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18. 'Sorting the Sheep from the Sheep': Value, Worth and the Creative Industries

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Economic value?

Quite some years ago, while I was a PhD student, a train I was travelling in stopped in a railway cutting. It was a cold night out; the train was packed and, clearly, we were going nowhere soon. Fortunately, I had my books with me. I was working on a study of prime-time television, reading furiously and making detailed pencil notes in the margins. To me, this seemed like a perfectly normal activity – but not to the man sitting opposite.

He asked me to explain. It turned out he was a sheep farmer from Scotland, and he was also singularly unimpressed. He pressed me hard to justify not only my reading, but also the value of learning, doctoral study and – effectively – arts and humanities research as a whole. He compared both its rigour and its utility, unfavourably, to 'birthing sheep at four in the morning.' He concluded: 'It isnae *work*, is it?'

I have to admit that I did not put up a very good fight. To me, the value of this work (and it was work) was self evident. But it wasn't to the farmer – nor, it seemed, to the rest of the carriage, who had now become quite fascinated by the exchange. I could see that I was losing the fight and eventually retreated, silently, back to my books.

The French have an expression: *l'esprit d'escalier*, which is what you wished you had said at the time – that brilliant, put-down riposte that in reality (and sadly) only seems to come to you after the event. At the time of course, I had none, and I also had no desire to put this man down because his question was a fair one – and anyway, what I might have construed as rapier-like wit would probably have been interpreted only as arrogant or rude. But more than that (and I have thought about this quite a lot over the years) there really isn't one simple answer to his question. On the other hand, because it is not easy, it does not mean that it is also unimportant. Indeed, the response is even more critical now than it was then: we live in a time in which old-fashioned notions of the intrinsic value of art and even education no longer 'go without saying' (Barthes 1993).¹ On the contrary, the arts and humanities have become something of an endangered species, and so has their study and research. Our farmer had concluded that it wasn't *work*, but nowadays there is a far more widespread concern about its *worth*. Its value is changing from the intrinsic to the instrumental, and that is something that needs to be challenged or (at the very least) realigned. But how would I explain that now to the sceptical sheep farmer? Actually, I would bring it

back round to sheep, but not in ways that he might have expected. But I'd begin with the fashionable argument of the day, hoping that the rest of the carriage were listening, too.

The fashionable argument actually goes back to 1997 with the landslide victory of New Labour in the general election. It was the height of 'Cool Britannia', epitomized by that famous photograph of Oasis front-man Noel Gallagher, champagne glass in hand, shaking hands with Tony Blair at a media-friendly cocktail party at Number 10. 'Cool Britannia' faded, along with the memory of Spice Girl Geri Halliwell's Union Jack dress, but the government's newly created Department for Culture, Media and Sport continued the legacy of taking what it now called the 'creative industries' seriously. The DCMS was originally the rather cosier-sounding Department of National Heritage, but in its new form it proudly promotes: 'the *economic contribution* and educational benefits of the arts, media, sport and our national heritage' (Prime Minister's Office 2003). I've emphasized that 'economic contribution' because while 'Cool Britannia' went the way of Ms Halliwell's diminutive dress, it is the arts' contribution to the economy that continues to be seen as most important today. Underlying it all was the discovery at the end of the last century that the arts, rather than being a drain on the public purse as 'heritage', were in fact an enormous contributor to the economy as part of the 'creative industries'.

We can see the farmer starting to get much more interested here: some facts and figures might even clinch the deal. According to the DCMS, two million people are already employed in this creative sector, contributing some £60 billion a year to the British economy, a contribution that since 1998, has grown at twice the rate of the economy as a whole (according to DCMS figures for 2008). The then Culture Secretary Andy Burnham, launching a government strategy called 'Creative Britain, New Talents for the New Economy', stated in 2008 that in order to continue the success story, the creative industries 'must move from the margins to the mainstream of economic and policy thinking'. He had a vision of a Britain 'in ten years' time where the local economies in our biggest cities are driven by creativity ... We want to take raw talent, nurture it, and give people the best possible chance of building a successful business' (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2008).

