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Final Version

Community Development and the Arts: Sustaining the Democratic Imagination in Lean and Mean Times.

Rosie Meade and Mae Shaw

Abstract

This paper argues for a more expressive and expansive understanding of culture, citizenship and democracy. It seeks to reaffirm the importance of imagination, creativity and emotion in sustaining and enriching community development, particularly given the inexorable rise of a managerialist and programmatic culture of practice. Community development should have an intrinsic interest in the fostering of a democratic culture within and between communities and between communities and state institutions. In practice, however, democracy often becomes treated as a 'deliverable', and community participation is filtered through prescribed and institutionalized relationships. In the context of funding retrenchment and public sector cutbacks, democracy and participation can simply become codewords for neoliberal hegemony.

Against this, we argue that the concept of democracy must be reclaimed as an active social, political and cultural process through which change occurs in different contexts and spaces by means of subversion, opposition and resistance as much as by participation and consent. In this regard the arts have much to offer community development, but the relationship should also be a reciprocal one. The arts can be drawn upon to justify particular kinds of social and cultural exclusion, particularly when creativity becomes monetized and subject to market incursions. There are also parallels between the pressures community arts projects experience to demonstrate results and relevance, and those experienced by community development

projects. Therefore, this paper considers dialectical tendencies in both community development and the arts. We argue for a more symbiotic engagement between these fields, and by using the term ‘democratic imagination’ we hope to enliven what can otherwise become a deadly culture of instrumentalism in both.

By highlighting the concepts of cultural democracy and cultural resistance this paper explores the potential for a more nuanced and less institutionally fixated vision of cultural practice. Cultural democracy acknowledges the centrality of creativity to human experience and emphasizes that citizens be actively supported to engage in the production, consumption and distribution of the arts. Cultural resistance theories recognize that cultural and political expression can occur beyond the radar of mainstream community development and arts practice. Resistance is too easily dismissed as atomized and trivial, and we suggest that practitioners give it more committed attention in order to better understand the issues, identities and ideas that animate communities.

Finally, we consider the creative potential of ‘consumption’ which is often dismissed as a degraded form of cultural engagement. In so doing, we challenge some of the underlying assumptions regarding the apathy and passivity of communities that serve to rationalize policy and practice interventions in the current context.

Community Development and the Arts: Sustaining the Democratic Imagination in Lean and Mean Times.

Rosie Meade and Mae Shaw

Introduction

Utopia’s proper space is the education of desire, to teach desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way (EP Thompson 1976:790)

When the times darken

Will there be singing even then?

There will be singing even then.

Of how the times darken (Bertolt Brecht, translated by Edwin Morgan)

These two quotations, together, speak powerfully and eloquently to the particular challenges of the times in which we live. The first might be read as a forceful challenge to the spirit of conformity and resignation that has characterized the crudely economistic rationality that now dominates the public and political spheres. The problem here is conceived as acquiescence to a limited and limiting form of social and political life – particularly by those who benefit least from existing arrangements. Desiring ‘in a different way’ therefore suggests that the drive to think economistically and to pursue self-interest as mere consumers or customers strips desire of its capacity for yearning, craving and longing for something more meaningful. But more than that, it diminishes our ability to feel, think and act collectively as democratic citizens.

Bertolt Brecht combines a threat with a warning and a hope in his metaphor of the dark. In the first place, there is a warning to those in power that the human spirit cannot be broken, despite the darkness that looms. There is also an invocation to make sense of ‘how the times darken’ (and why) and the implicit warning about simply cursing the darkness. This is as much a matter of reason as it is of feeling. Perhaps, too, we can apprehend a warning about relying on certain kinds of institutionalized or formalized responses to the darkening, and a conviction that a deeper expression of the human spirit will be necessary if the forces of darkness are to be confronted. What is perhaps most important in what Brecht is saying is that, whilst singing can simply relieve the darkness, it can potentially do much more: it can begin to convert the darkness into a struggle for light. This is essentially an emancipatory process because in the singing, the singers collectively become active subjects in politics rather than objectified victims of politics. Such work may even form a kind of creative vanguard, securing the fertile ground on which the work of progressive politics can, once again, begin to flourish.

