

The Arts and the State in Times of Crisis:  
The Prospect of a New WPA



A transatlantic conversation between  
Arlene Goldbard and François Matarasso

First Edition 6 October 2020

# The Arts and the State in Times of Crisis: The Prospect of a New WPA

Authors' note	3
1. Who cares about an old government program?	5
2. What values shape our thinking?	7
3. the U.S. in the 1930s: The WPA	11
4. The U.K. in the 1940s: ENSA & CEMA	18
5. The U.S. in the 1970s: CETA	25
6. The UK in the 1980s: MSC and the Community programme	31
7. What made public service employment successful – or not?	34
8. Where to now?	39
Resources	45

# Authors' note

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on countless lives, bringing death, grief and fear. In an unequal world, its impact has been very unequal. Artists, most of whom are not high earners, are among those whose ability to work has been arrested in mid-flight. [The Musicians' Union reports](#) that 34% of its members are considering abandoning their careers altogether, while artists in other fields face similar existential threats. It's not surprising, in this context, that many in the arts are calling on governments to support the cultural sector, or that some look back, perhaps with rose-tinted spectacles, to times when public employment programs gave such a boost to the arts.

- [UK gallery curator calls for public art project in response to Covid-19](#) (Hans-Ulrich Obrist), The Guardian 30 March 2020
- [We need a New Deal to save the arts](#). Here's how it should work, by Annabel Turpin and Gavin Barlow Prospect June 30, 2020
- [How will Chicago artists make it through the pandemic? 85 years ago the Feds had an answer. Could it work again?](#) Christopher Borrelli, Chicago Tribune, 15 July 2020,

Most famous of these is the Works Progress Administration established in the USA as part of the 1930s New Deal, but there are other examples including the War Artists' Advisory Committee in the 1940s, CETA in the 1970s and the Community Programme in the 1980s. And that is just the experience of Britain and America.

We have been talking throughout this crisis, about community art, cultural democracy, and array of threats to much that we both hold dear. We share experiences and values, but our different perspectives – North American and European – can be unexpectedly illuminating. Naturally enough, since we have both written and thought much about the state and the arts, those past experiences have been part of our conversations (as they have been part of our working lives). Given the interest in past employment programs, and the urgent need for real world help, we decided to share some of our thinking through our respective blogs.

This text is the result. It is a conversation between two community artists (even if they each have slightly different ideas of what that identity means). We've tried to preserve the tone of our exchanges, even as we tidied them up to be more readable, because we are speaking here from our experience and beliefs. This is not an academic treatise on the

WPA, the Arts Council or CETA: it's a record of what we know (or some of it) and what we think and feel about that. And some of it – CETA and the Community Programme – is what we knew at first hand, because we were there, learning to make art with people in that context.

We specifically don't want to tell others, especially the young generation whose future in the arts is now so fragile, what to think or do. The solutions to our present problems will be found only in social solidarity, mutual aid, and generosity of spirit. We don't have the answers – which is why the text ends inconclusively – but we are willing to share what we know with other, like-minded people.

This first edition will be published between 29 September and 6 October 2020, in the lead up to a transatlantic Zoom conversation we will host then. We will probably revisit it after that and we invite anyone with an interest to let us have corrections or additions.

Arlene Goldbard  
<https://arlenegoldbard.com>  
email

François Matarasso  
<https://arestlessart.com>  
email

## 1. WHO CARES ABOUT AN OLD GOVERNMENT PROGRAM?

---

*Gentlemen, he said [...] Eden is burning, either brace yourself for elimination  
Or else your hearts must have the courage for the changing of the guards*

Bob Dylan

**Arlene** Why are we so interested in the WPA ([Works Progress Administration](#)), and all of these other public service employment programs right now?

The answers may be a bit different from a US or a European perspective. My specific reason would go back around 50 years. If you graphed it, it would have these little peaks that were political opportunities to make something like this real again. There was a peak in the early 70s in the US with the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) one of the programs we'll talk about. At that time, many community artists of my generation began to learn about the WPA, the Works Progress Administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, another program we'll discuss.

Then there was a lull of several decades. The last time I got really excited about this was in 2008 when Obama was elected and people thought he would support a new WPA, but we were mistaken. And the latest peak is right now because we have **an election coming up** which the Democrats might win. If so, they will have to do a lot of things to revive the economy and reweave social fabric. To myself and other advocates this seems like a natural, especially because unemployment in the United States is at a level now equal to what it was in the Great Depression, which spurred the first public service employment programs in this country. So those are my two immediate causes for being interested now.

**François** For me, the immediate sphere is the pandemic and the sense that **this changes everything**. It also goes back to 2008, which I saw as the point at which anyone with any real honesty would see that the neoliberal economic model is unsustainable because it failed in its own terms. The policies that had been in place since Reagan and Thatcher had comprehensively failed. Unhappily, most of the political effort after that collapse was to put the train back on the tracks: it would just limp a few miles further down the track to the bigger political crisis we have gone through since, not just in the US and UK, but in Turkey, Hungary, India, Brazil, the Philippines and elsewhere.

The **implosion of neoliberalism** and the threat to the planet are now factors of fundamental instability. I am concerned about what new order could emerge, and how much suffering could happen in the period of relative anarchy that intervenes between periods of relative stability. Maybe we're living through a version of the 1970s, or we might be living through a version of the 1930s, both moments when the existing settlement crumbled and was replaced with another one.

So my specific reason for thinking about this now is twofold. One is that everyone's talking about it in the art world because there's an immediate crisis and the existing economic model for how the arts operate has come off the rails exactly like the neoliberal economy did in 2008. That's the arts world-specific reason. The bigger reason is how do we live? Not just the arts world: how do we all live in a world with **finite and polluted resources**, growing injustice and inequality, and a broken down economic and political system?



San Sebastian, Spain, February 2020 (F. Matarasso)

## 2. WHAT VALUES SHAPE OUR THINKING?

---

**François** We both agree that whatever answers our societies come up with, they must be rooted in a universal approach. They can't be for a special interest, whether that special interest group is artists or miners or farmers or whatever, because if you prioritize one special interest, you end up disadvantaging others. The other problem is that we live in an interdependent world, and I have yet to see a valid basis for determining that one human being is more valuable than another human being. Their actions can have different values. Some people's work as an ecologist, or a surgeon, or a philosopher or a visionary leader may be exceptional and benefit many, but people themselves are of equal value. That's what I meant when I wrote in *A Restless Art* that **artists aren't a special kind of people**, they're people who do a special kind of thing. We are faced with fundamental human challenges and solving the problems of only some people doesn't help – it creates new divisions.

**Arlene** I don't disagree with anything you're saying, but your reasons are more philosophical values-based. In US society, I have a really practical reason which trumps everything for me: I can't imagine how to successfully get what we need passed into law just for artists. There's not enough of us and we don't have enough political power. From that perspective, **reality forces universalism**.

And to me, it's right on time, because this is a good moment in the history of art and artists for people to recognize that that specialness was created in a certain historical context for certain reasons and is being lived out in an evolving historical context. It makes even less sense in some ways than it did before. Way back when I first started organizing with artists, I would give this talk where my metaphor for the artist was Sleeping Beauty, because your social role was to repose beautifully and wait for the prince—the dealer or the funder or whoever—to give you the kiss that awakens you into life. It was a weird exchange system because you got to be gifted with all this specialness, but in exchange you had to be passive and patient. Maybe it's timely for artists to finally recognize themselves as workers.

The second point goes to my own core social values: to understand **social goods versus market-driven goods**. Here in America, we have a front seat on the commercialization of absolutely everything—the privatization of air and water and everything. We're definitely the lead villains on that story, although obviously not the only

ones. There's been this constant erosion since the Reagan era. So now we've had 40 years of the idea that there aren't any social goods at all. As we talk, Trump is allowing drilling in the Alaska wilderness, so there isn't anything that can't be a profit center. The belief that we have a responsibility to nurture and support our **commonwealth** is practically gone here. I don't understand how we'll make any progress without reversing that. The wicked problems that we have in this country cannot be solved by profit-driven companies.

We have to raise this question of what are social goods. Yes, it goes to fundamentals like air and water and power, which are already privatized here, but it also goes to collective acts of culture-making and culture-bearing, which are essential to create a society out of a crowd. That takes me to a place where most of the cultural policy ideas I espouse are about **watering the roots**, like providing space and materials and training, for example, rather than purchasing finished works or even designating specific artists. Something like a WPA, which is public service employment, makes the point that labor can be a social good and calls on you to define when that's true.

#### François

I agree with you on the fundamental issue about valuing social goods and rolling back from the privatization of so much. One of my criticisms of the art world is that certain parts of it, including the publicly funded art world, got drawn into that neoliberal way of working in the last 40 years. Salaries went up hugely for curators, theatre directors and other cultural leaders, along with the profession's self-image and expectations. Without romanticizing, in the 1970s I think most people who worked in culture institutions had a different sense of public service.