It doesn't stop there. According to NESTA (the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts), the creative industries are not just an island to themselves but appear to support innovation throughout the entire economy. As a result: 'no longer is it sufficient to support the creative industries alone and for their own sake – policy should encourage and embed linkages between them and the wider economy' (Bakhshi *et al.* 2008: 3).

On the face of it, this makes a hugely persuasive case: the creative industries make a significant and growing contribution to the economy, even beyond the parameters of their own sector. Research in the arts and

humanities, therefore, makes enormous economic sense. Such research can only help the sector and therefore the economy as a whole. So, instead of having to justify itself to its critics, or even having its funding cut, arts and humanities research should now be seen as a sound investment in the future of Britain. More than that, such research could help demonstrate how productive that investment has been. I can almost see the nods of approval from the railway carriage: the farmer smiles and the whole train lurches back into motion.

The economic argument is in many ways a good one, and many people in the arts thank Chris Smith (the first Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport) for bringing the creative sector up to join the top table of government policy. The trouble is that more than ten years on, the argument has not been sufficiently developed. There is a growing realization that there is far more to the arts and humanities than economics. People who participate in the arts, either as artists or audiences (both broadly defined) don't do so entirely under the stark, guiding light of economic rationalism. The arts are different. Indeed, there's increasing evidence that the whole idea of rational economic behaviour is a bit of a misconception anyway.

Behavioural economics and cultural production

Let's take the example of tipping after a meal. When we go to a restaurant, we nearly always leave a tip, no matter how mediocre the food or service has actually been. What is more, when we leave a tip we are voluntarily paying more than the agreed price for the meal, and doing so after the service has been provided. In terms of sheer economic self-interest, this at best makes only partial sense. Tipping makes far more sense, however, as a cultural act which says more about our social selves than the service.

This may be a fairly simple example, but the principles behind it constitute the growing field of behavioural economics. Behavioural economics is a fusion of economics and psychology. It seeks to explain why people behave the way they do in contrast to the way in which classical and neoclassical economics suggests they ought. Craig Lambert, describing the growing strength of the discipline at Harvard, explains that 'Economic Man makes logical, rational, self-interested decisions that weigh costs against benefits and maximise value and profit to himself.' The only problem with this convenient theory is that Economic Man 'does not exist' (Lambert 2006: 50).

The idea that people do not act entirely within their own financial best interests is not new. Herbert A. Simon, working at Carnegie Mellon University in the 1950s, developed its new Graduate School of Industrial Administration on the basis of both economics and 'behavioural science'. Simon famously argued that in practice, people make decisions only within the concept of 'bounded rationality' (and went on to win the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1978). Since then, new generations of behavioural economists have applied such thinking not only to the financial markets but also to

areas such as pension planning, developing countries, interest rates and even giving to charity (which in purely financial terms has to be a pretty poor investment). Harvard economist Edward Glaeser has gone still further, using behavioural economics to try and explain hatred and vengeance within both the market and beyond (Lambert 2006).

The point of this brief foray into a still emerging field is simple: if rational economic models are not adequate to explain economics, then they certainly won't tell us everything we need to know about the arts and humanities. Indeed, this is a sector considerably more behavioural than economic; a field in which people are demonstrably motivated by factors other than economic self interest. More than that, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was able to argue that 'the field of cultural production' was in fact 'the economic world reversed' (Bourdieu 1993: 164).

At this point I can see my adversary narrowing his eyes. French sociologists probably don't go down too well with people more used to 'birthing sheep at four in the morning', and hadn't the whole French farming community once taken exception to importing British lamb? But French sociologist or otherwise, Bourdieu still has a lot to tell us.

Bourdieu argued that the economic was only one kind of capital. If we wanted to understand more complex things such as art and literature, we had to recognize both symbolic capital and cultural capital as well. Symbolic capital was concerned with notions such as prestige, recognition and honour, while cultural capital was the accrued formal and social education that enabled one to understand the arts (Bourdieu 1986). Now, we might dispute some of the details of what is, of course, a much more complex argument, but the overriding point remains that to equate the arts and humanities only with economic capital is a mistake. There is much more at issue, and it is also clear that cultural capital, just like its economic equivalent, is not equally distributed. Professional footballers, it might be argued, may be rich in one but not the other, while the converse may be true of poets, museum curators or even university academics. Cultural capital, though, still has its uses – one of which is creating distinctions between social groups via matters of taste. But again, these distinctions are not straightforwardly hierarchical, and neither do they equate simply with economics. All manner of subcultures, for example, have very clear ideas of what constitutes style and taste, even though they could not hope to compete with the dominant culture in matters of wealth. When it comes to understanding culture, then, the economic field is only one among others.

