

Arts and Culture as Profit Centre? A Martial Arts Lesson for Canada's Cultural Policy Warriors

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Abstract: This discussion paper proposes that those who would champion a higher ranking for culture and the arts on the national agenda should take a leaf from the Asian martial arts training manuals: the pages which explain how to employ an opponents' own strengths to your advantage. Since "good business" is where "good policy" begins in contemporary capitalistic democracies, rather than competing directly with economic priorities for ranking on the national agenda, cultural policy warriors should make their arguments in the language of economics. They must demonstrate the contribution of culture and the arts to society through their role as determinants of social capital and as market-economy facilitators.

Résumé: Cet article propose que ceux et celles voulant que la culture et les arts occupent une place plus importante dans le discours national devraient s'inspirer des manuels d'instruction d'arts martiaux — surtout leur idée d'utiliser les atouts de l'adversaire à son propre avantage. Puisque les « bonnes politiques » commencent par les « bonnes affaires » dans les démocraties capitalistes contemporaines, les supporters de politiques culturelles devraient parler un langage économique pour appuyer leur cause, plutôt que de faire concurrence directe avec les priorités économiques du gouvernement. Ils devraient démontrer comment arts et culture contribuent à la société en produisant du capital social et en soutenant l'économie de marché.

"What is good for General Bullmoose is good for the country!" General Bullmoose (read General Motors) himself used to say in a once-famous U.S. comic strip. Here is what the General meant:

- economic growth (not stand-still prosperity, but annual growth) is the first and last pre-condition for happiness;
- governing for the short-term trumps governing for the long-term; and
- the majority of the voting public endorses the economics priority as the primary success indicator for governments.

Public policymaking in most industrialized countries today is addressed as though increased material prosperity is the overriding objective of governments

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and dollars-equals-success is the reference point of choice for ranking policy options. Since “good business” is where “good policy” begins in contemporary capitalistic democracies, rather than competing directly with economic priorities for ranking on the national agenda, cultural policy warriors should make their arguments in the language of economics. It might be faulted as opportunism, but when things get desperate in the national policy arena, challengers should make their case with whatever works. “Whatever works” is what innovation is all about after all, and if cultural policy warriors cannot exercise innovation and creativity even in their own interest, then perhaps they do not deserve that coveted national policy priority.

Culture policy warriors are familiar with the argument that culture and the arts have no legitimate claim to national policy priorities until there is “bread on the table.” Lots of bread. Arguing that culture and the arts can help bring in the bread is not enough. We cannot afford a cultural priority, say its detractors, if the economy is not both prosperous and growing. It is not enough that culture can help take you there, we have to already be in the prosperity zone for culture to qualify as a priority. Prosperity is the pre-condition and culture and the arts are luxuries to be accommodated only in the very best of times. Unfortunately, until they are history, the best of times are a policy will-o’-the-wisp . . . we don’t know they were here, until they are gone. History is when it is too late for making policy adjustments.

In recent years, national well-being, quality of life, and similar concepts have become fashionable policy research constructs. But national well-being, unlike national income, is not a dollars-measurable concept and whereas the language of commerce and economics is an established and indispensable part of our everyday conversation, measurements of public well-being (the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index is a good example) are not yet a feature of the Web site homepages of governments in Canada. The notion of “well-being” often seems too abstract, too vague, too remote to be persuasive as a guide for public policy.

So put aside art-for-art’s-sake and forget the connections between culture and national well-being. Experience tells us that such notions are at best a tough sell in Canada’s market-driven policy arena. Instead, consider how the case for culture and the arts can be made in a nation driven by *economistics*.

Two economic arguments for culture

It can be useful to think in terms of two arguments for the interdependence of commerce and the arts. The first concerns the arts in the marketplace and their direct contribution to national prosperity as goods and services, as sources of employment, as national revenue, and as foreign exchange earnings. We know that for many years the direct economic benefits of the arts have been undervalued by policymakers. However Statistics Canada, the Department of Canadian Heritage, and the Canadian Conference of the Arts are finally producing hard data that demonstrate the increasingly important role the sector plays in the national economy. Policymakers and even trade policymakers are beginning to understand that there

is “real value” here: dollars. Theatre, film, music, and even the literary arts are gaining legitimacy as commercially viable and hence as legitimate concerns for policymakers. The cultural industries can take their best artists to income levels of the commercial sports stars, right up there with the country’s top CEOs. So, recently endowed with fledgling economic muscle, culture and the arts are increasingly able to participate in the competition for public policy attention.

But how to leverage that new muscle, how to use the opponent’s strength to advantage? My contention is that if the opponent’s strength is his economics, his vulnerability is the dependence of his economics on a community’s social capital and especially the degree of trust amongst its citizens.

