

**CultureWatchEurope conference 2010
"Culture and the Policies of Change"
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Part I: Re-thinking Cultural Policy by F. Matarasso

1 WHY RETHINK CULTURAL POLICY?

1.1 Culture, art and policy

People express their values through culture. Consciously and unconsciously, they create, choose, advocate and reject beliefs symbolically expressed in objects, rituals, language and performances collectively known as culture. In Western European thought one highly sophisticated and self-conscious cultural practice has been distinguished from the rest under the term 'art'. That distinction, itself an expression of values, has created debate and contestation, but that, after all, is one of the purposes of culture: to make meanings and to identify those who share them.

Much as individuals and social groups have cultural values, public bodies, corporations and institutions have cultural values that are expressed in their policies and practice. Sometimes they are articulated in formal statements, though these may describe ideals rather than reality; more often cultural values are unconscious, implicit or unacknowledged. States are the most obvious creators of cultural policies, at national, regional and local level. But they are not alone in cultural policy production. Public and not-for-profit bodies such as museums, universities and even health services each, in their own ways, produce cultural policy. So do private sector corporations, though not all may be conscious of it: Google's influence on culture is complex and profound.

Policy is a small and seemingly benign word, which is usually taken simply to refer to the stated intentions of governments and other bodies. But policy shares a root with police and part of its sense is to define what is permissible and how conduct is to be regulated. Since policy is also not always published, even when public bodies make it, its relation to the sectors or activity it aims to affect may be opaque and is often contested.¹

Public policy for culture, at least in Europe, typically concerns itself with three loose domains:

- Those associated with the achievements of national culture or civilisation: the 'fine' arts, some performing arts, museums, historic buildings, sites and monuments; the complex associations between 'national' culture, identity and citizenship has in some cases linked cultural and education policy, for example in library services;
- States became concerned with broadcasting early on, typically seeking direct control over it at least in part; rapid technological change, and notably the Internet, presents them with ill-defined and unresolved challenges;

¹ Bennett, T., Grossberg, L. and Morris, M. eds. 2005, *New Keywords, A revised vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Oxford: Blackwell, p.258-9.

- More recently, the economic character of current public discourse has made cultural policy more conscious of the so-called creative industries, which are still widely taken as the domains defined by the UK Department for Culture in the late 1990s.²

The definition and boundaries of these domains varies in different countries, as does the extent of the attention given to popular forms of cultural expression. Some states include industries such as tourism within cultural policy for largely pragmatic reasons: cultural assets attract visitors. Differences in perspective may also mean that a practice is considered a concern of cultural policy for different reasons: thus cinema is seen as part of national culture in France but as a creative industry in Britain. A more significant distinction may be observed between states that associate culture and religion in administrative and policy terms.³

Although cultural policy is most evident in the formal positions adopted by governments about these domains and activities, it would be a mistake to think that it ended there. In fact, it is better understood as comprising the whole discourse about culture involving public, private and not-for-profit organisations and increasingly citizens. Policy or action that seems quite unconnected with culture may have large, if unintended, effects on it. To add VAT to building repairs but not to new construction may be seen as a fiscal measure designed to increase the housing stock. But, by incentivising the demolition and replacement of old buildings, this policy's impact on the built heritage may be greater than many formal cultural heritage statements.

The idea that culture is a marginal concern for most people, or that it is not a priority for public policy, is not reconcilable with this analysis. Governments can no longer limit their focus to areas such as heritage, libraries, the arts or broadcasting that have conventionally been seen as the domain of cultural policy. On the contrary, culture is always a dimension of decision-making, even – or especially – when it is so embedded as to be unnoticed. Consequently, it should be at the heart of how European people imagine, negotiate and develop their democratic societies.

1.2 Culture and the Council of Europe

The importance of culture to those democratic processes is one reason why the Council of Europe is concerned to encourage recognition of and debate around its role. The Council was established in 1949 to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law across the continent. With 47 members, it links almost every European state via its statutory bodies (Committee of Ministers, Parliamentary Assembly and Congress). Through intergovernmental work processes the organisation has been concerned with culture and education since its earliest days, building the reconciliation and integration of the continent on cultural cooperation, as reflected in the European Cultural Convention of 1954. It has established programmes such as the European Heritage Days, supported European film co-production, developed pilot initiatives such as Intercultural Cities and runs capacity building and regional co-operation programmes in former CEE countries. These activities are underpinned by its cultural policy work including national reviews, the knowledge base of CultureWatchEurope with its online information tools on cultural, heritage and media policy and the publication of research and policy guidance.

