General

Professionalism and Creative Industry: The Demolition of Dutch Arts and Culture

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Column – October 1, 2013

What is the real motivation behind the Dutch government's increased efforts to reduce arts funding?

I used to be involved in Rotterdam's arts and culture scene. I was hired as a part-time producer in 2008, just as the Dutch Labour Party's (PVDA) Ronald Plasterk emerged as the Minister of Education, Culture and Science.

The austerity mantra

I was immediately startled by the lack of resistance among my colleagues against Plasterk's intention to foster "more entrepreneurship" in the arts in order to "increase public support for the arts".

Plasterk's euphemistic vocabulary amounted to the following: the rightwing political discourse has managed to successfully demonise the arts scene as a bunch of "lazy elites feeding on taxpayer's money". In order to appease voters they were going to reduce public funding incrementally, and , as a consequence, the relatively high level of autonomous creativity among Dutch artists.

I was unsuccessful in my attempts to convince my colleagues of the enormous potential danger of Plasterk's plans when I noted that "if we allow this to happen without a fight, it will eventually lead to a total dismantling of Dutch art and culture". They, however, seemed convinced by Plasterk's austerity mantra: "everybody has to pitch in during an economic crisis". This was, in no small way, due to the fact that many of them were long-time PVDA voters.

The first protests came late and were only organised in 2010. The fact that, by then, the conservative parties, the VVD and CDA, plus the extreme rightwing PVV as a "tolerating" partner in the coalition, were in power made the decision to protest somehow easier. But most of them continued to agree that austerity was necessary, and disagreed only on the degree of the measures.

Political economy

Public expenditure on the arts has never been more than 0.4% of Dutch GDP. Even if the austerity argument was legitimate, which it is not, the unprecedented cutbacks in public arts and culture funding are totally irrelevant – at least from a purely economic perspective, in any case.

So, what is the real motivation behind the Dutch government's increased efforts to reduce arts funding? Minister Plasterk, during his first austerity measures proposed in 2007, was already convinced that the cultural sector needed "to professionalise".

Mainstream analyses of these neoliberal Orwellianisms are difficult to find. While the need "to professionalise", from a neoliberal perspective, simply means that the powers that be consider publicly funded, autonomous culture to be at a serious disadvantage, primarily because it does not serve corporate interests, is often critical of the status quo and can be readily utilised for social protest purposes.

While the neoliberal cocktail of austerity plus the supposed hegemony of the "free market" is accepted by pretty much the entire spectrum of mainstream politics, that same argument is seldom made in the realm of the gigantic and ever-expanding welfare state that exists for corporations and the rich.

For instance, privatisation efforts coupled with cutbacks in health care, social security, education and the arts continue to be legitimised by this neoliberal cocktail. Meanwhile, in 2010, the Dutch government increased its coverage of state-funded export-credit insurance policies (*exportkredietverzekering*) because it seems that this corporate insurance could not survive for very long in the realm of the "omnipotent free market".

Top sector

A core feature of neoliberalism that is often ignored is – ironically enough – the ever-expanding socialisation of costs and increased privatisation of profits. The Dutch state covers the costs and risks of research and development in various “top sectors“ and related government agencies, and also offers many other indirect subsidies and tax cuts. When an invention or other publicly funded development turns out to be useful or profitable it is never offered to the taxpayers who actually paid for it, but is instead handed over to the private sector.

Current Dutch neoliberal policy dictates that the arts become increasingly “innovative”, or, in other words, useful to corporate interests. To accomplish this goal, the Dutch government not only continues to cut arts funding but has also added the “creative industry” to the aforementioned list of top sectors.

For example, the government recently provided €7.7 million to this so-called “creative industry” to "stimulate both research and improve the synergy between the (scientific) knowledge of artists and designers and the private sector". In other words, artists and designers are now only funded when they channel their creativity through corporate interests. Meanwhile, artists who prefer autonomous art that may be critical of the status quo are increasingly marginalised.

The neoliberal discourse continually misrepresents the “high costs” of welfare for the poor and artists, while the much higher costs of corporate welfare continue to go unmentioned. In short, if politicians were sincere about their “free market” ideology they would immediately abolish the huge direct and indirect private-sector subsidies.

Slow suicide

Most of the current criticism tends to succumb to the neoliberal “necessary austerity” mantra with, as a consequence, the continued demolition of autonomous art in the Netherlands with very little resistance. History tells us that the only way to reverse this enforced transformation of artists into creative corporate cogs is the formation of a broad coalition with other segments of society that have become the victims of neoliberalism.

To accomplish this, however, requires taking an initial step of (self) education regarding the nature of neoliberal economic policy, which is responsible for the dismantling of the welfare state. Our continued operation within the current narrow spectrum of public debate that only argues about the degree of the cutbacks will inevitably lead to a slow suicide.

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Art Discourse, Capitalism, Democracy, Money

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