Putting Policy into Performance Studies?

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[1] I am referring mainly to Shannon Jackson's important work, which implores us to address the aporias brought about by a history of administrative allergies.

[2] Many of the papers presented at the 'Cultural Studies Now and in the Future' conference were collected in a massive anthology from Routledge titled *Cultural Studies* (Grossberg et al. 1992).

[3] For a selected overview of these 'debates', see Cunningham (1992), O'Regan (1992), Miller (1998), Miller and Lewis (2003), Bennett (2004) and McGuigan (2004).

[4] Bennett provides a most extensive explication of this 'instrumental' notion of culture in his historical study on the museum. See Bennett (1995).

With this essay, my hope is to contribute to recent conversations about art and its supporting infrastructures – discussions that are working, I believe, to unsettle a kind of anti-institutional prejudice that has haunted performance studies.[1] As my rather polemical title hints, I want to enter these discussions by revisiting an older set of debates that arose in the annals of cultural studies in the 1990s. I argue that Tony Bennett's controversial claim – that we *put* policy into cultural studies – unintentionally invites us to examine how 'policy' itself may continue to serve as a generative term to further unravel unhelpful dichotomies and persistent predispositions. By tracking a critical genealogy of these so-called 'policy debates', I contend also that we move beyond an acknowledgement – or avowal – that arts of institutional thinking are essential in and for performance studies. Ultimately, I want to suggest that performance *as* policy has a unique capacity to inspire experimental modes of social organization and perhaps even an overhaul of our institutions of public life. My hope is that an examination of the ways a notion of what I call 'institutional (dis)avowal' is already embedded in the history of contentious conversations about culture and administration will both bolster this claim and open avenues for further enquiry.

STAGING THE 'CULTURAL POLICY DEBATES'

In April 1990, an international crowd of almost a thousand scholars gathered for a conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.[2] Among those poised to present

papers was Tony Bennett, whose provocative polemic would raise more than a few eyebrows. Indeed, Bennett's 'Putting policy into cultural studies' catalysed a set of heated 'policy debates' that would polarize interdisciplines in the critical humanities for years to come.[3] As Bennett explained, he was interested in a radical reappraisal of the underlying theories and political orientations of cultural studies. Specifically, Bennett took issue with a preponderance of neo-Gramscian thinking that, so he claimed, committed a generation of scholars to 'too automatic a politics' and to a romance of resistance indifferent to the specific institutional conditions that give rise to particular political situations and 'regulate different fields of culture' (Bennett 1992: 25). Instead, Bennett called for an explicitly pragmatic agenda for cultural studies – one that, in his most sardonic articulation, insists that we abandon 'heady skirmishing with postmodernism' and 'sleuth-like searching for subversive practices just where you'd least expect to find them' (32).

In Bennett's admittedly idiosyncratic view, Foucault's writings on 'governmentality' demanded a 'revised understanding of the 'relations between civil society, culture and the state which allows culture its autonomous spheres and forms of action' (Bennett 1998: 10). Unlike Gramsci's flows of hegemonic ideology, says Bennett, Foucault does not rely on a notion of centralized power. Rather, governmentality is characterized by a diverse means of social management that exceed state action. Culture, Bennett insists, is one of those regulating technologies that shapes social relations and organizes human conduct.[4] Culture is, in

a certain sense then, already policy. For this reason, Bennett suggests that 'an engagement with policy issues needs to be seen as a central component of the practical concerns of cultural studies' (4). Further, he stresses that a policy-oriented cultural studies must

> begin to think the possibility of a politics which might take the form of an administrative program, and so to think also of a type of cultural studies that will aim to produce knowledges that can assist in the development of such programs. (Bennett 1992: 29)

Bennett's proclivity for disciplinary institutions and administrative programmes, in addition to his flagrant diatribe against the 'contrived appearance of ineffable complexity' that, in his mind, characterizes so much social theory, evoked very strong reactions (33). Even if one was compelled by Bennett's particular reading of Foucault, why should cultural studies become cultural policy studies a priori? Why should cultural critics become bureaucrats? Fredric Jameson was only the first to excoriate Bennett for his 'anti-intellectualism', 'obscene … proposals', 'misplaced advice', 'remarkably misleading' tone and overall 'ignorance' (Jameson 1993: 29–30). What followed were years of adamant debate, resulting often in the most starkly polarized – and often suffocating – positions: policy versus cultural criticism, top-down versus bottom-up practices, reformist versus revolutionary politics, and contextualist versus textualist emphases.

