Chapter 34

Tony Bennett

PUTTING POLICY INTO CULTURAL STUDIES

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

TONY BENNETT'S ESSAY argues the case for the defense in what has come to be called "the cultural policy studies debate" – cultural policy studies being the study of, and training in, the formulation and provision of cultural policy. He's on cultural policy's side. It's a rather confusing debate though, because it drifts somewhat haphazardly over three levels. The question is not so much (level 1) "should cultural policy be studied in universities?", the answer to which is pretty clearly "yes, where there is a demand for it". The question is rather (level 2) "should cultural studies as a whole move in the direction of cultural policy studies?" – or to state it in a rather more nuanced fashion, should cultural studies' habitual modes of more or less radical theoretical and utopian critique, which do not have to account for their practicability, be marginalized in favor of forms of cultural analysis which can feed into policy-formation? Behind this question lies a more theoretical one (level 3), drawn from the work of Foucault, which we can pose very starkly like this: "is the realm of modern culture independent of government, or is governmentality the condition of possibility for all modern culture?"

Tony Bennett takes the side of governmentality and policy at all three levels by arguing that it is wrong to believe that cultural policy studies are committed to a "top down" rather than a "bottom up" approach (i.e. are on the side of governments rather than communities) because in fact communities and their cultures are formed within governmental practices and (though Bennett emphasizes this less) vice versa.

This essay was written in Australia, traditionally a highly governed nation, where, particularly under 1980s' Labor Party rule (an equivalent to Britain's

1990s' New Labour), governments were committed to developing national and regional cultural resources and institutions. Good pickings for left-leaning policy consultants. But this means that the hot issues on the American culture/government interface – censorship, withholding of public funding for so-called obscene or blasphemous works, the attack on multiculturalism, the questioning of the public funding of culture at all – do not really appear in Bennett's work. So, leaving theoretical questions aside, we can ask: what happens to left-ish cultural policy studies when a combine of right-wing, anti-statist, populist government and private or corporate patrons or sponsors are in control? In those circumstances, presumably, free-wheeling dissident cultural studies absorbs most of cultural policy studies once more, however we theoretically interpret the relation between governmentality and culture.

Further reading: Bennett 1992b; Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991; S. Cunningham 1992; Donald 1992; Hunter 1988; Jameson 1993; Lloyd and Thomas 1998; T. Miller 1993, 1996; Morris 1992a; O'Regan 1992; N. Rose 1993.

In the first issue of *Text*, the newsletter of the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Natal, Keyan Tomaselli describes the most important change of emphasis in the recent work of that Centre as being 'the dramatic shift from theories and strategies of resistance to policy research'. 'Where policy research prior to February 1990 was seen by some academics, as negatively "idealist" or pejoratively "utopian",' Tomaselli continues, 'policy research has now assumed major significance as the country desperately attempts to address vital problems' (Tomaselli 1992: 2). It is easy to see, given the changing political context of South Africa, why this shift 'from resistance to policy' should have taken place. It is also easy to see why, internationally, few intellectuals would object to the adoption of such a position in the contemporary South African context or, if they did, that they would be prepared to say so. To do so would be to place oneself on the wrong side in relation to the democratic process that has delivered the South African state into the new and, for the moment, benign form of an ANC government.

The response to similar suggestions in the Australian context – where the political conditions which make them intelligible can claim a longer history – has, by contrast, been a quite vexatious one. John Frow and Meaghan Morris have argued that the so-called 'policy debate' conducted in a range of fora – conferences, journals, the media – in the late 1980s and early 1990s, mainly in Australia but occasionally spilling over into the international circuits of cultural studies debate, 'produced much heat and less light' (Frow and Morris 1993: xxix). Perhaps so. My own assessment, though, is both that the debate was a necessary one and that it has proved productive.