This is especially true of Bourdieu's theory of 'the field of cultural production' in which he analyses the way in which what he calls 'symbolic goods' are made, circulated and consumed. Although Bourdieu uses words like 'production' and 'goods', it is clear that he is not talking about traditional manufacturing because these 'goods' are clearly defined as symbolic. A car tyre or a microwave oven might have a distinct practical purpose, but the

same could not be said for every product of the arts (some of which, like a symphony, do not even exist in a physical state). And although symbolic goods are different, he certainly doesn't think they are so very different that they can only be understood internally, as though works of art could in practice be autonomous. In reality, they have to be understood, he argues, as part of a complex social system within which they are made, distributed and received. This is not to say that they don't have any aesthetic value of their own, but that is never the whole story. Neither, on the other hand, is the whole story economic. For Bourdieu, literary and artistic production takes place within the field of power relations, which is in turn set within the field of class. Again, we may argue about the detail, but the point remains that the cultural field is not purely or even mainly economic.

More than that, Bourdieu argues that there are two different categories of cultural production. The first is the one most easily recognized from the current 'creative industries' perspective. Here, mass-cultural goods are created on an industrial scale mostly for consumers who are not themselves active in the arts. It is primarily concerned with economic capital and prioritizes what business often likes to call the 'bottom line'.

The second category, though, is significantly different. Here, production is much more 'high' cultural and it is aimed mostly at others who are themselves active in the arts. It is far more concerned with prestige and critical approval than economic capital and the mass-cultural 'bottom line'. Crucially, though, commercial success here is perceived to be the very opposite of critical value and artistic worth. As Bourdieu puts it, the 'loser wins' because in this restricted but highly influential cultural field we see nothing less than 'the economic world reversed' (Bourdieu 1993: 169).

I hope our farmer does not misunderstand me at this important stage. I am not arguing for a precious, misty-eyed, pursed-lipped, aesthetically autonomous understanding of the arts and humanities that denies any kind of financial influence or economic context. What I am doing is harnessing thinking from areas as seemingly diverse as behavioural economics and social theory to show that the purely economic, creative-industrial, one-size-fits-all approach to the understanding of culture leaves a gaping, art-shaped hole in the arts. Trying to make the arts and humanities comply entirely to this crude, one-dimensional economic model is like the ugly sisters trying to push their swollen feet into a glass slipper. Try as they may, it just won't fit. The arts are different. And if this is true, then to see the arts simply as a form of business is not only bad for the arts, it's even bad for business.

Now that I've risen to something of a rhetorical crescendo, I might be tempted to sit back and wait for the applause from a train-full of passengers hurtling happily to their final destination. More likely, however, someone is likely to object that the creative industries still make money, don't they? What about that £60 billion a year? Certainly, the Blair/Brown government

thought so, and the DCMS policy document 'Creative Britain: New Talents for the New Economy' viewed this as vast job creation opportunity with a plethora of training and other initiatives to support it. NESTA saw the potential of the creative industries to boost innovation throughout the wider economy, but one doesn't have to be an econometrist to see what a thriving cultural and creative sector has done for urban regeneration in places like Shoreditch in London and (famously) Bilbao in Spain. This has led to phrases entering the vocabulary even beyond planning professionals. When a well-connected mother and daughter team in West Sussex commissioned Thomas Heatherwick to design the new East Beach Café, the down-at-heel seaside resort of Littlehampton braced itself (according to the media) for 'the Bilbao effect' (MacLeod 2007; Bracey 2007).

