Culture as Foundational

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Frans Masereel, 1925, The City: A Vision in Woodcuts, image courtesy of The Anarchist Library
https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/frans-masereel-the-city

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1 Introduction

This paper is an account of culture as foundational. It is not meant to be definitive but rather aims to stimulate a conversation. It has developed out of dialogue between UK-centred cultural policy scholars and members of the Foundational Economy Collective (FEC). At the most basic, the FEC approach promotes the accessibility and affordability of foundational goods, including infrastructures of sociability, and includes engagement with community and place, increasingly focused on precarity and 'fallen below' groups.[1] Bringing the foundational approach to the field of cultural policy studies reveals shared concerns and, we argue, a crisis with its very object of study.

Our dialogue starts with the premise that the foundational approach helps to reframe cultural policy as an essential and transformative part of social life. It asks, if culture is - or should be - a foundational basic, then what exactly does this claim mean and what should it imply for action?

We begin with 2) *Definitions*, making a loose distinction between a "big" anthropological definition of culture and a "small" definition focused on what we call, following Raymond Williams, "a realised signifying system" or "art and culture".

In 3) *Why Culture Matters*, we argue for culture as a foundational public good, rejecting cultural economics' default to market failure. Public funding for culture is a positive collective good, in both its production and consumption. We justify this not by a system of basic needs, nor simply based on rights, but on Amartya Sen's notion of capabilities. Culture provides part of the essential capabilities for a full participation in democratic citizenship. This is set against the expanding instrumentalism, whether economic, social, wellbeing etc., which fails to recognise the substantive benefit of cultural participation and is increasingly reduced to abstracted, financialised metrics.

In 4) *A Foundational Approach to Culture*, we discuss the concepts of cultural infrastructure and why it matters for a foundational cultural policy. We briefly survey the history of cultural funding in the UK, and how it fed into the crisis of the late 1970s. We discuss the implications of reduced funding, privatisation and fragmentation of that public infrastructure.

In 5) *Ecosystem Collapse – the Crisis of the mid 2020s* we explore the idea of cultural ecosystem, as a hybrid assemblage of public, private and non-for-profit, suggesting its co-evolution with cultural infrastructure in often unplanned ways. We then suggest that this ecosystem is in serious crisis, affected by both a wider crisis of foundational liveability and developments specific to culture, not least of which is the rise of the digital platform monopolies.

In 6) *Foundational Interventions – and Questions*, we look at some of the real challenges facing local interventions in foundational culture.

The focus is on the UK but we believe many of these issues can be found across the developed countries, and not just the Anglosphere.

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[1] Froud, J. *et al.* (2018) *Foundational Economy. The Infrastructure of Everyday Life.* Manchester University Press; Bassens, D. *et al.* (2025) Geography, the foundational economy and the fallen below, *Dialogues in Human Geography* online first. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/20438206251388515

2 Definitions

Many discussions around art and culture go past each other because they refer to different ideas of culture and their accumulated baggage. Even the couplet 'art and culture' is fraught with culture viewed as foundational to 'art' which is secondary or derivative.

Further tensions lie between 'small culture' as a set of practices, artefacts and language-use, and 'big culture' as an anthropological 'whole way of life'. A tradition of left politics since the 1960s frames this tension as an institutionalised, reified 'art' opposed to a democratic, 'ordinary', culture. From the 1980s, neoliberal discourses also adopted a variant on this classic distinction, as did cultural economists, who juxtapose culture as 'expression' with culture as 'identity' and 'anthropology' with 'function'.[2]

The same tension between small and big culture can be seen in the UNESCO's 2005 Convention, where culture is:

> First, a sector of activity [which] includes, but not exclusively, cultural workers, artists and other creative professionals; commercial (for-profit) businesses; not-for-profit firms in the arts and culture; public cultural institutions, such as museums and galleries, heritage sites, libraries etc.; education and training institutions in the arts; government agencies and ministries responsible for arts and cultural affairs; NGOs and civil society involved in cultural activity.
>
> Second, in its anthropological sense, referring to the people's way of life – the different values, norms, knowledge, skills, individual and collective beliefs – that guide individual and collective action. In this sense of values and norms, culture is understood as a stock of intangible renewable resources upon which people draw inspiration and through which they express the meaning they give to their existence and its development.[3]

On one hand, cultural policy is directly connected to the small definition of culture. But this small definition can also be understood in both a narrow and broad sense. For instance, the UN small definition presents culture as a specific (and mostly) professional sector. But small culture is more, as recognised in a recent European Commission report where culture is associated with "but not limited to, choral and theatre groups, fairs, festivals, gallery exhibitions, music events, carnivals, literature, storytelling, dance and craftwork, and the institutional, community and social settings that support them".[4]

If small culture is a broad social activity, it is therefore not 'owned' by the established cultural sector and is constantly contested by new emergent cultural voices and social technologies.

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[2] Kaszynska, P. (2025) Cultural value as meaning-making. *Cultural Trends*, *34*(4), 463–477. https://doi-org.manchester.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/09548963.2024.2381767

[3] UNESCO (2014). *UNESCO culture for Development Indicators. Methodology Manual*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, p.10.

[4] European Commission (2025) *Culture and Democracy: the evidence: How citizens' participation in cultural activities enhances civic engagement, democracy and social cohesion*. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/07370fba-110d-11ee-b12e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

Cultural activities, as defined above, often have origins in the lives of individuals and groups well outside the direct purview of cultural policy.[5]

On the other hand, cultural policy's relation to the big definition of culture as a 'whole way of life' is opaque and potentially tenuous. This definition is co-terminus with social life and consequently cultural policy takes a back seat to economic, social, urban, and environmental policy. Policies aimed at changing 'whole ways of life', such as Stalinism, 'third world' developmentalism or Thatcher's consumer revolution, don't primarily work *through* cultural policy, and have more of an impact on the workings of the cultural sector than vice versa. Platformisation (and its lack of regulation) is another example: the use of digital technologies to 'nudge' and significantly alter online and offline behaviour is now the predominant "social, technical and institutional logic affecting the everyday experience of billions of people, and the ways in which they relate to each other, conceptualise themselves and even manage or express their most intimate emotions".[6]

It is common to conflate Raymond Williams' 'whole way of life' with his 'culture is ordinary', but he clearly distinguished between culture in the small sense, as a "realised signifying system"[7] and big culture as that "whole range of activities, relations and institutions, of which only some are manifestly 'cultural'".[8] Whilst Williams sees the tension between the two definitions as an important reminder of this wider social context, in a complex society we must make this distinction, even if it is a relatively fuzzy, permeable, 'more or less' distinction.

The relationship between the cultural sector, cultural activities, and culture as 'whole way of life' is not simple or direct. What the cultural sector produces ultimately reflects changing ways of life, and has some impact on them, but this is highly mediated and refracted. This mediation becomes further pronounced in modernity, with its more complex and fluid social relations. Culture could not easily be mapped onto traditional orders (church, aristocracy and the natural-traditional order). Coupled with the rise of the market in culture, it has achieved a high degree of autonomy, though its relation to this market was always double-edged.

Traditionally, cultural policy has responsibility for 'culture' as part of a nation-state, regional, ethnic or other minority groups, with its symbols - including dress, food, flags, buildings - often constituting cultural policy as a form of display (following Williams again)[9]. This formulation of cultural policy has not disappeared, as debates around right-wing culture wars and 'woke' social engineering show.

All this being said, for our purposes here, the term 'culture' refers to the small definition of culture as commonly understood within the phrase 'art and culture'. As such, culture for us is a particularly affective, aesthetic (related to the senses), imaginative and embodied symbolic space of collective communication and meaning making. Images and sounds, movements and rhythms, forms of poetic language speak to us about our place in the world. They allow a form of

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[5] We leave here the ways in which different practices of art and culture are aligned with class, race, gender etc. divisions, which Bourdieu mark the very origins of the modern "cultural field".

[6] "Gilbert, J. (2024) "Techno-feudalism or Platform Capitalism? Conceptualising the Digital Society". *European Journal of Social Theory*, 27:4, p.573.

[7] Williams, R. (1977) *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: University Press, p.110.

[8] Williams, R (1981) *Culture*, Fontana: London, p. 209.

9 McGuigan, J. (2004) *Rethinking Cultural Policy*, Open University Press, p.61.

collective meaning making, a distinct mode of symbolic knowledge not available to rational discourse, providing an indispensable, if sometimes opaque, contribution to our shared social life. The transformative ideals we place on culture relate to the creative freedom we experience through the capacity to enjoy, engage, participate, make, experience, critique, and celebrate art and culture.

For culture to be foundational it must be rooted in place and in people's lives, be accessible to them and responsive to their needs. Furthermore, it must be 'democratic' in practice. As such it is concerned with a particular dimension of everyday life, that of Williams' "realised signifying system".

In our foundational frame, culture requires a certain degree of collectively funded and facilitated provision, usually involving the state and a range of public and private agents. Art and culture can thus in principle be aligned, in policy and practical terms, with other foundational services where provision (e.g. of health and care) is not and should not be exclusively or primarily a matter of individual private consumption.

3 Why culture matters

Most mainstream economists see culture as a private good, not a public good like education that has 'externalities' which justify collective provision. For them, public support for culture is only rationalised by market failure. Our position is very different. We think culture is essential for personal development, it is a fundamental attribute of human beings and has an intrinsic value that *does* make claims on collective provision. Culture founds the human right to freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, making it an essential part of social citizenship.

