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POLICY REVIEW

Four observations on *The Arts* (2015) by Jeremy Corbyn*

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In the UK, the arts have a new champion and he goes by the name of Jeremy Corbyn. In setting out his pitch for the Labour Party leadership, Corbyn was the only candidate to publish a specific Arts policy and in doing so he sought to position himself as picking up where Jenny Lee had left off in 1965. However, Corbyn is not the only politician seeking to present themselves and their party as the “natural” home for anyone who values the arts. It is interesting to note the degree to which many of those seeking to set themselves against the “old politics” have whole-heartedly stated their commitment to the arts, artists and the creativity that is espoused to lie in all of us. In Scotland, the SNP have repeatedly claimed that “the case has been made” and that arts are safe on their watch. In the USA, Bernie Sanders has recently taken to YouTube in order to promise that he will be an “Arts President”¹. In Greece, Syriza have promised to challenge the cultural imperialism of the USA, while in Spain, Podemos have committed to placing culture at the core of their transformative politics. All appear to suggest that they understand the arts like none have done before, that with them in charge the arts will not only be safe but also will flourish and bloom like never before. Yet beyond the rhetoric it is unclear as to what is being offered other than warm words and vague aspiration.

Below are four personal observations on Corbyn’s policy document, *The Arts* (2015b). Each contributor has taken his or her own approach to reflecting on what this document tells us about how Jeremy Corbyn might approach cultural policy, should he ever find himself in Downing Street. What is noticeable across all of these observations is the degree to which each of the writers feels that they have “heard it all before”. Whether it was in the 1970s, the 1990s, in the promises of another party or in the pages of another report, publicly backing the arts appears to be a tactic that many of those offering a new political direction have chosen to adopt. This raises two questions. First why, when it comes to arts policy, the majority of these supposed radicals revert to primarily offering more of the same? And second, why do so many of those in the cultural sector who present themselves as the vanguard of progressive politics seem so keen to support proposed cultural policies that in their familiarity are so conservative?

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Of all the recent candidates for Labour leadership, only Jeremy Corbyn published an arts policy. *The Arts* (2015b) part of his *Vision for Britain 2020*, followed hot on the heels of an earlier statement – *The arts are for everybody, not the few; there is creativity in all of us* (2015a) – that coincided with the publication of all four candidates’ statements about the creative industries. Not only were Corbyn’s proposals introduced by Frank Cottrell Boyce (renowned for the London 2012 Olympics’ opening ceremony) but he also referred to various current and recent crusades including those run by David Lan (Young Vic and Chair, What Next?²), the Warwick Commission, the Creative Industries Federation, a-n³ and other initiatives. This suggested both familiarity and empathy with the sector, and it found Corbyn a receptive and appreciative audience amongst the arts and cultural constituencies.

It’s been suggested that Corbyn’s thinking stood out from his colleagues’ precisely “because politicians’ statements on the arts and creative industries are so often, bland, generic and interchangeable” (Newsinger, 2015). As if to prove the point, Andy Burnham, former Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport, acknowledged the importance of our creative industries “not only to the UK economy, but as a vital part of our national identity” (BECTU, 2015). Yvette Cooper given both stressed her appreciation for the economic case for the arts and regarded them as a fundamental part of society. Under her leadership, Labour would “defend the value and contribution the arts make to our lives against a Tory government whose education secretary has said an arts education could hold [children] back for the rest of their lives” (BECTU, 2015). No disagreement from Liz Kendall either who promised to “ensure this talent can face the future with the confidence our cultural growth demands they must have” (BECTU, 2015).

But are Corbyn’s ideas so very different to those of his running mates, or to what went before? Many of his broader policies have been criticised as harking back to the 1970s (see, e.g. Bagehot, 2015; *The Observer*, 2015). It’s said that he wants to turn the clock back and restore Clause IV (see, e.g. *The Independent*, 2015) and he has admitted that he doesn’t intend to shy away “from public participation, public investment in industry and public control of the railways” (*The Independent*, 2015). What might that imply for the arts?