The veneer, the rhetoric, the language of that remains, but it gets muddled up into some ideas that I find dangerous, including the idea that culture (always as defined by the person making the claim) is an intrinsic good. A lot of the arguments that I've heard since the pandemic hit—about why art needs protecting, why artists need protecting, why theatres, concert halls and orchestras need protecting—stand on this fundamental but not well thought-through idea that the European culture invented in the late 18th century is a good in itself.

But culture is a power. All culture expresses values—and those values can be oppressive, hostile, and toxic. In cultural terms, I think we are starting to move from a world in which art's purpose was the production of cultural goods, to one where the **production of cultural activity** may be seen to be more valid, more interesting. That's what I think it means when you say cultural experiences enable people to come together to become communities. But I don't know how we can claim culture as a public good without perpetuating an unsustainable belief that culture is somehow in itself good. And that has often been oppressive because it says, you're not good enough because you don't have these tastes, this knowledge, this education.





Opera on Skegness Beach, 2009 (F. Matarasso)

**Arlene** There's no question that culture just *is*: it isn't good, it isn't bad. You know, when I'm talking about our commonwealth and social goods, I'm talking about things with some kind of social benefit. What I think we can say is good in the cultural realm is access, opportunity, and awareness. For example, the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) states that everyone has the right to freely participate in culture and the arts. The social good is implementing that right, as UNESCO Director-General Rene Mahu said in 1970:

*"It is not certain that the full significance of this text, proclaiming a new human right, the right to culture, was entirely appreciated at the time. If everyone, as an essential part of his dignity as a man [sic], has the right to share in the cultural heritage and cultural activities of the community—or rather of the different communities to which men belong (and that of course includes the ultimate community—mankind)—it follows that the authorities responsible for these communities have a duty, so far as their resources permit, to provide him with the means for such participation."*

When that right was articulated, we had no idea what it would take to make it real. And it still isn't real, right? So that's the social good: to provide the means and remove the impediments. And that takes a lot of money.

**François** Yes, and for me, it connects with the capabilities approach – the 10 capabilities that Martha Nussbaum writes about in her [Creating Capabilities](#). They include life, bodily health and integrity, senses, imagination, and thought, play—and artistic speech is part of

that in Nussbaum's analysis. Still, though I share your vision of culture, we have to accept that it is values-driven; it's not neutral. So much of art discourse pretends that art is a neutral good. We're standing up for a set of values, rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the capabilities approach, that say **it is a public good to enable people to fulfil their potential**. As human beings, that's the public good and culture has a powerful place in enabling people to fulfil their potential as individuals and as social, interdependent human beings.

**Arlene** I buy that, but for me it's not sufficient. It speaks first of the individual, and that is foundational. But the second level is that art nourishes culture, it creates the fabric of communication, interaction, celebration, and commemoration—all those things that make societies livable. Without them, there'd be a lot less reason to not just be the war of each against all. So culture incorporates individual capabilities, and can help create **loving, just, and humane societies**. Art doesn't intrinsically do that because as you say, there's Nazi art, but it can.

**François** This is important, but it doesn't often get acknowledged in the art world.

**Arlene** There's an inhibition, I think, a feeling of not wanting to poke the beast, not wanting to offend the powers-that-be in the art world by questioning their assumptions. There's the hope that if you find just the right way to express yourself, resources will start flowing. That relates to the question of what defines success. What defines success for us is implicit in what we were saying about social benefit, right?

**François** Yes, success in our terms implies responses that are universal, rather than specific to any sector such as the arts, and produce social benefit through common goods. And that respond to the environmental, political, economic, and social crises that threaten and divide us.

### 3. THE U.S. IN THE 1930S: THE WPA

---



Dorothea Lange, 'Migrant agricultural worker's family', 1936 [Farm Security Administration](#)

**Arlene**

The WPA ([Works Progress Administration](#)) was a massive relief program that was created in 1935 by the federal government in the United States in response to the Great Depression, where unemployment hit levels unequalled until today in America. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president. He was a progressive guy. There was a worldwide depression, but what that looked like in America is familiar to people who've seen Charlie Chaplin movies or images of people queuing all day for bread. It was a true depression, so the cost of goods was deflated, everything was very cheap, but people had no money so they still couldn't buy the necessities of life.

The idea was to have **a big federal intervention that provided relief of some kind**. They could have thought of it as welfare: you apply and you get a payment, you go about your life, try to find work. But these programs took a different tack: let's do things that need doing in this country, the important work for the public good that isn't getting done because nobody has the money. But the programs weren't just for artists. So, for example, one of the fondly remembered aspects of the WPA was the CCC, the [Civilian](#)

[Conservation Corps](#), in which men and boys were employed doing infrastructure projects, including building parks and amphitheaters that still exist in the United States. It's a model that had a lot of resonance in the 1970s; in fact, California started its [California Conservation Corps](#) and it was seen as an amazing opportunity for kids who might otherwise be caught in the school-to-prison pipeline.

There were agricultural supports for farmers, engineering and construction programs, and much more. It was massive and covered a lot of territory. Different aspects were administered differently, reflecting culturally-embedded attitudes. The agricultural program is often held up as an example of discrimination against black people, because most of the farmers that got help were white. A lot of people trace to this time, and to the public programs that followed the WPA, the persistent disparity in wealth between black and white households.

**The cultural aspect of the WPA is the best-known**, partly because it generated so many images and artifacts. People have seen the posters, the post office murals, etc. But it was also known because arts and cultural initiatives are about communicating. So as opposed to all the non-arts programs where photographers such as [Dorothea Lange](#) worked for the agricultural administration documenting Dustbowl farmers and their migration, many of the other programs weren't as well-documented, so people weren't that conversant with them. If you say WPA, most people who have heard of it will think of the art programs first.



"Industries of Lewis County" **Kenneth Callahan**, 1938, Centralia, [Washington main post office](#)

I direct folks to [a very old website](#) that has a summary of the WPA art programs, which collectively went by the name **Federal One**. The five divisions were: Federal Arts Project, Federal Music Project, Federal Theatre Project, Federal Writers' Project, and Historical Records Survey. They did a lot of amazing things: cutting-edge theatre including the **Living Newspaper** and the creation of ten black regional theatre companies; an index of American design; [state guides](#); almost all the surviving narratives of enslaved people, and much more.

**Artists in those programs were structurally unemployed, and not only on account of the Great Depression.** For instance, it was estimated that 30,000 musicians were displaced by new mechanical modes of music reproduction. Earlier, if you wanted music you had to go hear musicians, now you could listen to a recording or the radio. They also estimated that more than 30,000 theatre workers were unemployed by the mid-1930s because so many legitimate theatres were converted to movie theatres. The Loew's theatre chain had 36 theatres offering 50 weeks a year of live entertainment before 1930; by 1934, they only had three left. So there was a huge structural change brought about mostly by mechanization putting people out of work. Artists were clearly seen as an unemployed group, just like farmers or construction workers. So the approach to making programs that used artists' skills was **grounded in need**, not in making artists a uniquely special group.

**François** That's interesting on two levels. I hadn't appreciated how important the technological change was. There's a parallel now because we're going through another wave of technological change. It's striking that government could see artists just as people who had been earning their living and now weren't – it wasn't about art, it was about unemployment and economic change. There's no complex about it. You just get on with it.

**Arlene** CETA, the 1970s program which we'll talk about later, was the same: a response to unemployment. We need that now because unemployment is epidemic. **Our technological shift** is about music streaming, YouTube, and all these free platforms for people's cultural creations, and the reality that most often the artist is not able to capture as much revenue from the work. It's ironic, because there's a zillion more artists producing. In the aggregate, it's probably just as much money but divided among so many that fewer artists are actually able to monetize their work.

Another interesting thing about the WPA is that its origin stories are about individuals. [George Biddle](#) was a classmate of FDR's at Groton, a super-elite prep school. He had gone down to Mexico and studied with [Diego Rivera](#), and he came back and told Roosevelt that he wanted to bring a team of muralists to embellish a new federal building in Washington, DC. And when Roosevelt was Governor of New York, his state relief director was this guy called [Harry Hopkins](#). He had given the [College Art Association](#) in New York funds to put 100 artists into [settlement houses](#)—community centers created to assimilate immigrants by having classes in English, hygiene, some condescending and some good stuff, and so art programs were integral to this. Harry Hopkins became the first head of the WPA. So these two guys that Roosevelt knew personally said, "I've seen this in another country, it's a really a good thing. Let's have it here." And Roosevelt was like, "Okay, let's try it."

I think the reason I love that is because I think about trying to start initiatives as rolling a gigantic boulder uphill for a really, really long time, trying to gather popular support that will force recalcitrant politicians to respond properly to conditions. But the other way is somebody they trust just gets them to do it. I wish I knew somebody!

