

THE NECESSITY OF CULTURE

by Chris Torch

1

DEMOCRACY





Calls for developed cultural leadership have been heard numerous times. It has become obvious for many that the missing ingredient in the European Project is culture.

The original impulse to a European union of nations was a natural reaction to centuries of war, colonialism and the unique cruelty of the first half of the 20th century. Creating inter-dependent economic and political systems was envisioned as a guarantee for ending aggression, conflict, even poverty. As the short-sightedness of this “rational” construction has become exposed, the cultural factor grows more significant. The recent turbulence of people on the move, mass migration from wars and poverty in North Africa and the Middle East, underlines the necessity of culture - cultivating empathy, provoking dialogue, mutual transformation of values and social units. If the key challenge - and it seems to

be - is competent negotiation, what response would be more appropriate than a cultural one?

There explodes a sudden need for cultural leadership: producers, policymakers, innovators, team builders. It is human-structure we lack, even when infra-structure is in place. Building the capacity for inventing/creating/managing cultural encounters and shared space is an essential step in re-inventing the European Project. Educational platforms must be generated, internships and other mobility programs must be designed, residencies prepared. All to strengthen the intercultural competence of European citizens.

However - before we learn to make budgets, book hotel rooms, organize conferences, reform institutions or design new buildings, there is a significant question to be asked: Why?

Before we can speak about "cultural leadership" and "capacity building", we must ask ourselves first what the essential function of culture really is.

We are not facing temporary social traumas or crises. Instead we are in transition. This requires flexibility, a capacity to adapt and re-invent, faced with as yet unimaginable challenges. It is about learning. How do we learn? Because we have to learn very very fast.

Democracy. It's an old word. Used for the first time by the Greeks, paradoxically in the same decade that the word "theatre" was first used. Culture and Democracy have basically gone through the same painful process the last 2500 years. Amphitheatres built by the Greek civilization were not performance places but gathering places, for exchange and discourse. The audience stayed for a week or two, drinking wine, camped in the surrounding fields. Medea or Oedipus Rex were not performed, but declaimed, stories told to be taken back to the camps and sublimated. That's how a public

could deal with such heavy narratives about a mother who kills her child or a king sticking out his eyes because he made love with his mother. Such experiences can be coped with only if you are prepared to actually make them a sounding board for yourself and for your community. During 2500 years, Culture has gone through a number of transformations. And the worst transformation has taken place in the last few hundred years: culture has been caged in, formed into a tightly controlled tool for defining and maintaining national identity. The construction of a national identity through cultural institutions is a tragic historical parenthesis. It's over. I don't mean the beauty of an opera or dance performance. The problem is the caging of culture into closed and exclusive spaces, for the rich and educated.

The ideas of democracy (shared values) and culture (shared space) are intimately connected.

My close colleague and friend Dragan Klaić, who unfortunately passed away far too early, once wrote: "Cultures do not dialogue with each other. They compete, clash, fight, interact and mutually influence each other." This is, for me, a definition of interculturalism, which implies an international outlook and an intercultural insight. Or, shortened, inter//local.

Where are we today? Can we identify the challenges? Are we honest and humble enough to see the threats?

Environmental change, through technological insensitivity, is a human-made problem at a disastrous level. No government today can take an initiative without first making an environmental impact analysis. Our present situation requires even a cultural impact analysis for future decisions.

We are faced with reduced democratic participation. Fewer people are voting, unless demagogues from an extreme party manage to whip up the energy for a short time. We see less engagement in traditional political activities. Citizens are no longer with the leaders they (apparently) have chosen. The democratic gap.

We are facing an increasing fear of immigration, expanding

islamophobia. Not just on the political level, but we also see a kind of cultural xenophobia, a fear of being infected, rather than transformed by the other.

Finally, there is a major shift of economic power. We are not producing much any longer in Europe. We design, market, sell and buy what others are producing somewhere else. This puts us in a fragile situation, dealing with the rest of the world.

