

Methodology and Ideology in the Evaluation of Cultural Investments

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The social impact of cultural institutions, their programmes and events is an imprecise concept, used in multiple ways by government agencies, cultural institutions, and researchers (AEA Consulting). At least in the UK,² there has been a growing tendency to link cultural sector usage of the term, social impact, to questions of social exclusion (Policy Action Team Ten; DCMS, *Libraries*; Social Exclusion Unit, *Preventing*), but it is clear that the question of impact goes beyond this. The description and analysis of the current state of social impact knowledge within the cultural field must begin from the following four basic structural features:

1. There is no benchmark classification (Boyne, “Classification”) of cultural institutions, their programmes and events.³

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² This is the first publication deriving from a comparative research project, sponsored by the Durham University Office of the Partnership Venture Fund and Culture North East. The project aims to assess current methodological developments in cultural evaluation, and to develop some French and German case studies for comparative purposes.

³ There is some work in the European context which is relevant. The Eurobarometer survey of cultural participation in 2002 appears to have been a ‘one-off’ and sought very little discrimination in its broad categories. Allin reports in 2004 on a serious attempt by European statisticians to work on this issue in the late 1990s, but having agreed a framework the problem was they had no substantive statistics to illustrate its utility, and the project ended without a future strategy partly due to a lack of political support. He also notes progress being made within the Eurostat system by the Audio-Visual Statistics Working Group. Madden (“International Comparisons”) provides a survey of current issues, and a checklist for cross-national comparison work. David Coish (“Census metropolitan”) has also done useful work on the culture industries for Statistics Canada. Finally, it

2. There is no reference list of the social groups impacted upon, either potentially or actually, by the cultural sector.
3. Paradigmatic clarity with respect to the political, social and psychological processes which structure the sector's engagement with and impact upon social groups and their members does not exist.
4. There is no clear understanding of the permanence, duration or fragility of the social impact of cultural institutions and events.

Individual cultural institutions have collected information about their own particular operations, sometimes for a number of years, but aggregation of this data is substantially beyond present methodological and resource capacities. In the UK, there have been five or so serious general studies (as opposed to project specific evaluations) of the social impact of cultural institutions and events (Matarasso; Hooper-Greenhill et al., *Museums and Social Inclusion* and *A Catalyst for Change*; Bryson et al.; Long et al.). There is scattered work in other places, including California (Mataraza et al.), Canada (see Brault), and Australia (Winchester, Australian Expert Group).

It might seem surprising that the UK government's drive, over the last 25 years of public sector review, to cut costs, reduce wastage, spend wisely where it is needed, and improve accountability, exemplified by its 1999 *Best Value* Local Government Act, has not led as yet to a clear general statement of assumptions concerning the social impact of cultural institutions and events. It is less surprising that this is so elsewhere in the world, since the UK has tended to lead the way in relation to the rationalisation and audit of public expenditure.⁴ The outcome of further development there is likely to

might be noted that the California economic impact study refers to more than 650 separate types of creative industry organisation. (Mataraza et al. 18)

⁴ Part of the reason for this may be the remaining dominance outside the UK of a general ideology (frequently trespassed against, it is sure) which tends to link artistic excellence (valued for its own sake) with autonomous cultural institutions. Thus the US National Endowment for the Arts phrases its current five year strategy as follows: 'The National Endowment for the Arts enriches our Nation and its diverse cultural heritage by supporting works of artistic excellence, advancing learning in the arts, and strengthening the arts in communities throughout the country.' While the Japanese Ministry for Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is similarly focused on its own missions, which include, 'to work to develop an environment that enables artists

emerge in relation to the dialogue between the UK Arts Council's 1980s negotiating position that the prime social impact of cultural institutions and events is economic, and the late 1990s response, summarised by Matarasso (*Use or Ornament?*), which emphasised the many ways that cultural institutions and events can form, shape and enhance individuals and their communities.