² 'The creative industries do not constitute a concept; they are made up of an arbitrary grouping of diverse cultural, communicative and technological practices. The mystical 13 are these: advertising, architecture, art and the antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and television and radio. There have been various reformulations but this simple enumeration remains astonishingly durable.' Schlesinger, P. 2009 *The Politics of Media and Cultural Policy*, MEDIA@LSE Electronic Working Papers, No. 17; see http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/study/pdf/EWP17_final.pdf

³ There is at least an etymological justification for doing so.

1.3 Why do this now?

The cornerstone of cultural policy in Europe – the concept of democratising culture – was laid in the period after the Second World War. It responded to an urgent need to protect human rights, to rebuild democracy and to heal divisions within the European space. Much has done since then to achieve these goals, though there can be no complacency in a world faced by complex new problems.

But Europe in 2010 is very different from Europe in 1950. Its people, society, politics, security, technology, environment and economy – all have changed profoundly. And those changes have been reflected in and shaped by its changing culture. Or cultures: even the uncertainty about whether we can speak today of a single culture is a sign of the distance we have come.

As a result, the concepts – explicit and implicit – that have framed cultural policy need to be tested against the world we now inhabit. Some will no longer be found meaningful and others will evolve so that governmental and non-governmental organisations can develop better frameworks for responding to today's needs and opportunities.

This has been true for some time – perhaps as long as 30 years – but it has been given an added urgency by the banking crisis of 2008 and its continuing impact. The most optimistic analysts accept that the bank bailouts and fiscal stimulus packages forced on many governments will have serious and lasting consequences for public finances. A reduction in the funding that European states expend on supporting culture is just one likely result.

But the recession is only part of the change evident at this time of historic uncertainty. It should be a focus for action, but must not define the boundaries of the rethinking now needed about culture, its role in society and how Europeans respond to that change.

That rethinking will not be done in a single conference, or by one small group of people. Nor is it a process that a single organisation, even one uniting 47 countries, can manage. But we can start a dialogue, begin to ask new questions and look for common ground in imagining how to meet the uncertainties ahead. Succeeding in that would already be an achievement – a democratic and cultural achievement.

1.4 This discussion paper

In keeping with this analysis, this paper does not set out to solve the challenges facing cultural policy today or even to provide a definitive exposition of those challenges. Instead, it provides a structure, linked to that of the conference itself, within which to begin thinking. The work we anticipate will follow as a result of this event is likely to find other analyses, approaches and responses.

The economic crisis and its urgent implications for culture across Europe are a natural starting point, high in the minds of politicians, policy-makers and cultural and creative workers. Finding coherent, principled approaches in times of financial restraint will be crucial in safeguarding cultural life in the short term.

But limiting the damage of funding cuts is not enough: indeed, it is only the beginning. Even within the economic sphere there are other challenges to consider, some arising from the recession, but

others driven by deeper forces such as climate change and new modes of production. We have therefore proposed two additional strands of reflection.

The first considers the connections between culture and wider public policy, including areas such as education, the environment and social cohesion. In many of these areas, culture professionals are already active and changing practice – their own and that of those they work with. But their role may also be to raise questions, imagine alternatives, communicate experiences and share ideas – all the things people look to culture for.

The second asks how culture itself is changing and the consequences for existing policy. That change is evident in every sphere. New technology is reinventing how culture is made, shared, bought and critiqued. Democratisation, diversity and rights are bringing new voices, new forms and new expressions into the established cultural space. Under these multiple influences, our very concepts of culture are evolving.

1.5 Conference questions

But this is still a very large agenda. So, for this conference, we have proposed to focus on two principal questions: the first reflects the urgent need for responses to economic instability while the second considers change on a longer timescale.

- What immediate steps should governments and public bodies take to protect the creativity, vitality and diversity of European cultural life in next three years?
- What are the opportunities and dangers that policy makers need to understand so that European cultural life can flourish and fulfil its potential in the next 20 years?

The rest of this paper gives some background to these by sketching some of the issues for cultural policy in a changing and increasingly uncertain world. It raises further questions and areas of enquiry, but is no more than a starting point for discussion: the quality of the discussion it encourages is what matters.

2 CULTURE AND ECONOMICS

2.1 Banking crisis, recession and public finances

The steps taken by different governments to safeguard their economies since 2008 appear to have prevented a catastrophic collapse comparable to 1929, though the future remains uncertain and fears remain of a 'double-dip recession'. Economists differ about how fast and how hard different countries should cut back on public expenditure, but not about the need to do it. Austerity measures may be in place for a long time to come. Yet the anticipated demands on public expenditure associated, for example, with aging populations will not vanish because of this crisis. One result may be disproportionately severe pressure on discretionary spending. The Irish government – faced with imposing pay cuts on public sector workers – made substantial cuts to the Arts Council budget in 2009 and 2010. Other countries, such as Greece, are facing similar crises in their cultural budgets.