It was necessary in the sense that it was not possible, in the mid-1980s, to connect policy work to the concerns of cultural studies except, more or less apologetically, as an aside from 'the real' theoretical and political issues which, it was assumed, lay elsewhere. This is not to say that policy concerns had not figured in earlier stages in the development of cultural studies. To the contrary, they were

and remained central to the concerns of Raymond Williams. This was largely a personal commitment, however, and one which had relatively little impact on debates within cultural studies. The most significant exception to this was comprised by the interest that was shown in the cultural policies of the Greater London Council as an important bulwark against the early phases of Thatcherism until, of course, the GLC was itself dismantled. In Australia, similarly, the only synthesising engagement with cultural policy was Tim Rowse's *Arguing the Arts* (1985), although there had been important work done in the field of media policy from at least the late 1970s. Policy issues, however, were not effectively knitted into the fabric of debate within Australian cultural studies during these early years of its emergence as a discipline. They did not figure prominently within conferences and were seldom aired in the pages of the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* or its successor, *Cultural Studies*, when it went international. In these circumstances, as Tom O'Regan describes them, those who wanted to engage with policy issues had found it necessary to 'set up shop somewhere else' by describing their work in other terms – as, in his case, variously that of 'cultural historian, film critic, sociologist and political scientist' (O'Regan 1992: 415–16). Policy issues, in short, had not been given in either the Australian or British contexts, any principled rationale or justification that defined a clearly articulated role for them within cultural studies. The same was true in the United States, where the disconnection of cultural studies from any effective socialist traditions has minimized the significance it accords the relations between culture and government. As a consequence, policy work could be, and too often clearly was, seen in all of those national contexts as a narrowly pragmatic activity lacking any broader theoretical or political interest. It also reeked of a politically unpalatable compromise with 'the state'. Against this background, the development of an argument which insisted on the need to locate a policy horizon within cultural studies as a necessary part of its theorization of, and effective practical engagement with, relations of culture and power was a necessary step if such concerns were to be placed effectively on the agendas of cultural studies.

I suggest that the debate has proved productive for two reasons. The first is that, at least in the Australian context, it has played a role in facilitating the development of new forms of collaboration between intellectuals working in the field of cultural studies as teachers and researchers and other cultural workers and intellectuals working within specific cultural institutions or in the branches of government responsible for the management of those institutions. Of course, more systemic tendencies have driven these developments which are best viewed as local manifestations of a more general response within the humanities academy to the requirement for greater relevance to contemporary practical needs and circumstances that governments now typically press for in return for the taxpayers' dollar. To recognize these new realities is not, of course, to idealize them as if every response for greater relevance were clearly formulated. Nor does it entail an overestimation of the kinds of contributions intellectuals can be expected to make to policy, as if these could – or, indeed, should – override the imperfect and compromised nature of any policy-making or political process. However, being sensibly cautious on these matters is a far cry from the kinds of wholesale regret with which some sections of the cultural left have responded to demands for the greater 'practualization' of the academy unless those demands can meet the measure of

some ideal critical calculus of their own making. While such views still have their advocates, it can now confidently be expected that such advocacy will prove increasingly inconsequential, just as it can be expected that the locus of productively critical work will shift to the interface between pragmatically orientated theoretical tendencies and actually existing policy agendas.

This brings me to my second point, for, while the propositions I have just advanced would not recruit the support of the majority of those who locate their work within cultural studies, they would recruit *some* support and, if my antennae are reading the changing environment correctly, are likely to prove more successful in this regard. However, this is less to say that the advocates of cultural policy studies have proved successful in winning new converts to their case than it is to suggest that the 'policy debate' was itself a symptom of what was already a clearly emerging division between revisionist tendencies within cultural studies – tendencies, that is, wishing to embrace reformist rhetorics and programs – and tendencies still committed to the earlier rhetorics of revolution or resistance. The 'policy debate', viewed in this light, served a catalysing function in serving as a means of clarifying options which were already evident as emerging tensions within cultural studies. Be this as it may, policy-related arguments now occupy a recognizable position within the landscape of cultural studies debates, a position in which it is clear that the references to policy serve to flag a more general set of issues concerning the kinds of political stances, programs, styles of intellectual work and relations of intellectual production that can now cogently be claimed for cultural studies work.

