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Cultural work and contributive justice

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ABSTRACT

Ideas of contributive justice are concerned with what people give or contribute to society, rather than what they get, as in ideas of distributive justice. This article deals with contributive justice as applied to a specific example of cultural work – work and employment in the UK publicly-funded arts, cultural and creative industries. It is offered mainly as a conceptual discussion rather than a set of concrete policy recommendations. However, given some of the limitations of current distributive models, a principle of universal distribution is postulated, supported by contributive justice as a complementary framework for conceiving and implementing programmes of equal opportunity and ‘creative justice’ in publicly funded cultural work.

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Introduction

A good deal of recent scholarship has focussed on identifying the pervasive inequalities of ‘cultural work’ – paid work and employment in the arts, cultural and creative industries. But identifying the existence of inequalities is not sufficient to effect social justice. To support progressive change, it is also important to develop projective normative positions that move beyond the enumeration of inequalities and begin to both imagine (and enact) better kinds of cultural work.

Previously, I have made my own attempt to think through some of potentials and possibilities of justice thinking in relation to cultural work (Banks 2017). I proposed that a more socially-just sharing of jobs and opportunities in cultural industries workplaces was justifiable on three fundamental grounds:

- *Economic grounds*: it is of social benefit that everyone who wishes to should have a fair chance to try and enter, participate in, and earn a living from, cultural work;
- *Cultural grounds*: in cultural work, people should have fair and equal opportunities to obtain cultural recognition and respect and to express themselves and their interests, within certain limits;
- *Political grounds*: opportunity to participate in cultural work strengthens access to the democratic polity, assuming a pluralist, multi-vocal society that permits cultural dialogue between different democratically inclined parties and interests.

These three conditions for what I term ‘creative justice’ were adapted from the tripartite and ‘participatory’ conditions for social justice outlined by Nancy Fraser (2013). Under such conditions, all adult members of society should be ‘able to interact with one another as peers’ (Fraser 2013, p. 184) as moral and juridical equals. I argued that one prerequisite for the fulfilment of these

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three conditions would be some strong investment and improvement in systems of *distributive justice*; the kind of justice concerned with fair dues and just desserts in relation to allocation of a given resource (Walzer 1983). In the context of the cultural industries, a ‘creatively just’ society would be one that maximises the social distribution of the range of opportunities, jobs and rewards¹ associated with cultural industries production. One of the problems, of course, is that cultural work is far from ‘creatively just.’ In fact, the critical scholarship has consistently shown the cultural industries to be highly unjust, with positions dominated by the already socially privileged, and socially disadvantaged and minoritised groups disproportionately excluded (e.g. see Banks 2017, Saha 2018, Belfiore 2020, Brook *et al.* 2020, Eikhof 2020).

As distributive injustices in the cultural sector have become more recognised by academics, so too have they been more publicly condemned. In 2019 the black British broadcaster and actor Sir Lenny Henry used his speech to the UK’s Royal Television Society to call on broadcasters to provide ring-fenced funding to commission new black and ethnic minority productions, citing disproportionately low levels of ethnic minority recruitment and hiring in UK screen industries (Henry 2019). Similarly, in June 2020, over 3500 UK film and television professionals co-signed a letter to the Government and screen industry leaders asking them to not only hire more ethnic minority ‘talent’ but to do so in the interests of ‘tackling structural and systemic racism in our industry, in the UK and around the world’ (see Kanter 2020). In the wider public arts, there are now well-reported problems in the under-recruitment of socially disadvantaged (especially) working class, disabled and ethnic minority workers. In 2019, the Arts Council England (ACE) issued its annual diversity report highlighting how its own principal beneficiaries – the National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) – were failing to address inequalities in hiring practices. Nicholas Serota, Chair of the ACE, suggested that organisations were ‘treading water’, as only a slight rise in the ethnic minority arts workforce had been detected, up to 12% from 10% over two years. This was compared to an overall figure of 16% in the UK working population – which is nearer to 40% in London, where most major arts organisations are located. The total percentage of disabled workers across NPOs was also measured at 6%. This was despite more than 20% of adults in England identifying as having a work-limiting condition or impairment (see ACE 2019, Brown 2019).

The problems of creative injustice do not end at the point of recruitment and hiring, however; they also infect the distribution of pay and rewards for those socially disadvantaged and minoritised workers who successfully navigate a workplace entry. For instance, in the UK, recent controversies have included the absence of female directors or black and ethnic minority actors nominated in any of the main British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) 2020 award categories, and ongoing disputes about gender pay inequalities at the BBC. In the first case, the black British filmmaker Steve McQueen criticised BAFTA for failing to recognise the ethnic diversity of UK film talent, suggesting the awards were at risk of becoming out of touch with UK society (see Bakare 2020). In the second instance, in November 2019, the broadcast journalist Samira Ahmed told the employment tribunal she had brought against the BBC that she ‘could not understand how pay for me, a woman, could be so much lower than Jeremy Vine, a man, for presenting very similar programmes and doing very similar work’ (Ahmed, quoted in BBC 2020). The tribunal unanimously upheld her claim.

The consistent failure of many cultural industries and organisations to engage, recruit or appropriately reward socially disadvantaged and minoritised candidates undermines the prospects for a fully realised distributive justice. Such failure suggests there may be some significant problems in current systems of distributing cultural work opportunity. Indeed, under the existing distributional systems I suggest we might identify three such problems, based on a synthesis of established findings from the critical scholarship:

- (a) the problem of *scarcity* (the number of cultural opportunities, jobs and resources is limited or unduly restricted);

- (b) the problem of *discrimination* (distribution of opportunity or resource tends to be socially exclusionary);
- (c) the problem of *competition* (which inhibits progression for participants without certain social attributes or advantages).

