

MAKING CULTURE COUNT

The Politics of Cultural Measurement

Edited by

Lachlan MacDowall, Marnie Badham

Emma Blomkamp and Kim Dunphy



NEW DIRECTIONS IN CULTURAL POLICY RESEARCH



Making Culture Count

New Directions in Cultural Policy Research

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Making Culture Count

The Politics of Cultural Measurement

Edited by

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University of Melbourne, Australia

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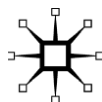
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Foreword

It is a real pleasure for me to be able to preface this important edited collection that tackles, head on, two of the defining issues of contemporary cultural policy debates: cultural value and the challenge of its measurement. This is a very timely book, since recent developments in cultural policy and arts funding trends across the world have shown compellingly that the obsessive focus on questions of measurement (and the attendant focus of collective resources and efforts on the development of arts impact evaluation toolkits) has not fulfilled the promise of providing solid support for the arts and culture's claims over the public purse. Quite the opposite: 25 years of highly politicised and advocacy-driven debates over measurement have left the arts in a weaker position, and less able to 'make the case' in the context of post-2008 financial austerity.

This was already emerging very clearly in the UK context – the one in which I work and with which I am therefore more familiar – when I was invited by the editors of *Making Culture Count* to give a keynote speech at a conference they organised in Melbourne, Australia, in May 2012, and which offered the inspiration and impetus for this edited collection. This was truly one of the best conferences to which I have ever been: I was struck by the energy in the room; the genuine desire to discuss the tensions, challenges and opportunities that lie in the connection between culture, policy and social, cultural and economic development. I was thrilled to see academic colleagues, policy-makers, arts administrators and creative practitioners in lively discussion – the perfect mix for a conference audience, but one that is rarely found in the international cultural policy conference circuit. It is to be celebrated that the editors have succeeded in recreating the same rich combination of voices, experiences and perspectives in this volume, thus creating a rare space for genuine shared, multi-perspectival and interdisciplinary exploration of important themes in contemporary arts practice and policy.

The key argument I made in my contribution to the 2012 conference was that the arts cannot thrive by measurement alone. By this, I did not mean to dismiss the progress that has been made, over the past ten years, in developing better arts evaluation and measuring tools, and a more sophisticated approach to evaluation and evidence-gathering and analysis (both within academia and the sector itself). My aim was to raise the concern that the methodological focus on 'how' to measure adequately might, in fact, be obscuring the equally important (I would even go as far as saying paramount) question of 'Why measure?' I contended that there are merits to

attempting to deconstruct our contemporary anxiety over effective measurement so as to bring to light the assumptions, over-simplifications and downright obfuscation that so often lie behind it. This would entail tackling a fundamental issue that underlies questions of value, and the preoccupations with evaluation and measurement – namely, the issue around the role that evidence, evaluation, measurement and quantification *really* play in policy rhetoric and in the decision-making processes that are at the heart of cultural policy-making.

The official emphasis on evidence-based policy-making presents it as a way to bring a modicum of transparency and accountability to decision-making within the public policy sphere. However, I was keen to show how the reliance on evidence from research, and quantitative and qualitative data within policy discourse and practice, is far from effective in eliminating (or even neutralising) vested interests, political influence and ideological motivations from decision-making. So much of my work to date has aimed to show how data, statistics and other forms of ‘evidence’ are brought to bear in policy discourses precisely with the purpose of muddying the waters of public debates and aid the advocacy of specific positions: hardly a victory of policy transparency and accountability.

However, whilst problematic, this account of the ways in which the effective utilisation of data and information in policy circles does not fit into the linear model of the research-policy nexus envisaged by the evidence-based policy ideal does not mean to suggest that cultural policy-making (or, indeed, any other area of public policy) is outright irrational, or relying on a brutal and Darwinian clash of interests and ideologies. Rather, I would argue that policy-making in general, and cultural policy-making in particular, can be made sense of if we understand the deployment of evidence, research and statistics as strategies in a *rhetorical* exercise. In other words, if we see policy-making as an arena where different arguments about how complex social issues are to be tackled battle it out for dominance, we can begin to see how measurement is just part of the arsenal of resources that can be harnessed to achieve policy change.