These are the issues with which I want to engage here. However much heat or light it may once have generated, the 'policy debate' has been 'off the boil' for some time now and I have no wish to heat the topic up again by reviving the controversies which characterized it. There is some value, however, in looking beneath the surface of those controversies to identify some of the discursive antagonisms which the debate activated. For these have a longer history and, if we can identify the historical provenance of the discursive grid which places culture on one side of a discursive divide and policy on the other, we shall have gone a good way towards undermining the logic of this antagonism and the related oppositions which are frequently articulated to it.

This is not, I should stress, a matter of pointing an accusing finger at those who criticized the proponents of the 'policy case'. To the contrary, I want to take my initial bearings from two such critics – Meaghan Morris and, although he had earlier seen himself as a proponent of the 'cultural-policy push' (O'Regan 1992: 415), Tom O'Regan – both of whom, while supporting the view that cultural studies should concern itself with policy issues, registered their main concern (with some justice) as being with the polarized options which policy advocates seemed to be posing. Morris thus objected that 'the big dichotomy of "Criticism and Policy"' had proved unable to focus debate in a fruitful and realistic way and saw 'policy polemic' as 'haunted by phantom *tendencies* that never quite settle into a mundane human shape' (Morris 1992a: 548). Tom O'Regan's nuanced and challenging discussion of the 'policy moment' led in a similar direction. Objecting to the over-polarized option of 'criticism or policy', O'Regan rightly points out that the relations between these are both permeable and variable:

> As far as intervention and self-conduct are concerned, the very issue of choosing between policy and cultural criticism – which to write for, which to inhabit – must turn out to be a question admitting no general answer. There are no *a priori* principles for choosing policy over cultural criticism. Nor can any presumption be made about social utility and effectiveness as necessarily belonging to one or the other. Cultural policy and criticism are not hermetically sealed but are porous systems; open enough to permit transformation, incorporation and translation, fluid enough to permit a great range of practices and priorities. To put this crudely: words like 'social class' and 'oppression' (and their attendant rhetorics) may not enter the vocabulary of government policy, but without their social presence in credible explanatory systems, any policy directed towards securing equality and equal opportunity would be diminished in scope and power. The recognition of oppression informs the policy goal of access, the persistence of social class underwrites the goal of social equality. Cultural policy and criticism are different forms of life, but they often need each other, they use each other's discourses, borrowing them shamelessly and redisposing them.
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> (O'Regan 1992: 418)

Given this, O'Regan argues, the call to change cultural critics into cultural bureaucrats reflects a failure to identify correctly the often indirect, but none the less real and consequential, contribution which cultural criticism makes to the policy process in, through time, shifting the discursive grounds on which policy options are posed and resolved.

I can find little to quarrel with here except to suggest the need for more clearly stressing the two-way nature of this traffic if we are also to understand how the discursive terms in which some forms of cultural criticism are themselves conducted – those which speak in terms of cultural rights, for example – are often a by-product of specific forms of governmental involvement in the sphere of culture. Where I think O'Regan is mistaken is when, in the light of considerations of this kind, he suggests that those who have argued that cultural studies should reorient its concerns so as to accord policy issues a greater centrality have been 'attacking phantom targets' in supposing that such concerns could not simply be accommodated within existing traditions of work within cultural studies. Notwithstanding his own good sense in stressing the permeability of the relations between cultural policy and cultural criticism, there are versions of cultural criticism which *do* rest on a principled rejection of any engagement with the mundane calculations of bureaucratic procedures and policy processes. Fredric Jameson offered one version of this position in his unqualified rejection of policy questions as of no possible relevance to the critical intellectual. Nor was this an isolated instance: indeed, a veritable cacophony of voices was raised in principled condemnation of the policy option as such.

