The Emperor's New Ecology

By Martin Cox, Birmingham City University

Abstract

Government arts funding has provided an official policy framework for cultural intermediation, creative practice and evaluation in contemporary urban neighbourhoods. This framework has drawn criticism for privileging 'legitimised' culture, reinforcing inequality, excluding grassroots activity and failing to equitably engage multi-faith urban communities. How does Holden's version of 'cultural ecology' interoperate with Bourdieu's Field of cultural production, which views culture as the location of a 'game of struggles' which determines a hierarchy of culture as a mode of social distinction? Is government involvement in culture a natural element or is it architectural and deterministic? Viewed together, what do these ideas tell us about the inequalities observed in the cultural sector today?

This article draws on Bourdieu and Holden to explore how designed institutional frameworks determine cultural intermediation that reinforces inequality and divides communities. My provocation is that cultural democracy cannot be achieved through an institutional framework that is implicitly hierarchical and that polarises notions of diversity as representations of difference.

Introduction

'The Ecology of Culture' has become a popular metaphor in the language of cultural policy. The term is often used ambiguously and without definition, leaving its meaning open to a wide range of interpretations. This paper argues that despite its numerous positive attributes, the 'ecology metaphor' has characteristics that paper over structural inequalities and shore up extant cultural hierarchies.

There is no agreed, formal definition of what is actually being referred to by 'The Ecology of Culture' so we should be careful about generalising. However, John Holden's influential *The Ecology of Culture* (Holden, 2015) captures the general 'spirit' of the ecology metaphor and develops its possibilities as an approach to cultural policy making. This approach acknowledges the "complex

interdependencies" and "dynamic ways in which cultural activities affect each other and are linked together" (Holden, 2015:3).

By exploring the weaknesses in Holden's conceptual framework, it is possible to demonstrate how the ecology metaphor can be deployed in a way that diverts questions of inequality and sustains problematic hierarchies of cultural value. By way of example, this paper analyses the use of the Ecology Metaphor in Arts Council England's response to *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital* or (RoCC report) (Stark, Gordon and Powell, 2013).

The ecology metaphor

Conceptual links between ecology and theories of culture have been with us for a long time. It's interesting to note how frequently the ecological metaphor appears in efforts to explain culture, from Kantian *'a priori'* appreciation of form, transcendent of social concerns, to Bourdieuian 'constructivist-structuralism' which places culture squarely within a social 'game of struggles', often analogised to Darwinian natural selection.

John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) provides an interesting diversion that shows how far the ecological idea of culture can be taken. Dewey viewed art as a state of equilibrium between organism and environment. According to Dewey, as living beings every person is an artist and art is simply another experience of nature; a "bi-product, of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world" (Dewey cited in Jackson, 2000:4).

Adam Krause views the 'ecology of art' (Krause, 2011) as an escape from the 'masters of progress' narrative that became entrenched in modernism and post-modernism. According to this narrative, art pushes forward in a race against democratisation and commercialism, elevating the 'standards' that preserve abstract high/low art differentials until, as with the post-modernism of Arthur Danto, art reaches 'the end of art', where all that remains is to reproduce and refine the innovations of past masters. Krause rejects this linear teleological historicizing in favour of a type of 'ecological progress' that liberates art from crass-commercialism and 'roped-off' elitism, returning it to the everyday activity of everyone:

> "By redefining progress in ecological terms, reintroducing human agency, democratizing, and decentralizing production and consumption of art, we see progress can still exist in the arts, not through a single movement towards a single goal, but through the creation of a rich and complex whole" (Krause, 2011:80).

What can be taken from these diverse ecological accounts is the widely held feeling that art is in our nature; a natural aspect of human life. So, does the use of the ecological metaphor in contemporary cultural policy discourse indicate a positive move away from entrenched high/low-culture hierarchies towards a more equitable distribution of cultural value?

Holden's Ecology of Culture

The Ecology of Culture as recently advanced by John Holden (2015) has become a popular touchstone for scholarship and policy makers. Holden develops Markusen's definition of the ecology of culture as meaning "the complex interdependencies that shape the demand for and production of arts and cultural offerings" (cited in Holden, 2015b:2). Holden argues that examining culture as an ecology rather than as an economy offers "a comprehensible overview that does not privilege one type of value – financial value – over others that attach to culture" (Holden, 2015b:3).

