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Cultural value as meaning-making

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ABSTRACT

This article defines cultural value as a non-monetary and fundamental expression of the value of culture. It argues that cultural value is constituted through meaning-making and can be characterised as normative, hermeneutic and intersubjectively warranted. Thus understood – even though originally a construct of the discourse of cultural economics and considered a factor shaping the economic value of culture – cultural value sits outside of the purview of contemporary welfare economics. This raises many questions, including how and whether cultural value can be registered in policy which relies on standard economics as its *lingua franca;* what implications this has for polemics about how value, impact and evidence are framed in cultural policy; and, centrally, what role arts and humanities expertise plays in policy decision-making.

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Introduction

Many quarrels in cultural policy have been caused by the erroneous belief that cultural value can be measured in economic terms – it cannot. This article explains why. Cultural value is normative, hermeneutic and collectively certified. This means that cultural value is pronounced on the basis of cultural values – norms, beliefs and practices collectively shaping how people live; it is a product of a communicative effort where people interpret what matters to them in the light of collective norms and individual goals; and it requires collective validation which can be done though intersubjective warranting and agreement, rather than objective verification. In a nutshell, cultural value is constituted through meaning-making. This *norms-grounded, inherently interpretative* and *irreducibly collective* value can neither be expressed in economic terms nor measured through the aggregation of individual utility in welfare economic approaches.

So what? This has implications for cultural policymaking and for how we think about the value of different academic disciplines in policymaking more broadly. This article does not advocate quitting economics, though it does note that new approaches – going beyond the welfarist, neo-classical approaches – are needed. In particular, a family of approaches developed in the context of environmental and ecological economics, collectively referred to as socio-cultural valuation (Kaszynska et al., 2022, pp. 39–44), is highlighted for its potential

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to communicate cultural value in policy terms. Many of these approaches use deliberative and discursive methods and, therefore, rely on arts and humanities expertise, alongside other human and social sciences.

However, the importance of arts and humanities disciplines goes further in cultural policy, this article argues, in that their concepts are needed to understand and explain what cultural value is in the first place. To reiterate, the *norms-grounded, inherently interpretative* and *irreducibly collective* value cannot be expressed in economic terms. Accordingly, the article emphasises the need to re-think the place of arts and humanities research in informing policymaking, and in cultural policy in particular (Banks & O'Connor, 2021; Belfiore, 2015; 2022; O'Connor, 2022; also, Bille et al., 2016). This discussion is directly relevant to the broader and ever-resurfacing question of how value, impact and evidence are framed in policy and the implications this has for how different disciplines and fields are perceived in terms of the contributions they make to public policy (Hadley & Gray, 2017; Hazelkorn, 2015; Kaszynska, 2015).

The article is based on a theoretical analysis of the key concepts and considerations arising in relation to making cultural value an object of decision-making, supported by relevant literatures in the areas of cultural policy, cultural economy, cultural economics and the arts and humanities more broadly. The article starts with dismantling some unhelpful dichotomies shaping the discourse of value in relation to culture (notably, it insists on the relationality and co-dependence of the conception of culture as identity and a basis of everyday cultural practices on the one hand, and as the reified/objectified forms of cultural expression such as art on the other). The article proceeds by proposing an analytic distinction which, in turn, is claimed useful from the point of view of advancing the present argument, namely, the difference between the discourse of the *value of culture* (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008) and the much narrower discourse of *cultural value* (Kaszynska, 2021) with the attached historical manifestations (Hewison, 2012; Holden, 2006). Next, while tracing the term "cultural value" to cultural economics and the work of David Throsby in particular, the article discusses the limitations of economic approaches acknowledged by many leading cultural economists (Hutter & Frey, 2010; Klamer, 2003b; Throsby, 2001). Paradoxically, cultural value is a construct of the discourse of cultural economics, but – as the article argues – economics is unable to define what cultural value is, nor can it measure it *per se*. Next, a characterisation of cultural value that draws on concepts from the arts and humanities is offered. With this, the contribution of arts and humanities expertise to cultural policy can be stated: arts and humanities concepts are needed to define what cultural value is in the first place; in addition, alongside other human and social sciences, these areas can inform how cultural value is expressed in policymaking by supporting the development of socio-cultural valuation approaches.

