

# Many Voices

## The importance of cultural diversity in democratic society

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CULTURAL DIVERSITY IS NOW A TOPIC OF URGENT DEBATE IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, AND often with a subtext of anxiety, doubt, even fear. Politicians and commentators ask whether the multicultural society has failed, citing as evidence everything from terrorism to school dress codes. Those whom they discuss pose the same question from another perspective, arguing that integration follows equal access: as the French *slammeurs* John Pucc' Chocolat and Grand Corps Malade ask « Aviez-vous remarqué que l'ascenseur social est bloqué / Et qu'les experts ont bien mieux à faire que d'le réparer » ('Had you noticed that the social elevator is stuck, and that the experts have better things to do than to fix it').<sup>2</sup> Intellectual debate within academic circles has been equally sharp and equally divided. The reasons behind the emergence of these arguments are not hard to find: the changing demographics of European society and the ideological challenge of Islamism in the post-communist vacuum are only two of the most obvious factors. But there is another, perhaps less well-recognised, aspect: the changing nature of the European nation-state.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, European empires were succeeded by much smaller nation-states forged around defining myths of ethnic, religious and cultural uniformity and powerful historic narratives. By 1945, as a result of war, genocide, forced resettlement, legislation and administrative measures, the populations of western European countries was probably more homogenous than they had ever been; (comparisons are neither easy nor very meaningful since contemporary concepts of identity differ so much from those that existed in the past). Since then, for economic and social reasons, that unreal uniformity has been gradually eroding, a situation that many people brought up within its cultural norms find difficult. But cultural diversity, not monocultural nationalism, is the norm of human experience. Most people today, as in the past, live in societies composed of citizens with widely different cultural, religious and linguistic traditions. Over a quarter of the world's nations has two or more official languages, while of the 192 member states of the United Nations, only 42 have a state religion, and several of those recognise more than one.

It is possible to see the growing cultural diversity of European states not as the loss of a golden age of social cohesion, but as the normalisation, in world terms, of societies that experienced a historically short period of apparent unity achieved through massive loss of life, displacement and 'ethnic cleansing'. If the relative ethnic and cultural homogeneity of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe was no more than a temporary abnormality, in historic and global terms, there are important consequences for how the societies concerned should adapt to their changing circumstances.

Perhaps this seems somewhat abstract, distant from the practical challenges of arts administration and cultural development. Actually, it cuts to the heart of what public cultural policy is for, and highlights a constant and increasingly difficult tension in the cultural policies of European liberal democracies, namely, what (or whose) culture should be supported. Indeed, that question has now become even more sharply defined, implicitly at least, as what (or whose) culture should be *restricted*. State cultural policy, as expressed through diverse legislative, administrative and financial measures, has always articulated, more or less overtly, a complex set of values associated with the state and the society that it governs. But if that society is thought, by some people at least, to be losing the essential cohesion that makes it a society, then the basis of national cultural policy itself looks shaky. It is that challenge I will consider today, and particularly by looking at some of the current tensions in how that policy is shaped, and how well it serves all the citizens of a democracy.

These connections are so important because culture is how humans express their values. People must do many things to survive: eat and drink, keep warm (or cool), develop social ties, produce children and so on. The satisfaction of these everyday needs is the basis of human activity: *how* they are satisfied is culture. All the painstaking variety of dress and food preparation, of social and religious ritual, all the stories, images, sounds and designs – through these and similar signs, people create, define and communicate their sense of meaning. Human beings seem compelled to distinguish good from bad, right from wrong, the admirable from the shameful, the tribe from the others, and they use the infinite complexity of cultural expression to mark those distinctions. Whether it carries those meanings and distinctions consciously or unconsciously, overtly or implicitly, culture's human importance lies in its capacity to externalise what people care about, what gives meaning to their lives. To say it simply, culture is the expression of human values.

