

BLUE PLATE SPECIAL

**FRACTURED DISCOURSE: A REPORT FROM THE
SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
CULTURAL POLICY RESEARCH - “CULTURAL SITES,
CULTURAL THEORY, CULTURAL POLICY”**

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by
M. Sharon Jeannotte
Strategic Research and Analysis (SRA)
Strategic Planning and Policy Coordination
Department of Canadian Heritage

25 Eddy Street, 12th Floor
Gatineau, Québec
CANADA K1A 0M5

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For a PDF copy of this report contact us at:
sradoc_docras@pch.gc.ca
or Fax: (819) 997-6765

** The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

It is difficult to summarize a four-day conference, particularly when a good part of the event consists of simultaneous workshops, the majority of which it is impossible to attend. Nevertheless, the Second International Conference on Cultural Policy Research, entitled “Cultural Sites, Cultural Theory, Cultural Policy” was such a rich collection of cultural policy research that it seems worth the effort to try to extract a few “main messages” from the presentations that were made.

Main message

The principal focus of many interventions was the “fracturing” of cultural policy discourse and research. In several cases, presenters stated quite bluntly that cultural policy had lost its way and had ceased to be a significant player in either culture or policy, at least at the national level. Within this main message, a number of themes repeatedly emerged:

- 1) Cultural policy at the national level focusses on cultural products or culture as an end state. However, cultural policy at the global and sub-national level focusses on processes or “flows” – the unceasing interchange of images, sounds and ideas. At the global level, the computer has become “the new icon” through which virtual cultural flows are channelled, while at the sub-national level, the city has become the “iconic space of consumption” for these flows.
- 2) Cultural policy, for the most part, is based on the modern world-view and is grounded in the nation-state, where the primary goal is to create a citizen whose identity is rooted in the territory bounded by the state. It is being challenged by the postmodern world-view (mostly espoused by multilateral corporation and non-governmental organizations), where the primary goal is to create the citizen-consumer whose identity is global, or at least not confined within national boundaries.
- 3) Cultural policy must now operate on three levels, further contributing to the fracturing of discourse:
 - the micro-public sphere (civil society, which is becoming more diverse);
 - the meso-public sphere (the nation-state, which is subject to pressures both from above and below);
 - the macro-public sphere (the global environment which is increasingly dominated by multinational media firms).
- 1) Cultural policy has also become more fragmented and diverse as it has become an aspect of other policy fields, such as innovation policy, urban planning policy or economic development policy.

Cohesion in a fractured policy environment

The research presented by many participants expressed deep concern about the degree to which economic rationalism was displacing social reproduction as the primary driving force for national cultural policies. Perhaps it was because the conference was being held in the southern hemisphere, but Australian policies on “the creative industries” came under intense negative scrutiny. Australian researchers such as Tom O’Regan of the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy and Jo Caust of the University of South Australia noted that, strategically, it makes no sense for cultural policy to tie development to economic and industrial

objectives, since only a small portion of cultural activity falls within standard industry models. Both made a plea for cultural studies to move beyond the dominant economic rationalist discourse toward a broader framework (perhaps based on a cultural planning model) which aims at promoting cultural diversity and inclusion, as well as industry development. Their research and that of other presenters generally included a normative discussion of the proper role of cultural policy, but there was little agreement about alternative principles that might guide cultural policy in an era where global and sub-national imperatives were increasing in strength.

Despite the lack of a clear blueprint on the “way ahead”, several presenters suggested alternative frames for cultural policy and cultural policy research that might be helpful in understanding and dealing with a diverse and unpredictable environment.

Cultural capital and cultural sustainability

Several presenters (including me) suggested that new perspectives on Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital might help researchers and policy makers to develop a coherent framework for future interventions. David Throsby from Macquarie University in Australia suggested that “a model of the world based on the maximisation of individual utilities, as in the standard neoclassical economic model of human behaviour, may overlook some of the collective or community values that are intrinsic to culture and cultural activity”.¹ In my presentation, after examining both theory and empirical evidence on the role of cultural capital in sustaining communities, I concluded that “... the findings so far appear to confirm that there are collective benefits to investments in cultural capital and that some sort of “virtuous circle” is in play.”² Both of us were of the opinion that cultural research and cultural policy need to adopt a broader and more long-term perspective on the non-market benefits of cultural investments.