What is an appropriate cultural response to these threats? Can the arts contribute to citizenship? Can they contribute to the public good, to the common wealth? Can they create shared space? Or is this just myth that we repeat in applications to cultural authorities, time and again, to the economists, to the arts councils, to the EU. "We're changing the world, that's why we work with culture!". And they give us 0.03 percent of the EU



budget. No city, no region or state within Europe, use more than a few percent for culture in their public budget. If you add education, you arrive at a slightly larger percent. But Culture and Education are stigmatized, underestimated public activities. Why?

I visited Latin America for the first time a few years ago. For me, Latin America was a strange place with military dictators, then socialists, then neoliberal economic plans. But always going its own way. I had the great pleasure of representing Europe, in a discussion with cultural ministers, state secretaries and others from a wide spectrum Latin American countries. I met the state secretary for culture in Colombia, who explained for me about cultural investments made in Medellín. During the last 7 years, 25-30 percent of the public budget has gone to culture and education. This is an appropriate cultural response. They have built 12 new cultural centers, placed in the poorest neighborhoods in Medellín, known for narcotics and violence. With two million visitors a day, mostly children from schools, a series of shared spaces have been built. They have access to movies, computers, books. There is a market place outside. We are talking about serious cultural investment.

How is it possible that developing countries, as in Latin America, devote such resources to culture, while richer countries cut budgets? Why are richer countries so afraid of these cultural investments?

I had a friend, his name was Mandiaye N'Diaye. Mandiaye called himself an Afro-European. He was born in Senegal, in a small village a bit from Dakar. When he was 18 years old he went to his shejk and said: "I want to become a doctor, I will go to Paris and study. I know French, I have family there. I



want your blessing.” And the shejk said “Mandiaye, yes travel. But to Italy.” Mandiaye: “Italy? I don’t speak Italian, I don’t know anything about that country, how can I study?” The shejk: “I don’t know. But you should go to Italy.” Born in a small village in Senegal, you don’t decide against the advice of your shejk. Mandiaye found himself on the east coast of Italy, outside of Ravenna, selling souvenirs, and he wondered what he was doing there. At the same time, the director of the city theatre in Ravenna, Marco Martinelli, looked around Ravenna, his birthplace and beloved hometown, and he saw black faces and he wondered. He walked along the beach and like any good artist with curiosity, he looked for answers. He presented himself to the first black man he met and he said to Mandiaye: “Excuse me, I hope I don’t insult you but may I ask you a question - why are you here?”. Mandiaye looked at Marco, considered what his sheik has said, he responds: “In order to meet you.” Marco and Mandiaye became close friends, they worked for years together in Ravenna until Mandiaye moved back to Senegal, where he prematurely and unfortunately died.

Mandiaye told me this story:

In my village when we gather for a cultural activity, for storytelling, we gather in a circle. Everyone. Children, old people, dogs, the artist himself. The artist steps into the center of the circle, and (s)he begins to perform, dance, sing or tell a story. The people watching become the “set design” of the performance. I see into the faces of my neighbours on the other side of the circle, watching together, sharing space. I see their reactions, I respond to them. The artist is not the point, the point is the circle. The artist is important, in fact the key. This natural relationship was transformed, sometime in the 1600s, probably around the same time the design of churches was changed. A French king decided to divide the circle, to re-form it into two half circles: stage and audience. All light on me, darkness on you. You don’t even know who’s there, or how many of you are there, because you’re all watching me. Mandiaye says that his task as a cultural worker in Europe today is to re-create the circle. This has given me the basis of my work for the last 15 years. Continuously re-creating the circle. We don’t need to change all the architecture, some cultural buildings are used in unconventional and interesting ways. But we need to re-design their function.

If we want to explore the connection between democracy and culture, then we have to make a link between citizen and visitor.

Practicing culture is practicing democracy. There is an intimate connection between citizen and visitor.

When we stop seeing our citizens as consumers, when we stop seeing our visitors as consumers, but as active participants, then we can open to cooperation and co-creation, instead of passivity.