This was indeed the UK dialogue in 1997 when the new government Department of Culture, Media and Sport was formed, and when the national Museums, Libraries and Archives Council was formed three years later. There is as yet little sign of its transcendence – at least in the UK – but it is worth noting that both sides of the dialogue – between, as it were, two virtual positions within the command structure of the cultural sector – ground the value of cultural events and institutions outside of the field of culture itself; these institutions and events are reviewed and called upon to review themselves in economic and community terms, even if with intermittent reluctance on their part.⁵ As an important aside, it is important to recognise that both sides of this virtual debate simultaneously take for granted and ignore the commitments to the intrinsic values internal to cultural forms such as painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, music, dance, film and theatre which are essential to the existence and reproduction of the cultural field. To employ an organic metaphor, it is as if the institutions of cultural governance are only seriously interested in what the sector can do, not in how it is. Should this continue for a further substantial period, it is probable that the outcome will be a degree of loss, and that an *unintended* consequence of the present situation, whereby the only form of examination of the operative commitments to the intrinsic and constitutive values of the cultural field is through the current form of public management, will be that the sector is able to do less.

and art organizations to conduct freely creative activities, and to make these cultural activities accessible to all people'. The Annual MEXT White Paper has not addressed Culture and the Arts directly since 1993 – in major policy terms, the Japanese state has allowed the sector to maintain its balance of intrinsic artistic values and consequent functioning contribution to national and community agenda.

⁵ The defence of curatorial autonomy at the Baltic modern art museum in Newcastle upon Tyne, for example, presented from some quarters in terms of a logic of contemporary art, can be seen as constituting a rejection of the ruling economic and social impact paradigm.

At the level of the institutions and events themselves therefore, there has been an increase in the pressure to adopt the input-output paradigm, and to measure, review and evaluate in its terms. There has been an associated increase in initiatives to improve results through such means as audience development (McCarthy et al., *A New Framework*; Morton Smythe), collaborative projects, and outreach work. It is arguable that illustrating this work through case studies and descriptive accounts of participant reaction is an essential, if not the only, way to communicate what is being done. It is understandable although disappointing that the UK Audit Commission's 2005 work on the evaluation of local authority cultural and related services, often referred to as the 'Culture Block', appeared to give no thought whatsoever to qualitative aspects of evaluation, even though they clearly figure in individual inspections.⁶ The Audit Commission, like the scorpion, is what it is. Its demand is that measurement is essential to ensure and demonstrate success.

What the current audit, review and management demands omit, however, is something really quite crucial in their own terms. Measured success matters because it communicates something important to a particular audience – the robust presence of an accountability regime, confirming verifiable excellence at best, admitted failure at worst. The governance function does not, of course, end with the receipt of measurements. Excellence must be announced, failure must be analysed and corrected. This too is part of the disposition to accountability. At this point graphic but reliable narrative accounts are needed. Their classic vehicles are the press release and the Inspectorate report. To cut a long story short – these qualitative measures, presented to the appropriate standard, should have been part of the measurement process from the beginning. The two key questions at the nodes of judgement (including, through the media, by the public) are, 'We can see the figures, but what is it really like?' and 'We can see that these stories are wonderful and will stand up, but how are the figures?'

⁶ See, for example, the Best Value Review of Shropshire Museum Services in 2001 (Audit Commission, *Best Value Inspection*). The pleasure expressed there by the two individual inspectors in the quality of the collections is in sharp contrast to the lack of such interest in the 2005 consultation process on performance indicators for the cultural field. (Audit Commission, *CPA Service Assessment*). There is a significant contrast (and perhaps this is to labour the point) between Audit Commission evaluation demands and the advice given in well-regarded evaluation 'toolkits' (for example, Moriarty; Jackson).

This is why the Audit Commission's neglect of the relationship between quantitative and qualitative measurement holds down the quality⁷ of its work.

