



STEERING COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE

in cooperation with

INTEGRATED PROJECT 2:

«Responses to violence in everyday life in a democratic society»

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND CONFLICT PREVENTION PROJECT

Expert Colloquy

Dialogue serving intercultural and inter-
religious communication

Strasbourg, 7 to 9 October 2002
Council of Europe

Cultural Diversity - Interculturality – Cultural Policy

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The Expert Colloquy «Dialogue serving intercultural and inter-religious communication» is organised with the support of

Japan Foundation
- Tokyo -

and

European Cultural Foundation
- Amsterdam -

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Cultural Diversity – Interculturality – Cultural Policy

For most European countries, cultural diversity has now become one of the explicit aims of cultural policy – at least in theory and purportedly. For the last two years, the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Culture has been making an interdisciplinary study of this question, and has produced interesting ideas and proposals on convergence, divergence, differences and omissions in the cultural policies of the various participating countries. Among other things, this study has shown that there is no ONE form of cultural diversity which is typically, identifiably European, by comparison with other parts of the world.

Cultural diversity is the product, not just of the great upheavals of the past, but also of the specific, distinctive adjustments which external changes have provoked in the local, everyday, cultural and social lives of the communities concerned.

It is precisely because cultural diversity is, formally and theoretically, an "accepted" aim today, that we can start thinking about the challenges it poses, the things we have to do to make good our intentions.

Cultural diversity is not just a matter of cultural policy; it is also a sociological and philosophical issue. It may be as old as the world, but the thing we need to focus on is the way people see it today, the context in which it is now developing and acquiring a positive and dynamic value – a value it has not always had in the past.

I. Two landmarks in the history of cultural diversity in Europe

1. The unacknowledged universality of cultural diversity

Everyone agrees that Greek thought was the cradle of European culture. It was the philosophical basis on which "our" culture took shape, though we obviously know that other peoples – Romans, Celts, Vikings, Turks, Arabs, Jews, Gypsies and others – made Europe too. We also know that Greek thought itself was plural, that it absorbed many influences.

European thought, which was strongly marked by the Greek philosophical tradition, came to prefer the single to the multiple, unity to diversity, the universal to the particular, stasis to mobility, the eternal and immutable to change and growth. And the fact that "social, cultural, economic and political reality" was at odds with this tendency, and that various thinkers rejected the majority line, made no difference.

The Christian tradition did much to encourage, and indeed impose, this vision.

2. Liberty and equality as alternative to cultural diversity

Liberty and equality are the intellectual values on which Europe, as a geo-political entity, is founded – and cultural standardisation was seen at one stage as necessary to achieving them.

During the Enlightenment, which culminated in the French Revolution and the emergence of the nation-states, Europe took shape on the basis of two major principles.

- Political liberalism was the basis of European philosophy: the recognition of individual liberties, such as freedom of worship, which had sparked so many conflicts in the past. Intellectually, liberalism has a natural leaning towards cosmopolitanism, towards opening of the public space to differences.
- The invention of the nation-state (which later became the social state, the welfare state) imposed a national culture, achieving equality via a single dominant language and form of education – and so closing the public space once more.

These poles are the twin pillars of European identity. They are potentially contradictory, and there has indeed been tension between them in the last two centuries.

It is no mere coincidence that cultural diversity has today become an issue at a time when the nation-state is in crisis, when globalised economic and financial forces are combining to weaken it, and it is having to come to terms with a whole range of cultures – the cultures of artificial (e.g. women) or actual minorities, and (particularly relevant to our subject here) the regional cultures which it has not succeeded in absorbing into the dominant culture, and the migrant cultures which it has not been willing to acknowledge and accept.

Cultural diversity has always been typical of Europe. And we have always known this - but have not always sought to turn it to advantage. The history we were taught did not really make much of that diversity.

In other words, the idea that cultural diversity is – philosophically, culturally, politically, socially – “a good thing” is not one of our basic, instinctive assumptions. Cultural diversity is not a “natural” part of our European culture – or cultures.