The difficulty which O'Regan's arguments tend to gloss over, then, is that there have been influential traditions within cultural studies which have sought to render criticism and policy constitutively impermeable to one another. The grounds

invoked for this have been variable, ranging from the anti-reformist heritage of some traditions of Marxist thought to radical-feminist perceptions of the state as essentially patriarchal and, therefore, beyond the reach of useful engagement. These are, however, variants of more general positions which have been applied to justify the adoption of a position of critical exteriority in relation to other policy fields – those of economic or social policy, for example. Objections of this kind have usually been based on the grounds that any policies emerging from the state are bound to reflect the interests of a ruling class or of patriarchy rather than because of any intrinsic properties that are attributed to the economy or to the field of the social as such. The more distinctive reasons that have been advanced in opposition to an engagement with cultural policy, by contrast, have rested on a view of culture which is in some way intrinsically at odds with, and essentially beyond the reach of, the mundane processes of policy formation.

This, then, is one of the issues I want to look at: the respects in which the shape of the criticism–policy polarity has been configured by a unique constellation of issues, pertaining solely to the field of culture, which are the legacy, broadly speaking, of Romanticism. I shall broach these issues by reviewing what Theodor Adorno had to say about cultural policy in the context of his broader discussion of the relationships between culture and administration. The discussion in question has been referred to by a number of contributors to 'the cultural policy debate', mainly to suggest that we should view Adorno's account as exemplary in its refusal to dissolve the contradictory tensions between culture and administration (see, for example, Jones 1994: 410). I shall suggest, to the contrary, that the historical limitations of Adorno's account are only too apparent and that it is, accordingly, now possible to see beyond the rims of the polarities which sustained it.

I shall take my bearings for the second issue I want to discuss from a related polarity, and one O'Regan introduces in contrasting a 'bottom-up' concern with policy, which he argues has always characterized cultural studies, with the 'top-down' approach which he attributes to advocates of the 'cultural-policy push'. In the 'bottom-up' approach, policy is 'understood in terms of its consequences and outcomes, and in terms of the actions of those affected by it, as they exert some measure of influence upon the process' (O'Regan 1992: 409). The 'top-down' approach, by contrast, recommends that cultural studies 'should reorient its concerns so as to coincide with top-down programs and public procedures, become bureaucratically and administratively minded in the process' (412). In the course of his discussion, O'Regan draws on a term I had proposed in suggesting that intellectuals working in the cultural field should think of themselves as 'cultural technicians' – a concept which O'Regan interprets as being about 'securing policy resources, consultancies and engagements' (413). This is an unfortunate representation of the concept, since the context in which I had introduced it was as part of an argument that was intended to call into question the very construction of the kind of bottom-up–top-down polarity O'Regan proposes. For such polarities lose their coherence if the relations between the kinds of politics cultural studies has supported and modern forms of government can be seen as relations of mutual dependency to the degree that the former ('bottom-up' politics) often depend on, and are generated by, the latter ('top-down' forms of government).

'How cultural forms and activities are politicized and the manner in which their politicization is expressed and pursued: these,' I argued, 'are matters which emerge from, and have their conditions of existence within, the ways in which those forms and activities have been instrumentally fashioned as a consequence of their governmental deployment for specific social, cultural or political ends' (Bennett 1992b: 405). It was in this context that I proposed the term 'cultural technicians' as a description of the political role of intellectuals which, rather than seeing government and cultural politics as the *vis-à-vis* of one another, would locate the work of intellectuals within the field of government in seeing it as being committed 'to modifying the functioning of culture by means of technical adjustments to its governmental deployment' (1992b: 406).