Holden's ecosystem encompasses the "three spheres of culture'; 'funded', 'commercial' and 'homemade'", which are "intensively interlinked, with many feedback loops and systemic strengths" (Holden, 2015a:2). While Holden doesn't claim that his ecology is a complete, totalising account of culture, he argues that the ecological metaphor "offers a richer and more complete understanding of the subject" (Holden, 2015a:2). He advocates an ecological approach "that concentrates on relationships and patterns within the overall system, whereby careers develop, money flows and content moves" (Holden, 2015a:3).

Ecology without hierarchy?

I suggest that a problem with Holden's ecology, and the ecology metaphor as it is commonly used, is that it pushes questions of equality and agency aside, in favour of

what Holden perceives to be an “explicitly non-hierarchical” system in which “all parts of the cultural system are interdependent and, in this sense equal, and equally valuable: all parts are needed to make the whole” (2015:12). According to this thesis, the ecology has no hierarchy.

This raises a number of questions; Are all parts of the cultural system interdependent? Does ‘interdependence’ equate to a value that matches, balances or redistributes cultural, social or economic value (values that Holden says very little about)? Can an ecological approach escape the necessities of economics?

While Holden’s attempt to redistribute value via the interdependency of cultural activity has merit, his positioning of the funded sector reflects a common assumption that undermines this effort. Holden discursively acknowledges that “new ideas can be generated and acted on anywhere in the cultural ecology” and questions “the ability of the parts of the cultural sector to learn from each other” (Holden, 2015:9), but he ultimately foregrounds the policy driven idea that the funded sector is “the base on which the rest of culture is built”, where “vital R&D is undertaken” and “cutting edge new knowledge is generated” (2015:8). By privileging the funded sector in this way, Holden’s *Ecology of Culture* supports the traditional boundaries of public funding while ignoring the underlying structural forces that ensure that these boundaries remain skewed towards cultural hierarchies that institutionalise inequality and serve the interests of a privileged few.

In this sense the ‘Ecology of Culture’ enables socially constituted cultural hierarchies to be legitimised and reproduced by accepting without critique that “publicly-funded cultural organisations act as a source of legitimacy for emerging creative talent” (Holden, 2007:20). Looking at culture through the lens of sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1993), Howard Becker (1982), Janet Wolff (1981) or Georgina Born (2010), who focus on questions of hierarchy, capital and agency, reveals that, rather than challenge extant hierarchies and redistribute value, Holden’s ‘Ecology of Culture’ submits to the homeostasis foisted upon us by the natural laws of the ecosystem. I talking here about the covert social laws that ensure that those who possess the rarefied knowledge and social capital to ordain what is to be officially recognised as legitimate or ‘cutting edge’, dominate the destinations of public

funding and so inescapably institutionalize a hierarchy of cultural value.

There is little doubt that the social-structural inequalities of funded culture should be of concern to the policy maker. More than three-quarters of cultural workers are from middle class backgrounds, having parents who worked in managerial or professional jobs. More than half had at least one parent with a degree and 88% of people working in the arts worked unpaid at some point in their career (Create London, 2015). Arts Professional's *Pulse: Diversity in the Arts* (2017) survey found that social class is the "elephant in the room" and the "biggest barrier to engagement in the arts"(Arts Professional diversity survey, 2017). Only 11% of staff at Arts Council Funded National Portfolio Organisations are from a Black and Minority Ethnic background, compared to 16% of the working-age population. Excluding the IT sector, only 6.5% of workers in Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) are non-white (Taylor and O'Brien, 2017:5).

The Warwick commission's briefing on 'the future of cultural value' revealed that;

> "The wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the population forms the most culturally active segment of all; between 2012 and 2015 they accounted for at least 28% of live attendance to theatre, benefitting from £85 per head of arts council theatre funding. The same 8% also accounted for 44% of attendance to live music, benefitting from another £94 per head of arts council funding. For the visual arts, this highly engaged minority accounted for 28% of visits gaining a further £37 per head" (Belfiore and Neelands, 2014:3)

Rather than create a framework for tackling these inequalities, Holden's approach is to effectively ignore them. By proposing a model that ignores the structuring role of hierarchy and the uneven distribution of cultural value, Holden's ecology waves through, without critique, the covert reproduction of inequality that Bourdieu described as "symbolic violence (…) exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu, 1996:167). According to Bourdieu, recipients misrecognise the symbolic violence of the dominant group as something, natural, simply the way of the world (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002).

