

## **What is Cultural Policy? A Dialogue for an Emerging Field**

**Princeton University**

**Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies Faculty and Student Affiliates**

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Stan Katz introduced the session by noting that our central question - "What is Cultural Policy?" - was first raised during a faculty advisory meeting in the fall. In fact, even more basic, one faculty member had asked, "What do we mean by 'policy'?" To help focus the April 29th discussion, Paul DiMaggio agreed to circulate a paper he wrote in 1983 on the topic, "What are Cultural Policy Studies: And Why Do We Need Them?"

Paul DiMaggio noted the context in which the paper was written and summarized its main arguments. First, he suggested that it is useful to think about cultural policy across many different fields, comparing public and private policy in the arts with communications policy, debates about education curricula and other areas of cultural production and reception. Second, it is useful to think about cultural policy as having to do with decisions about cultural goods when those decisions are, in some way, contested. In other words, if there is broad public consensus about the public value of a cultural good, then policy is principally about how best to distribute or allocate the good in question. This is social policy, not cultural policy. Perhaps, cultural policy requires conflict over the value of the good itself. A third idea in the paper is that there is a distinction between direct policies that are intended to shape cultural fields and indirect policies that do so unintentionally. The cultural policy enterprise needs to pay attention to state and non-state actions that impact cultural outcomes without intending to do so. Finally, the fourth point in the article, which is less relevant today, is that policy means actions by the government and ignores policy made by foundations, corporations and nonprofits. Today, most academics and practitioners would instinctively include non-government actors as critical players in cultural policy discussions.

As further background, Stan Katz mentioned an essay he wrote for the American Assembly publication in 1984 that criticized the notion that because America lacks a centrally administered culture, as compared to Europe, that we don't have a cultural policy. In his essay, Katz disputes this claim by showing how a variety of government policies, from immigration to urban renewal, create environments that affect which cultural goods and practices are carried forward. Katz pointed to the Lincoln Center as an example of an institution whose practices have been greatly influenced by unintended public policies. In this regard, the U.S. does not have a singular cultural policy; it has cultural "policies."

One participant pointed out the value of thinking about the "always, already" of cultural policy. In other words, there is never a condition when cultural policies are not at work; nonetheless, in many contexts, foundations, nonprofits and governments are reluctant to avow the practice of cultural policy. However, the DiMaggio article helps us account for shifts that allow cultural policy to become salient and legitimate for such institutions to discuss. It is basically in "the presence of cultural conflict and uncertainty" - when

certain cultural domains are being challenged - that the question of cultural policy arises.

Additionally, an implicit model of cultural practice derives from America's tradition of democratic consensus. Unlike European cultural policy that supports projects that are deeply avant-garde, politically critical, and analytical, America's need for a broad consensus leads to cultural practices that produce art as an opiate for the masses. Thus, the democratic market place of ideas in the U.S. imposes a model of cultural practice (cultural policy) that tends to support innocuous art.

An objection was raised regarding the assumption that U.S. cultural policy is inherently biased against avant-garde art. First, the NEA and NEH had a great deal of autonomy in the early days of their existence and often supported very provocative works. Second, if we look at places like SECCA (South Eastern Center for Contemporary Art), we see that avant-garde art is often funded through indirect means, e.g., through a circuitous route of grants and accounting practices. Thus, the government is often able to fund provocative work without its hand being detected. So, we have to look at the indirect as well as the explicit and direct.

One participant cautioned against taking an "Arnoldian" approach to culture - e.g., viewing culture as an "extra-rational" force that is administered and organized by some "governing body." In this way, our approach to culture is often too "economic," as in the case of GATT and the U.S. defending the export of Hollywood films primarily on economic grounds, although for the French it was an issue of cultural chauvinism. Another example is the failure of international organizations to balance economic models of development with sensitivity to local and indigenous cultures. We also need to think about cultural policy outside the framework of just one state - policies affect "culture" across national boundaries.

