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"Speaking Doubt to Power: Art as evidence for public policymaking"

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A note on contents:

Speaking Doubt to Power:
Art as evidence for public policymaking

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Introduction

"A world which is becoming increasingly directional – though it hides behind a rhetoric of free choice and pluralism – needs the waywardness, the sense of special occasion, and exception, which are at the heart of true theatre."
Michael Kustow (2000) pxii

Hurray for positive science
Gentlemen, to you the first honors always!
Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling I
but enter them to an area of my dwelling.
Walt Whitman, Song of Myself Part 1

Every fortnight from 2007 until the 2011 election, the Canadian novelist Yann Martel sent a book to his prime minister, Stephen Harper. Its stated purpose was not to educate, let alone influence, but simply to encourage 'stillness' in Canada's busiest man. The books, ranging from children's fiction to Canadian classics to Russian poetry, bore no specific relationship to any particular political topic. The occasional responses from the prime minister's office did not indicate whether he had read any of them.

In this article, I will argue that Martell was being too modest: that fiction and indeed other art forms can be seen as valid evidence that should actively influence policymaking; that there is good match between the defects and deficits of most policymaking processes and the potential and possibilities of much great art; and that deliberately positioning art as a tool for (rather than of) policy is not yet another compromising form of instrumentalism. A conscious, systematic and collective engagement with art could significantly improve policymaking processes, and contribute to art's public value.

1. The Problems with Policymaking

Throughout the world, there are continuous attempts to improve policymaking processes. Whether focusing on basic governance issues in the developing world,

or writing precise guidance for civil servants, the sentiment that policymakers 'could do better' grows, regardless of performance. The way in which policymakers make policy, defined by government in its 2010 policy skills framework as "making change happen in the real world", is under constant scrutiny[1].

The Institute for Government recently outlined four policymaking 'traps': an over-idealised process; an unwillingness to engage with the realities of implementation; an excessive focus on structure; and a deluded attempt to neglect the politics (Hallsworth and Rutter 2011). Building on the decade-old attempt to formulate guidance for civil servants (Cabinet Office 1999, CMPS 2001), the Institute attempted a more refined codification of how to improve policymaking, taking into account new findings and realities.

For all their multi-bullet-pointed frameworks, at the fulcrum of these guides lay two central ambitions. First, to 'professionalise' through, for instance, better use and synthesis of evidence; and second, to 'de-professionalise' through opening up processes to new influences. User perspective is now perceived as valid evidence, with policymakers exhorted to 'get out there' and marshal this evidence, even where it might appear confusing or inconsistent. There has been a proliferation of attempts to engage service professionals and users in policy-informing (as opposed to decision making) processes. Changes generated through the Localism bill or inspired by the broader 'Big Society' rhetoric will probably accelerate this momentum.

The public policy analyst Professor Wayne Parson's sharp critique of the 1999 Cabinet Office guide concluded that it was hard to detect the influence "of those approaches which have emerged in more recent years which question the relevance of rational planning and are more concerned about learning, uncertainty, emergence and complexity than forecasting, coordination and control" (Parsons, 2001 p.96). The attempts to involve the public were, Parsons argued, simply methods to co-opt views into a dominant paradigm, rather than to open up decision making. Above all, Parsons bemoaned the attempts to 'tidy up' policymaking, calling instead for a return to Laswellian principles: "Evidence based policy should be about the process of understanding context and clarifying values: not simply assembling 'hard facts". In similar vein, the public policy theorist Donald Schon described the policy process as "a swampy lowland where solutions are confusing messes incapable of technical solutions" (Schon, 1973 p42). Parsons and Schon aspired to "a policy process that is open and democratic and which can facilitate a process of deliberation and public learning rather than (strategic) control" (Parsons, 2001 p105). They and other critics saw New Labour's managerialist approach as turning evidence-based policy making

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[1] Available at http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/networks/policy-profession/skillsframework

into a form of control, rather than democratization, and making a minimal dent on existing power relationships.

The tensions between 'tidy' and 'swampy' policymaking rest partly on concepts of 'evidence'. What kinds of knowledge deserve to be brought to bear on policymaking processes, and the relationship between knowledge and power?