This is not, of course, a matter of 'working for the government' (although it may include that) or of formulating policy in a 'top-down' fashion. To the contrary, my concern was with the ways in which the practice of intellectual workers both is, and is usefully thought of, as a matter of 'tinkering with practical arrangements' within the sphere of government – that is, the vast array of cultural institutions, public and private, that are involved in the cultural shaping and regulation of the population – in ways that reflect the genesis of cultural politics from within the processes of government, rather than viewing these in the form of a 'bottom-up' opposition to policy imposed from the top down. By way of making this argument clearer, I shall review a contemporary example of radical political engagement represented by those who argue that museums should be transformed into instruments of community empowerment and dialogue. I shall do so with a view to illustrating how this politics involves, precisely, a series of adjustments to the functioning of museums which, far from changing their nature fundamentally reconnects them to a new form of governmental program and does so – as any effective engagement with the sphere of culture must – precisely by tinkering with the routines and practices through which they operate.

The aesthetic personality and administration of culture

It is useful to recall that recent debates regarding the relations between culture and policy are not without historical precedent. Their closest analogue, perhaps, was the debate between the Frankfurt school and the American traditions of applied social research represented by Paul Lazarsfeld during the period when Lazarsfeld was seeking to involve the Frankfurt theorists, particularly Adorno, more closely in the work of the Office for Radio Research which he directed. The tensions this engendered were perhaps best summarized by Adorno's testy remark, recalling his rebuttal of a request from Lazarsfeld that he (Adorno) should aspire to greater empirical precision, that 'culture might be precisely that condition that excludes a mentality capable of measuring it' (cited in Jay 1973: 222). This tension between the aesthetic realm and the requirements of bureaucratic calculation and measurement was one to which Adorno returned in a later essay on the relations between culture and administration which, if its limitation is that its diagnosis is ultimately caught and defined by the terms of this antinomy, identifies its historical basis with unparalleled acuity. Adorno characteristically insists on retaining both

aspects of this antinomy, refusing both an easy resolution that would side, unequivocally, with the one against the other as well as the temptation to project their overcoming through the historical production of a higher point of dialectical synthesis. For Adorno, culture and administration, however much they might be opposites, are also systemically tangled up with one another in historically specific patterns of interaction from which there can be no escape.

The terms in which the tensions between the two are to be described are made clear in the opening moves of the essay:

> Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well, whether this is his intention or not. The combination of so many things lacking a common denomination – such as philosophy and religion, science and art, forms of conduct and mores – and finally the inclusion of the objective spirit of an age in the single word 'culture' betrays from the outset the administrative view, the task of which, looking down from on high, is to assemble, distribute, evaluate and organize . . .
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> At the same time, however – according to German concepts – culture is opposed to administration. Culture would like to be higher and more pure, something untouchable which cannot be tailored according to any tactical or technical considerations. In educated language, this line of thought makes reference to the autonomy of culture. Popular opinion even takes pleasure in associating the concept of personality with it. Culture is viewed as the manifestation of pure humanity without regard for its functional relationships within society.
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> (Adorno 1991: 93)

This sense of a constitutive and inescapable tension ('culture suffers damage when it is planned and administered' but equally, culture, 'when it is left to itself . . . threatens to not only lose its possibility of effect, but its very existence as well' – 1991: 94) suffuses the essay, gaining in layers of complexity as the analysis develops. The two realms, Adorno argues, rest on antithetical norms:

> The demand made by administration upon culture is essentially heteronomous: culture – no matter what form it takes – is to be measured by norms not inherent to it and which have nothing to do with the quality of the object, but rather with some type of abstract standards imposed from without, while at the same time the administrative instance – according to its own prescriptions and nature – must for the most part refuse to become involved in questions of immanent quality which regard the truth of the thing itself or its objective bases in general. Such expansion of administrative competence into a region, the idea of which contradicts every kind of average generality inherent to the concept of administrative norms, is itself irrational, alien to the immanent ratio of the object – for example, to the quality of a work of art – and a matter of coincidence as far as culture is concerned.
>
> (1991: 98)

