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Contemporary Theatre ‘Philanthropy’ and the Purchase of Participatory Privilege

Adam Alston and Rebecca Daker

Prometheus may well have been the first philanthropist. Zeus had taken fire from humankind and Prometheus risked life and limb by scaling Mount Olympus to give it back. Stealing fire from the gods for the benefit of others evidences *philanthrōpos*, a Greek term meaning ‘love for humanity’, which comprises the root of our contemporary parlance, *philanthropy*. It is easy to see why Karl Marx was a fan of Prometheus, the Robin Hood revolutionary. For many of our contemporary philanthropists, however, the model is flipped: Zeus, the new philanthropist, remains power-broker, a power-broker whose humanitarian image ends up constituting that position of power.

This brief article looks at the ramifications of private and corporate philanthropy having become institutionalised in the policy of Arts Council England – although couched in the rhetoric of mixed economic funding – and in the fund-raising strategies of theatres themselves (perhaps as a consequence). Philanthropic giving frequently comes with strings attached, strings tied to a much wider system of power. This, in itself, may seem a tired complaint: patronage of various kinds has been a fact of artistic life for centuries. But perhaps this complaint seems a little less tired once we ask how ‘philanthrocapitalism’ might be trickling through into arts funding policy, particularly in the light of the heritage from which this trickling stems. And what of the recent, but dumped plans of the current coalition government to cap philanthropic giving?

The relationship between Shell and the National Theatre seems a far cry from that between the Medici dynasty and the luminaries of the Florentine Renaissance, where the stark binary of public and private finance simply did not exist and art and artists were there to be purchased, to serve and further glorify the ruling elite. But is this servicing and purchasing now obsolete? Of course, the answer is no. For example, respect by association is among the most obvious reasons why corporate giving takes place, particularly for an oil company like Shell looking to clean up its image, if nothing else. However, we, the authors, contend that philanthropic giving is becoming increasingly innovative and effective at masking, or perhaps palliatively rendering the accumulation of vast sums more palatable to those for whom the power to give effectively is not an option.

The point of what follows is not to vilify those at either end of the funding stream, those

philanthropists giving and arts organisations and theatre makers, particularly, receiving money; rather, it is to underline the compromises of a funding system which proffers the illusion (which can have very real consequences for those making and receiving theatre) of *necessity*. Not only this, it is to maintain the importance of debate concerning the role of government intervention in the distribution and re-distribution of financial capital in the context of arts funding. Inevitably, such debate concerns the most basic and central assumptions about the political spectrum which, we believe, is rarely without want of re-assessment.

Shell's relationship with The National was satirised in 2008 by a spoof press release produced by activist collective Art Not Oil, a release which falsely claimed to come from the National Theatre, in which the artistic director Nicholas Hytner appeared to justify a long-standing relationship with Shell: 'We hope this production of *Oedipus* [...] – as well as stimulating, shocking and moving audiences – will help open up a space where we can talk about the role that oil, and oil companies, play in maintaining a western way of life that appears to be having toxic impacts across the board'.¹ This satirical action enraged the theatre, who demanded that Art Not Oil withdraw the release. And who can blame them for their desperation to protect a financial relationship on which they had come to depend? But dependency comes in handy for corporate funders when a major national institution does all it can to defend a vital funding stream, or potentially face financial straits. Such defence suggests not only that the funding stream is worth defending, but, by extension, that the funder is worth defending, and having an institution like the National jumping to defend an institution like Shell reflects well on the latter. This is not necessarily to point the finger of blame at the National: if the institution finds itself financially short of the mark required to mount a production then, one assumes, the money needs to be raised. At the same time, particularly for critics sceptical either of corporate funding generally, or Shell's funding in particular, this defence can still be seen to put the National in the critical firing line. The respect by association which, arguably, is sought by Shell, finds its counterpart in a more toxic kind of contagion as the National, perhaps unintentionally, implicates itself within a much wider financial network with a different set of working, ethical and, of course, environmental practices. There is no easy answer to this problem, particularly where such a large institution is concerned (a point often overlooked by smaller companies and organisations which might be described as 'ethically' minded). What it does call for, however, is structural pressure: attempts, such as this, however small, to encourage re-

1 Tabard, 'Chit chat – Hytner, miss or maybe an attack?', *The Stage*, 20 October 2008, <<http://www.thestage.co.uk/features/feature.php/22157/chit-chat-hytner-miss-or-maybe-an-attack->> [accessed 11 June 2012] (para 5 of 7).

evaluation of the financial structures currently in play which promote what might be interpreted as the dependency of theatre and other arts organisations to seek the market as a friend.