Several trade unions, whose logos appear on *The Arts*, endorsed Corbyn’s candidacy. And it’s significant that the leadership candidates’ statements cited above should have been invited by BECTU (the media and entertainment union). Could it be that Corbyn’s ideas about the arts reiterate the unions’ historic thinking? Those commenting on his cultural ideas veered between identifying Corbyn’s thinking as “a breath of fresh air” and just “common sense”. The same applies to how his views are viewed more generally.⁴

Corbyn’s ambition for *The Arts* was to fulfil the promise of Jennie Lee’s, 1965 White Paper – “the first comprehensive national strategy for the arts of its time and the only since” (2015b, p. 2). As such, Corbyn argues that:

We must make the arts central to everyday life and as Jennie recognized, for this to happen the arts must be embedded in the education system, must be valued as highly as any other industry, must be available to all with equality of access across the country, participation must be encouraged and new ventures must be supported as much as established institutions. (2015b, p. 4)

Corbyn’s proposals for a comprehensive national plan for the publicly funded arts, culture and heritage sector involves: restoring arts funding as our economy recovers, addressing

regional imbalances, access for all (including a digital cultural sphere), education and participation, tackling exploitation and encouraging diversity. In his view, “a successful economy and a healthy, creative, open and vibrant democratic society depend on a flourishing creative sector” (Corbyn, 2015b, p. 2).

Much of this recalls an earlier document, also entitled, *The Arts*, in this case the 1976 Consultative Document, produced by the TUC Working Party. It similarly regarded the arts as an important part of life, as enriching “the productive processes of manufacturing industry”, providing opportunities “for us as human beings to explore and extend those creative capacities which we all possess”. Given the Working Party’s finding that “the arts do not figure significantly in the lives of most working people”, it argues that they could play a more prominent role in daily life, but that would depend on overcoming “the history of neglect of popular arts and the seeming inability of the arts themselves to reach a wider audience”. More specifically, it pointed to “the inequality of opportunity in education which does not appear able to equip young people for a life of creative leisure”. But, it acknowledged that there were now opportunities “as never before to bring about a far greater degree of cultural equity”. Indeed, making the arts “more widely available and understood” would be synonymous with both central and local government having successfully tackled cultural inequality.

The very positive reception of Corbyn’s policy in the blogosphere recalls the initial optimism that greeted New Labour’s strategy, *Create the Future*, published shortly before Blair first came to power in 1997. At the time, its promises seemed like manna from heaven to a sector that perceived itself as having been under siege throughout most of the previous 18 years of Tory rule. Conceivably seduced by the notion that artists and “creatives” would “be able to fulfil their potential when they have the wholehearted support of a government that has an effective strategy for cultural policies” (Labour Party, 1997, p. 7), New Labour attracted enormous support from the sector. In its substance, *Create the Future* proposed that creativity should be encouraged. Its priorities included the widening of opportunities for children and young people (not least by promoting education) and the “building and nurturing” of new audiences. It proposed free admission to make the national museums and galleries “more accessible”, and to encourage local authorities to develop leisure and cultural strategies that would encourage wider access. And, of course, it described the cultural sector as of fundamental importance to the operations of the incoming government – “integral” to the country’s future economic success and regeneration, and as opening up our minds, making us “wonder and question, delight us, disturb us, challenge us and sometimes change us”. They were also credited with the capacity “to promote our sense of community and common purpose”. Indeed, cultural practice was anticipated as being of such central importance that: “In a Labour government, every ministry will be expected to make a contribution to achieving the goals of our cultural policy.”

It’s outside my remit here to explore specific differences that have informed Labour’s thinking about the arts from generation to generation. But, the Party’s cultural policy has been nothing if not consistent, and is far from controversial, compared to other issues – say – Trident. Its overarching priority has been to address inequality. Corbyn suggests that it’s essentially a matter of time, citing Lee to that effect: “There is no short-term solution for what by its very nature is a long-term problem” (Corbyn, 2015b, p. 2). But one hopes that he will pause to consider whether it might take more than

just hanging on in there. Labour has held power for almost half the 50 years since Jennie Lee's *Policy for the arts* (1965) was published. Perhaps, somewhere alongside Margaret Beckett's Learning the Lessons from Defeat Taskforce,⁵ the Party might see fit to assess what it has achieved in terms of its arts policy, what it has failed to deliver and why, and what Jeremy Corbyn might be able to do about that in the future.