The role of the ecology metaphor is to obfuscate the way that the boundaries of cultural funding become frontlines for symbolic violence and inequality. While Holden stresses that grassroots (he uses the term homemade) activity can “aspire to and achieve the highest standards, equivalent to those found in the professional sector, whether funded or commercial”(Holden, 2015b:9) he sidesteps the uncomfortable reality that the very idea of ‘grassroots’ culture is created *by* funding, structured in such a way that necessitates that funded institutions define themselves against something; ‘cutting edge’, ‘professional’ and ‘important’. These distinctions implicitly render grassroots activity anachronistic, less professional and less important. Holden highlights the scale, economic potential and diversity of grassroots culture, but more-or-less relegates it to a conceptual silo, beyond the scope of official cultural policy, reinforcing the situation where “official measures and official provision of culture both exclude everyday (grassroots) forms of cultural activity” (O'Brien and Oakley, 2015a:10).

Holden situates the value of grassroots activity in its ‘interconnections’ within the ecosystem, where it both contributes to, and crucially, benefits from the work of the funded cultural sector. In this way, the ecology metaphor provides useful facility by assuming causality in the “flows” of “people“, “money“, “careers“, “products“ and “ideas“ (Holden, 2015:15) between funded and unfunded cultural activity. In cultural policy, causality is usually assumed to flow from the funded to the unfunded parts of the ecosystem and in doing so, provides justification.

In this way the ecology metaphor has a similar rhetorical function to the economically conceived ‘Spillover benefits’ (or trickle-down) of the neoliberal culture-led regeneration schemes that undergirded the construction of costly cultural centres such as The Public in West Bromwich or the Millennium Dome project. Many have observed how the supposed ‘Spillover benefits’ often fail to materialise and that investments predicated on top down ‘trickles’ act to further institutionalise pernicious hierarchies of cultural value and inequality. Kong et al’s expansive study of the subject found that constructing what she calls “mega facilities” actually contributes to the depletion of local cultural assets, consuming large amounts of public resources with little benefit to large sections of communities (Kong, Chia-ho and Tsu-Lung,

2015:8).

Comunian and Mould's analysis of The Baltic Gateshead made similar conclusions, highlighting the "weak connection between local practitioners and cultural flagship developments" (Comunian and Mould, 2014:2). One interviewee summed up the absence of the 'trickle', noting that the flagship "tends to take a lot of regional money, but doesn't really invest in local people" (2014:13). The authors concluded that although "public investment in arts and culture has been promoted as impacting on local creative economy, [it] often ignores the potential and possible links with the [local] creative industries" (Comunian and Mould, 2014:17).

Holden strives to develop an ecology model that moves beyond the 'spill-over thesis' which "implies a uni-directional movement of ideas, people or content from one part of culture to another" (Holden, 2015b:11) towards a non-hierarchical ecology thesis. While this might be possible in theory, in practice, primacy is given to a top down funded institutional framework where fiscal intervention is presumed to stimulate the wider ecology and so the metaphor is often indistinguishable from the 'spill-over' thesis Holden seeks to escape.

Undergirding traditional cultural hierarchies while advancing the notion that all cultural activity is 'interdependent', the ecology metaphor provides a useful rhetorical device to the policymaker seeking to circumvent questions of inequality. This is exemplified by Arts Council England's (ACE) response to the geographic inequalities highlighted by *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital* (RoCC) report (Stark, Gordon and Powell, 2013). The RoCC report found significant geographic inequalities in arts funding between London and the rest of England, stating that "combining […] DCMS expenditure with that of Arts Council England produces a benefit per head of population in the capital of £68.99, compared to £4.58 in the rest of England" (Stark, Gordon and Powell, 2013:8).

Arts Council England's response, *This England: How Arts Council England uses its investment to shape a national cultural ecology* (Arts Council England, 2014) uses the accommodating concept of the 'Ecology of Culture' to circumvent its culpability, assigning itself the role of "Direct[ing] our investment in considered and sustainable

ways, to benefit the whole arts and cultural ecology – the living, evolving network of artists, cultural organisations and venues co-operating in many fruitful partnerships – artistic, structural and financial" (Arts Council England, 2014:4).

