What are we evidencing? Cultural Value

‘What is a cynic? A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.’

Oscar Wilde, 1892.\textsuperscript{117}

Having offered a critique of what he felt were increasingly tortuous ways of demonstrating benefit in the arts, and the use of increasingly ‘complicated and contested assessments of causation’, in \textit{Cultural value and the crisis of legitimacy: Why culture needs a democratic mandate}\textsuperscript{118}, Holden (2006) proposed a value triangle that demonstrates the inter-connectedness between the intrinsic, the instrumental and the institutional.

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}[auto, scale=0.5]
  \tikzstyle{every node}=[font=\footnotesize]
  \node (A) at (0,0) {Intrinsic};
  \node (B) at (-3,3) {Instrumental};
  \node (C) at (3,3) {Institutional};
  \draw (A) -- (B) -- (C) -- cycle;
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

Value, Holden suggests, finally being ‘located in the encounter between individuals (who have all sorts of pre-existing attitudes, beliefs and levels of knowledge) on one the hand and an object or experience on the other’.

As a definition of where value might lie in terms of participatory practice it provides an excellent starting point. Unfortunately, however, except in suggesting it as framework ‘for helping people and organisations to understand themselves, articulate their purpose and make decisions’ it provides nothing in the way of concrete approaches to measuring this value.

\textbf{Cultural Economics}

The arrival of the ‘age of austerity’ and major cuts in public funding meant the arts once more needed to be able to prove their ‘public value’ in new ways. Policy makers began to re-visit notions of cultural economics, (the application of economic analysis to the creative and performing arts, the heritage and cultural industries) as a possible method. Throsby, in his influential (2001) publication, \textit{Economics and Culture}, is one of the first to suggest ‘economic value’ and ‘cultural value’ might be regarded as ‘distinct entities’. Indicating willingness to pay (asking people how much they would be prepared to pay to maintain the existence of something like the arts) and other more traditional economic indicators might be less than adequate in terms of measuring ‘cultural value’. Throsby indicates we might also need to take account of:

- Aesthetic value – in terms of beauty, harmony and form,
- Spiritual value – in both a religious and/or secular context,
- Social value – in terms of identity and place as well as connection to others,
- Historical value – in providing a continuity with the past,

\textsuperscript{117} Wilde, O. (1892) \textit{Lady Windermere’s Fan}

\textsuperscript{118} Holden, J. (2006) \textit{Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy} Demos
• Symbolic value – as a repository or conveyor of meaning, and
• Authenticity value – in being original and unique

He also suggests culture may have economic value for those who do not experience it directly. The focus of his argument however being almost entirely based on the value of ‘goods’ rather than experiences. In his later (2010) publication The Economics of Cultural Policy he notes the distinction between the ‘economic’ and the ‘cultural’, might ‘create a dilemma for the process of valuation’, suggesting, however, this should not deter, ‘the cultural policy analyst from the task of assessing value as fully and accurately as possible’. Like Holden, while offering some sense of the ways in which cultural objects might be valued in terms of what he calls ‘cultural capital’, he offers little in the way of proposing how cultural engagement or participatory experiences might be measured.

Bakhshi, Freeman and Hitchen in their 2009 paper, Measuring Intrinsic Value: How to stop worrying and love economics, suggest the arts might be in danger of backing themselves into a ‘needless’ corner, especially by continuing to insist on the immeasurable nature of ‘intrinsic’ value. Rather than spending energy on resisting the instrumental, they propose the arts learn to embrace ‘cultural economics’ and strengthen the case for public investment by revisiting the economic rationale. In particular, they propose ‘Contingent Value’ and ‘Willingness to Pay’, although the latter is rejected by Throsby as a means of establishing ‘the public’s own estimate of the intrinsic value of art’. Surveys in Australia in the 1980s, it seems, having pleasantly surprised researchers in demonstrating that even those who didn’t participate in arts and culture still placed real value on its existence.