The established liberal solution to these problems has been, firstly, to try to obtain more resources; secondly, improve the equitability by which such resources are allocated; and thirdly, 'level the playing field' for competition. These are worthy aspirations and have led to some advances. However, they have also failed to significantly address problems of inequality in cultural work. For the most part, inequality and social injustice have strongly endured – and in some cases become more deeply entrenched (Banks 2017, Brook *et al.* 2020, Masso 2021). A conclusion we might draw, therefore, is that these existing distributive systems are themselves *inherently* defective, since they have been shown, over time, to be incapable of delivering the justice they are imagined conventionally to provide. Thus, while distribution is a worthy goal, the consistent failure to distribute justly might lead us to question the assumptions and mechanisms underpinning these distributive systems.

On this basis, it is reasonable to assume some other system of distribution, based on different assumptions, might be required to help occasion a greater 'creative justice.' The aim of this article is to propose how this might *theoretically* be conceived – within the specific (and circumscribed) example of publicly funded arts and culture in the UK.² I first identify the limits of existing distributions that rely on liberal, merit-based relations of scarcity, discrimination and competition before considering how a different kind of distribution – the universal distribution of an opportunity to contribute to culture-making – might be needed to ensure maximum opportunity for people to partake in cultural work. However, I mainly argue that such a universal distribution could be paired with, and indeed, partly *premised upon*, a fundamentally different conception of justice ('contributive justice') which might provide a strong philosophical foundation that could further support and justify the revised and more radical availability of universal cultural opportunity.

The failure of current distributive systems

Failures to overcome distributional inequality in cultural work might be said to derive from ingrained liberal assumptions about the necessity of maintaining (but incrementally 'improving') the existing relations of scarcity, discrimination and competition that underpin current distributive systems. Arguably, these assumptions have served to undermine – as much as enhance – the fair distribution of cultural opportunity, jobs and rewards in public arts and culture. To summarise each relation, in turn:

Scarcity: the conventional approach to the problem of scarcity is to campaign for a greater share of resources – this is a worthwhile and accepted aim. Problems of resource scarcity weaken efforts to improve distributive justice, since any reductions in funding undermine the possibility of a wider sharing. Yet, while investment might be needed, overcoming scarcity is not simply an issue of obtaining or spending more money. The mere provision of extra resource is not sufficient to overcome distributive inequalities, since already advantaged groups have tended to obtain a relatively larger and disproportionate share of the expanded supply. Indeed, we know that funding boosts in themselves do not fundamentally challenge the unequal relations of power that have tended to reinforce middle-class dominance of the arts (Belfiore 2020). Therefore (in the UK at least) most arts and cultural funding is allocated to bourgeois art forms, 'major' arts institutions, as well as to leadership and managerial positions, 'superstar' pay, PR and marketing, and administrative infrastructures, at the expense of more direct and distributed funding of arts and cultural activity across diverse populations (see Hadley and Belfiore 2018). Here, we also find training, career development and diversity and inclusion initiatives tend to be of low priority, or under-resourced. At the same time, scarcity is often naturalised when it is claimed by managers, employers

and selectors that while ready opportunities exist, there are simply ‘too many people chasing them.’ Failure of some people to participate, in this respect, is explained by the ‘oversupply’ of candidates – rather than a shortage occasioned by the manufactured scarcity of positions. In some sense this is true – the number of prospective and aspirant participants in cultural work has grown, over time. But it tends to overlook that while opportunities *are* scarce (since more are always desired and required, and could be resourced), they are also *weighted* significantly in favour of the socially privileged. Under current distributive systems the availability of resources is therefore limited, not only in the sense that, (a) more could conceivably be offered, but that, (b) resources and opportunity could theoretically be *shared out quite differently*, according to alternative (and potentially more encompassing) social logics. Hereon, I refer to these limitations as ‘artificial scarcity’ – since they are socially constructed, rather than the result of some ‘natural’ equilibrium or ordinance.³

Discrimination: recent decades have witnessed the advent of numerous equalities legislations and the proliferation of workplace initiatives designed to help selectors develop more ‘inclusive’ (and non-discriminatory) processes of recruitment, selection and reward. These have had a slow and limited effect. The empirical evidence tends to show racism, sexism, classism, dis-ableism and other forms of discrimination as enduring (rather than receding) barriers to more equal participation. Yet while unjust forms of social discrimination are recognised to exist, and to potentially shape selection and allocation, they are very seldom identified *in situ*. Few cultural managers or selectors would admit openly to any kind of classism, sexism, racism, homophily, or even ‘unconscious’ forms of bias against socially disadvantaged or minoritised candidates. Indeed, such biases are often disavowed since there is also the wider (though erroneous) perception that arts and culture are intrinsically more ‘open-minded’, ‘liberal’ and ‘inclusive’ than other kinds of work (Taylor and O’Brien 2017). Yet, discriminatory selection persists, and remains intrinsic to ostensibly ‘merit-based’ distributions of cultural work.

Competition: there is a prevailing belief that the distribution of opportunity in cultural work is premised mainly on objective assessments of competing candidates’ creative skills or artistic merits. While qualifications and ‘hard work’⁴ are (also) regarded as necessary and desirable qualities, it is competitive selection through ‘talent’ (and its numerous close proxies⁵) that remains the principal criterion for selection into cultural work. Yet, this is problematic, since talent is not a self-evident quality. Talent (and proxy) based selections tend heavily to rely on the dispositional preferences of selectors and the charisma of their professional authority. While these charismatic judgments are ostensibly rooted in an objective evaluation,⁶ they tend *also* to be deeply subjective; expressed in emotional or affective terms, as senses, feelings or moods, or as the product of some irrefutable experience or knowledge. In this respect, despite the avowed good intentions and acumen of selectors, it is clear judgments of artistic or creative talent can provide ideal cover for the concealment of social interests. An identified ‘lack’ of talent is an irresistible alibi for the exercise of a social discrimination that prevents equality occurring. This is shown, not simply in the widespread use of talent in cultural discourse as a positive signifier and affirmation that *a priori* justifies routine exclusionary or discriminatory selection but is more tangibly evidenced in *actual* attributions of artistic talent, which tend to skew heavily towards the already socially advantaged (Banks 2017). Yet if talent really were only a ‘natural attribute’, and judged solely on objective merits, the distribution of opportunity would more closely reflect the social composition of the population at large. We therefore find that while talent (or ‘energy’ or ‘gift’) is commonly assumed to be some special quality of the person that lies *beyond* the social, its recognition and attribution remains social through and through (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

