

COMMENTARY

Comic Con Goes Country Life: On British Economy, Society and Culture

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This commentary explores the impact of a recent comic art festival through questions of gender, labour and taste. The article suggests a redefinition of the meaning of legitimate culture, with its associated aesthetic hierarchies, may be the platform for the emergence of a new economy in parts of the UK.

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It's a Sunday afternoon and, in keeping with the Cumbrian autumn, it is absolutely pouring down. There are 10 people taking cover in a small shelter, all waiting for the connection to Oxenholme. The train is, of course, late-delayed because of a wet track. In Cumbria, in the autumn, this is about par for the course, a picture of normality. The rain and late train are about the only things that are typical of this rainy Sunday.

The passengers waiting are all unusual, marked as such by their conversation. The discussion is focused on whether comics are an art form that deserves Arts Council England (ACE) funding and support. They wonder aloud how they might get ACE to be interested in their work.

The main theme is the worry that arts funding is not for the likes of them.

A day earlier and I have the pleasure of watching Dave Gibbons being interviewed on stage in the main theatre of the Brewery Arts Centre, Kendall's cross-arts venue. He is in Kendal as part of the second Lakes International Comic Art Festival (LICAF). Gibbons is rehearsing the standard clichés of many artistic practitioners, of growing up and being expected to get a real job and not mess around with drawing comics. He originally trained as a building surveyor, realising the architecture course would be too long and surveying might allow him to carry on drawing. As his career began to unfold Gibbons became connected to pivotal moments in British culture as part of Felix Dennis', of *Oz* magazine fame, publishing empire and as one half of the creative team behind the critically acclaimed *Watchmen* (1986–1987).

In October Gibbons was named the Comics Laureate, a new addition to the laureates' ranks. He is now the standard bearer for an art form that is peripheral to what is considered to be legitimate culture in the UK. His role is intimately connected with the struggle for legitimacy for comic art in the UK. Comic art is taken much more seriously in continental Europe, for example having an important status within French culture. Having a laureate to speak at a cultural festival is one marker that comic art, as a cultural practice, is gathering a new status in British society. Whilst visual arts and classical music, or even film, are lauded with festivals and celebrations in prominent London locations, LICAF is unusual. By comparison, one of the major events for comics culture takes place in a warehouse space beyond Canary Wharf. Visibility is important to art forms becoming a legitimate part of national cultural life. The new visibility offered by LICAF is connected to a wider transformation of cultural taste and ideas about what is, and what is not, legitimate in British society.

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Dave Gibbons (left) talking to Alex Fitch (Resonance FM) at LICAF, 17th October 2014. Photo courtesy of LICAF.

Cultural tastes have been changing in radical ways in the UK since the 1980s. Cultural consumption used to be a marker of social position. Sociologists would often describe the links between being from one social class and having an affinity for a particular form of culture. Of course the relationship between social position and cultural tastes was never simple and direct. For example many of the supposedly social elites were not interested in what were thought to be elite forms of culture. Cultural tastes were also influenced by personal characteristics such as gender or age.

The role of cultural taste is now a hot topic for debate for sociologists, between those arguing that cultural hierarchies are bound up with wide-ranging cultural consumption (Chan and Goldthorpe 2005) and those arguing that culture still plays a role in displaying social distinctions such as class (Bennett *et al* 2009). Both sides in the debate identify a new kind of cultural consumer in British society, a person who is comfortable consuming popular culture as much as they are consuming more traditionally elite cultural forms. For social scientists working on the recent BBC Great British Class Survey (Savage *et al* 2013) this was a new kind of cultural capital, a new form of social currency. Other sociologists describe these people as 'omnivores', as they consume everything. What both sets of research have identified is the way that consuming all types of culture, having an eclectic and unbounded taste may be a new 'normal' in British society.

This new normal, the individual that listens to classical music, loves manga, goes running and plays on their DS, is a bit of a problem for cultural funding. After all, if all culture is relatively equal, then how can certain cultural forms be declared more deserving of money than others? Alongside this sits the evidence that the new normal isn't really normal at all, as state funded arts organisations seem to still attract audiences from specific social backgrounds. Despite the best attempts of both Labour and the Coalition, offering free entrance to national museums has disproportionately attracted tourists and the more highly educated middle class. Culture, even in the form of the omnivore, is still intimately related to social inequalities.

In particular what, and what does not, get funding from the state is a clear instance of how these social and cultural divisions occur.

If we care about social inequality, how can this cultural inequality be addressed? It is here that LICAF is an interesting case. Taking a commercial art form seriously expands the definition of what legitimate art and culture are. It also offers up a new cultural form in a way that fits with how others are supported and therefore legitimised by the state. In the case of comic art there are obviously the creative talents that might need career development, support after they leave art colleges, or grants to work with other talents in the art form. Expanding the definition of what is legitimate culture also has other implications. It means that British society can see creative practices, such as comic art, as a legitimate form of both cultural and economic activity. In places like Kendal this means that festivals that would normally be about presenting the history and heritage of the place can also present forms of cultural production that are taking place right now, such as those profiled in the 'made in Cumbria' shop on one of Kendal's main street.

The tourist information office, offering the made in Cumbria produce, embraces the festival, with comic art in the window. This tells us more than just the importance of advertising. It's also a clue to how cultural production functions. We're used to seeing places like the lakes as a retreat for artists or poets, away from satanic mills and the relentlessness of urban life. However the artwork in the window also points to how those forms of artistic life we'd assume are urban and youth orientated, are finding a place within localities that are seemingly unconnected to.

