

Rethinking the foundations: Global cultural policy at the crossroads

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Abstract

This article extends the culture-as-foundational approach to the global level of cultural policy. Reviewing the failure of the 2015 campaign to establish culture as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the article argues that reframing culture away from being an economic sector and towards a cross-cutting all of society thematic is likely to compound the problems facing culture at global level. The article argues for a narrower framing of culture as the symbolic system of ‘art and culture’, taking as its exemplars the 1982 UNESCO MONDIACULT Conference, the 1995 UNESCO Our Creative Diversity and the 2005 Convention on Diversity of Cultural Expressions. It tried to show how a foundational approach to culture, including the notion of (global) public goods, can open up a route to a new, more radical approach to global cultural policy fit for these more uncertain times. This article is part of the special issue *Culture as Foundational*.

Keywords

Cultural and creative industries, culture and development, foundational economy, global cultural policy, Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

In September 2024, the United Nations’ (UN) Secretary General organised a ‘Summit of the Future’, following 2021’s *Our Common Agenda*. It sought to address failures of the UN itself, where it was felt the power of the many was being usurped by that of the few, and inaction would lead to a ‘dark future’ (United Nations (UN), 2024a, 2024b). The

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world was at a tipping point, the pact's opening noted, threatening a world of 'persistent breakdown and crisis'.¹ We are at a decisive moment, but the choice is not so clear, as to where we stand or where we should go to next. People talk of a 'polycrisis' (Tooze, 2022), a moment of intersecting contingent and structural problems which defy any straightforward solution. We are faced with a conjuncture in which established political lines, along with their underpinning assumptions, are fragmenting and their fixed certainties unravelling. This is certainly the case for the neoliberal global order that began in the early 1980s and took off after the collapse of the USSR and its satellites. For some, it is not just the world of the post-1989 'Washington Consensus' that is unravelling but the whole post-1945 settlement. For others still, the death-rattle emanates from the global political order of (Euro-American) modernity that crystallised in the mid-to-late 19th century and is now dissolving (Anderson, 2024; Clarke, 2023).

However we parse this, we are in an epochal moment, and in facing this poly-cross-roads, cultural policy experts cannot just rely on administrative reason, on legal-bureaucratic treaties and precedents alone. Which is not to say these instruments are of no use but rather that more thinking is required around the societal project out of which these cultural policies have emerged. And we need to do so registering the very real, existential possibility that culture may continue its progressive marginalisation within national and global public policy, heading towards a not-so-distant vanishing point.

In the past few years, and accelerating after the pandemic, the call for culture to become a stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) has become a rallying point for a global cultural policy 'epistemic community'. The SDGs direct global investment and organise metrics for the development agenda and represent a key policy instrument around which cultural planning, advocacy and budgetary claims can be organised. They involve a lot of mechanical 'box-ticking', but if the SDGs fail to include culture, then culture is excluded from the decision-making table. The failure of the cultural sector, led by UNESCO, to obtain a distinct goal for culture in the 2015 negotiation process was a significant one, as I discuss below. The stakes are high for those involved in the campaign for a cultural goal to be included in the new framework to be agreed in 2030. Inclusion in the 2030 re-iteration of the SDGs is crucial if culture is to retain any traction in global development policy.

Yet though the Culture Goal objective is clear, it is not clear what such culture goal might do if it was adopted, or indeed if there is any agreement as to what we mean when we say 'culture'. I suggest that this is not primarily a question of administrative or advocacy language but a deeper question of the contemporary narrative around culture as public policy. Without a radically different narrative around culture's role in development – in public policy writ large – a 'cultural goal' campaign is unlikely to be effective. In what follows, I attempt to give historical context to the contemporary challenges facing global cultural policy and suggest ways in which we might move forwards.²

Culture as sector?

Missing out on a named SDG in 2015 speaks to a serious failure of global cultural policy. The Culture 2030 Goal campaign, a broad, loose coalition of cultural policy advocates,

suggests a number of reasons for the failure, some of them tactical and contingent, such as the failure to build a coherent coalition or identify a state ‘champion’ (cf. also Throsby, 2017; Vlassis, 2015; Wiktor-Mach, 2020). More substantive was UNESCO’s decision to lead with ‘cultural industries’, directly at odds with the SDG’s ‘non-sectorial’ nature, an approach which ‘even expanded to include non-market cultural institutions, is unlikely to gain traction in the future.’³

There are two issues here. One is the emphasis on ‘cultural industries’ or ‘creative economy’. The other is what we understand by sectorial/non-sectorial. I suggest the main objection to the ‘creative economy’ led approach is not that it is ‘sectorial’ but that it explicitly reduces culture to an *industrial* or *economic* sector. This is a basic category error. Absorbing culture *in toto* into ‘creative economy’ reduces culture to an economic driver, however empowering or benign this is taken to be. It ignores culture’s core function as a constitutive fact of social existence, in favour of a purported economic-industrial value. Culture is not an industry, it is a specific sphere of public policy concern, relating to a set of what Charles Taylor (1995) called ‘irreducible social needs’ or what this special issue calls culture-as-foundational.