Culture as capability

If foundational liveability is a matter of ensuring the supply of essential everyday services for most citizens, most of the time[10], how does culture fit in? Isn't the proliferation of fabricated cultural desires and their ancillaries in fashion, travel, *Instagram* and *TikTok*, online shopping – the whole lifestyle-entertainment complex – deeply implicated in the sorts of useless, wasteful consumption that contributes to the current systemic crisis? More generously, is not art and culture a matter of discretionary spending rather than need, something pleasurable that comes after, once the basics have been met? After all, art is not food, water, or housing.[11]

Certainly, it is easy to dismiss popular culture as hedonistic and destructive, though there is often a scent of an older, patronising condemnation of 'mass culture' here that we should be wary of. Perhaps it is more useful to view culture as a capability rather than a need (or a luxury). Amartya Sen emphasises the capabilities that allow citizens to live "the lives they have reason to value".[12] This certainly does require material resources – as Hegel said, "secure at first food and clothing, and the kingdom of God will come to you of itself".[13] What the foundational economy approach

[10] Calafati, L., Froud, J., Haslam, C., Johal, S. and Williams, K. (2023) *When Nothing Works*, Manchester University Press.
[11] Doyal, L. and Gough, I. (1984) A theory of human needs, *Critical Social Policy*, Volume 4, Issue 10.
[12] Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, p.18.
[13] From a letter by Hegel to K. L. von Knebel, published in von Knebel (1840) *Literarischer Nachlass und Briefwechsel*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1840), p. 446.

has added to Sen is a collectivist twist which highlights how, in complex society, individual freedom requires collective provision. It is impossible to conceive of foundational culture without a holistic recognition of other forms of foundational liveability like housing, food or transport, without which it would barely, or only unequally, flourish.

Foundational cultural provision, like education, with which it is closely aligned, equips citizens with the ability to fully engage in culture. If culture is no longer aligned with traditional authority, and so open to negotiation and contestation, then a basic capacity to evaluate and judge our shared values and traditions, as articulated through art and culture, is crucial to democratic life. Citizenship is then less a right or status; rather, following the republican tradition, it is an activity of decision and choice where we are defined as much by shared meanings as shared needs. Hence the importance of culture and the connection of culture to freedom, and the assertion that foundational thinking is liberal collectivist.[14]

It is important to emphasise again that while big culture, as anthropological fact, concerns the human ability to understand, and thus act in, the world through symbols, by small culture we understand a subset of this. It is a "realised signifying system" involving the senses and emotions, a relation to the world involving both mind and body, not just an abstract rationality associated with modern science and administration. This is why it is not just a question of individual expression alone, but of shared social meaning.

What does culture do?

In 'A Matter of Choice' (1996), Sen distinguishes three roles for culture. The *constitutive* role of culture builds on the observation that "giving the opportunity to understand and cultivate (…) creativity is essential to any concept of human development".[15] Culture as constitutive is about shared values and traditions articulated through art and culture. Shared 'rules of the game' in which our active individual *parole* works in relation to a common *langue*.

The constitutive role of culture refers to the institutions within which we acquire our cultural capabilities and the spaces in which we might exercise these individually and collectively. As such it covers the 'cultural infrastructure', conceived as a set of cultural and educational institutions (spaces of preservation, learning, production and consumption, and the provision of cultural funding) which sustain the exercise of the right to full participation in culture. This constitutive role directs us to consider how culture underpins the social, political and economic capabilities required for the full exercise of citizenship.

The *evaluative* role of culture is for Sen the ability to make judgements of what we value, individual and collectively that comes with participation in art and culture. This way citizenship becomes substantive and inclusive as citizens acquire a voice in the debate about what we should hold as valuable in common in a democratic public sphere. As such, culture is a 'meta-good', like

[14] Equally FE liberal collectivism is different from the classic liberal collectivism of Keynes and Beveridge which was a matter of top-down benevolence and enlightened self-interest. If Sen is about the lives *they* have reason to value, top down is not good enough. Collective provision requires citizen agency and deliberation because choice and agency does not mean everyone can get what they want all the time.
[15] Sen, A. (1996) 'A matter of choice', *UNESCO Courier* September, p.34.

education, which provides the ground for judgements about other goods, their purpose and value for us.[16]

Finally, the *instrumental* role is where culture can translate into economic growth but also other broader improvements in the quality of life. We understand the instrumental role when the practice of art and culture positively increases employment in an area, adds to the liveability of the built environment, enhances social cohesion, and stimulates trade and international exchange. And/or works negatively, for example, to undermine cohesion. The problem with instrumentality begins when putative, positive outputs become the dominating purpose. Because, as Sen insists: "culture must appear not as a servant of ends, but as the social basis of those ends themselves".[17] Without a clear acknowledgement of the first two roles, the instrumental will become destructive of art and culture. This is precisely what has happened.

Culture as instrument

Over the last forty years there has been a radical shift towards framing art and culture as a system of production and consumption and valuing its instrumentality narrowly through its contribution to economic growth. The value of the cultural and creative sectors is seen primary in their capacity to create jobs, generate GVA and drive innovation. Thus, the creative industries figure as one of eight sectors in the Starmer government's current industrial strategy complete with a sector plan to "unlock growth".[18]

This appropriation of culture by economic policy has a complex and long history. Its roots are in older forms of public policy in support of 'cultural industries' which saw these as crucial, not only to local economic development but also to multicultural development. In these earlier waves of cultural policies, support for cultural industries was conceived as a way to embrace popular urban cultures as central to the UK's new global identity. By 1997, when New Labour announced their version of 'creative industries' policies, these utopian elements had been boiled off to leave a residue of 'jobs and growth'.[19]

The appropriation of culture by economics was further deepened by the dominance of 'Treasury brain' and the capture of the commanding heights of public administration by economic rationalism and new public management. These positioned art and culture in a cold new order where they had to justify public funding in new ways.

Within this kind of policy thinking, art and culture were ultimately providing private consumer goods and services. Public funding could be then justified primarily to correct 'market failure' when 'positive externalities' - social and economic benefits stemming from the aggregation of individual cultural purchases - could be identified. More generally, this approach was reinforced

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[16] Keat, R. (2000) *Cultural Goods and the Limits of the Market*. Basingstoke, Macmillan. See also Banks, M. (2009) *The Politics of Cultural Work*. Palgrave Macmillan; Hesmondhalgh, D. (2010) 'Russell Keat, cultural goods and the limits of the market'. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 16:1:37–38.

[17] Sen, 1996, p.33.

[18] Sector Plans - GOV.UK. See also O'Connor, J. (2024) 'Creating growth: Labour's plan for the arts, culture and creative industries'. *Cultural Trends*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2024.2383671.

[19] Though it must be said, the economists at the core do not buy this argument, and, we might say, nor does the government, who constantly cut the culture budget.

by the mentality of what Michael Power termed "the audit society" where input of resources must be justified by measurable outputs.[20]

In response to this policy setting, the cultural sector and its advocates have developed sophisticated metrics to satisfy the demands of the audit society. These attempts typically focus on producing what we call a 'shadow business model' which adds an imputed monetary value to benefits which are not directly nor easily quantifiable in monetary terms. Shadow business models are then used to demonstrate that cultural activities can indeed generate a substantial economic return on the initial public investment.[21]

Against this kind of policy thinking, our perspective aligns with the humanistic tradition. In this tradition, activities like reading or writing, watching films and playing games, attending the theatre, listening, experiencing or learning music, going to a museum, attending a drawing class or dancing are about shared meaning, identities and self-expression. These are the goals of existence, ontological essentials, part of Williams' realised signifying system that cannot be conceived as just commodities or reduced to instruments subjected to a cost-benefit analysis. We might restate Anna Kornbluh, in different words, on the specificity of art and culture, where "artistic mediation—representation in excess of messaging, creativity in excess of use, giving sensuous form to the unexpressed—has always been a fundamental human activity."[22]

The failure to accord culture a valued place in society and public policy, and its reduction to an industry is itself a 'negative externality', part of the wider corrosion of non-instrumentalised forms of individual and communal life. The reduction of culture acts as a warning light – like climate change, social precarity, political corruption and cynicism – that something is wrong with the system. We can endorse Nancy Fraser's notion of "Cannibal Capitalism", wherein capitalism relies on "non-economic" systems of regulation, political legitimacy, ecological sustainability, and social reproduction – systems that, nonetheless, it systemically undermines in its search for ever-expanded profits.[23] Like the *ouroboros*, it eats its own tail. We would argue that culture is also part of social reproduction and is similarly being devoured.

This allows us to connect with other forms of struggle around the social foundations, but the crisis in culture is part of a wider crisis of sociability. As Kaiser Y. Kuo wrote, "We're left here in America, and perhaps in the West more broadly, with free speech devoid of shared meaning, innovation without a shared purpose, and pluralism without a civic scaffold sturdy enough to hold it".[24] The fight for a cultural infrastructure is not simply tackling the mission creep of economically rationalised instrumentalism but ultimately about confronting "the systematic destruction of the cognitive and social infrastructure that makes cooperation possible in the first place".[25]

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[20] Power, M. (1999) *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*. Oxford Academic.
[21] This can also be seen in the burgeoning field of 'arts and health', where the benefit to the personal is both medicalised and metricised in increasingly elaborate ways.
[22] Kornbluh, A. (2024) *Immediacy; or the style of too late capitalism*. Verso.
[23] Fraser, N. (2023) *Cannibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet – and What We Can Do About It*, Verso.
[24] Kuo, KY. (2025) "The world has changed" *Sinica.* https://www.sinicapodcast.com/p/the-world-has-changed
[25] The Structural Lens (2025)'The dissolution of civic infrastructure'.https://harmoniousdiscourse.substack.com/p/the-dissolution-of-civic-infrastructure

4 A foundational approach to culture?

Foundational provision is about the accessibility and affordability of foundational goods, including infrastructures of sociability, which underpins citizens' ability to decide what they have reason to value. How then to secure the collective basis of culture? And how can this be done in a way that strengthens culture's contribution to democratic flourishing?

