Cultural democracy and 'the long march to alternative institutions'

Report to the Raymond Williams Foundation
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In the decades since the death of Raymond Williams in 1988 we have become all too accustomed to celebrities endorsing politicians and political causes. In fusing the arts to politics many less glamorous cultural and educational projects also seek our attention. Williams would have recognised that many of these promotional efforts leave the relationship between the arts and democracy virtually untouched, as if all that matters is activism to win hearts and minds.

In this seductive manner the issue of cultural democracy is often buried. Without Williams' critiques of 'pseudo radical' practices and elite patronage systems, egalitarians have few immediately practical answers to the "culture wars" and "clashes of civilisation", ideas welcomed by authoritarians as opportunities to get people in line and on message. Across the ideological spectrum in institutions, organisations, parties and social movements, all eyes are on networking. Opinions are formed, movements inspired and cultural battle lines drawn through the proliferation of communication technologies. A wedge theory of racial and cultural "replacement", authored by the French writer and artist Renaud Camus (no relation to Albert) who describes the effects of mass migration as the "genocide" of Western peoples is very successfully networked by the far-right to the point it has entered the political mainstream in many countries. The classical fascist intention to undermine the legitimacy of voters and the cultural authenticity of electorates has been unveiled again, this time from the heartland of the liberal arts. Camus, a well known gay author and a disciple of the semiotician Roland Barthes, classes people who help immigrants as traitors and his theory is clearly calibrated for civil wars. Can egalitarians win a war of cultural position with yet more networking, consciousness-raising efforts and party-building, in other words the same methods favoured by authoritarians?

Raymond Williams would not have thought so. He wrote of 'a long march' to alternative democratic cultural institutions that had begun in the arts.[1] Undoubtedly there was a shared idea that participative democracy could liberate the arts from top-down management, or at least change the arts for the better. However in the years since Williams' death this organic movement has changed direction very significantly. Even Marxist inspired concepts of art and institutional critique alluding to the 'social imagination' have turned towards notions of creative networking that fail to mention egalitarian imagination and democratic organisation.[2] Instead a premium has been put on the social identities of artists as governments and public agencies encouraged organisations and artists to describe their self-promotion and audience creation in terms of 'inclusion' and 'access.' Along the way the idea of people moving to liberate the arts reverted to an older and previously much questioned quasi-religious idea of the arts liberating and improving people.[3] Renaud Camus reflects an extreme manifestation of that prophetic approach to culture.

Our Pilot Study

Raymond Williams was open to the potential of new technologies to facilitate cultural democracy but warned that communication technologies driven by business, electoral marketing, or the general competition for power would flatten out and streamline opinions. The transformation of the world-wide-web into echo-chambers and information cocoons proves that Williams was right. So perhaps it is time to recover the ancient egalitarian principle of random assembly of public representatives for deliberative purposes. Sortition (random

selection) is intended as a counterbalance the negative effects of the competition for power and influence in any kind of democracy worthy of the name. The claims made for sortition have motivated our inter-university study *The Spirit of Fascism in the Arts and the Prospects for Cultural Democracy: Testing a Randomised Jury Model.*[4] Drawing on Williams' materialist sense of culture our research acts on the premise that if widening participation in the arts matters it matters first and foremost at the level of public-funding decisions.[5] To this end we have begun using sortition to assemble citizen juries from members of the general public, comparing their hypothetical funding preferences with that of more homogenous focus groups including expert groups. Our initial findings suggest that groups with some kind of direct or expert interest veer between promotion and censorship, whereas independent citizen juries may strongly prefer critical contextualisation of the arts.[6]

To further test public capacities for non-specialist and independent deliberation all the juries in our study will be financed to independently commission art projects they believe to be in the public-interest. The first jury assembled in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne by the BxNU Institute selected video-computer games as a commissioning theme and agreed on the wording of the call to artists for 'a creative project that critically compares power, domination and the glorification of violence in the invented worlds of gaming with everyday life and reality'. The jury also proposed two key questions for applicants to consider: 'Are malevolent invented worlds a consequence of a lack of control and collective material investment in the physical world we inhabit? How far do the invented realities of gaming actually underpin social isolation and ecological catastrophe?'[7] Ten artists from several disciplines responded to the international call, all were high-quality proposals, and most were very detailed. By majority vote, after a day-long face-to-face meeting in the summer of 2024, the jury awarded the £8000 commission to the London-based game designer Ducky Elford to develop a game entitled *Echoes of Humanity*. The jury also commended a proposal from Hadi Mehrpouya and Duncan Nicoll from Dundee for 'Barzakh: journey through the hybrid life of gaming', an immersive video-installation and video-essay project which the jury thought also deserved public-funding.