It is often very sound strategy to look for a strategy that avoids the worst of both worlds. But it does seem that, wise counsel though that last statement might be, the search is on for the one formula that will turn experiential narratives into solid evidence and that will add an axiological dimension to percentages, correlations and rank ordering. There are five ways in which such a leap might be produced:

- Personal testimony could be ground between hard boards to leave a residue which cannot be denied or ignored. This is not necessarily a model of the interrogation or deep security clearance kind, since it more typically arises out of media amplification processes working on individual stories. The question is whether the area of qualitative methodology could be legitimately extended to produce comparable outcomes and therefore increase impact. The simple technique that springs to mind is to find the stories and keep telling them, but should there not be a professional sensibility behind that impulse?
- Methodological breakthroughs in the field of culture research perhaps comparable to the development in 1972 of the statistical method of 'partial likelihood' in the health care field, which allowed rigorous estimation of hazard in relation to altering circumstances and over time. However, the signs here are not propitious. The International Statistics Institute does not have a cultural statistics sub-section, indeed its interest in such applied areas seems relatively weak. The most promising area for the future may be the joint work of UNESCO, OECD and Eurostat, but the UNESCO Institute of Statistics programme to 2007 is centred on work to agree international categories for cultural statistics, and appears to have no 'blue skies' aspect at all.

⁷ For some helpful reflections on statistics, contextualisation and quality, see Allin.

- Operational transcendence of the two critical dichotomies⁸ (the first in evaluation methodology; the second with respect to the strategic logics of the cultural institutions)
 - Quantitative ~ Qualitative
 - Goal-focused ~ Value-focused

but it needs to be recognised that this may practically amount to a change of language and assumptions.

- An innovation in the defining assumptions of cultural evaluation, which might have happened, but probably did not, with Pierre Bourdieu's development of the concept of cultural capital – the message there being that finding a new language is relatively easy; the hard part is getting it accepted. To take an example, the recognition of the importance in cultural research of a generational time-scale is widespread, yet its strategic space within the cultural field is weak.
- A collective re-working of the specific objects of the cultural research process led from within the cultural institutions themselves.

Proceeding from that last bullet point, what kinds of impacts, social and economic, could the cultural research mechanism measure and describe? We can get a pretty good picture by integrating recent Californian and Canadian material with the work of Matarasso and others. The categories of impact and output which form the basis for what may be claimed to emerge from the work of cultural institutions (both intrinsic and applied) are as follows:

- personal development of skills, vision and motivation, enabling
 - increase in individual employability

⁸ There are theoretical resources available, such as attempts to reconceptualise, to emphasise its defining realism, the overall research paradigm which contains the quantitative-qualitative distinction (Thorleif); and the possibility certainly exists of the compatibility of the Frankfurt School critique of instrumentalism with a critique of religion, thus at least allowing the possibility of a transcending critique of both instrumentalism and 'art for art's sake' immanence at the same time (Adorno is a place to start, but there is a huge literature bearing on the question whether demands which derive from principles of efficiency and management are inimical to creativity and imagination).