The reason these quotes have been selected to begin this article is twofold. The first is to do with language and expression. Used within the context of what currently constitutes democratic life for community groups, the quotes are discursively subversive in that they speak in a language that establishes a basis for interpretation, expressiveness and discussion rather than blind adherence. Tony Judt (2010: 6), in his book *Ill Fares the Land*, sees our current predicament in large part as a discursive one: ‘Our problem is not what to do; it is how to talk about it’. In other words, the language available to us has become so constricted that questions to do with fairness, justice and morality – the real questions for democratic life – have become depoliticized within a stunted and sanitized discourse. In the service of a more expressive vocabulary, the poet Adrienne Rich (2007: 423) emphasizes the utility of the ‘great muscle of

metaphor' that takes strength from collective recognition and upon which we must draw if we are to transcend 'that brute dictum, "There is no alternative"'. Or to put it another way, we cannot talk about suffering, need, anger or greed in the alien and alienating language of the boardroom.

Second, the quotes generate a sense of what is possible when the intellectual and affective dimensions of human experience can be activated towards a common purpose: to excavate, understand and re-imagine both external and internalized relations of power. Structures of power and domination work their way into how we see ourselves and others so that they are regarded as natural – common sense, as it were. We argue that the arts offer a unique possibility to turn the spotlight on this so-called common sense and to light the fuse of imagination that is central to the creation of the kind of democratic society that seeks to ask the right questions of itself. In this article, we argue that community development should have an intrinsic interest in the fostering of a democratic culture within and between communities and between communities and state institutions – however compromising these relationships may become in particular contexts. At this time, we are particularly interested in the potential of the arts to rescue community development from the darkening shadow of the managerialist paradigm that has diminished its practice globally and that actively stifles the capacity to imagine better and more just alternatives. In fact, the latest rediscovery of self-help in the face of staggering cuts in public welfare potentially places community workers at the forefront as (albeit reluctant) carriers of the new welfare order.

We are interested therefore in reviving the potential of community development to catalyse and nourish a more dialectical relationship between the cultural politics of people in communities and the wider political culture of the state. Finally, we wish to draw together what we think are some vital components of the kind of democratic disposition that desires more and desires better for all in these darkening times.

Community development and democracy: an ambivalent relationship

As an essentially contested concept, democracy has a range of meanings, and community development has been drawn upon to support competing and sometimes conflicting models (Shaw and Martin 2000). Generally and historically speaking, community development is concerned with the relationship between government and its citizens, and is charged variously

with strengthening, inducing or ‘delivering’ participatory democracy. This has become a particularly problematic prospect in the twenty-first century because as John Gaventa (2007: x) puts it:

Democracy is at once the language of military power, neoliberal market forces, political parties, social movements, donor agencies and NGOs. What is going on?

What this signifies is that democracy is continuously and famously rediscovered by different and competing actors, particularly at times of crisis or change. Such plasticity may be both a strength and a weakness, but in any case its deep ambivalence has to be acknowledged in a global context where there appears to be ‘an obligation’ to export a particular version throughout the world, whatever the wider consequences (Chomsky, 2003). At the same time, globalisation destabilises and undermines (and sometimes reinforces) traditional forms of affiliation and identity in the sudden confrontation with the ‘stranger’. These changes – mobility of people and finance, social heterogeneity and the competing claims to ‘belonging’ they produce – place new demands and pressures on what Amin (2002: 960) calls ‘the politics of living together’. A more nuanced approach to democracy is therefore necessary in order to locate its ideological deployment in policy and to appreciate how this translates in community development theory and practice.