Playing down the challenge brought by the RoCC report, *This England* states that "geography is one aspect of how investment can be viewed, but only one of many […] we need to make the money work hard by using it in a strategic way, taking careful account of how the many parts of our cultural networks interconnect and work with each other." (2014:4). Couching the 'Ecology of Culture' in the language of new public management, *This England* sidesteps the ethical ramifications and imbalance of power created by geographic inequality, while preserving its authority over cultural 'investment', claiming that they have learned how best to "use resources to shape the cultural ecology, and the importance of adhering to a long-term strategy" (Holden, 2015b:17).

Writing in Arts Professional, Liz Hill scrutinised the data lying beneath the ambiguous ecological rhetoric of *This England* to conclude that:

> "Rather than present a balanced picture of its investment in England's arts and cultural sector, ACE is in effect making a case for the status quo […] there can be no justification for the sort of analytical trickery, that is all too evident in its submission to the Culture Media and Sport Select Committee." (Hill, 2014)

Despite ACE's claims to nurture the whole cultural ecosystem, geographic inequality persists. In 2016 Dorling and Hennig's evaluation of the UK's London-centric cultural inequality concluded that "the English have become culturally attuned to seeing and experiencing a geography of extreme inequality as normal" (2016:1) highlighting that "the situation in the UK is unusual for Europe. It is also unusual for any English-speaking, affluent country" (2016:7).

Bringing the rhetoric of ecology and the reality of inequality together, the proposition delivered by *This England* is that by privileging the whitest, more affluent echelons of culture in London, ACE are 'strategically stimulating' cultural activity elsewhere in the

global ecology (ACE, 2018). As with the illusive ‘splillover’, there is little evidence to support the idea that there exists an ecology that demands for the niche interests of a privileged minority be publicly subsidised so that cultural activity might be stimulated (unsubsidised) elsewhere, or that ACE are successfully nurturing cultural activity beyond that of its own institutional construction. *This England* was published at a time when independent music venues, excluded from official policy provision by the cultural hierarchy that governs cultural funding, continued to slide deeper into crisis. 35% of small music venues in London closed down between 2007 and 2015 (Taylor, 2015:40).

Conclusion

While the idea that everything is connected and therefore equal is a useful device for the re-distribution of cultural value, it is also a fallacy that allows inequality to prevail. Holden’s idea that, through the ecology metaphor, we should *imagine* that culture is not hierarchically formulated is fundamentally at odds with both reality and his own positioning of funded culture, which simultaneously imports and ignores the cultural hierarchy that undoubtedly influences the way we “see our position in relation to culture” (Holden, 2015:12); the way artists produce work; the way audiences engage with cultural products and so on. If the inequalities of cultural policy are to be addressed, then covert systems of hierarchization should be made visible, not swept under the ecology metaphor carpet.

Encouraging policy makers to value cultural activity that exists beyond the borders of what policy directly supports is no bad thing. The ecology metaphor is useful for locating and describing certain connections, but fundamental ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions are insufficiently accessed. By ignoring the underlying structural forces that determine the destinations of cultural funding, Holden’s ‘Ecology of Culture’ does little to advance our understanding of cultural production or consumption. *This England* (ACE, 2014) demonstrates how, in practice, the ecology metaphor serves as a rhetorical device that sidesteps questions of inequality while retaining the capacity to erroneously claim achievements for cultural policy.

In practice, the ecology metaphor makes itself available for narratives that legitimise and even make it possible to re-frame inequality as a strategic imperative. Focusing

on particular connections that justify funded culture is useful, but it obscures the possibility of activities that emerge from entirely different networks and reasoning. For example, the unfunded Gospel Jazz Festival that took place in Bearwood, Birmingham in 2018, might be better explained by the social relationships that exist between a musician, church organisers and faith, than by drawing a catalogue of independent organisational structures and actions into a complex web of tenuous links that may be evinced as 'ecological' phenomena that has been successfully 'stimulated' by the 'investment approach' of an outstanding goal-led cultural policy (ACE, 2014).

Further research is needed to determine the extent to which funded and grassroots culture are 'interdependent' and in what ways the funded sector enables grassroots activity and vice-versa. Research should seek to identify and explore activities that are at least one step removed from the funded sector, as well as the activities of intermediaries that are engaged in the funded sector and therefore represent a connectedness that may not apply to all actors engaged in cultural production.