I would suggest that when the condition of entry to the arts and culture is postulated to be the meritorious possession of some demonstrable ‘talent’ then a system of unfair competition is likely in operation. Talent-based selection is also a sociological verdict on the acceptable parameters within which talent might be conceived of or judged. Not only are candidates presenting themselves for assessment in the context of a whole social and aesthetic history of an enterprise or practice, their own personal and social histories act as determinant on their possibilities of selection

(Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). For example, a candidate's class, gender or ethnic background, their schooling, their record of access to different kinds of networks of support, their attributes of physical and verbal presentation, communication, style and deportment – these are just some of the explicit determinants in the social attribution of a learned or 'natural' ability (e.g. see Gaztambide-Fernandez *et al.* 2013, Bull 2020). I'd argue these factors help explain why – even when they have been the object of targeted interventions designed to improve their competitive 'prospects' in the arts and culture – disadvantaged groups have failed generally to overcome deeply ingrained exclusions from opportunity, jobs and rewards.⁷ We can therefore suggest that while people might indeed have different natural aptitudes and abilities (while noting these abilities are usually more learned than innate⁸), the idea that competitive selection by talent offers some fair and objective sorting mechanism for shaping distributions of cultural opportunity is an illusion. Yet, even the more radical critics of the status quo are often loath to question current uses of 'talent' as a sorting mechanism – such is the faith in its veracity as an objective indicator of worth.

Given the problems with prevailing merit-based systems we can see how the opportunities, jobs and rewards of cultural work tend to be unequally distributed, in the ways routinely evidenced in the critical scholarship. Yet, by using the specific example of publicly funded arts and culture, I want to argue that there is no reason for societies to limit access to cultural work in this way. Indeed, I want to propose the possibility of a new conceptualisation of publicly funded cultural work, which presumes (in ideal fashion) the non-merit-based *distribution of universal opportunity*, supported by the generative and conducive (but hitherto overlooked) notion of *contributive justice*.

Theorising contributive justice

The distribution of a universal opportunity to work in the public arts and culture would require the elimination of artificial scarcity (increasing resources and equalising their distribution), removing the possibility of undue discrimination and eradicating the need for competition. The rationale for doing so would be to maximise public access to culture-making and so broaden 'creative justice' in a distributional sense. But this is not the only conception of justice we can draw upon to justify distribution of universal opportunity. There are arguably other benefits to be gained from universal distribution in the form of the potential enhancement of *contributive justice*.

Contributive justice offers a different way of approaching the issue of equal opportunity. As its name suggests, contributive justice is concerned with ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity *to make some kind of social contribution*. It derives from the Aristotelian notion that what we *do* in life is as important as what we *get* in terms of our overall quality of life and well-being (Sayer 2009). Thus, while distributive justice emphasises what we might receive or get from society, contributive justice emphasises what opportunity we might have to *give* to society, in pursuit of different personal or social priorities or goals.⁹ To universalise the *distribution* of an opportunity to take part in public culture-making would therefore be the precondition for maximising the possibility of a universal *contribution* to the production of culture. As we will see, contribution¹⁰ can be distinguished from distribution as an important quality and value in its own right, and one that has the potential to generate numerous personal and social benefits and goods – and so invites inquiry as to its distributed availability.

Contributive justice is becoming more widely discussed in the social sciences (Sayer 2009, Sanghera 2018, Timmerman 2018). To date, however, the most extensive and influential account of contributive justice has been offered by the political philosopher Paul Gombert (2007) in *How to Make Opportunity Equal*. A study of racial injustice in the USA, Gombert outlines how black people have been systematically denied equal opportunities to obtain the kinds of good and meaningful¹¹ work disproportionately enjoyed by their white counterparts. Yet, the opportunity to contribute to good or meaningful work is seen by Gombert as crucially important because of the different benefits it can provide, *both in terms of enhanced personal well-being (opportunities for different kinds of 'human flourishing') and in terms of the wider social benefits that can accrue*

from (or are contingent on) the undertaking of this given labour. In terms of personal well-being, the opportunity to undertake meaningful work is regarded as an important social good because an interesting and complex job, which offers stimulation and variety, is *likely* to be better than a job that is routine, tedious or unpleasant. Good work more greatly enhances the skills and capacities of workers themselves, bringing benefits of human development, and the goods internal to a practice, but also affords people the recognition and esteem that comes with undertaking work that is socially respected. Additionally, an opportunity to undertake good or meaningful work is seen not simply as a means to personal development, but to support ambitions to contribute to a wider society – our social desires to give and not just to receive (Sayer 2009). Gomberg’s analysis is rooted in a particular ethical (Aristotelian) conception of the human – where the shared pursuit of the good life is occasioned through collective enterprise that involves opportunities for participation in ‘good’ and complex labour:

... we can argue [in favour of] contribution (...) by articulating an ethical ideal of humanity as active, creative and contributive (...) [w]e are a socially intelligent species; our intelligence develops through mastery of language. It is a good for us to contribute to others, and because we are capable of and enjoy mastery of complexity and because mastery naturally inspires esteem, it is particularly a good for us to contribute complex mastery. Contribution to a social group with which we identify is central to our well-being. (Gomberg 2007, p. 151)

The work of contribution is the route to personal well-being and the work ‘that sustains a social group’ (2007, p. 149) – the basis for a more harmonious co-existence powered by the energy of co-operative surplus. Here, people give, or do, for the benefit of the group or society, and, in doing so, also benefit themselves. Thus, we see contribution and the products of contribution as substantive and concrete goods to be valued in their own right – distinct from, yet complementary to, the merely distributed *opportunity* to participate and contribute.

