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Recensioni

R. Hewison (2014), *Cultural Capital. The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain*, London-New York: Verso, 278 pp.

Based on the deep examination of “grey literature” of policy documents and reports, academic commentaries, contemporary journalism and the author’s observation of events (p. vii), *Cultural Capital – The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain* provides a well-documented and detailed critical analysis of New Labour cultural policy between 1997 and 2012 – even the lack of public policy during this period.

Adopting a chronological approach, the book leads the reader from the “Golden Age” heralded by New Labour in 1997 (Introduction) through to the “Age of Lead” before concluding with the new prospects coming from “What next?” at the end of 2013 (Conclusion). Throughout the book the author helps readers to disentangle themselves between the «chauvinistic bombast» (p. 189) and «blistering jingoism» (p. 194) of the Government rhetoric and the fiasco of some projects (Millennium Dome) and events (the Olympics), unmasking the

betrayal of language (p. 181) and the illusion of a New Jerusalem (p. 234).

Through eight thematic chapters¹ Robert Hewison reveals his growing disenchantment, probing the gap between “words” and “things”, announced aims and achieved results, also discussing disappointments and failures, but without losing hope in the future of public policy and suggesting some possible paths for «the reconstruction of the public realm» (p. 231).

There are many topics the author deals with that merit further highlighting. Here we only mention those that had and continue to have a huge impact on cultural policies – not only in the UK.

First of all, Hewison discusses in depth the shift from “cultural” to “creative”, up to the rhetoric of “creativity”, sounding at last un beholden to the past and suggesting freedom and personal autonomy (p. 61). The zenith of this process is the invention of “Creative Britain” (p. 39), which the

¹ 1. Under New Public Management; 2. Cool Britannia; 3. ‘The Many Not Just the Few’; 4. The Amoeba – and Its Offspring; 5. ‘To Hell with Targets’; 6. The Age of Lead; 7. Olympic Rings; 8. Just the Few, Not the Many.

author identifies as a perfect example of New Labour's ideology continuing the all-pervasive and all-encompassing neoliberal programme established by the Conservatives:

When New Labour set out to encourage individualism and release a new spirit of entrepreneurialism, it had to use the state to set it free. To achieve this, it had to bring about not just institutional reform, but a *cultural* change [...] And who could be against creativity? Creativity is positive and forward-looking – it is *cool*, just as New Labour wished to be (p. 5).

In 1997, one of the first actions aiming at this target was the «profoundly ideological» (p. 27) change of name from Department of National Heritage to Department *for* Culture, Media and Sport:

Dropping 'heritage' meant that, throughout the Blair/Brown years, heritage organizations – notably English Heritage – would feel unfairly treated. [...] The economic and technological convergence between culture and media was the driver of what Smith claimed was a 'whole industrial sector that no one hitherto has even conceived of as an "industry"' – the cultural industries² (p. 28).

Defining creativity is a tricky task as it is often treated as a buzzword but, in fact, occurs in various industries outside the arts (p. 41). Of course, the computer software business could not be excluded. This, together with advertising and design, accounted for almost half the total turnover of the creative industries, while in 1998 the charitable and not-for-profit cultural sector that DCMS funded «constituted as little as 5 per cent of the

creative industries as a whole» (p. 42)³. As a consequence, «English Heritage was always at the back of the queue for DCMS funding» (p. 79).

Hereafter, carrying on from the Conservative "Cool Britannia" brand, heritage has become a part of cultural and creative industries, and, as such, is treated as a cultural enterprise. Equally, another central theme *Cultural Capital* deals with is the notion of culture as a commodity, the subsidy of which was and still is justified as the driver of a much larger process of cultural consumption (p. 28).

To get around these types of issues, an associated argument is the role – or, better, the effectiveness – of managerialism. Identifying the "stakeholder society" as New Labour's version of neoliberalism, Hewison quotes Norman Fairclough, who has dismissed the government's approach as «Thatcherism with a few frills» (p. 12).