**François** We've just seen the British government in the UK produce £1.57 billion to the arts and cultural sector. And I'd guess that happened because various ministers and prime ministers have friends, exactly like you're talking about. But they're not using that money to do a WPA-type program. They're trying to save what they call 'the crown jewels,' by mothballing organizations so that they can re-emerge and be able to make it work again after this is over. In the end, that's why **who-knows-who doesn't work** because the Trump administration is based on who can get close to the President. It's dangerous, unjust, and opaque. Anyway, how did the WPA come to an end?

**Arlene** It ended in 1942, seven years after it started. **It came to an end in two different ways.** One was that that World War II effectively ended it because it put people to work and this money had to be repurposed for the war effort. But it also dovetailed with rise of anticommunism. The WPA was constantly being attacked from the right for creating art that was too political, too left-wing. The head of the House Committee on Un-American Activities denounced the WPA as a "hotbed of communists." And that was basically the end.

**François** When I speak to younger artists today about community art murals in the 70s and 80s, they don't always understand the difference between an artist who happens to paint on walls and a community artist. My impression of the WPA is that it's got nothing to do with **community arts**, even if many of the artists involved were left-leaning, and reflect those



values in the work, because they weren't involving people in the work. I don't think they thought that local people, not artists, could have a say over the work, even less contribute to its making. That's an idea that only emerges in the 1960s.

- Arlene** Yes and no; you're half right. There wasn't something called community arts. But there was a tremendous amount of work rooted in folk traditions, popular vernacular. The American Communist Party at that time, their policy was called **Popular Front**. The idea was you use all the vernacular forms and heritage of the people to create this feeling of belonging, of unity. So like the artists worked in the settlement houses, people were making stuff together. They were making dances, they were making paintings, but they didn't have a self-conscious idea of being a community artist as opposed to a fine artist. For example, the Index of American Design, part of the Federal Art Project, documented vernacular design, and all of the arts projects included many participatory classes and workshops.
- François** In Britain in the 1930s you have artists teaching miners to paint, but it's essentially art education, with the intention to help people produce stuff that, if not the same as what the market likes, is still recognizably within an idiom and a framework. It may be more pictorial, some of it may be called naive, but it's essentially painting in frames that you're going to try to sell.
- Arlene** I get you, but I think there's way more grey area than you're giving credit for.
- François** I think that the WPA has an image which is romanticized by the fine art world now. The political ideology behind, say, Dorothea Lange's photographs is far enough away from contemporary life not to be threatening to any political position. Some people who worked in WPA programs went on to become successful in the fine art market. So I think the fine art world looks at that and says, "What a great idea. We give lots of money to artists to be artists. And the cream will rise to the top. Wouldn't that be good?" I find that questionable because that's not the best of what the WPA was about or the reasons why it was valuable.
- Arlene** But if the artworld people are saying it was just giving them the money to do whatever they want, they're mistaken. They were employed to do specific things that were considered public goods, social goods. You can list people: [Richard Wright](#) or [Ralph Ellison](#) or [Zora Neale Hurston](#) were in the Federal Writers Project; [Jacob Lawrence](#) was a [Federal Art Project](#) painter—there's a long list of people. But what they did was people's art for the WPA, and then as they became more well-known, they worked in the

conventional framework of getting your work published or getting paintings shown. But mostly their subject matter remained very much rooted in all the same aesthetic and social concerns as when they were in the WPA.

- François** I agree, but there's also the missionary idea: if you pay artists to go and work with communities, they will do good, because artists are good people and they bring good things, this good thing called culture. They will civilize wherever they go,
- Arlene** Which is the **democratization of culture rather than cultural democracy**. That's the part of the Popular Front idea that is not very appealing to me—"Let's have this chamber ensemble go play lunchtime concerts in the factory." But maybe it's better to have a lunchtime concert in the factory than no concert at all. That just would not be the thing that I think does what is needed.
- François** A social good is having the choice to be able to go listen to a string quartet. But if it's "We understand that you will be a better person, and more socially acceptable if you like this stuff...."
- Arlene** We're parsing the **elitism of it from the democratic impulse**, but a lot of these things were very confused.
- François** As they still are.
- Arlene** I like I like the framework that the Council of Europe used when it articulated the **democratization of culture versus cultural democracy**, because that makes sense to me. It's been true since the beginning of time that democratization of elite culture—discounted museum admission, busing kids to blockbuster shows—gets a whole lot more money and attention than cultural democracy—pluralism, participation, equity in relation to multiple coexisting cultures. We're always trying to change that. I wouldn't want to romanticize the WPA because it was highly imperfect in all the ways that anything mass-scale is highly imperfect. But the truth is it did a number of important things. Right now, theatres are folding right and left, they can't sustain themselves; just in these six months they ran out their resources to the point where they're no longer viable. And that creates all these unemployed theatre artists and if the federal government did supply the funding to have troupes where it hadn't been sustainable to have theatres before, that would be a great thing in this country.



**François** One of the differences is that the infection makes certain kinds of artistic activity simply impossible. You could hire the actors and create black theatre companies as part of the WPA in the 1930s. Today, you'd have to have a good long think about what you're going to do, because the economic model that we're working with won't work for the foreseeable future. It's hard to imagine when we're going to be able to sit in a theatre again elbow to elbow, or when people will want to.

There's one other thing I'd like to bring up to finish talking about the WPA. The work that many of the artists were making was engaged with what America was, how it was changing, what its values were. That's a parallel, also true of the work of government-supported artists in the Second World War in Britain. America and Britain were both facing enormous change and existential threats. Then it seems natural both for people to become more politicized and for artists to think about where they live, what they're doing, and what the society is. Maybe that's one of the reasons that gives the works of that period a degree of commonality and the degree of resonance after the period has ended. You recognize a sense of common purpose, common preoccupations. You would recognize that in the 1950s too. But in the 1930s the common purpose and preoccupations are to do with things that really matter; they're urgent, if you like, they're about who are we? And where are we going? In the 1950s, Abstract Expressionism was about a lot of things, but it wasn't asking "who are we and where are we going?"

**Arlene** That's true. There's a strong argument that the reason it wasn't asking that was because of the rise of the Red Scare. There was a huge push toward art that couldn't be dismissed as left-wing. But that's a whole other conversation. For the Federal Theatre Project, that was super-explicit in their description of what they were—it's in [Hallie Flanagan's](#) book [Arena](#). She was head of the [Federal Theatre Project](#) and another person who crossed paths with the right person at the right time. She had gone to college in Iowa with Harry Hopkins. They did Federal Theatre of The Air on radio, The Living Newspaper, which I mentioned before. That was the intention, to make the theatre relevant to the day. The book is very interesting. I also recommend reading about the 1936 American Artists Congress. There are library copies and used copies around of *Artists Against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*. The painter Stuart Davis opened the Congress this way:

*"In order to withstand the severe shock of the crisis, artists have had to seek a new grip on reality. Around the pros and cons of 'social content,' a dominant issue in discussions of present-day American art, we are witnessing determined efforts by artists to find a meaningful direction. Increasing expression of social problems of the day in the new American art makes it clear that in times such as we are living in, few artists can honestly remain aloof, wrapped up in studio problems."*

#### 4. THE U.K. IN THE 1940S: ENSA & CEMA

---



Henry Moore, *Pink and Green Sleepers* (1941) © Tate

**François** The first thing that happened during the Second World War in Britain was different from the occupied countries like France. Once they were occupied, the theatres and galleries could reopen and then the question was do you collaborate or not with the enemy? But Britain was still fighting and a free country. London was being bombed and a lot of theatres were closed. The **government recognized that there were a lot of musicians, actors and other artists who had no income** – and they probably weren't going to be much use in the Army or anything like that. So two structures were created

The [Entertainments National Services Association](#) (ENSA) was tasked to boost morale among the troops and on the home front – factory workers and so on. It was rooted in music-hall tradition and the entertainment side of popular culture. The [Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts](#) (CEMA) took what were then called 'the high arts' (and still are by some people today): theatre, classical music, painting exhibitions and so on. So Dame Myra Hess famously playing lunchtime concerts of Bach in the National Gallery, which was empty because all the paintings were safe in slate mines

in North Wales. Since the first World War government had paid artists to be war artists. Now they set up a big program for artists to document the home front and important buildings they thought might be destroyed. That led to some extraordinary work, including Stanley Spencer's [paintings of workers](#) in the Clyde shipyards, and Henry Moore's drawings of [people sheltering in the Underground](#) during the Blitz.