Culture and conflict

Conflict is essentially a cultural question. One doesn't go to war, one doesn't rape a woman, one doesn't kill your neighbor with a knife, with a political, economic or social reason. It is a cultural impulse. You put your knife into the back of someone you know, when you feel threatened or you feel their fear. These are emotional impulses, based in misunderstanding, domination and submission. The only appropriate and sustainable response to violent conflict is cultural and educational initiative. We need more shared space, and we need more resources.

Where is conflict taking place in Europe? Northern Ireland; the Balkans; the Basque coun





try; the Black Sea region; the borderlands between Ukraine and Poland, Ukraine and Russia; the Caucasus. These are places of conflict, but they're also places of amazing stories. We call them the "corners" of Europe, the outer reaches. CORNERS - turning Europe inside out began in 2010 as an ongoing collaboration between 11 European arts/culture organizations, with long term support from the EU.

We started with Xpeditions, organized travels with 30-35 artists and researchers, two weeks each in different "corners of Europe". We visited different marketplaces, bus and train

stations, neighborhoods and we intervened. We had no finished performances, only creative interventions by the artists, as tools to meet local citizens and start a dialogue.

An example: the Bulgarian stage director Nedyalko Delchev took five photographs from a second hand shop in Sofia, Bulgaria, put them in his pocket, chose a Georgian family name (we were traveling in Georgia at the time) and entered the marketplace. He approached different vendors, showing them the photographs. "My grandparents left Georgia many years ago and emigrated to Bulgaria.", he said. "Do you know anybody who looks

like this? Can you help me find these people?" Within 30 minutes the entire marketplace was buzzing trying to find Nedyalko's relatives. They had different ideas, they compared impressions, they studied noses and eyes in the photographs. The results were inconclusive however, no agreement was reached about who Nedyalko's "lost family" might be.

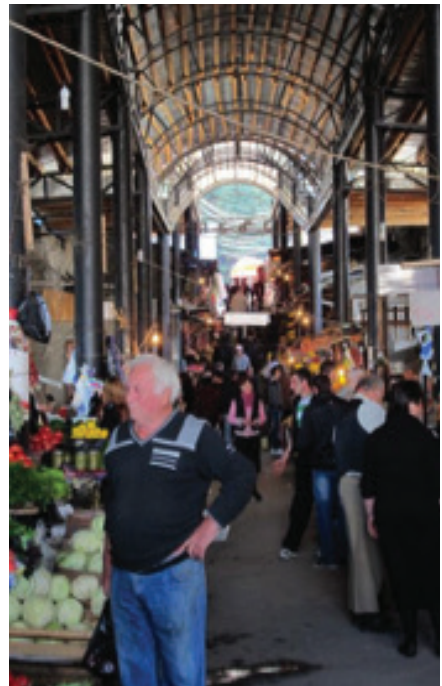
However - when we climbed into the bus the next day to leave the town and we were about an hour away, Nedyalko received a telephone call from the hotel. "There are two cars and a truck outside filled with people who have come to get you, to take you to your family village." Fourteen people came along with the truck, and they expected Nedyalko to stay for three or four days, because that's the only way that they could celebrate their returned relative.

Where is art? Where is life? Stories heard on one street corner get retold on another. And this creates shared space, imagined space, new space. But can we turn our cultural centers, our museums, even our public spaces in our neighborhoods, our theatres and our concert halls, into shared spaces and imagined spaces? Can we open the doors and the windows and make a movement, a free flow of movement,

from these places, which have began as bastions of national identity, and turn them into places that we share and that we need to create a human identity?

Participation is an important aspect. We have advanced beyond funding special experts who create for us while we sit passively and consume. Co-creation is practicing cultural democracy.

