

CULTURAL POLICIES 2009

Rebeca Gordon Nesbitt, Janek Sowa, and Kuba Szreder in conversation

**The Premiere of The EPK2015 report
The talk and questions from the audience**

KUBA SZREDER: The publishing of the EPK 2015 report crossed in time with the publicizing of the news about the proposed changes in the Polish cultural policy, intended to introduce by Professor Jerzy Hausner. It is quite a lucky coincidence. Our report embraces the set of analysis concerning the ways of creating a cultural policy in different European countries. They aren't optimistic. Everywhere there is a growing trend towards neo-liberalism and its influence on culture is catastrophic. Instead of being blind followers, we should look for some alternatives.

We can learn from the mistakes of others. From Rebeca's lecture, we can clearly point out that our transformation applied the economic principles used in the UK to the Polish environment. That was the model to follow for Polish minister Leszek Balcerowicz. We see many similarities in the Polish and Scottish situation when it comes to the model of cultural policy, introduced in Glasgow, which was described by Rebeca, and the plans of Mr Hausner.

In both cases the discussion goes about the creative or cultural industries. These are the passkey words which justify the necessity of introducing neo-liberal reforms. Maybe we should re-think the true meaning of these terms.

REBECCA GORDON NESBITT: The way the Scottish government defines it, there are thirteen different departments of the creative industries. I don't need to read them all aloud, but, to summarize, it is every kind of cultural field you can imagine - all the traditional fields of the arts, then architecture, fashion design, games development, music, or graphic design. Many of these cultural forms can conform to an entrepreneurial model, but our argument would be that certain art forms do not conform so well to that model. So the government's expectation is that artists would set themselves up as a company - involving perhaps themselves or perhaps other people as well - and that they would take on business loans and try to acquire capital to set themselves up in business. And early experiments in places where this has been tried out before have proven to be a complete failure for artists. So, for example, in Catalonia, artists were encouraged to take loans on commercial interest rates and none of them repaid their loans; they all defaulted on them, so it is a complete disaster.

So, actually, what a group of us around the Variant magazine are looking at today is whether there is a particular clause within the UNESCO Treaty - that Scotland has signed up to - which prohibits this kind of hybridization of culture and commerce. UNESCO says that you should keep culture and commerce separate.

KS: The data describing the material status of the artist don't give one a reason to be optimistic about it...

RGN: Yes, in fact, that was some time ago that this research was published and it appears in this report. The research was commissioned into the living conditions of artists in Scotland, and it was found that - I think from memory - 82% of artists within Scotland earn less than £5000 a year from their practice. So that would be about 25000 PLN a year. And that is less than a third of the average national wage, so it's not very sustainable as an economy for artists, even at the status quo before this creative industries legislation gets implemented.

JANEK SOWA: I would like to add a few lines on the so-called "creative industries," as I had the opportunity to get in touch with the British policy concerning it. It was linked with my work in Ha!Art. The British Council suggested that we should participate in an international project for young publishers and independent publishing houses. People from around the world spent two weeks in the UK: London, near London and in Edinburgh. We met British publishers and culture managers. It came out that the creative industries chief of the British Council subsidiary said to us directly that the British side doesn't have the slightest interest in what are we doing as publishers.

The more important was what we know about the book market in Poland and if we are able to sell the strategic information on where to invest; also, if there is any chance of getting a second "Harry Potter" in Poland, which could be published in England. The chief of the creative industries underlined that culture and art are becoming more and more important part of the industry,

and we have to develop these according to the schemes of the car or aircraft industry development. So, it was more of the industrial intelligence interview which they developed based on this project.

RGN: Yes, just one observation. That is a huge ideological shift when you consider that the British Council's previous role was very much this kind of, you know, spreading the word of the empire around other countries, so, for them, to actually now be speaking about it in purely industrial terms, it is quite staggering, really.

KS: Any questions?

QUESTION1: Has the situation changed? Any decisions from the government?

RGN: Yes, this is a good question. The past twelve months coincide with the period during which the Scottish government has been trying to force this legislation through and they do not seem to have taken any notice of the financial crisis at all, so they are going forward with this creative industries model, which is very much based on there being a sound economic structure within the private sector. So, in answer to your question, no, unfortunately the situation hasn't changed. I suppose what it has done is that it has given us more ammunition, because now we have evidence which very strongly suggests that this model is not sustainable. So, it has given us better tools with which to fight this.