Geoff Mulgan, a former head of policy in the prime minister's office, has analysed how different kinds of knowledge are harnessed for three types of 'policy fields' – 'stable' (where knowledge is reasonably settled); 'in flux' (where both the evidence base and the desired outcomes are constantly contested); and 'inherently novel' (which precludes a strong evidence base) (Mulgan, 2008). Over time, the first field is diminishing, while the second and third are growing, influenced partly by the growing impact of cultural and identity issues on public policy. This presents challenges and opportunities for how we use knowledge to inform policymaking processes.

We have also experienced an increase in 'what counts' as knowledge. To use Aristotelian definitions: we have gone from a reliance on Episteme (academic evidence) to a tolerance of Techne (professional and institutional experience) and a positive encouragement of phronesis (practical wisdom) (See Parsons, 2002). But however you mix the ingredients, a reliance on knowledge is a reliance on positivism, none of which helps us to adapt to new findings about human nature that challenge assumptions of rational behaviour. As Taylor (2009 p1) has summarised: "how we operate as social beings has been challenged by thirty years of research in neuroscience, behavioural economics and social psychology…. that we do the things we do because we consciously choose them, that our actions are always rational and self-interested, and that there is a clear boundary between the self and the world it occupies" (See also Brown et al in this edition of PPR).

Regardless of the mass expansion of knowledge and information, and the co-opting of different kinds of knowledge into policymaking processes, all goes through the positivist filter, where scientific method, empiricism and objectivity are excessively prized.

2. What's art got to do with public policy?

The relationship between art and politics has been comprehensively debated and will be eternally contested. Plato, so concerned about the emotional power of rhetoric, demanded a clear separation between art (theatre in particular) and political life. Aristotle contested this distinction. More recently, we can contrast Augustus Boal's assertion that "all theatre is necessarily political" with Alan Read's response that theatre and politics are "bonded in a fantasy of expectation… theatre and the political are enemies" (Read, 2008 p7). Whether

fantasy or not, 'expectation' exists on both sides, from Brechtian or Artaudian concepts around theatre provoking immediate political action from its audience, to the way politicians, especially in dictatorial regimes, have placed faith in the power of the arts to change collective political consciousness.

In contrast, thinking around the relationship between art and public policy is more fallow terrain. It is perhaps the case that the debate around art and politics has undermined more pragmatic debates around how art, as product, might be able to help decision-makers make better decisions. Even art that is not overtly political may have political power. Indeed, it may be that the art of most value to policymakers is that which is the least 'political' or, at any rate, least 'sure' of its politics. This hypothesis may be worth testing further.

Could art play a role at every stage of the policymaking process, from reimagining problems, to generating ideas, to reflecting on policy decisions? Could policymakers engage with art as a way of stress-testing a policy idea pre-formulation, exploring the unintended consequences before the unstoppable force of policy meets the immovable object of human behaviour? Can it provide a reality check on 'optimism bias' and 'anchoring effects', where our first impressions are excessively influential and optimistic? Above all, if policymakers engage with art as evidence, could it catalyse some of the cultural changes that are so needed, in particular mitigating the worst instincts of positivism?

This may seem, even in the context of an arts world that insecurely over claims on 'impact', a grand assertion. However, it is not an attempt to remake a 'case' for the arts or arts funding. Belfiore and Bennet (2008, p10) expose the collective paranoia of cultural funders and policymakers which leads to a confusing cocktail of advocacy and research, and "excludes the possibility of a critical and open-ended interrogation of what the real value and impact of the arts might be". I am also not attempting to add a new instrumentalist wing to an arts sector which already tries to serve too many other agendas, from health to education to regeneration.

What does art 'do' to its audiences? Inevitably, the theoretical and anecdotal – what it might do, or what it has done to me – dominates any empirical analyses. Kreitler (quoted in Carey, 2005) synthesises over a century of investigation within and across academic disciplines on the psychological effects of art. He concludes that responses are so subjective and variability so high that it is impossible to draw any robust conclusions about whether art ever changes thinking or behaviour. Neuroscience may eventually provide clearer evidence of the impact of art, but its findings are currently limited. Some studies have demonstrated emotional responses; others have shown a
'peak shift effect', equivalent to a neural response to exaggeration (see Carey, 2005). But, similar to the psychological findings, the variation in responses is large. Empirical evidence of the impact of art on human cognition and behaviour barely exists.