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As an arts worker, I am excited by Jeremy Corbyn's *The Arts* (2015b), an enthusiastic manifesto for supporting arts and culture under his leadership. However, in this piece, I review *The Arts* not as a personal positioning document that lays out a set of beliefs, but as "an outline of policy proposals" (2015b, p. 2) as Corbyn himself calls it. Therefore, I assess the document on its success in identifying clear goals, and the extent to which its policy proposals are likely to achieve these goals. In addition, as Corbyn calls upon the Labour party to provide "a radical alternative offer [for] the arts" (2015b, p. 2), this piece also questions to what extent Corbyn's ideas represent a significant departure from the ideas of previous administrations.

Corbyn's manifesto includes a preface by Corbyn, an introduction by Frank Cottrell Boyce, and several sections with banner headlines such as "Ensuring Access for All" and "Encouraging Diversity in the Arts". The headlines are mostly uncontroversial, and in many cases reiterate recommendations made by key cultural policy reports of the last few years. For example, Corbyn cites the 2015 GPS Culture report *A New Destination for the Arts between a RoCC and a Hard Place* to suggest that we need to address regional imbalances in arts provision. He offers some concrete ideas about how to do this, such as limiting and redistributing London's proportion of lottery funding, while protecting grant-in-aid for "national" companies. However, he ignores the very difficult question of how to redistribute capital without diminishing the vitality of London's art scene, an inevitable outcome of his proposal and which is seemingly at odds with his commitment to creating a vibrant cultural life for the nation as a whole.

In another instance, Corbyn suggests that the government should "consider proposals made by the creative learning alliance to consider dance and drama in the national curriculum as subjects within their own right" (2015b, p. 8). While the work of the creative learning alliance is certainly admirable, Corbyn's promise to "consider" is neither clear, nor convincing. Too often throughout the manifesto, Corbyn's commitments are made with weak verbs that do not stand up as legitimate policy proposals. For example, Corbyn calls upon policy-makers to "do their utmost" (2015b, p. 8) to give young people exposure to a multi-disciplinary mix of subject areas and for the government to "do more" (2015b, p. 7) to ensure public organisations offer a coherent and accessible programme of extra-curricular activities. Corbyn does well to identify key issues in the subsidised cultural sector, but more often than not he fails to offer a clear and achievable way of translating his commitments into action.

In addition, although Corbyn sets up his manifesto in opposition to previous administrations, his central proposition – more support for the arts – is familiar. New Labour gave a great deal of money to the arts, however, numerous scholars including most recently, Robert Hewison, have written about how despite this the administration had a calcifying

effect on creativity in Britain – partly because they sought to bring so much of the cultural life of Britain under their control (2014). Although Corbyn speaks of greater devolution of cultural budgets (2015b, p. 6), he also promises more support for the arts at the national level, and the creation of a Cabinet Committee in Parliament on the arts and creative industries. In order to offer a radical approach to the arts, Corbyn needs to move beyond the rhetoric of increasing support and demonstrate truly innovative ways of encouraging the arts, while protecting against the kinds of bureaucratic interferences that enervated the sector under the previous Labour administration.

Indeed Corbyn blames previous administrations for their over-reliance on value measurement methodologies (2015b, p. 2) and yet he says that organisations should be “incentivised” to increase take-up. Under New Labour and during the era of evidence-based decision-making processes cultivated by the political and administrative climate of New Public Management, cultural organisations were asked to demonstrate their success in non-cultural areas. However, owing to what Dave O’Brien has described as the “social life of methods”, indices that were intended to measure existing activity quickly became targets that began to shape activity – a situation that the cultural sector now recognises was highly problematic (2014). And yet curiously, with the suggestion of incentivising organisations to increase uptake from different sections of the population, Corbyn seems to take this very situation as a starting point for his policy proposal on access.

Where Corbyn has the chance to propose an innovative approach to access through the use of digital technology, a resource that was not available to New Labour in the same way, he somewhat misses the opportunity. Instead he offers a weak reference to “live streaming” (2015b, p. 6), and pays lip service to the recommendations of a report by Warwick University (2015) but fails to expand upon the potential for digital participation to cut across traditional barriers to access.