Cultural infrastructure

The ability to actively participate in cultural life requires an institutional backbone: educational institutions, spaces of preservation, learning, display, performance and engagement. These might be readily seen as foundational and are in many European countries the responsibility of the state. This apparatus supports a diverse ecosystem of public, commercial and not-for-profit actors which together make up the cultural sector (as outlined in the UNESCO definition above).

The publicly (and to a lesser extent privately) provided apparatus that sustains culture is commonly called cultural infrastructure. The concept has clear resonance with the idea of material and providential foundations, relating to everyday infrastructures that provide housing, food or energy, for example. Cultural infrastructure has traditionally referred to the physical (public and private) facilities made for cultural production and consumption, and it is still used in this way by many governments. However, we need to understand infrastructure not as a thing but as a series of social relations - a physical structure, institution or recurrent set of practices whose purpose is to allow other things happen. Though the concept has been extended to cover a capacious "soft" cultural infrastructure, including traditions, values, identities and histories and so on, we would suggest a more focused definition, following Bain and Podmore (2024), which incorporates buildings, facilities, spaces, practices, funding and legal frameworks, personal, professional and institutional networks, social media sites and digital platforms.[26]

For something to be deemed 'infrastructure' would mean it would be primarily intended to facilitate the production of other goods and services (as in an electric grid); and it would produce significant externalities or spillovers (effects on third parties who are not directly involved, for instance, a clean water distribution infrastructure benefits not only those who drink it but public health at large). As a provider of 'public goods,' we would argue that such infrastructure is best provided by a public sector (however organised) and that such public goods should be conceived, democratically, as non-rivalrous – that is, can be used by multiple people without detriment or significant depletion. Indeed, in recent work commissioned by the British Academy, the Bennett Institute incorporate such characteristics into their definition of social and cultural infrastructure as enduring, accessible and available (open to all), enabling (facilitating a wide range of activities valued by people); and non-rival.[27] This infrastructure does, of course,

[26] Bain, A. and Podmore, J. (2024) *The Cultural Infrastructure of Cities*. Columbia University Press.

[27] See Frischmann, B.M. (2012) *Infrastructure: The Social Value of Shared Resources*. Oxford University Press; Kaszynska, P. (2024) 'Cultural value as meaning-making'. *Cultural Trends*, 1–15. Kaszynska, P. (2025) 'Enabling as the anchor for regenerative cultural policy', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 31(4), 422–433; Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, D. et al (2025) 'Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure'. The British Academy. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/5725/British_Academy_Measuring_social_and_cultural_infrastructure_Final_version.pdf; Star-Leigh, S. (1999) 'The ethnography of infrastructure', *American Behavioural Scientist*, Vol. 43 No. 3, November/December 1999, 377-391.

require ongoing repair and periodic upgrade to keep it in good order; the absence of resources to meet these two needs can lead to subsequent crises and the deterioration of provision.

Cultural infrastructure and strategic purpose

For the reasons implied by its definition above, cultural infrastructure provisioning is surely the responsibility of public authorities, however this position has been increasingly challenged in the last forty years. Positioning the constitutive role of culture in terms of infrastructure has a double strategic purpose in making the case for collective provision and public funding.

First, it loosely aligns cultural infrastructure with the concept of a public good as something which generates positive externalities. If infrastructure appears in this frame as long-term 'assets' and intergenerational investments, this also aligns cultural infrastructure with other infrastructures, such as water and gas, as *legitimate objects of public investment*, though the case may need to be remade, even in the case of these utilities.[28]

Second, following infrastructure theorists[29] this extends public goods arguments beyond narrow market failure and connects to broader ideas of the 'public good' and 'public value'[30] with roots in longer-held notions of *democratic politics and the good' polity* (for example, socialist, social-democratic, Confucian, communitarian, Aristotelian notions).

Third, seeing culture as infrastructure broadly orients policymakers towards facilitating *a system of collective provision* rather than funding individual institutions, programmes or events. Cultural infrastructure focuses the value of cultural provision as a whole, aimed at a democratic public and connected to other forms of infrastructure as a shared resource, generating social value. Thus, culture as infrastructure enables a more holistic approach to the value of culture. This is particularly important since attempts to identify social and cultural infrastructure have produced inventories of 'assets' which lend themselves to various forms of accounting and more 'shadow business models.[31]

There are several caveats. First, the 'enabling role' of cultural infrastructure can lead to the dominance of instrumentality we cautioned of earlier, and an enthusiasm for seeking metrics of culture's positive contribution to social cohesion and well-being, tourism, real estate development and inward investment, or the production of goods and services useful to other

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[28] Notably the current national infrastructure plan in the UK makes scant reference to cultural infrastructure, although it does propose it as a sub-set of social infrastructure alongside education and justice, defined as "cultural assets, such as museums, libraries and theatres that create long-lasting impacts on living standards by shaping our communities", HM Treasury (2025) *UK Infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy*, p.91

[29] E.g. Frischmann, B. (2012) *Infrastructure. The Social Value of Shared Resources*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Chachra, D (2023) *How Infrastructure Works. Transforming our shared systems for a changing world*. London: Transworld Publishers; Kaszynska, P. (2024) 'Why cultural infrastructure deserves public funding', *Royal Society of the Arts Comment*, 14th March. https://www.thersa.org/comment/2024/03/why-cultural-infrastructure-deserves-public-funding

[30] Mazzucato, M. (2024) 'Governing the economics of the common good: from correcting market failures to shaping collective goals', *Journal of Economic Policy Reform*, 27:1, 1-24.

[31] See for example the Culture and Heritage Capital framework, developed by the UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport as a methodology for broadening economic analysis of the contribution of creative, cultural and heritage sectors to non-market values such as welfare: DCMS (n.d.) Culture and Heritage Capital Portal. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/culture-and-heritage-capital-portal

economic sectors.[32] Cultural infrastructure should primarily be about enabling cultural flourishing and we should be wary of policy attachment mission creep.

Second, a focus on cultural infrastructure needs to be linked to the wider foundational argument about access for all to material and providential services like water or health care. Without the material resources necessary to full citizen participation, the 'public goods' of culture will become the private preserve of those wealthy enough to take advantage of them. This is to reiterate the importance of protecting public provisioning for equity and the 'good polity'.

The funding for public provision is increasingly problematic for debt burdened governments in high income countries facing ever higher welfare bills, with political resistance to higher taxes and progressive reform of taxation not on the agenda. Hence, the increasing tendency to seek private investment in foundational infrastructure, though with downside risks often still underwritten by the state (and the citizen). Development of social media platforms or of AI as a new technological backbone depends almost entirely on private investors. So too, the role of private finance in new build and operation of large-scale cultural venues like stadia and arenas or multiplex cinemas. In this it can be hard to distinguish between public and private interests, but this distinction is essential for any long-term strategic approach to cultural infrastructure.

The ownership and control of cultural infrastructure

It is for this reason that the question of who owns and controls cultural infrastructures is a matter of practical importance and considerable historical variability. Cultural infrastructure is clearly a source of public value. Yet much of this infrastructure can become a source of private profit, as we have already seen in the UK with infrastructures of material and providential services such as water or adult care.

As Kaszynska summarises, quoting Appel et al (2018):

> infrastructures are inherently political in that they hold answers to the fundamentally political questions: 'To whom will resources be distributed and from whom will they be withdrawn? What will be public goods and what will be private commodities, and for whom? Which communities will be provisioned with resources for social and physical reproduction, and which will not? Which communities will have to fight for the infrastructures necessary for physical and social reproduction?'. [33]).

Infrastructures are therefore necessarily implicated with certain 'distribution regimes';[34] they not only represent long-term accumulations of finance, technology, know-how, and organisational and geopolitical power but actively govern access and redistribution of resources[35] and – bringing

[32] "Enabling means contributing to the production of goods and services in other domains and informing the dynamics of the system without being a directly measurable outcome". Kaszynska, P. (2025) 'Enabling as the anchor for regenerative cultural policy', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 31(4), 422–433.
[33] Kaszynska, P (forthcoming) 'Culture as infrastructure: the functional, the political and the need for poetic'. Journal of Cultural Economy, citing Appel, Hannah, Nikhil Anand, and Akhil Gupta, eds. (2018). *The Promise of Infrastructure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p.2
[34] Edwards, Paul N.; Bowker, Geoffrey C.; Jackson, Steven J.; and Williams, Robin (2009) "Introduction: An Agenda for Infrastructure Studies," *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 10(5), p.371
[35] Graham, S., and Marvin, S. (2002) *Splintering Urbanism*. London: Routledge, p.8.

this back to the cultural orbit – thereby enabling what forms of sociality emerge and what symbolic orders are dominant.