More specifically, such an approach to cultural value would highlight the inherently political, agonistic and contested nature of any debate around cultural value, which is inevitably embroiled in questions of power, authority and influence. Arguably, part of the appeal of technologies of auditing and measurement is that they seem to sidestep the political dimension of policy-making, avoiding the need to deal with the political case for impact evaluation as an argument for continued arts funding (which is where the need for ‘evidence’ is seen as more pressing). It is with great pleasure that I see many of these challenges being taken up in this volume, from different theoretical, practice-based, geographical and political perspectives.

Ultimately, I am convinced that a better understanding of cultural value, how certain cultural forms are valued, validated and accounted for in the

public domain (and, crucially, *why*), and the development of broader, more inclusive and intellectually diverse explorations of these themes might result in better policy-making (as opposed to a brand new measurement toolkit). In other words, I am advocating a form of policy-making more aware of the values and intellectual positions at its roots, more transparent about acknowledging them, but also more open to considering different sets of values and modes of valuing *other* than those currently predominant in cultural policy discourse, which – I would argue – are largely predicated on an economic understanding of ‘value’ and ‘valuation’. This volume does precisely this and, as such, represents an important new step forward for the artistic and cultural policy communities.

Eleonora Belfiore
January 2015

Acknowledgements

This collection has its beginnings in the work of three doctoral students based in Melbourne each of whom was undertaking research on cultural indicators. Now graduates and editors of this collection, the research of Marnie Badham (University of Melbourne), Emma Blomkamp (University of Auckland/University of Melbourne) and Kim Dunphy (Deakin University) spanned four countries (Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Timor-Leste and Canada) and their informal collaboration as ‘amigos indicados’ was the original impetus for this collection.

The book has also been significantly shaped by the *Making Culture Count* conference, held at the University of Melbourne in 2012. The conference sought to bring together established scholars and emerging researchers working in the field of cultural measurement internationally, and to provide a platform in which theorists and analysts of cultural policy could mix with practitioners, artists and cultural managers, particularly from state-based arts agencies, cultural institutions and local government.

That conference, *Making Culture Count: Rethinking Measures of Cultural Vitality, Wellbeing and Citizenship*, was a partnership between the Cultural Development Network under the leadership of John Smithies and the Centre for Cultural Partnerships in the Faculty of the VCA and MCM, University of Melbourne, represented by Lachlan MacDowall, now Head of the Centre. The conference was also supported by a number of agencies, including Arts Victoria, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and the Australia Council for the Arts. More than 60 papers from 12 countries were presented and many chapters in this book were developed from those conference presentations. We thank all the contributing authors for their work in refining their ideas for this collection, and for their generosity and patience.

Two keynote speakers at the conference – Eleonora Belfiore (Associate Professor of Cultural Policy at the University of Warwick) and Maria Rosario Jackson (formerly of the Urban Institute, USA, and now Senior Advisor to the Kresge Foundation) – shared thought-provoking research. We would particularly like to acknowledge the support of Eleonora in shaping this book through ongoing collaboration and her leadership in the field of cultural value.

Sadly, two distinguished figures in the field of cultural measurement passed away as this book was being compiled. Michael Volkerling had a long career as a cultural policy researcher and practitioner, and was a valued colleague and contributor to the *Making Culture Count* conference. A version of his conference paper ‘Cultural Policy Research and the “Known

Unknowns''' was to have appeared in this collection. While not directly involved in this book, Colin Mercer was one of the most influential cultural policy scholars of recent decades, a generous thinker who was a supporter and mentor to many. We acknowledge the significant contributions both scholars made to this field.

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Cover image: an informal music event beneath a freeway overpass, Melbourne, Australia (photo: Lachlan MacDowall, 2010).