Knowledge and cultural sustainability

Perhaps because of the location of the conference (the Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand), there was strong representation of the Maori community, and several of the most thought-provoking presentations focussed on policies with regard to both traditional and contemporary knowledge and intellectual property practices. The Maori presenters were quite negative about the impact of “neoliberal mythologies” which they characterized as reifying individualism, commodifying everything and creating a “level playing field” where democracy primarily serves the dominant interests.

Brain Opie of Victoria University in Wellington, in a presentation on “Cultural Policy as Innovation Policy” stated that there was currently no model for integrating cultural knowledge into innovation policies, but suggested that a broader theory of knowledge was needed. In his view, any new theory should take into account such elements as qualitative change, radical uncertainty, heterogeneity of agents and techniques, variety, historic specificity and multiplicity of institutional configurations. The organizing unit for such knowledge, he proposed, should be the city or region, not the firm, and the organizing concepts should be language, memory and media.

¹ David Throsby, “New Approaches to the Economics of Cultural Heritage”, p. 1.

² M. Sharon Jeannotte, “Singing Alone? The Contribution of Cultural Capital to Social Cohesion and Sustainable Communities”, p. 12.

Brendan Tobin, a lawyer working with Aboriginal people in Peru to combat biopiracy (the move by multinational corporations to patent and licence traditional knowledge, materials and processes), pointed out that the fight to preserve biological diversity is linked to the fight to preserve cultural diversity, inasmuch as the extinguishment of indigenous rights to traditional knowledge leads to the destruction of their cultural patrimony. He went so far as to suggest that current TRIPS (Trade-related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) trade negotiations could potentially be in conflict with human rights. From a completely different perspective, Harvey Feigenbaum from George Washington University was moved to observe, in his presentation on the cultural and knowledge industries in a global trade environment, that “neoliberalism seems to be more lethal than the Taliban” in reducing choice within the cultural sector.

Governmentality and culture

Foucault’s concept of governmentality, as interpreted by Tony Bennett of the Open University in the U.K., was also invoked by several presenters as a way of understanding and coping with fractured policy environments. Governmentality in the classic sense refers to the practices of governance in producing citizens. In the cultural studies field, Bennett sees the need to focus on processes rather than content in order to apply the best set of tools in a variety of cultural settings, emphasizing “the intersection and management of diverse knowledges”.³ The aim of cultural policy interventions, under this rubric, would then become the establishment of viable and sustainable cultural ecologies connecting diverse peoples, sectors and cultural forms.

Ravi Sundaram gave an interesting presentation entitled “Fragile Economic Futures: South Asia and the Enchantment of New Media” which outlined how older techniques of governmentality, based on a legal and economic framework of elitism and protectionism, was breaking down as a result of globalization and the formation of new networks for the creation and consumption of cultural products. He noted that in India women and the lower castes were the most likely to participate in these new networks, creating numerous challenges to traditional standards of decency and the legal codes underpinning them.

In another comment on governmentality, Scott Lash of Goldsmith’s College in London suggested the cultural policy was facing an era of institutional meltdown, where non-linear and reflexive cultural sites, embedded for the most part in cities, were serving as routers of communications flows. In his view culture (and the economy) has deserted the logic of accumulation for an emergent logic of circulation. For example, traditional cultural institutions, such as museums, were now becoming more interested in positioning themselves as conduits of global cultural flows (in their case, embodied in blockbuster exhibitions) rather than as instruments of national cultural policy. This tendency is reframing the terrain upon which cultural development occurs.

Concluding observations

This summary is a subjective, rather than comprehensive, overview of the “Cultural Sites, Cultural Theory, Cultural Policy” conference, and any conclusions must be taken as impressionistic rather than definitive. It does seem clear, however, that cultural policy and cultural policy research are currently undergoing a paradigm shift of major proportions. Practitioners are becoming uncertain as to whether they are dealing with products or

³ Tom O’Regan, “Rethinking Cultural Policy Studies”, pp. 6-7.

processes, as the dominant organizational principle shifts from hierarchies to flows. And, while market capitalism is the only model that seems capable of bringing about a relatively seamless fit among the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of cultural production and consumption, many see serious limitations in its capacity to foster a diverse and democratic cultural environment. Clearly, this debate and the reframing of cultural policy discourse is only beginning.