The recession has already had an impact on other sources of funds readily accessed by cultural organisations. Charitable trusts and foundations have seen their income hit hard by falling asset portfolios, dividends and interest rates. Corporate sponsorship has also been reduced as companies curb expenditure, even if only for symbolic reasons.

When reductions come, they will follow a period of sustained growth in public spending on culture in many western European countries (though the situation has been very different in some of the former communist countries in the east). This growth has contributed to and supported an expansion in cultural supply over recent years. For example, in the US, Americans for the Arts calculates that the number of not-for-profit arts organizations grew in number from 73,000 to 104,000 in the decade up to 2008; they also calculate that a third of them failed to achieve a balanced budget in that time.⁴ Although the US cultural economy is different from Europe's, the vulnerabilities are similar.

The cultural sector and its supporters will need to rethink the basis of their arguments in this climate to convince people that culture is not a dispensable luxury. New alliances will have to be formed reflecting a real understanding of other people's concerns and the role of culture in responding to them. Above all, culture must avoid being merely another problem faced by public bodies, another expenditure line: in these comparisons, it can only be marginal. Instead, the cultural sector must be able to show that it offers solutions and positive responses at a time of difficulty. If it can attract audiences and partners to obviously worthwhile programmes and activities, friends will follow.

- What principles should guide the responses of cultural ministries and public bodies faced with reduced budgets? Should some grants or organisations be protected at the expense of others? If so, on what basis?
- What scope is there for efficiencies in shared services, co-production and mergers? Should there be different expectations of those cultural organisations that continue to receive public support?
- What alternative investment models could be developed for public support of culture? Should there be a greater focus on stimulating demand?

2.2 Culture and wealth creation

The public sector is only part of a society's cultural ecology. Most cultural and creative organisations, including many who receive some public funding, depend also on trading in the mainstream economy. The creative industries, which range from multinational corporations to freelance individuals, have grown with a booming consumer economy. This expanding market has attracted new entrants who may find it difficult to survive in leaner times. In 2003, 39,242 young people were accepted onto Creative Arts and Design Courses in British universities; by 2008, the number had risen to 49,188, a 25% increase in five years in the numbers who are training for the arts job market.⁵

Whether the consumer spending power that has supported parts of the creative sector will be available in years to come is an open question. Economists such as Joseph Stiglitz anticipate

⁴ See http://www.americansforthearts.org/information_services/arts_index/001.asp

⁵ See http://www.ucas.com/about_us/stat_services/stats_online/

major changes in the global economy: if so, how will the creative industries change with it? Living on thin air may not seem so attractive in future.

Similar questions arise in respect of the cultural tourism that has driven much growth in arts festivals and cultural infrastructure. A depressed leisure economy, perhaps associated with changes in the economics of travel, would place many cultural institutions in financial difficulty. As a result, it may be harder to secure public sector support for activities whose economic impact, in contributing to place marketing, is secondary.

The development of digital methods of creation, reproduction and distribution are also undermining the economics of other, once powerful businesses. Media companies, publishers, record labels, newspapers: all are working hard to find new ways of selling content but the answer remains elusive. Even the advertising revenues that have driven much of the Internet economy may slow with a contracting consumer economy. At the same time, the publicly support cultural sector lags far behind in this area. There is an opportunity to redefine users, to develop new support networks and even to change the subsidised business model – with imagination and commitment.

- What are the policy implications of recent technological, cultural and financial change in the commercial cultural industries?
- How can policy foster a sustainable future for cultural tourism?
- How can public policy assist freelance creative practitioners to earn a viable living? Is it time to look at other mechanisms than copyright to protect creators' earnings from intellectual and cultural property?
- Should small, new and innovative digital creators be protected from the economic power of the Internet's mega-corporations.

3 CULTURE AND PUBLIC POLICY

3.1 In from the margins

One of the biggest changes to culture in recent decades is also one of the least commented upon: the transformation of its relationship with other areas of public policy and of social and economic life in general. What once was seen as a recreation, a restorative after the demands of everyday life, has come to permeate not just the economy but community life, education, even health services. Culture is a terrain of political contestation, most obviously in the symbols of ethnic and religious diversity. It is increasingly important in public services, in communication and diplomacy and in personal identity.