So, returning to the theoretical, what might art do, or what might certain kinds of art do in certain kinds of policymaking dynamics? Art can enable audiences to vicariously experience situations, relationships and conflicts which might be remote from their own lives. It can provide a sideways look at the critical challenges facing society. It can frame and reframe thinking, expanding the range of possibilities for action. (Scharfstein 2008 p7) argues that "because they create something different from conventional perceptions, works of art are the medium through which new meanings emerge." According to Di Piero (1993 p.215) art can challenge "formulas of historical wisdom and journalistic platitudes that numb us to moral ambiguity." Of course, art can and has been used for precisely the opposite purposes. However, Edelman elegantly summarises art's policy-shaping potential:

Commonly held assumptions about the nature of the world are partly arbitrary, partly conventional, often contradictory, only rarely based on verifiable tests, and even in the last case likely to change as scientists revise their premises, hypotheses, and techniques of observation. Successful works of art enhance, destroy, or transform common assumptions, perceptions, and categories, yielding new perspectives and changing insights, although they sometimes reinforce conventional assumptions as well. They can transfigure experience and conception, calling attention to aspects and meanings previously slighted or overlooked (Edelman, 1995, p52).

Perhaps the best way to capture the special contribution that art, as opposed to social sciences, could make to public policymaking is to use Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing. Social sciences, concerned with objective descriptions of the world, 'say'. In contrast, art shows us the things that such linear thinking might miss. And the showing is largely designed to provoke unpredictable responses.

This may mean that the kind of art which is most valuable to the policymaking processes is that which is as far removed as possible from other kinds of evidence – the objectivity of the social scientist, and the certainty of the lobbyist. What policymaking needs is some doubt and ambiguity brought into its tent. Edelman again is worth quoting:

There is evidence that works of art themselves are more effective influences on political beliefs and action when they are indirect and implicit rather than direct or explicit. … the indirect political purport of a work of art exerts its effects on ways of conceiving, seeing and understanding, rather than simply offering a polemical argument regarding a particular policy or action….Because it subtly derives the political outlook from relevant moral, social, economic and psychological premises, its ideological thrust is likely to be deeper and more lasting (p21).

Although despite his upfront claim he offers no 'evidence', his assertion explains the policymaking possibilities of 'ambiguous' art. Kelleher takes a similar line: "theatre's value for political thinking may derive – paradoxically perhaps – from its seeming fragility and tendency to untruth rather than from the strength of its representations and the justice of its political messages" (Kelleher, 2009, p42).

The process of creating art is a diametrically opposed to standard 'professional' policymaking processes. Consider one example. Think of all the recent policy documents relating to violent crime. Their general approach is to explore empirical evidence, take soundings from experts and others, in particular victims of crime. Through this process, they come across conflicting, contradictory evidence. This should have led to doubts about the best course of action. However the modus operandi for policymakers is to cull any doubt from the final output so it is clear and unambiguous (with a couple of 'further research is needed' caveats). The media pick apart these documents for any tensions, as if doubt is the enemy of reason.

Although it may seem less systematic, an artist often goes through a very similar research process, To create "London Road", the National Theatre's recent play about the murder of Ipswich prostitutes, playwright Alecky Blythe read all she could, and interviewed a large number of residents in the neighbourhood to produce a disturbing, powerful mix of verbatim theatre, songs and commentary. Blythe may have concluded her research with strong views about the causes and consequences of those murders. Yet these were expertly hidden in a quest to provoke the audience to think for themselves, to think differently. She let doubt blossom.

How might seeing 'London Road' change anything? What it wouldn't do, of course, is lead directly to changes in prostitution policy. Some art can aspire to 'Kathy Come Home' moments, which actively seek to influence a particular course of action.[2] But this is, to some extent, art as marketing, and policymakers already have excessive exposure to people and organisations peddling particular points of view. The former cabinet minister James Purnell once said that if he ever became a minister again he would have far fewer 'stakeholder meetings' with people whose opinions he already knew. What might he do with the time saved? Ranciere (2007 p280) claims that "artists, like researchers, build the stage where the manifestation and the effect of their competences become dubious as they frame the story of a new adventure in a new idiom. The effect of the idiom cannot be anticipated. It calls for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation." This to me seems very *unlike* researchers; but therein lies its value. Policymakers could, if prepared to spectate as "active interpreters", use the ambiguity of art as a tool for critical thinking.

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[2] This refers to Ken Loach's 'Kathy Come Home', which highlighted the issue of homelessness in the UK, and led directly to policy interventions and the birth of a new charity, Shelter.