The arts – a concept that is itself peculiar to post-Enlightenment European cultures – are among the most sophisticated means human beings have invented not just to express their values but also, uniquely, to challenge and change them. Through creating, witnessing or participating in the arts, people engage in a complex and subtle dialogue through which they and their peers shape meaning in their lives. That dialogue

is both a reflection of and a commentary on the public discourse of every society, sometimes affirming it, sometimes subverting it, always enriching it with perspectives and understandings that are not otherwise represented within it. The arts are rational but not only rational: they also celebrate and exploit other aspects of human perception, notably the senses, in articulating human experience. They use techniques such as metaphor, allegory and symbolism and work on feeling and sensuality to express what cannot be said in words: what they do say is ambiguous, usefully deniable. They move, excite, destabilise, manipulate, influence and transform and they can be very powerful: Dionysus was, for the Greeks, both inspiration and warning, vine and ivy intertwined.

However, while the power of the arts to create and communicate meaning is an unequivocal good, the results of that power's use are much less certain. There is a parallel with science, another conceptual system that has given human beings great power over their lives and environment: in itself, it is an extraordinary tool, but not all that can be achieved through its application is desirable or good. Similarly, people use art to give form to ideas and beliefs that others question or oppose; and art's techniques, which often bypass rationality, can make it a fast and powerful carrier of those ideas and beliefs. As the example of popular music in the 1960s illustrates, new artistic sensibilities can spread faster than a virus and produce equally dramatic results. One of the most firmly held beliefs of those who love western art is that it is intrinsically good, even, in Matthew Arnold's famous, if misunderstood, expression, that it represents 'the best that has been thought and done'<sup>3</sup>: but that is a matter of faith, no more capable of proof than the existence of God, and it assumes that all people, not matter the diversity of their experience and culture, will inevitably agree what is best. But even a limited acquaintance with history and philosophy will show that sophisticated art has been used to articulate oppressive, evil ideologies, and that even a love of Schubert is no guarantee against barbarism.

Ironically, it was in the aftermath of the Second World War, which had so clearly shown the failure of culture as a guarantor of civilisation, that Western European democracies laid the foundations of today's cultural policy, both domestically and through trans-national institutions like the Council of Europe. Recent experience seems not to have shaken the faith of those who built this conceptual and actual infrastructure: on the contrary, they sincerely believed that the correct response to genocide was to reaffirm the value of culture and extend access to it. What mattered then was the democratisation of culture, alongside other public services such as education and health, to ensure that more people could enjoy its unquestioned benefits. There was little doubt as to the character of those benefits, and little consideration of how culture actually functioned within or upon society. Such an approach was possible

because most European societies were then culturally and ethnically relatively homogenous, partly as a consequence of the horrors they were determined not to repeat. Political and cultural leaders could and did make confident assumptions about both societal values and the value of culture, partly because they were ignorant of, or actively ignored, discordant voices that indicated a more complex reality.

In the subsequent half century, the appearance of a cultural consensus has been harder and harder to maintain, though there are still many who, for different reasons, would like to do so. But Europe in 2006 is not Europe in 1946, or even 1966. To take just a few instances, the voice of women in social, political and cultural life has been transformed, while immigration has created many new Europeans with cultural roots and social ties to other parts of the world. Theory and philosophy have challenged assumptions about how culture is created, for what purpose and by whom: 'the death of the author' has become an intellectual given, and post-modernism has undermined claims of cultural authority. Yet culture has grown in importance, socially, politically and commercially, changing constantly the while with the emergence of new forms of production, distribution and consumption. Even criticism has been transformed, so that opinions of new films, books and music are now formed as much by people communicating online as by critics writing formally for publication; one can only imagine what Matthew Arnold would have made of it.

Whatever its intentions, it would seem that public policy has not simply democratised culture, as was envisaged in the 1950s, but allowed to emerge a kind of cultural democracy – or perhaps more accurately the potential for cultural democracy. It is difficult to imagine a time when it has been easier for more people not only to access national cultural life, but also to become actively involved in influencing that life and even to earn a living doing so. I don't mean to suggest that cultural democracy is achieved or general, but there is an unprecedented diversity of expression in European culture today, and that it is closely linked to a gradual process of increasing democratisation in European societies.

In saying that, I do not see democracy as a constant, but a spectrum of political systems; democracy can take many forms, as evident for instance in France, Britain or Switzerland, to go no further afield. In other words, it is not a fixed state, as some proselytising politicians would have us believe, but an ideal that is understood differently in different places and at different times, through the filter of different cultures. Partly for that reason, democracy is also a relatively unstable system, subject to constant adjustments that reflect the competing interests of its constituent parts. As well as continuing internal inequalities, there are anti-democratic forces willing to subvert or overturn democracy itself. Despite its current prevalence in Europe, democracy

should not be mistaken for a natural outcome of development: it needs to be created, supported and protected.

