Commentary

Who gets to consume the arts, when and under what conditions have always been important questions for cultural policy makers; as has the related one of who gets to make them. Chan and Goldthorpe’s work in this issue is to be welcomed therefore, for injecting an empirical note into what can often become a heated, and misguided, debate.

Their description of cultural omnivores versus cultural univores seems to me a useful description, though the policy makers who want to take it further may have to think up snappier ways of describing these groups. Equally useful is the de-coupling of class from status, though since ‘class’ has fallen out of favour as a term that policy makers actually use, in favour of less accurate terms like ‘people on low incomes’ or ‘the socially excluded’, the immediate utility of this distinction may be lost.

But there are remaining issues, both with the Chan and Goldthorpe study itself and, more importantly, with the policy implications that flow from it, that bear some attention.

Firstly, I can’t help thinking that this notion of a ‘group of cultural consumers whose consumption is essentially confined to high cultural forms’, and who do not consume more popular culture, is something of a straw man. It is not clear to me that a group of people who go to the opera, but never listen to pop music; or attend the National Theatre, but never the National Film Theatre, have existed, either in imagination or in reality for some time. Nor am I convinced that it is this particular notion of elitism that underlies New Labour policy on ‘access’. When the Chairman of the Arts Council is at least as well known for his work on Spaghetti Westerns, as he is for his work on Rousseau, the notion of a high-culture-only elite seems something of a chimera.

Secondly, and I am aware that this is an argument that Chan and Goldthorpe have sought to refute on several occasions (see, for instance, Chan & Goldthorpe, 2006), the categories used in the research are crude and do not allow the researchers to make sufficient distinctions about the possibility for stratification within them. Thus, the film category (which is considered ‘popular culture’, though why should it be more so than the theatre?) does not allow one to distinguish between a Tarkovsky retrospective at the art house cinema or a showing of Die Hard 4 at the local multiplex. In popular music terms, whether I like Bob Dylan, Arcade Fire or Atomic Kitten does not register, therefore the possibilities for differentiation within categories is lost, though this is surely where it matters most. Sub-cultural musical differences may not be as strong as when mods fought running battles with rockers in the fifties and sixties, but that is not to say they have gone away completely.

Further interrogation of these categories is surely warranted (while recognizing that this is impossible with the data sets available) before we can safely conclude there is ‘no
cultural elite’, not least because opportunities to differentiate are continually being reproduced. A recent US study suggested that the social networking sites, Facebook and MySpace, are increasingly dividing along class lines, with Facebook appealing to the better-educated, white middle class, and MySpace remaining the choice of ethnic minorities, working and lower middle-class class kids (Johnson, 2007).

In policy terms one might say why does this matter? People seek to differentiate themselves according to particular cultural tastes and associate themselves with others who share their passions. So what?

It is here that I think that the findings about omnivores and univores can become important and can lead to a more informed policy approach, though other misconceptions may need to be cleared out of the way first.

The real problem is that while intellectual and social elites may consume popular culture—indeed the amount of space the broadsheets devote to deconstructing Big Brother may lead one to assume they consume nothing else—but in policy and funding terms, many aspects of popular culture remain beyond the pale. Thus, while film has achieved the status of an art form worthy of public support, videogames have not, at least outside of ‘economic development’ initiatives. Art house or ‘public service’ videogame content has no significant backer in the UK—unless one counts the military’s funding of so-called ‘serious games’. Similarly, popular music is treated schizophrenically; either name-checked by politicians seeking to establish credibility or blamed for gang violence. The fact that the first kind of popular music is white and the other black should not be ignored, either.

More worryingly, it is still assumed that popular culture can be safely left to the market, while classical culture needs to be protected from its ravages. Thus, small bookshops and record shops are allowed to go the wall, nightclubs can close or be turned into apartments, and cricket, our national summer game, can be made available only on pay TV. All of these could be construed as issues on which cultural policy makers should have a voice; all of these are places were people become exposed to culture, but policymakers seem content to leave this to ineffectual competition regulation.

A cultural policy that seeks to create ‘omnivores’ of more of us, if that is indeed its aim, must therefore recognize the real threats. One of the gravest seems to me the increasing ‘personalization’ of cultural consumption, with the growth of multi-channel TV; books, film and music recommendation sites; and social networking that seeks to ‘sort’ us according to pre-stated cultural preferences.

TV, the great democratic cultural educator of my childhood, has largely given up that role. Writing just after the deaths of both Bergman and Antonioni, I can remember coming across both Blow Up and Fanny and Alexander just by watching TV, and not some special, European-art-house film channel. In terms of cinematic education, the average TV watcher in the 1970s would have come across everything from Buster Keaton to the Marx Brothers, Busby Berkeley to the Bicycle Thieves, just by sitting in front of the television. A similar TV-watching child today will have no such luck. They might get to know that these joys exist because their parents will tell them, or they will most likely never find out.
It should be the aim of cultural policy to provide multiple opportunities for consumption and taste formation. But that means grappling with the marketplace in which much of it is produced. My concern is not that cultural policy concerns itself with ensuring that the some of us get access to ‘high’ culture; but that it neglects so much of what makes up the rest of our culture, to the detriment of us all.

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