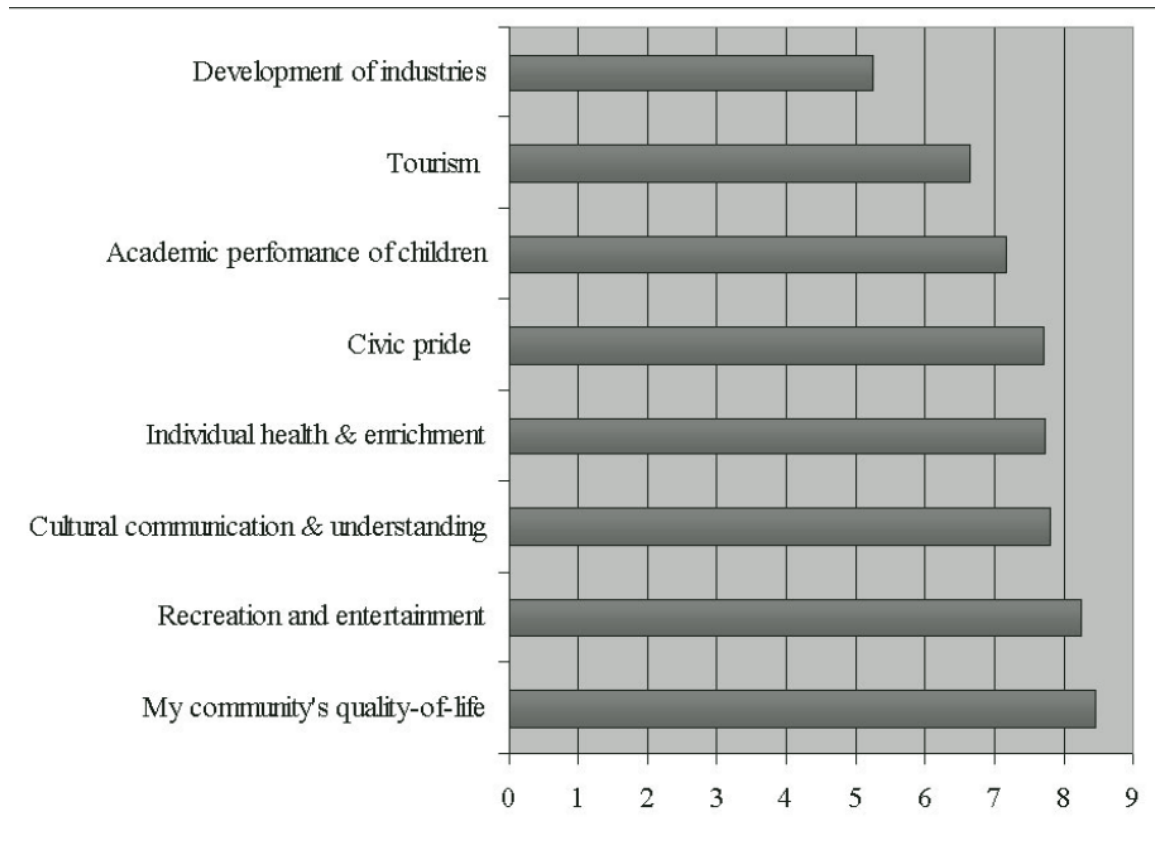
- alleviation of some mental health conditions, and palliative strategies to work alongside serious and long-term medical treatment
 - reduction in youth crime and alienation
 - loyalty to shared and emerging values
 - enjoyment of the arts for their own sake
 - realisation of the life-long power of education, and self-determination to participate in further and higher education
 - recognition of environmental responsibilities
 - emergence of a reflexive approach to self, and a constructively critical approach to others
- community cohesion, esteem, empowerment and self-development
 - enhancement of local and regional identity
 - positive reflections of cultural diversity
 - project-based employment and involvement
 - entrepreneurship in the creative industries and elsewhere.

Before we engage with the methodological issues which arise in the area of social impact study, it is important to realise that the rigorous estimation of social impact is not the only model which is of importance for the cultural sector. No matter how defensible data might be, it will not serve any of the purposes and values of the cultural sector unless it is well-disseminated and then received non-prejudicially. For this reason, and as a check for cross-matching with the social impact work, it will be necessary to digress into the area of arts advocacy, and to consider two recent examples.

For the 2004 California Economic Impact of the Arts study, 3,405 organisations were included (it has, of course, to be borne in mind that California is the world's fifth largest economy). The top 200 in revenue terms were fully surveyed, the remainder

were statistically sampled. As the report explains, economic impact was calculated by taking the direct expenditures within the arts sector and adding a multiplier. When employees spend their salaries on household needs and bills, this creates economic activity in the areas concerned. Arts bodies buy a huge range of material and services which also creates economic activity. This derived economic activity is scaled up using the agreed multiplier (to take account of the subsequent economic activity due to these expenditures), and the aggregate sum is added to the total direct spending of all arts organizations. This provides the estimated total economic impact of the sector.