The limits of instrumentalism

The creative industries, it is held, are good not only for the economy, but can be good for society, too. In addition to their economic benefits, it is believed that they can be useful in pursuit of all manner of well-intended objectives, such as social inclusion. The argument, then, is that one should invest in the arts because of what one can get out of them. This leads to a focus on aims, objectives, targets, 'impacts' and predicted 'outcomes'. These in turn need to be audited to see if the desired results have been delivered, and ultimately provided 'good value for money'. This is, then, a social variation on the business model in which the usefulness of the arts is measured according to its return on investment – even though those returns are not necessarily financial. Its focus, therefore, is on the instrumental as opposed to the intrinsic value of the arts, in which we ask not what we can do for the arts, but what the arts can do for us. In some ways, this is an eminently sensible perspective, applying a stern cost-benefit analysis to a field previously thought to be too precious for such a steely gaze.

Not everyone is comfortable with this, however. First, it is a prescriptive approach to the arts and humanities that defines 'upfront' what their specific benefits are going to be and defines their success only by the extent to which these predefined objectives are realized. This clashes with more traditional (but not necessarily invalid) notions that the arts are intrinsically ennobling, or at least that one should accept their undoubted benefits *a priori*, without daring to know in advance precisely what those specific benefits are going (or indeed ought) to be. Second, this instrumental approach fails to account for the reason why so many people, in spite of everything, continue to engage with the arts not for reasons of expedience but out of sheer and apparently mystifying passion.

To practitioners in the arts, of course, the mystery is the other way round. Their world is one in which the simple equation of culture with commerce can lead to equal bafflement. Surprisingly, a subsequent report and policy briefing by NESTA (a generally 'policy friendly' organization much more

typically a supporter of the 'cultural industries' model) has gone so far as to acknowledge this discontinuity. Its research into fine arts graduates and innovation accepted that any reforms to art education must accept the real motivations and aspirations of art students. The briefing pointed to: 'a strong suspicion of formal "business" education amongst art students, who regard it as promoting commercial gain at the expense of other values' (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts 2008: 3). Indeed, the research revealed that fine art graduates use the term 'creativity' very differently to policymakers, while the term 'creative industries' is hardly used at all (Oakley *et al.* 2008: 6). They maintained a clear distinction between symbolic and utilitarian production. A running shoe, the report found, may have 'cultural inputs', but according to the respondent fine art graduates: 'it is not a piece of art' (Oakley *et al.* 2008: 38). Could this, coming from NESTA, signify a policy shift – or at least a growing concern?

A problem with opposing the instrumental value of the arts and humanities is that this might seem to rule out any kind of benefit as instrumental. If we were to argue, like John Ruskin, that the arts are ennobling, then that could be portrayed as an instrumental value, as would the argument that the arts, quite simply, make life better. It's the same with education: if we were to argue for an entirely intrinsic justification of education (education for education's sake), then we would presumably be happy if education had no demonstrable benefit at all! The argument, though, presents us with something of a false dichotomy, for it is in fact possible to argue for the benefits of something without determining in advance precisely what (and only what) those benefits are going to have to be. This is especially the case when we consider the value of arts and humanities research to education and, by extension, to democracy, too.

One of the drawbacks of democracy, it is argued, is that everyone has the right to vote regardless of their education, seriousness of purpose and knowledge of current affairs. Walter Lippmann, the Pulitzer Prize-winning American journalist and political commentator, feared that the average citizen was just not sufficiently informed to participate meaningfully in the democratic process. The media, he argued, were not up to the task of their civic education. Others have been less pessimistic. John Grierson, the early pioneer of the British documentary movement, was convinced that cinema had a vital role to play in 'modern citizenship' and, indeed, 'civic appreciation, civic faith and civic duty' (Grierson 1946: 174). The film medium, in other words, both could and should be used for the 'civic education' that Lippmann thought impossible – or at least inadequate – for the task. Now, whether we side more with John Grierson or Walter Lippmann, both agreed that there was a vital connection between education and democracy. More than that, both understood that one's civic education does not end with one's formal schooling. This leads us to two further positions. First, that if we think an informed democracy is still worth working towards, then education still has a

vital role to play in that, no matter how hard the struggle. For that education to be in any way complete, the understanding of human affairs has to include the study of the humanities. Our humanity, it may be argued, depends on it. Second, it follows that if our formal education stops when we leave school (or, if we are fortunate, university) then our civic education needs to continue long afterwards and by other means. And if education in the arts and humanities is to continue, then so must research. The research may take place at university (or similar) level, but its benefits are disseminated to the benefit of the country as a whole (Howells 2004: 141–55).