It is important to note that any support for a progressive notion of contributive justice should be seen as distinct from endorsing the conservative idea that people must feel obliged or be forced into work or employment – one that assumes people’s primary social ‘contribution’ is to give their labour power in service of surplus value production. While in most societies there exists a social requirement (and strong moral compulsion) to sell one’s labour – and material necessity makes some kind of paid work inevitable for most – the idea of contributive justice focuses less on coercion or enforced labour and more on realising the potential for self-development and positive social contributions through a collective workful effort.

In theories of contributive justice, work is therefore regarded less as a curse or burden, and more as a potential social good. It follows from a social justice viewpoint, as Gomberg and others, such as Sanghera (2018) and Sayer (2009), have argued, if good and meaningful work is able to provide multiple benefits, *then access to such work should not be unduly protected or restricted in supply*. It is in the interests of social justice that work with demonstrably ‘positive content’ (Sayer 2009, p. 6) should be made as widely available as is socially possible. This would enable people to enjoy the goods of intrinsically fulfilling and meaningful work, but also allow them to contribute to and benefit from the range of other social goods and rewards that might pertain to the work in question. It follows that if any such work remains artificially restricted or protected for an elite minority that we would be justified in saying that that contributive *injustice* is occurring because ‘people are [being] denied the chance to have fulfilling and stimulating work, and the recognition and status associated with it’ (Sanghera 2018, p. 309). It is important to note that Gomberg (and Sanghera and Sayer) make the case for meaningful work without idealising *all* work as intrinsically good, and without discounting work’s recognised potential to inflict human suffering – indeed, it is partly in recognition of work’s often dispiriting and alienating nature that the case for a more equitable distribution of any available good work is construed.

We should further acknowledge that Gomberg is not concerned with any *particular* kind of work or employment but seeks simply to identify the ideal social conditions under which meaningful

work opportunities of all kinds might be made more equally distributed. His key claim is that capitalism is systemically unable to deliver this equality because it tends to allocate jobs and rewards based on a socially manufactured scarcity, unwarranted social discriminations and market competition. Yet, as Gomberg repeatedly insists, ‘competitive equal opportunity is impossible’ (Gomberg 2007, p. 1). This is because jobs and positions are always in limited supply and so even where a disadvantaged social background is compensated for there will still be those who have good, desired jobs and those who do not. Conventional efforts to, say, increase employee diversity might have some limited effect in terms of widening the social distribution of scarce positions but leaves intact what Gomberg regards as a more fundamental injustice: the fact that ‘opportunity is a scarce good’ (Gomberg 2007, p. 27), which only a limited number can ever enjoy, regardless of social background.

Gomberg’s radical solution is to aim for the maximal elimination of scarcity, by ensuring that participation in good and meaningful work is made an unlimited opportunity, available to all:

Equal opportunity must be unlimited opportunity: when opportunity is for goods of limited supply, it will be competitive; children will be socialized for different social positions, and opportunity will not be equal. (Gomberg 2007, pp. 152–153)

Crucially, for this to take place, Gomberg argues that society would need to be fundamentally reorganised around the social sharing of all forms of work and labour. To enable the ‘good’ work to be more freely distributed it requires the ‘bad’ or more routine work to also be more equally shared. Indeed, only through equitable sharing of *all* work can equal opportunity for good work be realised. In such an ideal society, where labour is more equally shared, and where opportunities for good and meaningful work are no longer scarce (since everyone has opportunity to do them), then these opportunities would cease to be objects of competition, and so chances to undertake such work would better be equalised – only then, Gomberg suggests, might we have a genuine ‘equality of opportunity.’

For the purposes of this article, we do not need to address all the questions raised by Gomberg’s theory – such as the unlikely possibility of wholly eliminating scarcity, the validity of the value-distinctions between different kinds of labour, or the issue of whether all labour should be shared at societal level and how this might be equitably achieved – to recognise that there are at least some provisional grounds upon which contributive justice might be usefully theorised in relation to cultural work. The value of Gomberg’s theory, here, is simply to illuminate the *conceptual possibility* of rethinking the ways in which access to and undertaking of publicly funded cultural work is organised socially, by foregrounding the importance and value of recognising contributive as well as distributive forms of justice.

Applying contributive justice to cultural work

How might an idealist theory of contributive justice usefully pertain to cultural work? Three possibilities suggest themselves.

Firstly, we can see, in social justice terms, that cultural work fits the profile of the kind of ‘good’ or ‘meaningful’ work identified by Gomberg as desirable to share more socially. Working in arts, culture and creative industries is widely regarded as having ‘positive content’ and often cited as an example of ‘good work’ (e.g. see Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). To have an opportunity or job in the arts and culture that might allow one to use imaginative skills, or express artistic impulses, to be recognised and rewarded as creatively gifted and talented, or simply to be involved in stimulating and interesting activities of linguistic, aesthetic or knowledge production is widely prized. While, of course, current conditions of much cultural work and employment leave a lot to be desired as ‘good’ work, this is partly due to the problems I’ve already identified in those distributive systems that dominate the allocation of opportunity and reward. In this respect we have a *prima facie* case for seeking ways to ensure a more just (non-discriminatory, non-competitive) allocation

of this valued activity to enable the widest possible accrual of its available benefits. Good work in culture, where found, should be made more widely available to all.