Thus, the second argument for the economics of culture must be about the *indirect* contributions that the sector makes to national economic success. It is here, the indirect, where we find the leverage to take the opponent to the mat. In this discussion, the tables are turned and it is culture and the arts which become not merely important new cogs in the machinery of commerce, but determining pre-conditions for successful capitalist democracies.

Fear for the sustainability of the growth economy and viable democratic institutions and processes can be a powerful source of the discomfort which drives public policy decision-makers to make changes. There is ample evidence to convince policymakers that when societies are fragmented and citizens hostile, barriers are erected which frustrate collaboration for commerce. There are also indications that as societies grow more diverse and as their cultures are commodified for financial gain (or worse, rejected as unsuitable for commodification), the resulting cultural insecurity erodes social cohesion and leads the offended groups to polarize. We know that as communities come under threat of either assimilation or of marginalization, members increasingly exclude others and otherness, and cross-cultural conversation tends to become more confrontational than constructive. When interdependence is constrained, generating trust becomes more difficult and “acting together” problematic and—*voilà!*—economic security, prosperity, and growth are threatened.

Enter culture and the arts

Preparing a game plan for strengthening the policy priority for culture exposes a new catalogue of policy research needs, but thanks to a growing body of empirical evidence and other research, it can finally be argued that neglect of the non-economic factors in governance and policymaking eventually destabilizes societies and threatens peaceful co-existence across cultures. We are beginning to understand that governing for business only can backfire and in fact be harmful for business when it frustrates the generation of shared values, social cohesion, and human development within and across national borders. At the institutional level, the U.N.’s “Power of Culture” conference in Stockholm in June of 1998, the Council of Europe’s *In From the Margins* report (1997), and UNESCO’s *Our Creative Diversity* (1995) all make these points. Professor Robert Putnam has done the same with even more dramatic effect in his landmark book *Bowling Alone*.

There are several arguments emerging as credible best examples of how culture and the arts can contribute to restoring or maintaining a healthy business climate. Particularly in times of traumatized economic and political environments, there may be greater opportunity to demonstrate how culture and the arts can be key to the sustainable recovery of public confidence. Given the right spin, culture and the arts can be re-profiled not as luxuries but as indispensable techniques for *facilitating the development of trust* amongst citizens; as new sources of an eroded social capital.

Here are three examples of how that can happen. First, the arts can claim to be important builders of social capital because they *generate low-risk conversation* across and amongst the various diversities of modern communities. Through music, dance, film, and public radio and television we participate in the dialogues and perspectives of others without engaging into debate about, or committing to, the kinds of policy differences “which count.” Through literature and the theatre we can experience how others see us, fear us, hate us, love us, or find us funny. These experiences set up opportunities for safe communication even when policy opponents may not be on easy talking terms. Of course, mobilizing the low-risk-conversation argument requires researched evidence. It requires proof of why and how that happens, and which forms of cultural and artistic activities are most effective for generating the kinds of positive interaction needed. For example, with social capital as objective, research may indicate that funding support for the arts is better directed to participatory initiatives than professional . . . more trust for the buck.

A second argument which has promise to be persuasive in the context of our so-called contemporary knowledge-based economy is about how the arts *generate public habits of innovation, creativity, and flexibility*. But this argument implies the need to answer the same three questions as for our first trust generator, low risk conversation: (1) Can the creativity claim be proven or demonstrated? (2) What kinds of cultural activities work best for building habits of innovation? and (3) How does public policy encourage those activities and priorities? Both more research and better public awareness of existing research is needed to make this argument stick.

Third, policies aimed at shoring up democratic institutions and practices for the sake of sustainable capitalism can have new urgency in a social environment threatened by fragmentation. Many believe that culture and the arts also have a legitimate claim to assisting the *generation of those public values of tolerance and respect* which are necessary for peaceful co-existence within and across national borders. The peace dividend is a particularly captivating notion post-September 11, and it is worthwhile reminding policymakers of the direct and indirect (business) costs of wars, hot and cold. But how valid is this claim? *Do* the arts have a historic track record of assisting public values of tolerance and peaceful co-existence? If so, what are the kinds of cultural activities that do it best and how can public policy stimulate them? Here, too, more research and research awareness are indispensable to relocating the priority.

Are there other techniques and arguments to add to this short list of *petites astuces* for taking the opponent to the mat? Are cultural policy researchers and tacticians equipping their warrior-employers to argue persuasively that an enhanced cultural policy priority is good for General Bullmoose . . . for building sustainable capitalist democracies and democratic capitalism? How else, in our economics-driven policy environment, can the relevance of culture and the arts be leveraged to win coveted policy recognition? More thought and more research must be directed to the development of those arguments because until it can be demonstrated that an important part of the contribution of culture and the arts to society is through their role as determinants of social capital and consequently as market-economy facilitators—through trust, innovation, and peaceful co-existence—there is no contest. Culture will remain a secondary public policy priority . . . even in times of prosperity.

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