Community development occupies a contradictory yet strategic position between the demands of the state - to deliver policy objectives - and the needs and interests of people in diverse communities - to articulate their own experience, often as a critique of policy (Poppo, 1995). In its best sense participatory democracy, as articulated through community development, has served as the crucible for contestation, negotiation and, in some important cases, significant reform. Within the neoliberal state, however, a *genuinely participatory* democracy is seen as at best a time-wasting irritant and, at worst, a barrier to ‘economic growth’. Under such circumstances, maintaining legitimacy and consent becomes a difficult balancing act for the state: there are real tensions between the authoritarianism of its market enforcement and its responsibilities to support individual freedom and social solidarity (Harvey, 2005:79). Democratic engagement, whether in government institutions or informal governance of the kind facilitated through community development, therefore, uneasily embodies deeply contradictory ambitions.

Over the last decade or so, the discourses and practice of community development became inextricably linked in many contexts with concepts such as ‘active citizenship’, ‘social capital’

and, as noted already, 'participatory democracy'. Generally, these discourses assume that the most effective way for citizens to co-operate, voice their opinions or influence processes of governance is through participation in community-based structures and organisations. Localised institutions are presumed to more accurately represent citizens' interests both internally, within the community context itself, and externally, to government, state, media and other power structures. Since the mid-1990s, coincident with the normalisation of social partnership in the Irish context, the success of New Labour in the UK, and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the range of agencies claiming and promoting such forms of community engagement has grown exponentially to include actors from statutory, private and NGO sectors. Indeed the duty to 'consult the community' is now obligatory in England (Communities and Local Government, 2009) and Scotland (Scottish Parliament, 2003).

Although suggestive of community ownership and control, these invocations of community participation typically fail to explain 'what exactly people are being enjoined to participate in, for what purpose, who is involved and who is absent' (Cornwall, 2008; 281). Furthermore, their democratic reach tends to be defined narrowly. It continues to be wedded to traditional political concerns such as local government reform and focussed upon relations, whether oppositional or more congenial, with the state. Discourses represent citizens as 'targets' for engagement in existing or future structures, represented in more or less equal measure as problem and/or solution (Mooney and Neal, 2009). The creation of institutions is privileged as a marker of democratic engagement, at the expense of a more qualitative understanding of the practices that engender or hinder democracy in the broad socio-cultural field. Important though engaged interaction between formal political institutions and more informal community networks might be, such interaction is usually conducted within 'invited' spaces which are mediated and controlled by the powerful with a narrow focus on increasingly market-led policy priorities (Gaventa, 2004). Mainstream discourses and practices of community participation rarely recognise those other realms of life, including workplace, family and cultural settings where democracy is being practised or can take root (See Greene, 1976).

We would like to emphasise a more expansive concept of democracy, one which is not simply a set of managed institutions or relationships and certainly not a codeword for neoliberal hegemony. Instead, we would argue that the concept needs to be reclaimed as an active social, political and cultural process through which change occurs in different contexts and spaces by means of subversion, opposition and resistance as much as by participation and consent. In

this sense, democracy is sustained not by the conformist citizen, but by the agency of the critical and creative citizen. This highlights a potentially crucial role for community development practitioners in finding ways to enhance people's potential for democratic agency by helping to release or resource their capacity to be active and creative.

The poet, Emily Dickinson, writes that 'imagination lights the fuse of possibility', and it is just such a sense of possibility that community development needs to become infused with. Malik (2000: 46) argues that the arts provides a distinctive space where personal and political roles and relations can be renegotiated and re-imagined partly because of its unique potential to take us out of ourselves, 'to range over the actual, the probable, the possible and even the impossible'. In this sense the arts have much to offer community development. But the relationship should also be reciprocal. The expectation – if not always the actuality - of participation which is enshrined in anything which calls itself community development may lend weight and depth to what otherwise may be ephemeral or diversionary arts activities. Such a symbiotic relationship may create the conditions in which 'imagination' can be sustained as a dynamic process of communication so that 'meaning-making' begins to replace 'meaning-taking' as a primary objective of community development work. Indeed Raymond Williams (1989) argues that the process of communication itself leads to community in the sense of 'the sharing of common meanings and thence common activities and purposes: the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change'.