Sortition never offers a perfect microcosm of society although the social composition of juries can be evaluated and the quality of deliberation assessed. Going by our diversity scale running between a Type A jury (the most homogenous) to Type F (the most diverse) the jury assembled in Newcastle which included a total of seventeen female and male jurors was a moderately diverse Type E jury. The more diverse Type F jury on our scale would include two or more population groups subject to a significant conflict. All the Newcastle jurors were UK citizens or residents, sharing English as a common language though they reported a variety of social-economic backgrounds and cultural identities on our questionnaires. The oldest juror at the outset was 74, the youngest 23. The average age of the jury was 37. To deliberate adequately any jury requires time and needs to hear competing arguments. This is a demanding process in policy areas where expert and scientific opinions have to be sought out to ensure informed debate. There is of course no shortage of expert views about art and culture but the public-centred commissioning process we are testing is led by juries who decide on commissioning themes and by artists who respond with detailed proposals. Anyone may propose public-interest themes for the consideration and commissioning by juries.

Here we may briefly recall Williams' declaration that 'Culture is ordinary', the title of his 1958 essay arguing that the arts are one aspect of an 'expanding' culture more deeply connected to everyday life.[8] The bad exists but it does not drive out the good he insists. If, as Williams suggests, important common meanings arise in the arts thanks to their connections to everyday

experience, and that the making of a society depends on the search for such meanings, then surely the idea of what is good needs to be tested out much more by ordinary people than the mixture of politicians, art-lovers and professional elites who tell us what we should be concerned about or valuing. If culture is understood as communication and process (the social processes that create value and values) it seems doubtful that the public-interest can be determined by professionals and directly interested parties acting on their own or in concert with one another. Yet great claims about the public benefits of the arts are interwoven into the self-promotional rhetoric of organisations and in many instances it is difficult to distinguish the bland promotional techniques of public organisations from private ones. The actual public-interest in cultural development may be neglected by both because we have few practical ways to work it out democratically. There is little hope of using referendums to test the public-interest each and every time it presents itself without exhausting public capacities for participation and deliberation, hence our study of citizen juries as a practical egalitarian answer to networking and the streamlining of culture.

A useful measure of deliberation which sets it apart from judging talent shows or popularity contests is the extent to which it changes minds and modifies opinions. More by circumstances than by design there was a long delay of more than two years between the jury's first face-to-face meeting to decide on a commissioning theme and their second meeting to make an award. Among the tasks in the intervening period a website was created to facilitate the whole process, and by the time of the second meeting some jurors were no longer available and five new jurors were recruited by random selection and invitation. However aside from the practical problems delaying the award we (the researchers) did also want to give the individual jurors as much time as possible to contemplate the theme and reflect on proposals received. Because not all the jurists benefitted from the delay some did not want to express preferences by nominating proposals for the award before reaching a collective decision. During the face-to-face meeting to make the award the jury reached a decision through a process of elimination working through the proposals and relating each to the terms of the original jury call until arriving at the two proposals which were considered the best responses. So in this case it is difficult to say how many jurists changed their mind on any particular matter, though jurors who were unsure about certain proposals made up their minds in the course of the day-long award meeting.

However a more general shift in the jury position is discernable. The original jury call reflected various concerns. Some jurors focused on the content of video games and kinds of escapism they endorse or behaviour they might encourage, while others were more concerned about habit-forming activities and addictions. These different perspectives underpinned a critically forthright call in the eyes of artists who responded. However their proposals revealed to the jury the political aesthetics of game design, an especially contested and nuanced area of culture after Gamergate harassment campaign. The fact the jury eventually favoured game design projects, rather than art projects *about* video-games suggests the inter-generational and non-specialist consensus in the jury that the public-interest entails supporting critical aesthetics within game design as an aspect of general cultural development. The decision to finance Ducky Elford is particularly interesting since it reflects what jurors both liked and feared about Elford's project *Echoes of Humanity.* By proposing to use 3D scans to populate a psychological gamescape with real people from Newcastle, Elford presented the jury with ethical production issues for a game which also intends to explore the unexpected consequences of players' moral dilemmas. The award reflected the jury's confidence that Elford showed a readiness to take these combined issues seriously. Following this successful outcome Elford now hopes to

assemble another citizen jury to examine issues of artificial intelligence and game design in an even more focused experiment in artistic power-sharing that reminds us of Williams' argument about the importance of 'creative disturbance.'[9] Elford looks forward to cross-examination by a jury. Instead of diminishing an ideal, Elford thinks that citizen juries might strengthen artistic autonomy, releasing artists from transactional networks that underpin trust and patronage in the creative industries.