Secondly, as Gomberg's arguments suggest, there is also an ethical and humanist justification. Because cultural work is also widely taken to be 'active, creative and contributive' and thus rooted in 'complex' skills and capacities that support human flourishing, then allowing the maximum number to participate in such work, *should they wish to*, is arguably important for effecting a greater social justice. The production of art and culture – understood in its most generous and liberal sense – is a viable route to human flourishing that should not be unduly denied when opportunities to expand access to it readily exist.

Thirdly, there is a strong 'public good' justification for expanding the opportunity to contribute to cultural work. As Gomberg and others have argued, good work can build a person's self-esteem and sense of self-worth, and contribution to the group can generate important social benefits. Good cultural work can do also do this – *as well as* contribute to the wider and more expansive commonwealth of cultural productions, dialogues and exchanges that underpin the social. Cultural work should therefore not be regarded as valuable solely in terms of a contribution to any specific (cultural) task in hand, but also in terms of its potential contribution to, say, a wider sense of cultural democracy (e.g. see Jeffers and Moriarty 2017) or the broader cultural commons (Gilbert 2014). Arguments for widening contribution to cultural work also support Keat's (2000) notion that culture be regarded as a vital 'meta-good' – a good whose cultivation affords populations the ability to reflect on the meaning and value of *other* kinds of good. Cultural work therefore allows people to undertake meaningful activities that contribute to the shared production – and evaluation – of the qualities and universe of our common life.

Thus, these are three good grounds on which to argue for contribution *alongside* distribution in the just allocation of cultural work. Consideration of contribution expands the horizon of justice thinking. Contribution – as much as distribution – has substantive *content* with real implications for justice struggles. Indeed, to return to my initial tripartite conception of 'creative justice' we can see that a closer consideration of contribution can help strengthen this as a framework for postulating better forms of cultural work. Let me demonstrate this by revisiting each of my three initially proposed conditions of 'creative justice', in turn, showing how distribution *and* contribution provide enhanced conceptions of justice:

- Recall that it was argued on *economic grounds* that it is 'of social benefit that everyone who wishes to should be given a fair chance to try and enter, participate in, and earn a living from, cultural work.' This, however, need not necessarily be limited to the fair distribution of an economic opportunity that would allow individuals to 'earn a living' from culture. It might also include the economic benefit that would come in the form of the expanded social repository of 'complex' skills and abilities, related to cultural production, which would otherwise have been denied to excluded or rejected applicants, and which might be re-invested in cultural production or deployed across other social domains. We might therefore also include a valuation of the *expanded contribution* to the overall economy of ideas that is engendered by accessible cultural production and increased social access to the meaningful goods and labours that make up the production of a co-operative cultural surplus. Note here that the overall economic benefit need not be restricted to simply having more people working in culture – but having more people with diverse cultural knowledges and capacities working across different domains of society.
- Similarly, it was argued on *cultural grounds*, in cultural work, people should have 'fair and equal opportunities to obtain cultural recognition and respect and to express themselves and their interests, within certain limits.' This need not be restricted to people awaiting a given or distributed opportunity to obtain representational justice within some idealised workplace context. It might also involve populations also being engaged *en masse* as potential contributors to a system of state-supported cultural work designed to contribute to the total expansion of social and

cultural possibility. Put otherwise, in ideal form, it is only through the endowed provision of a *right* to contribute – rather than through the chance receipt of a limited distribution – can we provide scope for the widest array of cultural representations, worldviews and interactions that might serve to manifest the most diverse plurality of our social dreams. In this respect, socially disadvantaged and minoritised cultural workers are not simply ‘given’ a cultural opportunity, they might also have their *contributions valued*¹² as a part of a wider calculus that might seek to weigh up the benefits of providing a more universal input into the realm of symbols and ideas. This more robust notion of cultural inclusion is premised on contribution as an innate right and value – and might be weighed against the currently limited distributions that have long been gamed to provide cultural recognition (and recognition of contribution) mainly to those with established social privileges and advantages.

- Finally, on *political grounds*, I argued the opportunity to participate in cultural work ‘strengthens access to the democratic polity, assuming a pluralist, multi-vocal society that permits cultural dialogue between different democratically inclined parties and interests.’ Again, we need not simply stress what is distributed or received in this transaction – an individual opportunity for political ‘voice’ – but also what is contributed in terms of additional enhancements of the pluralised public sphere, as new contributions and connections are made in the catalysing admixtures of a more diverse and recursively expanding terrain of communication and exchange.

Thus, in this fashion, if we are to take both distribution *and* contribution seriously, the challenge in public cultural work is to conceive of a comprehensive system of justice which includes the *universally distributed opportunity to contribute to culture-making*, as well as a *plurality of ways of valuing contributions*. This has the potential to offer better social outcomes (or as I would prefer, in this case, ‘creatively just’ outcomes) than those provided by prevailing, liberal and merit-based systems of distributive justice which have inherent limitations and occasioned only minimal gains. And while there may be several practical objections to the universal expansion of public access to cultural work – not least its seeming unlikeliness in the current conjuncture – these should be seen as subordinate to the egalitarian, ethical and public good justifications I’ve previously identified. Fundamentally, if cultural work is recognised as a valuable and desirable activity with many personal and social benefits – then why shouldn’t the maximum amount of people be given the opportunity to benefit from its goodness? Why, in short, should we not strive for a universal equal opportunity to partake – and contribute – in public cultural work? Or, put otherwise, given the failures of ‘merit’-based systems, what ethical justification might there be for *not* redirecting public funding for arts and culture to provide a nationally distributed system for cultural contribution – whereby all existing public cultural institutions would be required to prioritise (a) reduction of artificial scarcity (b) elimination of exclusive discrimination and (c) elimination of competition in distribution of resources, and to foreground justice of distribution *and* contribution in the form of the free and unfettered opportunity of all who would wish to, to work on art and cultural projects?

Discussion – contribution as foundational principle?