There are two things to say about this: why it was done, and what happened after. During the 1930s European governments (although interestingly, not the American government) had understood the power of art, especially through the mass media, including cinema and radio, and, whether they were Nazi or Fascist or Communist, **governments were trying to reforge the minds of their populations**, which they did with a lot of success for a while. Britain also in effect conscripted artists into the war effort, this existential challenge to keep the country going and raise morale. The British government also wanted to demonstrate national values and influence the population, but the ideology was different: Britain's war was about defending democracy, freedom and "the little man". And consequently they were able to have a cultural war program that allowed the artists to be much freer ideologically than in the other combatant countries.



Charles Mozley, ENSA Concert (© IWM)

Then at the end of the war, a [radical socialist government](#) is elected under Clement Atlee and begins to establish a welfare state with a National Health Service and new



opportunities for education. [The Beveridge Report](#), which had been written during the Second World War, promised to stamp out the five great evils of want, disease, ignorance, squalor, and idleness. That laid the foundations of the welfare state for the **generation that became the community artists**. Most of those people were baby boomers, the first of their families to go to art college or university, and crucially to have been brought up in an expectation that was much more egalitarian, and where culture was really prized.

It's important not to romanticize this, but it's the moment when the Royal Festival Hall is built for the [Festival of Britain](#) (1951) and, they build a concert hall which is one space, instead of having the class system built into the architecture they try. Now the government had to decide what to do with ENSA and CEMA in 1945. CEMA became the [Arts Council of Great Britain](#) (ACGB) with the economist [Maynard Keynes](#) as the first chairman. Keynes was close to the Bloomsbury set, and married to a Russian ballerina: he was absolutely in that world. So the critical choice that Britain made then was to embed hierarchical attitudes to the arts in its institutional structure. The **Arts Council took the posh part of the arts world** but wouldn't touch the popular work of ENSA: that was allowed to die as far as the state was concerned.

Fortunately, there was another important but undervalued, form of support for the arts in Britain – the [BBC](#), an independent public broadcaster with its own visionary leader, [John Reith](#), who gave it a mission to 'educate, inform and entertain'. Broadcasting its own orchestras, the BBC has played a massive role in classical music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while also supporting popular music and entertainment. (I doubt the British pop music boom of the 1960s would have been as strong without the BBC: the Beatles and the BBC are intertwined.) So, in July 1945, the BBC launched the [Light Programme](#), a popular radio station that became home to many the artists who had been performing in ENSA. They did comedy and music hall, laying the foundations, in things like [The Goon Show](#) for the Baby Boom generation to become [Monty Python](#) and the Beatles. In its post-war years, and while there's plenty you could criticize it for, the BBC was the most successful cultural institution in Britain and it was comfortable with the diversity of artistic expression. In terms of origin stories for state support of the arts, that's the **British equivalent to the WPA**. Of course, it was much more complicated and shaded than that, but it was transformative until it ran out of steam in the 1970s, and the neoliberal project began dismantling all of those institutions.

**Arlene**

That's really interesting, US versus UK, because here we privatized broadcast spectrum first, then they much later they created this little teeny thing for public broadcasting. But in the UK, they saw it as a social good, apropos our earlier conversation, and spent a lot of time developing it as a social good before they allowed the privatization of spectrum.

**François** It's worth it's worth noting that the BBC started as a private sector company. It was nationalized after the General Strike of 1926, because government saw radio's importance and that it couldn't be out of state control. Luckily, we had politicians wise enough to recognize that having it directly under their control would be equally unwise, so they invented what's now been enshrined as the [arm's length principle](#).

**Arlene** Two questions. One is for the artists who were commissioned to document the home front. How was that administered? Was that like a national program kind of like the Arts Council today where decisions are made centrally? Or were there local authorities, any form of decentralization?



John Farley (1900-65), Raymond Buildings, Gray's Inn 1941 (Courtesy V&A)

**François** It was a bit ad hoc, I think. There was the [War Artists' Advisory Committee](#), which nationally commissioned about 300 artists to document life on the home front, buildings at risk, and military operations. One of their projects, [Recording Britain](#), was funded by the Pilgrim Trust, and produced about 1,500 artworks most of which are now in the V&A Museum. Several artists, including [Eric Ravilious](#), were killed while on WAAC commissions; others, like [John Piper](#) had successful post-war careers. They created a

remarkable body of work and some, including Ravilious, have now become celebrated today, more than in their own lifetime.

**Arlene** That leads to my second question. As we talked about in the context of the WPA, in the US, there was a great politicization of artists during the Great Depression that preceded the establishment of these entities. As a class, **artists were predisposed to do work that had social content**, and they cared about justice—not 100% of them, but the majority. That gave a certain coloration to a lot of the work that came out—the posters and the theatre pieces and so on. Is that true in the UK?

**François** In the 1930s, we were in a different place because we were on the doorstep of Communism and Fascism. There were artists who felt they had to take one side or the other of that conflict, and some, like George Orwell, went to fight in the Spanish Civil War. I think that fades away when you come to the Second World War, because suddenly, there is only one enemy, which is the Nazis. From 1941, the Soviet Union is our ally, so that ceases to become an issue for most people: it's an **existential struggle to survive as a nation and a culture**. Of course, after 1945, and the emergence of the Cold War the left-right split re-emerges and dominates until the 1990s,

**Arlene** I see that. In every mass war-effort there's creation of fellow feeling and pulling together. Meanwhile the lived reality isn't so much we're all in it together. Like the British government is full of antisemites, racists, and so on. But as a general point, it's true.

**François** The reason I feel what we're now going through is comparable is because it's throwing up problems on such a scale that only the mobilization of society and the resources of government can respond to. So there's a parallel, and the other parallel is that perhaps, much as they did in 1945, people will say **we want this suffering to be meaningful**: we demand that a better world should come out of this situation that we have lived through.

**Arlene** And it relates to the post-war revolution of rising expectations where working-class people throughout Europe come back from the war and don't want to just take their appointed places and tug their forelocks again. Stuff like the Open University flows out of that desire.

**François** There's a **useful competition between ideological systems**, which is one of the things we have lacked during the neoliberal hegemony. Western European nations didn't build welfare states only out of the goodness of their hearts. They wanted to prove that capitalism could take care of ordinary people, just as Soviet propaganda was showing how

they were taken care of under communism. That strong motivation to improve the conditions of working people disappeared after the end of the 1980s, which is why their living condition have declined so sharply.

**Arlene** There's another difference that's worth mentioning too. There was such a clear objective in World War Two: to defeat the Fascists and regain control of your own country. If our objective is to defeat the virus, that's not big enough to catalyze that kind of sea-change. It's potentially up to all of us to say what it actually is we are trying to accomplish. Trump's trying to destroy the Post Office – and he's not just doing it, he's admitting it. That gives an excellent hook to understand **what a social good is**, and to see why the right in this country is so determined to destroy all social goods, transforming them into profit centers. So that's the evidence, but I don't know if it's getting across to enough people to make a consensus. But that seems possible.

**François** I read about why pandemics do not touch the human imagination the way wars do, because we can't make a story out of them, with heroes and villains. But the suffering that they can create is real, and there is a powerful and a natural human sense that when we have paid a heavy price, we want it to have meant something.

**Arlene** I hope so. It's such a strong element in British culture, this stoicism, this feeling of we survived and we want it to mean something. It's not that it isn't woven into our collective personality here. But it's not quite the same, in part because not everybody did have to sacrifice something. A lot of people didn't.

**François** The cultures are very different. There remains a sense of collective spirit that politicians like Boris Johnson can and do call on regularly. When I see American politicians talk in that kind of way, it seems to me that they that they appeal to things that are more abstract.

**Arlene** If the WWII books and movies are to be believed, then even these people who had stately homes out in the country had to take children and billet soldiers and so on. I don't think that was true in the US. Nothing like that happened. Cities were never evacuated because we weren't bombed.

**François** Hence why 9/11 was such a trauma for America. For the first time in anyone's memory, America was physically threatened.