It was suggested that we narrow our definition of "cultural policy" and distinguish between policies that have effects on institutional areas of cultural production versus "cultural analysis" of policies in other sectors such as health or human services. For example, most policies - whether debates over welfare or the sale of human organs - have an important cultural component, such as the language used to frame debates, assumptions about sacred and non-sacred goods, beliefs about the value of the market, etc.. And researchers should employ the tools of cultural analysis in order to expose the non-rational, non-functional components of such policies. If the Center's research net were cast this broadly, however, it would be called "the Center for Policy Studies," not the "Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies." But, if you ask the same questions of the film industry, which is in the business of producing cultural goods, then we are closer to the notion of "cultural policy studies."

One respondent felt that the term "culture" itself is often misused and misappropriated. They directed the groups attention to the work of Roslyn Deutche (architecture) who has written about the way in which corporations use "cultural projects" - i.e., public art - to make a claim on public space, and in the process, often exclude marginal groups from

that space. Thus, we need to pay attention to the political side of "cultural policies" - the way in which they can be used to legitimate certain groups and disempower others.

Another participant felt that an important project for cultural policy studies is to investigate how different groups - government, foundations, corporations - define "culture" or define the object of their support/policies. These definitions are influenced by norms and values that we need to understand in order to study cultural policy decisions. For example, a dominant norm in the history of cultural policy making has been to equate "culture" with cultivation. Another person noted, however, that the goal of cultivation (the appreciation of "high" culture) is just one of many possible policy goals, and we should not assume that elitism is at the core of all cultural policies.

It was suggested that instead of concerning ourselves with the normative goals of cultural policy, perhaps it's more fruitful to examine how cultural policies are constantly negotiated and contested, regardless of their explicit objectives. For example, during the 1950s there was a U.S. policy of cultural exchange with Soviet Union where films, books and exhibits were shared between the two nations. The underlying policy objective was to sell American capitalism abroad in an effort to undermine communism. But actual policy outcomes were much more complex. For example, the exchange helped to open up a space for dialogue, understanding and appreciation of Soviet culture - an unintended consequence that had many right wing groups, like the American Legions, up in arms. Again, this reinforces the need to look at unintended consequences of cultural policy and to realize that regardless of the implicit norms or "interests" of a policy, its practice is always contested and redefined; and thus an important subject for policy research.

Disagreement arose over whether public policy should be restricted to only actions carried out by the government. One participant noted that governments are empowered to make certain kinds of decisions, and when we study those decisions, we are studying public policy. This domain of policy making is important enough in its own right, without bringing in corporate policy, philanthropic policy, etc.. Others disagreed, and felt that just as NGOs (non-governmental organizations) play a critical role in many international policy debates, so do the actions of major philanthropies affect, in very public ways, cultural practices and activities. One possible solution is to use cultural policy to describe what foundations and non-government organizations do, and to use public policy to describe what governments do.

One respondent summarized the conversation, noting two important themes. The first deals with definitional issues. And, from an instrumental standpoint, researchers can define cultural policy as they wish, as long as they are clear about their definition from the beginning. Nonetheless, definitions are important if, for no other reason, then to decide what is the most useful and practical domain of research for a Center like this to undertake.

The other strand in the conversation deals with questions of legitimacy. Is cultural policy legitimate? Some seem to suggest that because of its normative overtones, cultural

policy is not a legitimate exercise. And, in fact, there are constitutional limitations, such as the first amendment, that restrict a whole range of possible cultural policies, such as favoring certain practices over others or regulating speech in movies. And there are issues involving the heterogeneity of American society and the fact that widespread disagreements and populist impulses cut against public expenditures and support for the arts. These are fundamentally political questions, different from other more academic issues of how to define cultural policy.

One participant asked, "To what extent are we just talking about the production of cultural products or artifacts?" And, if so, "What makes this a policy issue? Why is this not just a history of how culture gets created?"

One discussant thought the issue of "non-activity, or "non-regulation" was a useful approach to studying certain types of indirect policies, but wondered, from a methodological perspective, how one goes about studying this.