But rejecting ‘creative economy’ does not mean that we should return to a broad anthropological view of culture, present across all SDGs as it is across all aspects of human society. Why rule out culture as a ‘sector’? We speak of ‘sectors’ when we speak of health, or material infrastructure (water, food), or education, or urban planning, all of which have distinct SDGs. These are not discreet economic sectors but rather key spheres of public policy serving the basic requirements for any recognisably human development. Yet they all imply the institutions, skills, bodies of knowledge, public resources, the functioning infrastructures and mixed economies we call health, or education, or social services, or infrastructure, or planning that are required to deliver on these promised goals.

A move away from ‘creative economy’ then does not have to mean a retreat from a cultural sector nor an embrace of a wide, anthropological view of culture. Culture as an object of public policy is not everything, and nor does it organise itself, spontaneously – certainly not in the sense I will define it, as a complex ecosystem of ‘art and culture’. What I want to argue is that while we want to avoid hard ‘silos’ and to actively seek cross-cutting connections, cultural policy needs to be ‘at the table’ as a distinct, if broadly defined sector, serving a distinct public purpose, with the same sense of identity, legitimacy and capacity as other sectors. These do seek cross-cutting linkages, but they have a firm presence in and for themselves. Before culture can be a ‘transversal vector’, it needs to be a coherent sector, one with adequate capacity to deliver on any new cultural SDG. This is not some self-serving corporatism (though of course it can become this) but a recognition that the *cultural sector* itself delivers something essential, without which any society cannot be considered as fulfilling essential human needs.

Culture as anthropology

The 1982 MONDIACULT definition is still used by UNESCO as its default definition of culture:

Culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs (UNESCO, 1982).

In these anthropological terms, human society would be impossible without culture, which is built on learnt behaviour rather than instinct. As Edwin Tyler wrote in his 1871 *Primitive Cultures*, ‘culture is everything that is not nature’ (Tyler, 2012/1871). But while seeming to ground culture as the foundational dimension of social life and thus a primary and indispensable factor for public policy, its sheer breadth consigns it to the ‘too hard’ or ‘too vague’ basket. Is this ‘culture’ to be understood as heritage, or tradition, or languages, or religion, or the arts, or food and clothing, or the vast array of available cultural commodities, or communications and media, the Internet and AI? Or sport, yoga, tattooing, piercing and body modification?

I suggest that this anthropological definition is doing more harm than good for cultural policy.

The 1982 MONDIACULT definition expressed a vigorous assertion of the Global South, or ‘third world’ as it was then called. It came after more than three decades of colonial independence movements, 27 years on from the 1955 Bandung Conference, and less than a decade from the movement for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) launched in 1973. In his context, the cultures of the newly independent nations signified a distinct identity to be confidently retrieved in a repudiation of colonial tutelage. The anthropological definition was an assertion of a wider, more inclusive notion of culture, beyond Euro-centric ideals of ‘art and literature’, so often associated with its so-called ‘civilising mission’ and western educated colonial-era elites. It was a crucial resource for nation-building in a post-colonial era, and as such the anthropological definition had a strong political-normative dimension (cf. Mishra, 2021).

But it was normative in another sense too. The aforementioned clause is followed immediately by this:

It is culture that gives man the ability to reflect upon himself. It is culture that makes us specifically human, rational beings, endowed with a critical judgement and a sense of moral commitment. It is through culture that we discern values and make choices. It is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his own achievements, seeks untiringly for new meanings and creates works through which he transcends his limitations (UNESCO, 1982).

This echoes long-standing European ideals of art and culture, along with others found in many non-European civilisations, such as Persia, India and China to name but three. That is, culture as a kind of individual and collective transformation, a process of self-development or ‘cultivation’ that included both material and spiritual aspects. The new definition was embraced as a key platform for nation-building and a series of future-oriented modern developmental projects. These developmental states looked to mobilise new confident national identities, drawing on a plurality of non-western traditions, animating a coalition of newly independent nations, strongly manifesting

in global forums and above all at the UN. In this sense, it could be attached to the transformative modernisation of nation-building, a cultural adjunct to what Charles Maier (2023) calls the 'project state'.

This heroic nation-building use of culture could often default to a bombastic cultural nationalism, promulgating grand ideals detached from the lived material experience of those whose lives it sought to transform. Worse, it could act as a mask to cover over those material realities and silence those who raised concerns. Nonetheless we should acknowledge how far a confident assertion of distinct national cultures against centuries of colonial metropolitan dominance was not just about local 'identity' but linked to a project of transformative modernisation – now on their own terms and for the benefit of their own people. And often in co-ordination with other newly independent countries, energised by Bandung.