The issues around ownership and control of cultural infrastructure cannot be separated from post-1980 privatisation, nor from a prior history about the development of ownership and control before 1980. The two main post-1980 developments in the UK came under Thatcher and New Labour. Thatcher privatised the physical infrastructure of monopoly utilities with a revenue stream that could deliver profits. Public assets were sold off and services like energy, water, telecoms, railways or airports gained private owners. New Labour promoted public private partnerships for facilities like schools and hospitals, where design, build and operate contracts could generate profits for capital. Urban regeneration programmes or digital technologies can then be seen in the same way as more opportunities for private profit facilitated by public policy.

If this is reprehensible, the alternative is unclear when a series of FE studies of utilities, such as that on water most recently,[36] have demonstrated that the indignation about private extraction is completely justified but the kneejerk response of public ownership and democratic control is inadequate. Public ownership may be necessary but is not sufficient when it does not solve the problem of funding capital investment in asset intensive utilities. Meanwhile, accountability and, more broadly, democracy is limited by rudimentary public understanding of problems and choices in utility provision as much as by an absence of meaningful participatory spaces. In a similar vein, though public investment should play a key part in cultural infrastructure, as we discuss below, public ownership cannot be recommended as a simple, general policy fix.

Before the current crisis: public and commercial cultures since 1945

If we are to understand the current crisis of the mid 2020s in UK cultural provisioning and the possibility of alternatives, it is helpful to consider a pre-history of the development of public and commercial cultures since 1945. From this time, a multi-level government system typically operated through some form of top-down control of public provision, which was increasingly leavened by commercial provision under private ownership. Indeed, there was as much restless movement as 'settlement' post-1945 with the outcome that by the 2010s at a local level provisioning was a messy symbiosis of public and private. As such, there never was a golden age but things were done differently in ways that are now breaking down.

In the immediate post-war period, a broad concept of culture as a public good (much broader than the classic concept of the public good in welfare economics) motivated state-provision of cultural infrastructure. Over the 1950s and 1960s this continued as top-down with no participation by citizens although it was administered at arm's length, via public bodies like the Arts Council. Policy decisions at all levels on culture (and everything else) were to be made in the public interest by small groups of informed and disinterested insiders.[37] This reflected the mental world of elite figures like Keynes in the 1940s[38] and worked because it was relatively generously funded by central and local authorities which could rely on a revenue surplus.

[36] Calafati, L. Froud, J, Haslam, C and Williams, K. (2025) *Murky Water*, Manchester University Press.
[37] Hirsh, F. (1976) *Social Limits to Growth*, Routledge & Kegan Paul
[38] Harrod, R. (1951) *The life of John Maynard Keynes*, Macmillan, pp.152-3.

The public settlement deliberately left untouched the kinds of popular culture celebrated by TS Eliot and Richard Hoggart, free to take its own roots and routes but also unprotected by Arts Council subsidy. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, an explosion of popular culture met with an equally explosive art world culture to produce new kinds of cultural dynamics and demands. This is the world identified by Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, driven by new commercial opportunities and cultural aspirations.

This made new demands on the public provision of culture, which expanded accordingly. Experiments such as the Greater London Council (GLC) 1979-86 were a response to these demands when in the late 1970s, culture as a broad public good was becoming part of a wider threat to the status quo. This is evidenced by the noisy, hostile reaction to the GLC's cultural policy, a first salvo in the forthcoming 'culture wars'. The brief return of a strong discourse in favour of popular culture (in less threatening form) under Blair gave that government a utopian aura even as public culture was subsequently brought under increasing direct (not arm's length control) through endless initiatives and competitions.

The explosion of popular culture that took off in the 1960s was overwhelmingly privately owned and rarely received direct public funding. However much of its infrastructure was public or civil society based: trade unions, community centres, religious and other civic centres. The 'business model' of this first wave of cultural industries was ramshackle, informal, permeable and mutable. The way it managed talent was entirely hands-off, feeding on a growing pool of creatives whose work in these new cultural markets was presented in aspirational form as autonomous good work, just as legitimate as work in the established field of 'high arts'.

The new focus in the 1990s on the regeneration of 'post-industrial cities' under the guise of 'the creative city' opened the way for a new symbiosis between state funded and commercial culture Regeneration primarily serviced finance through real estate, retail and hospitality activities but the a mix of deindustrialisation and regeneration provided cheap or subsidised spaces in in which creatives could make a living encouraged by free education and various welfare support schemes such as Enterprise Allowance in the UK. From the 1990s, UK local authorities were expected to use their revenue to satisfy the demands from, and conflicting priorities of, citizens, art and cultural workers, and more commercially focused businesses.

In this context much 'everyday' local culture grew increasingly reliant on various forms of public funding and regulation, whether directly or via large cultural and education institutions. This local everyday culture includes small venues, bookshops, theatres, indie galleries, record stores, along with small scale printing, publishing, rehearsal and recording, printmaking, 'dirty' art spaces for painting and pottery, local radio, indie film and video games. At local level, the different forms of public funding for 'everyday' culture formed a complex set of interlocking activities which could be understood as an undesigned yet broadly functional ecosystem. Undesigned, because there was no comprehensive plan informing these policies. Functional, because it practically sustained many cultural producers and engaged users.

5 Ecosystem collapse – the crisis of the mid-2020s

The idea of ecosystem and ecosystem collapse

This pre-history of the post 1945 period shows that public policy and commercial culture never came together to produce anything like a system in the engineering (or socio-technical) sense of an apparatus which was bounded, tightly coupled and with stable cause/effect relations. Looking back, more than fifty years of public facilitation of culture had worked through accretion and decay, challenge and blockage, intention and diversion all interacting with private and third sector.

In this context we would want to draw a distinction between public cultural infrastructure, and a wider, complex cultural ecosystem. The notion of cultural ecosystem is sometimes chosen to define configurations of culture that are somehow self-regulating and preferred for its presumed neutrality.[39] However, this is rarely if ever the case; rather, cultural ecosystems are intimately connected to the systemic factors of place, politics and provisioning that inform their day-to-day functioning.[40] They are beholden to these contexts, malleable and reliant on "the organic way relationships and events develop",[41]they cannot be depended upon to create their own resilience or remain unrivalled, especially in times of financial crisis.[42] In contrast, public infrastructure provides a basic scaffolding for foundational culture, one that is broadly shared and gives a minimum basis for social and cultural cohesion. At the same time, the capacity of policy to sustain diversity depends on a much broader ecosystem which symbiotically combines public, private, and third sector motives and efforts in an undesigned way. **We are currently witnessing a crisis of this ecosystem, in two senses: first, a declining financial viability for many of the actors in this ecosystem, and second, the increasing privatisation and fragmentation of this ecosystem as public infrastructural spending declines and large-scale private sector finance increases.**

What we have described in our post 1945 history is a UK-based ecosystem which sustained a multiplicity of life forms. These included for profit and not-for-profit corporates of many different kinds; individuals training and then making a living from their craft as producers in diverse niches; user engagement spread in all kinds of old and new ways. The post-war period may have never been a golden age but there was rich (maybe increasing) diversity in the cultural life forms that the ecosystem sustained.

Fast forward to the mid-2020s and what we see is ecosystem collapse. Ecosystems are never static and subject to stabilising and destabilising forces. In collapse, destabilisation wins out and the system loses its capacity to sustain diverse species. The collapse of the cultural ecosystem has three elements which we will consider in turn: first, the rise of the predatory platform corporations and financialisation; second, the loss of a governmental revenue surplus for funding

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[39] O'Connor, J (2024) *Culture is not an industry,* Manchester University Press.

[40] Gross, J. D., & Wilson, N. C. (2019). *Creating the Environment: The Cultural Eco-Systems of Creative People and Places. Creative People and Places*. http://www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk/our-learning/creatingenvironment

[41] Flourish (2025). Commissioning for creative ecosystems, https://www.flourishgateshead.com/work-1/commissioning-for-creative-ecosystems

[42] Barker, V. & Jordan, J (2022) *Finding the sweet spot: critiquing a cultural ecosystems approach to civic cultural strategy making*, Journal of Cultural Economy, Vol. 15, No. 3, 277–292

culture, especially at local authority level; third, the precarisation of heterogeneous groups (industry workforce, small scale business, independent creatives), all against the background of a general crisis of liveability that directly affects cultural producers and their (potential) audiences.

The rise of platform capitalism and financialisaton

The classic work of the French historian Braudel is a key influence on FE thinking in several ways.[43] One key Braudelian insight is that the driver of capitalism is not competition but the pursuit of monopoly because monopoly and oligopoly positions deliver profits while competition erodes margins. Achieving and sustaining substantial monopoly positions is usually technically and politically difficult but in our own time digital technologies and platforms are a special case exception.

After the internet boom and bust in the late 1990s, new digital technologies allowed exponential growth for a small number of players who could mobilise huge amounts of capital.to exploit the economies of scale and scope which made extra users profitable and created powerful network externalities. Meanwhile, competition policy in the UK and elsewhere focused on collusion, mergers and market share by three or more producers in old fashioned physical product markets, But policy did not restrain digital platform operators to build dominant positions in digital markets.

At the same time financialisation and shareholder value prioritisation increased the pressures on management to pursue profit. Shareholder value in the tech sector was, however, created not so much through immediately higher profit margins on as through high share prices obtained by firms in the glamorous and fast-growing By 2025,, the five largest companies in the world by market value are Nvidia, Apple, Alphabet (Google), Microsoft and Amazon; together these five companies account for roughly 25% of all US equity value.