What is (joyfully) missing from this picture is the hardline instrumentalism that seeks to regulate both the practice and the study of the arts and humanities. In a truly liberal democracy, we must be prepared to allow both the arts and education to flourish regardless of what specific enrichment or enlightenment they proceed to provide. We must be unafraid to let the population be exposed to ideas and reach conclusions with which we may not necessarily agree. To seek to regulate the consequences (nowadays the 'impacts' or 'outcomes') of art, culture, creativity and education may be well-intended, but it has an authoritarianism that sits uncomfortably with them all. Far better a crucible from which the best (rather than the simply preferred) emerges.

There is, I think, something of a backlash brewing over both the economic and instrumental justifications of the arts and humanities in both practice and research. Yes, we know that culture and creativity takes place partly within the economic realm, but not exclusively so. The old Marxian argument that economics are the base and everything else is mere superstructure is reductionalist folly – as is its disturbingly close monetarist relation, which says much the same thing from a seemingly opposite perspective. It isn't *just* 'the economy, stupid'.² Similarly, we realize that the arts and humanities have their uses, but may at the same time interpret these as agreeable consequences rather than their *raison d'être*. There is clearly much more going on here, including that seemingly irrational passion to which I referred earlier. All this still needs to be explained at a much more complex and sophisticated level. Today, the Economic and Social Research Council's 'Business Engagement' wing operates under the slogan 'Making Business More Successful' (Economic and Social Research Council 2010), but one doesn't have to be a bearded, wild-eyed, sandal-wearing sociologist of the old school to believe that there is far more to culture, creativity and modern society than that.

It is important to remember that the expression 'the culture industry' was originally coined as a derogatory term. It was first used in the 1940s to describe seemingly identical, mass-produced cultural products (including radio and the cinema) of poor aesthetic quality, forms which, according to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer: 'no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the

rubbish they deliberately produce. They call themselves industries' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972: 121). How usages (if not times) have changed! What has also changed is our understanding of what we mean by 'industry'. When we had plenty of it (and when we took it to mean manufacturing), we were wont to deride it. But in this country we don't really make things anymore. We have witnessed a rapid and overwhelming decline in our manufacturing strength, and this has had a detrimental effect on our national self-esteem. We are suffering, then, from a marked case of post-industrial angst in which activities (tourism was an early example) are rebranded as industries in compensation for the traditional industries that we have, in reality, lost.

What makes people creative?

Research in the arts and humanities is particularly well placed to see what is both gained and lost in this transition. More than that, it is uniquely qualified to demonstrate what is missing from the current economic/instrumental paradigm. We need to think anew about why people are so driven to be creative, and what the analysis of these cultural texts tells us about our humanity and ourselves. But just in case I am losing our farmer again, I'm going to use a very good case study – which just happens to have some sheep in it.

The Navajo people, the native Americans who live in the desert south-west of the United States, are very passionate about their sheep. In 1966, a group of visual anthropologists were seeking permission to run a documentary project among a Navajo community in Pine Springs, Arizona. The Medicine Man asked them: 'Will making movies do the sheep any harm?' They assured him not. The man responded: 'Will making movies do the sheep good?' Again, probably not. 'Then why make movies?' (Worth *et al.* 1997: 4).

Sheep are central to the Navajo culture and economy: they are a source of both food and wool. The wool is needed for weaving into the famous Navajo textiles which are still hand-made and collected around the world. It is thought that the Navajo learned to weave from the Pueblo Indians, but that the real leap came with the introduction of the resilient Churro sheep into the Americas by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. The wool was ideal for the distinctive blankets woven originally by the women for purely Navajo use, but with the increasing establishment of trading posts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a growing market emerged within the rest of the United States. Modern American homes wanted rugs as much as blankets, and the Navajo, under the guidance of traders such as the Hubbell family, adapted to the demand while at the same time incorporating new colours, dye-stuffs and (to an extent) designs. The older examples are very much sought after today, but production still continues using techniques very similar to the earliest examples. As these are individual, hand-made pieces by skilled Navajo craftswomen, these pieces remain a significant source of income for those who make and sell them.