1982 MONDIACULT was a watershed, one marked by the global defeat of the NIEO, and associated UNESCO initiatives such as the New World Information and Communication Order and the 1980-2 MacBride Commission (Nordenstreng, 2005, 2015). The 'third world' upon which MONDIACULT built was, by the early 1980s, in full retreat before a resurgent North. Paul Volker's interest rate 'shock' marked the rise of third world indebtedness and the tightening of constraints on the internal political decisions of those states forced to apply for International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans. A new global economic and political order was emerging, led by Thatcher and Reagan, and given free reign after the collapse of the USSR. This 'neoliberal revolution' was not simply about the 'free market' but new forms of governance. It was about reining in excessive economic and political demands both in Northern 'welfare states' but also at the global level. The UN, with its 'third world' majority gave way to new, technocratic agencies of governance – the World Bank, IMF, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and a range of new legal instruments protecting global trade from 'democratic' interference (Franczak, 2022; Slobodian, 2018).

These new techniques of governance were not 'cultural' but legal, economic, political, and military. They might not be cultural tools, yet their ultimate object was cultural. As Margaret Thatcher famously said in 1981, vis-à-vis the 'collectivist nation': 'If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul'. It is clear that certain models of consumption – shopping malls, suburbs, cars, credit cards, nuclear families – have fundamentally changed our behaviours and subjectivities. As William Davies (2017) had it, the 'economy is cultural . . . markets, property rights, work and consumption produce distinctive identities and affects, not as side-effects . . . but as integral components of how they operate'. What John Hartley (1996) once called the American model of 'comfort and freedom' is now a powerful aspirational imaginary throughout the globe. The consumerism that accelerated in the 1980s was about images, aesthetics, emotions and desires that were cultural but more or less completely uncoupled from 'cultural policy'.

Which is to say that cultural policy actors need to take a step back from their grandiose claims for the transformative effects of culture because for the last 40 years at least, it has been others who have sought to 'engineer souls'. Actual cultural change in society – its 'spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features', its 'modes of life . . . value systems, traditions and beliefs' – was not achieved through cultural policy at all.

The key point is that *culture does not own culture*. Howsoever we deploy the anthropological definition as ‘a whole way of life’ or the ‘glue that holds society together’ and so on, cultural policy is nowhere near in control of that agenda of wholesale socio-cultural transformation, as in the 1980s and 1990s. If it were, culture would be up there with the most powerful ministries. On the contrary, it is usually the weakest. Three consequences follow.

First, ‘culture is everything’ is too wide and amorphous and renders it unavailable for practical policy. Consequently, culture is routinely used to evoke warm feelings at the start of conferences and then dropped as we get down to the *real* business of development.

Second, we cannot ground the normative claims for cultural policy directly on an anthropological definition of culture. There is no longer any straightforward step from claiming culture as a constitutive fact of human society and the ideals consequently placed upon it by cultural policy actors. The transformative ideals expressed at MONDIACULT 1982 draw on long-standing, even ancient ideas of cultivation and self-growth, but these ideas are now associated with one particular area or aspect of social life. This has been the case in Europe and ‘the West’ since the late 18th century. As sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1989) argued (following Max Weber), the sphere of art was separated from the immediate reproduction of social life, thus no longer a direct product of a particular ‘way of life’. By being transformed into, and circulated as a commodity, art was subject to public dispute and criticism through complex means of communication and sets of intermediaries. It might be argued, with some reason, that Habermas ignored folk or popular culture. However, as the discipline of cultural studies has shown, this process of separation from immediate social reproduction, and increasing commodification and publication, is now very definitely the case in contemporary societies. We might say it is a by-product of modernisation.

Third, these global policy ideals were closely linked to a promise of a transformative modernity (‘development’) driven by newly independent nation states. These transformative ideals of culture and nation are no longer so obvious. The stalling of third world development across the 1980s and the disciplining of the project state by the (military, legal and financial) forces of globalisation was part of this. But also, as we have suggested, culture no longer exclusively owns the policy ‘levers’ to transform culture. Not only have ‘the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features’ of society been transformed by policy agencies and agendas outside culture, but culture itself has been transformed by globalisation, commercialisation, social diversification and fragmentation, computing and communication technologies and so on, in ways that make the anthropological definition of fixed ‘ways of life’ increasingly problematic, if not redundant.

To persist with the MONDIACULT definition, and thus assert culture’s transformative ideals with no reference to how contemporary global societies are actually governed and organised, and the marginal place of culture within that governance, is both irresponsible and, ultimately, serves only to further marginalise culture.

Culture as a 'system of symbolic products'

MONDIACULT's expansive definition was not just about breaking with Eurocentrism, opening up to different cultures and non-western development paths. Moving beyond 'art and letters' was an embrace of a plurality of cultural forms outside a particular elite culture. Similar moves were made in the Global North, from the 1950s at least. But saying, with Raymond Williams (1983 [1976], 1989 [1958]), that 'culture is ordinary', and open to everybody, is not the same as saying culture is a 'whole way of life', belief systems, behaviours etc. Widening our focus from a small area of 'art and letters' does not mean embracing an anthropological definition, but rather the wide range of symbolic practices and artefacts often dismissed as folk or traditional or popular or 'low' culture. The moves to 'culture as a way of life' and 'culture as ordinary' might look the same, but they are very different. Not least because ordinary culture increasingly included the consumption and production of symbolic forms that are not so attached to any traditional 'way of life', were more complex, could come from afar, changed with increasing rapidity and often involved commerce of some sort.

