



## BOOK REVIEW

**Justin O'Connor**, *Culture Is Not an Industry: Reclaiming Art and Culture for the Common Good*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024. 304pp. £85.00 hbk. £14.99 pbk. £14.99 eBook.  
doi:[10.1017/S0963926824000750](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000750)

New Labour's 1990s rebranding of arts and culture as part of the broad and amorphous 'creative industries' is the jumping-off point for Justin O'Connor's book *Culture Is Not an Industry*. The illusory promise of the creative industries was that culture could transform Britain's economic prospects in a globalized world. O'Connor argues that in the light of its failure, as evidenced by the current funding crisis in cultural organizations, the insecure working conditions of cultural workers and the rise of a monocultural global tech industry, we need to radically rethink our ideas about culture. He proposes that not only is culture important for its own sake, but through it we can also collectively imagine and bring about alternative, equitable and sustainable futures. Building on recent work by the Foundational Economy Collective calling for an economy prioritizing basic material and social requirements, his contribution is to articulate the centrality of culture to this project. The book makes a convincing case for moving culture out of industrial policy to take up its place alongside, for example, health and education – that is, as culture for the public good.

This is a book about the future of cultural and economic policy, but it also stresses the need to build on the past, borrowing architects Lacaton and Vassal's concept of 'adaptive reuse' (p. 23). Woven through the book, therefore, is an account of arts and cultural policy in Britain since World War II, tracing its shifting relationship with the economy, industry and urban regeneration. The first part of the book critiques and contextualizes New Labour's 'creative industries' policy, announced by Chris Smith in 1998, through examining its relationship with the 'cultural industries' of the 1970s, which, in turn, emanated from an evolving relationship between art and popular culture over the preceding decades. Key moments include: the founding of the Arts Council in 1945, where art and culture became the subject of welfare state policy and were democratized through public art in neighbourhoods and shopping centres and publicly funded cultural buildings; the Greater London Council's 'cultural industries' experiment of 1979–86, where culture was identified as a distinct area of economic focus and highlighted the risks of privatization on cultural consumption and democracy; and the Thatcher government's absorption of culture into the neoliberal consumer economy, with metrics used to back up the claim that one-off events such as Glasgow's City of Culture stimulated local economies, while slashing public subsidies for cultural institutions.

In the second part of the book, O'Connor builds a case for a cultural infrastructure approach that differentiates 'libraries and galleries, subsidised cultural services, and

the everyday economies of record shops and fringe venues from transactional global corporations' (p. 24) and addresses their means of production. He locates the seeds of individualism and consumption that have influenced a retreat from collective cultural experiences in the design of the post-war home and shopping centre. He traces them through 1980s planning deregulation to contemporary online shopping and streaming services and connects this to the demise of cinemas and record shops. Admiring the civic and cultural buildings of the Victorians and the welfare state, he derides the iconic buildings of New Labour's Heritage Lottery millennium projects, the 'hard infrastructure' of culture, for the lack of accompanying 'soft infrastructure', the people and programmes required to populate them (p. 165). He argues that, ultimately, the late 1980s 'creative city' idea that influenced the 'creative industries' policy has failed to deliver on its utopian promise. Instead, it was absorbed into a political project that benefited private capital.

One of the many strengths of the book is its accessibility for those not knowledgeable in cultural and economic theory. O'Connor also weaves his argument through drawing on an extremely impressive range of sources. The historical content of the book is more than just context, it is central to a critique of the creative industries concept and the development of an alternative and future-focused conception of culture. For the most part, it is successful in achieving this, although the scope for developing more than a surface treatment of the history of cultural policy here, and particularly its relationship with urban renewal/regeneration policies, is obviously limited.

*Culture Is Not an Industry* will be of interest to scholars in cultural and urban studies and is also a must-read for those working in the cultural sector and in policy-making. Additionally, through offering broad-brush appraisal of post-war cultural policy and a cultural infrastructure lens through which to analyse it, there is also an invitation here to historians. Extending further the possibilities offered by what Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin have termed the 'infrastructural turn' in urban research, those interested in the arts, community and urban renewal will find value in this timely re-evaluation of culture and its relationship with democracy.

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