The reasons for this gradual coming in from the margins are complex and they vary in importance in different countries within Europe. Obvious factors are the social changes that have brought higher education, leisure and disposable income to more Europeans than ever before. More intangible is the decline of party politics and organised religion as sources of shared meaning and identity (a decline that has also made space for radical ideologies of all kinds).

At the same time, governments in developed countries, having made big strides in areas such as public health and education, now face seemingly intractable problems and ask if a cultural dimension to programmes may prove effective. Some object to what they see as the instrumentalisation of culture. Others welcome the recognition of the centrality of cultural experience to every aspect of life. For better or worse, there have rarely been greater or more complex expectations placed on the cultural sector from other quarters.

3.2 Culture's policy connections

The connections between culture and non-economic public policy are too varied to enumerate here, but at least some of the more notable instances can be mentioned. Perhaps most obvious among these is the role of culture in education, both in its own right and in supporting wider learning goals. Cultural organisations are increasingly expected to provide educational programmes to school pupils, often related to aspects of the curriculum. In some countries, creative programmes have been used to raise attainment, engage disaffected young people or provide alternatives to traditional teaching methods.

The increasing focus of health policy on wellbeing, as distinct from disease prevention, has encouraged arts and health practice in medical and community-based health services. Arts on prescription schemes are now operating in several British cities, while culture is seen as both a cause of childhood obesity (too much television) and a response to it (more sport and outdoor activity).

The cultural sector has begun responding to climate change by considering the carbon footprint of their own activity and by creating projects that raise awareness and debate. There are also connections here with the 'sci-art' interface that has sought to explore the differences and similarities between research methods and epistemologies between these fields and promote public understanding of science through artistic work.

Changing work and social structures have weakened the bonds of European societies in recent decades, even as immigration has increased their diversity. Public policy has turned to culture in its attempts to address social cohesion and inclusion, partly because it is widely seen as fundamental to issues of individual and group identity. Intercultural dialogue is the latest but not the last policy initiative in this area.

Culture has also been seen as an important way of responding to the difficulties faced by post-industrial cities. New museums and cultural venues have been built to cement regeneration, alongside cultural quarters to attract Richard Florida's 'creative class'. Less celebrated community cultural programmes have aimed to support local communities in adapting to their changing social and economic situations.

All these developments have been contested in different ways and for different reasons: culture remains a preeminent forum for the negotiation of ideas, practice and values.

- What is the role of culture in supporting formal and informal learning?
- In what ways could cultural policy respond to the challenge of climate change?
- In the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, what contribution can culture make to social inclusion?

- What role can culture play in reviving Europe's cities?
- What is the role of culture in Europe's increasingly diverse and mobile societies?

4 CULTURE ON ITS OWN TERMS

4.1 A technological cultural revolution

In the 1950s, the Council of Europe and many national governments set out to achieve a democratisation of culture. In many ways, that has been realised, but not as the architects of that policy imagined. There has been an increase in the accessibility of public cultural services since the 1950s, and audiences have grown and been appreciative. But the big transformation has been a technological revolution that has been rightly compared with the arrival of moveable type printing in Europe.

People have always had the means of cultural production at their disposal: music, dance, stories and craft have been the arts of even the poorest Europeans throughout history. But new digital and communication technology has enabled people to access the standard of cultural production previously available only to organisations with large resources and then to enter a cultural forum on their own terms. Freed from dependence on the judgements of editors, producers or businesspeople, artists, musicians, filmmakers and writers, among others, have been able independently to seek out an audience for their work. And the views of audiences are increasingly challenging the ability of cultural leaders – whether producers, critics or businesses – to control ideas of quality.

In some areas – initially music, but also now in film, visual art and literature – digital technology has transformed systems of production and distribution. This has affected cultural publishers and retailers of different kinds, but the most obvious impact has been on record stores, which have gone out of business in large numbers. Although file sharing has been blamed for this, the price-cutting competition from big online retailers may be the bigger cause.

The arrival of ebooks is expected by many to do for reading what digital downloads did for music but the real lesson of the Internet revolution is that all forecasts are unsafe.

For instance, one consequence of the huge availability of music today has been to devalue its currency. When records were expensive artefacts, often hard to get hold of, listeners invested them with much greater importance than they do today. In the 1970s, bands lost money playing live to promote albums that earned well. Today musicians give away music with newspapers and charge inflated prices for concert tickets. It's not just the economics of music that have been transformed: it's the cultural meaning. The live experience – as most performers have always thought – is valued above the record of it.