Platform companies with infrastructural monopoly positions now dominate the digital space, control key intellectual property resources and have amassed huge amounts of data about users.[44] Their software has provided access to creative and distribution technologies on an unprecedented scale. But this overwhelmingly takes place within the tech enclosures of algorithmically managed markets. There is no doubt that platform capitalism has exacerbated social fragmentation, from "Bowling alone to Posting Alone", as Anton Jäger has it.[45] All these companies are deeply intertwined with 'small' culture, with far-reaching implications for 'big' culture too, repatterning the cognitive and social infrastructure through which we communicate and cooperate. [46]

Elsewhere, financialisation encourages mergers and acquisitions, as cultural industries in publishing, TV, radio, film, games, music etc. become ever more concentrated. The games company Electronic Arts was bought by a Saudi-backed consortium in "the biggest ever

[43] See Braudel, F. (2002) *The Structure of Everyday Life: Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century. Volume 1*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
[44] Durand, C. (2024) *How Silicon Valley Unleashed Techno-feudalism: The Making of the Digital Economy*, London: Verso.
[45] Jäger, A. 'From Bowling Alone to Posting Alone', *Jacobin*, 12 May 2000.

leveraged buy-out".[47] Warner Bros. Discovery will be taken over either by Netflix or Paramount backed by debt of around $55 billion.[48] Larry Ellison's Oracle, Silver Lake private equity and Abu Dhabi's MGX are set to be shareholders in in the US operations of TikTok, with stakes totalling an estimated $14 billion.[49] Concentrations of ownership are also happening in areas such as festivals, promotion, ticketing, performance venues and everyday digital tools which extend the power of large-scale capital down to local and communal events. The story is everywhere the same: the financial results are positive for those who own capital and negative for everybody else who gets squeezed by the corporates who are the top predators of the new ecosystem.

There has been an explosion of opportunities for highly individualised cultural consumption and expression, and a proliferation of global interconnectedness and awareness. This has come at the expense of what anthropologist Biao Xiang calls "the nearby",[50] the foundational local spaces of socialisation and interaction. But it has also come at the expense of a fragmentation of shared meanings which is now going beyond what we have called small culture. The emerging ecosystem is one in which spaces and assets are privatised, made 'rivalrous' and inaccessible to many, and experienced outside any shared, or common cultural frame. This collapse of the "epistemological infrastructure"[51] in now becoming part of a wider erosion of a shared 'big culture' where many of the basic life choices for individuals and communities are now to be made outside of any shared institutional infrastructures.

Can't pay – or won't pay - government

As we have noted, post-war governmental provision and facilitation of culture worked on the basis that central and local government had a fiscal surplus and used its discretion to apply that surplus to public goods including culture. The problem by the 2020s is that, in the UK and many countries, this surplus no longer exists. The Great Financial Crisis of 2008 was followed by the policy mistake of austerity. But beneath that there were two more profound problems. First tax yield was not rising with the stagnation of economic growth. Second reform of regressive central and local tax systems is not within the Overton window of the political elites.

There is no doubt over the last forty years the old idea of culture as a public good has been eroded. But the immediate problem is the current economic trajectory with the existing tax system and a multi-level government system. The UK has a no-growth economy where central government is indebted, short of revenue and will not consider radical tax reform, There is not enough money to support culture or anything else from mending potholes to sorting out the criminal justice system. Under present conditions, we have no fiscal surplus because, with stalled growth and an unreformed tax and utility charging system, the UK has a 'can't pay' government.

If we look at trends in English local authority spending by service area since 2010 (Figure 1), spending on 'cultural and related services' was halved in real terms between 2010 and 2023, as was spending on housing and highway services. These findings are consistent with a 2025 Public

[47] Financial Times, 29th September 2025 https://www.ft.com/content/be980240-13ec-498c-ba79-71eada30d133
[48] Dayen, D. 'Why is Warner Bros. for sale at all?' *The American Prospect,* 10 December 2025. https://prospect.org/2025/12/10/why-is-warner-bros-for-sale-at-all/
[49] *Financial Times*, 19th December 2025 TikTok says Chinese owner will retain core US business
[50] Biao Xiang (2021) "The Nearby: A Scope of Seeing". Journal of Contemporary Chinese *Art.* 8:2&3:147-165
[51] The Structural Lens (2025)'The dissolution of civic infrastructure'.https://harmoniousdiscourse.substack.com/p/the-dissolution-of-civic-infrastructure

Accounts Committee report that found local government finance in "a perilous state" with 58% of revenue spent on the statutory responsibilities of adult and children's services which have more or less maintained spending in real terms.[52]

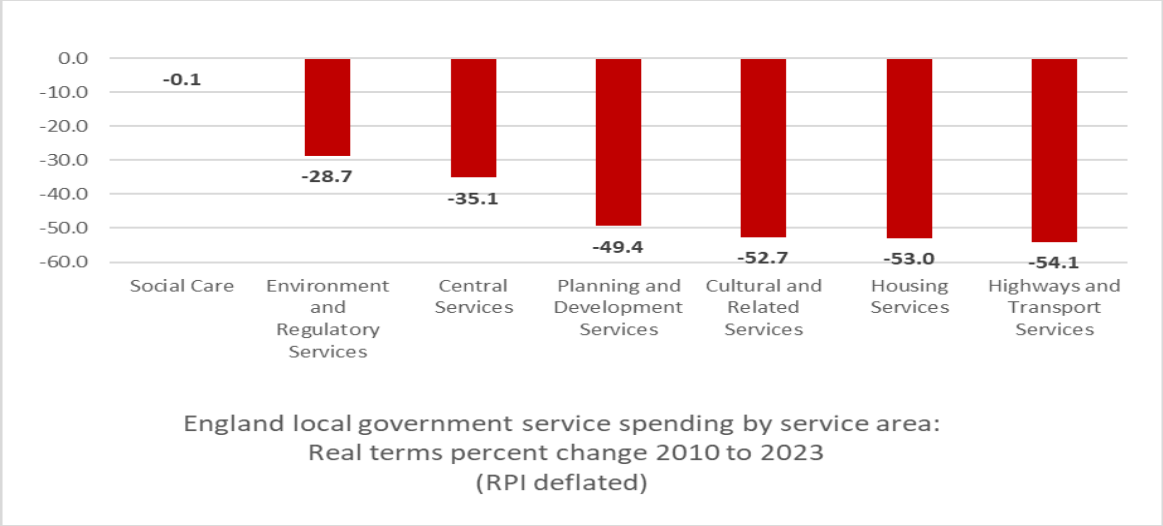

Figure 1. England local government service spending by service area, 2010-2023[53]

In UK central government, the overall position on Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) funding is complicated when the department has historically had a large capital spend on digital infrastructure.[54] But, if we turn to revenue expenditure, DCMS grants in aid to funded organisations[55] increased from £1.046 billion in 2010 to £1.276 billion in 2023 i.e. a near 20 percent cut in real terms (using the consumer price index as deflator). Like other departments, the DCMS now faces real terms expenditure cuts to the end of the present parliament in 2029. Health and defence spending are squeezing all other departmental budgets in central government with the Treasury hesitating about any form of new tax on property or other forms of wealth.[56]

The dearth of state funding is ironic. At the same time as art and culture are promoted in industrial policy (as creative industries), they are also represented as the key to placemaking and inclusion. Not only are these frequently contradictory, but both agendas suffer from repeated budget cuts.

Contradiction and parsimony are managed in an instrumentalist way, and the focus on place and inclusion has made it possible to access other pots of money for cultural projects. Michael

[52] House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2025) *Local Government Financial Sustainability,* HC 647. Public Accounts Committee, Local Government Financial Sustainability, 31st Report of the Session 2024-25
[53] Ogden, K. and Phillips, D. 'How have English councils' funding and spending changed? 2010 to 2024', Institute for Fiscal Studies, 7th June 2024. Institute for Fiscal Studies, How have English councils' funding and spending changed? 2010-2024
[54] See https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons/scrutiny/dcms-slides-2021-22.pdf. Note that the DCMS was responsible for digital infrastructure investment up until 2023 when the responsibility passed to a new Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.
[55] Campaign for the Arts, 'What did the 2025 Spending Review mean for the arts?', 12th June 2025. What did the 2025 Spending Review mean for the arts? | Campaign for the Arts
[56] For an overview of the European context see Elena Polivtseva (2026) *Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom and Democratic Resilience*. Performing Arts Coalition. https://www.ietm.org/system/files/publications/PAC_Report_06.pdf

Gove's 2022 'Levelling Up' policy promoted cultural projects as instruments for restoring a sense of pride, empowering local communities and an optimistic bash at high street recovery.[57] However the policy offered only short-term project funding, primarily for capital development in a time of rising costs and with no long-term revenue funds. The financial sustainability of these new cultural venues and spaces relies on the capacity of their operating organisations to compete for further funding from a mix of public and private sources in a complex landscape, where demand for various kinds of community-benefitting innovations far outruns the capacity of funding regimes.[58] At worst, such opportunities become liabilities as when assets are built without provision for operating funding.

These national competitive funding programmes were poorly planned and dependent on the remnants of local authority capacity. Yet they engendered new localised strategies for place-making and culture-led regeneration, such as Creative Enterprise Zones and Creative Improvement Districts, which aim to lever land values and property-led investment through art and cultural designations.[59] There is a certain irony in the hopes for such policies given the collapse of planning in the UK. The planning system which has existed for the past 30 years has been in hock to developers, as demonstrated by the difficulty of extracting section 106 contributions for infrastructure provision.[60] And large parts of the post-1995 Act planning system are now being dismantled by the Starmer Government, which believes that planning controls restrict growth.

