



Culture as an Instrument of Social Transformation

*by Ronald Grätz**

The Basic Idea

It is well known that culture is a key factor in sustainable development and in securing the success of social change. Culture stands for heritage, which is the basis for determining the future. Culture shapes people's identities and strengthens social cohesion - and it divides societies. It builds bridges between groups and peoples, it creates peace, and it is a significant economic player. Culture encompasses ways of living, religion, law and science, tradition and innovation, art and music, language and literature. In short, culture is what people create. It is the matrix of people and of humanity, and globally the most powerful engine of change and integration. Culture is neither good nor bad at per se, but rather reveals its qualities in social contexts.

An Attempt at a Definition

Culture, seen academically, is thus a partial system of complex modern societies that are based on intellectual and aesthetic interpretations of the world, and it has a key function in maintaining these societies.

If we see culture as a system of social orientation or a mental map, then it represents the entirety of socially shared values and norms, ways of life and forms of knowledge, patterns of thought, action and perception - all appropriated by people through socialisation, and defining how societies differ from each other.

Thus it is clear that culture has direct relevance for political action by state and civil-society protagonists in all forms of communication and styles of cooperation. Culture has an internal function to integrate and create identity, and it also has the function to exclude the exterior, insofar as it adheres to notions of inner homogeneity.

Culture as an Instrument

This description and delineation of what culture is clearly shows that culture by definition cannot be used as a mere instrument - as the title of this contribution may suggest - and certainly not for the politics of state interests. Any attempt to use culture as soft power, as a tool for nation branding, for example, will end in simplistic advertising or clichéd folklore.

In the societies of Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union, culture is an important way of jointly shaping development policy and innovative policies for the future and for peace within global contexts.

Culture as an Engine



Under present global political conditions, culture, cultural diversity and the creative economy are important resources for innovation. These offer orientation and possibilities for identification and integration in an increasingly confusing world, and provide space to test out new solutions for social problems. These cultural resources also open up opportunities for investment, as can be seen in the quickly growing film industry. The potential of culture for transformation and development becomes apparent when cultural diversity is deliberately promoted. Music, the theatre, film and the performing arts offer spaces for a critical exploration of social problems and they often directly formulate proposals for improvement. The arts and creative industries frequently work as catalysts and politically committed people working in culture are often the seismographs of social challenges.

Culture and the Economy

In addition to its social relevance, culture also has considerable influence on the economy and economic policy. Culture and the creative industries are the fastest growing sectors of the economy. Experience with large-scale film production in India and Africa, and also in Brazil, as well as innovative trends in product design, in the arts and crafts and fashion, shows, that culture can be an engine of the economy, promoting not only social transformation but also economic development.

Culture and Conflict

ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen), an organisation working in cultural exchange and dissemination within the remit of the foreign cultural and educational policy of the Federal Republic of Germany, has come to understand that processes of social change - often in the wake of crises or conflict situations, are primarily the result of civil-society initiatives from grass-roots level. Understanding that civil society is the most powerful shaper of societies and that state administration has lost significance is one of the great insights that we have gained. One result of globalisation and development is that many people are now demanding participation in politics and wish to be convinced by political decisions and have their opinions heard.

EU-CELAC

In the dialogue and cooperation between the EU and CELAC, for the reasons named, cultural exchange must play a role alongside political and economic or technical exchange. It is precisely here that interests-based politics becomes a shared responsibility and that thinking in terms of states is transformed into thinking in terms of societies. Furthermore, in the field of culture in our globalised times, national ascriptions are becoming more and more vague. Certainly language, history, and specific typical cultural forms of expression still form the core of people's identities. But in music and in fashion, for example, any firm sense of one place only is receding, and we now have to think in terms of spaces of shared communication, of collective



memories and of supra-regional narratives. This is true of the Mediterranean area, for example, where a number of very different singular cultures come together to form a Mediterranean culture as a condensed space of communication and identity.

New Forms of International Cultural Relations

ifa sees a great challenge in reshaping international cultural relations on the basis of insights from transformed cultural processes engendered by globalisation. National isolation of the like we are seeing today in Europe is no way forward, and it will ultimately fail. Not only culture and art, but also humankind - and individual people - are all striving for more freedom, more autonomy, and to shape their own societies in this freedom.

Final Remarks

It is necessary to understand culture in its entirety and to see the significance and substantial power of cultural processes in order to shape changes, promote transformation and facilitate dialogue. These are but a few of the many beneficial aspects of social transformation through and with culture. Without any doubt, they should be explored furthering political processes to unlock their full positive potential.

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This paper was prepared for the EU-LAC Foundation's Newsletter of July 2017 on the theme "Culture". This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the EU-LAC Foundation.