What structural influences might have prompted this kind of dependency? The privatisation of arts funding has been evolving into its current form for at least the last sixty years, but most prominently (in the UK, at least) since the 1980s. The indices of this evolutionary trend can be found in a number of governmental innovations, most notably in the Thatcher administration's introduction of a Business Sponsorship Incentive Scheme in 1984, the introduction of Private Finance Initiatives under John Major's leadership in the early 1990s and, under New Labour (despite the New Labourites condemnation of PFIs), through Private-Public Partnerships.² These New-Speak flourishes all signal a shared faith in 'mixed economic funding', a faith intended to encourage businesses to give to the arts, thus enhancing public funding and supposedly giving both the state and philanthropic organisation 'more bang for its buck'. What set the private and corporate giving of the 1980s apart from previous ages of philanthropy was arguably the extent to which theatre was expected to draw its strategies and methodologies from commercial enterprise, encouraged by top-down government funding initiatives. Value for money was the new impetus for a subsidised art industry.³ Art was seen as a means to the end of fulfilling a bigger socio-economic vision; not only that, but business became a constitutive part not just of that vision, but of the 'sustainability' of the arts.

Despite the above, one might assume that the rise to power of New Labour in 1997 would mark a change of direction. However, in 'New Labour's Double Shuffle',⁴ Stuart Hall suggests that neoliberal ideology remained a determining force in New Labour's political, economic and cultural policy. Firstly, he discusses New Labour's promotion of 'the businessman' and 'entrepreneur' as principal social role models. Secondly, he comments on how terms like 'efficiency' and 'modernisation' were employed to justify such shifts. *Choices* in policy making were consequently shrouded as *necessary means* to more 'efficient' ends in the running of formerly public assets, effected through New Labour's promotion of and reward for 'entrepreneurial subjects', placing the needs and wants of the individual over and above those of a group or 'people'. The point of drawing on this much-discussed observation is to highlight what we hope is emerging as a clear trajectory which was not some radical new vision, but a continuation of a process which both pre-

2 Wu, Chin-Tao, *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention Since the 1980s*, (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 62-63 and p. 278.

3 Kershaw, Baz, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 43.

4 Stuart Hall, 'New Labour's Double Shuffle', *Soundings*, 24 (July 2003), pp. 10-24

dates and, as we shall see, continues on into the operations of contemporary arts funding streams. The kind of rhetoric employed by New Labour, however, marks particularly clearly what we're dealing with here: a potential mapping onto the stated mission of 'philanthrocapitalism', as embraced by Bill and Melinda Gates and many others. What remains to be demonstrated, of course, is how this particular 'Double Shuffle' bears specific relevance to our discussion of arts funding, or, indeed, of philanthrocapitalism.

Philanthrocapitalists suggest that wealth should be re-distributed by wealthy individuals and businesses for the improvement of society. Using existing business models, philanthropic donations are approached as an investment to better the world. Matthew Bishop and Michael Green comment on the philanthrocapitalist deployment of business rhetoric, such as getting more 'bang for your buck', achieving leverage, being impact oriented and strategic in giving. They expose readers to a number of neologisms which have emerged in philanthrocapitalist discourse, such as 'venture philanthropy', 'philanthpreneurs' and 'social entrepreneurs who [harness] the profit motive to achieve social good'.⁵ For its proponents, this promises superior solutions to those offered by the public sector by exorcising bureaucratic manhandling. For New Labour, the Tory governments which preceded them and, as we shall see, with the coalition which followed, such championing of the entrepreneurial subject is laudable.

Slavoj Žižek, on the other hand, recognises that to donate vast sums, you have to have vast sums in the first place,⁶ and perpetual reinvestment in the continuation of this process simply serves to perpetuate the problems philanthrocapitalism claims to address. Social responsibility ends up as the concern of the private sector, rendering that sector *seemingly* all the more necessary by virtue of its Promethean image. But, as Marx taught us and as the dictum of the Humanities bewails, an image does not always correlate to the material circumstances from which it emerges.

