

# REFLECTIONS

Owen Kelly looks for the shape of a cultural democracy

## Value For Money



Is this 'art' I see before me?

The Thatcher years have not been good for the funded 'arts'. Many Arts Council clients have been jettisoned or 'devolved' to an uncertain future at the hands of regional arts associations. Regional arts associations are themselves being wound up, to be replaced with more tightly controlled 'arts boards'. Long-standing theatre companies such as 7:84 have closed. Theatres like the Albany Empire have been forced to go dark. The RSC is leaving London and retrenching to Stratford.

Meanwhile, the Left is pulling out its cultural conservatism and putting it on again like an old familiar sweater. 'Public subsidy for proper artists!' it is shouting, 'there's nothing elitist about the theatre - it's an inherently socialist process'. The Left has generally contented itself with simply defending whatever is currently having its state funding withdrawn. When it has gone on the attack, it has merely asked for more of the same - more 'artists', more 'art', more grants - as though there was nothing political about culture, as

though 'art' was not itself a political construction.

This conservatism works at all levels. We can see it in the steadfast refusal of the Labour Party, until very recently, even to countenance creating a Ministry Of Culture with responsibility for the 'arts' and broadcasting, and the ability to develop coherent and progressive cultural policies. We can see it in the absence of any debate about the nature of culture and the relationships between ideas, beliefs and social action.

Of course there have been exceptions to this. The GLC, under Ken Livingstone, did move to establish a coherent cultural policy. It did not seek to replicate the work of the Arts Council, nor to provide a 'progressive' equivalent. Instead, it aimed at establishing different criteria as to what constituted cultural activity suitable for funding, and different ways of funding it.

To understand why such an approach was necessary, we need only look at why the Arts Council was launched in the first place. It developed in

1945 out of the Council for Education in Music and the Arts (Cema), a group that was formed during the war. Cema's members were drawn from the worlds of classical music, the 'legitimate' theatre and the fine arts. There was also a similar organisation Entertainments National Service Administration (Ensa), whose members were drawn from music hall, variety and popular music.

Cema was given official status when the war ended, and incorporated as the Arts Council of Great Britain. Ensa, on the other hand, was simply disbanded and its members sent back to the music halls and variety halls, which then proceeded to close down in the face of changing leisure patterns and competition from television.

The establishment of Cema, and then the Arts Council, was an example of the 'inter-recruitment, cross-posting and the exchange of both ideology and experience' which EP Thompson has characterised as typifying imperialism. Cema's aim was to provide 'refreshment for the multitude of war workers'. It was founded by a small group of powerful men. The pleasures of this highly particular group were taken as the self-evident measure of the civilised man or woman.

The opinions of one powerful section of society were thus sanctified as the 'Great Tradition'. This is presented as being the natural outcome of some process of social Darwinism. It would be truer to say that it is a Eurocentric, gender and class-specific construction, which is inherently reactionary and probably unreformable.

The failure of the Left to acknowledge this has been disastrous. The Arts Council and its satellite bodies fund 'artists' to produce 'art' to the detriment of all those whose cultural pleasures fall outside its definition of the 'Great Tradition'. At the root of this policy is a belief that some 'art', the art of the dominant political culture, is objectively good and that people need to be educated into seeing that this is so. The Left's cultural arguments ig-

nore this central point of cultural oppression. They argue, when they argue at all, that the 'art' is not reaching the right people in the right quantities.

Culture is concerned with creating and sharing meanings. If the Left is serious about democracy it must fight to democratise the means of making meanings. It must begin by recognising that the present funding structure for the 'arts', which categorises some cultural activities as 'art' and devalues the rest, is a political project established for political purposes. The 'Great Tradition' of male Eurocentric art operates to the detriment of women, black people, the working class, and other marginalised groups, whose cultural pleasures are diminished and colonised by being forced into an annexe of the 'Great Tradition'.

The Left needs to abandon reactionary notions of 'art' and develop the idea of a cultural democracy which can operate alongside political and economic democracy. Cultural democracy proceeds from the idea that each social group derives meaning and identity from its cultural activities, which can only be understood, valued and ranked from within the meanings and values of that group.

A raga is not a symphony: it does not operate within the same musical rules, and it does have the same social function. It cannot be subject to the same 'assessment criteria'. A dub poet cannot be judged 'better' or 'worse' than Kingsley Amis, any more than an orange can be judged better or worse than a carrot. The 'Great Tradition' which implies that these comparisons can be made has lingered on, unnoticed by the Left perhaps, but nonetheless shaping the culture in which it operates.

The dismantling of Thatcherism offers us an opportunity to create a new agenda, which can help plan and shape the increasingly interlocked and electronic future. This agenda must begin with the concepts of cultural democracy. •