The methodology is standard in public sector accounting and review. In the Californian case, it yields an annual economic impact figure for organization expenditures of 3.5 billion dollars, and this is not the end of the story. To be added to this is the figure, similarly derived, for audience spending, which is shown to be 2 billion dollars. The combined total of 5.5 billion dollars is the measurement of the economic impact annually of the not-for-profit arts sector in California, and it affirms its presence and significance within the state and national context. Comparable work is done for the numbers of jobs represented by all this activity. The Study then breaks down the sub-sectors of the activity by arts area and by geographic region to provide details of sub-regional and sub-sector activity. The Study, having established the absolute scale of the sector proceeds to explore its importance in two further basic areas: quality of life and education. In the former, 2700 survey forms were distilled into Table 1.

Table 1: Quality of life factors ranked in importance by arts audiences

Source: Mataraza 72.

As can be detected, the respondents were asked to rank the importance of the arts sector on a scale of 1 (weak) to 10 (strong). To the economic weight, then, is added a measure of public opinion. The final descriptive point to be made about the Study concerns its demonstration of the value of the arts, both economically and non-economically in primary education. It is made a significant area, with economic impact toward 700 million dollars annually, and strong indication of its education use and importance.

The California study follows a basic arts advocacy model. Its simple message is ‘This is what we do. It’s big and important on lots of levels. Please continue to support us.’ The study in itself creates further interest in the arts. It is not a passive review, or an obedient evaluation. It very clearly, however, was a great deal of work. The previous

report of this form had been ten years previously. Alongside this can be set the 2004 *Canada Council Advocacy Resource Kit*.⁹ The important headings from this are:

- ‘Boxed’ quotations as ‘evidence’.
- Provision of web addresses where further information can be accessed.
- Why advocate – a conversational approach which exemplifies the approach – get the arts into the consciousness of decision-makers.
- What to advocate
 - Size
 - Success
 - International competitiveness and comparability
 - Presence of major figures, events, achievements
 - Role in new technology
 - Importance for Canadian identity.
- Why and how to take some personal responsibility and become an advocate – with many focused suggestions about how to do this (most are internet-based), and advice specifically for artists as well as enthusiasts for the sector generally.
- Distinction between advocacy and lobbying. The former does not aim to influence decisions, but to raise awareness and understanding of the sector as a whole.
- Key messages (with examples and references to consult) on community, diversity/minority cultures, participation, economic contribution, Canadian identity, relevance for creative thinking/problem-solving, and on young people and their positive development – all this reinforced in a later more detailed section.

⁹ This is not necessarily a pristine model of its kind, but while lacking a degree of organisation, it is comprehensive, and contains its own instructions (how to advocate) for further dissemination.

- Advice for Arts and Culture Managers, also Board members, including an *Arts Advocacy Self-Assessment Tool*.
- Detailed, tabulated economic activity facts and figures broken down by province and by cultural sub-sector.
- Culture sector employment facts, broken down by region and sector.
- Focus on the culture industries: publishing, film, sound, broadcasting, multimedia, international trade figures for culture goods, heritage.
- Current challenges, stories, issues.
- Extended discussions of performing arts highlights.

The arts advocacy model promises strength in the areas of dissemination and mobilisation. It deserves further study through comparative analysis of campaign effectiveness in the cultural field, both sectorally and regionally/nationally. On the other hand, the area of social impact studies promises rigour and evidence. Both are interested in the social impact of cultural investment, and methodological deficits will damage both.