By using the term 'democratic imagination' we hope to enliven what can otherwise become a deadly culture of instrumentalism in both the arts and community development fields. We are also suggesting that arts and community practices must seek to unleash underexplored possibilities: for entering attentively into the experience of others; for asserting the place of the arts and cultural production in the lives of communities; for excavating and exploring the causes of flaws and wounds in society; for thinking critically about structures and relations of power; and for acting creatively to transform the world collectively for the better (Meade and Shaw 2007). We argue that the relationship between community development and participatory arts needs to be reconsidered in light of these possibilities. In the following sections we suggest that the concepts of *cultural democracy* and *cultural resistance* can contribute to a more nuanced and less institutionally fixated vision of cultural practice.

Cultural democracy in the marketplace

Cultural democracy conceptualises democracy as vibrant, public and discursive (McGonagle, 2007). It asserts that citizens should and do communicate their views and understandings of the world through a range of processes and in a multiplicity of spheres. In particular, cultural democracy positions cultural production as both central to human experience and as a necessary site for democratisation. In other words, citizens are seen as creators, as opposed to mere audiences or spectators, whose active engagement in the making, consumption and distribution of culture must be acknowledged and supported (see Matarasso, 2006). Here, 'culture' incorporates both 'ways of life' or shared 'meanings' *and* 'special processes of discovery and creativity', including the arts (Williams, 1958/1989: 4). While it is obvious that all of us are involved in the fashioning and re-fashioning of culture in its anthropological sense, it is not clear that opportunities to engage in the arts are so broadly distributed. Matarasso (2006:3) points to the persistence of cultural exclusion and the failure of governments, in particular, to support 'the diversity of cultural expression'. Furthermore, dominant classifications of *the culture* or *the cultures* of a given society often tend towards reification or essentialism: valuing individual artefacts over collective enterprise, heritage over ecology, authors over audiences and the heroic over the mundane. In this way the porosity and contested character of culture is overlooked and under-examined, and particular versions are promoted to the exclusion of others.

Intense political interest in the 'creative industries' illustrates the point. Peck (2009:7) argues, for example, that 'the creativity script' in the USA in particular combines cultural libertarianism with neoliberal economic imperatives: originality and creativity is 'cool' - so long as it sells. The result, in some cases, has been the bohemification of declining inner city areas, attracting diverse groups which in turn contribute to the creation of a vibrant some cases, has been the bohemification of declining inner city areas, attracting diverse groups that in turn contribute to the creation of a vibrant metropolitan space, only to drive out traditional working class communities who can no longer afford to live there. As Peck (2009) puts it, 'hey presto, thorny political problem becomes competitive asset'. In this process, creativity strategies, such as arts projects and 'street culture', can simply represent commodified assets that reinforce the neo-liberalized domination of public space and the exclusion of the poor. Far from an imaginative clash of ideas, struggles and meaning, the outcome is more likely to be a homogenized version of culture, which is 'rolled out' irrespective of diverse interests and experience.

Similar developments are discernible across the European Union where, according to Marita Muukkonen (2004), the meaning of culture has been appropriated for new and dubious purposes in official cultural policy documents. She observes a transformation towards a model of cultural economics – as opposed to cultural politics – based on the ‘reciprocal movement of commodifying culture and culturalizing industry’ (Muukkonen 2004: 3). In other words, culture is primarily regarded as a commodity, devoid of transcendent symbolic meaning and available only to those in a position to afford it. At the same time, economic production relies on the arts as a means of providing economic advantage – ‘value added’. Business leaders and management gurus have become as interested in creativity as those who are involved in the arts, reflecting a change from a manufacturing economy to what has been called an ‘economy of the imagination’ (Mirza 2006). This places artists and the arts in general in a particularly invidious position and has the potential to reinforce a deeply conservative estimation of the potential of art as critique.

The establishment of Creative Scotland Ltd (2010) to replace the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, for example, is symptomatic of the times. It is made up of ‘key stakeholders’ including local authorities, the voluntary sector and business interests. At its long-awaited launch, and in a climate of impending cuts, the Director, according to arts critic and journalist Joyce McMillan, ‘spouted worrying management speak’ about ‘making new partnerships’ and ‘being an advocate for the arts’ (*The Scotsman* 24 July 2010). Given the economic view of the arts, which already pertains, and the way in which such cuts will no doubt focus the managerialist mind, it is reasonable to assume that the commodification of the arts will continue apace.