In a situation in which 'the usefulness of the useful is so dubious a matter', a line drawn 'strictly in ideology', the 'enthronement of culture as an entity unto itself' mirrors and mocks 'the faith in the pure usefulness of the useful' in being looked on 'as thoroughly useless and for that reason as something beyond the planning and administrative methods of material production' (99). At the same time, there can be no withdrawal from administration which, in the past as in the present, persists as a condition of art's possibility:

> The appeal to the creators of culture to withdraw from the process of administration and keep distant from it has a hollow ring. Not only would this deprive them of the possibility of earning a living, but also of every effect, every contact between work of art and society, something which the work of greatest integrity cannot do without, if it is not to perish.
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> (1991: 103)

At the same time that art 'denounces everything institutional and official' (102), it is dependent on official and institutional support, just as administration invades the inner life as with the 'UNESCO poets' who 'inscribe the international slogans of high administration with their very hearts' blood' (107).

While thoroughly aware that the system he describes is historically specific, Adorno can see no way beyond it, no set of relations in which culture will not be, at the same time, critical of, while dependent on, an administrative and bureaucratic rationality, no way in which culture can escape the gravitational pull of the everyday forms of usefulness to which it presents itself as an alternative. The best that can be hoped for, Adorno argues, is the development, in the cultural sphere, of 'an administrative praxis' which, in being 'mature and enlightened in the Kantian sense', will exhibit a 'self-consciousness of this antinomy and the consequences thereof' (98). What Adorno has in mind here becomes clearer towards the end of his essay when he articulates his vision for a cultural policy. A cultural policy that is worthy of the name, that would respect the specific content of the activities it would administer, Adorno argues, must be based on a self-conscious recognition of the contradictions inherent in applying planning to a field of practices which stand opposed to planning in their innermost substance, and it must develop this awareness into a critical acknowledgment of its own limits. Practically speaking, this means that such a policy must recognize the points at which administration 'must renounce itself' in recognizing its need for 'the ignominious figure of the expert' (111). Adorno is, of course, fully aware of the objections this position might court and he rehearses them fully, particularly the 'notorious accusation . . . that . . . the judgement of an expert remains a judgement for experts and as such ignores the community from which, according to popular phraseology, public institutions receive their mandate' (111). Even so, the expert is the only person who can represent the objective discipline of culture in the world of administration where his (for such experts, Adorno assures us [113], are 'men of insight') expertise serves as the only force capable of protecting cultural matters from the market ('which today unhesitatingly mutilates culture' [112]) and democracy (in upholding 'the interest

of the public against the public itself' [112]). It is from this perspective that Adorno concludes his account of the relations between culture and administration in suggesting that there is still room for individuals in liberal-democratic societies to unfreeze the existing historical relations between the two. 'Whoever makes critically and unflinchingly conscious use of the means of administration and its institutions,' he suggests, in the slim ray of hope he allows himself, 'is still in a position to realise something which would be different from merely administered culture' (113). 'Whoever', in this context, however, is not quite so open a category as it seems, for Adorno has in fact already closed this down to the expert, the aesthetic personality who alone is able to act in the sphere of administration in the name of values which exceed it, a lonely historical actor destined to be lacerated by the contradictions he seeks to quell in culture's favour.

It is easy to see why, in terms of both his intellectual formation and historical experience, Adorno would be driven to a conclusion of this kind. It is equally clear, however, that the position is no longer – if ever it was – tenable. For, in its practical effects, it amounts to an advocacy of precisely those forms of arts administration that have been, in varying degrees, successfully challenged over the postwar period because of the aesthetic, and therefore social, bias they entail. The criticisms that have been made of the rhetorics of 'excellence', as interpreted by expert forms of peer evaluation, within the evaluative criteria and processes of the Australia Council are a case in point. The grounds for such criticisms, moreover, have typically been provided by a commitment to those democratic principles of access, distribution and cultural entitlement whose force, in Adorno's perspective, the enlightened administrator was to mute and qualify in a cultural policy worthy of the name. What has happened over the intervening period to make Adorno's position pretty well uninhabitable, except for a few retro-aesthetes, has been that culture has since been relativized – in policy procedures and discourses just as much as in academic debate – and, except in the perspective of cultural conservatives, relativized without any of the dire consequences Adorno predicted coming true.