As Sara Selwood (“The politics of data”) shows, since at least the early 1990s¹⁰ the UK cultural sector has been directed to contribute to economic growth and reduce social exclusion. Cultural provision has been measured by its promotion of access to everyone, and subjected to monitoring and evaluation. However, funding decisions were based not on the evidence of outcomes achieved, but on the expectation that they will be achieved, and there has been growing realisation that proving the expected outcomes is not easy. In the 2003 DCMS Research Strategy, existing research methods are subjected to criticism: as far as social impacts are concerned, neither robust evidence nor systematic data has been produced. In the circumstances, it was not

¹⁰ From the beginning of the 1990s as access came to be a key issue, data collection would appear to demonstrate that people from all social sectors were participating in the results of cultural investment. The 1991 omnibus survey done by the Arts Council of Great Britain National Arts and Media Strategy was based on a sample of 7,919 people in the UK. Other surveys were produced (Selwood).

surprising that interest emerged in the possibilities for other kinds of evaluation that might deal differently with economic, educational and social impact. The hope, as mentioned earlier, was for a robust qualitative methodology. Selwood lists interviews, reflections, mind mapping of visitors, focus groups, social audit, case studies, project evaluations, critical incident techniques, organisational surveys, and public surveys. The conclusion that the debate edged towards was that such a trawl of the available qualitative methodologies did not promise a great deal, and it is at this point that the 2004 Holden paper is published by Demos. His argument was that a new discourse is needed.¹¹

This new discourse would need to go beyond Matarasso's intuitionism. Despite the apparent rationality of his planning and performance indicator model, the fact that not even flawed processes and poor data looked to be supporting claims made (see Merli)¹² saw the influence of his work waning after five years or so. Holden, no doubt riding the same wave as the DCMS Minister, Chris Smith, when he warned in 2003 that an obsession with impact risks ignoring "the fundamental life force of the cultural activity that gives rise to educational or economic value in the first place". So Holden looks to take us beyond evidence-based decision making in the field of culture. His notion of cultural value would create a new framework for cultural funding, recognising the affective side of cultural experience as well as measuring what is properly quantifiable, and also accepting the irreducibility of culture as part of social structure. His argument is that culture comes to be seen as something like health, an area which does not need to legitimate itself. Its constituent parts would include

¹¹ Selwood did make the point that keeping the field of methodology and evidence disorganised might be an optimum solution for the cultural sector.

¹² The answers to the following questions about Matarasso's work are not clear: What did his research measure? Did he lead his 513 respondents? Was it ever possible for him to use a control group? Could he measure the robustness of the social impacts he claimed? Why did he not systematically ask his respondents, across the 60 projects, if they were participants in the arts? Is participation a factor in explaining the 75% non-return rate of questionnaires? Why did he neglect to discuss adequately negative responses? If his sample was not representative, how could his 'findings' be extrapolated to the wider society? Are none of his claimed fifty impacts measurable? (see Merli).

quality, plurality, community, creativity.¹³ For Holden, the danger is that the emphasis on measurement and evaluation – which focuses on what cultural activity causes rather than on what it consists of and expresses – will lead us to institutionalise cultural mediocrity.

It is interesting that some values are given more weight than others. Thus there is little recognition of the possibility of a cultural multiplier which might operate in the same way as the economic multiplier, which we saw above in the Californian report. Recent work on derivatives may have some relevance for new thinking. In Holden's thinking about a new framework for understanding cultural value and for relocating the funding process, he does look to widen the value range (learning from anthropology, for example), to incorporate non-economic values, and to find a language which allows the discussion of historical, social, symbolic, aesthetic and spiritual values. From environmentalism he draws out the importance of duty of care, and system resilience plus diversity and creativity. This focus here on the structural pre-conditions of continuing community well-being links to debates in accounting which have drawn attention to desirability of explicating the resource base that makes profits possible (and also to the dangers attendant on this, as can perhaps be seen in the Enron case, where the *other* in the *ceteris paribus* assumption is accorded perhaps undue weight).