Furthermore, in situations of scarcity or diminishing public expenditure, the arts are being increasingly functionalized as government demands ‘that [they] build communities, regenerate economies and include marginalized groups’ (Selwood 2006: 53). The parallels with community development are instructive. For example, projects begin to redevelop and redirect their work in ways calculated to secure funding, what Belfiore (2006) calls ‘policy attachment’. This, in turn, can severely compromise the nature of the work undertaken, creating an aesthetic that is framed by ‘officialdom’s image of the public’ (Selwood 2006: 54). For one thing, substantial anecdotal evidence would suggest that those projects that are conceptualized and imposed from above according to limiting funding streams and limited timescales, often fail to

attract the very people for whom they are intended, leading to questions about the effective and efficient use of public funding. This may leave community arts projects particularly vulnerable in the context of public expenditure cuts. In a wider sense, there is a distinct danger that community identity and experience is presented in terms associated with the heritage industry that all too often offers a sanitized representation of social reality – ‘postcard versions’ (Selwood, 2006) – under the banner of ‘popular culture’. Popular culture as ‘product of the people’ was historically understood as standing ‘in creative tension with, though not necessarily direct opposition to, mass-consumer culture’ (McGuigan 1996: 126). More recently, it has been used to describe all manner of mainstream cultural practices, particularly those peddled by the market.

As proponents of cultural democracy, it is essential that we take into account the issues highlighted above and that we look more carefully at what constitutes popular culture in the current context, and by what authority. First, it may be necessary to talk about popular cultures rather than popular culture, appreciating that class, place and other affiliations inflect the cultural lives of citizens. Second, we might need to look beyond the artefacts and experiences that people buy, to consider their own flashes of artistry and productivity. Of course these may be difficult to track, particularly when they involve no obvious commercial exchange or occur in lowly venues or in private spaces. Third, we might consider whether and how state and market forces misrecognize popular cultures: by denying them status, audiences or channels of distribution. Finally, we may ask what, if anything, communities need in order to make and do culture better. In raising this we might keep in mind Paul Willis’s warning against condescension and presumption: not starting with the question ‘why are their cultures not as we think they should be?’ but rather with ‘what are their cultures?’ (Willis 1990: 5) and maybe, even, with ‘what would they like them to be?’

Cultural invasion and cultural resistance

It has become almost a commonplace fact that life in many post-industrial democracies is more unequal than at any time since World War II (see Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). And this appears to be true on a range of indicators: income, mobility, health, education, morbidity and mortality, criminality. According to Judt (2010: 21), for example, there is a negative correlation between income inequality and trust, with serious implications for levels of suspicion in relation to difference. He quotes research that demonstrates that an increase in mistrustfulness is particularly marked in the United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland, ‘three countries

in which the dogma of unregulated individual self-interest was most assiduously applied to public policy'. His simple conclusion is that 'inequality is corrosive [...] it rots society from within' (2010: 21).

It is worth remembering then that the arts can provide a convenient means of political displacement, as it were: distracting attention from the rotting process, or even aestheticizing its putrifying remains. This potential for ideological complicity in the arts and cultural spheres was emphasized by the Frankfurt theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in an analysis that seems to have continuing relevance today. Writing during the mid-twentieth century they described how the 'culture industry' – incorporating the media, mass culture and advertising spheres – bound individuals to the repressive logic of capitalist society and effectively hollowed out their intellects (Kellner 1995: 28–31). Stereotyped narratives, formulaic characterizations, the elevation of the 'average' to the 'heroic' – e.g. our own cults of celebrity – and the constant din of advertising, were just some of the strategies employed to divert and distract the public (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972: 130–168). In this pessimistic and generalizing appraisal, mass culture and the more degraded forms of artistic practice are seen to both demand and secure the public's political conformity.