The difference became clearer in the 1990s, as many countries modernised and cultures got more complex, during a decade of intense globalisation. Cultural ministries and cultural policies proliferated and connected across global networks. At the same time, cultural products and services became more commercial, and global, and less attached to traditional forms and norms. These traditions became more a matter of choice and thus were necessarily subject to questioning (and cynical manipulation). Development meant modernisation, in some form, and this weakened (for good or ill) the links between traditional and modern (often urban) cultural practices. Traditional forms of religious belief and ceremony, community rituals, kinship links, political affiliations and so on persisted. But the 'culture' to which the new cultural ministries and new cultural policies were applied increasingly involved a broad system of symbolic production and consumption: 'arts and letters' now expanded to include recorded music, film, TV and radio, new popular performing arts, contemporary visual art, computer games, popular press, newspapers and magazines, music cultures, new kinds of fashion, new kinds of heritage appreciation, new kinds of crafts driven more by aesthetics than tradition and so on.

It is this narrower frame to which cultural policy now mostly applies. I would argue that it is this symbolic system, with its complex system of preservation, education, production, distribution and consumption, that is the proper object of cultural policy. It provides a far clearer foundation for cultural policy in the contemporary moment, and more accurately describes the actual sector that pursues such policies (cf. UNESCO, 2009). Indeed, we can see how focusing on unitary national cultures became increasingly problematic on its own terms and increasingly left the symbolic system to the mercies of a globalising economy.

In the wake of the 1980s 'third world' retreat and the collapse (and radical restructuring) of communist countries, the 'cultural project state' stalled. There were multiple issues with this project, most immediately the unproblematic link it made between development and a unitary identity of *nation-culture*. The state-led, top-down approach could be both ineffective and coercive. Actual cultural policy often focused on national cultural infrastructure (museums, galleries, promotion of national music and drama) that could

itself be seen as a version of a local elite culture. Did the cultural 'project state' know or try to find out what 'the people' wanted?

As globalisation took off apace in the 1990s, the talk was of a 'global space of flows', multi-directional flows of capital and trade, people and ideas, across global networks overseen not by nation states but by 'transnational' corporations and co-ordinated by market logic (Appadurai, 1990). These flows permeated the solid containers of the nation-state, complicating, dissolving and hybridising fixed national identities. The system of symbolic culture was now part of these flows of signs, images, sounds, role models, aspirations, carried by expansive new technologies of satellite and fibre-optics, air travel and tourism, DVDs and films, magazine brands and iconic architecture. Should not the job of the state rather be to 'get out of the way' of markets? This injunction was enforced by the IMF and other agents of the 'Washington Consensus'.

This directly impacted the cultural project state, even (especially) for those that still sought to tightly control a particular national culture. In terms of cultural policy, the dominant response, in the Global North, was to reposition symbolic culture as a consumer economy, surrounded by various 'market failures' that needed public funding (such as community or heritage culture). Globally there were strong voices saying everyone now must have choice, the more 'free trade' in cultural goods the better, and that states had only a residual role to play in culture.

Our creative diversity?

Faced with these fundamental changes of circumstance, the response of global cultural policy was two-fold. The first step involved adoption of 'sustainable' development, from the Brundtland Commission (1987), extending that concept from the physical environment to culture. This drew on a critique of gross domestic product (GDP)-centric development and called for a more 'human' approach to development. This necessarily involved culture, but less as a nation-state project than one aimed at building individual or communal human capabilities and freedoms. Second, there was a growing concern with global 'diversity' in the face of the massive cultural flows which appeared to many less a free market 'let a thousand flowers bloom' than a force of cultural homogenisation, dislocation and disorientation.

The human development approach, exemplified by UNESCO's *Our Creative Diversity* (OCD), drew heavily on culture as an anthropological category, while the diversity agenda, which achieved UN Convention status in 2005, focused on ensuring more equitable systems of production and trade for 'cultural expressions'. I would argue that these two responses were not put together adequately.

OCD, which came out in 1995, followed a long decade of hard thinking (and hard sanctions) by UNESCO and associated actors, including a well-organised network of civil society actors. It is still one of the better global cultural policy reports, and in many ways, its agenda remains relevant – and unfulfilled. OCD registered the critique of the unitary and often abstract identity pursued by the 'culture project state'. It embraced culture as complex, fluid and multiple. Culture was part of tradition and long-established identities, but it was also a *questioning of* tradition and identity. As such, OCD introduced questions of voice – who can speak, whose voice gets heard? – as a form of

cultural citizenship, even democracy. Its chapters evoked multiple spaces of contestation and negotiation in the face of political forces that embraced strong forms of traditional cultural identity (national, gender, ethnic, religious).