The article focuses on the Western, Anglo-Saxon tradition of thinking about culture and the British, and more narrowly English, institutional context of policymaking. The analytic categories and concepts used originate in the Global North. This is a limitation. The author hopes however that the argument and considerations presented will have resonance outside of the Global North, in particular in those contexts where the cultural policies that are being implemented bear some – albeit at times superficial – resemblance with the Western formations (Henze & Escribal, 2021; Lee & Lim, 2014). Insofar as the key argument questions the exclusion of arts and humanities expertise from cultural policymaking and vindicates the forms of understanding that have been silenced and ignored in the

dominant discourse of public policy – the forms of knowledge derived from people's experiences and validated through their collective meaning-making efforts, such as those at the basis of cultural value – the article contributes to the agenda of expanding the accepted "ecology of knowledges" (Santos, 2015, p. 297).

The binaries shaping the meaning of "culture"

In a field cutting across multiple sectors and discourses such as the areas of research and practice converging on cultural value, it is helpful to start with setting out the premises of the central argument by clarifying the terms of analysis. This section looks at a series of dichotomies which have structured the understanding of what culture is in the UK.[1] The key point is that a more productive approach is to see these binaries as dialectical relations where the two seemingly opposed terms come to interact.

Historically in the UK there have been two dominant ways of thinking about culture. On the one hand, there is the Arnoldian/Leavisite tradition of the "best and brightest" (Arnold, [1869] 1993). The view holds that culture should be defined in terms of an institutionally enshrined cannon that sets a standard of excellence to be emulated by the "producers" of culture and to inspire the "consumers" of culture. This view is often caricatured as reducing the value of culture to the connoisseurship of a reified and rarified set of privileged cultural objects – "tangible assets" most often securely and safely stored in museums and archives. On the other hand, there are anthropological accounts of culture as a way of thinking and behaving based on shared values and practices. The latter underpins Williams's culture as "way of life" ([1958] 2010; 1983) and can be traced back to Tylor's *Primitive culture: Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art and custom* of 1871 and to Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* which originally appeared in 1943 (Eliot, 2010).

These two – allegedly competing – "definitions" of culture have not only co-existed historically but continue to shape the contemporary landscape, both in academia and policy. Many recent discussions of what might be seen as cross-cutting topics: the inequalities of production, consumption and representation (Bennett et al., 2009; Brook et al., 2020; Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007) and the considerations of "democratising culture" versus "cultural democracy" (Gross & Wilson, 2020; see also Miles & Gibson, 2016) – have been informed by the contestation over the "high" and "vernacular" culture(s). As such, the distinction persists in the UK policy discourse.[2]

In relation to policy internationally, this distinction has been manifested in the differentiation between culture qua a set of practices, and culture as an objectified form of expression or a sector of activity. For instance, the World Bank's volume edited by Rao and Walton speaks of culture in the first sense and in terms of "the relationships among individuals within groups, among groups, and between ideas and perspectives [and as] concerned with identity, aspiration, symbolic exchange, coordination, and structures and practices that serve relational ends, such as ethnicity, ritual, heritage, norms, meanings, and beliefs" (Rao & Walton, 2004, p. 4). At the same time, Rao and Walton note that this understanding of culture as identity co-exists, and is perhaps augmented by, "culture as expression" which refers to heritage, festivals and other sites "where communities reify their group identity" (Rao and Walton, 204, p. 35). Likewise, the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the subsequent publications by UNESCO see culture in a dual sense:

> […] as a sector of activity [which] includes, but not exclusively, cultural workers, artists and other creative professionals; commercial (for-profit) businesses; not-for-profit firms in the arts and culture; public cultural institutions, such as museums and galleries, heritage sites, libraries etc.; education and training institutions in the arts; government agencies and ministries responsible for arts and cultural affairs; NGOs and civil society involved in cultural activity. Second, in its anthropological sense, referring to the people's way of life – the different values, norms, knowledge, skills, individual and collective beliefs – that guide individual and collective action. In this sense of values and norms, culture is understood as a stock of intangible renewable resources upon which people draw inspiration and through which they express the meaning they give to their existence and its development. (UNESCO, 2014, p. 10)

This dual sense of culture is acknowledged in the context of cultural economics, with Klamer using the World Bank's terminology of "identity" and "expression", and Throsby speaking of "the functional" and "anthropological" approaches (Klamer, 2003a, p. 24; Throsby, 1995, p. 202). This begs the question of how the two meanings of culture relate.