Firstly, he criticizes the limited attempts to decentralize power (p. 14) and – despite original expectations – its increasing centralization. A significant example of this trend is provided by the dominance of national museums, reinforced by their being in London (p. 102), where the great majority of funding is concentrated (p. 168). Secondly, the limitations of the "arm's-length" principle are pointed out. In the report *The Pale Yellow Amoeba* (2010) – asking how this principle was working – some witnesses spoke of a "parent-child relationship" and "a management by nagging" (p. 94). On this point Hewison assesses:

³ In 2010 the decision was taken to exclude business and domestic software design and computer consultancy from the DCMS's annual economic estimates for the creative industries (p. 42).

² Smith C. (1998), *Creative Britain*, London: Faber & Faber, p. 26.

In theory, the principle keeps a prophylactic distance between the politicians who provide the funds for culture, and those who take the decisions about how they are spent, even though there are often intimate social and cultural links between the two groups. This applies to the Boards of directly funded national museums as well as to the Arts Council, the HLF and other Lottery distributors. As the metaphor is commonly understood, the Arts Council and similar bodies are only the hand that releases the money, while the arm is guided by government policy. Since the 1990s the distance between government and such organizations has shortened considerably (p. 232).

Last but not least, the drawbacks and weaknesses of Value for Money and “evidence-based policy” are discussed – target-driven culture turning out «to be pallid, shapeless, and [...] constantly dividing against itself» (p. 95). In particular, the author reports the lack of: (1) effective and agreed methodologies for measuring and assessing cultural achievements and (2) baselines against which to measure them (pp. 69 and 124)⁴. Moreover, remembering the application of numerical targets to areas such as education or the National Health Service, he provocatively highlights «how badly things could go wrong when meeting targets become more important than meeting real needs» (p. 123). The quotation of the playwright David Hare’s description of the target-driven culture is significant:

[a] sclerotic embarrassment, engorged with its own bureaucracy and inflicting the demented horrors of management culture on poor, luckless theatres which are forced to spend more time in form-filling and the corporate nonsense of fundraising than they do in putting actual plays on the stage⁵ (pp. 95-96).

Analysing the results of New Labour cultural policy, the lack of participation in cultural activities emerges as one of the most critical issues to cope with. A deep analysis of statistics about cultural consumption (e.g. museum and theatre attendance) confirms that «the majority of people are not taking part» (p. 214). Not surprisingly, between 1997 and 2012 «not only access to the market, but access to the arts and heritage, was unequal because of the unequal distribution of social, educational and cultural capital» (p. 28). It means that «general taxation was subsidizing the recreation of the educated and the rich» (p. 22). Thus, borrowing a phrase from *Culture, Class, Distinction*⁶, we can conclude that:

class remains a central factor in the structuring of contemporary cultural practice in Britain: class matters. Whatever social advantage might arise from heavy engagement in cultural activities will accrue to those who are highly educated, who occupy higher occupational class position, and who have backgrounds within higher social classes (p. 211).

⁵ See: «Telegraph», 6 November 1997.

⁶ In this book, drawing on a national study of the organization of cultural practices in contemporary Britain, the authors – Tony Bennett, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva, Alan Warde, Modesto Gayo-Cal and David Wright – review Bourdieu’s classic study of the relationships between culture and class in the light of subsequent debates.

⁴ Among the others, methods as willingness to pay (WTP) and willingness to accept (WTA) are considered a poor guide to cultural policy, reducing the discussion to a plebiscite, «a mere aggregation of individual opinions, as opposed to the dialogue of democratic engagement» (p. 138).

Finally, a few words have to be spared to bring the subject of populism of New Labour cultural policy into the open. Without going over all the steps of some big projects and mega-events again, the radically revisionist idea of British history and contemporary identity that underpins the Millennium Dome and the Olympic Games should be recalled at least. As far as the former is concerned, quoting Simon Thurley, it «came to symbolise the nadir of appreciation of Britain’s history and heritage. Its zones were free from the accumulated debris of what were seen as colonialism, xenophobia, national triumphalism, oppression and class war» (p. 55), while the latter is well represented by Boyle’s ceremony, where «the negative history of imperialism is transformed into the positive narrative of inclusivity» (p. 195). Hewison concludes that «the Britain that emerged in this selective portrait is cheerful, funny, energetic, pleasure-loving, undeferential, full of fantasy, and given to feeling» (p. 193).