Holden does seem to think that we need to find ways to recognise why people value culture, and we may need a more powerful rhetoric of the creation of values. A formula might be something like: explicate the constituent values, relate this to social resilience, enhance conceptions of professional judgement, focus on value creation systemically, and enhance the public interest in the reproduction of cultural creativity.

Michelle Reeves (*Measuring*) suggested that social impact research in the cultural sector has the following needs:

¹³ Holden does not deal with the arguments between the areas of public spending which have no need for legitimisation (ie all of them!) but must still argue their case in the Government spending round. This may show that his wish to transcend methodological debate will not be fulfilled.

- Consistent use of key terms.
- Evaluation consciousness.
- Higher level of methodological rigour.
- Bi-polarity: recognising both quantitative and qualitative information.
- Short-, medium-, and long-term evaluation horizons.
- Enhanced comparability between projects and organisations.

But there is one sense in which such lists (and the work on which this interpretation is based is careful and comprehensive) may appear to miss the extraordinarily important distinction between measuring social impact *and creating it*. Where social impact is a priority (which need not be so for every funded cultural initiative!), measurement of particular social impacts is made easier, if the appropriate evaluation tools are constructed as part of the integral project design right from the beginning. At this first stage of project creation, one might go further and say that the intended audience needs to be intensely studied, and that the project and its intended outcomes should be substantially defined by that study (see AEA Consulting).

Postscript: Towards Global Horizons

In the vision of globalisation presented by such thinkers as Benjamin Barber and Antonio Negri (see Boyne, "Cinema"), the cultural field is subject to two countervailing tendencies. First, there is a set of forces which threaten the de-differentiation of the cultural field. Thus, on the one hand, the rationalising and enveloping administrative logics of contemporary political, legal and economic structures may be seen as having the potential for further evolution. Whether the sources of this development are politically led, as may have been the case with the spreading doctrine of audit and accountability, or whether they are juridically led as new situations test the meaning of constitutions and existing law, or whether they are

economically driven as the search for value means a continual striving to subordinate everything possible to the rule of the market, a systems prediction of the outcome of these tendencies – were they untrammelled – could be further homogenization and instrumentalisation of the cultural field. Second, however, the operational continuity of mass systems is dependent on local trust and loyalties. Heightened performance measured against global parameters in areas like output, health, education, crime prevention, and so on, are also underpinned by positive subject formation at the local level. This latter, seen functionally, at least, requires a substantial measure of cultural continuity and perceived fairness of cultural provision. Thus it is that the forces of cultural de-differentiation and cultural preservation are in tension. This is, of course, a tension which is far from fully described here, and has other dimensions: regional competition and ethnic diversity to name just two of them. The overall point, however, is that globalising tendencies may be seen as a factor in the development of cultural evaluation practice. The question of whether to embrace social impact methodology on a regional or national scale, or even to pilot it on a trial basis, may be wound up with perceptions of what this might appear to signal to a variety of audiences: local, regional, national, international. It is even possible to think that the further development of evaluation methodology for the cultural field is not simply a question of scientific work, but also has ethical ramifications, since such research may be perceived to contribute to the future devaluation of culture in itself.

Despite these arguments against the development and spread of the audit and accountability problematic across the cultural field, it remains the case, seen from a sociological point of view, that public spending on culture in any context requires in the long term robust legitimation. Unless a new language of cultural entitlement is learnt, or unless the roots of the public cultural funding ‘which has always been provided’ are absolutely secure, the utilitarian impulse behind social impact methodology is going to be irresistible. This does, finally, make one rather large assumption, which is that the methodology can be developed further to provide a solid foundation for at least that minimal level of public provision that would secure general assent in some form. The hope and expectation will be that it can go much further and

demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that cultural investment – in well-maintained and access-friendly libraries, parks, sports facilities, museums, exhibitions, events, concert halls, and theatres ... – has substantial and desirable social impact.

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