The Green Book
This need to further engage with the economic argument is developed by O’ Brien in his, Measuring the Value of Culture report for the Department for Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS). Here he makes the case for arts and culture coming directly under the direct guidance of the Treasury’s ‘Green Book’. Whilst acknowledging the importance of providing narrative accounts of ‘intrinsic’ or ‘cultural value’, he suggests these offer; ‘little in the way of commensurable data for a cost-benefit analysis’. Insistent that clear economic arguments are needed, he underlines the necessity for the arts to start to make the ‘business case’. Whilst he acknowledges the drawbacks of many existing techniques to do this satisfactorily he nevertheless suggests it is incumbent on DCMS to provide clarity on what it wants ‘the cultural sector to measure and how it wants this measurement carried out’. And for the arts to fall in line and learn to meet Treasury demands.

BOP’s, Arts Council commissioned, report, Measuring the economic benefits of art and culture, offers a practical approach to tackling these economic imperatives. A mixture of case studies and analysis, it introduces the additional economic concept of SROI (Social Return on Investment); ‘a type of ‘social accounting’ which includes non-economic costs and benefits alongside the monetary. Offering a means to create ‘an impact map’ that includes negative as well


120 http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/live-principles-measuring-value-culture-0


123 Rumbold, K. (2010) “From “access” to “creativity”: Shakespeare institutions, new media and the language of cultural value” Shakespeare Quarterly 61(3)

as positive outcomes, SROI, focuses on involving all stakeholders in defining value and impact. BOP argues this makes it 'non-comparable in measuring value': especially when linked to the recent nef (Markers) guide for the Cabinet Office. At the same time, the challenges in providing, ‘a suitable financial proxy’ for things such as ‘raised self-esteem’ or ‘improved personal relationships’ are acknowledged.

Bakhshi’s more recent blog for NESTA, intriguingly offers 5 principles for measuring cultural value, suggesting, having moved ‘from the City’, as he has, he finds ‘we both over-complicate and over-simplify the issues in culture’. Principle 1, he suggests, being: ‘We must get more comfortable working with economists.’

Economic, social and cultural value
Dutch economist, Arjo Klamer, brings a refreshingly pragmatic perspective to the table, especially for those working in participation. Differentiating between economic value, social and cultural value he proposes:

- Economic value is about the pricing of goods at the point of exchange i.e. what people are prepared to pay for them.
- Social value is about being a member of a group, identity, social distinction, freedom, solidarity, trust, tolerance, responsibility, love and friendship.
- Cultural value evokes qualities beyond these e.g. the aesthetic, the spiritual, the historical and the symbolic.

For Klamer ‘the cultural economic perspective compels us to distinguish social and cultural values from economic values.’ Using the rebuilding of the Mostar Bridge after the war in Bosnia as a model, he suggests the cultural and social outcomes of bringing both Muslim and Bosnian communities together to carry out the task far outweigh any economic considerations. (What he doesn’t mention, except in a footnote is the additional symbolic value of the bridge since 1566 and its place in the cultural narratives of both communities). ‘A cultural policy’, Klamer concludes, ‘that is geared solely to the market or government’ therefore, ‘fails to see the point’. Although he acknowledges this is hardly a ‘practical message’ for policy makers.

In describing the aims of the AHRC Cultural Value Project, Belfiore suggests cultural value is ‘inherently a political process and one in which power relations play an important role’. Citing Richard Hoggart’s conclusion in The Way we Live Now (1996) this means when there will never be enough money, that, ‘Choices will always have to be made, judgments-between’. She wonders whether the concept of cultural value might yet ‘be harnessed as part of an emancipatory intellectual, cultural and political project aimed at achieving greater social justice’.

If we seriously want to find ways to begin to articulate wider social and cultural outcomes, participatory arts practice would seem well placed to make an important contribution to this understanding.

126 http://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/five-principles-measuring-value-culture-0