Even though the book focuses on the analysis of cultural policy in the UK during the last 15 years, it provides useful lessons for the future of cultural policies in the EU as well as in European countries, particularly concerning austerity in public policy and the increasing value assigned to the creative sector in the European context. It is difficult not to see a causal link between the advance of “Cool Britannia” at the beginning of the 21st century and the release of the European Commission’s green paper *Unlocking the potential of cultural and creative industries* (2010) and then *Creative Europe*, the European Union programme for the cultural and creative sectors 2014-2020, aimed at promoting cross-border cooperation projects between cultural and creative organisations within the EU and beyond.

As a consequence, if the rise of “Creative Britain” has had a certain influence on European approach to cultural policy, its fall – here deeply analysed – opens up a wide variety of observations for the future, one of which clearly emerging in the conclusion is subsidiarity. Criticising the centralising impulse of the New Labour government – replicated by the Arts Council, that «dissolved the Regional Arts Boards, overcame regional resistance, and established central decision-making» (p. 230) – Hewison states that:

The reconstruction of the public realm calls for the revival of the local, the diverse and the different. This extends from distinctive local dialects, customs and cuisines to architecture, where every high street now looks the same. It is essential to encourage local production in the arts, and celebrate the local significance of heritage. The opposite of centralism is subsidiarity, and cultural decisions are best taken at the level closest to those whom they most affect. As the guarantor of the public realm, central government should require local authorities to contribute to the cultural commons, and help them to do so – but not at the price of local autonomy (p. 231).

Despite the fact that an Italian translation of the book is not yet available, Italian policy-makers would still be intrigued by its rare, frank and unconventional gaze on the UK cultural system and, as a consequence, be warned about the unconditioned passion for foreign things. The author’s clear and firm overview of 15-year policies could deepen the superficial “tourist gaze” of some politicians – often attracted and fascinated by everything exotic coming from English-speaking nations and ready to reproduce it in other countries – and support a more detailed and thorough knowledge and understanding of processes and dynamics

behind the rhetoric of some projects, particularly mega-events.

Finally, we should not forget to point out the research methodology that the author, as a historian, adopts. Beside public documents and academic papers, among the declared source material Hewison mentions the «own observation of events» (p. vii), that is the capability of a researcher to scrutinise reality and its dynamics, finding gaps in government and suggesting possible solutions. Despite the fact that from a managerial perspective it is difficult to measure its value and social impact, it is the *quid* that makes the difference between good research and bad research. It is the ingredient that makes the research brilliant and useful – even if readers disagree with some thoughts and statements⁷.

In particular, some issues and possible misunderstandings between humanities and socio-economical sciences should be pointed out as they could continue to widen the gap between culture and economics. Hewison's continued criticism of New Labour's instrumentalism and enhancement of the intrinsic value of culture somewhat downplays the fact that, being subsidized through taxation, cultural policies should produce public benefits much like other sectors (e.g. education and National Health Service). Of course, we could discuss the need for more useful methods and tools to boost their effectiveness. However, even though

the system is currently far from perfect, the principle on the whole is widely democratic and, as such, performance measurement and evaluation are essential in the improvement of service quality and the creation of public value. Indeed, one potential problem could be if the New Public Management approach is used as a means of masking the horizontal cutting of resources, therefore further depleting public spending on real cultural investments.

Another mistaken distinction concerns cultural and commercial benefits that are not necessarily in contrast. Widening this concept, there is no reason to be astonished if culture becomes an extension of economic policy (p. 46). Perhaps, the Throsby's phrase – «The economic impulse is individualistic, the cultural impulse is collective» (p. 226) – ought to be discussed again, but this is another subject altogether.

*Mara Cerquetti*⁸

⁷ Pointing out that his «readable insider narrative» seems to progressively abandon any recognition of New Labour's achievements, some scholars have underlined that Labour's record is more complex than «Hewison's many entertaining and scathing verdicts». Cfr. Hesmondhalgh D., Oakley K., Lee D., Nisbett M., *Culture, Economy and Politics. The Case of New Labour*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 31.

⁸ I owe special thanks to my friend and colleague Giuseppe Capriotti who first discovered this book in a bookshop in London during one of his trips in 2015. He bought it for me thinking it would be of interest to me, and it most certainly was. Additional thanks also go to Louisa Hrabowy for sharing ideas on target-driven culture and to Carly Hand and Jackie Narendran for their guidance in editing this book review.

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