The phrase 'the world wants to be deceived', has become truer than had ever been intended. People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them. (Adorno, 1991; 89)

Despite such potential for manipulated alienation, however, the arts and cultural practices can also speak out against oppression and domination. For example, the sociologists Eyerman and Jamison (1998) have analysed the longstanding significance of song in helping social movements in the United States to frame issues, to memorialize grievances and victories, and to demonstrate and create internal solidarity. Song – like other art forms – provides activists with alternative routes to the hearts and minds of potential supporters and adversaries, but it can also be an expression of politics itself, as Brecht reminds us. Recognizing the 'political' role of the arts, forces us to look beyond the tired institutional formulae for democratic communication that still characterizes much community development practice. Furthermore, if we were to adopt a more organic approach to popular culture, such as that suggested in the previous section, we would surely find that citizens inflect, oppose and transcend their given roles in surprising ways. Countering Adorno and Horkheimer somewhat, we might

acknowledge how, via the most 'miniscule' of gestures and deviations, people add to the culture and in so doing how they defy being reduced and objectified by the all pervasive 'grid of discipline' that surrounds them (de Certeau 1984: xiv). Given our concern at the bland homogeneity that characterizes mainstream public and political debate, we are particularly interested in the extent to which artistic and cultural practices might subvert or resist the dominant ways of thinking and talking about contemporary life. At the very least, this process might open up a space for creative contestation. In these terms, we are interested not only in pluralizing or democratizing the practice of the arts, but also in celebrating their radical and transformative potential, however tentative or muted it may sometimes be.

Stephen Duncombe (2003: 5) defines cultural resistance as 'culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure'. If, as he goes on to argue, politics is essentially a cultural discourse derived from socially constructed rituals, symbols and understandings, it follows that cultural practice may be utilized to subvert or challenge the norms of political discourse. This is an important point for community development. For example, rather than assuming that communities and individuals, with their low rates of participation in electoral and development processes, are pathologically apathetic or disengaged, we need to pay closer attention to the practices of everyday life in order to discern the values and commentaries that infuse them (de Certeau 1984). We need, in other words, to grasp what captures people's imagination rather than to lament or penalize their passivity towards normative democratic practices from which they are to a large extent excluded.

Cultural resistance theorists draw attention to the covert or implicit strategies through which social actors articulate a sense of self or contest both low level and grand scale oppressions (e.g. Kelley 1996). What Duncombe (2003) describes as a 'politics that doesn't look like politics' incorporates cultural practices – including style, attitude, jokes, artistry, participation in gangs, graffiti, outlaw status – through which oppositional identities may be nurtured and expressed. Similarly, James Scott (1990) argues that between the poles of political activism and disengagement other resistant strategies may be employed. He points to what he terms 'hidden transcripts of resistance':

discourse that takes place "offstage", beyond direct observation by powerholders...it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript (Scott, 1990; 4).

The naming and contestation of (pre-)public woes often occurs within the safety of close social, family or community networks; oppositional solidarities are forged and reinforced in comparatively privatized spheres where the force of dominant power relations is felt less acutely or in which politics becomes deeply personal. Theories of cultural resistance, therefore, force us to interrogate if and how community development or community arts may be overly prescriptive in their efforts to engineer democracy, how they may in fact trample over indigenous 'practice', practice that defies *their* conventions of what it is to be an active citizen. Such theories also remind community arts and development workers of the importance of deep and open-minded engagement with communities and of the necessity to create mutually respectful educational relationships. Ironically, the interventionist practitioner's gaze may be too superficial and too myopic to recognize the questioning and critical intelligences that animate these cultural gestures.

Consumerism and consumption, what place for creativity and imagination?

In the current climate, democracy can too easily become conflated with the market, but if we are to think more dialectically we need to think about consumption more carefully and purposefully: to explore consumption for its democratic or subversive spaces. An appreciation of cultural resistance and its place in democracy forces us to try to come to terms with the place of consumption in contemporary society. Given the centrality of the consumer role for citizens, it is to be expected that much of their cultural and political preferences will be articulated in and through consumption.