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Introduction: Making Culture Count

Lachlan MacDowall

In recent years, culture and cultural development have become internationally recognised as important dimensions of contemporary governance and public policy. As part of this process, the production of accurate and relevant data has become increasingly important to cultural policy and how the cultural lives of citizens are understood. There has been a range of conceptual and practical developments in measurement tools, such as new indicators monitoring the role of culture in relation to health and well-being, the vitality of towns and precincts, and sustainability and heritage programmes. From benchmarks for cultural freedom used by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), through to comparative measures of government cultural provision and creative cities indices, there are now many established approaches to quantifying cultural value and measuring progress.

However, many questions remain about the efficacy of cultural measurement. For example, there are technical and methodological questions about how forms of culture can be accurately measured and represented in data. Despite living in an age of pervasive information, framing cultural activities and accessing data about the cultural participation and preferences of particular groups is not always straightforward. There is also a range of questions about the broader political implications of cultural measurement, particularly the ways in which systems of measurement can create rather than capture cultural value, their complicity with neoliberal economic paradigms and their inflexibility in registering cultural difference.

Making Culture Count: The Politics of Cultural Measurement explores some of these significant issues, paying particular attention to the political, rather than technical, issues of cultural measurement. In Chapter 4, Harriet Parsons argues that forms of cultural measurement also present ethical challenges, and that ‘defining cultural value is not a question of finding the right “system” but resolving inherent flaws in the terms of the debate’. We would add it is also a question of finding opportunities to contest, refine or democratise existing systems of cultural measurement. Cultural measurement is

a diverse field that transcends singular disciplines, institutional locations and conceptual aims. It covers a range of systems for measuring aspects of culture, from quantified cultural indicators that lend themselves to comparison and analysis over time, to qualitative measures of cultural value and techniques for the evaluation of arts and cultural programmes. In this book, such diversity is reflected in the range of contributors, who span policy-makers, academics and independent scholars, managers of cultural agencies and artists. The aim of the collection is to promote a shared sense of engagement across these domains, and to highlight the stakes in the design and operation of systems of measurement.

The interests of contributors to this book range in scale from global networks of measurement (Woolcock and Davern, Duxbury and Jeannotte) to the effects of measurement in particular suburbs or neighbourhoods (Badham, Hope), and from carefully argued case studies that propose new frameworks (Blomkamp, Dunphy, Yue and Khan) to wider polemics on the limits of measurements (Redden, O'Connor). Some chapters have been selected because they focus on very recent and ongoing measurement efforts (Tanguay, Badham, Hope, Yue and Khan) while others look to the longer history of cultural measurement in order to develop a critical perspective on the current debates (Parsons, Dubois, Blomkamp). A number of contributors engage with the recent debates on cultural value in the United Kingdom, while considering their broader implications (O'Connor, O'Brien and Lockley).

Among the key features of cultural measurement are the diversity of locations in which it happens, the lack of consensus about its methods, and ways in which questions of measurement seem to draw out and intensify the complexities of the term *culture*. Cultural measurement has to grapple with overlapping and competing dimensions of culture, including its dual aspects: as a bounded set of activities in which a degree of autonomy is prized; and as an expansive and connective aspect of life, spanning everyday and symbolic activities and joining together social, economic and political terrains. The relationship between shifting notions of art and the cultural field also contribute to this definitional complexity. While the basis of much large-scale cultural measurement turns on abstract and generic notions of culture that allow dominant cultural modes to remain unquestioned, more sophisticated approaches have begun to insist on the specificity of culture and its complex relationship to ethnicity, identity and indigeneity. The limitations of how framings of culture operate in practice is demonstrated by Polly Stupples' analysis of an artists' initiative in Central America, in which she argues that the definitions and funding of the arts are highly constrained by the context of international development paradigms, unable to 'find a natural home in either of the two dominant conceptions of development (development as economic growth or human-centred development that focuses on basic material needs and rights)'. In different ways, Chapter 1

by Emma Blomkamp and Chapter 15 by Kim Dunphy provide frameworks for navigating the complexities of these definitional questions.