In a quite peculiar turn, this was also the criticism that Bennett himself hurled back at debate participants in his book-length intervention in 1998. Surprisingly – and without much explanation – he condemned his many 'real and substantial' critics for their own propensities toward binary thinking and for their failure to adequately demonstrate a more productive permeability between policy and critique. Although he continued to lament the 'serious blockages to an adequate engagement … with the horizons of policy', Bennett suddenly dashed the air of exclusivity, of strict either/or, from his vocabulary and hinted instead that there must be a mutual imbrication of seemingly contradictory perspectives – although he provided little methodological help (Bennett 1998: 5). In an even more unusual move, Bennett claimed that the penchant for polarity on the part of his critics – and perhaps himself – was an extension of, and could therefore be blamed on, Theodor Adorno's infamous meditations on the inherently 'contradictory tensions between culture and administration' from his 1959 radio lecture of the same title (194). Bennett accused Adorno of first formulating and then sustaining the irreconcilable antinomies that came to constitute the 'torn halves of policy research' (Bennett 2004: 237).

Bennett's invocation of Adorno is powerful precisely for its provocative misreading. Indeed, Adorno's analysis provides the very tools necessary to unsettle the overwhelmingly stagnant binaries that Bennett accuses him of fixing in the public imaginary. Rather than explicating an impenetrable set of opposites, Adorno's mode of negative dialectical argument provides methodological insight into the ways a more *critical* policy studies could – and should – explore the nuanced entanglements of policy and critique that Bennett and many of his critics failed to demonstrate. Further, Adorno begins to articulate the radically different kinds of institutional practices and programmes enabled by embracing such tendentious interdependencies.

Bennett focuses the bulk of his critical attention on a later moment in 'Culture and Administration' in which Adorno 'opens a perspective for the protection of cultural matters from the realm of control by the market' by turning to the admittedly 'ignominious figure of the expert' as a potential foil to the reified logics of administration (Adorno 1991: 129). In his attempt to imagine what kinds of historical actors may advocate for this perspective, Adorno postulates a kind of Benjaminian critic 'whose task it is to uphold the interest of the public against the public itself' (129). Here Bennett digs in his heals, as he has little patience for what he considers to be Adorno's blatantly elitist commitment to 'men of insight', to the 'aesthetic personality who alone is able to act in the sphere

of administration in the name of values which exceed it' (Bennett 1998: 198–9).

It is a shame, however, that Bennett pays almost no attention to Adorno's broader discussion about the nature of policy itself. Although Adorno's 'expert' language and its classed, raced, gendered and abled entailments are problematic, his unfortunate wording does not pervade the essay in its entirety, nor does it theoretically exclude more radically inclusive formulations. Committed to his negative methodology, Adorno does not posit a lone elitist who proceeds from a 'position of transcendence in relation to its object' (Bennett 1998: 200). Rather, Adorno's critic must both critique, even protest against, those most pervasive institutions, just as they reflect their 'objective substance' (Adorno 1945: 678). Elsewhere, Adorno remains most open about the kinds of 'critics' and the arts of critique that may prove useful in exposing the ways culture and administration enact their own interdependence. Indeed, Adorno works consistently to demonstrate the ways a more critical form of policy can only be thought immanently from within the very material and always heteronomous ranks of the publics in which it is invested. As he insists:

> [C]ultural policy would not misunderstand itself as godwilled; it would not blindly endorse faith in culture, blind to its entanglements with the social totality – and for that very reason truly entangled – it would find a parallel in the negative naiveté involved in accepting administration as faith. (Adorno 1991: 128)