To apply philanthrocapitalism to the arts, rather than to sanitation projects or vaccination programs in developing countries, is risky. The privatisation of theatre funding may not amount to philanthrocapitalism, but that is not to say that New Labour's 'entrepreneurial subject' does not remain in the arts funding driving seat. As Michael Edwards suggests, if philanthrocapitalists are to apply business models to arts funding, that funding should, according to the philanthrocapitalist ethic, bear the responsibility of creating a better world.

5 Matthew Bishop and Michael Green, *Philanthrocapitalism: how the rich can save the world*, (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), p.6

6 Slavoj Žižek, 'Nobody has to be vile', *London Review of Books* (Vol. 28 No. 7, 6 April 2006) <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n07/slavoj-zizek/nobody-has-to-be-vile> [accessed 25 April 2012]

Consequently, we find ourselves in the thick of one of the central debates of political aesthetics – namely, whether the role of art is to effect social change or answer to some alternative purpose. If private and corporate investors fund the arts, it can signal several things: disinterested giving (a factor which ought not to be overlooked or bypassed as some kind of impossibility), self-promotion through, for instance, respect by association, or, worryingly, instrumentalism. The injection of large amounts of corporate and private investment into the arts may evidence attempts to address socio-economic problems such as crime, social exclusion, unemployment or even ill health. In this sense, we might speak of ‘instrumentalising instrumentalism’, capitalising on, by investing in, art geared towards an instrumentalist agenda. This is a typically philanthrocapitalist ideal. Such investment feeds back into respect by association, as well as turning economic capital into political clout via cultural capital. An example here would be the urban regeneration motive underlying a project like the Royal Court’s Theatre Local programme, a local outreach initiative funded by Bloomberg.⁷ The notion of applying business models to arts funding to make money ‘work harder’ in social investment is quintessentially New-Labourite; and this form of double shuffle, *one still underlying ACE policy*, is philanthrocapitalist.

There is much to be admired in the philanthrocapitalist ethic: seeking leverage through rigorous philanthropic investment is surely a good thing. What’s more, the significant majority of artists need money to make the kind of work that they believe might be innovative or, in whatever way it may be, of some kind of worth, significance or value either to the abstract notion of ‘art’ as a practice and discipline, or to an individual, group or society. If the state, in its current austerity drive, has little money to give, then philanthrocapitalists may provide relief. However, unlike the selfless Prometheus, philanthrocapitalists can bask in the glory of returning bright lights to humankind, lights spelling out the investor’s name as do-gooder and humanitarian, whilst the acts of plutocratic capital accumulation which got them there appear outweighed. This is illustrated not only by Arts Council England’s current drive towards the privatisation of arts funding while claiming the goal of ‘Great Art for Everyone’,⁸ but by theatres themselves in the

7 Bloomberg are framed as a ‘cutting edge communications company’ which ‘champions innovation’ and ‘arts initiatives that burst beyond the four walls of theatres and galleries, taking the excitement of theatre and art further out into the community’. This assumes that there is a community which, otherwise, is excluded (which may well be the case, but not by necessity) and which, given the nature of Theatre Local, is attributed locally to catchment audiences within specific locations (as opposed to the more obvious financial restrictions of attending theatre). ‘Bloomberg Supports Theatre Local’, *Royalcourtheatre.com* <<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/support-us/our-supporters/theatre-local/>> [accessed 11 June 2012] (para 1 of 2).

8 ‘Achieving great art for everyone’ (London: ACE, 2010).

philanthrocapitalist vocabulary they use to attract corporate sponsors. For instance, the Hampstead Theatre's funding agenda attempts to woo potential sponsors as follows: 'Do you need to build brand awareness within a hard-to-reach, high net worth demographic? Would you like to encourage creative and expansive thinking among your clients, colleagues and partners? If so, then support Hampstead Theatre and enhance your company's profile'.⁹ The additional (and potential) reward for high investment? Branded foyers, programmes and hosted events, seamlessly blending financial, social and cultural investment. It goes beyond the age-old relationship between art and sponsor and into the ideological territory of philanthrocapitalism – making investments rather than donations, whereby wealth purchases cultural capital in pursuit of a brighter future and an admirable image. Whilst an admirable image has always been the preserve of donors, the metamorphosis of savvy financial investment in arts funding into cultural capital can, by means of a humanitarian image, pay financial dividends once the boost of cultural capital reflects well on the company. Quite simply, it makes good capitalist sense. And, of course, let's not forget that 'high net worth demographic'. 'Seek the market as a friend' – so runs the dictum of Third Way politicians, neoliberals and philanthrocapitalists.