This is not an attempt to overstate the potential of art to influence and improve public policy. Johan Lehrer's 'Proust was a neuroscientist' explains how many great artists have predicted scientific theories long before these theories were discovered: "Proust was right about memory, Cezanne was uncannily accurate about the visual cortex, Stein anticipated Chomsky, and Woolf pierced the mystery of consciousness" (Lehrer, 12007, p.ix). However, Lehrer conveniently ignores all of the wrong predictions that these and others make along the way. Artists have no duty to be right; in fact, they have a right to be wrong – to be promiscuous in predicting possibilities about human nature and society, in a way that our scientists, including social scientists should avoid. In a sense, art is the dialectical opposite of empiricism. Art can never prove, but it should almost always provoke. Returning to Edelman again:

Art expresses an ambiguity that provokes, not an explicitness that terminates wonder and analysis. Its pervasiveness in shaping thought and feeling accordingly yields an indeterminacy in action and belief that characterises the human condition, but that a great deal of writing and political discourse is designed to obliterate (p64).

All art forms are of course possible of provoking ambiguity. The Specials sing Ghost Town, or Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi dance Zero Degrees, or Monica Ali writes *Brick Lane,* and all are casting useful doubt on the policies that surround the immigrant experience. However, it might be that theatre offers a particularly useful type of collective, visceral experience, demonstrated by Latour's claim that "theatre … is excellent at tracing the connections between controversies while wholly unable to settle controversies (Latour, 2005 p7)." Theory on the relationship between theatre and audience is fulsome, growing and, of course, inconclusive. Kelleher has rightly criticised the lazy assertions about theatre's 'difference', as if its "liveness" immediately renders it more interactive or powerful (Kelleher, 2009). Adorno's rejection of the speed of film which leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience is difficult to justify. Many theatrical productions are speedier than films. Others have gone further in proclaiming theatre's total uselessness as a 'meaning-making space' (Handke, 1968 quoted in Kelleher, 2009).

However, if the most policy-useful art is that which promotes doubt and ambiguity, then theatre may have moved in the right direction. Billington describes Beckett's Waiting for Godot as a turning point for theatre:

 "The shock lay in the fact that it closed no door and allowed the spectator total interpretative freedom…He [Beckett] erupted into a theatre where plays were categorised and pigeon holed, as in a postal sorting office, and where they were expected, once delivered, to convey a particular message … Beckett's achievement was not merely to extend the boundaries of theatre. It was, in a world still based on the sanctity of authority, to democratise the medium: to

suggest that the audience, by the power of its concentration and the variety of its interpretation, ultimately creates the play' (Billington, 2007, P83)

Of course, changes to the theatre landscape have been more fluid and a single 1950s shock. Old plays can aggravate doubt, and new ones can peddle a specific message, or do neither. But this doesn't deny theatre's overall direction of travel towards the ambiguous. As Peter Brook said in a radio 3 interview:

The role of theatre, it's a tiny field the theatre, but within it there is a specific possibility, first of all to expose… take the lid off whatever the situation is, more of it is hidden than we can begin to imagine, you take the lid off and you find a snake pit… that is very very valuable because it introduces doubt, you see through the lies, but then, I think this is the most vital thing which leads to your magic word 'revelation', the theatre can go one step farther, which is to touch on an unexpected sense of amazement, which leaves you not in that comfortable thing of 'they go to jail and the question's over but you're left with doubt turned into something living, something that is the way to something indescribable, which is real hope.

3. So what more could art do?

In reality, art has always influenced and will always influence the way policymakers make decisions. They will bring the totality of their experiences to bear on any issue, and, for most people, some of those experiences will be cultural. Since the 19th century urban policymakers have read Dickens, and most contemporary ones will have watched *The Wire*.

However, my improvable contention is that art is an under-utilised asset that policymakers could sweat. As Robert Hughes (1991 p47) has rightly suggested, art in general only "provides a background hum for power". It needs reinforcing that I am talking only about the art that is or will be already out there. Some artists and organisations, for instance Haring Woods or the RSA's project in Peterborough, deliberately create work and participatory processes to engage with local decision making. These activities, done well, create a different kind of value. However, my argument is based on how we make use of existing artistic products, ancient and contemporary.