Concepts of cultural democracy and resistance are attractive insofar as they highlight the creative and activist potentialities of citizens and, as such, they may also show the potential for people to transcend the limitations of consumerism. It is often assumed, for example, that while people are buying, watching or selecting, they are not making or doing or even being. We suggest that such a conclusion is both premature and somewhat simplistic. It is important to deconstruct the idea of consumerism in order to recognize its dialectical tendencies; tendencies that may constrain particular forms of cultural action and may enable or support others. It may be the case that the role of 'the consumer' is less deterministic or infantilizing than we think; that the polarization of consumer and creator may occlude possibilities for creativity through consumption or for politically effective forms of consumer action.

In the Republic of Ireland, most obviously in the context of the current recession but even during the heady days of the Celtic Tiger, moralizing discourses about consumerism's grip on the collective psyche have become ritualistic. These discourses emphasize consumerism's inevitably corrosive effects on the spiritual, community and cultural lives of the population (e.g. Bohan 2009; Department of Education and Science 2003), with Irish President Mary McAleese emerging as a high-profile critic of this shift in collective values:

I think that everyone of us would have to say with our hands on our hearts that we were all consumed by that same element of consumerism...Somewhere along the line, we began to think that we weren't happy with deferred gratification. ... And now the balance presumably is going to swing back the other way and it will be no harm. (Mary McAleese, Irish Times, Tuesday, Dec 16, 2008).

It is evident that the sheer pervasiveness of consumerism ensures that previously sequestered spaces – the body, the school, the family or childhood itself – are now identified as fair game for commodification and incessant marketing (Cook 2007). Even our mental and physical health is endangered as our pleasure seeking culminates in an 'obesity crisis' and the 'scourge of binge drinking'. The inclusive 'we' is, however, misleading: as Michael Aaronovitch points out, 'such worries rarely afflict the wealthy – always the moral panic about consumption is about the lower orders [...] the banker isn't the target' (*The Times* 24 January 2009). In addition, as Lenihan(2006) observes, moralizing discourses rarely acknowledge or interrogate the economic, political and geographical factors that shape individual behaviour. Consumerism may be bad for the culture but it is consistently represented as an imperative for the economy, with the decline of 'consumer confidence' generally regarded as an indicator of recession. Similarly, social geographers such as Valentine (2001: 227) remind us that urban development and community regeneration processes have been instrumental in 'reorganizing cities around consumption rather than production' (see also Minton 2009).

Such considerations are suggestive of both the 'hegemony' of consumption in contemporary society and its dialectical character. Indeed, theories of consumer society generally argue that we – in late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – occupy a distinct historical period in which 'consumption' is the primary frame of reference for our behaviours and emotions (Bauman 2007a, 2007b; Gilbert 2008). In other words, it is largely through consumption that our social identities are forged and it is increasingly difficult – if not impossible – to conceive

of human desires, emotions or needs as ‘prior to’, ‘outside of’ or ‘distinct from’ consumer relationships. In line with neo-liberal ideology, *freedom* is defined as freedom to consume and to resist the consumerist imperative becomes tantamount to a refusal of freedom. Consumers pick and choose from ready-made images and commodities in a cycle without end. Likewise, things – including cultural artefacts and the arts – are not celebrated for their durability or their ability to speak to some longstanding fundamental need; in ‘liquid modernity’ ‘[E]verything is disposable, nothing is truly necessary, nothing is irreplaceable’ (Bauman 2007a: 123–24

