

# My essential reads: Cultural democracy

by David Stevenson

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# Background

The clamour for ‘evidence’ to inform cultural policymaking fascinates me. Despite a significant body of public policy scholarship that shows the complex and contingent ways in which policy decisions are made, many continue to seek out definitive ‘evidence’ that will ‘prove’ the value of culture to those who hold the purse strings. If only policy making were that simple.

My own research is concerned with the ways policy decisions are created, informed and legitimised by discourse and rhetoric. In short, the ways in which particular ideas become taken for granted positions about what the state ‘should’ do in relation to any given circumstance.

## Radical roots

The idea of a ‘cultural democracy’ is one such idea that has gained increasing traction in the past few years. Commitment to ‘cultural democracy’ has become a signifier of a commitment to greater inclusion and diversity, often from a starting point that recognises a wider form of cultural practice than is traditional subsumed with the label of ‘the arts’. However, cultural democracy is not a new idea and its history is bound up with the political counterculture of the 1960s. In the UK it has a particular association with the ‘community arts’ movement of the 1970s and ‘80s. However, some of the ways in which the term is now employed are arguably far-removed from its radical roots.

## A changed landscape

As someone constantly caught between a radical and pragmatic perspective on social change, what is particularly interesting to me are the tensions that have emerged in trying to enact an inherently political aspiration through the bureaucratic and technocratic modes of governance by which cultural policy in the UK functions. The suggested readings below have been selected with exactly that tension in mind. Not to suggest that contemporary writers on cultural democracy have ‘failed’ to respect the legacy of the term but to remind us that in lieu of a revolution, we have to contend with the realpolitik of delivering change.

So, after reading my suggestions, my question to you would be:  
Is a ‘good enough’ cultural democracy good enough?



The notice board at the [Out of the Blue Drill Hall](#) Leith, Edinburgh.  
Photo credit: David Stevenson



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# My Essential Reads

## 1. [A Good Night Out. Popular Theatre: Audience, class and form](#) by John McGrath (1981)

My first choice is a book consisting of a series of lectures given by theatre maker John McGrath, founder of 7:84 Theatre Company. While there are elements of the argument presented here that I would critique, I have picked it because at its core is an argument about respect for the cultural values of others that I believe is vital to any attempt at establishing a cultural democracy.

## 2. [Culture and Democracy: The Manifesto](#) by Owen Kelly, John Lock and Karen Merkel (1986)

I have picked this piece for two reasons. Firstly, because it is one of a small number of seminal texts that capture the revolutionary position being advocated by many of the champions of cultural democracy in the 1970s and '80s. It makes explicit that cultural participation is about democracy and requires pluralistic systems of values. The fact that it is presented as a manifesto also acts as a nice counterpoint to the arguably less political attempt to map a way forward detailed in my sixth choice, below.

Secondly, as someone interested in the importance of language I would also highlight their assertion that 'the arts' will always be an exclusionary label that functions to diminish the value of other creative acts and as such should be abandoned; something that I also began to question in my [PhD](#).

## 3. [Culture, Democracy and the Right to Make Art](#) edited by Alison Jeffers and Gerri Moriarty (2018)

This recent publication offers both a historical account of the community arts movement in the UK and a consideration of its legacy in contemporary participatory practice, outreach and socially engaged art. In so doing it reminds us of the manner in which radical ideas can gradually become appropriated by the same systems, structures and institutions that they had been born in opposition to (for another example see the extent to which the idea of cultural industries advanced in my second choice bears little resemblance to how it is commonly used today). This insight is vital in understanding why it has proven so hard to significantly change the status quo in regard to how cultural participation is understood and supported in the UK.

## 4. [The Ecology of Culture](#) by John Holden (2015)

My next choice is not strictly about cultural democracy, but rather another related term that is enjoying a moment of popularity in cultural policy discourse - that of cultural ecology. I include this here because any attempt to understand what a cultural democracy might look like needs to begin by abandoning the rigid criteria by which different forms of creative acts are classified and ultimately valued. Taking an ecological approach to understanding cultural participation places a focus on the relationships between different types of creative acts and organisations. It emphasises the extent to which culture is created by the coming together of people, ideas, skills, assets, resources and opportunities, and in this regard evokes the idea of capabilities, discussed below. The idea of a cultural ecology is explicitly non-hierarchical and implicitly asserts each element is interdependent, equally important and should be valued as such.