The chapters in this collection also illustrate how the stakes of cultural measurement vary across times and places. Where, in one instance, there is a recommendation to resist the imperative to measure culture (Goldbard, Chapter 13), others argue that the omission of a cultural perspective is problematic and can be remedied or contested by the development of more relevant measures (Tanguay, Chapter 10; Badham, Chapter 12; Yue and Khan, Chapter 16). This point is also forcefully made by Vincent Dubois, who demonstrates in Chapter 3 how cultural statistics rose to prominence in France as a means of providing legitimacy to the establishment of public cultural policy in the 1960s, only to be deployed to support reactionary rhetoric in the 1980s.

In developing their critical accounts of cultural measurement, many contributors note the importance of assessing the context in which cultural measurement occurs. For some, this means considering how groups assigned lowly cultural rankings might respond, such as Marnie Badham's practical intervention with locals in a suburb dubbed by media as 'the Worst Neighbourhood in Canada' (Chapter 12), or Jamie Tanguay's discussion of how Vanuatu contests its place in the United Nations ranking as a 'Least Developed Country' (Chapter 10). In this case, Tanguay argues it is possible to develop alternative measures of development that incorporate the strengths of local indigenous cultures. In Chapter 16, Audrey Yue and Rimi Khan use ethnographic fieldwork to challenge existing cultural measures and make visible forms of cultural participation in a community with large numbers of recent migrants.

Many contributors in the book turn their attention to the factors driving an intensification of measurement, such as the current emphasis on business planning, strategic outcomes, accountability and evidence-based policy-making throughout the business, non-profit and public sectors in many countries. For publicly funded cultural activities, there is a particular pressure to account for their value and for the efficient and effective spending of funds, and to do so through the prevailing mechanisms of government. But, for some, the drive to measure is not rational but irrational: a compulsion or fixation on quantifying culture, or what Arlene Goldbard in Chapter 13 terms 'Datastan', an empire in which measurements specific to the sciences hold sway in all aspects of social life. As Blomkamp notes in Chapter 1, the power of 'the weight of numbers in contemporary society' comes both from the practical importance and their symbolic power: 'Through categorisation and quantification, cultural indicators transform intangible phenomena and contested concepts into authoritative and seemingly objective knowledge'. Single cultural indices always occur as part of a broader circuit of measurement, implying both cycles and networks of measurement and, over time, tracking and comparisons.

Justin O'Connor, in Chapter 5, argues that the demands for constant quantitative monitoring of cultural organisations, such as occurs in the United Kingdom, creates an 'increasingly metricised cultural sector' in which 'the once esoteric language of neoclassical economics – market failure, transaction costs, business model, Return on Investment, market profile and so on – now pervades discussion of cultural activity'.

Cultural measurement has come to prominence during a period in which data itself has become pervasive. The global spread of digital networks for communication and commerce, and the dovetailing of state surveillance with the data collection of corporations have produced aggregated data on an enormous scale, far outstripping existing capacity for analysis. At the same time, as Dave O'Brien and Pat Lockley note in Chapter 6, traditional methods of data collection and analysis are being challenged by a participatory culture, in which audiences are active agents in the production and sorting of data, and data journalism and data visualisation are more prominent. And yet, despite these torrents of data, José Pessoa points in Chapter 7 to the paucity of formal cultural data sets at a national level, suggesting a mismatch between the areas in which data is produced (such as electronic transactions) and the work of public institutions.

