's historical account traces the ways in which mandatory public education became a universal of its own as a "quasi-constitutional principle of state" (2012: 63), eventually necessitating theoretical models for the teaching of "general culture" that emerged during the Third Republic. Ahearne's essay then moves to the development of public education in the twentieth century, where he traces the formation of the "single school" (*école unique*) in primary policy documents that proposed what was termed a "common culture" as a basis for schools. This was primarily a curriculum that was designed to engage students from a range of class backgrounds with material that would be relevant to their daily lives, but the measures to implement it were never adopted nationwide in any comprehensive way. Ahearne explains that the issue of the uneven implementation of a pedagogy with a more general relevance to the public continues to be the central problem in current schools system that developed out of these policy debates. Ahearne's conclusions illuminate contemporary dilemmas facing public education projects in France and elsewhere, namely, the continued importance of replacing entrenched systems of meritocracy with an educational system that reflects the culture from which students come, and which provides practical knowledge that is useful in both their social lives and places of work.

Instead of considering policy as a level of discourse of national or local governments as the other essays in this volume propose to do, the final essay addresses the work of the public relations apparatus of religious institutions as a type of policy making. In "Strategic Canonisation: Sanctity, Popular Culture and the Catholic Church", Oliver Bennett describes the ways in which saints in the Roman Catholic Church exhibit many of the hallmarks associated to figures celebrated in secular popular culture. He follows a short explanation of the current growth of institutionalized religious movements, drawing on the phenomenon that Jürgen Habermas (2006) has described as the rise of a "postsecular world", with a related discussion on the many canonizations that took place during the term of Pope John Paul II.[1]

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[1] Quite appropriately to his theme, Bennett quotes Habermas's more general comments on life in a "post-secular" society in his collaborative work with pope emeritus Benedict XVI, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (2006), but in contradiction to Bennett's argument that this is a global phenomenon, Habermas has written elsewhere that this term "can only be applied to the affluent societies of Europe or countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where people's religious ties have steadily or rather quite dramatically lapsed in the post-World War II period" (2008: 17). See: Habermas (2008).

Bennett details how canonization procedures were streamlined during John Paul II's term as pope. He explores the way in which the church's vast media network then acted as an engine of the church's very own brand of popular culture as it staged mass public ceremonies for newly canonized figures. Bennett's essay elaborates on how John Paul II utilized "the strategic potential of sanctity within popular culture" (2012: 87) in these canonizations as a way of establishing a parallel, and often undisclosed, agenda alongside the church's official pronouncements. Canonization policies were thus a channel by which conservative messages on sexuality and abortion could be communicated to the church's global followers, as well as a mode of historical revisionism, by which attempts could be made to recuperate the church's image within narratives of the rise of Nazism during World War II. Like Cloonan's essay on live music, Bennett's description of the ways in which the Catholic Church shapes its public image and interacts with followers through a form of public policy lacks critical conclusions on the information it presents and is instead an attempt to forge a new direction in the field of public policy research. Additionally, Bennett leaves several important issues unaddressed that are key to understanding the population for which the church is creating policy, such as how particularities of ethnic or racial identity, as well as the economic status of the church's, bear upon the messages being sent, as well as the way in which the church's policies actively contribute to constructing terms of social existence for its public in ways that reproduce hierarchies and divisions from which the church may continue to benefit.

This title is recommended with reservations as a primer for those interested in working on cultural policy studies, or to read selectively on specific projects related to different research areas (live music, history of the French educational system, etc.). Nevertheless, the volume as a whole does not satisfactorily address the construction of the popular as a concept behind policy, and although Looseley states in the introduction that this is deliberately excluded, this poses a problem for many of the essays because without a discussion of how policies are actively creating and reproducing the category of the popular, the study of public policy relating to this concept devolves into mere documentation of past policy measures with commonalities of language, instead of a comprehensive social analysis. Only Dubois and Ahearne, in the two essays dealing with the francophone sphere, attend to the issue at any length by examining the way public policy decisions can be based in language that does not disclose its origin in historical biases and the stratification of culture along the lines of class hierarchy. Although the essays of Cloonan and Bennett present new areas of material for researchers on policy, they nonetheless share with Looseley and Street's

essays the tendency to only account for the surface discourse of policy makers instead of initiating a painstaking analysis of the ways in which the category of popular is constructed in ways that conceal complex social realities, such as disparities of wealth and privilege. A glaring omission in all of the essays in this volume is a discussion of the role that race plays both in the formation of government policy for a diverse public with a multitude of interests, as well as in the creation of generic political concepts, such as popular, to unite part of a national population across a variety of demographics.

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