QUESTION2: What were the recommendations in 2005, and could you tell us if any of those came to life, or was it just paperwork?

RGN: [Do you mean the recommendations of the Cultural Commission or of this report? I see, the ones we made to the Cultural Commission.] The main recommendation of the Cultural Commission was the formation of Creative Scotland, and there were many other justifications provided that led the Commissioners to this foregone conclusion. I would have to say that not many of our recommendations were taken up. So the arts communities of Scotland feel very neglected by this process. And, in fact, what we are seeing now is that the new Culture Minister - of which there have been maybe five since the Cultural Commission fiasco took place - is mounting a "charm offensive" in between now and the time the legislation is voted on in parliament, and he is trying to engage with the arts communities, when the legislation is already on the table.

[And now, about the proposals we had.] They were very much from the "grassroots communities." So there was an idea to archive previous artworks and to have an active slide archive so that visitors to Glasgow could have access to artworks, because what we saw happening was that this commercial gallery that I mentioned, the Modern Institute, became the main place the British Council would take people to if they came on a tour to Glasgow. And they would generally show only works by the artists that they represented. So it was not a holistic picture of the art that was being produced within Glasgow. Alongside that, we made other recommendations about residency programs and about grants being paid directly to artists and other things that would improve the quality of life for the artists practicing in Scotland that have nothing to do with commerce. Not much has changed in the sphere of residencies, and I would say that there is much less direct funding available for artists, especially those who aren't prepared to work towards social inclusion or who don't conform to the creative industries model. As Culture and Sport Glasgow and Creative Scotland are highly politicized companies which are expected to fit the government priorities, there is very little scope for artists to engage in publicly-funded acts of dissent which has traditionally been part of their role.

KS: It is an interesting idea of a new type of economics. We can call it "the economics of a gift." It is about a self-organizing networks of institutions or quasi-institutions. These initiatives could be a real alternative to the commercial model. Making knowledge and creative activity a commercial good collides with this form of culture, known e.g. from Wikipedia, which is characterized by enthusiastic sharing of thoughts and artistic energy.

The shallow economic discourse held in the monetarist spirit says that a particular initiative should "earn for itself or it is deficient." In this model, culture "spends public money resources" and its creators act irresponsibly avoiding to define their activity in terms of the profit gained through work. If we agree to such conditions of the discussion, we are already on the losing battle stance.

JS: Rebecca mentioned the instrumental approach to the case, and we are beginning to understand this phenomenon better and better - the attempt to

utilize art and culture to build the national identity, to make a city lifting, or use it to promote private businesses, which start to become very significant in Poland. The motto of your university is: "Culture not for profit." This is very important. The capitalist or bourgeois pragmatism has its evidence in an instrumental approach to culture. "We have one million PLN to invest. So let's invest into something that brings profit quickly and let's find out how all these creative businesses work." Culture doesn't work this way.

Leaving aside criticism at the level of ideas, even from the pragmatic point of view we can see clearly that if we want to have a live and developed culture, we cannot treat it as a mercantile investment, profit, company, image or symbolic advantages taken out instantly. This is a nonsense strategy. If we spent the same resources on less sure, more experimental, less spectacular but, in the longer run, more interesting artistic enterprises - the effects would be far better.

The hopes of the 1990s that everything will be managed by managers became vain. The neo-liberal Thatcherism failed here and in other western societies. The crisis started in the financial sector; we can see what the managers have led to in their own field and how the corporate culture and its standards look like.

Transposing this model onto other fields of social activity won't bring any positive results. One just has to bear in mind that in their own field they couldn't cope with the problem on their own.

RGN: Yes, I very much agree with what you are saying. This Creative Scotland organization I mentioned is now inhabited by bankers, so these are the people that they put directly in control of our culture, which doesn't seem like a particularly sensible way of going about things in light of what we have recently encountered, with major financial institutions going into liquidation and others needing to be bailed out by the government, particularly in the US and UK. And, like you, I have been involved in organizations that are kind of outside the state - you know, setting up these kinds of alternative economies. But I also think we have to bear in mind what Kuba said: Are we really going to let the state off the hook? I mean, if we fulfill this model and do it very successfully without the state, then we've really just exempted them from their responsibility.