At the same time, OCD critiqued GDP-focused development and did so by asserting the anthropological and normative ideas outlined in MONDIACULT 1982. Culture was an inescapable 'medium' of development. Without some connection to local culture, no abstract-mechanical developmental project could properly work. It needed to take account of local cultural understandings and forms of behaviour if it was to have any real chance of long-term, 'sustainable' success. But it was more than this. As Javier Pérez De Cuéllar wrote at the time:

However important it may be as an instrument of development (or an obstacle to it), culture should not be reduced to being a mere promoter of (or impediment to) economic growth (Isar, 1996).

It was not just a matter of 'add culture and stir'. Culture is 'not a servant of ends but the social basis of the ends themselves'. Culture was development's 'soul'.

Once you define culture as we have as 'ways of living together' and once development is seen as a process that enhances the freedom of people everywhere to pursue whatever goals they have reason to value, then culture must be far more than just an aspect or a means of development . . . Rather, it is the end and aim of development when the latter is seen as the flourishing of human existence as a whole (Isar, 1996).

This, for me, is the maximalist view of culture as foundational to all social life and the *telos* of human existence. As I argued above, this was simply not a viable position to be taken at a time when the global order was being re-organised under the dominant order of markets, trade and economic growth. Indeed, OCD only dealt with the globalised system of cultural production, distribution and consumption in the last chapter, focused on the media. However, alongside this maximal rhetoric was a more grounded notion of the role and importance of culture.

OCD drew on Amartya Sen's 'capability' approach, which rejected GDP measured development in favour of a 'human-centred' approach, promoting those capabilities which give people the freedom to choose 'whatever goals they have reason to value'. These choices were 'culturally conditioned' (Sen, 1996). Pérez de Cuéllar specifies that human development encompasses a broad array of capabilities, 'ranging from political, economic and social freedom to individual opportunities for being healthy, educated, and creative and for enjoying self-respect and human rights' (Isar, 1996). This formulation places policy measures for culture alongside health, education and political, social and economic freedom. The focus is less on delivering fixed cultural 'goods' (such as those declared central to the identity of a particular nation-state) nor on acting as the ultimate social connector, but on developing individual and communal capacities, giving all the ability to freely choose, to make informed evaluations and judgements of what is valuable to them.

Amartya Sen suggests that culture has three roles:

Constitutive, giving the opportunity to understand and cultivate their creativity is essential to any concept of human development. *Evaluative*, the ability to make judgements of what we value, individual and collectively. *Instrumental*, where culture can translate into economic growth but also other improvements in the quality of life (Sen, 1996).

This is a much more grounded approach to cultural policy, as long as we are specific about to what aspect it is being applied. Defining art and culture is a necessarily messy process and will fall foul of innumerable local specificities. But as a guide to a workable global policy, I would say it refers to 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 collective meaning making, a distinct mode of symbolic knowledge not available to abstract-rational discourse, providing an indispensable, if sometimes opaque, contribution to our shared social life. The transformative ideals we place on culture relate to the particular exercise of creative freedom we experience through the capacity to enjoy, engage, participate, make, experience, critique and celebrate art and culture. That is surely the cultural sector's brief and the role it needs to claim in public policy.

In light of this, we might parse Sen's three categories. Culture as *constitutive* is about what our shared values and traditions are, as articulated in through art and culture, the shared 'rules of the game' in which our active individual *paroles* works in relation to a common *langue*. 'Constitutive' refers to the institutions within which we are helped to acquire our cultural capabilities, and the spaces in which we might exercise these individually and collectively. This constitutive role directs us to consider culture alongside the social, political and economic capabilities required for the full exercise of citizenship. This is culture as a human right to 'freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits'. The *constitutive* covers the 'cultural infrastructure', conceived as that assemblage of cultural and educational institutions, spaces of preservation, learning, production and consumption, and the ecosystem of cultural funding and support which allow the exercise of that right to full participation in culture.

The *evaluative* role is the capability and capacity acquired to question existing meanings, values and structures, to exercise creativity, to make judgements on arts and culture, to have a voice in the debate about what we should hold as valuable in common, to sustain and animate a democratic public sphere. Often reduced to 'choice' between competing market offerings, the evaluative relies on the 'meta-goods' provided by the cultural infrastructure, those goods which allow the judgement to be made about other goods.

The *instrumental* role is also important, for it is to be hoped that a full participation in culture, as part of a flourishing citizenship, will help build an active and productive citizenship – as long as we recognise that that 'productive' is itself open to evaluation and contestation. We might hope that a modernist and modernising cultural policy recognises both the material and the spiritual dimensions of development rather than a zero-sum opposition. The ability to art and culture to provide employment, to add to the liveability of the built environment, to enhance social cohesion, to stimulate trade and international exchange is to be welcomed.⁴ In a sense, art and culture are instrumental – they are a

means for exercising one's own freedom and thus enhancing one's life and the communities within which one lives. They are one of the means to create a fully human society.