In fact, those of us who work in the cultural policy field are aware that cultural diversity can often look like an obstacle which needs to be overcome. More generally, in our everyday experience of social and political life, we are disconcerted and alarmed to find that the cultural diversity rooted in migration is, above all, a barrier to recognition of citizenship, which is the central principle of democracy.

We know that cultural diversity is a fact - more or less permanent, inevitable and obvious – but we must not forget that, while some people make it a source of enrichment, exchange and growth, others accept it only grudgingly, doing their best to restrict it and limit its effects.

II. Europe enters the modern age

1. Recognising cultural diversity as a force for democratic development

Positive attitudes to cultural diversity are closely bound up with modernity, which is itself characterised by the growing importance of the individual in relation to the group, by social and cultural mobility, and by the world-wide development of all forms of communication, both material and intellectual. Cultural diversity is achieving appreciative recognition in a social and historical context in which many of the old reference points are being lost, and everything penetrates, mingles with and combines with everything else.

The nation-states' insistence on uniformity and hierarchies is giving way, not to the universality long pursued as an absolute ideal, but to the rampant diversity which has always been there: diversity of communities living in a single area, diversity of languages, diversity of religions and the diversity which runs through all fields of human activity; diversity of lifestyles, behaviour, cultural practices, etc. The standards are becoming blurred.

2. Interculturality of the public space

This situation must not be taken as a sign that the old relationship has been upset, and that one value is losing out to its opposite. On the contrary, complementarity of the two is essential to the development of democracy. We need to rethink the relationship between the universal and the diverse, without reducing the particular to the universal, and resisting the temptation to sacrifice universality to diversity.

The dominant culture and policy have managed to pass their own special values (the white/male/heterosexual/Catholic paradigm) off as universal. Today, the universal can no longer be seen in terms of content: knowledge, skills, behaviour; it has to be seen in terms of access to the public space, to a place where ideas and arguments can be compared. This space cannot exist without certain universal values, such as equality, respect, tolerance and free speech. This conception of the universal has its limitations: it is often at a loss in the face of mind-sets which do not respect these values, as is the case with religious or political extremism.

Our conception of diversity also needs to be reviewed. Diversity must be thought of, managed, developed and steered as something which is changing all the time, not as something which needs to be preserved. Cultural diversity obviously implies multiplicity, difference, contradiction, inequality, choice, etc. – but as soon as we leave the private space for the public one, it must also imply exchange, communication, interaction, mutual influence, joint projects, the creation of new languages, and new viewpoints which are shared and acknowledged. In short, the public space turns cultural diversity into interculturality. This is a question of cross-breeding, of constantly rebuilding, unbuilding and comparing, of meeting and mingling.

In terms of democracy, it is thus impossible to separate the question of cultural diversity, of separate and specific cultures, from the question of cultural policy. This holds the only key to creating a space where cultures can communicate.

Just as the nation-state established a specific relationship between citizenship and culture, based on the concept of “one dominant, homogenising culture for everyone”, so the present upheavals are highlighting the fact that we can no longer envisage cultural diversity without rethinking citizenship, too, as something which is now diversified.

III. The current societal context of cultural diversity in Europe

The interdisciplinary study of cultural diversity, which the Council of Europe has been carrying out with various partner countries, has been guided by one decisive principle: cultural policies must not be out of step with the society in which they operate, with the various communities living on the national territory.

What are the democratic challenges which cultural policies must meet, to accommodate cultural diversity? The approach I propose is based on four main factors which typify European societies today.

1. The “diversity of diversity”

Diversity of communities living in a single area can have many different causes. The chief are:

- a historical situation in which the irreducibility of certain minority cultures in states is reaffirmed, and ethnicity proclaimed;
- migration flows resulting in the permanent settlement of communities and cultures of foreign origin in those same states;
- the heritage of a past, on which we are still terribly discreet, which grew rich on the slave trade and colonisation, and forged, with other parts of the world, economic, social and cultural ties which were not exactly in keeping with the solidarity and equality demanded by democracy;
- the presence, in significant numbers, of new arrivals – political and economic refugees, people joining their families, illegal entrants – who are tolerated to a greater or lesser degree, and put a strain on our solidarity and commitment to human rights.