The idea of contributive justice suggests that we cannot limit our account of inequalities in the cultural industries to concerns about the distribution of opportunity – however vital such concerns remain. While ensuring a more universal distribution of opportunity is important, and necessary, there is a further and complementary concern regarding who can participate (or rather ‘contribute’) in culture-making, in *any* kind of opportunity structure. In *Spheres of Justice* (1983), Michael Walzer asks the question: ‘By virtue of what characteristics are we one another’s equals?’ One answer to that question, he suggests, is that ‘we are (all of us) culture-producing creatures, we make and inhabit meaningful worlds’ and it is therefore vital that ‘we do justice to actual men and women by respecting their particular creations’ (1983, p. 314). If this holds, then the role of the state in funding

culture might be to afford people the universal opportunity to contribute to public ‘culture-producing’, and so open the possibility of having those creations – and the act of creating – recognised and respected. If this sounds impossibly idealistic, ludicrous even, how much more ludicrous is the notion that current methods of distributing cultural opportunity (and so garnering contributions) are widely regarded as ‘fair’ or ‘meritocratic’, when the evidence has so comprehensively contradicted such faith? Why continue to tolerate a system that appears so intrinsically deficient, at the expense of considering the range of untested possible alternatives?

As discussed, current systems of opportunity distribution remain premised on artificial scarcity, undue discrimination and unfair competition. Furthermore, the idea of public cultural funding being used to furnish participative (let alone ‘contributive’) cultural democracy – once a fashionable goal¹³ – has been largely supplanted by bureaucratic concerns around ‘excellence’, ‘value for money’, ‘impact’ and (highly circumscribed) notions of ‘diversity’ as principal criteria, over a breadth of actual participation in culture-making by a large and representative population (Hadley and Belfiore 2018). Under these conditions, some people will *never* be able to obtain a share of this limited distribution, nor contribute. But perhaps the strongest argument in favour of a more universal distribution and contribution is that current distributions rest upon the weakest and most sociologically suspect of criteria – discriminatory selection based on competitive and ‘meritocratic’ attributions of ‘talent’ (and talent proxies). As we’ve seen, talent might well bear some mark of a ‘natural aptitude’ – but is best understood as misrecognised social advantage. If we judge current systems of merit-based selection to be a practice integral to the reproduction of social inequalities,¹⁴ then there is a progressive case for subjecting some or all public cultural work to a greater social sharing that disregards these socially dubious criteria of selection. Removing merit or talent-based selection and positing an alternative system of universal access and free cultural contribution by right, can help address the issue of artificial scarcity (by expanding the range of population provided with opportunities, even *without* a financial uplift, though doubtless one would be necessary), by removing discriminatory selection, and overriding the damaging effects of competition.

A question one might reasonably ask here is what of the exceptional individual? What of realising our own seemingly unique gifts and attributes? And what of the recognition and esteem we seek to bestow on others, in admiration of the magic of their talent? I would suggest under systems of universal contribution, there is no need to abandon the socially cherished idea of ‘talent.’ But it *could* be redefined. The positive connotations of talent can be retained in the scope of its progressive redefinition under the conspectus of some newly instantiated contributive norms. The right to contribute, and the social goods of contribution, provide the basis to produce art and culture, based on an ethical conception of the human as ‘active, creative and contributive.’ If we regard talent as part of our collective human capacity, rather than a singular or superior gift, and if everyone is regarded as having some kind of expressible talent and capacity to contribute (as, indeed, many liberal arbiters and supporters of selection by ‘natural ability’ so often claim), then maximising the widest possible opportunities for artistic talent to be publicly developed and expressed is a desirable social goal. When talent is viewed as socially enabled facility rather than a natural endowment, possessed only by the person, then the conditions of its genesis will come to re-determine its socially recognised qualities. Talent will still exist – but we will see it as a combination of personal attributes and social affordance; an emergent property of our social being, and in doing so recognise it not as the necessary basis for competitive discrimination or self-elevation – but a complex quality that both draws from and enhances the co-operative surplus. Furthermore, as research has shown, the more people participate and contributive *collectively* in cultural practices, then the more proficient and capable they become as cultural producers and the more ‘talent’ becomes visible in the individual (e.g. see Turino 2008). In short, when everyone contributes, everyone gains. And even if people turn out *not* to be especially proficient or skilled in arts and cultural production, they will still have contributed in the form of their efforts toward a collective enterprise of good and complex work designed to confer and enhance the total goods of society. They will have gained *and* contributed socially, even if they have no evident artistic or cultural skills of traditional kind. Questions of artistic

‘quality’ are also themselves laid open as determinants of value and worth become pluralised – good work is that which both enriches and enhances facility with an artistic or cultural practice but is also that which affords other skills and facilities generated by contribution to the shared labour of production. Universal contribution does not preclude the making of artistic quality or an aesthetic advance, and *lack* of artistic talent is no barrier to contributing to a common set of practices that not only enhance the prospects for social synchronicity, but, as I’ve argued, have the inbuilt potential to furnish a wide plurality of economic, cultural and political gains.

A system of universal distribution and contribution might therefore also address the systemic problem of *wasted* talent and unlock the untapped social goods of collective cultural contribution. Despite the existence of some well-established policy concerns about improving access to cultural jobs, there is usually very little concern for those people who try and fail to enter the cultural industries. Yet, this is not consistent with the principles of social justice, ethical recognition or public good, as previously outlined. We might reasonably ask, what are the potential *costs* to society of the cultural industries not having the existing capacity to absorb a wider constituency into its opportunity and reward structure? Or, rather, to put this in terms of our tripartite model of creative justice, what is potentially lost, not just economically, but culturally and politically, when socially disadvantaged (but willing and capable) people *en masse* are prevented or restricted from taking part in the cultural industries? What ‘meaningful worlds’ will we fail to afford or inhabit, under these restricted circumstances?