Precarisation of heterogeneous groups

Platform and financialised capitalism and can't pay government together produce precarisation of cultural workers. It is important to draw the distinction between the foundational concept of precarisation and the concept of the precariat as classically developed by Guy Standing.[61] For Standing the precariat was a stratum in a seven-class concept of the social order between the traditional working class and the marginalised. It is a class in itself which could become a class for itself. Foundational precarisation is a process which applies to heterogeneous groups who do not have a shared relation to production or to the welfare system. It is caused by rising prices of on-market essentials like housing, energy and food as well as by welfare cuts.

In the cultural ecosystem we see precarisation at work in different ways:

(1) Platform capitalism has systematically eroded the position of what David Hesmondhalgh called "the complex professional", that is an employed professional working in relative autonomy within the networks of large-scale corporate culture.[62] The crisis of complex professionals in the creative sector is part of a broader crisis of professional middle

[57] HM Government (2022) *Levelling Up the United Kingdon. Executive Summary.* Levelling Up the United Kingdom: Executive Summary
[58] FERL and People's Economy (2025) *The Precarity of Community Benefiting Innovation.* Precarity report final March 2025.doBothy stracx
[59] Gilmore, A. & Burnill-Maier, C. (2025). Creative improvement, cultural infrastructure and urban zones: a tale of three cities and their cultural districts, *City, Culture and Society*, Volume 41., pp.1-10
[60] Arts Council England & The National Archives (2023) 'Guidance on seeking and securing developer contributions for museum and arts provision in England'. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/research-and-data/guidance-seeking-and-securing-developer-contributions-museum-and-arts-provision-england
[61] Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat,* Bloomsbury.
[62] Hesmondhalgh, D. (2018) *The Cultural Industries*, Sage.

classes. Full-time jobs are outsourced and those that are full-time employed have their autonomy squeezed. Also, for those working in the interstices – once eulogised as 'creative entrepreneurs' and 'project workers' – making their practices pay is becoming difficult.

(2) Small independent cultural businesses that once could recover their costs go out of business. At this point we should remember the importance of material embodiments, typically the buildings and venues which have symbolic and practical importance in a place. Examples include smaller venues, independent bookshops and record stores, galleries, community theatres, the local pub. All these spaces struggle to recover the cost of business rates, energy bills and general cost increases (including rents), which they cannot pass on to customers, while a commercial property developer can often offer good money for their site, especially where it can be reused as residential flats. This contributes to the decline in public and private spaces of "socialisation, identity and creative expression", as identified recently by the Bennett Institute.[63]

(3) Finally, what might be called the artisan practices of independent cultural production are increasingly threatened. The artisan has to make a living so that her labour input and overhead costs have to be covered by selling tickets, services or product. Of course, we have volunteer labour and the everyday creativity of hobbyists whose cultural production or engagement in evenings and weekends are relief from the day job. But the indie band in the rehearsal room or the artist in her studio would also like to dispense with the day job or at least work fewer hours.

6. Foundational interventions (and questions)

This section is headed 'foundational interventions' not 'foundational policy', because policy generally implies a locus of control and often comes with the promise that the problem is defined and amenable to treatment which will deliver desired results. But these assumptions are doubtful, not only because 'culture policy' is a multifaceted object with fuzzy boundaries and lacking governmental clout, but also because there are no longer any agreed paradigms within which solutions might easily fit. Its potential classical liberal, social democratic and neoliberal framings are all contested.

At the same time, finding the financial and other resources required for interventions is likely to be a difficult task. Taxpayer funds for culture must compete with other pressing demands related to the post 2022 crisis of provisioning which is undermining liveability[64]. The crisis is about the rising prices of the four foundational, on-market essentials (housing, utilities, food and transport) squeezing residual income; at the same time as access to foundational services (like health and care) is increasingly difficult. The crisis is crowding out other concerns so that the economy and the NHS are two of the three top issues of general public concern in the UK. Just as more

[63] Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, D. et al (2025) 'Measuring Social and Cultural Infrastructure'. The British Academy. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/5725/British_Academy_Measuring_social_and_cultural_infrastructure_Final_version.pdf

[64] Calafati, L, et al. (2025) Notes on Foundational Economy as Grey Skies Thinking, available from https://foundationaleconomyresearch.com/index.php/grey-skies-thinking/

households making heating vs eating choices and using food banks, is unlikely to be good for cultural engagement.

In the UK and other high-income countries, we have created complicated systems of multi-level governance and government which reduce agency and increase ineffectuality. So that it is now much more difficult to get things done in the early 21st century than in the 20th century with municipal enterprise or centrally administered welfare. In multi-level systems, the political classes at the top often pull levers connected to nothing operational (e.g. in the NHS) While imaginative reform at the lower levels easily gets extinguished by administrative inertia and default back to routine (e.g. in adult social care). A self-referential metropolitan political class floats above fragmented social interests, in what Peter Mair called "the void".[65]

The result is government as activity without discernible forward movement to foundational objectives. The policy scape for culture – as with many other activities sectors – is littered with announcements and initiatives, a proliferation of salaried intermediaries, consultants and advisers plus reviews which make recommendations and strategizing reports which set objectives that are generally not delivered. In the background, the UK Treasury sets hard financial constraints. When its unattainable objective of economic growth is not achieved, the Treasury parsimoniously rations funding for central departments (including the DCMS) and refuses to consider tax reform which would endow local authorities with financial resource. The implication is that the DCMS and your town hall have a Potemkin village quality.

If this context is depressing, foundational economy is not despairing Because it has argued that there is scope for political and social actors at all levels to make top down and bottom up moves for all kinds of foundational improvement inside and outside the mainstream Overton window of what is thinkable and doable. The 2023 book *When Nothing Works* recommended starter, stealth and switch Westminster policies for an incoming centrist government which accepted all kinds of real and imagined constraints. The 2025 book *Murky Water* asked for a radical social movement which would push a centrist government into reform of water underpinned by progressive charging. At the same time, we recognise the Overton window in the UK is moving rightwards under pressure from reactionary insurgents in Reform partly because progressives are failing to relate strategy and tactics to concrete analysis of specifics.

The foundational approach is value driven but unromantic because it rests on an analysis of the specifics. From this point of view on UK cultural policy, we can separately consider (a) the challenges to action at supra national and national level and (b) the opportunities for improvement at local and regional level.

The challenges at supra national and national level

It is now widely accepted that the liberal global order, emerging between 1980 and the collapse of the Communist Bloc in 1990, is coming to an end. But it is not at all clear what will replace it, leaving us in an 'interregnum' of great volatility and uncertainty. From the mid-1980s, cultural

policy agencies and member states advocated for culture's contribution to sustainable development in a globalising world, built on equitable access to international markets and

[65] Mair, P. (2023) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, Verso.

universal human rights, overseen by strong 'rules-based' global governance.[66] The struggle to articulate culture's value in the liberal global order saw a growing alignment with an econometric and technocratic framing of (sustainable) development, formalised in the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs)[67]. A campaign to add culture as a stand-alone SDG was re-affirmed at UNESCO's Mondiacult conference in September 2025. These efforts themselves built on a body of international cultural conventions and international law, under the auspices of the United Nations, including those aimed at minority and indigenous rights, tangible and intangible heritage, and the cultural industries (cf. 2005 UNESCO convention referred to above).

The Trump administration has resiled from the SDG process and the Paris Agreements, divested from USAID, UNESCO and other agencies, and radically undermined the UN and other forms of global governance. Its industrial and trade policies assert US national interest as primary. Other countries and regions are following suit. Global trade will continue but now 'fractured' around friend/enemy lines[68], uncoupled from any discourse of human rights or global development. The tendencies of monopoly capitalism towards imperialism and war, noted by Marxists such as Luxembourg and Lenin, as well as economists such as Schumpeter, now seem to have the upper hand.[69] This leaves global cultural policy in disarray.

The problem is made much more serious as the monopoly power of platform capitalism, with its all-pervasive influence on "small" and "large" culture, is rolling out at breakneck speed. Platform capitalism is supra national because these American corporates are everywhere (except China). The leading streamer Netflix, for example, had 300 million paid subscribers worldwide in Q4 2024, an increase of some 40 million on Q4 2023; with the prospect of substantial further growth from lower cost with advertisement subscriptions[70]. The platforms are disruptive for established corporate players like terrestrial broadcasters and more broadly community threatening as part of a process of radical individuation, manifested in the privatisation of the public sphere, This has (in Jodi Dean's words) "fragmented the symbolic order"[71] so there is no "master signifier", no overall sense of shared meaning only the fragmentation of experience and subjectivity.[72] In this context, cultural policy cannot abandon the issue of platformisation, for its own coherence as a collective project hangs on its outcome.

But the problem of the platforms is intractable for two reasons:

(1) Platform success in attracting and retaining subscribers and users depends on network externalities i.e. a dominant platform is attractive because it has so many users and so much content and facilities funded out of the "winner takes all" profits of dominance. Hence minor share and start up platforms generally struggle to recruit users.