OCD could have led us towards a cultural policy agenda in which a full participation in citizenship was inconceivable without its art and cultural dimension. But its failure to explicitly make the connection between cultural rights, capabilities and citizenship and the actual system of symbolic goods meant that concerns about the actual global system of symbolic goods became increasingly about trade and national identity.

Culture did not own culture. Cultural policy could not determine the overall shape and direction of development or set its overarching ends. But it could (and in my opinion should) make a claim on how the system of symbolic products and practices should be framed and acted on in public policy. Instead, culture remained unspecified, a floating value with less and less purchase on actual policy. Rather than a system of symbolic production, with its multiple connections to other parts of the social whole, we embraced an anthropological culture as everything. And thus nothing.

From diversity of cultural expressions to creative economy

The work done by OCD in registering the openness, mutability and diversity of culture within and between nations and linking this to the capabilities required for truly human development was crucial. It remains relevant and unfulfilled.

It ran in parallel with the second response to globalisation of the 1990s in the form of the accelerated circulation of cultural goods and services, that is, the global symbolic-cultural system. Free trade and the global 'space of flows' might mean an emancipatory expansion of horizons for some. For others it might represent a disruption of older certainties, the proliferation of new sounds and images, new stories, new products, new desires and subject positions feeding a deep ontological insecurity and instability. For others it was experienced as cultural homogenisation, or Westernisation, or Americanisation, or cultural imperialism. With memories of the defeat of the New World Economic Order it seemed like the 'level playing field' of global trade hoped for in the 1960s had failed to materialise. Global flows were complex shapeshifters, but to many it seemed that behind their complexity were the usual suspects of Global North dominance.

These concerns began the process leading to the 2005 convention, which I won't chart here as they are quite well known (cf. Garner and O'Connor, 2019; Von Schorlemer and Stoll, 2012). Hedged in by complex interests and oppositions, the 2005 Convention used the concepts of 'diversity' and 'ecosystem', picking up the jargon of the ecology movement, with two main objectives. First, to resist the absolute commodification of culture (asserting culture's 'dual value') and so allowing member states to make policy judgments based on cultural value without incurring the wrath of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Second, to assert the need for a fully free trading system – as initially claimed by UNCTAD in its early 1960s iteration – and ensure open access to markets allowing the Global South to develop their own art and cultural systems. The Convention would allow states to support their own cultural sectors as part of their own identity, thus promoting global diversity, acting as a weak form of the 'development state' model in which local industries were protected until they were able to compete more widely.⁵

Retrospectively, it is easy to see how the 2005 Convention might morph into the creative economy agenda which had emerged alongside it at its moment of conception (O'Connor, 2023). The 'dual value' of culture was a legal conceit to avoid the strictures of the WTO, but it quickly became sidelined as culture was positioned as an engine of economic development in its own right. A core aim of the 2005 Convention, encouraging member states to make decisions in the political economy of the culture system in order to pursue cultural ends, was progressively sidelined as UNESCO, and other development agencies, hitched culture's contribution to sustainable development to the jobs and wealth created by the commercial cultural sector.

The rationale for promoting local arts and culture was no longer to provide some of the capabilities essential to a modernising society or Sen's culture as freedom. Rather it was to provide a source of income, to get 'culture to pay for itself', to provide jobs. The creative economy agenda took off in the Global South after the Global Financial Crisis 2008–12, and at a time when development itself was stalling. What has been called 'premature de-industrialisation' was deeply affecting the economies of developing countries (outside East Asia and perhaps Southeast Asia) and creative industries was sold as job replacement as it had in the Global North in the 1990s. The role of culture as contributing to the capabilities of the citizenship became framed as building 'human capital' to be made available to a creative economy 'nexus'.⁶ The social and cultural benefits accruing to the population were now positive 'externalities' or 'spillovers' of policies primarily designed to promote creative industries.

The instrumental – economically productive citizens – was now leading the constitutive and evaluative roles of culture. Education, institutions, arts and cultural funding, physical cultural infrastructure – all were justified as factor inputs into the creative economy. If there were 'souls' involved here, they were now restructured as creative subjectivities embedded in networks of social and cultural capital accumulation. Rather than universal cultural rights we had a particularistic investment in those sections of the population (a 'global creative class') whose cultural capacities might prove to be economically productive.

Cultural policy actors face a profound bifurcation. On the one hand, they see culture as the soul of development, foundational to human society, the pillar that binds all the others together, and on the other, a complete instrumentalisation of the system of art and culture and its reduction to an economic-industrial sector. This extends to cultural policy networks, with those committed to culture as part of human development mostly operating in different worlds from those pursuing an industrial strategy for creative economy. Quite often now these take place in different ministries – as with the EU or others where culture and economic development divide these two branches of cultural policy.