In a certain sense, Adorno's position is one that *already* accommodates and challenges Bennett's. Adorno is certainly aware of, and dialectically obliged to consider, the most pragmatic horizons of policy, and takes seriously the suggestion that we begin 'talking to … what used to be called the ISAs [ideological state apparatuses] rather than writing them off from the outset' (Bennett 1992: 32). In the opening half of his essay, he examines how all artists and their modes of production are deeply reliant on the material and financial supports of the varied administrations in which they are enmeshed. As he explains, 'the

appeal to the creators of culture to withdraw from the process of administration and keep distant from it has a hollow ring' (Adorno 1991: 119). Indeed, Adorno obliges himself to interrogate closely a version of Bennett's later claim that 'we can now, without regret, treat culture as an industry' (Bennett 1998: 199–200), even if Adorno's version of no regret more closely resembles the 'urge to release the safety catch on a revolver' (Adorno 1991: 108).

Even more interesting, however, are the ways that Adorno begins to imagine alternative possibilities for administration itself. He is interested in, and again dialectically obliged to, thinking through what policy may entail if it were to exceed increasing normalization – to which Bennett seems to have already subscribed. Adorno is interested further in thinking through what kinds of institutions and administrative programmes this different mode of policy may enable. Here he begins to sketch, albeit most tentatively, what I call a negative art of *institutional (dis)avowal*. This is a practice or 'dialectical idea of absorbing that which is spontaneous and not planned into planning, of creative space for these factors and of a strengthening of their possibilities' (127). In this moment, Adorno alludes to the ways a more 'creative' institution may embrace its own determinate negation. He gestures toward an institution that is itself obliged to reckon with the concrete particulars of its own contradictions, to reckon also, in other words, with its own inherent proclivity for spontaneity, processuality, even instability. In a move, then, beyond a more unilateral critique of administration, and at the same time, in a move beyond the sphere of idealist autonomy that Bennett associates with his thought, Adorno sketches the broader entailments of a critical cultural policy. This alternative institutional orientation – one of (dis)avowal – would necessarily attend to the more 'pragmatic' considerations of dollars, cents, nuts and bolts, while *also* proliferating practices and programmes that move beyond obduracy or entrenchment, and that call urgent attention to the institution's own penchant for 'renouncing itself' (128).

POLICY AND PERFORMATIVITY

Ten years after Bennett's inaugural polemic, Toby Miller and George Yúdice shifted the discursive terms of the 'debates' with the publication of their *Cultural Policy* (2002). On the one hand, their volume directly challenged Bennett's dismissal of the 'committed norms of cultural studies', thus taking up an expressly politicized agenda:

> Our book seeks ... to articulate knowledge with progressive social change, with social movements as primary *loci* of power, authorization, and responsibility. More conventional research articulates knowledge with social reproduction, with governments as primary *loci* of power, authorization, and responsibility. Whereas our project is concerned with transforming the social order, the alternative seeks to replicate it – a struggle between cultural policy as a transformative versus a functionalist sphere. (Miller and Yúdice 2002: 3)

While Miller and Yúdice stress the importance of 'committed' scholarship, their project also engages with Bennett by focusing critically on the specific institutional conditions that give rise to political situations and regulate different fields of culture. Specifically, they argue that an appraisal of the *performativity* of policy is necessary to account for the complex interplay between the 'transformation' and the 'replication' of institutional matrices already in place and at work. In his solo project on the increasing *Expediency of Culture*, published just the following year, Yúdice makes a similar claim: 'The very term [cultural policy]', he explains, 'conjoins what in modernity belonged to emancipation on the one hand, and to regulation on the other' (Yúdice 2003: 25). In line with his larger argument diagnosing the ways that culture has become a central resource in the globalized, post-Fordist market economy, Yúdice sees policy as a necessary consideration *and* intervention at a time when 'culture is being invoked to solve problems that previously were the province of economics and politics' (ibid.).