The question is whether this could be done more consciously, systematically and collectively. By consciously, I am proposing an environment where policymakers perceive art as legitimate evidence to bring into policymaking discourse. By systematically, I am seeking a way to engage a group of policymakers in cultural experiences as a planned, structured part of policy formulation. And by collectively, I am tentatively suggesting that there may be particular value in policymakers experiencing art as part of an audience.

How could this be achieved? First, art should be recognised as evidence that can validly inform policymaking processes. In a sense, this builds on Jackson's concept of 'radical empiricism', requiring a focus on 'lived experience" that "accommodates our shifting sense of ourselves as subjects and as objects, as acting upon and being acted upon by the world, of living with and without uncertainty, of belonging and being estranged" (Jackson, 1989 p2). If this seems unlikely, perhaps it is useful to think of art as being on the first rung of a ladder of evidence-legitimacy that other previously unfashionable forms of evidence, for instance surveys, or the views of young people, has already climbed. Susan Sontag has written that the role of the artist is to make things more complex. Art as evidence would undoubtedly complicate things for policymakers – more 'swampy', to borrow Schon's definition – but this complexity could help policy making achieve Laswellian aspirations around policymaking as a learning process.

Second, policymakers should add the arts to the portfolio of ways in which they seek to 'get out there' and engage in the real world. There may be structured, deliberative and collective ways for this to happen, learning, for instance, from the LIFT Enquiry which brought business leaders to see and discuss performances (Rowntree, 2006). But could there also be some incentives for some more individualised, random experiences? Could cultural experiences be seen as a valid form of professional development, or 'field visit' to a different kind of 'front line'? Augustus Boal's groundbreaking legislative theatre was titled 'theatre of the oppressed'. Because I am not suggesting that policymakers need to engage with similar participatory experiences, perhaps I am simply asking for some theatre for the repressed.

Finally, if the localism bill and broader 'Big Society' rhetoric genuinely begin to re-engineer the where and how of policymaking, art can play a huge role in this reinvention. Knell and Taylor put forward a powerful case for the 'Big Society' as an opportunity for the arts to reclaim and reinvent instrumentalism. "If the 'Big Society' requires citizens to have strong critical faculties and a capacity for empathic imagination, what connections – theoretical and empirical – can be made between artistic participation and appreciation and engagement in civic life" (Knell and Taylor p27). If the idea of 'art as evidence' receives a sceptical reception from civil servants, there will be plenty of other possible locations to experiment. Engagement with Art might prove a powerful tool to catalyse some of the ideas around relationship building suggested by Marc Stears in his *Everyday Democracy* pamphlet (Stears, 2011).

Art could never provide a perfect counterweight to what the Institute of Government describes as "the day-to-day pressures on ministers and civil servants: to maintain a steady flow of initiatives; to respond rapidly to events; pressure to keep decisions closed until they can be announced fully formed; to place short-term departmental advantage over long-term collective benefit

(Institute for Government, 2011, p10). It might, however, give policymakers some tools to meet these pressures with the required resilience.

Beyond these ideas, the demands on arts, artists, or the funding system that supports them need not change. Any link with the policy world requires a reinforcement of the arms-length principle. This is not about creating a new way to commission policy-informing art to order. If policymakers or funders ever deliberately commission art to inform their thinking, the result is often bad art, with minimal impact. Many recent climate change and migration projects are open to this charge.

And yet… we need to recognise that art mirrors and reinforces existing power relationships. As a result, many art traditions tilt more towards a reiteration of social normality than a desire to provoke. If we rely on the art that is already made, then we may give ourselves over to a public European art tradition that is predominantly white, moneyed, male and increasingly generated by market forces. If we promote art as a policy-shaping tool, it becomes even more incumbent on those funders, aiming to cultivate the spaces where private patronage and the market will not tread, to support work that redresses this balance, and puts resources to produce art in the hands of the less powerful.

Are these ideas testable, or 'good enough to be wrong' as economists might say? During 2012, I aim to work with artists, arts organisations and policymakers to explore these concepts through action research. An attempt to empirically prove that empiricism is never enough seems tautological, but may have value. As the late Vaclev Hazel argued during the reformation of the Czech Republic:

There is no simple set of instructions on how to proceed… It is a way of going about things, and it demands the courage to breathe moral and spiritual motivation into everything, to seek the human dimension in all things. Science, technology, expertise, and so-called professionalism are not enough. Something more is necessary. For the sake of simplicity, it might be called spirit. Or feeling. Or conscience. (Havel,1992 pxvi-xvii)

ENDS

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