

SARAH BROUILLETTE: UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary. Palo Alto, CA (Stanford University Press) 2019. 192 pp.

In *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary*, English studies scholar Sarah Brouillette explores the ways in which cultural policy reflects and responds to political agendas and economic considerations. She observes that cultural policy is frequently “a site of reproduction of people with certain dispositions...that complement, contest, or engage ambivalently with styles of governance that are themselves shaped by underlying economic realities” (2). Taking the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a case study, Brouillette describes how this global institution’s cultural policies are affected by “the shifting states of the global economy and the dominant ideologies and cultural policy directives attached to them” (3). UNESCO’s cultural policymakers, for instance, have instrumentalized literature in attempts to assuage or align with international political economic pressures brought to bear upon the institution.

Three signal phases in UNESCO’s history are identified, which, in turn, serve as the arrangement for the book’s dense discussion. Within each historical phase, Brouillette situates and analyzes the impacts of changing political economic circumstances on the institution’s cultural policies, specifically those focusing on the literary field and literature.

Beginning with UNESCO’s creation, and until the 1960s, the first phase was shaped by a postwar liberal cosmopolitan worldview pitted against threats of totalitarianism, communism, and feared global disintegration. This first phase became associated with the institution’s Collection of Representative Works that sought to assemble “the world’s most notable literatures together onto a global roster of masterworks... to foster cross-cultural understanding and help to establish the bases of lasting world peace” (21). Although the objectives hoped to stimulate a universal culture and cultivate an international consciousness, the collection’s scope and storage were problematic. The scope was narrow, focusing exclusively on classic literature emanating from the world’s dominant languages; meanwhile, the storage was restricted to only a few Western archival settings. At the time, however, these restrictions were adjudged as “key and determining feature[s] of the enterprise” (26) instead of being controversial.

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Coinciding with the 1960s and 1970s, UNESCO's second phase concentrated on decolonialization, inequality, and humanistic development, which was exemplified by the institution's declaring 1972 as International Book Year to advocate for increased access to books to ostensibly improve people's lives. The institution's commitments were geared towards "a humanistic rather than economic world view" (65) in which its policies imagined "culture as a humanizing answer to the depredation of developmentalist capitalism" (67). This aspirational humanizing answer entailed redressing cultural imbalances between developed and developing countries, in this case, through the promotion of books. UNESCO recognized that, due to the reliance of developing countries upon book imports from abroad to help meet their educational and intellectual needs, books "had become a specific kind of tool: a tool controlled by a small part of the world's population and yet needed for participation in a global conversation about what kind of global order would unfold in the wake of colonialism" (96-97). This phases' aim was to help nurture local literary fields in developing countries to offset creative, publishing, and distribution imbalances in the global cultural industries.

Commencing in the 1980s, UNESCO's third, and present, phase has been influenced by both a neoliberal economic ideology equating culture with productivity and growth, as well as economic stagnation and turbulence. During this time, UNESCO's cultural policies have approached culture as a resource and "conceived as a form of wealth that, properly husbanded, protected, and promoted, results in job creation and economic development thanks to growing visitor and creative economies" (101). During this phase, UNESCO has become "fundamentally dependent on the existence of viable, legitimate, legally protected markets for cultural import and export" (101), and thus its current efforts are channeled towards ensuring "the economic profitability of culture" (101).

This troubled third phase is reflected in UNESCO's capitalist-oriented programs such as the City of Literature, World Book Capitals, Creative Cities Network, and World Book and Copyright Day. These current programs are differentially implemented. In wealthy areas, these programs, and the resources devoted to them, "largely tend to support and sustain existing metropolitan markets for culture, where relatively wealthy and leisured consumers are assumed to power the dynamism of the creative economy" (102). Contrastingly, in impecunious areas, UNESCO often solicits resources from public and private partners for

profit-focused programs supporting new creative enterprises. These tend “not to highlight literary development much at all...Instead, [the area’s] future economic development is thought to require other sorts of [economic and financial] programming support” (108). The primary goal is to generate money, business activities, and employment opportunities, in addition to easing social strife usually associated with underemployment.

These current cultural policies nevertheless share a neoliberal approach to literature as economic resources. First, UNESCO’s cultural policies—whether employing literature to promote or strengthen literary industries or using literature as a tool to create jobs or build new businesses—are positioned to promote capitalist and financial expansion. Second, UNESCO is increasingly dependent upon public-private partnerships to fund its programs and events. The institution has begun to expect that whatever locality is granted one of its programs or events, it should “include some plan for the development of literary experiences that might incorporate new audiences, or to identify new ways of extracting value from the literary tradition, such as via partnerships with the video game or smartphone industries” (122). Finally, UNESCO has become consumed with copyright enforcement to secure private sponsors and funding. Copyright, in other words, has become regarded as a tool in which to cater to capitalistic concerns and mutually benefit both businesses and UNESCO.

While Brouillette’s incisive critiques of the often-infelicitous impacts of political economic realities on culture and cultural policymaking are convincing, they can sometimes seem overly deterministic insofar as literary production and consumption is concerned. The literary field is portrayed as a passive place in which literary production and consumption are unassertive undertakings and pliable by-products of governance and financial forces. Yet, creating, producing, and consuming literature can be, and are, imbued with agency and determination that possess the power to transform and impact the world. There are other factors, including personal, cultural, and intellectual, that also drive and determine literary production and consumption in addition or parallel to political economic realities.

Scholars in cultural studies, as well as authors, librarians, archivists, curators, and cultural policymakers, should nonetheless find this book of academic interest. Its historical overview and accompanying critical analyses of UNESCO’s changing cultural policies can help shed light on the ways in which cultural policies in various contexts are similarly

impacted by political economic forces. Indeed, as this book compellingly demonstrates, these forces not only affect cultural policies, but also in so doing, shape perceptions of what culture is or can be, the roles it plays, and the places it can inhabit in the world.

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