To an extent, then, we could interpret this as a long-established creative industry that has adapted to changing markets and demand. This economic understanding, however, is at best only partial, for the Navajo relationship with their textiles remains significantly cultural. Navajo culture is essentially oral and visual. Their textiles, then, carry a great weight of the Navajo people's view of the world and sense of themselves. Paul G. Zolbrod, who has both studied Navajo textiles and translated their (oral) creation story into English, discovered: 'An entire culture might be woven into a single textile: its mythic and historical associations, its ceremonial practices, its need for balance and order, its sense of place' (Willink and Zolbrod 1996: 4). To be sure, dealers and traders had some influence on Navajo designs for the American market, but the Navajo perspective still remained paramount, for as Zolbrod says: 'Things came together in rugs; what was said went into the rugs as much as did the yarn. Weaving was a way of life. To live as a Navajo was to weave; to weave was to live as a Navajo' (Willink and Zolbrod 1996: 2). This may seem, at first, to be a little sentimental, but when one considers the sheer inhospitality of the Navajo landscape, one realizes the remarkable lengths to which the Navajo go to weave. The land is arid and the vegetation poor. Even to be able to dye and wash the yarn takes incredible effort and ingenuity in an environment so clearly lacking that basic raw material: water. It would have been far easier to have made purely practical textiles without colour and design, but the creative drive clearly eclipsed the logistical and economic constraints.

This was painfully demonstrated during the Navajo people's internment by the US Army at Fort Sumner and the Bosque Redondo reservation in New Mexico in 1864–8. Although they had been forcibly removed from their homelands and marched some 300 miles to incarceration, they continued to weave, even unravelling (it is said) cavalrymen's red woollen underwear in order to have something with which to work. As an elder explained: 'When you want to weave badly enough you find wool no matter how' (Willink and Zolbrod 1996: 2).

This overriding need to create, to encapsulate and to articulate Navajo experience in visual form can be understood through the Navajo concept of *hózhǫ́*, a word that is best equated in translation by harmony, balance or order. To the Navajo, *hózhǫ́* must be maintained, recovered or, if need be, remade at all times. That is why it is so crucial to weave, creating something that is beautiful from the raw materials of human experience. It may even point us to the Utopian function of art and literature, representing a better world as it ought to be or, at the very least, making a better job of the one we have already got.

The case of the seemingly distant Navajo helps us better to reflect upon ourselves. Sometimes we need the example of others to do this. The late Clifford Geertz was a great exponent of case studies as part of an interpretive, comparative anthropology in which we could often see glimpses of ourselves

in unexpected places. This, at the same time, provided a wider rationale, theory and methodology for the study of culture. His most famous case studies included an analysis of ritual sheep-stealing in Morocco, together with cockfighting in Bali, which he argued was for the Balinese what *King Lear* or *Crime and Punishment* were for us. Wrapped up within the cockfight was a symbolic representation of Balinese culture and experience, 'a story they tell themselves about themselves' (Geertz 1973: 448). This is true, of course, throughout human experience: cultural and creative texts (which we might still, on occasion, be permitted to call the arts) are shining vehicles for our needs, dreams, fears and aspirations; our identity writ large. They are visions of ourselves; visions both of whom we are and the people we might rather be. They have a value beyond the economic and a purpose beyond the instrumental, so our mission is to discover not just their uses but – crucially – their *meaning*. The arts and humanities are uniquely qualified to do this. Of course, meaning is complex and interpretation is often very difficult indeed, but that is the challenge, the purpose and indeed the necessity of arts and humanities research.

As Geertz explained (and surely our sceptical farmer must finally agree): it's figuring out what 'that rigamarole with the sheep' is all about (Geertz 1973: 18).

Notes

- 1 This expression is also used, with some irony, by Roland Barthes to suggest that things that 'go-without-saying' usually don't.
- 2 A phrase used by Bill Clinton as part of his 1992 presidential campaign against incumbent George Bush Sr.

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