The emergence of forms of cultural production that can take place anywhere goes hand in hand with the importance of festivals as drivers of local economies. The obvious example is Edinburgh, but as the capital of an increasingly independent Scotland it isn't really the right comparison. Liverpool, the European Capital of Culture 2008, made much of the economic impact of hosting the festival. That too had a unique cultural offer, both historic and contemporary, which goes some way to account for its success in attracting tourists. The Liverpool case does offer a note of caution, as there was little real impact on the creative industries in the city, rather the festival seemed to boost tourism and property development. Both are obviously important to local economies, but symptomatic of broader issues facing the British economy.

What is happening in Kendal may point to a new model for towns in the periphery of England. It's not just that comic art is a medium that is emerging as legitimate, as tastes change and it is recognised with formal offices and state funding. Rather seeing an emerging art form situated in a site associated with rather more traditional forms of English tourism reinforces the idea that artistic and creative activity can contribute to supporting a regional economy, rather than just being leisure pursuits or the hobbies of the well off.

The new model offered by Lakes International is important for the regional economy. The encouragement of creative work, as well as tourism, matters to a place that has a complicated relationship to industrial decline. To the south of Kendal sit places such as Leyland and the Lancashire mill towns that have been devastated as industrial activity has left the region. The former 'makers', in Coalition discourse, of the region have all but disappeared, with no new class to replace their security of career. LICAF saw considerable economic success, both for the town and also for those exhibiting at the festival. Page 45, a comic art shop based in Nottingham, described their pop up shop's weekend as the most successful ever, taking more money than any Christmas weekend (the usual comparisons for bumper sales periods) in their history. The risk here is of sounding call to an economy based merely on consumer consumption. But the relationship between creatives and consumers is especially interesting in the arts.

The importance of a new festival economy for a town like Kendal is paralleled in the frank discussions about the relationship between art and money that takes place in many of the panels at the festival. Becky Cloonan, an artist best known for being the first woman to draw the main Batman comic, is quite blunt about how artists need to think about making a living. Many of her responses to questions from the audience are about unit costs; storage for books or how to get initial print runs right. As Cloonan points out, you need to think like a business and it isn't fun all the time.

The openness of discussing comics as a business, about framing the art form within the market for creator driven books or zines, is something that has not sat well with other cultural forms. Cultural Policy in the UK, since the 1980s, has been beset by arguments about whether to make a case for funding in the language of economics. For some this misses the essence of culture, which should never be narrated in terms of its economic value. For others it is an important method for recognising that culture is big business, business that the UK is very good at. This debate has certainly shaped discourse around British culture with ministers comfortable in talking about the export value of culture, trotting out Warhorse as the blueprint for successful cultural policy or giving speeches demanding that cultural organisations produce a stronger return on state investment. This approach sits badly with the hope that culture, like other areas of British society such as education, might be an uncommodified, unpriceable, activity.

The denial of culture as an activity that is intimately related to market relationships is grounded in a specific idea about aesthetics. On this point the aestheticism of Wilde is often offered up, about knowing the price of everything and all that. This aesthetic position was never fully tenable, not when it could be analysed in terms of who tended to benefit from it. In particular the class, gender and race analysis in both social science and literary theory have noted that who gets to make culture is closely related to the economic privileges that they enjoy. Who enjoys funding from the state is a deeper expression of these social relationships, suggesting to us that it is not just the

timeless quality of the art form that is being supported, but some form of social arrangement that is being expressed.

Celebrating the aesthetic elements of cultural production, separating culture out from its social position has another outcome. It means that comic art might escape important criticisms. Comic culture, for all its potential, is a problematic antidote to the economic problems facing the deindustrialised North. The future is still more like the past. Conversations around tables at the festival discuss the Bechdel test and recent geek sexism, suggesting that comics reflect life and life has much still to do. Comic art is part of a wider transformation of geek culture, in the UK, USA and more globally. Questions about the representation and role of women, as both creators and subjects are ever present. One recent manifestation of this has been a controversy over a cover for Marvel's *Spider-Woman*, depicting the character in a highly improbable and sexualised pose. As Laura Sneddon, an expert on comics history and women in comics, pointed out in an interview with *The Guardian*, the comics industry is still not diverse (Flood 2014). In particular this is true of the key creative jobs, such as working on mainstream superhero titles.

The gender imbalance is not unique to comics. Across the cultural sector in the UK concerns are being raised about access to cultural careers, whether in terms of social class, ethnic group or gender. This is one of the reasons that Cloonan's comments on making a living in comics are prefaced with her status as the first woman to draw a full issue of Batman. It is here where questions about cultural legitimacy can be really useful. If comic art is afforded the same or similar status to what is accepted in traditionally elite cultural forms, then debates about what is and what is not appropriate are more likely to occur in mainstream media spaces. In many ways cultural legitimacy is a mirror for popular cultural activities, as much as it is a spotlight on funding decisions and government policies.

The aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis was supposed to be solved by a march of the makers. Its clear this just hasn't happened. The nation is supposed to be more entrepreneurial. Again, there's not much evidence of this happening, as jobs seem to be low pay, insecure, service sector work. The creative economy is, unfortunately rife with these types of jobs. Notwithstanding this issue, it is also an economy that offers a utopian alternative to the office or the factory. In order for this utopian potential to be realised the types of culture that are part of the creative economy will need to be rethought. In particular the omnivore's tastes are there to be celebrated, embraced and sated to make a living. This can only really be done if the ideas about legitimate culture, what is worth funding, or celebrating at festivals, or waiting on rain soaked railway platforms to see, are challenged and remade.

Rethinking the meaning of legitimate culture will lead to society supporting and championing makers we hadn't thought of before. Celebrating their work, their art, is something that others will want to be part of, whether buying comics, seeing films or attending festivals. Comic art, it seems, just might be for the likes of us after all.

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