A recurring problem with many forms of cultural measurement has been their inadequacy for dealing with the complexities of cultural processes. Consider, for example, some of the challenges facing the formal evaluation of arts and cultural activities:

- the lack of clarity about what evaluation means: it is currently used to refer to a range of very different procedures with different aims;
- many arts and cultural activities are designed to contest the idea of singular, narrowly-defined or pre-defined ideas of value: these aims are not usually reflected in evaluation frameworks or processes;
- evaluation poses technical problems: what methods will register the kinds of data required?;
- cultural activities are often complex and unfold in non-linear, unpredictable ways, posing challenges for evaluation, particularly where resources are limited;
- increasing partnerships between arts and non-arts agencies can mean differing frameworks for evaluation, with divergent assumptions about success and measurement;
- evaluations often consider 'the arts' in the abstract, without reference to the specific processes through which art-making and collaborative activities actually unfold.

A number of contributors address the challenge of such complexity, such as Kim Dunphy in Chapter 15 in her holistic model for evaluating arts engagement.

As Eleonora Belfiore has argued, behind the debates about the technical operations of evaluation sits a range of political questions about value. Questions of cultural value have re-emerged in recent debates in the United Kingdom and across Europe against the backdrop of a global economic crisis, a widespread questioning of financial systems and increasing austerity measures. This has been particularly so in arts and cultural funding, which have been dramatically reduced in many areas. Since before the global financial crisis, cultural economists such as Hasan Bakhshi and Dave O'Brien have looked to the discipline of economics to find techniques to make cultural value legible within existing measures of economic wealth and existing data collection (such as willingness to pay and social return on investment). These techniques can help make visible the economic impact of cultural production, as well as audience behaviours and preferences. However, critics of this approach have argued that valuing arts and culture primarily in economic terms has been detrimental to articulating cultural value, and that the focus on technical measures has obscured the political questions at the heart of cultural value. Under this view, economics represents not a range of disinterested measurement techniques but a particular cosmology, a set of assumptions about human relations and subjectivity, a theme taken up by Parsons in Chapter 4, Redden in Chapter 2 and O'Connor in Chapter 5.

The cultural value debates suggest that solving the technical operations of evaluation will not remove broader political and philosophical questions about value. Despite some techniques of evaluation offering a seemingly value-free source of data and evidence that might elevate arts and culture beyond debate, questions about value are necessarily political. The title of this collection aims to capture this necessary tension between technical demands and political debates. On the one hand, initiatives to make culture count can have an active and positive drive to include a cultural perspective, and to have it be made visible and taken into account in broader decision-making. On the other hand, too often, culture is *made* to count, in the sense that it is forced unwillingly and unhelpfully into systems of measurement, from where it can be pressed into the service of divergent agendas. This is a tension that must be negotiated in all critical discussions of cultural measurement and it is hoped that this book will assist in this enterprise.

Part I

Qualifying and Quantifying Cultural Value: Critical Accounts of the History and Politics of Cultural Measurement

Introduction

Emma Blomkamp

The politics of cultural measurement are at play both in debates about cultural value, and in attempts to measure the performance and impacts of arts and cultural organisations and policies. The first part of this book outlines some of the key political and historical drivers of the current interest in cultural value and the intensification of forms of measurement. With particular attention to the economic logic of indicators, six authors from different disciplines introduce the historical context of cultural measurement, from the magic of medieval accounting, through sociological surveys of cultural practices, to the spread of neoclassical economics. Together, these chapters highlight the culturally and historically specific nature of debates on cultural value, drawing the reader's attention to the values, theories and power structures embedded in contemporary regimes of measurement.

In Chapter 1, Emma Blomkamp begins by mapping the diverse forms of indicators that are connected to the various meanings of the term *culture*. Blomkamp traces the emergence of economic and social indicators, describing the broad trend towards performance measurement in business and politics. Her genealogical analysis of cultural indicators offers a historical introduction to this field that encourages us to question the apparent neutrality of numbers.

Chapter 2, by Guy Redden, similarly takes a critical approach to cultural indicators' presentation of 'matters of value as matters of fact'. Drawing on the sociology of quantification, Chapter 2 outlines the constitution and effects of indicators. Redden's argument about the power of numbers and the logic of accountancy underlines concerns that cultural indicators cannot come in democratised forms. He takes a nuanced position, nonetheless, pointing to the potential to resist hegemonic discourse and take deliberative action to democratise indicators. Such possibilities are explored further in Part III of this volume.