So, what if we imagined things differently? What if – in a hypothetically expanded settlement – people moved from being chance recipients of a limited distribution to engaged and active contributors in the production of our common cultural life? What if – *as a first step* – ‘meritorious’ selection and the competitive market ceased to be the means for allocating positions and rewards in the publicly-funded cultural sector? If opportunities and job roles in publicly-funded arts and culture were shared amongst a larger number of persons, and those positions themselves were also compensated by other means – such as a living cultural wage or some form of UBI – then both the number of positions and the means of their allocation could be opened to allow a more maximal social distribution *and* contribution. The provision of an equal opportunity – say, in the form of a post-16 national scheme of cultural contribution, a suite and programme of funded organisations and works, to be undertaken by all who would wish to for an initial time-limited (though potentially extendable) period, would provide the framework for universal contribution. This might be modelled as a kind of socially (and/or industrially oriented) cultural ‘apprenticeship’ or ‘citizenship’, or an ‘open university’ for the arts without entry qualification or discriminatory selection, and with indeterminate outcome. This would be geared not necessarily to supporting individual careers in arts and culture (though that may be one desirable end) but to more generally increasing and equalising the stock of ‘good’ and ‘meaningful’ cultural work opportunity, and reaping the attendant economic, cultural and political benefits of the enhanced commonwealth of a mass cultural contribution.

It is beyond the purpose or scope of this article to provide a list of ‘applied’ examples detailing how universal distribution and contribution might be occasioned and embedded in organisations. This is for others to discuss, or for other future works. But, indicatively, simply to help further concretise the concept, I will conclude by speculatively applying ideas of universal distribution and contribution to my earlier cited examples. What if BAFTA,¹⁵ the BBC and Arts Council England engaged publics and potential workers on fundamentally different, and *contributing* basis? What if the charitable role of BAFTA was to administrate the disbursement of its funds for training and projects in the film and televisual arts, organised as non-competitive exercises in participation and recognition for a maximal and representative sample of the national population? What if one of the BBC’s public service roles was to train (and employ) a maximally expanded number of journalists at an agreed fixed wage rather than narrowly supporting a restricted and internal economy of ‘stars’ who then compete to be paid at inflated rates? What if the role of the ACE was to radically expand its roster of client organisations and to commit them to distributing opportunity and

resources according to principles of equal abundance, participation by right and allocation through non-competition?

These suggestions might seem somewhat fanciful – but note that cultural production is one form of ‘complex’ labour it *is* quite possible to imagine as more equally and easily shared.¹⁶ Consider also that there is nothing in the history of the cultural industries that would suggest an opening up of opportunities to the widest population of contributors has a detrimental effect on quality, efficiency or the potential availability of material benefits and rewards – indeed, the weight of evidence would suggest *quite the opposite*. When opportunities to contribute to the mass production of culture have been radically expanded, this has led to an abundance of social gains (e.g. see Denning (2011) on the WPA in Roosevelt’s New Deal; Fisher (2014) on the gains of post-war ‘popular modernism’; Frith and Horne (1984) on the proto-genesis of the creative industries through the post-war public expansion of UK art schools; Worth (2019) on the activation of women’s educative creativity and social mobility during the ‘Long 1970s’; Jeffers and Moriarty (2017) on post-1960s community arts movements). These precedents might well prove useful in guiding future initiative.

I have argued that successful inclusion in cultural work must be premised on more universal and equal distributions but also on recognition of *contribution* as an innate right and value.¹⁷ There are, of course, many potential objections¹⁸ – and innumerable obstacles. Any movement in favour of contribution would likely require paradigmatic transformations in conceptual thinking, a resurgence of an egalitarian politics, a widespread redefinition of the remit and structure of public cultural organisations, and the implementation of some significant redistribution of public resources. And, of course, even if achieved, universal contribution would not immediately solve all the problems of creative injustice that are endemic to public arts and culture – though it may help to address them – and guarding against the establishment of any new or unforeseen axes of inequality would also be a priority. But when it comes to conceiving of ‘complex’ and ‘meaningful’ forms of work in culture, and the egalitarian possibilities afforded by sharing and expanding the collective undertaking of such work, then we need not let the perfect become the enemy of the good. We do not have to fully accept the idea that all cultural work opportunity is capable of being shared, or indeed should be shared, to recognise that even a limited conception of contributive justice might have progressive benefits for some forms of publicly funded cultural work. And if one still wanted to dismiss contributive justice as an obtuse concept distant from pragmatic realities then one would be ignoring its already existing centrality to conceptions of justice in other social contexts. This not only includes other kinds of workplace (think of our own endless academic disputes about whether colleagues are ‘pulling their weight’ or being given a ‘fair crack of the whip’), as well its fundamental importance for conceptions of justice in, say, the gender division of labour. Here, scholars have consistently shown that women traditionally confined to the domestic sphere were being denied opportunities to contribute to the more socially valued public sphere. Yet, even when ostensibly obtaining greater equality in the workplace, as they began to enter paid work and obtain better kinds of jobs, women continued to suffer the contributive injustice of having their public contributions devalued¹⁹ (e.g. see Sayer 2009, Fraser 2013). Feminists have long argued that women have a right to contribute to all areas of society *and* have that contribution appropriately recognised and weighed against other kinds of contributions. Contributive justice concerns tend in fact to infuse *all* group and organisational contexts where there is work to be done, and opportunities, recognition and reward to be distributed and obtained. Far from being an abstract or esoteric concern, contributive justice is central to how we conceive of, and seek to justify, the division of labour, in any given context.