In 2008, Sir Brian McMaster wrote a report for the Secretary of State for Culture about supporting excellence in the arts (2008). The report included many radical ideas, but its recommendations simply weren’t implementable, and the report quickly became redundant in the wake of the financial crisis and increased tensions around arts funding. If Corbyn wants to offer a truly radical approach to the arts, and to create a strong and sustainable future for culture in Britain, then he needs to present not only alternative ideas but also alternative ways of doing things. His decision to foreground the arts in public discourse at such an early stage in his campaign is a good start.

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Jeremy Corbyn’s policies have been described by some as closely aligned to those of the Syriza and Podemos parties in Greece and Spain, both political parties that share his claim to oppose the austerity agenda common across much of Europe at present. At first glance, Corbyn’s manifesto for the arts would appear to affirm these affinities; however a closer reading of their respective art policies reveals some notable differences between them.

Beginning with Syriza, its 2014 proposals for culture aimed to respond to what the party identifies as the cultural imperialism emanating from the United States. It sees this as leading to a standardised model that on the one hand fosters individualism and

consumerism while on the other obstructs the development of Greek culture. Although the party has since made a volte-face that has been widely discussed (Daley, 2015), Syriza's original political positioning may be what is on the mind of the commentators that compare it to Corbyn's recent publication (Silvera, 2015). Central to Syriza's arts policy is a response to what they see as the inequality of access to culture. This is why their aim is to invest in arts education, to stop the privatisation of cultural heritage and to fight unpaid labour in the sector. However, Syriza's attention to the cultural industries is marginal at best. Although the document mentions the cultural economy, its focus lies rather on creating the conditions to strengthen "indigenous forms of cultural production" that don't follow "commercially successful recipes" (Syriza, 2014). Finally, Syriza wishes to "nurture the conditions that will allow intellectuals and artists to develop a narrative that will be at the heart of social transformation in Greece, interweaving the aesthetic and the moral dimensions" (Syriza, 2014; edited for clarity). While this statement attests to Syriza's understanding of the social and political relevance of the cultural sector, it also foregrounds their contradictory position in relation to culture – that the party defends cultural autonomy but proposes to mainly support a specific type of cultural activity in pursuit of state objectives.

The arts manifesto of Podemos (Podemos Cultura, 2015) also defends a more autonomous cultural sector, opposing the mercantilisation and clientelism that they believe have become ubiquitous. Like Syriza, they seek to address inequality and to renegotiate austerity; however, differences in how they believe the cultural sector can contribute to this are evident. For example, Podemos accentuates the sustainable management of cultural organisations, the consolidation of existing cultural audiences and the growth of cultural networks – in which it includes the private organisations that Syriza appeared to overlook. There is also no mention of ideology, a term that is central to the arguments of Syriza. Instead, the Spanish party discusses culture as serving different, yet complementary interests. This means that culture is variously acknowledged as: a right; a public service; something to be enjoyed; a sector that is economically relevant. In order to foster Spanish culture, the party identifies four key challenges that must be addressed: reconnecting its values with the interests of citizenship through participation and access; becoming a sustainable, autonomous and diverse creative sector; reducing institutional dependences; nurturing existing institutions. More broadly, the party sees cultural policy as transformative, that is, as contributing to an engaged, informed and diverse citizenship. The central axes of Podemos' cultural policy are twofold: on the one hand supporting emerging, experimental cultural practices while on the other promoting economic sustainability through a combination of public and private funding and transversal collaborations (e.g. in R&D aimed at consolidating and growing informed audiences). Connecting them is the idea that all cultural institutions should be transparent, democratic and managed responsibly.

Corbyn's proposals share with Podemos the view of culture as a form of individual growth and expression. The policy is also accompanied by the promise to "implement a Cabinet Committee in Parliament on the arts and creative industries" (2015c, p. 4), that could be read as having similar intentions to those underpinning Podemos' proposals. Additionally, Corbyn has stated: "there is an artist in every one of us [...]. When you unleash that creativity you [...] might end with a more equal society" (2015d). However, despite describing his arts policy as comprehensive, the elephant in the room

is precisely the absence of a link between its aim to widen access to the arts for all and the social and economic form of organisation that frames it – something that is perhaps offered by Podemos and, to a lesser extent, by Syriza. When reading Corbyn’s manifesto in light of the other two, it becomes obvious that the proposal of the new Labour leader mainly addresses cultural consumption. In fact, the document begins by foregrounding the importance of arts participation to individual fulfilment and well-being. It also opposes an exclusively instrumentalist measurement of cultural value, which could be read as a subtle critique to New Labour’s legacy. The exception to this resides in Corbyn’s discussion of the homogeneity and the precarity in the sector, which he proposes to address by requiring organisations that depend significantly on public funding to have training in diversity and by creating a Sector Skills Council that will define minimum employment standards.