Sociologists of culture have long appreciated the need to analyse the objectified manifestations of culture as actively shaping, as well as being shaped by, culture as identity (DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004; Harrington, 2004; Mohr et al., 2020; Wolff, 2017). Likewise, in the academic cultural policy discourse, the objectified cultural expressions have been argued to shape and re-shape cultural identities and to legitimate and institutionalise some identities over others. This underscores the importance of asking "whose values" are being given the privilege of expression in the accepted cultural forms (Belfiore, 2020; Hadley & Belfiore, 2018). And yet, cultural policymaking – as practiced by policymakers – suffers from the lack of a relational understanding of culture, one spanning the *canonical* and the *everyday*.

The first contribution of this article is to argue explicitly that culture should be understood in terms of a relationship, and not a distinction, between the reified/objectified forms of cultural expression and the manifestations of culture as identity (Kaszynska, 2021) and that this relational understanding is a basis for any "operationalisation" of the notion of cultural value in the context of policymaking.

The value of culture and cultural value

Whereas the previous section suggests that the binaries structuring the Western, Anglo-Saxon discourse of value in relation to culture are unhelpful, with the splitting off of the *everyday* from the *canonical* as ontologically separate categories being particularly problematic; the point of this section is to insist that the notion of cultural value should be distinguished from the broader term: the value of culture. Whereas, as explained below, cultural value and the value of culture are not unrelated, it is important to be clear that the terms have different genealogies and purposes.

The value of culture is a much discussed topic in the humanities as formed in the Western world – across literature, history and the philosophy of art and aesthetics – and in more cross-disciplinary contexts such as cultural studies or arts management (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Hall, 1997; Lehman et al., 2021; Skeggs, 2004). These discussions remain far from settled with a variety of views competing for attention. In a kaleidoscopic review and looking at some "text book" examples: Aristotle tells us that the arts and culture are valuable because of the relationship to emotion and virtue, Plato argues

the opposite; Vico commends the arts' ability to reveal truths about reality, Schopenhauer praises aesthetic and artistic forms for enabling escapism from the real; Tolstoy argues that art is valuable because it makes us moral, Oscar Wilde that it is precisely the suspending of moral judgement that is to be valued about art (Cahn et al., 2020; Cazeaux, 2017). These are, of course, (over)simplified accounts. In reality, any of these individual positions can be revealed to be multi-dimensional when open to discursive interpretation. For instance, the so-called Kantian formalism – often misinterpreted as a species of universalising aestheticism – can be shown to be an example of using the aesthetic domain in support of the injunction to be moral (Kant, 2000); or Adorno's insistence on abstraction can be seen as a way of ensuring that art remains politically useful not despite but *because* of its self-imposed autonomy (Adorno, 1997). As should be apparent from the selective overview above, focusing on a narrow and necessarily partial slice of the discourse from the Northern hemisphere – there are multiple and divergent arguments for what the value of culture consists of without an overarching synthesis or resolution.[3] The need for clear-cut definitions and aggregative answers is not what motivates the value of culture discourse in the arts of humanities, as the ambition is not to feed into decision-making in a direct way.

Simply put, asking about the value of culture is a long-standing area of theoretical discussion and argumentation whose complexities – and, at times, contradictions – render it unruly for the purposes of decision-making. This is in contrast to cultural value which, as the next two sections explain, has emerged in response to the demands of policymaking.

Cultural value, historically speaking

On one level, the question of value in culture becomes less complicated if considered explicitly from the perspective of cultural policy. It is because here the discussion can be seen as shaped and responding to a set of specific questions about the legitimacy of state support for the arts and the allocation of public funding (Bennett et al., 2009; Selwood, 2002). Significantly, these considerations have been shaped by what some academics identified as the pressures to cast value in the "language" of policy-making, especially as types of impacts associated with domains other than culture (Belfiore, 2015; Hadley & Gray, 2017) and to "square" cultural value with the forms of value expressed in financial and/or economic terms (Alexander, 2018). In the context of policy-making, we are confronting what we are told are "two inescapable facts":

1. Human wants (including those with the highest possible motivations such as improving society) exceed the resources available to satisfy them all;
2. Because of these resource constraints, every time we decide to do one thing, we in effect decide not to do another; our decisions implicitly place values on each option. (Bateman et al., 2019, p. 3)

Debating whether these are "facts" and whether they are "inescapable", as Bateman and colleagues claim they are, is outside the scope of this article. For now, it should be noted that historically speaking and at present, comparing the marginal costs and benefits of investment in culture to other societal benefits is indeed the premise of Social Cost–Benefit-Analysis – the approach currently used to calculate the value of culture in policy.