And so, in the aftermath of the Cultural Commission that I described, when it seemed that Creative Scotland was going to be the model that was adopted by the government, we got together in a room, not dissimilar to this one, and we asked the same question: Are we going to go at it alone or are we going to pressure the state to support what we do? And we decided to act on both fronts - to continue to pressure the government and to work towards other sustainable solutions for culture that perhaps excludes the "official" strategy completely. So, I think we need to keep up the pressure and to keep having these kinds of discussions. And, in answer to your question, actually just thinking about it a bit more, although the government has not directly adopted the proposals that came out of this - you know, the grassroots consultations around the Cultural Commission - many of the artists that were involved in that discussion process have taken some of those ideas forward.

So, in a way, you can feel optimistic about some of the gains of these kinds of processes. Transmission Gallery, the main artist-run gallery in Glasgow, is run on the membership basis - people pay about five pounds a year to be member as an artist. And they have actually taken forward this archive idea, on their own initiative, because one of the artists involved in formulating our proposal was a member of the Transmission Committee. So they are going to be moving into a new space (albeit gentrified by Culture and Sport Glasgow in advance of the Commonwealth Games) and are going to represent artists in the way that I described.

So I think, in conclusion, that we have a reason to feel a little bit optimistic. We have really gone so far that we are almost coming out of the other side right now, and people are so strongly against this "business model" that I think we have enough ammunition to look into other areas.

JS: The research of Robert Putnam in Italy shows that an active and self-organizing base can successfully influence the government and the state and public sector to make it active as it should. I still believe in public institutions and I don't want to replace them by the group of enthusiasts. The social capital worked out by groups acting spontaneously can change a great deal; it can make the government not commercialize culture, or the public services sector, water, air, etc. And one more issue - the interests of any power (whether that of capital or that of authoritative dictatorship) lies in the

dismantling and dividing of the society, so it can be more easily governed.

QUESTION3: There were words like "influence" and "discussion." Were all these recommendations worked out in 2005 by you and passed on to the politicians, or were you collaborating with them? Maybe if the politicians were more engaged in this kind of talks, they would be more decisive in introducing some changes? So is it an "influence" or more like a "discussion"?

RGN: In answer to your question - whether it is "pressure" or "dialogue," and whether anything came out of this, we had to err more towards pressure because the Commissioners weren't interested in hearing representations from the grassroots visual arts communities as they had already decided on their creative industries agenda and artists don't fit with that. But, since Creative Scotland has been on the table, I think there has been a kind of two-pronged approach - half-pressure, half-dialogue - and the kind of pressure I am talking about is really about trying to publicly force the government to the table.

There have not been any individual instances of artists and politicians coming together and developing anything, but we have the Scottish Artists' Union and they have been quite active about campaigning around very small areas of the Culture Scotland Bill. And when I say "small areas" I mean, for example, the fact that the word "artist" was not included in the Culture Scotland Bill, because artists can't be regarded in entrepreneurial terms within the creative industries discourse. So the union tries to have the word "artist" belatedly introduced into the Bill.

This would have been a small concession if the Minister had gone back to the legislation and written a few words that were not there beforehand. In fact, in this case, he referred to this argument about whether "artists" should be explicitly included, but actually he said "No," because it might exclude people who felt themselves to be musicians or writers; he felt the word "artist" was too narrow, so he decided not to include it.

But what I suppose it has done is that it forced him to actually engage, on some level, and to answer his critics, a process that is often missing from our supposedly open and transparent government. And one of the major areas we were concerned about was that the creative industries discourse - which is being taken up by the current government, which is now the Scottish National Party, instead of Scottish Labour; they are very much a nationalistic government - works in tandem with this idea of creating "Scottishness." And what many of us are very concerned about is the fact that artists should not be expected to be consolidating the national identity; they can also have a role in critiquing it. And so again, the Minister has been forced back to this document and had to insert a line about how culture could also critique the national identity; but, of course, the main ethos is still very much this kind of neoliberal creative industries.

KS: We have to finish our meeting. Thanks to everybody for coming, especially Janek Sowa and Rebeca Gordon Nesbitt.