The end result is that while cultural policy has the 'idealistic high ground', the commercial and, increasingly, public policy levers for the system of art and culture – TV, radio, film, recorded music, computer games, performance, publishing, social media and so on – are held by those who see these in purely industrial terms. It is thus tempting for the former to speak about culture and everyday life, culture as social bonding, and put art and culture, especially its commercial parts, in a 'creative industries' black box. 'That's just the creative industries; we are concerned with real culture'. This would be

a catastrophic mistake. On the other hand, governments are tempted just to stress the economic aspect of culture. In an age of 'anti-elitism' and the growth of 'populist' voices, cultural justifications seem 'metropolitan' and 'professional class'. Much better to offer jobs and wealth.⁷

Culture as public good(s)

Establishing a distinct goal for culture is a crucial step for global cultural policy, although success is extremely uncertain. If there is to be a new narrative around culture it needs to be around its specific contribution to society and its futures. This cannot be some sectoral economic contribution but nor can it be culture as anthropological *telos*. The ability to actively participate in art and culture is a human right because that participation is part of what it is to be human. Such participation is a form of being in the world, a specific kind of making meaning, which is different – often tangential, sometimes opposed – to forms of abstract rationality. Its instrumental value is how it contributes to a sense of flourishing citizenship of which cultural capacities are an inalienable dimension. Much of this argument will have to be undertaken in opposition not to our common material needs and aspirations but to mainstream economics' characterisation of human society as made up of atomised, self-interested, rational-calculating individuals. I do not see any way around this task.

Art and culture no longer emerge 'spontaneously' from traditional forms of life but are produced, facilitated, organised, financed, regulated, evaluated, exchanged, shared and enjoyed in a complex system whose basic foundations are guaranteed and maintained through concerted communal and governmental action. This may be on the part of the local commons or local government, but they are also guaranteed and maintained by the state in the form of public goods. Public goods, as outlined in the introduction to this special issue, are those provided non-exclusively to all citizens, not just because they can not be made to pay (as in the standard 'market failure' economics) but because it is a positively held value that they represent the best, most equitable means to provide for (in this case) the human right to full participation in culture. In shorthand, cultural infrastructure and cultural capabilities, provided as public goods, provide the resources required for the exercise of cultural rights. Without arts education, or training, preserving, exhibiting and performing institutions, without accessible public spaces and an open public media sphere, without the legal and material means of participation and contestation, cultural rights cannot be exercised. These have to co-exist with the material means of social reproduction – housing, food and water, social services, basic infrastructures, education, decent work and so on. The slow strangulation of publicly funded culture shows that. But these are not by themselves enough to sustain art and culture.

As also noted in the introduction, cultural infrastructures work best when they are publicly owned (in whatever form) and collectively provided. For some infrastructures, this might be accepted as economically rational – water, electricity, mass transportation – but for others, these are also political choices, about the positive civic value of free, collective provision. In these latter public goods and the public good overlap. However, it is undeniable that the practical knowledge and shared sense of purpose that once allowed public sector cultural provision has been severely eroded by privatisation – both

of ownership but also of the imaginary of culture, reduced as it now mostly is to private consumption good. Retrieving this practical experience and rearticulating it for a new epoch is an urgent task.

However, we must also accept that markets are crucial providers of art and culture, which might be best approached not via ‘CCI’ but rather the ‘political economy’ strand of cultural studies, whose origins can be found in US ‘mass culture’ studies, the Birmingham School and the later Raymond Williams, a definitive historical overview of which can be found in David Hesmondhalgh’s (2018) *The Cultural Industries*. The problem is not the commodification of culture *per se*, but the forms by which the production and exchange of cultural commodities takes place, including the commodification of cultural labour itself. As we discuss more in the introduction to this special issue, the commercial or non-state production of culture can be seen as a form of public goods. One of the distinguishing characteristics of cultural commodities is their tendency to become public goods – leaking out into the public domain – that underpins their ongoing business problem of how to make them pay. That is, how to tap into a collective cultural imaginary to create commodities that can generate revenue even as they inevitably return to that collective cultural imaginary. Recognising that the private sector can produce public goods should be a crucial dimension of any cultural policy. How to make sure that the private sector has the capacity to produce the public goods that we – collectively – want is a crucial policy issue buried by creative economy, whose only criterion is growth.

The kind of public goods we might want the private sector to produce are in turn a result of governmental public goods. That is, they are fiscal, budgetary and regulatory, concerned with rent controls, planning laws, anti-monopoly action, price controls (such as book agreements), independent access to art and culture funding, local quotas, import duties – whatever range of policies help ‘tilt’ the market in favour of local, thriving ecosystems and an open public sphere. More negatively, public goods protect against public bads – not only heritage-preservation laws, artist rights or fair trade, but against the depredations of large-scale platform companies whose core business model is to become a dominant player in whatever field they have chosen.

