

## Book Review

# Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries

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The November 2022 publication of the National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) of the Arts Council England has instigated intense discussion around who and what is funded publicly in the arts; opera, particularly, has been subject to a significant change in the funding and this has resulted in attempts to reaffirm the importance and value of the art form. Nonetheless, it is one of many art forms that continue to suffer from inequality and under-representation. Despite Brook, O'Brien and Taylor's book being published at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 it remains deeply pertinent, and weaves tightly into the recent NPO outcomes. The NPO outcomes will result in insecurity for many working in the industry; Covid-19 already had amplified the inequality for certain groups in the creative sector, and little has meaningfully changed since.

Those working in and advocating for arts and culture will extol the virtues of participation and the benefits for health and wellbeing; large-scale research continues to investigate the benefits of engagement through a variety of arts and culture. Culture is Bad for You agrees the case for the seemingly good of culture is there, though the main premise of the book grapples with the inequalities that prevent some from experiencing such benefit. The book focuses on the inequalities experienced through gender, race and social class for those that consume and produce culture.

A key contribution this book makes is challenging meritocracy; 'talent' is not the key determining factor of progressing in the industries and many barriers exist that will prevent the vast majority (and particularly certain groups of people) achieving a sustainable career. The authors reveal how those from working-class backgrounds, and people of colour (notably women of colour) will struggle the most to access a career. Chapter 10 demonstrates that male cultural workers consider talent and luck as indicators of their success, in counterpoint with the structural inequal conditions experienced by others.

The authors have meticulously made use of UK-based data; analysis of the UK's 'Taking Part' surveys that track cultural, digital and sporting activity in conjunction with a 2015 cultural workers' survey. The interviews of over 230 cultural workers provide a range of compelling detail and the quotations from some of these amplify the key themes of the book well. Chapter 5 is particularly important to many of us working in education; the limited access in our childhoods to arts and culture makes future access to the cultural professions more difficult. And this privileged access to the sector is typified in how it caters for those that can work without pay (such as unpaid internships).

There are quotations from the cultural workers peppered throughout the book, and we hear of the tensions they experience between who they believe they should be, and the expectations they pull against. A strength of the

book is the spread of voices; workers of differing ages and cultural roles. The diversity of the contributions sadly do not match the lack of such diversity in the sector, but this is why the book is so skilfully conceived.

There is the opportunity to consider a broader definition of culture, and the book perpetuates the ‘high-culture’ artforms that the sector could challenge more (and the November 2022 NPO outcomes appear to be an attempt to challenge some of these high-art ideals). But there is strength in investigating these forms as a priority, particularly when they have received considerable government support.

*Culture is Bad for You* is significant for the cultural and creative industries; it deserves to be read widely by academics in relevant fields who share the authors’ deep concerns for addressing the variety of inequalities the book presents. It also deserves much wider readership, and those working in the sector and educating, training and studying creative subjects will find this engaging throughout. The authors have worked diligently to make this a book accessible beyond the social sciences and the book makes a purposeful contribution to public discourse. Only through magnifying the embedded inequalities widely will we be able to initiate the changes our sector urgently needs; the more who read this book, the better.