It is helpful here to talk about a shallow history of cultural value, compared to the deep history of the value of culture sketched above. While not limited to the UK, and notably present in the Australian cultural policy (Glow & Johanson, 2006), the term cultural value can be considered against the backdrop of the so-called *cultural value debate*: an attempt to agree the grounds of decision making and investment in in the arts, culture and heritage in the context of public funding in the UK. Inspired by the public value model proposed for public administration and management (Moore, 1995), this debate can be traced to the 2003 conference – Valuing Culture – organised by the think tank Demos with AEA Consulting which featured a speech by then The Secretary of State for Culture, Tessa Jowell, republished as her essay "Government and the Value of Culture" (Jowell, 2004).

Underpinning this historically specific debate was a desire to get more clarity about what is meant by the value of culture in the context of decision-making. However, this meant different things for different players involved. Public sector cultural organisations cared more about using the public value model as a management tool and a way of gaining public legitimation. In the words of Clarke and Maeer, the imperative was to start "from the premise that such organizations are there to add or create value for the public, and that the best way of measuring their success is to look at it in terms of what the public cares about" (Clark & Maeer, 2008, p. 25).[4] Demos and the researchers involved were more interested in developing "a specific theory of Cultural Value" which married the multidimensional model of public value with the conceptualisation of cultural value in "the work of the cultural economist David Throsby" (Hewison, 2012, p. 2010). Notably, the way Hewison and Holden (who led the conceptual work for Demos) developed this thinking – including through the influential proposal of the "Cultural Value Triangle" (Holden, 2006) – departed from Throsby's original intentions (see below). Still, tracing the debate to Throsby, as Hewison (2012) openly does, is helpful as a way of locating the roots of the term cultural value.

The roots of cultural value in cultural economics

David Throsby has remained consistent throughout his long and influential academic career with respect to what he means by cultural value. Steadfastly he has been emphasising the distinction between cultural value and economic value. Economic value is the value "measurable by methods of economic analysis and expressible in monetary terms" (Hutter & Throsby, 2008, p. 4). In contrast to economic value, cultural value is "characterised by multidimensionality and has no single unit of account. The latter characteristic places cultural value outside the framework of pecuniary value inherent in neoclassical economics" (Throsby et al., 2021, p. 336). As Throsby reiterates elsewhere, cultural value can "only be fully realised in collective terms and cannot sensibly be represented in individual monetary valuations" (Throsby, 2010, p. 20).

Cultural value is not just non-market but also non-monetary. Such an understanding is echoed by others, notably Klamer who holds that cultural value is the "residual" that remains after subtracting the economic and social values from the total value of a cultural good (2013; 2003b). The upshot is that the concept of cultural value, as it has crystallised over the last 20 years, is distinguished from economic value, even though the relationship between the two is very much debated (Angelini & Castellani, 2019).

Now, it is important to stress that Throsby is not saying that cultural assets, goods and services (what can also be referred to as aspects of "cultural capital" – see Throsby, 1999) cannot be valued in economic terms, far from it. Cultural assets can be valued in terms of economic estimates using non-market valuation techniques as well as market values, where markets for cultural assets exist. With those aspects of cultural value that cannot be bought and sold – for instance, ensuring that something stays accessible for future generations – economists can resort to constructing quasi-markets by observing people's revealed preferences (e.g. how far they are prepared to travel) or by eliciting their stated preferences (constructing surveys asking people directly about their willingness to pay or be compensated for a loss of a cultural asset or by constructing choice experiments to give an insight into their preferences). Indeed, Throsby himself has done a lot over the years to improve the non-market valuation techniques and to give economics a better grip on the forms of value that are not traded. Throsby and his collaborators were able to show how economic value is often "inflated" due to the presence of cultural value (imagine the difference between a house considered purely as a site of dwelling and an item of cultural heritage which has a significant aesthetic and historical appeal). However, Throsby is adamant that economic value and cultural value are not synonymous, nor equivalent, neither coterminous nor co-extensive – even though they interact (Hutter & Frey, 2010; Throsby, 2001). What is then cultural value in economic terms?