The rise of institutionalised private and corporate giving in Arts Council policy arguably reached an apex under the current coalition government following publication of *Achieving Great Art for Everyone* in 2010. One of the most notable characteristics of this publication is an unabashed privatisation of arts funding through mixed economic models; it might be noted that these models are likely to end up lopsided, leaning more towards the so-called self-sustaining. Where the ideological turn in Arts Council funding under Thatcherism functioned as a prime mover for shifting disciplinary dynamics from the artistic sphere to the economic, ACE is now taking this shift as a point of departure. Somewhat inevitably, the steady shifts towards the private sphere instituted at the level of government have found their home in ACE funding policy. A culture of need develops, and the Zeus-like philanthropist is there, at hand, ready to return the fire which keeps the artistic sphere alight as an innovative system of cultural production which sees itself not only as dependent, but thankful. Fear of obsolescence bubbles among those caught in the web of cultural production, obsolescence characterised by financial insecurity and justified by the seemingly necessary.

So what's at stake here? The purchase of privilege, respect by association and the stoking and

⁹ 'Corporate Support', *Hampsteadtheatre.com*, <<http://www.hampsteadtheatre.com/support-us/corporate-support/>> [accessed 6 May 2012] (para 2 of 4).

maintenance of a shift towards plutocracy: the wealthy call the shots. And the context today? Here unfolds the crux of the matter, and one which may not seem palatable, not least for the idealism which, admittedly, underlies the argument to follow. It seems that the coalition have been caught in the act in recent months as performing a 'double shuffle' of their own. On the one hand, as a consequence of the austerity drive, they are institutionalising the arts' reliance on mixed funding models which promote both corporate investment and private philanthropy; on the other, somewhat controversially, they have looked to reassess tax breaks for philanthropists – having proposed a cap on tax relief which was to be set at 25% of income or £50,000, whichever was higher – after recognising the extent to which charitable giving can drive down income tax for top-level earners. On 31 May 2012, however, George Osborne announced the latest in a series of budgetary U-turns in scrapping plans to impose the cap on charitable donations. One consequence of this is to help preserve an economic system which may not mean that top-earners *directly* profit from giving, but nonetheless allows them to substantially reduce income tax and consequently take control from the state regarding how their money is spent (the philanthrocapitalist ideal), thus acquiring a degree of power unavailable to the majority of tax payers. Interestingly, the coalition's rejected plan for the introduction of a philanthropy cap would have decreased the capacity of those top earners to distribute cash of their own accord whilst increasing the capacity of the state to do so.

The U-turn followed claims that the imposition of a cap on philanthropy would put the final nail in the coffin of struggling charities. However, the continued absence of a cap, while on the face of it beneficial to charities, still supports the spirit of entrepreneurship propagated in Third Way politics and serves to maintain a culture of dependency which has shifted from the state as arbiter to both private and corporate givers. As a closing provocation, the left might wish to re-think its criticisms of the coalition's intended cap on philanthropic giving.¹⁰ The cap would have marked a turn away from the cult of entrepreneurship championed under both Thatcher and Third Way politics, and mean more income tax for the government to distribute not just to the arts, but to a host of public services and institutions. The intended philanthropy cap would have marked a step towards undermining plutocracy. Maintaining the contradiction espoused by a government championing mixed economic funding on the one hand, and a philanthropy cap on the other, would not be healthy. What is more, the assumption that that government would follow up on the increases in

¹⁰ Both Tony Blair and Ed Miliband have, unsurprisingly given their third Way heritage, supported scrapping the philanthropy cap.

capital afforded by retrieved income tax with democratic and socially responsible policy-making may be impossibly idealistic. However, it may at least have offered hope of an erosion – albeit an unintentional one – of the hegemonic dominance of Third Way politics. What remains is an appeal: an appeal to re-consider how a philanthropy cap might function in the context of more sweeping policy changes, particularly with regard to the perplexing problem of an inherited and unsustainable funding structure where the wealthy call the shots under the guise of mixed economy.