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[66] O'Connor, J. (2025) "Rethinking the foundations: Global cultural policy at the crossroads" *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, online first https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494251337934; Moyn, S. (2018) *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*

[67] Tooze, A. (2025) 'The End of Development', *Foreign Policy,* 18th September; O'Connor, J. (2025) 'Global Cultural Policy at a Crossroads: Reflections on the summit of the future', *The Culture Policy Room.*

[68] Wolf, M. (2025) 'The Fracturing of the World Economy', *Financial Times*, 25th November

[69] Milanovic, B. (2025) *The Great Global Transformation.*

[70] Statista Research Department (2025 "Number of Netflix paid subscribers wprld wide "November 19th 2025 https://www.statista.com/statistics/250934/quarterly-number-of-netflix-streaming-subscribers-worldwide/

[71] Dean, J. (2025) *Capital's Grave: Neofeudalism and the New Class Struggle,* Verso.

[72] Hochuli, A. (2025) 'Techno-feudalism versus Total Capitalism', *American Affairs* August 20th 2025.

Spontaneous subscriber boycotts are an effective weapon but only against offensive platforms in a polarising world as in the case of Twitter/X where UK use has declined by some 30% since 2023[73].

(2) The platforms are aggressively supported and sponsored by the American Federal Government which by the end of 2025 was threatening sanctions against major European companies like DHL and Siemens in response to the EU fining X and opening investigations of Google and Meta[74]. It has targeted key legislators, such as European Commissioner Thierry Breton.[75] A coherent and effective response to this bullying is extremely difficult for the EU with 27-member states. It is completely out of the question for the UK government which stands alone and is, in key sectors like defence, completely dependent on the Americans

Control of the platforms depends on a change of government in the USA and/ or a transformative paradigm shift in technology. As for paradigm change, the nature and timing of the disruption caused by AI is the great imponderable. At this stage all we can predict is machine incursion into many routine creative activities and large-scale entry level graduate employment which is likely to produce secondary socio-political perturbations.

If we cannot expect the UK's Westminster government to stand up to American bullying, what more can we obtain for culture when Westminster government acts in its own national domain where it has the prerogative to set and shift policy parameters. In the terms of our previous analysis, the UK central government (and local authorities) can't pay government which lacks a fiscal surplus for revenue and capital support of culture. Is it possible to find the financial resource which at worst would turn the UK's 'can't pay' government into a 'won't pay for culture' government, and at best would turn it into a 'will pay' government which generously funds culture?

Mobilising the financial resource depends on a governmentality shift in what is thinkable and doable. At present the UK centre and right political class is fixated on the supposed problem that government spending is at the post 1945 high of nearly 45 % of GDP[76]; and increasingly their politically preferred solution is to reduce this percentage by explicitly cutting expenditure on welfare claimants (and implicitly rationing spend on everything else). The foundational alternative problem definition is that UK government has a revenue constraint which prevents good things being done across many policy domains, from the NHS to culture. The foundational solution is to shift this revenue constraint by reforming personal taxes and utility charges so that both are levied on a progressive basis on income; with the relevant consideration being household (not individual) income because, with high levels of female workforce participation, two earner households are the norm.

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[73] Kelly, J. (2025) "With Bluesky, the social media echo chamber is back in vogue", *Financial Times,* September 22nd 2024. https://www.ft.com/content/65961fec-a5ab-4c71-b1c8-265be3583a93

[74] Williams, A. and Bounds, A. (2025) " Washington threatens European groups over EU's treatment of tech giants "m Financial Times, December 16th 2025. https://www.ft.com/content/65961fec-a5ab-4c71-b1c8-265be3583a93

[75] https://www.dw.com/en/us-bans-ex-eu-commissioner-others-over-social-media-rules/a-75291190

[76] H M Treasury (2025) Public Spending Statistics: July 2025, Chart 4.3. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/public-spending-statistics-release-july-2025/public-spending-statistics-july-2025#economic-analysis-of-budgets

The Westminster political classes will only shift under pressure from some kind of broad-based social movement that problematises the framework of governmental priorities and funding which demotes everything foundational including culture (rather than a civil movement which seeks improvements within the framework of what is thinkable and doable for the political classes). The question is whether and how this might be done around an object like culture.

In our recent work on water, we have argued that a social movement may be possible if we build on the civil society movement about river and coastal water quality,[77] which is motivated by public disgust about sewage in waterways. Disgust represents and reproduces a very limited analysis of the water sector's problems, but it is a powerful recruiter and driver for NGOs like Surfers against Sewage or River Action. This driver is conspicuously absent in two other sectors – railways and electricity distribution- which have very similar problems of capital intensity and revenue constraint but have not incubated civil society movements. Water may be a special case.

So, here are two big questions about culture.

- First, is a broadly based radical social movement possible on culture? Professionalisation of art and culture encourages not biting the hand that feeds. So, can local (and national) political alliances be made to sustain an oppositional cultural movement; and what changes in the habitus of the cultural professional – long aspiring to the 'creative class – might that entail?

- Second, and relatedly what would the focus/issues of that movement be? We can see that a social movement needs to change the particularly weak status of arts and culture in the minds of the UK political classes. But how much traction does the language of citizenship, rights and public duty have in establishing a wide-based support for the intrinsic value of culture? What then are the issues that would animate such a movement with the grand objective of revaluing culture? How far might the expressive and re-imaginative power of culture be mobilised both to save itself and to show that another world is possible?

The opportunities for improvement at local and regional level

If answering the big questions is too much for some of our readers, they could start by focusing locally on specific places, because place is an anchor of collective identity. Even in the most deprived areas more than one half of respondents to the DCMS annual community survey feel very strongly or fairly strongly they belong to their neighbourhood.[78] At the local level - the 'nearby'- the consequences of failing ecosystems, absence of and erosion of social and other infrastructure and ongoing liveability crisis are concrete and there are opportunities for improvement.

But where and how do we set the boundaries of place when many live in large urban areas and different scales may be relevant for different kinds of cultural engagement? 18 million of the English population live in the six largest conurbations, where across relatively small urban areas

[77] Calafati, L. *et al.* (2025) *Murky Water*, Manchester University Press.
[78] DCMS (2025) *Community Life Survey: January to March 2025* quarterly publication. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-january-to-march-2025-quarterly-publication

at ward level there is a 2:1 difference in mean household income and other realities. There are stark inter and intra-regional inequalities in the distribution of public funding for culture. Here we might further distinguish between local communities and 'the public'. The latter is predicated on the impossibility of face-to-face contact, both require distinct but equally important attention. In the case of culture, we then have complications about deciding on provision (what) and delivering facilities and activities (where, how etc). There has been an increased attention to the geography of cultural infrastructure investment from arms-length cultural funders in the UK, which includes metrics and criteria for targeting of funds, based on need and opportunity, using national statistical data such as the Participation Survey, Community Needs Index and Indices of Multiple Deprivation. These do not benchmark cultural infrastructure requirements specifically, however, and are constrained by data availability and methodological nationalism. Primarily a corrective to the recognition of spatial inequalities in per capita arts funding, and its significant bias towards Greater London area, they lack an understanding of places as systems and of the contingencies of cultural participation.[79]

First, the diversity of citizens in terms of income, cultural interests and much else greatly complicates the issue of deciding on local provision. In terms of facilities like theatres, community centres or libraries, what provision should be made for whom? Ideals like the 15-minute city abstract from the radically different time, space and money constraints around different households with various cultural practices and living in very different kinds of places.

The two-income managerial household with two cars and ability to pay public transport fares and subscriptions has very different access options from the household where members may combine several jobs to generate half the income in a public transport desert. Nearby provision for the latter does not solve the problem of time constraints on participation in the bottom third of the income distribution where households cannot afford to outsource social reproduction tasks, work unsocial hours and have less time for cultural engagement. At the frontier, FE research is increasingly concerned with the time, space and money constraints around the practices of households in urban, peri urban and rural settlements.[80] Without such understanding, minimum standards or benchmarking exercises are problematic, even before we reach the question of how to convert diverse interests and priorities into something that looks like meaningful rights.

Second, a declaration of rights without effective delivery mechanisms and funding is potentially damaging rhetoric which risks making things worse. In this situation it would be better to focus not on entitlement and absolute standards but on improvement in some of the conditions which in the current crisis are undermining local cultural production and consumption. These should include:

- Recognition and promotion of open, publicly organised cultural engagement that enables people to participate in arts and culture, via spaces which are about actively doing and going to see, watch, move or listen. This means a focus on accessible cultural

[79] Gilmore, A. *Cultural Infrastructure and Place-Based Investment*, UKRI Policy Fellowship Report prepared for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (forthcoming).
[80] Bassens, D. *et al.* (2025) 'Geography, the foundational economy and the fallen below', *Dialogues in Human Geography,* online first. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/20438206251388515

infrastructure - libraries, art, dance, music classes, theatre, choirs etc. - which includes variants that are community driven and facilitated and delivered by professionals.

- Support of independent professional cultural production via income or no-cost/or low-cost workspace. This means not just basic income, grants, fellowships, project money and workspace for individual artists. It also means easing the cost pressures of rent, rates and such like on SME cultural producers.