Of course, in the publicly-funded (let alone the wholly commercial) cultural industries, even if justice of contribution *or* distribution both seem some way off, we should note that a prerequisite for ensuring ‘creative justice’ is maximal population *inclusion* – understood in its fullest and ideal sense. How to involve the widest array of persons who have the aspirations and abilities to undertake and contribute to the shared stock of cultural work, and how to ensure that, once in work, they are appropriately rewarded and able to obtain the respect, recognition and voice that is both their

right and due, must be of paramount concern for those who argue for social justice in the cultural workplace. Thus, to be genuinely inclusive is to create the social conditions that allow for a maximum distribution of opportunity and the maximum garnering of contributions, while minimising the possibility of people obtaining opportunities, jobs and rewards through established social privilege and undue discrimination. This would undoubtedly require making new and unforeseen connections between existing workplace conditions, policies and initiatives, and broader and emergent political struggles. However, I propose fundamentally that we should see this as a question of both distributive *and* contributive justice: a matter not just of what people are allowed to *get*, but also what people are allowed to *give*.

Notes

1. Opportunity in the form of, say, a commission or contract, job as in paid work, and resources that might be made available through such opportunities and jobs (e.g., grant, funding, pay, royalty, awards, prizes or prestige).
2. By this I mean UK arts and cultural funding provided by the state, usually distributed through the Department of Culture Media and Sport, local authorities, and entities such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, public broadcasters (BBC, Channel 4) and the national arts councils, to organisations (and individuals) often also funded in various supplementary ways by sponsorship, commercial activity, philanthropy etc.
3. Though of course there may be some real and absolute limits to any given resource, the *actual* provision of resource (such as public arts funding) at any point in time tends to be much less than is theoretically possible, despite routine political claims about its prevailing absolute scarcity.
4. Though, as noted, hard work discourse – like discourse of ‘luck’ – is often used as a mask to disavow social advantage (see Brook *et al.* 2020).
5. Talent is the primary value yet also expressed in diverse and varied terms; cultural selection relies heavily on judgments of a candidate’s ‘feel’, ‘gift’, ‘creativity’, ‘novelty’, ‘star quality’, ‘touch’, ‘genius’ ‘energy’, ‘charisma’ ‘fit’ or ‘it’ to name a few of talent’s synonymic guises.
6. The ability to judge if someone can sing in tune, perform a dance step, deliver a soliloquy etc. all in some sense rely on objective criteria; yet sociology has consistently revealed that objective skills or attributes are *never* the sole basis of a judgement of ‘talent’ (Howe *et al.* 1998).
7. Yet, ironically, there also remains widespread antipathy to any more direct or explicit forms of affirmative action – ones which might lead to more equal distribution of opportunity and reward – since these tend to be seen as antithetical to supposedly ‘fair’ competition.
8. For example, see Howe *et al.* (1998) and Turino (2008) on the social basis of ‘individual’ musical talent.
9. While distributive and contributive notions of justice are different, they are also quite closely related, and in some ways co-constitutive (see Gomberg 2007, pp. 150–151). Firstly, for example, without the distribution of some basic social and material necessities, people would be unable to contribute to society; contribution already relies on some pre-given social distribution. Similarly, without some pre-requisite labour of contribution (such as designing or manufacturing, conceiving or cultivating), goods cannot be generated and made available to distribute. There is further co-constitution because one might be said to socially ‘receive’ (or be distributed) the opportunity to contribute to an activity, just as the receipt of ‘distributed’ reward (such as wages, esteem or a sense of self-achievement) tends to rely on pre-given contribution (such as work, or some estimable effort).
10. While somewhat like the idea of ‘cultural participation’, the idea of ‘cultural contribution’ more strongly suggests an ‘added value’ – some additional direct or indirect benefit that might be more or less consciously cultivated or gained, other than that which might contingently be generated simply by being present and ‘taking part’.
11. Which work is ‘meaningful’ – and which is not – is difficult to define and is as at least to some degree relative. However, see Timmerman (2018) for a comprehensive attempt to define some of its possible characteristics and attributes.
12. These might be valued aesthetically, socially, economically; or according to their contribution to an expanded public or political sphere – schemes of value that might intersect or coalesce or be regarded as singular.
13. See Jeffers and Moriarty (2017) for a history of cultural democracy in the UK.
14. Hence why, as Bourdieu and Passeron noted, talent is perhaps best defined as ‘a negation of the social conditions of the production of cultivated dispositions’ (1977, p. 52).
15. Not publicly funded as such, but an independent charity, mostly funded by subscription and membership – but having a ‘public’, industry representative role and a strong education and training function.
16. Not only is cultural work less standardized and homogeneous than other occupations in terms of its required specialisation and training (there are many non-standard routes of entry, and untrained amateurs can thrive

alongside highly-trained professionals), but it also relatively open (if one discounts the acquired social advantages that currently over-determine selection) in terms of its material requirements of entry, since the most precious asset is seen to be a creative imagination or capacity for aesthetic expression. Labour sharing impacts on 'productivity' and 'efficiency' are likely to be less severe than in other more technical and specialised industrial sectors, since art and culture are not valued according to an industrial logic but an aesthetic one – the key labour input being expressive ideas, measured not in labour time but in symbolic value. Similarly, the costs of labour transfer or job rotation are likely to be less in the small arts and cultural enterprises and organisations which characterise the sector. Finally, as discussed, the actual division of labour is more a result of elite hoarding than an expression of actual differences in candidates' inherent ability or 'talent' and so any 'natural' division of labour objection does not hold.

17. There are resonances with current thinking on cultural 'capabilities' (see Wilson *et al.*, 2018) and cultural rights espoused in theories of cultural democracy (Jeffers and Moriarty 2017); this article is sympathetic to those approaches but insists on an equal recognition of contribution vis a vis distribution, and the value of foregrounding non-competitive allocations as primary.
18. Not least the likely impossibility of *wholly* eliminating scarcity – raising the possibility that some people will fail to secure an opportunity, in the last instance, or that there will be mismatches between desired and available cultural opportunity. In such cases *some* system of criteria-based selection might eventually be required – which would need to be made as egalitarian as possible and protect against meritocratic abuses. Though, again, we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.
19. While of course enduring the other contributive injustice of still having to do most of the domestic and unpaid labour in the home.

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