The limitations of cultural economics when it comes to cultural value

Having specified what cultural value is not, cultural economics does not have an alternative definition to offer. The closest Throsby and collaborators come to specifying the *meaning* of cultural value is by proposing to "decompose" this value. As they suggest in their recent contribution, "to operationalise cultural value for any cultural good or service, it can be deconstructed into its constituent elements, identified in general terms as relating to the aesthetic and symbolic properties of the good or service in question" (Throsby et al., 2021, p. 336). Throsby's earlier work identified six dimensions that are associated with cultural value: aesthetic value, spiritual value, historical value, social value (a sense of connection to others), symbolic value (value resulting from "repositories and conveyors of meaning"), and authenticity value (value from the recognition of something as the "real, original, and unique artwork which it is represented to be") (Throsby, 2001, pp. 28–29). However, Throsby stresses that the list is neither definite nor conclusive.[5]

The decompositions or disaggregations of cultural value proposed by Throsby and colleagues can be thought heuristically useful from the point of view of the economic valuation of cultural assets, goods and services (and, in very practical terms, in building contingent valuation and choice experiment surveys) but they do not purport to define cultural value. Moreover, their status is problematic because, presumably just like cultural value, they too can only be fully "realised in collective terms and cannot sensibly be represented in individual monetary valuations" (Throsby, 2010, p. 20). And yet, as pointed out by Klamer, Throsby seems to disregard that the problem does not go away with the disaggregations. In the words of Klamer:

> [Throsby] treats those [disaggregated] values as given, as inputs in an economic valuation process. Cultural values become like preferences that people hold — as if they would

> know those. In reality people have to find out how to sort through values, how to evaluate, revalue or devalue them. The process of valuation is a dynamic one […] (Klamer, 2003b, p. 23)

Noting this problematic aspect of Throsby's approach has far-reaching implications. Disaggregated or not, cultural value can neither be defined nor measured by cultural economics. The categories to which cultural value is decomposed suffer from the same problem as cultural value itself, in that their constitution is collective – drawing on Taylor's "irreducibly social goods" (1995, p. 127). More broadly, the disaggregating approach raises the question of how the allegedly universal categories were identified, and with this, of the feasibility and desirability of attaining a perspective that is global when it comes to cultural value.

While there have been notable efforts, in particular from organisations like UNESCO, to find some basic concepts for trans-national comparisons in cultural policy, these have been underpinned by an acute understanding of the need to recognise diversity and contextual difference (Alasuutari & Kangas, 2020; Isar, 2009). There too have been sustained attempts to test the transferability of the concepts developed in the dominant Western tradition to other contexts of implementation (Henze & Escribal, 2021; Lee & Lim, 2014). All this is against the cogent criticisms of the dominant Western-centric approach to knowledge production premised on the need for scientific distinctions that are universal and fixed (Santos, 2015).

Cultural value as meaning-making

Cultural value can be characterised using the expertise from the arts and humanities: it is a collective endeavour which is normative, intersubjectively warranted and interpretative or hermeneutic. Below, each characteristic is introduced separately before returning to the implications this has for cultural value and cultural policy.

To say that cultural value is normative is to say that it is based on norms – it is underpinned by some ideas about "what ought to be" (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 13) or, from an anthropological point of view, what can be referred to as cultural values in plural (Avrami et al., 2019). It is important to stress that what is at issue is not that there is one prescriptive idea for what cultural value ought to be; rather the point is that cultural value is constituted in the light of cultural and social norms prevailing in a given context. These standards are multiple and context-specific and yet – as explained below in relation to intersubjective warranting – by no means merely subjective or arbitrary. Borrowing a formulation from Anderson, cultural value could be said to be "structured by substantive non-consequentialist norms with their own expressive justification" (Anderson, 1995, p. 216). But what is the process of justifying in question?

The validation of cultural value is collective – cultural value is intersubjectively warranted. Intersubjectivity is a concept that can be defined in relation to objectivity and subjectivity (Cerulo, 2001; Zerubavel, 1999). Objectivity pertains to facts that are claimed not to be depended on subjects' positions and that can be verified; subjectivity, on the other hand, is no more than an expression of a subjective viewpoint. Intersubjectivity sits in the middle: it depends on multiple subjects who collectively warrant – or validate – that their subjective experiences can be epistemically vindicated, even though they do not have the

status of objective facts. What is intersubjectively warranted cannot be assumed universal and is not a subject to verification or proof the way scientific facts are said to be but this need not be a problem since intersubjective validation commands agreement. What are the mechanisms whereby this agreement can be reached?