Concluding Remarks: The Long Rerouted March

Raymond Williams' metaphor of 'a long march' to more democratic institutions may seem too infused with the socialist rhetoric of his times. In the arts there were organisational false starts and early failures, and this writer can only recall usually ill-attended meetings touching on such matters. If the political direction was clear to Williams it was soon rerouted by more bureaucratic temptations. However, the metaphor of a march does fit more general, and often ideologically ambiguous, movements to improve democracy. One of the most significant in recent years is the *Gilet Jaune* movement in France where we formed some comparative focus groups for our pilot study. In 2019 polls, 46% of France's *Gilet Jaune* movement endorsed Renaud Camus' ideas of cultural replacement. However, the movement as a whole calls for a system of citizen-initiated referendums (RIC), a demand which reflects but does not resolve all the problems of un-representative democracy seen by Williams. The formulation of referendums is anything but a neutral art of governance and cautious *Gilet Jaune* groups support sortition as a means of forming citizen assembles to deliberate on issues to put to referendums.[10] A case in point is the process leading to the 2018 referendum and repeal of anti-abortion laws in the Irish republic. Other potential applications of sortition include the organisation of mixed assemblies of elected and randomly selected representatives and bicameral councils or parliaments using twin methods of election and sortition. Research in Britain shows considerable public support for such democratic innovations that were largely abandoned by the arts as individuals and organisations took to networking and self-promotion.[11]

There are many areas where sortition can provide important jolts of equality and pluralism, counterbalancing party politics or curtailing elite cults of decisionism as already occurs in justice systems where judges share power with juries. However, when looking for reforms based on the same principle the two areas which appear most neglected according to OECD data are culture and international relations.[12] Without a more open participative democracy in both these areas egalitarians are in an increasingly weak position. The history of right-wing authoritarianism suggests that competition at the global level can all too easily trump desires for cultural co-operation and understanding at the local level. The United Nations Charter of 1945 can be read as a testament to that truism. Nevertheless reform proposals intended to bring popular oversight to UN structures have been rejected, and probably rightly, because they would either create more unelected elites, or because world elections would be extremely complicated and costly to fairly organise and end up enlarging an already unpopular political class.[13] Curiously, despite such obvious non-starters, the practical alternative of popular sortition as means of upholding the UN Charter and democratically reinforcing UN institutions receives hardly any attention, even though the loss of faith in the UN General Assembly is widely discussed. The UN Security Council's veto powers over the International Court of Justice resemble a sophisticated mafia-style protection racket operated instead by the world's leading arms-exporting nations. Surely time is up on the oft-repeated slogan to think globally and act locally. Perhaps sortition is a means of acting at both levels at the same time and for this reason we invite proposals for commissioning themes for cross-border citizen assemblies. [14]

Notes

[1] See Williams, R. (1989) *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso) p.134 ff.

[2] Cummings, N; & Lewandowska, M. (2006) 'A Shadow of Marx' in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945* (Jones, A. ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell) pp. 404-421.

[3] In British cinema two successful comedy-dramas signal these very different attitudes respectively: *Brassed Off,* directed by Mark Herman (1996) and *Billy Elliot* directed by Stephen Daldry (2000). Appreciation of the realist aspect of *Brassed Off* appears to have grown with time while the fantasy, and sometimes ludicrously stereotypical aspects, of *Billy Elliot* found a more suitable genre as a stage musical.

[4] Pilot study led by Dr Owen Logan, (University of Aberdeen/CISRUL) with Dr Martyn Hudson, (University of Northumbria/BxNU) Professor Alex Law (Abertay University) and Dr Kirsten Lloyd (Edinburgh College of Art) with assistance of Alan Lynn Northumbria/BxNU.

[5] This premise arose from my doctoral research, see Logan, O. (2017) *Fractured Culture: The Sociological Poetics of the Arts, Participation and Wellbeing* (Northumbria University).

[6] See Logan et al. (2023) 'Cultural Democracy at the Frontiers of Patronage', *Journal of Dialogue Studies Vol.11* (London: Dialogue Society) Also available at https://hosting.northumbria.ac.uk/bxnugamecall/publications/ (Last accessed December 2024)

[7] See Gamecall at https://hosting.northumbria.ac.uk/bxnugamecall/learn-more/ 5
(Last accessed December 2024)

[8] See Williams R. (1989) *Resources of Hope, Culture Democracy Socialism* (London: Verso) pp.3-18.

[9] See Williams, R. (1973) 'Dickens and Social Ideas' in *Sociology of Literature and Drama* (London: Penguin) p.347.

[10] See 'Référendums, assemblées citoyennes : des propositions à ne pas sous-estimer', by Laurence Morel, *The Conversation,* 17/12/2018. https://theconversation.com/referendums-assemblees-citoyennes-des-propositions-a-ne-pas-sous-estimer-108927 (Last accessed December 2024).

[11] See Chwalisz, C. (2015) *The Populist Signal: Why Politics and Democracy Need to Change*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield).

[12] In 2023 the OECD (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development) launched a global Deliberative Democracy Database. See https://cop-demos.jrc.ec.europa.eu/events/launch-oecd-deliberative-democracy-database-2023 and https://cop-demos.jrc.ec.europa.eu/resources/database-inventory
(Last accessed December 2024).

[13] See Kennedy, P. (2007) *The Parliament of Man* (London: Penguin) pp. 213-239.

[14] See guidance at https://hosting.northumbria.ac.uk/bxnugamecall/other-public-interest-commissioning-themes/ (Last accessed December 2024).