

DIVERSITY AND CHOICE

Leon Wainwright

In [‘The Death of the University, English Style’](#) Nick Couldry and Angela McRobbie asked ‘how easy will it be in 10 years time to propose a new degree in philosophy, art history, or a language not on the government's list of ‘strategically important’ languages? Will the result really be more choice?’ In response I would ask what is the impact on cultural diversity of the current plans to increase choice?

To settle on just one of those disciplines – art history – it is unlikely that the diversifying of the curriculum that took place under government funding over the last decade will ever be seen again, if the government goes ahead with the Browne proposals. Why should it, when the most effective initiatives for ensuring an ‘inclusive’ curriculum are those that involve universities working together, regardless of their market position? At the start of the last decade, HEFCE’s [‘Globalising art, architecture and design history’](#) project involved 47 institutions of Higher Education in the UK that all offered degrees in the discipline. They went through a shared process of reflecting on the relationship between ‘widening participation’ in art history – focusing on the makeup of the body of staff as well as students, our culturally diverse nation and the scope of what is taught in art history. This showed that a notably conservative discipline can at times, with the right level of support, be critically self-aware. But such an enterprise would be inconceivable within the current market-led scenario that we are now being asked to accept.

Of course, the argument could be made that certain universities might choose to emphasise a more diverse curriculum as a way of competing for student applications, or for research funding. A clear head start would be had by the University of East Anglia with its World Art Studies programme, the University of Essex with its expertise in the history of art in Latin America, or the School of Oriental and African Studies in its Department of Art and

Archaeology. But their distinctive curricula would seem like nothing more than a niche alternative to the offering among the greater body of art history departments.

This would rather let both government and art history off the hook in needing to face the question of difference. The marketisation of education would lead students away from the study of areas widely perceived as being of 'minority' interest. It would discourage university planners from undertaking the drastic re-staffing or the expansion of academic departments in order to build its expertise.

In the commercial sector, the marketing of art promotes an approach to understanding art that empties it of a critical context and history. Here art is a 'unique' phenomenon, a reified, commoditised historical artefact. Art history encourages students to see how this operates, revealing the role of art in inculcating taste, exclusive ideas of creativity and apparently essential differences. As departments of art history go about positioning themselves in the Higher Education market, their appeal to this concern with 'uniqueness' will only gain in emphasis. It may be their only conduit to a larger base of student-customers. But there is nothing to stop competing universities from eventually becoming unique in fairly identical ways.

Before our recent change of government in the UK, the case for cultural diversity was already being dismantled on the political left and frequently from within the art world. The winner of the 2003 Turner Prize, artist Grayson Perry, wrote that 'There seems to be a very new Labour idea that if we rigorously ensure a numerically fair proportion of BME (black or minority ethnic) practitioners, then that will automatically facilitate social justice in wider society. Hmm' (2007: 16). The suggestion there was that the multicultural 'mainstreaming' of attention to art is not the same as more widely-reaching social, political and economic change. This assessment fits with Martha Rosler's description of the situation in the United States during the 1990s, of 'an art world version of multiculturalism (and where more appropriately situated than in the realm of culture?), necessary but sometimes painfully formulaic, which produces a shadow constellation of the identities of the wider society but without the income spread' (1997: 20-24).

Current research in the field of cultural policy studies largely corroborates this change of concern. It has moved away from so-called 'impact analysis' – the enterprise to determine the value and

function of the arts and of how art works actually affect people. The preferred direction is to draw back from presenting 'appealing advocacy arguments' that would otherwise be demanded in any account of the positive impact of the arts. The aspiration in their place is to signal 'unexpected and rewarding directions' for research (Belfiore & Bennett, 2009: 17-33).

We may recognise that there are poor results within and beyond the arts of the turn toward cultural diversity. The vocabulary of diversity has not fulfilled the ambitions of modern and contemporary artists, for instance, who were historically excluded and marginalized, and its results for art audiences is also debatable. This picture appears to agree with the sense of needing to think beyond the advocacy of marginalised individuals and groups in art history.

But not only does this create the rather false impression that advocacy was itself a problem, it evades the question of whether the entire debate about diversity in the curriculum can continue in the present commercialising climate. The declarations of the end of advocacy are more to do with a loss of political will to see the value of the arts, humanities and social sciences as a suitable setting for change beyond the uncertainties of the market. It seems not to have properly hit home that we are being asked to abandon all such traditions of 'engaged' practice in Higher Education.

If by advocacy we mean the narrow pursuit of cultural diversity as a commoditizing force – leading to the ethnicising of art works, of curricula, students and their teachers – then its lifespan should duly be over. However, in trying to create alternatives in the face of the commoditization of difference, advocacy continues. The question comes to be whether we are able to negotiate such alternatives while our funding migrates to the government's 'priority' or 'strategically important' courses of study.

Among all the wreckage of our current parliamentary politics is a pathway from diversity to social mobility and 'choice'. The political investment in difference, which moved us so dramatically in recent decades to develop the university curriculum, is dissolving into a consumerist version of 'equality'. It seems that our choices have already been made.

References

Belfiore, E. & Bennett, O. (2009) 'Researching the social impact of the arts: literature, fiction and the novel', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 15, no. 1, February. (This is drawn from their larger study, commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Arts Council England: Belfiore, E. & Bennett, O. (2008) *The social impact of the arts: an intellectual history*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.)

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