All three manifestos defend stronger investment in the cultural sector in order to make it more inclusive and diverse, yet differ considerably on how to achieve this. Syriza sees public funding and organisations as the main force behind cultural activity while Podemos proposes an articulation between the public, private and third sectors. However the position of culture in Corbyn’s vision for Britain – for example, in economic, environmental and geopolitical terms – remains particularly unclear. If Corbyn wishes to offer something new then he must articulate the potential of culture to function as a social driver, that is, as something that not only opens up new ways of thinking about the world but that may also enact new modes of being in it, hence contributing to a different form of social organisation.

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Given that it’s such a niche interest, I was quite surprised to see Jeremy Corbyn’s team churn out a specific policy for the arts. After all, it must have been a busy few weeks for the man. The surprise was further compounded by the fact that it was such an unexpectedly bland and conservative document.

I’m a Corbyn fan. He’s someone who doesn’t simply spout comfy platitudes that speak to the dullards in middle of the bell curve. Corbyn seems instead like a man who is genuinely prepared to upset vested interests. It’s therefore disappointing that there is so little to celebrate in this policy document and perhaps, by extension, a Corbyn Labour Party.

At heart Corbyn is a progressive. A genuinely progressive arts policy would have the following attributes: diversity in provision, audience profile and workforce; recognition that the market does not always provide the greatest outcomes for the people of the UK; and most of all that the poorest must not disproportionately pay for an arts sector that mostly benefits the better off.

Policy-makers in the arts have tended to avert their eyes and ears from what the public tells them, and focus instead on pleasing the arts sector (on one hand) and the government (on the other). Disappointingly, Corbyn’s arts policy statement is no different. It references all the right things, as far as the arts sector is concerned: “Hello, Warwick Commission!”; “Good day to you, Paying Artists Campaign!”; “How are the children, Cultural Learning Alliance?” It resembles a shopping list of sector demands.

What's missing is a smart response to the message the public consistently sends, loud and clear, from the Arts Debate to the Understanding Everyday Participation Project. They want more accountability, they want arts that speak to them, they want a say in how their money is spent. Where is the clear vision of a different world? It all reminds me of the Warwick Commission Report (2015): a portrait of a sector doing fine, with just a few tweaks needed here and there. Status quo maintained. What's also missing is the *politics* – recognition that one person's art is another person's blasphemy, and that more money going to brass bands in Bridlington means less for ballet in Brighton.

Maybe I'm asking for too much. Overall, it's all harmless stuff, though extremely familiar, and imbued with the luxury of impotence: it's easy to make all these promises to the arts sector without having to get down to the dirty business of implementation and delivery.

Footage from the launch event⁶ in Dalston shows Corbyn a little spikier in person than he seems in print: speaking passionately about his desire to see an end to elitist funding decisions, and unlocking the creativity that's in all of us.

I wasn't at the Dalston launch (I am, as usual, a bit late to the Party) so the actual authorship of the policy is a bit of a mystery to me. Someone will eventually fess up to having written it. In the meantime, we'll have to assume that it represents the position of the new leader of the Labour Party and his entourage. In summary, it seems that when it comes to the arts, Corbyn signals business as usual. We await the development of a truly progressive arts policy from the Labour Party.

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Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqEzpz29mhs>.
2. <http://www.whatnextculture.co.uk/about/>.
3. <http://www.payingartists.org.uk/about-the-campaign/>.
4. See, for instance, blogs posted in response to *The Arts are for Everybody*, <http://www.theateofthearts.co.uk/2015/08/11/the-arts-are-for-everybody-not-the-few-there-is-creativity-in-all-of-us/> and Razavi (2015).
5. <http://labourlist.org/2015/05/we-cannot-waste-this-defeat-labour-launch-taskforce-to-find-out-why-they-lost-the-election/>.
6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnEbsbeNCnU>.

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