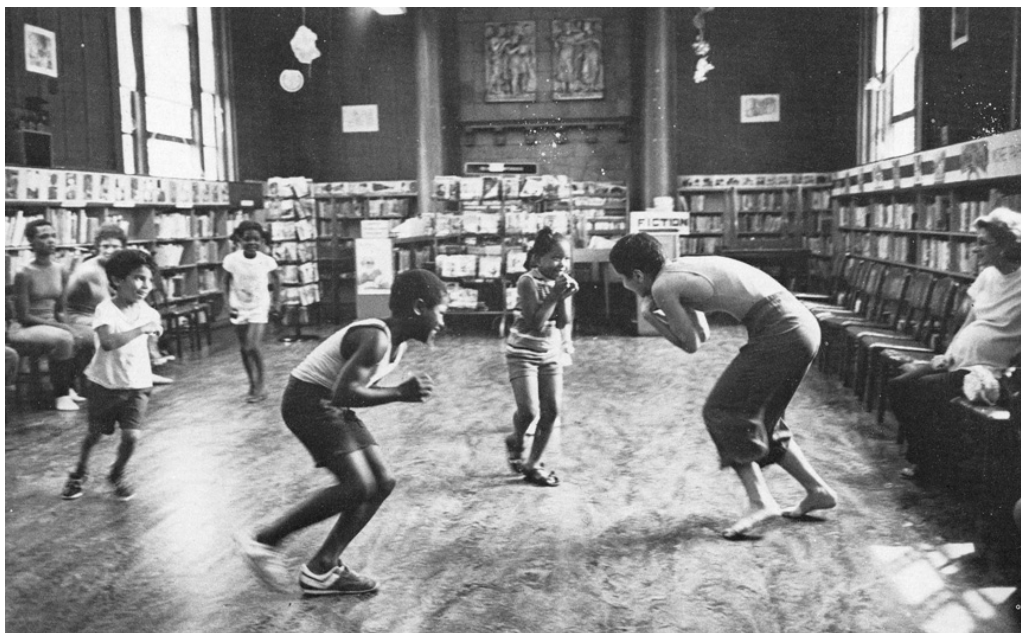
**Arlene** It shattered the invulnerability. But there's more to it. This friend of mine made a film ([\*Letter to The Next Generation\*](#)) on the anniversary of the Kent State shootings that

happened in 1970, where National Guardsmen shot some protesting students. He went back to that campus 20 years later to talk to the students that were then on campus about what they cared about and what they knew about that time. It turned out to be very little, although they all knew “The Brady Bunch” theme song by heart. We may not have the same interest in historic memory.



## 5. THE U.S. IN THE 1970S: CETA

---



CETA dancer Naaz Hosseini conducts a workshop at the Brooklyn Heights library.

(photo: Sarah Wells)

**Arlene**

Because you talked about the Arts Council, I'll mention the creation of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) in 1965, which is the equivalent of the Arts Council in Britain. That was driven by [Nelson Rockefeller](#), who had been Governor of New York and later served as US Vice President. He convened under the aegis of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund a blue-ribbon panel on the performing arts and funding. Their report was "[The Performing Arts: Problems and Prospects: Rockefeller Panel Report on the Future of Theatre, Dance, Music in America.](#)" They described what they called a culture gap, not between the ignorant unwashed masses and the elite, but a gap in the amount of money that operas, ballet companies, symphony orchestras, major performing arts institutions needed and what they were able to raise from the private sector.

There was a huge **terror of state art in the US** in the 70s when I was working in Washington monitoring cultural policy. People were still basically saying no, the United States doesn't have a cultural policy because only totalitarian states have cultural policies; we have freedom, we have the marketplace. So Rockefeller was very, very careful to frame his proposal for federal funding to say **private funding should lead**. All the grants

they gave, except block grants to the states, were matched by private money. The public role is to support the private sector.

When the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act ([CETA](#)) came along in the mid-70s, it was under the Nixon and Ford administrations that these public service employment initiatives were developed, along with community development block grants and other things. They all had a similar intention: 1968 had seen the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, lots of civil unrest, lots of violence in the streets of America. They wanted to pour money into the inner cities to address that, and a lot of it was framed in terms of employing youth. So there were these summer youth employment initiatives which had nothing to do with art, per se. Neither did CETA. It was a constellation of public service employment programs that were triggered when unemployment reached a certain level—much lower than it is now. Two things happened. There were some grants that went directly to municipalities and states, public entities. The other was that non-profit organizations could apply for funds to employ people.

I was in San Francisco then, working for the [Neighborhood Arts Program](#), which was the Arts Commission's initiative that started with summer unrest—let's do a workshop for kids—and continues to this day. (I wrote [an essay for its 50th anniversary recently](#).) After I left there, I became an organizer for something called the San Francisco Artworkers' Coalition, which looked at issues of how funding was allocated and other cultural policies. In the two-year period leading up to the bicentennial of the American Revolution, a lot of artists were outraged at how white the official commemoration was. John D. Rockefeller III had bought up this massive collection of American Art, donated it to the [DeYoung Museum](#) in San Francisco. It's still in the American art wing there. We were furious because it had perhaps one thing by a woman and one thing by a person of color and it was like 300 pieces of white art that was supposed to represent us all. So a newsletter was started, called the *Bicentennial Arts Biweekly* and I was an editor of that newsletter. In the issue of December 18, 1974 we wrote, "a queue of 300 unemployed artists each hoping to get one of 24 new arts positions recently made available by the Emergency Employment Act" [a CETA forerunner]. The same thing happened as CETA evolved. In the 1977 issue, we noted that 899 different proposals were being made by nonprofits for the 1500 jobs that were then available.

As these public service jobs started to be allocated, they were made available to open application and everyone was completely gobsmacked by how many people lined up. There was no way to assess before that there were **all these artists who wanted to work in community**. So the thing kept expanding until Reagan took office at the beginning of 1981. One of the first things he did was cut it off utterly, using those arguments that we talked about before—boondoggles with public money. [The Pickle Family Circus](#) was a one-ring circus in San Francisco that had a lot of CETA employees, for example, and that

was the kind of thing the right dismissed although the artists were very skilled, and some of them—Bill Irwin and Geoff Hoyle, for instance—went on to become famous. Pretty much everybody in my age group who was involved in community-based artwork—dollars to donuts, 8 out of 10 of them had a CETA job. It was all over the country



Larry Pisoni and Geoff Hoyle, CETA artists with the Pickle Family Circus in San Francisco

A guy called Eric Reuther, part of a big, famous union family, had contacts at the Department of Labor and got funding to study this phenomenon as an employer of arts people. What happened was just like the WPA: **as the project unfolded more and more arts and cultural uses were found for it.** There are a [few nice reports](#) that sum this up. It was estimated that at the height of the program, \$200 million a year—in mid-1970s dollars, so that's probably more like \$400-500 million now—went to arts-related jobs. It ended up being a huge phenomenon. And unlike the WPA, it wasn't divided by discipline. There were regional or local boards called prime sponsors that would allocate the funds, creating some kind of process according to general guidelines that could be tweaked. So there was a lot of diversity in in what was supported, but my impression is that the three main things were public art, performing arts and poetry—in New York [Bob Holman](#) had the Poetry Mobile and there were a lot of zines. I was a graphic designer in those days and I was running a mimeograph machine, churning out endless flyers. It was all people who one way or another were doing it for what they felt was the public good.



Jazzmobile CETA Big Band performing at the NYC Correctional Facility at Rikers Island.

Conducted by Frank Wess. April, 1978. (photo: George Malave)

**François** Just to be clear, it was a **general employment program**, not a dedicated art program.

**Arlene** That's correct. Public agencies and non-profit organizations hired clerks, janitors... there wasn't anything that specified or privileged a certain type of work.

**François** Why do you think artists did so well with it?

**Arlene** The level of demand is a big factor. When they put those first few jobs out and everybody and his brother showed up, they were really surprised. People thought, "Aha, this could be something." There was a **memory of the WPA**, which had ended in the 40s, and this is mid-70s, 30 years later. In the Biweekly newsletter, we had interviews with WPA veterans. Nobody had talked to them about this since, because what had intervened is the Red Scare of the 50s, and they were all leftists. We felt like we were doing archaeology, unearthing something that was buried countless years ago, even though it was just 30 years earlier. So we started reading WPA books and felt like we could make this opportunity into something like that. There was a lot of energy for that. It was shocking when it ended so abruptly. We couldn't imagine that Reagan would be elected.

Reagan had an alliance with something called [The Heritage Foundation](#), which still exists, a right-wing think-tank in Washington. In the run-up to the election and during the time between the election and his takeover of the office they created a document called [Mandate for Leadership](#), a humongous white paper that prioritized eliminating CETA and every other thing that was community-based. This is before things were published online. In the early days, the only way that you could see what was in it was to go to the Heritage Foundation office in Washington. They wouldn't let you photograph or photocopy it. My partner and I went there and spent the day copying it to share via [a community arts newsletter we published](#). It was shocking. Everything was dismantled overnight. It was a huge blow to the community arts movement in the United States. Up until then, it had been time of rising expectations. There were little bits of money and public programs and more people were understanding the importance of the work. When then it was cut off, it was profoundly demoralizing, and there was a big hiatus in any sort of meaningful or propositional organizing. That's what I was trying to do. The group that I then became co-director of was called the Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee—a couple of years later, we changed the name to the [Alliance for Cultural Democracy](#). If you look at what we put out there—it was just putting things in an envelope and mailing them to people—there's this attempt to foment self-consciousness as a movement and to propose. But it was really heavy lifting because it was a really demoralizing time.

**François** When I became involved in the community arts movement in 1981, that phrase meant something—it did **describe itself as a movement**. And that said a lot about its sense of confidence and of wishing to change something at a fundamental level. Let me go back a moment because there's a couple of things you said I want to pick up. I was really struck when you said America doesn't have a cultural policy. The people saying that are oblivious to the idea that claiming not to have a cultural policy is a cultural policy.