So profoundly has this new technology transformed our world and our culture that it is hard to remember how things were before the World Wide Web. But in the enthusiasm of novelty and liberation from existing ways of thinking and working it is important to ask questions about the risks and dangers that may be involved.

- What is at stake in the digital cultural revolution?
- What standards and principles should govern public policy in this field?
- Can cultural democratisation be continued through these means? If so, how can access to the digital world be secured for all?
- How should public policy respond to the increasing control over cultural goods and access by new media corporations?

4.2 Imagination

Although it is convenient for policy to frame these discussions in terms of changes in cultural production, distribution and consumption, one of the key changes enabled by new information and communication technology has been a blurring of boundaries that were once seen as clear, even rigid. The coining of the term 'prosumer' marks a growing recognition, not just that people can be both cultural producers and consumers (something that has always been the case) but also that conventional ideas about professionals and amateurs are increasingly meaningless. As museums and other cultural institutions open up curatorial and programming process to forms of co-creation, the knowledge of professionals is being modified by the experience and insights of their audiences.

Despite what has been said about the importance of new technology the most profound changes now evident in European culture are imaginative not technical. The boundaries between forms and types of culture are eroding: the latest video games exploit the narrative devices of postmodern fiction and the visual language of film noir to create new cultural experiences. Collaborations between musicians from very different cultures attract audiences with much more fluid ideas of value and value hierarchies. New cultural expressions are part of the European mainstream now, not simply as a result of increased ethnic diversity, but because historically marginalised people, including women, disabled people, gays and many others are creating new kinds of cultural identity.

At the same time, there are fears for cultural heritage – not only the great achievements of the past in literature and the performing and visual arts but also the assets of our cultural inheritance: historic buildings and sites, museums, archives and collections. There are calls for a return to 'excellence', though without a clear explanation of what it might be, nor how something as elusive can be achieved through policy.

Europe has so far contained the worst aspects of the 'culture wars' that have proved so divisive in other parts of the world but it would be naïve to think it was immune from the dangers. Finding democratic accommodations for the increasingly diverse values now expressed through culture within the European space is one of the most urgent challenges facing national and local governments and society itself.

- Can existing ideas of excellence respond to differences, subjectivities and innovation?
- Does it matter if a small proportion of the public use public cultural resources?
- How can cultural heritage live and thrive in the present?
- How should policy respond to the range of cultural expression within Europe?

5 A NEW PARADIGM?

Do the changes suggested in the preceding paragraphs signal the emergence of a new social paradigm for culture? That is something for the conference to consider but even this quick sketch of the landscape suggests that many of the assumptions that have guided cultural policy in Europe

no longer hold. The anxiety and sometimes hostile reaction produced by this change are symptoms of the weakening of norms and a growing recognition of uncertainty.

The political, social and technological democratisation of culture during the past two generations has hugely expanded the number of active creators in European societies and enabled them to find audiences and like-minded collaborators. The results of their creative work, their interactions and their mutual influence are beyond imagination. But policy-makers must still set the parameters of public interest in culture and attempt to advance the public good through laws, regulations, fiscal regimes and other measures.

At the same time, the number of policy-making actors has also expanded to include cultural industry and civil society representatives, lobby groups and academics. This demands new responses from government and new ways of engaging with multiple stakeholders and alliances. Culture needs to fulfil its potential for inclusive, participative and democratic policy making and, in doing so, point the way for public policy more widely.

This conference can consider whether such substantial changes require reference to a new paradigm for cultural policy, or whether it is sufficient to amend existing but still valid ideas. It builds on earlier work by the Council of Europe, in partnership with other interested bodies, including a conference on "Culture & Development 20 Years After Fall Of Communism In Europe", organised with the International Cultural Centre, Cracow in June 2009; and a conference by EUNIC on 'Breaking Down Barriers' in October 2009.

It is conceived as an adaptive process in which *how* debate and reflection occur will be as important as what is discussed or which principles might ultimately be adopted. The organisers hope that focused discussions in the working groups – inspired by the questions in this paper – will bring responses to the two key questions formulated earlier:

- What immediate steps should governments and public bodies take to protect the creativity, vitality and diversity of European cultural life in next three years?
- What are the opportunities and dangers that policy makers need to understand so that European cultural life can flourish and fulfil its potential in the next 20 years?

Conference ideas will flow into a follow-up process, through which the Council of Europe hopes to foster successful multi-stakeholder co-operation, bringing together policy actors from different levels and sectors, practitioners and researchers around a shared interest and commitment. There are no detached observers here, no bystanders: we are all the creators and creatures of our common culture.