Vincent Dubois, in Chapter 3, illustrates some of the concerns about governmental uses of statistics. Dubois focuses on the production of cultural statistics as they were developed for the renowned French policy of cultural

democratisation. Although cultural statistics made this policy seem more scientific, they were eventually used as ammunition to critique it. Much has been written on the need for, and development of, cultural indicators, but we know little about how these measures are actually used once produced. This chapter contributes to our understanding of the political uses and implications of cultural statistics in a particular national context.

Disciplinary and historically specific uses of language, especially related to early understandings of culture and of financial accounting, are demonstrated by Harriet Parsons. Chapter 4 explores the poetics of words and the magic of numbers, highlighting the creative and political power of both artists and accountants. Parsons' chapter weaves together 'imaginary machines', such as Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', with Captain Cook's colonial discoveries and more recent phenomena, such as political spin.

Taking Eleonora Belfiore's analysis of 'defensive instrumentalism' within New Labour cultural policy in the United Kingdom as a point of departure, in Chapter 5 Justin O'Connor explores the relationship between culture and economy. While critiquing the pervasive effects of neoliberal economics, O'Connor also points to broader, paradoxically 'positive' trends in the cultural economy, such as the new centrality of culture and creativity. Ultimately, he calls for a radical introduction of new values into an alternative economics.

In Chapter 6, Dave O'Brien and Pat Lockley focus on the significant term *cultural value*, which has permeated recent analyses and debates of cultural measurement, especially in Britain. Tracing its emergence in the United Kingdom and its relationship with the concept of 'public value', before illustrating its current usage through a social media experiment, their discursive analysis explores the incoherence and advocacy besieging discussions of cultural value. Chapter 6 is interesting in its methodological discussion and use of Twitter, representing a particular form of cultural measurement in itself.

Together, these authors make a case for considering the political stakes and implications of cultural measurement. They demonstrate that the framing of measures can effectively create forms of cultural value and that contemporary measurement, precisely because of its political character, should not be considered a substitute for politics.

1

A Critical History of Cultural Indicators

Emma Blomkamp

The topic of cultural measurement often evokes the quotation, ‘Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.’ Although commonly attributed to Albert Einstein, there is no evidence that Einstein actually wrote this, as the legend goes, on the blackboard in his office at Princeton University. Based on an older expression, the phrase should probably instead be attributed to sociologist William Bruce Cameron (1963, 13), who writes:

It would be nice if all of the data which sociologists require could be enumerated because then we could run them through IBM machines and draw charts as the economists do. However, not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.

Regardless of who said it first, this tension between the measurable and the immeasurable remains at the heart of debates on cultural indicators.

‘What’s measured matters’ is another commonly quoted expression that corresponds with contemporary interest in cultural indicators. While it is also difficult to source the original citation, it seems that in 1610 Galileo stated:

The man who undertakes to solve a scientific question without the help of mathematics undertakes the impossible. We must measure what is measurable and make measurable what cannot be measured.

Over time, this scientific rationality has given rise to what British cultural policy scholars Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett (2007a, 137) call the ‘cult of the measurable’. It underpins the emphasis on corporate plans, strategic outcomes, accountability and evidence-based policy-making throughout the business, non-profit and public sectors.

This chapter does not explore the question of whether cultural values and arts impacts can be measured. Rather, it accepts that they are being

measured, and it problematises the knowledge and values that underpin cultural indicators. Paying particular attention to conceptualisations of culture, it suggests four dimensions of cultural value – individual, collective, commodity and process. It then identifies six main types of existing cultural indicators within the matrix of cultural value – economic, human rights, ecological, symbolic, artistic and social policy. Acknowledging that this typology of cultural value and cultural indicators might not be universally applicable, the chapter focuses on the application of such slippery constructs in advanced liberal democracies. This analysis highlights the connections between dominant understandings of cultural value and particular tools of measurement favoured within the ‘cult of the measurable’.