## 5. [Cultural Participation and Inclusive Societies](#) by Regina List, Olga Kononykhina and Jessica Leong Cohen (2017)

My fifth choice is also not about cultural democracy per se. Rather it is about the role of cultural participation in democracy. Focused on Europe, this brief report shows that a correlation exists between cultural participation and some important elements and indicators of inclusive societies such as tolerance, trust and fairness, albeit that the direction of cause and effect is uncertain. What is important to note is that this is not about people taking part in 'the arts'. Instead, it is about people having the ability to undertake activities that, for them, help define their identity, and/or allows for personal expression ([as per the definition adopted by UNESCO](#)).

While this report takes a relatively optimistic outlook, what it makes me consider is the extent to which people who are not able/supported to pursue the cultural activities they value most may become less tolerant and trusting of a society that values the personal expression of some more than others.

## 6. [Towards Cultural Democracy: Promoting cultural capabilities for everyone](#) by Nick Wilson, Jonathan Gross and Anna Bull (2017)

I have selected this report as an example of trying to present a (relatively) radical vision for contemporary cultural policy in a pragmatic manner that speaks to practical, incremental policy change. The report offers fourteen tangible recommendations for actions the authors believe would support a cultural democracy, drawing on the 'capabilities approach' of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, which stresses the need for everyone to have the opportunities and resources to pursue their own development on their own terms.

## 7. [Cultural Democracy in Practice](#)

by 64 Million Artists and Arts Council England (2018)

My final choice offers case studies of how different organisations have attempted to put cultural democracy into practice. I include this not because I think these are all good examples of what I understand as cultural democracy (indeed it is co-authored by the Arts Council of England, an organisation that the authors of my second choice argued was oppressive and should be disbanded). Rather, it is indicative of the ways in which many organisations and individuals are pragmatically trying to work within existing governance structures to deliver a more equitable cultural sector. However, what this report does not make clear is that their ability to deliver widespread change is constrained by the precarity of their own situation and that of those they work with. For cultural democracy to function it is not enough to support some citizen's capabilities temporarily, they must be confident that they are secure for the long term.

## Summary

My seven choices are intended to make explicit the challenges of implementing radical structural change in cultural policy. Inevitably there will be compromises and most change will come incrementally. However, it is not clear whether a cultural democracy can ever be delivered through a gradual expansion of temporary projects and a relatively meagre redistribution of resources. For at its core is a belief that all forms of creative expression are equally valuable to the individuals and groups who practice them and that the state should value them as such. I do not believe that this will ever be delivered by shuffling around relatively small amounts subsidy. Instead, it will require significant change across all areas and level of government.

As I have written [elsewhere](#), let's stop trying to 'evidence' what value cultural participation has for the economy, or education, or health, and start demanding evidence of how our economy, our education system, and our health service can better deliver a society where we are all able to spend more time doing what is culturally valuable to each of us. That, to me, is a cultural democracy.

# Biography

[Professor David Stevenson](#) is Acting Dean of Arts, Social Sciences and Management at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. My research is concerned with two distinct, but interrelated areas of enquiry. The first focuses on relations of power and the production of value within the cultural sector while the second seeks to provide insight and understanding about the contingent and context dependent nature of organisational success in the arts and cultural sector.



My current research with [Leila Jancovich](#) from Leeds University aims to challenge the status quo by considering how cultural participation policies, projects and practices might be improved through recognising the pervasiveness of past failures. In doing so we hope to continue to facilitate the social learning that needs to take place before those who can exert the most power in the cultural sector acknowledge the extent of the structural change required for cultural participation to be supported more equitably. Details of this research can be found on our website at [www.culturalparticipation.co.uk](http://www.culturalparticipation.co.uk)

I have written extensively on the topic of cultural participation and my work is available online for download [here](#). For those papers that you cannot access you can contact me for more information: [DStevenson@qmu.ac.uk](mailto:DStevenson@qmu.ac.uk)

## Call to action...

*What's the most useful reading you've done in this topic area? What did you learn? If you'd like to share your reflections and learning with us get in touch at [ccv@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:ccv@leeds.ac.uk) and we'll feed this into a future resource. Or let us know if you'd like to submit a case study or contribute to a podcast or webinar on this theme.*

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