As discussed above, cultural value is fundamentally a communicative, meaning-making effort where multiple agents come together to agree significance in the light of some underpinning socio-cultural norms. As such, it can be characterised as hermeneutic. Hermeneutics stands for a structured approach to interpretation (Grondin, 1994). Initially narrowly concerned with the interpretations of texts, hermeneutics has evolved historically to be a study of signification more broadly, including in human intentions, experiences and actions; and most expansively, any inquiry into "a normatively structured space of meaning" (Crowell, 2016, p. 238). Crucial to all this is the "circular character of interpretive experience" (Grondin, 1994) – a process where "it is necessary to understand a text as a whole in order properly to understand any of its parts. On the other hand, however, it is necessary to understand the text in each of its parts in order to understand it as a whole" (George, 2021). Cultural value is hermeneutic in the sense that it requires the interpretation of cultural expressions, or the objectified forms of culture, in view of the collective norms, underpinning the everyday experiences of culture.[6] This going back to the section discussing the need to see the two meanings of culture – the everyday and vernacular vis-à-vis the institutionalised and objectified forms of expression – as related.

Thus characterised, cultural value is not something that cultural economics, as currently practiced, can lay its metaphorical hands on. Cultural economics espouses methodological individualism, in the sense originally intended by Weber in Weber (1922 [1968]), in assuming that social phenomena must be explained by showing how they result from individual actions, which in turn must be explained through reference to individual actors who are rational. Standard welfare economics works with the idea of individual preferences that are fixed and free of normative judgements and which aggregate, rather than interact. Cultural value, as characterised above and noted elsewhere, cannot be analysed in those terms (Appadurai, 1988; Kaszynska, 2020; Taylor, 1995). Now what?

Where now for cultural value?

Leading cultural economists have not only argued that the arts and culture are highly unusual public goods (Abbing, 1997) but that cultural value escapes economic measurement (Hutter & Frey, 2010; Klamer, 2003b; Throsby, 2001). They accept that cultural value sits outside of the purview of contemporary economic analysis. Klamer goes further in arguing that "the dominant economic paradigm seriously hampers discussion of values among economists" (2003a, p. 3).

Significantly, many established economists have been open in their critiques of the key assumptions in the mainstream paradigm of neoclassical economics: such as that human agency is solely premised on rational self-interest (Sen, 1977), and that it can be explained without understanding the broad array of motivations and intentions underpinning human actions (McCloskey, 2023). In the words of Smith and Wilson, economics has to come to terms with "the stories we tell ourselves to make meaning of our experience"

(Smith & Wilson, 2019, p. 195). How and whether this is achievable within the narrow confines of welfare economics as currently practiced – is far from clear.

Indeed, in recent years there has been a quest for alternative approaches in economics (Shaikh, 2016).[7] Notably, in environmental and ecological economics work is underway to come to terms with the socially and institutionally constructed nature of value (Kallis et al., 2013; Kenter et al., 2015) and to design valuation approaches capable of registering the "substantial collective and intersubjective meanings, significance and value" (Kenter et al., 2016, p. 358). These approaches, collectively referred to as socio-cultural valuation, are now well-established in the context of natural capital valuation, e.g. through programmes such as Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services [IPBES] and Operational Potential of Ecosystem Research Applications [OPERAs].

Socio-cultural valuation is a broad family (DEFRA, 2011; Walz et al., 2019) and the approach can lead to both, monetary and non-monetary valuation (Kaszynska et al., 2022). There is no one agreed list of methods: these can combine traditional questionnaire and interview formats with participatory mapping using visual approaches, and increasingly, forms of collective deliberation and other mini-publics, part of the broader "democratic innovation" agenda (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). Notably, participatory and deliberative techniques (Howarth & Wilson, 2006; Spash, 2008) were considered by UK government departments as complementary and consistent with *The Green Book* (DEFRA, 2011). And yet, the opportunity to harness arts and humanities expertise to develop these approaches as part of a concentrated effort to establish socio-cultural valuation in the field of culture – remains nascent.