It was suggested that in teaching American law, an important maxim is that a failure to act *is* a type of action that has consequences. And, the same approach should be taken with cultural policy. For example, one could study the effects in the UK of not having a tax regime that favors deductions and its implication for the private support of culture. This is a policy - even though the members of Parliament who passed these tax laws may not have been aware of their consequences on the shape of culture in England.

However, the point was raised that including non-purposive and indirect actions in our definition may make the study of cultural policy too unwieldy, especially if we want to include the actions of non-profits, corporations and foundations. It is not that difficult to study the unintended and indirect effects of a limited range of state policies, but when we open up our definition of the field, it becomes much harder to track all of the unintended and indirect effects of non-government actors.

Additionally, it was noted that if cultural policy analysis is partly about identifying sites of possible intervention, then focusing on state policies could be more sensible. There may be little room for policy intervention, for example, when we talk about the unintentional effects of decisions made by the publishing industry on the evolution of a certain genre of novels.

Another participant raised the point that in DiMaggio's article, and throughout the discussion, the metaphor of the marketplace (cultural industry, regulation, market place of ideas, etc.) serves as the dominant frame for understanding cultural policy. It was noted that maybe the marketplace is not the only, or even the most proper, way to look at cultural practices.

One speaker connected this point to questions of legitimacy. For example, debates about public education are often couched in economic or market terms. By focusing on the economic benefits of school choice, policy makers often fail to engage in the larger question about whether the state has a legitimate interest in promoting national,

standardized education or certain civic values. As in the case of education, when the legitimacy of the government's role in regulating culture is at stake, people avoid talking about cultural policy in anything but rational, economic terms (thus, often leaving aside questions of values and norms).

Attention was focused on the fact that the Center's name - arts and cultural policy studies - suggests that these are two different things. And, the arts side of the equation is much easier to think about in terms of production of cultural goods. However, the notion of production is less useful when it comes to other forms of culture - say the humanities or language where the "product" might just be an idea or an experience. For example, the graduate student exchanges between the U.S. and Soviet Union in 1959 were certainly an example of cultural policy making and the opening up of cultural relations, but there is no tangible cultural product at stake, as in the case of most arts policies.

It was noted that in the humanities, policy making is often more ambiguous and parceled together by multiple actors; actors who generally lack the authority to make and enforce binding policies. Take for example the current discussions between the Association of Research Libraries, the Copyright Clearance Center and the Association of American Universities. The groups are meeting with the hope of producing a joint statement on the implementation of the fair-use doctrine in the new digital environment. This is cultural policy and a joint statement could have significant consequences in the area of intellectual property. However, the nature of the policy making process is quite different, but equally important and relevant to what the Center is studying.

Intellectual property, according to one participant, is a good example of how Western notions of cultural policy are often selectively imported into cultural policies in the East. For example, the Chinese government enforces intellectual property rights by requiring users to sign an official form every time they make a photocopy. However, the government ignores property rights when it chooses to allow the sale of bootlegged videos and cassettes.

One participant noted the distinction between cultural production (Hollywood), cultural expression (language policy; headscarves for Muslims in France), and cultural analysis of policy (the cultural dimensions of welfare or health policy). The cultural production part clearly falls into the "arts" mission of the Center, and the cultural analysis part seems to fall outside the Center's interests partly because it is too broad (just about all areas of public policy have a cultural component). So, perhaps the bulk of attention should be placed on figuring out how to define or categorize policies related to cultural expression.

Finally, it was suggested that we think of cultural policy as being situated some where in a 3 dimensional box. One dimension is state vs. non-state policies; a second dimension is whether policies are aimed at products verses practices; and a third is whether these products or practices are primarily symbolic or material (i.e., arts policies vs. welfare policies). State actions about symbolic products are in one corner of the box, and such

policies are unambiguously "cultural policies." However, as we move out from this category, ambiguity is introduced. The further out we go, the more ambiguity.