**Arlene** Oh, yes. That was my stock-in-trade line: if they're saying they don't have one then you can deduce from what they're doing what it is. It was easy as pie to do that.

**François** In [Why I Write](#), George Orwell says much the same thing when he concludes that 'the opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.' Of course the American right had no problem with cultural policy, especially in Europe. Here's what Tony Judt writes in [Postwar](#):

*By 1953, at the height of the Cold War, US foreign cultural programs (excluding covert subsidies and private foundations) employed 13,000 people and cost \$129 million, much of it spent on the battle for the hearts and minds of the intellectual elite of Western Europe.*

It shows the hypocrisy of so much of those attitudes.

**Arlene**      There should be a better word than hypocrisy. Have you ever heard that word, kakistocracy? It means rule by the least qualified.



## 6. THE UK IN THE 1980S: MSC AND THE COMMUNITY PROGRAMME

---



Youth group poster, UK 1983, (photo F. Matarasso)

**Arlene** Let's talk about the 1980s public service employment program in Britain.

**François** My perspective of the [Manpower Services Commission](#) is partial, because it was happening when I was young—it's a lived experience rather than what I've read. One of the ironies of the 1979 election is that the Tories were elected on a slogan 'Labour isn't working' (coined by an advertising agency called Saatchi & Saatchi) because [unemployment was at 1.5 million](#)—but by 1982, it had risen to 3 million. At the time the larger part of the British economy was state-owned. The irony is Thatcher then started shutting it down and privatizing it, unemployment rocketed, producing a level of unemployment and social change that was a big shock to society. And so in the early 80s, the Conservative government had to do something for all those unemployed people, especially the young. The unions were still strong: they ran Unemployed Workers Centers

across the country. I was really struck that in 2008-2010, there was none of that organized help because the unions had been so weakened, but also because so many people have been persuaded that unemployment is an individual problem, not a matter of policy.

But in the early 80s, **government still felt that it had to do something**, so it tasked the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) to create jobs or at least training opportunities. The MSC set up the [Youth Training Scheme](#) and the Community Programme, which supported non-commercial jobs. Environmental work, charity work and the arts came into that. It created a lot of work for community artists.

In 1988, when I took over at East Midlands Shape we had 45 young people working on the Community Programme, 20 at Derby Hospital Artists Programme and 25 at a disability arts workshop in Leicester. The MSC helped make community art much more mainstream than it had been in the 1970s because suddenly there were an awful lot of young people coming out of college and art school and where did they go? Well, a lot of them went to the Community Programme. The month after I joined Shape, the Community Programme was closed and we were back down to a core team of five. You can see the difference: the next decade was tough in several ways for community art, and that's when we really had to **build alliances outside the art world**. A lot of people got their first training and their first chance of work through the MSC. I'm sure it had lots of problems, but it also enabled a lot of good work because it was community-oriented. It contributed to the mainstreaming of community art and to connecting it with other forms of social activity. If you put 20 artists into Derby's hospitals, the organization that's running that program is going to develop a different idea about what it can do in hospitals. Those things go together. It probably contributed to community art becoming more socially oriented in the 1980s.

**Arlene** What part of the MSC program was culture-related? Was it the main thing?

**François** It would be tiny, riding on a universal scheme in response to a universal problem of mass unemployment. Government needs to do something. It did other things as well. It tried to get people to go self-employed. I was self-employed from 1981—most community artists were because we didn't have an employer. There were less than half a million people on self-employment at the time, and government was pushing tradespeople—plumbers, electricians etc.—to go self-employed when they lost their jobs in nationalized industries. There were grants available to artists to set up as a self-employed artist, including through the Prince of Wales's charity, but that would have been small. The underlying point is that it's a general program that deals with mass unemployment. It wasn't *intended* to help the arts but artists saw that and used it.



- Arlene** That was true in the U.S. through all the programs. The WPA and CETA were **opportunities meeting resourcefulness**. But here, the art and culture part of these programs became something like the largest part, not because someone at the top said so but because there was so much opportunity, and so many artists needed the support and were doing community work.
- François** And also because lots of **artists are quite enterprising**. If there's a possibility to do something, they'll find a way, they'll find a project to do, a community to work with. Community artists are resourceful, as you say.
- Arlene** I remember this one person, Susan Pearlstein who ran [Elders Share The Arts](#) in New York, told me "I had to learn to speak in many tongues to support my work." She was describing justifying it to these people this way and those people that way. The money comes in and you do the work.
- François** That's what I learned when I was running Shape. There's no point in talking to a social services department about art except once you've already got them interested in what it can do for people.
- Arlene** Another thing to say is that I don't think that the feeling in any of these public service employment projects was punitive. In this country if you go to the unemployment office—which is an entitlement, you lost your job and you get this unemployment insurance weekly payment—they make you feel like shit, like you're begging. All of our social welfare programs are means-tested and punitive. None of them project "Welcome to this place where we can help you." The thing about these jobs programs is that they really weren't like that, because there was this recognition that there was a convergence of needs, high unemployment and the government needed to put people to work to sustain the society. You had to fill out forms but didn't feel humiliated by it, which is interesting.
- François** Yes, a big part of the **attack on the welfare state** we've suffered in the last decades has been to make it judgmental and punitive. That's where the moral and political case for a **universal basic income** is very strong, because it protects people's dignity because they're not having to ask for something. Of course it also does away with the need for a judgmental and well-paid means assessment bureaucracy...

## 7. WHAT MADE PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYMENT SUCCESSFUL – OR NOT?

---

**Arlene** The WPA is hard to see through a lens of success and failure because there were so many different programs under that umbrella. They tried out a ton of different things, some of which seem ridiculous to me now, and some of which seem really good. So for example, the Treasury Relief Art Program (TRAP) was for artists who were on relief to do things like decorate federal buildings. They also made easel paintings. If you were a painter, you're supposed to turn in a certain number of canvases of a certain dimension, and then get your check. Or people in Washington commissioned murals for all the post offices across the country, and some artists would place an oak tree here in Illinois and substitute a cactus in New Mexico. Some had the Indigenous people thanking the conquerors for coming to save them. Those were all early. The more sophisticated the people were who came to be in charge of those programs, the more willingness to experiment, the better they were.

The Federal Theatre Project was an excellent program. They made theatre happen in places that couldn't otherwise sustain it, and people really appreciated it. The Federal Writers Project was also deemed very successful, partly because of the historical documents it left behind. There was kind of a cultural anthropology tone to the Federal Writers Project, capturing material that was oral tradition and therefore bound to be lost, such as the narratives of enslaved people.

**François** That's where I see a parallel with what happened in Britain during the Second World War, that commitment to mapping perceived treasures including the very ordinary aspects of social life of a country at war. In America you weren't at war at that time, but it was a country in a crisis because of the Depression. That may have been one of the things that contributed to the program's success artistically and culturally, but I wonder whether it may also have helped build some popular support for it because that feels like a self-evidently good thing. Who's going to object to producing guides to the states, you know, or to some oral history work?

**Arlene** So **who did object and how?** Nowadays, as things have evolved, there is a blanket objection, which we now see in Congress from people who just don't want government to spend money on social programs. That's kind of an omnibus objection. But the specific objection that brought the WPA down was from anti-communists in government, and it was because of the specific content of those materials that were produced. It can go from

kind of the general objection of why do we want to preserve the culture of all these people that don't amount to anything when we have our wonderful museums and libraries for the real culture, to objections to a left-leaning play saying public dollars shouldn't be going into spreading these pernicious ideas. As I said, those attitudes converged with gearing up to get into the war took it down.



FEDERAL ART PROJECT

Poster showing the WPA defending itself against attacks (rumor, the fake news of the day)

There's another argument that didn't really hold water in the Great Depression, because the poverty levels and the unemployment levels were so astronomical, but the other **counter-argument** that is being deployed now and has been deployed in America for the last 35-40 years is that it's a role of the marketplace to employ people and it's not a good thing to have government employ people (beyond civil service, the military, and so on)

because it makes them weak and lazy. Later on, when Reagan came into office in 1980, and the right wanted to destroy CETA, the public service employment program, they cited things that they thought were ridiculous, like people in San Francisco got jobs doing a circus. What a waste of public funds, they said.

So what are the responses to those arguments against public service employment? I've been thinking about this a lot. The chickens that are coming home to roost in America right now are because we had such a **concerted attack on the idea of an effective public sector**. Reagan's favorite saying was, "I'm here from the government and I want to help." During the period of the 70s, the national Chamber of Commerce went huge on trying to foment a culture war, leading to Reagan's election and on and on. Now Trump is the apex of this campaign to destroy faith in the idea of a public sector, to weaken it beyond repair, and it has been really successful. When Margaret Thatcher said there is no such thing as society, she was part of that story, too. What we're facing in the US now is the total success of that campaign to the point where we effectively have no public sector in many ways and what we do have is incredibly crippled. But the wicked problems we're facing cannot be addressed by anything other than an effective public sector. I see that as the connection between all the crises we're facing.