Six out of the top 10 global corporations are involved in the production and distribution of art and culture.⁸ It is no coincidence that the US vehemently opposes any measure which might place ‘public good’ limitations around these enterprises. Though their dominance and form of extraction have often been characterised as ‘techno-feudal’, I would suggest they are the leading edge of the new hegemonic forms of capital accumulation. They are extremely powerful players geopolitically, and dominate the global public sphere, alongside many national ones, in ways we have only just begun to recognise. These issues are barely registered by the creative economy agenda, which abandons any politics for a technics of ‘factors of production’.

Conclusion: global public goods

These are the considerations we might take to the global level. Culture as a global public good (GPG) was first mooted by the UN Secretary General as part of the lead-up to the

September summit, where he called on UNESCO to develop a coherent approach in response. The aim of the summit was to relaunch the UN's mission as an agency of global governance, in an age fraught with conflicts, climate change, democratic deficits and stalled development. GPGs were those mostly regulatory frameworks and institutions around, for example, the financial system, global health, nuclear proliferation, digital infrastructure and climate change, which only some kind of international agreement or collective agency could supply. Culture as a GPG proved somewhat puzzling to global cultural agencies.

This speaks to a serious failure of cultural political imagination. If 'creative economy' could only think in terms of how to promote 'CCI' as an economic sector, then others, as we have suggested, returned to a culture maximalist approach which skipped the art and cultural sector as a primary object of policy. The 2005 Convention could have been reconceived as an important GPG, one capable of radially reframing the creative economy doxa in the face of relentless digital platform monopolies and a disastrous failure to close the gap in global trade in cultural goods and services. It might have explored what aspects of culture, at this global level, needed regulation and new forms of governance or what unregulated 'bads' in the global cultural system needed to be addressed, what kind of GPGs the UN or the international community ought to supply.

The 2024 Summit document had a substantial annex (almost a quarter of the whole document) on the 'Global Digital Compact', devoted to human rights and digital public goods. The word culture is absent. As it is from the long section on science, technology and innovation. In 56 pages, 'culture' is restricted to six mentions in two paragraphs, alongside sport. This might suggest that a doubling down on creative economy, perhaps with a touch of wellbeing, is the only way forward. Or it might encourage a radical shift, away from creative economy towards asserting culture as a human right and a crucial social infrastructure. That culture does not 'just happen' but is socially produced on the basis of a range of public infrastructural goods and regulations, all of which are in need of serious attention.

At global level, the dominance of the digital platforms is almost too big to contemplate, a Kantian sublime leading to political quiescence. But the ongoing plunder of the global commons cannot be shrugged off, as it reaches down into the ears and eyes captured by the proliferating devices and networks that sustain those global corporations. How is it that this global plunder can be passed over in silence by the global cultural policy community, more concerned with the minutia of equitable participation in an ever-smaller range of public cultural goods than the ongoing collapse of a whole ecosystem and public sphere? There is talk of a New World Economic Order, some radical redistribution of global political and economic power which is echoed even in the UN's Summit document (Progressive International (PI), 2024). Yet, despite expansion of a 'decolonisation' agenda across the global cultural and educational spheres, policy calls for a New World Information and Communication Order are muted. Yet, any project for decolonisation must include a global public sphere, or as Mbembe (2021) calls it, a space for 'world-thinking' outside of western colonial modernity, a world that still 'has to be created'. This, it seems to me, is the key project of global cultural policy.

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Notes

1. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/ltd/n24/252/89/pdf/n2425289.pdf>
2. This article was informed by a meeting, *Global Cultural Policy at the Crossroads*, hosted by the International Music Council in Paris, 21st March 2024, involving an ad hoc group of academic and policy experts, from Europe, Australia, North America and South Africa. The meeting was funded as part of the ARC Discovery Project DP 180102074, *UNESCO and the Making of Global Cultural Policy*.
3. Details of the campaign group and their analysis can be found at https://culture2030goal.net/sites/default/files/2023-02/culture2030goal_Culture%20Goal%20-%20ENG.pdf, p. 9.
4. But this cannot mean separating some 'intrinsic' artistic or aesthetic value from some external economic or social 'impact'. The separation of intrinsic and instrumental value is itself already a product of instrumental, individualising thinking. 'Intrinsic' means purely subjective pleasure, 'taste' as individual and thus non-disputable, which already implies an individualising relation to consumption. Evaluation here is simply individual consumer choice, with no other social implications, and which can be aggregated by the market.
5. That support would also be forthcoming from the Global North through preferential deals and the International Fund for Cultural Diversity (IFCD).
6. 'States need to make a creative nexus able to attract investors, build creative entrepreneurial capacities, offer better access and infrastructure to modern ICT technologies in order to benefit from global digital convergence, and optimize the trade potential of their creative products in both domestic and international markets' (UNCTAD, 2008: xxiii).
7. For a recent UK take on this, see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/culture-secretary-declares-culture-media-and-sport-sectors-crucial-to-national-growth-mission>
8. In descending order from #1 Apple, Microsoft, Nvidia, Amazon, Alphabet and Meta at #7. <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/explainers/top-10-largest-companies-world-market-cap/86341/1>

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