Bauman’s critique reflects some of the long-standing preoccupations of the Frankfurt theorists (Adorno 1991; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972), among them the concern that the character of the cultural sphere is overdetermined by the logic of capitalism and is therefore profoundly undemocratic. Perhaps, however, there are less deterministic ways of seeing consumer culture. In their bleak diagnoses, Bauman and the Frankfurt theorists do not really address what it is that people do with culture when they receive it. Contemporary cultural products may have degraded origins, their substance and presentation may owe more to the profit motive than any aesthetic vision and they may be designed for easy disposal and replacement, but that does not mean that their use or applications can be predicted reliably. Among recognised or aspiring artists the previously controversial use of ‘found objects’ is now commonplace. Bland or uninteresting mass produced items are re-appropriated and re-made when they are invested with unexpected meaning: Duchamp’s humble ‘Urinal/Fountain’ brazenly defied received notions of authorship and quality, while Oppenheim’s ‘Object’ suggested that cups and saucers could be receptacles for all kinds of alarming possibilities. In the context of the gallery, where we are conscious of being addressed by ‘artists’, it is easier to recognise as purposeful such efforts to re-animate consumer goods. However, the capacity to subvert or appropriate might be traceable across our societies, discernible in more low-key and everyday contexts.

In summary, critiques of consumer society may dismiss consumption too readily as an inherently passive role. For advocates of cultural democracy, a remaining challenge is to recognise and critically engage with more artful and active forms of consumption, as ordinary people negotiate and re-define the purposes of the objects they buy or, indeed, the democratic arrangements they are sold (See Willis, 1990). Otherwise we are at risk of repeating the same fallacies that guide those forms of democratic engineering and community development that were noted earlier, i.e. the assumption that there is little meaningful going on in communities save what is delivered or unleashed by well-meaning interventions.

Conclusion

[Art] can be used to free people or to constrain them, to empower them or to weaken them, to include or to exclude them ... [art] can act to reinforce the status quo and conform people to the logic of the present system. Or [it] can be a powerful tonic for the imagination and a necessary resource for progressive social change. (Thompson, 2002: 24)

Simply put, the arts cannot transcend socio-economic context by the force and will of their craft alone, but they can awaken people to both the negative and positive spaces which it opens up. We are reminded of Dewey's comparison of the aesthetic with the 'anaesthetic' (numb, imperturbable, unmoveable), and the power of art to 'break through the crust of conventionality ... reject the static, the automatic, the merely habitual' (Dewey, 1958, p.48). At their best, the arts can enable those most removed from the formal structures and institutions of power to communicate to those in power on their own terms in their own interests. The same can of course be said of community development itself.

In exploring the potential of and for socially committed arts practice, we would argue that there is a need to invigorate the concept of 'cultural democracy'. In our view culture must be defined in broad and inclusive terms as the making of meaning through every day living and through more specialised intellectual or artistic processes (Williams, 1958/1989). Therefore, our conception of cultural democracy accepts that cultural production is central to human experience not just by right, but as an 'evolutionary necessity' (Fyfe, 2007). It is also borne of recognition of the centrality of consumption in contemporary society, where consumer impulses are less a matter of moral character than they are responses to a complex web of structural and social forces. While we may have some choice regarding the specifics of what we consume, we may have little choice but to *be* consumers. In this context to assert the values of collectivity and productivity – values that are central to cultural democracy – is to strike a note of opposition against the current hegemony.

Our conception of cultural democracy, therefore, allows for the possibility that the multiple practices of resistance that occur within communities may contain an (albeit latent) political dimension. Without committed attention to identifying and exploring such practices, they may remain invisible to community and arts workers or dismissed as deviant or pathological. In this

sense, we recognize that through their everyday lives and within the parameters of their consumer role, citizens will artfully and imaginatively react to, reclaim and refashion commodities and experiences. The challenge is to locate the transformative and radical potential in such practices. We therefore hope that community development can serve as a space within which otherwise atomized or individualized resistances might be supported to become part of a *common* democratic culture. In so doing, community development's advocates may need to resist their own impulses to filter this culture solely through the tired institutions and procedures that now dominate the field.

In conclusion, this article argues for a more expressive and expansive understanding of culture, citizenship and democracy. It seeks to reaffirm the importance of imagination, creativity and emotion in sustaining and enriching community development, particularly given the inexorable rise of a managerialist and programmatic culture of practice. Reviving the democratic imagination is simultaneously a political, a professional and an educational task. As Maxine Greene (1995: 6) puts it:

All depends upon a breaking free, a leap and then a question ... the educative task is to create situations in which people are moved to begin to ask, in all the tones of voice there are, 'why'?

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