- Support for spaces of independent cultural consumption, including small venues, shops, galleries, museums and their integration into planning processes and obligations, and developer contributions through Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy, for revenue and capital costs and protection from property developers. Research suggests that community ownership is preferrable, with accompanying guidance and funds, and de-risking community ownership provides autonomy and removes liabilities from local government asset lists.[81]

Foundational improvement means reversing the trend to deterioration in these local conditions and the performative outcome would be more things happening as locally accessible culture. Redressing the lack of 'things to do', of animation, of interesting shops, or activated streets, or events, markets, carnivals, of places to do art or craft (professionally and amateur) or community groups doing theatre or choirs – the lack of locally accessible culture. But more positively, the promotion of 'nearby' culture is a direct antidote to the individualised consumption of culture at home. 'Something happening' is itself an intervention into community. And this intervention should also include a recognition of the 'craft' of artists and cultural workers, a craft which needs to be learned and passed on via the educational arm of the cultural infrastructure.[82]

If this kind of improvement is so thoroughly worthwhile, who are the actors? what are the mobilising issues which can sustain alliances of actors? and how can the resources for culture be found? It is likely that these will come out of the highly fluid, complex local contexts, requiring a degree of improvisation and cross-cutting collaboration that will not be unfamiliar to those involved in culture at local levels.

In the UK, since the financial crises and austerity years, and accelerating since the pandemic, we have new organisations and partnerships that are embedded in convening and coordinating at a local level. These include co-operatives, community land trusts, local authority partnerships, and a range of other organisational forms which are emerging in response to precarity, property development and predatory corporations. These could and should include "anchors" like health trusts and housing associations as they come to realise that the preconditions of foundational liveability are indivisible in the current general crisis of provisioning. Anchors often do not define their roles narrowly, so the health trust can be responsible for more than acute health care and the housing association can be responsible for more than renting social housing.

[81] Gilmore (forthcoming).

[82] This now tends to be learned in universities, but this was not always so in the past. Not only were art colleges a separate system but various trades union, charitable and religious organisations part of that educational cultural infrastructure.

Mobilising issues are important because local politics is multi agency, multi-level and always messily about many things as well as (or instead of) culture, with local allies often starting from different places. This requires an understanding of foundational pinch points and opportunities in a locality that relate mobilizing issues which can bring actors together around shared objectives. These may have cultural provision as a focal point, or they may have a breadth that relates to cultural infrastructure less directly. They depend on local advocacy and sponsorship. For example, in the north Wales slate valleys, a *mobilising against* issue is zero hours jobs in major corporate employers primarily because that threatens the Welsh speaking community; a *mobilising for* issue is 'fair tourism' which specifically includes artist and maker workspace. This is because in two of the valleys, the community economic leaders are a Welsh language poet and a rock musician.

The issue of funding and financial resource is then crucial. What to do when statutory care absorbs local authority revenue and central government won't bail out local authorities; when philanthropy is underdeveloped and corporate sponsorship is a fickle performative gesture, and when economic models and institutions (like community economics or community wealth building or coops and land trusts) are not quickly scalable and in any case only partly address the gaps in cultural infrastructure? If the public fiscal surplus for funding culture does not exist, the question is about how funds from other budgets can be appropriated. The good news is that culture only needs to capture a relatively small proportions of existing large welfare and economic development budgets, as the growing connection between culture and health outcomes shows.

The related big question is whether and how can we tap regional economic development and industrial policy budgets? Hundreds of millions are spent on City Deals, where the narrow regional development objectives are GVA and jobs. Industrial policy largely consists of multi-million grant funding for corporates to do what they would in any case do. Can the definitions of development and industry be broadened to free up monies for cultural provision and engagement (without instrumentalising culture and getting sucked into ends beyond culture)?

There are encouraging signs within English devolution, where culture is finding a place at the table for new investment strategies that can incorporate local need with decentralised national funds and integrated settlements. Similarly, within planning authorities there are windows for better take-up of planning gain and obligation, such as the need for Local Plans to take cultural wellbeing into account and the push for new housing within England.[83] If, more broadly, we had a tithing of regional development budgets for broad cultural objectives it would be transformational.[84]

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[83] UK Government (2022) *National Planning Policy Framework - 8. Promoting healthy and safe communities - Guidance* - GOV.UK, Clause 98 – this sets out the need to consider social and cultural wellbeing. There are however other proposed changes to planning policy within this framework, including the removal of statutory consultation with sports and theatre bodies, which suggest strong local advocacy and expertise are needed in place.

[84] An example of this is the Mayoral Precept for Mayoral Strategic Authorities: in Liverpool City-Region a precept of 2% is dedicated to culture. There is also scope for claiming resource from corporates: In Gwynedd, 20 councillors supported a proposal for a community-controlled endowment fund financed by a levy of 5 percent of turnover or 1 percent of profits on all corporate firms applying for public funds.

There is a series of unanswered questions about the potential of this kind of community led development. Who can provide ongoing leadership and depth in specific places? And how, over a decade or more, do we build organisational continuity and capability in managing money, people and networks? How do you put together an alliance which has resource and life beyond the typical one-to-three-year grant? How can this intersect with complex multi-level place governance arrangements, e.g. the devolving 'strategic authorities' of England and the proliferating number of localised development vehicles? What kinds of knowledge, capacity and skills are required, who is best placed to deliver these, and what kind of organising vision might animate such local alliances?

Culture Wars?

This radical process of re-imagining of the foundational role of culture, will involve a myriad of place-specific interventions, at a range of different levels. This will be a pragmatic, improvisatory process, but also a re-assertion of the value of culture outside the ever-increasing metrification and financialization of cultural policy advocacy. The "void" we noted above, falls between those involved in cultural practice on the ground, and the panoply of government funded agencies of advocacy, research and policy formulation that have been captured by the 'growth' agenda.[85]

In developing a new kind of policy language of foundational community, acknowledging the specific claims of culture for local transformation will be crucial, for much of the current political crisis is taking place in the realm of 'culture', and where our heuristic of "small" and "large" culture is beginning to go fuzzy. Flags, festooning the streets of the UK and many parts of Europe, have become heightened symbols of identity, of belonging and exclusion – even demonisation. What was once 'progressive' has now become, for many, a mark of decline and decay, a threat to our 'whole way of life'. In these circumstances, setting aside culture as a "nice to have, but not now", is a serious mistake. The EU at least is taking seriously culture's role in the current crisis of democracy.[86] In the 1930s Ernst Bloch noted the failure of the left parties to adequately deal with the emotional and aesthetic appeal of fascism, especially at a time of social fragmentation and economic stagnation: "Man does not live by bread alone, especially when he does not have any." Or as Alan Finlayson suggested recently that the new Right is,

> a broad ideological movement that uses the tools of digital capitalism – subscription models, social media engagement, parasocial relationships – to wage a cultural war against the idea and the practice of equality. It tells alienated people, young men, but also older people, women, people of all sorts of backgrounds who feel that they are struggling to get by or get on: "You feel worthless because 'they' want you to feel that way. But you're not. You're right. You're strong. You're better." That's deeply comforting…. Meanwhile, Labour is talking about 'missions', 'GDP' and 'growth strategies' while people feel worse and worse off.[87]

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[85] See for example Amy Tarr and Michelle Calame (2025) *Culture as Growth Infrastructure: Embedding Cultural Value in the UK's Economic Strategy*. UK Creative https://report.wearecreative.uk/culture-as-growth

[86] Elena Polivtseva (2026) *Between Rhetoric and Reality: Cultural Rights, Artistic Freedom and Democratic Resilience*. Performing Arts Coalition. https://www.ietm.org/system/files/publications/PAC_Report_06.pdf

[87] Alan Finlayson, interview Jack Jeffrey (2026) "The left (still) doesn't understand the internet", *Renewal: A Journal of Social Democracy* Volume 33, Issue 2

What we have called 'small' culture is not some peripheral luxury but is an essential part of the social infrastructure, and the grammar of local citizenship. It is not 'public information', nor some managerialist "social cohesion", but a space of freedom.[88] Art and culture's freedom is not primarily about free speech or opinion, rather its value lies resides in its indirect, or 'thick' language, that might be called 'poetic', what Anna Kornbluh describes as "representation in excess of messaging, creativity in excess of use, giving sensuous form to the unexpressed".[89] An Oasis song is poetic, a local authority mission statement is not.

This is the value culture brings to community, the specific democratic space that it creates. In the work of Jacques Rancière, *poises* marks the act of bringing something into being in the world by creating a way of doing and making, and *aisthesis*, how it is those things produce modes of felt experience: cultural infrastructure is poetic.[90] What Raymond Williams called our 'structure of feeling' is now one of fragmentation and statis, the future occluded, the present a grind. Art and culture can't solve this, but they can speak to it. And so bring those modes of felt experience into the light of day, not bury them under inchoate rage and despair.

[88] As (ex) director of Adelaide Writers Week suggested in her resignation letter "community cohesion, an oft-referenced anxiety which should be treated with scepticism. This is a managerialist term intended to stop thinking. Who, after all, would argue in favour of social division? Presumably only a terrorist or a nihilist. The raison d'être of art and literature is to disrupt the status quo: and one doesn't have to be a student of history to know that art in the service of "social cohesion" is propaganda". *The Guardian*, 13th January 2026 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/jan/13/i-cannot-be-party-to-silencing-writers-which-is-why-i-am-resigning-as-director-of-adelaide-writers-week-ntwnfb

[89] Kornbluh, A. (2023) *Immediacy, or the Style of Too Late Capitalism,* Verso.

[90] Larkin, B.. (2018). Promising Forms: The Political Aesthetics of Infrastructure. In N. Anand, A. Gupta, & H. Appel (Eds.), *The Promise of Infrastructure* (pp. 175–202). Duke University Press; Kaszynska (forthcoming), Culture as infrastructure: the functional, the political and the need for poetic, *Journal of Cultural Economy*

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