In place of Adorno's 'administration' and Bennett's 'governmentality', Miller and Yúdice describe a performative 'field of force generated by differently arranged relations among institutions of the state and civil society, the judiciary, the police, schools and universities, the media, consumer markets, and so on' (44). The varied national – and sometimes multi-national – intersections of these institutional frames compose a matrix of comportment and knowledge production. For Miller and Yúdice, then, cultural policy must be thought in terms of performativity because, in part at least, it is 'dedicated to producing subjects via the formation of repeatable styles of conduct, either at the level of the individual or the public' (Miller and Yúdice 2002: 12). Cultural policy, they continue, often implies the 'management of populations' through suggested forms of normalized behaviour, which have varying degrees of force depending on the context: 'enjoining [for example] universal adoption of bourgeois manners or stratifying access to cultural and other material resources on the basis of other demographic categorizations' (14-15).

In his lengthy exposition of Judith Butler's early work, Yúdice also reviews how her theory of performativity was devised precisely to contest these most constraining frames. He recapitulates the ways in which her politics of 'disidentity' emerges from and plays within the sovereign aims and representations of the institutional regimes of power, discourse and culture. Here, however, Yúdice raises his most fundamental objection. Questioning the 'efficacy' of Butler's theory, he asks just how she proposes to *actually* confound those most powerful and normalizing institutions. '[D]econstructive analyses', Yúdice claims, 'work quite well for texts but seem powerless before the operations of the institutions that exert regulatory force over these texts' (Yúdice 2003: 58–9). He continues:

> Butler's contention that the 'turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a "pure" opposition', has yet to be elucidated at the level of institutions and their effects.... To the degree that Butler imagines

"democracy" ... to inhere in such forms of gender trouble, and more generally, cultural trouble, she is caught up in the very fantasy that she aims to elucidate'. (Yúdice 2003: 59)

For Miller and Yúdice, cultural expression (of 'content') is by no means a sufficient strategy against the ubiquitous 'condemnation' to perform. In an age of expedience, in which culture functions as a technology of biopower on a global scale, 'there is little to be gained by deploying identity or disidentity if there is no juridical or other institutional uptake' (78).

It is for this reason that Miller and Yúdice turn to policy as a means of both participating in and intervening in culture. In one of his clearest articulations of the importance of this kind of explicitly institution-based thinking, Yúdice explains (albeit in the form of a disclaimer): 'It is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate on the premise that there is no outside of institutionality and that it will not do to expect an external force – the real – to solve the problems of an institutionally bound practice' (Yúdice 2003: 317). To work against the institution, in other words, is 'another way of allowing that institution to frame the understanding of the practices and to seek to incorporate it' (319–20). Instead – and this is the methodology Yúdice invokes in his final book chapter on the international inSITE triennial – it is necessary to understand, and to discursively critique, the inner workings of the institutional matrices that enable, or performatively shape, acts of culture. But, in addition to this understanding, Yúdice claims that it is also essential to participate in the institution itself in an effort to modify it from within:

Study allows us to see how the cultural economy functions. But what do we do once we see how it functions? Critique of this venue will not produce the disalienating effects believed to ensue from the uncovering of ideological structures.... What inSITE calls for, in my view, is to become a user, a col*labor*ator who intervenes in order to have the labor expended recognized and compensated. Venues like inSITE become important sites of the reformulation of cultural policy in a post-Fordist, globalizing world, not from the vantage point of a government agency, foundation or university

office, but by engaging as an archaeologist-practitioner in the process. (Yúdice 2003: 337, emphasis in original)

Yúdice insists that we understand arts institutions like inSITE as complex systems of labouring bodies and infrastructural supports. And the task of a critical policy practice is both to expose the supporting structures upon which those bodies depend to do the kind of work they do *and* to engage those supports on behalf of the workers who make them possible.