In the course of his essay, Adorno signals his awareness that the ground of culture on which he takes his stand is giving way beneath him. 'The negation of the concept of the cultural,' he writes, 'is itself under preparation' (106). He suggests that this entails the death of criticism as well as the loss of culture's autonomy.

> And finally, criticism is dying out because the critical spirit is as disturbing as sand in a machine to that smoothly-running operation which is becoming more and more the model of the cultural. The criti cal spirit now seems antiquated, irresponsible and unworthy, much like 'armchair' thinking.
>
> (1991: 107)

The truth is the opposite. It is precisely because we can now, without regret, treat culture as an industry and, in so doing, recognize that the aesthetic disposition forms merely a particular market segment within that industry, that it is a particular form of life like any other, that it is possible for questions of cultural policy to be posed, and pursued, in ways which allow competing patterns of expenditure, forms of

administration and support to be debated and assessed in terms of their consequences for different publics, their relations to competing political values and their implications for particular policy objectives – and all without lacerating ourselves as lonely subjects caught in the grip of the contradictory pincers of culture and administration. There are no signs, either, that this has entailed the death of criticism if by this is meant taking particular policy and administrative arrangements to task because – from a stated perspective – they fail to meet specified political or cultural objectives, or because they are contradictory or technically flawed. If, by contrast, it means the death of criticism as an activity that proceeds from a position – Adorno's culture – that is located in a position of transcendence in relation to its object, we should not mourn its passing. That critics have had to forsake such high ground in recognizing 'the professional conditions they share, for the most part, with millions of other knowledge workers', Andrew Ross has argued (Ross 1990), is no cause for lament. To the contrary, the less academic intellectuals working in the cultural sphere are able to take refuge in antinomies of this kind, the less likely it is that their analyses will be eviscerated by a stance which, in their own minds, gives them a special licence never to engage with other intellectuals except on their own terms.

Community, culture and government

Let me go back to O'Regan and the role that he accords the concept of community in illustrating the differences between the 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches to policy. From the former perspective, 'cultural studies engaged with the policy development of the state, from the point of view of disadvantaged recipients or those who are excluded from such policies altogether, and it sought to defend or to restore community' (O'Regan 1992: 410). For the latter, by contrast, the goal 'is no longer to celebrate and help restore the community which survives and resists manipulative social and cultural programs; it is rather to accept the necessary lot of intervention and to recognize that such communities are themselves the by-product of policy' (412). What this polarized construction misses, I think, are the more interesting issues, which O'Regan glimpses in his concluding formulations, concerning the respects in which what, at first sight, appear to be autochthonous forms of 'bottom-up' advocacy of community so often turn out to be generated from within, and as a part of, particular governmental constructions of community. Yet the antinomy is not, of course, of O'Regan's making. To the contrary, it is inscribed within the history of the concept of community which, as Raymond Williams has noted, is such a 'warmly persuasive' word that whatever is cast in the role of 'not community' is thereby, so to speak, linguistically hung, drawn and quartered by the simple force of the comparison. The state, in being portrayed as the realm of formal, abstract and instrumental relationships in contrast to 'the more direct, more total and therefore more significant relationships of community' (Williams 1983: 92) has fared particularly badly in this respect.

