

Impact in and of the Academic Humanities: Lessons We Might Learn from a History of Public Cultural Policy in England

Dr Zoe Hope Bulaitis¹

¹ *zoe.bulaitis@manchester.ac.uk*

Research Associate, AHRC Creative Industries: Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC). 3.15 Mansfield Cooper Building, Division of Art History and Cultural Practices, School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL.

Relevant Conference Themes

- Specificities of SSH research and SSH research evaluation: Relation between knowledge production and assessment.
- Aspects of SSH research evaluation: Societal relevance; Effects of evaluation and performance-based funding on SSH research and researchers
- Approaches to SSH research evaluation: Alternative Metrics.

Paper Presentation Proposal

This paper addresses the rise of 'impact' within research assessment criteria by placing it within a historical context of cultural policymaking. The need for such an enquiry has never been greater, given the escalation of accountability metrics and the consequent demand for scholars to perform within such frameworks.

2010 to 2014 should be understood as a significant watershed in terms of the assessment of the value, or values, of higher education in England. Professor Regenia Gagnier describes how it was at this time that “traditional markers of academic distinction [were] overtaken by internally established criteria of worth [in] compliance or alignment with the University’s competitive drive in a global Higher Education market”. Since 2010 there has been an observable expansion in league tables and statistics, which attempted to categorize, evaluate, and substantiate the value of specific universities to the student-consumer. Alongside the quantification of the value of teaching and education, there is also the expansion of such calculable values within research assessment. The 2014 Research Excellence Framework criteria exemplified the prioritisation of research that offers a form of measurable public accountability. However general such a concept might seem, it nonetheless required a scale on which it could be measured: impact.

My paper explores the valuation of “impact” in the university within the longer debate concerning the social value of the arts. Specifically, I will argue that in drawing a parallel between debates in accountability within the creative industries in England, it is possible to map these emerging critiques from the humanities onto a broader history of cultural policy. I demonstrate that the fields of higher education and the creative industries are not distinct in terms of the challenges they face, and emphasise how communication across those engaged in

arts and humanities work, be that practical, managerial, or academic is vitally important for addressing the idea of meaningful research and social impact.

My paper uses policymaking in England as a case study, although the debates concerning the creative industries are important across Europe (and at an international as well as national level). I will first highlight a brief history of the economisation of the value of creative work under Margaret Thatcher and, secondly, address the emergence of the concept of the creative industries under New Labour Government led by Tony Blair during the 1990s. Finally, this paper also argues that in the present climate of policymaking -- which is overly focused on economic short-term ends -- to historicise is in itself political act. To historicise is to argue for contingencies and potential reform and to recognise that sometimes a policy decision has made mistakes.

This paper is a presentation of research I have published in the *Palgrave Communications* special issue on the “Future of Research Assessment”. To summarise, I will argue that the current decisions being made (and language used) in higher education policy has close ties to cultural policymaking approaches in public institutions (e.g. galleries, museums, cultural organisations); I will reveal the historical precedent behind the “impact” agenda within the wider cultural sphere; finally, I will assert that close rhetorical analysis of debates in arts management and museology provides a relevant framework with which to better engage with the emergent research assessment models concerning “impact” and meaningful external engagement within universities.

This paper raises awareness of the urgent need for humanities scholars to engage in these emerging discussions concerning the future of research assessment and cultural value.

Biography

Dr Zoe Hope Bulaitis is an early-career researcher exploring the value of the arts and humanities within the neoliberal university in the UK. Her work seeks to historicise and contextualise present moments of crisis (both monetary and imaginary) within broader cultural landscapes. Currently, Zoe is working as a Research Associate (Postdoc) in the Creative Industries: Policy and Evidence Centre within the School of Arts, Languages, and Cultures at the University of Manchester as a Postdoctoral Research Associate. This role is part of the wider AHRC Creative Clusters Programme.

She completed her PhD “Articulations of Value in the Humanities: The Contemporary Neoliberal University and Our Victorian Inheritance” at the University of Exeter (July 2018). Most recently, Zoe has been teaching Critical Theory and English Literature at the University of Birmingham and the University of Wolverhampton whilst also developing her forthcoming monograph which builds upon her doctoral research. She has most recently published her research in *Palgrave Communications* and *The Sociological Review*. Zoe’s research actively engages in the fields of visual and popular culture; higher education policy; and cultural and critical theory concerning notions of artistic and cultural value.

Key References

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