For some critics, Miller and Yúdice end up sounding more like Tony Bennett and less like Judith Butler than perhaps anticipated. Peter Osborne, for example, is frustrated with what he reads as Miller and Yúdice's resigned endorsement of 'actually existing politics' and accompanying reduction of policy to an advocacy programme for better working conditions. 'How', Osborne laments,

did the path that Yúdice and others set out on in their desire for a cultural studies linked to a transformative left populism come to terminate in the sorry state of a cultural theory dedicated to legitimating an emergent political-administrative status quo? (Osborne 2006: 43)

My sense, however, is that Osborne oversimplifies Miller and Yúdice's analysis, which, in certain moments at least, is interested in more than a simple avowal of the way things are. 'Cultural policy', they claim, 'refers to the institutional supports that channel both aesthetic creativity and collective ways of life' (Miller and Yúdice 2002: 1). And while policy is often associated with deliberate institutional practices, they explain that it is also 'often made unwittingly, through the permeation of social space by genres that invoke a particular kind of organization of audience that may maintain or modify ideological systems on an *ad hoc*, inconsistent basis' (2). In this iteration, which seems to glance in Adorno's direction, policy is not a completely bound and determined activity. Rather, it is also something that can happen in action, inadvertently, '"on the run", in response to unpredictable pressures' (2). It is a practice of participation and intervention within the institution that is uniquely poised

to help us rethink how the institution itself is organized – to avow, in other words, the administrations that govern while also imagining, and perhaps even enacting, their undoing. The performativity of policy, then, also becomes an enabling paradigm, one that takes hold institutionally, and – at least potentially – performs a negative mode of (dis)avowal.

Interestingly, while Miller and Yúdice are critical of Butler for her presumed lack of institutional uptake, these more Adornian moments in their meditations on policy begin to sound something like Butler's own recent recontextualizations of her performativity theory from the perspective of contemporary social movements. In this newer writing, Butler draws explicit connections between her earlier work on gender and her subsequent work on precarity.[5] '[I]f performativity was considered linguistic,' Butler asks, 'how do bodily acts become performative?' (Butler 2011a). Although she is operating in a context outside the 'policy debates', Butler makes it quite clear that critics like Miller and Yúdice have misread one of her central interventions by relegating her project to a merely discursive exercise. She insists instead that 'there can be no reproduction of gendered norms without the bodily enactment of those norms' (Butler 2011a). And elsewhere: '[P]erformativity is not only speech, but the demands of bodily action, gesture, movement, congregation, persistence, and exposure to possible violence' (Butler 2011b). Indeed, for Butler, performativity functions precisely as a mediating term between language and body, both of which – and this is most central for her – are interdependent and infrastructurally supported acts:

> It is not, then, exclusively or primarily as subjects bearing abstract rights that we take to the streets. We take to the streets because we need to walk or move there, we need streets to be built so that ... we can move there, and we can pass through that space without obstruction, harassment, administrative detention, fear of injury or death. If we are on the streets, it is because we are bodies that require publicly funded support to stand and move, and for living a life that matters. (Butler 2012: 108)

It seems, then, that Butler would agree with Miller and Yúdice that there is no outside of institutionality. Indeed, bodies depend upon varied forms of social and institutional support, and this most fundamental state of interdependency comes into highest relief precisely as it is disavowed by the very infrastructures upon which it relies – for employment, education, healthcare, shelter, freedom of expression, dare we say art-making. '[T]his produces a quandary', Butler claims, in an articulation that reminds us also of Adorno's inescapable yet constitutive tensions: 'We cannot act without supports, and yet we must struggle for the supports that allow us to act or, indeed, that are essential components of our action' (Butler 2011b). Here Butler works explicitly to elucidate a contemporary politics of performativity by means of destabilizing acts of institutional (dis)avowal. She proposes a practice of 'acting together that opens up time and space outside and against the temporality and established architecture of the regime, one that lays claim to materiality, leans into its supports, draws from its supports, in order to rework their functions' (Butler 2011a). Here Butler also implicitly refunctions Miller and Yúdice's dialectics of 'replication' and 'transformation', of 'regulation' and 'emancipation', for now the platform of politics itself is front and centre on the policy agenda as we are asked to 'reconfigure what will be public' (Butler 2011a).