Cultural policies geared to each of these basic situations are needed to meet the expectations of individuals and groups with their roots in minority cultures.

- Minorities already present when the states in which they live were founded are increasingly demanding the right to determine cultural policy for themselves. This may not seem natural or obvious, but the issue is now regarded as a valid one, and dialogue with minority cultures – often at regional level – usually leads to their getting a measure of autonomy. It is to be hoped that these “cultural regions” will not repeat the nation-states’ mistakes by themselves imposing the cultural uniformity which the latter once imposed on them. The complexity and mutability of today’s world have forced us to stop regarding “culture” and “territory” as co-extensive. An exclusively “territorial” conception of culture can lead to total prevalence of collective over individual rights, and to restrictions on individual liberties.
- In the case of immigrant communities or groups, the first step is to permit and support cultural practices which help their members to preserve cultural ties with one another and with the home country: learning and using the home language, practising traditional art-forms and lifestyles, engaging in traditional religious worship and transmitting the collective memory. The next is to ensure that the host community is fully aware of these cultures and practices, and acknowledges them both socially and symbolically: this can be done by making them part of the wider community’s life, heritage and local, regional and national history, dealing with them in schools, public art and existing cultural institutions, providing public facilities for them, etc.

Finally, action must be taken to ensure that cultures – “national”, “international” and “global” – connect and interact in ways which create areas for communication, innovation and solidarity, and also in ways which link these cultural practices with developing cultural conceptions and practices in the home country.

These policies must beware of confining cultures or social groups within an identity fixed for all time, and of masking the internal diversity and development of groups or

communities who are marked by their home culture, but also by contact with other cultures and their present surroundings. We know how greatly the cultural concerns and practices of children born to immigrants in the host country differ from those of their elders, and also how diverse, composite and hybrid cultures imported from the same country can themselves become in their new setting.

- Cultural policies to give education and a voice to the communities which are least well-off socially and economically, and most vulnerable in terms of recognition as citizens, should be specially developed in the areas where they live. This is particularly important for new arrivals and refugees, who have no contacts, papers, work, resources or social rights. Grass-roots projects, geared to the realities, are needed for individuals or groups who have to put all their energies into simply surviving. Voluntary associations and neighbourhood cultural agencies and often the ones who tackle these problems and provide the cultural support which they need to express themselves – and get a hearing.
- Finally, knowing and understanding history are necessary and important parts of the educational process – and as such a matter for cultural policy too. This is not just the history of “major events and main dates”, but, above all, the history of ideas, cultures and religions. The history of cultural diversity must also be made a part of national history – not just by putting it in books, but by openly acknowledging the contribution which various cultures and communities have made to building our societies, and commemorating it in public life and public places.

2. The rise of individualism

Every individual goes through a number of identities and changing affinities, depending on his or her origins, experiences, stances and choices in life. Individuals have developed a distinct ability to distance themselves from their original identities and groups (cultural, religious, territorial, etc), to choose different directions for their lives, to weave the pattern of their identities and references and to invent new lifestyles and behaviours, alongside or independently of their cultures of origin.

Social and cultural groups continue, of course, to define their membership criteria and often still tend to want to impose those criteria on everyone “born” in the group.

This ability to “extract” oneself from one’s original setting is enhanced by global information and communication tools, by the central place the audiovisual media occupy in everyday life, “deterritorialising” cultural groups and spaces.

Greater freedom of expression and personal independence can lead to the loss of, or shed doubt on, identity-forming and existential references. This is the “disarray” into which many people and social groups have been thrown today, as they are uprooted, torn between contradictory cultures, tempted to break free from the constraints and pressures of their groups of origin, but destabilised by the responsibility needed to exercise their own freedoms and lifestyle options.