#### François

That's where there is a real parallel which has been clear to me since the pandemic started. I think **the case for a return to a public sector**, even in the US, should become possible because of the scale of what all our societies are facing. Only the State has the resources and the power to intervene effectively. That's the parallel with the Second World War. When you're facing an existential war, you mobilize society, you do things that nobody would allow at another time—like you send kids to go live on farms, so they don't get bombed in London. You couldn't have separated children from their parents in any other circumstance. It's the same now: we're not allowed to see our friends or our grandchildren. I'm hopeful that the pressure will come up in the same way that after 1945 there was a pressure that said, "Look what we've been through, we have to change, because we are not going to go through that again."

So universal responses could be on the cards. I didn't understand why Obama didn't do it. From what I read of America, there's a massive infrastructure problem of crumbling bridges and buildings. And that's what you do when you're faced with people out of work on the scale that we're talking about. This takes us back to universalism. It's about employing artists because they're part of the workforce. There's no point in sending an artist to build a Hoover Dam, but there is a point in sending an artist to paint or photograph the people who are building.

**Arlene** A hard thing here is that as this anti-government campaign has succeeded, the primary impact is the privatization of all social goods. Because of that, there's a huge story of effective infrastructure being replaced by ineffective incompetent infrastructure. One of the best examples goes back to when Los Angeles had an excellent mass transit system; the [Red Car Line](#) used electric streetcars, but General Motors and the Firestone Tire Corporation made money from internal combustion engines and rubber tires. They lobbied so hard that the city actually tore out the Red Car Line streetcar tracks, destroyed the streetcars and substituted a very ineffective, inefficient and polluting set of buses. We see that story everywhere. So with all of our infrastructure, what should be happening is stopped by the fact that unless certain corporations profit sufficiently, infrastructure investment won't get through.

Another point you raised was to note that these programs were distorted to a certain extent by the typical attitudes or biases or understandings of the time. I mentioned before that the agricultural programs under the WPA were biased against black farmers and they suffered greatly as a result. There's a lot of that. But then there are the federal theatres, and while the WPA didn't transcend sexism, there were a lot of women employed in and running these programs. They were of their time.

**François** That challenges us to ask, **what do we not see?** What are our blind spots? And that's a really important, really difficult question to answer.

One of the blind spots may be that artists deserve special treatment, special programs. It's perfectly legitimate for all groups to lobby and defend their interest. That's what democracy involves. What you have to do is to recognize that's what people are doing. And the art world can be pretty sanctimonious about how much good it's going to do for everybody else to mask its lobbying.

**Arlene** Yeah. I found that interesting way back in the 80s when I was doing more work with people in the UK that we would talk from an American perspective in terms of rights, and people much more spoke of demands. For us **rights were the bottom line**: if you got a right installed, then nobody could transgress it. That was naïve. The demands view is probably a more accurate description of society, with competing demands trying to acquire power and triumph over each other. That's part of the tragic romantic view of human life, which is probably more accurate. But I did believe in rights and I do still do in many ways.

**François** Yeah, I also hold rights as a principle, that they are a kind of bottom line. Of course, we haven't ever got to a society where everyone's rights are defended and fulfilled. Beyond that you inevitably get into competing demands. These are the things that people don't

want to admit about democracy. Democracy is not a level playing field. Some people are much better equipped to defend their rights. That's why I've always liked the idea that the test of democracy is how well it defends minorities, not the majority. After the election, how do the people who lose fare?

## 8. WHERE TO NOW?

---



**François** Let's talk about now and what any of this means for the world that we now live in.

**Arlene** Well, there's more interest in these ideas. A group here called [Imagining America](#), a consortium of universities with art, design, and humanities programs working in partnership with community organizations, gave me this award, but they couldn't have the conference this year because of the pandemic so they're doing a virtual thing. I offered them a few ideas for my presentation and they chose the new WPA idea. This will be in October, and the election will be a few weeks later. If Biden wins, that's our potential opportunity to have some kind of public service employment program. There are a few big questions about the feasibility of that. There's almost like a cellular memory of those arguments about wasting public money because it's doing frivolous things or it's supporting leftists. There's worship of the marketplace and how it can cure everything and government shouldn't be doing stuff like employing people to do things that aren't as essential public roles as killing and imprisoning, so there's that. I may well be wrong about this but my feeling is that the fact that the arts people are thinking of it as a special arts program may scuttle it. I don't know how much policy folks are considering it as a general

workforce remedy for unprecedented level of unemployment. I've seen articles saying we need a new WPA, but I haven't seen something concrete. It may be being discussed in backrooms.

But it's worrying that I haven't seen many general proposals that we need a new public service employment that arts work could be a part of. In the United States, we have a very small unionized workforce. It's like 11% now and I think 9% of it is public employees. The big unions—the Communication Workers, United Auto Workers, the Teamsters, are still there, but it hasn't been a conducive environment for unionization since Reagan. The unions have reasons to not want to have something like public service employment because they're not union jobs. If the government is going to support job creation, they want them to support the creation of union jobs and in the nature of public service, salary, benefits and duration will always be lower than private sector employment. But I'm not sure exactly what general conversations are going on because I'm not part of it. That connects to the obstacle that you and I have talked about so much: **a universal program versus a special one for artists.**

**François**

There are some places where the special interest approach can work. One is the French system where if you have irregular work as a stage manager or a technician or an actor, so long as you can show that you have had work for 13 weeks in the previous 12 months, then you're entitled to a different regime of unemployment support for the periods when you're not working. That's a marginal thing in terms of what we're talking about, but it essentially says, yes, this work is precarious and we don't want to put you through the same process as somebody who's lost a job and is just looking for another job, because you just have a kind of casual work..

The other thing I think might be the way to make this work is to make this a **scheme for the under-30s**. It's that generation who are hardest-hit by this pandemic and its economic consequences. Young people who are not going to be able to get their first jobs. And that I think government understands that if people don't get into the workforce young, then there's evidence that has long-term consequences. So it might be wise to say that we want an employment scheme for the young because even for the people who are against it, it's much harder to say, "No, we don't want to do this for the young." Then artists can be part of that. And that's when it's a good time to be a community artist—before you've got dependents. You can live in a much more freewheeling way when you're in your early 20s, you've got the energy to do that. So that could be viable.

**Arlene**

[Americans for The Arts](#), the US arts advocacy group, is putting forward proposals and younger people are a big piece. There's a thing here called [AmeriCorps](#). It started as a teacher corps, but it has other aspects to it too. Most people sign up right after they



graduate from college. There are different forms of compensation, pretty low salaries or a scholarship to go to graduate school. There was legislation passed before Trump was elected that said that there could be an artist corps as part of this. But the funding was never allocated for it. So that's probably the piece that's most likely of being approved.

I'm ambivalent about it. It would mostly be for people who went to college and just came out, though they also had some retirees, but that was the target demographic. I guess it makes the most sense in a time like this because it could conceivably give people paying work for a year or two. Theoretically, the economy could start to rebuild in some way and there'd be more of a chance of finding jobs. What I didn't like about it before the pandemic was that was in our real situation here, there's just tons of experienced people doing community-based work that are older —30s, 40s, 50s, and on up—and there's nothing for them because pre-pandemic, practically everything that was put out in terms of fellowships and stipends by mostly private sector entities like foundations, the key word was “emerging.” I cannot tell you how many times I was asked to write letters of recommendation for people that I knew and worked with who were like 30 years old, to be in a program that people who I thought were way more needy and deserving of support for the work they were doing couldn't get because they weren't emerging. But I see how it fits the moment and I defer to that.

**François** There's a **political argument** to make that could have some traction. Already the UK government has announced what looks like a pretty mean scheme to take on people for 25 hours a week, but they have to be young people. And some people are saying that we could use that in the arts. One of the moral hazards, as economists call them, is that you will have some organizations who've laid off staff using schemes like this, to take on kids on minimum wage or less, to do things that they're actually not qualified to do. But I do think that there is political traction with doing something around young people and I also feel very strongly that it is really right. Those 18 to 25-year-olds, unless they get a break now they're really going to be struggling. So I would argue for an employment scheme for that age group as the lowest-hanging fruit.

**Arlene** Are there political obstacles to that? Earlier, I named these ideological obstacles to public service employment over here, even if the need is great. I'm just wondering if that's true there too.

**François** We have the same obstacles in Europe to different degrees, and they're couched in different ways. In France there are already initiatives for the young unemployed. It's a lot harder to imagine job creation schemes for across the whole workforce. But it's not impossible. I still think there is hope for the universal basic income. And I'm not saying it's

a short-term thing. But to me that that will be the most effective way of supporting people who want to be artists, to give them a basic minimum income. And then after that, let them get on with it and see what they can do.