About the author

After working as a pie poker*, salad bar refresher, burger flipper, shed dipper and small-time music impresario, I've eked out what I generously refer to as a 'career in the arts'. As community arts activist, creative producer, programmer, fund raiser, I lead complex, multi-art-form creative activities. My award-winning work has been cited as good practice by ACE, DCMS and DFES and received international media coverage. In 2017 I was awarded a national Productivity Investment Fund Scholarship to undertake doctoral research into alternative models for creative practice in Urban rejuvenation.
*My pie-poking experience became the subject of 'Stories to Tell in the Middle of the Night' a theatre piece by Francesca Millican Slater: **** "the bleakest thing I've ever heard" - Lynn Gardener

References

ACE (2018) *Context for our approach to investment in 2018-22*.
Arts Council England (2014) 'This England: how Arts Council England uses its

investment to shape a national cultural ecology'. doi: 10.1080/09548963.2014.961299.

Becker, H. (1982) *Art Worlds*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Belfiore, E. and Neelands, J. (2014) 'Warwick commission future of cultural value'.

Born, G. (2010) 'The Social and Aesthetic; For a post Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production', *Cultural Sociology*, 4(2), pp. 171–319.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) 'Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (translation)', p. 613. doi: 10.1080/10848770.2013.772046.

Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. Edited by R. Johnson. Cambrige: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1996) *The Rules of Art*, *Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. doi: 10.4324/9780203131527.

Brien, D. O. and Oakley, P. K. (2015) 'Cultural Value and Inequality: A Critical Literature Review', *A Report commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Cultural Value Project*, p. 28. Available at: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/cultural-value-and-inequality-a-critical-literature-review/ (Accessed: 12 January 2018).

Comunian, R. and Mould, O. (2014) 'The weakest link: Creative industries, flagship cultural projects and regeneration', *City, Culture and Society*, 5(2), pp. 65–74. doi: 10.1016/j.ccs.2014.05.004.

Create London (2015) *Survey | Panic*. Available at: http://www.createlondon.org/panic/survey/ (Accessed: 26 January 2018).

Dorling, D. and Hennig, B. D. (2016) 'London and the English desert – the geography of cultural capital in the UK', *Cultural Trends*, pp. 35–46. doi: 10.1080/09548963.2015.1134097.

Hill, L. (2014) *It's England, Jim, but not as you know it | Blog | ArtsProfessional*, *Arts Professional*. Available at: https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/blog/its-england-jim-not-you-know-it (Accessed: 2 July 2018).

Holden, J. (2007) 'Publicly-funded culture and the creative industries', *Demos, London*, (June). Available at: http://vle.bruford.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/5724/mod_resource/content/0/DEMOS_-_John_Holden_Publicly_funded_culture_and_the_creative_industries_2007.pdf.

Holden, J. (2015a) 'The Ecology of Culture', *Arts and Humanities Research Council*, (January), p. 41. Available at: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/project-reports-and-

reviews/the-ecology-of-culture/.
Holden, J. (2015b) 'The Ecology of Culture'. Available at: http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/documents/project-reports-and-reviews/the-ecology-of-culture/ (Accessed: 10 January 2018).
Jackson Philip W. (2000) *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art*. Yale University Press,.
Kong, L., Chia-ho, C. and Tsu-Lung, C. (2015) *Arts, Culture and the Making of Global Cities*, *Arts, Culture and the Making of Global Cities: Creating New Urban Landscapes in Asia*. doi: 10.4337/9781784715847.
Krause, A. (2011) *Art As Politics*. Porsgrunn: New Compass Press.
Richens, F. (2016) *Arts professional diversity survey*.
Stark, P., Gordon, C. and Powell, D. (2013) 'Rebalancing our Cultural Capital', (October 2013), pp. 2013–2014. Available at: http://www.theroccreport.co.uk/downloads.php.
Taylor, M. and O'Brien, D. (2017) '"Culture is a meritocracy": Why creative workers' attitudes may reinforce social inequality', *Sociological Research Online*, p. 136078041772673. doi: 10.1177/1360780417726732.
Taylor, T. (2015) *Londons Grassroot Music Venues; A Rescue Plan*.
Webb, J., Schirato, T. and Danaher, G. (2002) 'Understanding Bourdieu', *Cultural studies.*, p. xvi, 209. doi: 10.4135/9781446221488.
Wolff, J. (1981) *The Social Production of Art*. Edited by S. Hall and P. Walton. Macmillan Publishers LTD.