Whenever 'community' is drawn into the debate, then, we need to be alert to the fact that it brings with it layers of historical meaning that have become sedimented

in contemporary usage – the common people as opposed to people of rank or station; the quality of holding something in common; a sense of shared identity emerging from common conditions of life – which imply a condemnation of whatever has been constructed as its opposite. A few examples drawn from contemporary debates regarding the relations between museums and communities will show how this, the rhetorical force of the term, operates. Advocates of the community perspective within these debates typically speak of museums as means of empowering communities by encouraging their participation in, and control over, museum programmes. This perspective of museums as vehicles for discovering and shaping a sense of community, of a shared identity and purpose, has been developed as a criticism of earlier views of museums which saw their roles primarily in didactic terms. The ideals of the ecomuseum thus constitute an explicit break with, and critique of, the 'top-down' model of museums which sees museums as having a responsibility to instruct their publics in favour of a more interactive model through which the public, transformed into an active community, becomes the co-author of the museum in a collaborative enterprise 'designed to ensure "mutual learning" and the participation of all', whose ultimate goal is 'the development of the community' (Hubert, cited in Poulot 1994: 66). From this perspective, the administrative vocabulary which speaks of museums in terms of their relations to audiences, citizens or publics appears abstract and alienated, just as the realms of government or of the state stand condemned as external and impo sitional forms which are either indifferent or antagonistic to the creative cultural life of communities.

Yet it is also the case that it is precisely from within the practices of government that 'community' acquires this paradoxical value of something that is both to be nurtured into existence by government while at the same time standing opposed to it as its antithesis. The points Poulot makes in his discussion of the ecomuseum movement provide a telling example of this paradox. The distinguishing feature of the ecomuseum movement, Poulot argues, consists in the way it connects the concern with the preservation and exhibition of marginalized cultures which had characterized the earlier folk-museum and outdoor-museum movements to notions of community development, community empowerment and community control. The ecomuseum, as Poulot puts it, is 'concerned with promoting the self-discovery and development of the community' (Poulot 1994: 75); 'it aims not to attain knowledge but to achieve communication' (76); it is concerned less with representation than with involvement – 'the ecomuseum searches, above all, to engage (*voir faire*) its audience in the social process' (78); and its focus is on everyday rather than on extraordinary culture. And yet, Poulot argues, no matter how radically different the programme of the ecomuseum may seem from that of more traditional museum forms, it is one which, at bottom, is motivated by similar civic aspirations, albeit ones that are applied not universally to a general public but in a more focused way related to the needs of a particularly regionally defined community. The ecomuseum, he argues, embodies a form of 'civic pedagogy' which aims to foster self-knowledge on the part of a community by providing it with the resources through which it can come to know and participate in its culture in a more organized and self-conscious way. Viewed in this light, Poulot suggests, the

ecomuseum is best seen as a 'kind of state-sponsored public works project' which seeks to offer 'a program of "cultural development" of the citizen' (79).

This identifies precisely why equations which place museums and communities on one side of a divide as parts of creative, 'bottom-up' processes of cultural development and the state or government on another as the agents of external and imposed forms of 'top-down' cultural policy formation are misleading. However much the language of community might imply a critique of the more abstract relationships of government or of a state, what stands behind the ecomuseum are the activities of government which, in establishing such museums and training their staff, developing new principles for the exhibition of cultural materials and a host of related tinkerings with practical arrangements, organize and constitute the community of a region in a form that equips it to be able to develop itself as a community through acquiring a greater knowledge and say in the management of its shared culture. This is not to deny the reality of the existence of regions or, more generally, particular social groups outside and independently of particular governmental programmes – whether these are those of museums, programmes of community development or community arts programmes. Nor is it to suggest that the ways in which communities might be constructed and envisaged are restricted to such governmental practices – far from it. What it is to suggest, though, is that community can no more function as an outside to government than government can be construed as community's hostile 'other'. When, in the language of contemporary cultural debates, 'community' is at issue, then so also is government as parts of complex fields in which the perspectives of social movements, and of intellectuals allied to those movements, and shifts in the institutional and discursive fields of policy, interact in ways that elude entirely those theorizations which construct the relations between the fields of culture and politics and culture and policy in terms of a 'bottom-up'–'top-down' polarity. An adequate analytical perspective on cultural policy needs, then, to be alert to the patterns of these interactions. But then so, too, does an adequate practical engagement with cultural policy need to be alert to the fact that being 'for community' may also mean working through and by governmental means.