Acknowledgment of cultural diversities and acknowledgment of universal values are complementary and must go hand in hand. This means that collective rights cannot undermine individual rights, that the right to assert, to choose and to change one’s diversities and one’s identities goes beyond geographical borders and inherited group memberships.

Cultural policies cannot ignore these possibilities and these existential difficulties, which can, of course, be experienced by individuals identified or identifying themselves as members of majority or minority groups. Originality, innovation and creativity are particularly strong values in the cultural and artistic field. Cultural policies must take care not to send artists and cultural actors back to summary identities in which they no longer recognise themselves. Being an artist means more than being “of foreign origin”. Each artist, each generation, each social group reinterprets its original cultural references. That is how culture evolves, how new forms of culture appear, how new ideas change the world.

In his final report on the first phase of the Council of Europe’s transversal study on cultural policy and cultural diversity entitled “Differing Diversities”, Tony Bennett refers to the strong, almost unbreakable bond nation states have forged between the notions of people, culture, history and territory. Cultural diversity and individualist behaviours are jeopardising this bond. Nowadays histories, territories, cultures and peoples are influenced by experiences and ideas they no longer necessarily share with the majority (if indeed they ever did), but above all they can no longer be imposed on them.

3. The changing vision of democracy

Our societies are asking questions about their democracy and its limits, which lie in:

- the effective power of worldwide economic, financial and media forces;
- the relative but worrying failure of democratisation processes and policies to bring the requisite progress in education (illiteracy rate) or civic awareness and responsibility (mounting extremist tendencies);
- the refusal to grant full citizenship (in particular the right to vote) to long-standing residents;
- the outmoded equation of majority opinion with democracy;
- the reluctance to define and apply cultural rights;
- the difficulties encountered in building a real European public space.

The cultural democratisation mission is far from accomplished. Cultural policies must also develop cultural democracy by finding proper answers to social expectations. Cultural policies have a major role to play in the fields of education, citizen participation and creative expression.

Education is just one dimension of cultural action, as “having” a right does not mean “being” in a position to exercise it. Cultural policies must not only ensure that the right exists but also measure the extent to which it is effectively exercised according to criteria that take the cultural diversity of the population into account. Life-long education issues, particularly the non-formal and basic education processes, and in particular literacy (in the mother tongue and the national language), must be considered as essential, unavoidable responsibilities, a springboard to the full enjoyment of cultural citizenship: education in citizenship, interculturality, human rights, the media, the new information technologies, multilingualism and even simply learning to read and write can no longer be dissociated from education in culture.

The processes of education, the shaping of critical minds, generate and strengthen the presence of participatory democracy, the complement of representative democracy. It is a cultural responsibility to support the NGOs, the voluntary sector, which develop social and cultural practices of citizenship and solidarity. It is also a responsibility to ensure that all social groups have access to these means of public cultural expression capable of defending citizens’ cultural rights.

The development of creative practices fostering the expression of minority groups seeking social recognition in their environment, or fostering intercultural projects carried out by a whole population in a common living space, is also in the spirit of cultural democracy.

Taking into account and respecting minority cultures or those relegated to a secondary or marginal position involves an approach that privileges dialogue and comprehension over integration or the ability to rally people to majority or dominant options.

4. The dizzy heights of globalisation and communication

The development of communication technologies is rapidly changing how we relate to the world and to others. The globalisation of exchanges, be they economic or cultural, subjects cultures to conflicting tensions: on the one hand the threat of a “single culture”, one that is “Americanised”, commercialised, all the same, with no room for diversities, minorities or “abnormalities”, and on the other, the threat of cultures built “on the defensive” and, under cover of a chill “authenticity”, taking refuge in the folds of their own identity and in their self-sufficient peculiarities.