PERFORMANCE AS POLICY?

In a 2012 keynote co-performance at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Butler further recontextualized her recent thinking in order to re-examine ways that performance itself may be understood as performative. In doing so, Butler explicitly expressed her debt to, or interdependency on, the work of her co-performer, Shannon Jackson, whose ongoing project demonstrates different ways that the interdisciplinary art of performance both relies upon and mobilizes a diverse set of interdependent bodies, objects and

[5] This writing is collected in her forthcoming volume. See Butler (forthcoming).

institutions. In her 2011 book, *Social Works*, Jackson enumerates an 'infrastructural politics of performance' (Jackson 2011a: 21), which calls into question a longstanding and widespread 'mistrust of structure', institutions, bureaucracy and policy, not only in 'neoliberal … circles but also [in] avant-garde artistic circles and critical intellectual ones where freedom was increasingly equated with systemic independence' (24). Instead, Jackson's work exposes the complex matrix of interrelated social institutions – both material and immaterial – that enable and also constitute the work of performance. As Butler explains:

> I take from Shannon the importance of the following question: how do we understand that mode of performance art that imagines it is without any need of infrastructure in a time when the destruction of social and economic infrastructure seems to be happening all around. (Butler and Jackson 2012)

During the MoMA co-performance, Jackson claimed that she is interested additionally in the ways that these acts of critical exposure may also constitute a 'performance-based institutional reimagining' (Butler and Jackson 2012). In closing, then, I would like to press this point briefly. Once we recognize performance – as I believe we must – as a set of interdependent and infrastructurally supported acts, how are we to understand such practices of 'reimagining'? Jackson suggested one answer to this question in the pages of this journal in 2011 when she introduced her notion of 'infrastructural avowal' (that also appeared in *Social Works*):

> I am most interested in social practices that provoke reflection on the non-autonomy of human beings, projects that imagine agency not only as systemic disruption but also as systemic relation. Through social art projects that provoke a reflection on the opportunity and inconvenience of our enmeshment in systems of labour, ecology, able bodiedness, social welfare, public infrastructure, kinship and more, expanded artworks might induce a kind of 'infrastructural avowal,' that is, an acknowledgement of the interdependent systems of support that sustain human beings, even though we often feel constrained by them. (Jackson 2011b: 10–11)

But, I would ask Jackson, are we ready now to move beyond practices that induce 'acknowledgement'? May we also think about how performance itself questions, critiques and even fundamentally challenges the institution *as* its way of acknowledging – of (dis)avowing – this interdependence? In light of the preceding analysis – and especially in light of Butler's toggling of transformation and replication, of emancipation and regulation, even of disruption and relation – I find myself most interested in performance practices that lean on and into systems of support as the *very* means by which they seek to rethink, confound, destabilize, disrupt, even undo them. To phrase it differently: I am fascinated by the seemingly paradoxical circumstance in which those artists who receive support make use of it in order to critically question its conditions and, simultaneously, work to imagine just how those supports could, even should, look differently. Indeed, as we continue to reimagine – and to refigure – just what is and will be public, I look toward performance as a performative art of policy to help us chart the way.

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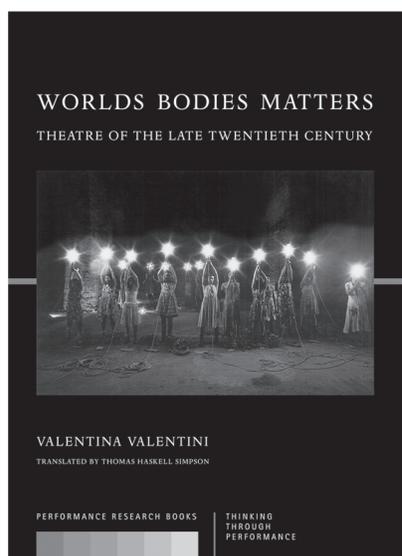
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