These methodological considerations, coupled with the central claim of this article – namely that arts and humanities concepts are needed to make sense of cultural value as the very object of policymaking – highlight that cultural policy stands to benefit from engaging arts and humanities disciplines more than it has been historically prepared to admit (Belfiore, 2022; Bille et al., 2016; Kaszynska, 2024; Weiss, 1989).

Summary

The key contribution of this article is to characterise cultural value in a way that explains why it is not reducible to economic value. Cultural value is *norms-grounded, inherently interpretative* and *irreducibly collective*. This is not something that can be *expressed* in economic terms. Rather, it is something that can only be articulated using concepts from the arts and humanities. This article thus argues that the forms of expertise found in in the arts and humanities are fundamental and foundational to the very constitution of the central object of cultural policy – without them it would be impossible to define the meaning of cultural value.

The argument here also shows that cultural value is not something that can be *measured* using the methods of standard welfare economics – it is not a sum of individual utility. In other words, alternative approaches are needed to ensure that cultural value can be registered as an object of decision-making. The article suggests that the socio-cultural valuation approaches developed in environmental and ecological economics provide an alternative way of making cultural value visible in cultural and public policy terms. Here again, arts and humanities expertise, alongside that of other social sciences, is crucial as socio-cultural valuation uses discursive and deliberative formats which invite participants

to engage in interpretation. With this, cultural policymaking needs the arts and humanities as much as, if not more than, it needs economics.

The point of this article is not to ignite disciplinary wars, nor even to criticise the hegemonic role of economics in public policy; rather the objective is to show that the arts and humanities are essential from the point of view of cultural policy. As observed above, insofar as the argument vindicates the forms of understanding that have been silenced and ignored in the dominant discourse of public policy, the article contributes to the agenda of expanding the accepted "ecology of knowledges" (Santos, 2015, p. 297). With this, the ambition is to put cultural policy on a more stable and better-grounded foundation.

Notes

1. To re-emphasise the positionality of this research: the categories analysed here belong to the Western, Anglo-Saxon tradition of thinking about culture (for an overview see the 2019 *Decolonial Introduction to the Theory, History and Criticism of the Arts* by Carolin Overhoff Ferreira (2019)). The author therefore recognises the Euro-centric bias of the discussion but hopes that making these categories visible may prompt more critical engagement with the assumptions shaping the discourse of the value of culture in the West.
2. The agendas of "levelling up" and "cultural placemaking" have – at least rhetorically – attempted to move away from the polarising categories of the canonical and the everyday (DCMS, 2023); however, they fall short of suggesting a unified definition.
3. Underpinning these arguments are divergent conceptions for how culture becomes a vehicle of value or an object of valuation. The question is whether the value in question attaches to objects (e.g. works of art and other cultural assets) or if it is more accurately located in the proverbial eye of the beholder. Approaching the value of culture in relational terms – as a product of an interaction between the object and the subject – has been embraced in participation and audience studies (Eriksson et al., 2019). The risk of taking a cross-disciplinary approach is however that the disciplinary rifts and different points of emphasis show themselves, with scholars either focusing on the social contexts and "leaving 'culture' behind" or ploughing forward "without context awareness [and being] prone to aesthetic universalism" (Stewart, 2013, p. 128). Many other pertinent considerations could be raised, e.g. the importance of seeing the value of culture as historically changing (Appadurai, 1988).
4. The debate informed the thinking about organisational management and evaluation approaches used by the Heritage Lottery Fund (Clark & Maeer, 2008), Arts Council England (Bunting, 2006) and, more recently, the BBC (Coyle & Woolard, 2010), to name some.
5. Notably, Throsby and colleagues offer multiple lists: for instance, the 2021 article cited in the text uses the disaggregation of: aesthetic, social, architectural and historic value (in relation to heritage buildings).
6. In this sense, it could be suggested that hermeneutics can take both discursive and deliberative forms: it can either unfold diachronically as an interpretation of texts and other semiotic artefacts (with regard to the former); or horizontally, fully embracing the importance of interaction – through dialogue, discussion and deliberation (with regard to the latter). Deliberation here is understood as a structured communicative process that produces shared knowledge and an opportunity to reflect on the individually held assumptions and agendas (Benhabib, 1994).
7. There also has been a search for alternative models of economy itself (The Foundational Economy Collective, 2018; Fullerton, 2015; see also Raworth, 2017) – much more ambitious a project.

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