**Arlene** I agree.

**François** My biggest hesitation about all the schemes for artists is that—this may be the biggest difference between European experience and the North American experience—is that essentially we've had a cultural policy which has put most of its attention to the **supply side of the cultural economy**. So, in the last 70 years, it's built theatres, it's built libraries, it's built cinemas. And it has then employed people to operate them and created grants programs for freelance artists. So it has created a powerful and often high-quality cultural offer. But it has struggled to get people to want the offer the art world has created. And that's the difficulty. It's why I used the phrase in one of my blog posts about '**peak culture**' – have we just expanded to the highest point, and perhaps to a point beyond what is sustainable, and we don't need as many artists being paid and living from their work as we have maybe had in the past? That's a difficult thing to say. And how you get from there is not obvious or easy. I'm less convinced that more programs that put money directly into artists and *only* into artists is the right approach, not least because you then have to decide who's an artist.

**Arlene** I understand the peak culture thing. That was used by Livingston Biddle who was NEA Chair during Reagan. He was saying, oh, we're oversupplied. This is 40-50 years ago. The reason I don't buy it is because only a small fraction of the people who want to be artists are employed or subsidized in any way and the rest are hustling along with their waitress jobs or whatever. And they still want to do it. And I know that was true for me. There were times I had jobs that were related to being an artist, but there were times that I had jobs that supported me that had nothing to do with being an artist. That's huge, lots of people. So there's already a **culling mechanism** and it's based on the existing criteria of whatever are deemed appropriate qualifications or credentials. If a decision were made that we're over-supplied, then they just amp up the criteria of the culling mechanism.

Over here, it's really different because the funding is so little, it's a few cents from the federal government to each person. The real value of the NEA budget is less than half today what it was in 1980. They would just use the new culling system to further privileged institutions over people who are working in more informal situations. I have to step back and look at the whole pie and say there are people doing so many kinds of work that are not needed by the society. Look at the prison-industrial complex and what our government is pouring into the world's largest prison population. How much of our

commonwealth is going to that? I'm more coming from shifting that and not so much in the peak culture thing.

So, we both think that a possibility that some employment initiatives of some kind will happen, whether they're universal or targeted for artists. What happens is subject to political opinion and the evolution of the economy post-pandemic, whenever that comes, and we just don't know.

**François** And that's where the situation of young people is important. Because I think it's how you can mobilize political support among the wider community for what you can do for young people.

The [A Levels exam scandal](#) has become a politically resonant moment in the UK during this pandemic. It touches millions of people. There is this sense that we are **at risk of failing a generation** if we don't help an entire generation get into the world, both through the exams and then getting them into work. That is a platform on which you can genuinely build a coalition of people who would care about that and say, we need a young people's employment initiative and you can tie it to environmental work, artwork, a whole set of stuff that is worth doing. And there are real jobs like that. Give young people a chance to do some good in the community.

**Arlene** A good part of our conversation would be to brainstorm the **different grounds for buy-in**. So the young people would be one. In the States right now everybody has money to give away, saying we're prioritizing people of color. That's our story because of what's happening here, the full emergence of the scale of structural racism and state violence. So that's another premise, based on the actual movement of money.

There's a larger more philosophical question too. What is work? The very definition of work needs to evolve as we've seen it evolve in the past. A hundred years ago, what work was is not what work is now for many, many people. Here in the States, if we focus on clean energy, dial back on prisons and wars post-Trump, then there'd be the potential to say, what are the kinds of work that our communities need to rebuild, to restore, to revive, to heal? And most of that isn't being provided by the private sector. The private sector isn't going to come into Kenosha, Wisconsin now and go, let's give all these kids who were in the street arts jobs or jobs working on infrastructure.

**François** That brings us back to the point that you brought up at the beginning of all of this, the question of social goods. **Work has to produce value for society**. That value can be cutting hair, plumbing people's houses, but it can also be doing a dance class with elderly people. We just need to understand that these things have value and that value should be the test. Selling derivatives doesn't produce much value.

**Arlene** That's a good way to put that argument: it could support the creation of social good that that can't be sustained by the private sector.

**François** It goes back to two ideas about how work confers dignity on people because their effort produces something that other people recognize as having value. The knowledge, the mastery of being able to do something or having a trade, conferred dignity. I'm probably old-fashioned, but I think there are ideas about dignity and work that are to do with knowing things, being able to do things, and that was as much true of what has been women's work, where skill and craft and even beauty brought respect. It is a really important part of our sense of self-worth as people and members of communities.

**Arlene** I think you're right, but that is a partial truth. When you're asking what kind of dignity comes from selling stuff, your critique is of capitalism, because capitalism needs an endless number of salespeople. If you look around in any city on the planet, sales people selling you something—even just your coffee—are the biggest category and there's not much mastery in it. Although the baristas do have those contests for making their foamy designs. But even when many people were in trades—my father was a house painter, my stepfather was a plumber, and they definitely did have knowledge and pride in skill. But there's an awful lot of guys digging ditches at the same time. Women washing someone else's floors and laundry.

**François** Yeah, you're right.

**Arlene** So I don't think we can say work exactly. We feel the same about having work that incorporates skill, mastery and respect, that confers dignity. I agree with that proposition. It's just a lot of people don't fall under it.

**François** It reminds me of Hannah Arendt's distinction between labor, work, and action – and I've always seen community art as falling within her concept of action.

**Arlene** Right, acting in the world somehow.

## Resources

Alongside the links embedded throughout the document, here are some sites and books that will help anyone wanting to explore these issues further.

### THE WPA

1. [The National Archives](#), 'A New Deal for the Arts'
2. Library of Congress [WPA Poster Archive](#)
3. [The New Deal Art Registry](#) is a collaboratively assembled and maintained guide to surviving public art that was created under the New Deal programs, 1934-1943
4. An archive of California WPA projects plus links and resources on the New Deal of the 1930s [Living New Deal](#)
5. Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, *New Deal Cultural Programs: Experiments in Cultural Democracy*, online essay from 1986, revised 1995

### BRITISH CULTURAL POLICY DURING AND AFTER WW2

6. ['Recording Britain'](#) collection at the V&A
7. Hewison, R., 1995, *Culture and Consensus, England, Art and Politics since 1940*, London: Methuen
8. Weingärtner, J., 2012, *The Arts as a Weapon of War: Britain and the Shaping of National Morale in World War II*, New York: I.B. Tauris

### CETA

9. [Art Works](#), video by Ideas in Motion profiling CETA arts in San Francisco, 1975
10. Cultural Council Foundation, [CETA Artists Project • New York City 1978-80](#)
11. Linda Frye Burnham & Steve Durland, [CETA and the Arts: Analyzing the Results of a Groundbreaking Federal Job Program](#), and [CETA and the Arts II: Fifteen Case Studies](#), Kindle e-books, 2011
12. Linda Frye Burnham & Steve Durland, ["Looking for CETA: Tracking the impact of the 1970s federal program that employed artists"](#), *Public Art Review*, Spring/Summer 2016

REVIVING THE WPA IDEA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

13. Arlene Goldbard, [“The New New Deal 2009: Public Service Jobs for Artists?”](#) & [“The New New Deal, Part 2 - A New WPA for Artists: How and Why”](#), 2009
14. [Cultural Recovery](#), three 2009 short videos calling for a new WPA, featuring Peter Coyote, Bill Irwin, and Arlene Goldbard
15. [A New Deal for the Mind](#), Martin Bright, *New Statesman*, 15 January 2009
16. Alana Semuels [“The Case for A New WPA”](#) *The Atlantic*, 14 April 2016

## RESPONDING TO THE PANDEMIC

17. [UK gallery curator calls for public art project in response to Covid-19](#) (Hans-Ulrich Obrist), *The Guardian* 30 March 2020
18. [We must use arts funding to rewild our cultural landscape after coronavirus](#), Suzanne Moore, *The Guardian* 6 May 2020
19. [Art Of The New Deal: How Artists Helped Redefine America During The Depression](#), Neda Ullaby, NPR, 25 May 2020
20. [We need a New Deal to save the arts](#). Here’s how it should work, by Annabel Turpin and Gavin Barlow Prospect June 30, 2020
21. [“In the Face of Mass Unemployment, We Need a 21st Century WPA”](#) by Max Page, *Labor Notes*, 9 July 2020
22. [How will Chicago artists make it through the pandemic? 85 years ago the Feds had an answer. Could it work again?](#) Christopher Borrelli, *Chicago Tribune*, 15 July 2020,
23. [Biblioracle: We need a new WPA for the COVID-19 era](#), John Warner, *Chicago Tribune*, 28 July 2020,