The burgeoning interest in cultural indicators

Around the world, government agencies have demonstrated an increasing interest in cultural indicators since the late twentieth century. At the forefront of international efforts is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2013), with its measures of cultural rights, cultural industries and cultural indicators for development, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014), which has developed statistics to measure the cultural sector of its member countries. UNESCO’s Framework for Cultural Statistics was first proposed in the late 1970s and eventually established in 2007 (Gouiedo 1993; Pessoa et al. 2009). Its long gestation is indicative of the difficulty in developing cultural indicator frameworks, especially for measuring intangible phenomena across different communities and countries.

Meanwhile, at a national level, Australia’s Cultural Ministers Council Statistics Working Group (CMC-SWG 2010) followed its neighbouring government’s statistical office, Statistics New Zealand (SNZ 2006), in releasing a draft framework of cultural indicators. The Canadian federal government has established a Cultural Satellite Account, and academics in the United Kingdom are spearheading the Cultural Value Project (Scott 2014). Some local governments and interested scholars in these and other countries have also attempted to measure the concepts of cultural vitality, cultural citizenship, artistic vibrancy and cultural wellbeing (Blomkamp 2014). Their efforts sit alongside numerous existing frameworks for measuring economic facets of cultural industries and creative cities.

Why are we witnessing this growing interest in cultural measurement? There are many explanations, as the chapters in this book demonstrate, but a fundamental reason is the weight of numbers in contemporary society. In public policy, numbers provide a common and consistent language for communicating decisions, reducing uncertainty, coordinating actions and settling disputes (Innes 1990; Porter 1996; Rose 1999; Stone 2002). The universal language of numbers is especially important in diverse and

dispersed communities where trust and interpersonal knowledge are lacking (Espeland 1997). Through categorisation and quantification, cultural indicators transform intangible phenomena and contested concepts into authoritative and seemingly objective knowledge. Cultural indicators have great symbolic power. As with social indicators, however, their impact is likely to be gradual, indirect and difficult to observe (Innes 1990, 19–20, 248). It is hence challenging to ascertain what difference cultural measurement is beginning to make.

Indicators are an important tool of evidence-based policy and public management. Evidence-based policy can be defined as an approach that ‘helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence at the heart of policy development and implementation’ (Davies 2004, 3). Instead of being inspired by untested assumptions, ideology or speculation, the use of scientific evidence is supposed to make government more rational and modernised. Within this mode of governing, ‘Indicators provide a seemingly impartial and open way to administer [public] programs and help to reduce the complexity of decision-making’ (Innes 1990: 274).

Belfiore (2004, 189) notes that, in the United Kingdom, evidence-based policy was tied to the British Labour Party’s modernisation agenda. From the mid-1990s to early 2000s, ‘strategies’, ‘performance’, ‘inputs’, ‘outputs’, ‘customers’ and ‘value for money’ were common refrains. The use of policy indicators goes back much further than the introduction of principles of New Public Management, however. Indicators are closely connected with notions of governance, population health and the political economy of capitalism.

Cultural indicators’ antecedents

By tracing the genealogy of cultural indicators, we arrive at the emergence of social statistics in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. In his theory of governmentality, Michel Foucault (1994) argues that statistics, as a ‘science of the state’, allowed phenomena related to the population to be quantified. This enabled governments to monitor and manage populations, with the aim of increasing their health, wealth and longevity. Population statistics have been used for more nefarious purposes, too. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social indicators were used in theories of eugenics and to justify racial superiority (Dean 1999, 138–143; Cobb and Rixford 2005, 54–57). These historical insights highlight the particular values and ideologies that have underpinned the emergence and application of social and cultural indicators. This reminds us that they are not a neutral form of knowledge. Such a historical approach can also shed light on why policy practitioners struggle to develop and apply certain measurement frameworks today.