The great director Peter Brook, when he formed his first intercultural company in 1974, defined the intention, together with artists that shared no language and no cultural referenc





es when they began. They took themselves to Africa, Iran and other “corners”, in order to be confronted with new and untold languages and narratives. Their intention was to create culture “in the meaning that yogurt is culture”: a human bacteria that transforms the milky substance of our society into something healthy, rich, tasteful. This transformation by a microcosm, a cultural virus, placed in the right temperature and under the right conditions, is exactly what must be done.

Finally: the question of “audience”. Because democratic participation and audience, citizen and visitor, are one and the same. We can shift our audiences, we can co-create with them, or we can engage

them. Shifting audiences means not just performing for people that have traditionally gone to our theatres, concert halls or culture centers, but rather changing the audience, matching it, mixing it, in order to create intercultural places. This is a great and difficult work to do, and sometimes we lose our old audience when we’re on our way to stimulate a renewed constellation. To find that balance is one of the greatest requirements for any cultural leader today.

If we engage with our audience, we empower them, we give them trust, we show humility. We make them shareholders, they become co-curators, we provide together with them.

When I underline the link between culture and democracy, I don't mean that every artistic production is a democratic process. Leadership, brilliant directors, brilliant composers, brilliance in general, is essential. But how do we combine ethics and excellence? Excellence is the quality of the art, integrity and ethics is the cultural context. And when I use the word "culture" in this discourse, I mean that which is not nature, culture is what human beings do with each other, for each other, and sometimes even against each other

The arts are not the answer to any problem whatsoever. Culture is not an answer to anything, because it is the central reason for why we are on this earth.

What do we need? What kind of art? It is empowerment just to ask the question. And that re-invention has to be done by artists and cultural leaders alike. Especially if we want to increase the public will to finance Arts and Culture. We have to change our ethics. Every cultural institution and organization needs to form a policy: for whom are we working? Who gives us our the mission? The answer is both simple and complex: our task is delegated by the citizens who pay taxes, build the buildings, offer us space and share their experiences.



Intercult

Intercult is an independent production and resource unit focused on culture, ideas and the arts. Created in 1996, it is a publically-financed institution, based in Stockholm, managing both a designated Europe Direct office and Access Europa, a platform for cultural organizations in Sweden focusing on international collaboration.

Intercult focuses to a large degree on exchange and co-production with the European Neighborhood, reflected in the long term SEAS project 2003-2010 and CORNERS, a complex partnership of organisations at the "edges of Europe", 2011-2018 (www.cornersofeurope.org), both financed by the EU Creative Europe program.

We initiate and lead collaborative culture projects, networks and the development of intercultural and international project competence. We act interculturally, both as producers and experts. We initiate large scale co-productions, primarily at the European level. We connect local and international initiatives, we work across disciplines and in multiple partnerships. We bring together artists, operators and audiences, creating unexpected encounters..

From our home base on the south side of Stockholm, we interact as a project-based platform, engaging with others on cultural policy development.

Chris Torch

Chris Torch, a former actor and director, is founder and Senior Associate at Intercult Torch is presently Program Director for Rijeka 2020 - European Capital of Culture and he has also been part of the artistic direction for Matera 2019 Culture Capital application.

Apart from large-scale project design, Torch contributes to intercultural policies. He currently serves on the Board of Culture Action Europe. During 2012-2013, he was designated expert to the EU Open Method of Coordination (OMC) group on Cultural Diversity, including 22 EU Member States.

Special thanks to Mikael Löfgren, editor and advisor.

The Necessity of Culture: DEMOCRACY was commissioned by Nätverkstan Kultur, an independent cultural organisation based in Gothenburg, Sweden, providing education, financial and technical services, project management and consulting to the cultural sector (www.natverkstan.net) as part of **The Fika Cultural Leadership Programme**, which offers a chance to replenish reserves, both physical and mental, and helps to develop work in a significant way. These are challenging times and The Fika Programme is about building leadership capacity to face these challenges.

Perspectives on Cultural Leadership: an anthology of research and essays published in book form, is one result of the project.

Graphic design and proofreading: Agneta Hansson, Intercult



INTERCULT

www.intercult.se 2016