Given its function as a creator of meanings and a carrier of values, culture is a powerful force within any strong democracy. The cultural domain acts as an alternative forum within which individuals and groups present and argue for their vision of the world: it was to this function that I was referring when I spoke earlier of a national dialogue. Culture permits people to try out values and ways of being without making lasting commitments. It is often more sensitive to changing social values than legislation: acceptance of homosexuality was evident in British culture long before it was decriminalised in 1967. One vital democratic function of culture is to enable people with minority values, ideas or lifestyles to represent themselves to the majority, to become subjects of their own characterisation rather than the object of other people's. Denying unpopular minorities the right to participate in the national cultural discourse is a standard abuse. The genocide of European Jews was prepared by excluding them from the arts, publishing and education: instead, the Nazi state filled the cultural environment with grotesque travesties of Jewish people and culture masquerading as novels, films and journalism. If that seems an unrepresentatively extreme example, there are plenty evident today: in Britain, for instance, disabled people, travellers, asylum seekers and people with mental health problems have all, in varying degrees, struggled to achieve the autonomous cultural representation that other groups take as a right. Today, other absences are evident in the national discourse, for good reason, some would say. To argue against such exclusions is not to offer comfort to hatred, masked or unmasked, but to defend the concept that democratic citizenship entitles people to represent themselves, even when doing so causes great offence to others. There is a legitimate limit on that representation if the values people express attack other citizens or the democratic structure of society as a whole. That is the basis of British laws that, quite rightly, outlaw incitement to racial hatred. Crucially, however, there are two important restraints on how the right to freedom of expression can be lost. First, it can only be withdrawn from an individual, not from a group. Secondly, it must be withdrawn following judicial conviction of an offence against the law – it cannot be enforced pre-emptively, because of a suspicion of what may be intended.

These issues demand immensely difficult judgements from the official structures of democratic states, though they have legal and administrative frameworks to guide them, and they are concerned largely with relatively straightforward statements by individuals. But cultural administrations and institutions increasingly have to face similar challenges in the context of a hugely diverse and discordant cultural sector whose clashing values cause deep offence and worse. The use of religious symbolism

in contexts as different as *Jerry Springer: The Opera* and Madonna's latest world tour has shocked many Christians and caused some to ask why their feelings are not protected by legislation. In 2004, Birmingham Rep put on *Bezhti*, a new play by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti that included some scenes of violence in a Sikh temple: the resulting civil disturbances caused the theatre to cancel the production under police advice. It is some time, in Britain at least, since street riots silenced people from expressing their values through theatre; I am rather afraid it may not be the last time.

In these fractious, sometimes dangerous times, there is an urgent need to rethink the basis of public cultural policy. It is no longer enough to assume a national consensus based on shared cultural values and promote the work that is judged to reflect that vision. It's not that society has become so fissiparous that there are no longer any common cultural values: that would imply that society itself could no longer exist. This is not the time to fall for simplistic relativism, or to lose faith in the possibility of human mutuality and cooperation. If public cultural institutions can no longer simply assert the existence of a shared cultural base that they alone understand, they must work actively to develop that common ground. It must be nurtured and protected, not unlike democracy itself, and it is the primary task of national cultural policy and associated institutions such as ministries of culture to do that.

But before they can envisage such a role, they need to build trust in their good faith as convenors of a cultural discourse that is fair, inclusive and open. There is no reason to expect those who feel marginalised by existing public cultural policy to accept the legitimacy of public actors. That in turn requires a shift from actively promoting certain normative or hegemonic cultural values, to ensuring a level playing field for other actors. It requires, if you like, public cultural policy to move from being a player, seeking to score against opponents, to being a referee, ensuring that other players respect the rules of the game. To some extent, that is the role it already plays, for instance in regulating commercial cultural activity; legislation on the proportion of French product to be included in radio or cinema programming is a well-known example. Subsidising art forms and expressions that would not otherwise be able to take the field is another common mechanism. But the key to this change is to establish some clear rules governing state intervention into the cultural discourse of a democracy. I will conclude by proposing some simple principles that might underpin an attempt to develop an equitable cultural policy along the lines I have suggested.