Cultural policies entertain strained and ambiguous relations with economics; for a long time they steered clear of material considerations and market forces. Globalisation, including cultural products, but also the breakdown of the welfare state, are obliging cultural policies to invest in this field. Globalisation and modern communication technologies are a threat but they also have their advantages. The adoption of the new technologies by cultural actors opens up new prospects and access to knowledge and to cultures that would otherwise have been confined to restricted spaces. Globalisation can reveal the local dimension, broaden the possibilities of mingling and mixing, trigger the modernisation of rigid tradition, open up new horizons of the mind, permit the creation of cultural groups based on new diversities, on shared values or cultural, artistic or citizens’ projects rather than on territorial boundaries.

The cultural exception should not aim only to defend “the” European culture against market forces; it should aim at access to the public space for the world’s cultural diversities with their many changing forms and contents, thereby broadening the prospects of interculturality.

Cultural policies have a responsibility to train cultural actors in the new technologies, to support the implementation of multimedia programmes, of sites that express and reflect artistic, creative and civic cultural diversities. A European cultural policy highlighting the diversities and the intercultural partnerships that are developing is needed all the more urgently at this level.

IV. Interculturality: a creative facet of culture

Our cultural policies are still largely dominated by a conception of culture focusing almost exclusively on the arts and geared to the major functions of creation, dissemination, conservation and education, leaving little room for participation.

Recognition of cultural diversity must be present in all these functions: artists and audiences from minority groups must have access to them. We must demystify art, so to speak, in order to diversify the criteria of excellence, quality and recognition and permit the emergence of new forms of artistic expression born of the mingling of cultures and actors.

The creativity and the artistic practices of young people, amateurs, groups who lack recognition or have difficulty expressing themselves, popular cultures and forms of expression, collective projects, associations of citizens to defend their opinions and their rights and act on their environment, these are all part of the building of an intercultural public space and should have their rightful place in cultural policies.

These dimensions of cultural policies must be present in every field of competence but they must also be put into practice using special devices and budgets designed specifically for that purpose, in order to steer clear of the “lists of priorities” found in the traditional sectors.

We must move on to a broad conception of culture if cultural diversity is to blossom into full flower: a conception that includes lifestyles and behaviours, outlooks on the world, myths, dreams and utopias, a culture of everyday life, of relations with society and the world.

This vision of culture rises to the challenges of cultural democracy. It is based on collective participation, on everyone contributing to cultural construction. A cultural construction which, in order to be creative, innovative and up-to-date, must be intercultural, heavy with world issues, shunning any notion of purism.

Towns and cities are the sites of this interculturality *par excellence*. Places where all kinds of diversity – cultural, social, economic, populations, neighbourhoods, activities and so on - live side by side. The ideal town is a town of movement, of change, where relations are deterritorialised, decompartmentalised. In the image of the “urban cultures”, fundamentally intercultural, interdisciplinary, innovative and transgressing convention and uniform models.

V. Cultural policy autonomy

Cultural policy is frequently subject to other political influences. Social cohesion is obviously a societal, democratic and therefore a major transversal issue. It is perfectly clear that cultural actions and policies contribute to its development. However, social cohesion must not be the main aim of cultural policies. Their main aim should be cultural, artistic and civic expression, fostering freedom and the ability to express oneself, and equality of access to all these means of expression. That aim privileges a form of “integration” built around interest, invention, questioning, tension and even going against accepted standards.

VI. The transversal nature of cultural diversity in all policies

Education, social, economic, health, housing and employment policies are all just as concerned by cultural diversity in the population as cultural policy, and must guarantee access to and effective enjoyment of related rights. It is essential that these policies, at their own level, regulate the difficulties encountered by individuals, populations or groups with minority or foreign cultural references.

We must denounce the tendency to culturalise social and economic problems. Confusing cultural differences and social and economic difficulties leads to social stigmatisation. The difficulties behind the well-known “immigration” problem are often social and economic difficulties. Stressing the value of cultural diversity does not make

it a decisive value in terms of which everything else can be explained. Only by the convergent action of all these policies is it possible to build a truly intercultural society.

VII. Brief conclusion

The importance of diversity in cultural policies thus raises questions about cultural political responsibilities, focusing our attention more on cultural citizenship and access to the public space than on identity issues.