First, the state must recognise the cultural arena as a crucial component of democratic life, parallel to the formal structures and institutions, such as parliament, by which democracies shape their law and administration. The quality of a democracy is reflected in and influenced by the quality of its cultural life and the way in which it functions.

Secondly, and arising from this first principle, the state must recognise that every citizen has an equal right to participate in that cultural life. In fact, most states already do, since they are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, under article 27, guarantees everyone the right to participate in the artistic life of the community. Unfortunately, this right, like others in the same document, is often disregarded or even forgotten. But it is included for very good reason: as I have argued, that right to participation is a key safeguard against the erosion of other human rights.

The third principle follows from this: the state must recognise the need to protect weaker voices to ensure that they are able to exercise their right to cultural participation. Those weaker voices come in all shapes and sizes. Some are art forms that cannot survive well in a market economy, because of their costs, small audiences or both: some of the performing arts, such as orchestral music and opera, are obvious examples. Others need support because they belong to minority groups, without the organisational, social or educational resources to avail themselves of their rights. Support will also be needed by innovative, experimental or unproven cultural expressions, those that may prove in time to be vital but cannot yet demonstrate that importance to a wide public or to commercial partners. Others still will need protection because they present controversial, challenging work, or simply represent unpopular groups or values.

The fourth principle is the obverse of this: that anti-democratic voices are not entitled to support and must, in extreme cases, be circumscribed. The right to participate in cultural life, like the right to vote, can be lost by individuals who use it to attack the structure that secures the right in the first place. Democratic societies are entitled to defend themselves against those who would overthrow them.

The overarching purpose behind these four principles is to foster the greatest possible cultural diversity within a democratic framework, so as to ensure that the voices of all the members of a society can be heard. Paradoxically, it is often the majority interests who find this idea most threatening, perhaps because they fear the loss of a dominant position. But minorities do not stop being minorities because they have equal rights: majority values will continue to occupy a majority position, simply because of the numbers of those who support them. At the same time, the real test of democracy is not whether it enforces majority rule (it is hard to see how it could not) but how far it protects minorities and contrary views.

There are those who reject the possibility of a culturally diverse democracy. The Dutch academic and poet, Afshin Ellian, himself a refugee from Iran, has argued that multiculturalism is incompatible with democracy since it is an ideology and democracy has no official ideology; he further contends that a democracy must be monolingual.<sup>4</sup> But, setting aside the fact that democracy is itself an ideology expressed, in

practice, through the distinct culture of specific times and places, it seems to me that democracy cannot exist without freedom of expression, since that right guarantees the legitimate participation of all members in the system itself. Freedom of expression must include cultural expression, and the state must do all it can to guarantee that freedom for all citizens. The inevitable consequence, in a world that is intrinsically diverse, is a growth of cultural diversity.

But promoting cultural diversity is not merely a by-product of democracy, or a question of protecting minorities: it is in the general interest to ensure that the widest possible range of cultural expression is available. It allows everyone to access new experiences, incubates innovation, and safeguards against narrow thinking. Perhaps it is naïve to propose that national cultural institutions, long used to defending a particular set of cultural values, should transform themselves into defenders of democratic cultural participation itself. It is certainly a huge challenge. But the alternative is the gradual marginalisation of public cultural services as other forces, including commercial ones, contest the values that will shape Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Opera houses and national theatres may continue unchanged, until the day they close. So the overarching goal of cultural policy today, I believe, should be to build a diverse cultural democracy with confidence in the long-standing European cultural values that gave us the idea of democracy in the first place. It's not easy, but it could scarcely be more important – and it may help us avoid some of the traps ahead.

## Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> 'Ça peut chémar', *Midi 20*, by Grand Corps Malade (Éditions Musicales Djanik 2006)
- <sup>3</sup> Arnold, M. (1993), *Culture and Anarchy and other writings*, edited by Stefan Collini, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiculturalism#\\_note-4](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiculturalism#_note-4) (accessed 5/9/06).