

Some Remarks on Current Cultural and Political Culture Trends in Europe

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Cultural institutions under construction

At the moment the Viennese Burgtheater is in massive troubles. Malversations of the former director and parts of his crew made evident that one of the core institutions of the cultural sector is not guaranteed any more. So it is just consequent when in an interview a prominent actor was asked: "Can you imagine a time after the Burgtheater?" By that a taboo was broken. When I was young these institutions were seen as eternal. But during these days the option comes up that there might a time without the Burgtheater.

By the way: Already now institutions like the Burgtheater do not exist for a majority of the population or are seen as completely irrelevant. They do not play a significant role in their life.

This might not be unique in Austria. When for a long time in Austria as seen as a cultural empire it was thought that this kind of public infrastructure is untouchable. But is this also true, when societal realities are changing completely?

Some numbers

During the last 30 years in Austria as a former catholic stronghold the members of the catholic church decreased dramatically, the same is true with the members of political parties, after 1945 seen as unsinkable battleships which could attract voters to enable absolute majorities and became middle sized parties with less than 20 percent of allegiance.

At the same time in primary schools in Vienna more than half of the pupils meanwhile have a migrant background; they are not any more a minority but represent the majority of the population with all the social, economic, political but also cultural consequences.

What I want to express is the fact that the conditions in which culture happens are fundamentally changing and my assumption is that these changes might have deeper consequences than the end of the coal and steel industry in some parts of Europe.

We all know that Europe is suffering from a fundamental crisis since several years. Accordingly the cultural sector is facing shrinking public funding with all its negative consequences for the cultural institutions and initiatives themselves. But it is more: hat we experience is that what we call crisis is influencing the redefinition of the core values of the continent in terms of modernity, democracy or diversity.

2012 EDUCULT was asked to carry out some research by the Austrian Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, trying to receive some hints, what is happening around us; what could, what should we put on the agenda. The research is based on a number of interviews with key figures in cultural policy thinking and acting.

I am not going to present the main results which at least some of them are meanwhile obsolete, when the situation became even more dramatic. In any case the observations, I am going to present is research driven speculation.

The Dwarfing of Europe?

Our expedition started with a Conference of the European Cultural Foundation: “The Dwarfing of Europe – Dialogue between China, India and Brazil?” – at that time still with a question mark. The issue was originally negotiated in the frame of a conference but is now also available as a book.

There I found this quotation: „For centuries Europe considered itself to be the centre of the world. Many of the concepts and institutions that have shaped the Western world – in politics and economics, in philosophy, the arts and literature – have a strong European imprint. [...] Over the course of the bellicose 20th century, Europa lost its predominance for ever“.

Strong words (at least for a member of the traditional European cultural community) The message mainly relies on the decreasing power of Europe in the world; this is the more true, when the main ally in the existing power structures - the US – is going to withdraw from the old continent and turns from the Atlantic to the Pacific where engagement seems to be much more promising than in a region where a number of old guys keep on running an over-complex and unmanageable political system.

In this short presentation I would like to concentrate on the aspect of democracy. At least in my imagination of Europe the aspect of being the cradle of democracy is an important aspect of legitimizing its power. Yes there had been fundamental conflicts in Europe between democratic and authoritarian forces in the 20th century. But when the big suffering ended the victory of democracy seemed to be the guarantee of further progress of European societies. This was the even more true after the break down of the communist regime which seduced Francis Fukuyama to speak about the end of history.

Democracy was in the air and – from a European point of view – sooner or later all nations would be Europeanized in the sense of representative democracy, human rights, rule of law, even welfare state. Cultural policy was seen as an important instrument of democratisation with the means of culture representing a world as it should be and stating that dealing with (mainly European) arts and culture would lead to a better world.

As far as we dare to look in the eyes of reality these times are gone. Economic decline (admittedly from a high level) together with military weakness makes evident that the European influence in the world is shrinking. And that it is no longer a model of policy making. Instead of that an increasing number of new nevertheless powerful players have no interest in democratic ways to manage interest conflicts. The opposite is true: Authoritarian regimes take over and try to get rid of what we loved to call European cultural heritage as comprehensively as possible. And in Europe the discussion comes up not how to attract young people from all over the world to take part in democratic progress but how to avoid young Europeans to join the fight for the implementations of religious regimes around the continent.

Will God take over again?

What I find fascinating is the fact that many of these regimes against the European democratic spirit are reinstalling religion as a social glue for the production of common meaning. When in Europe for centuries the main conflict was about dividing the status of religious and state institutions (and making visible the advantages of this division) we now experience an increasing influence of religion as it is in Russia or Turkey, not to speak about the violent regimes in Arabic countries all around Europe. It makes us believe, God would take over again ruling the world.

In all these countries culture in a European interpretation does not play a significant role any more, at best some intellectual opponent forces try to keep connection with.

This is what happens around Europe. But what's about within the continent. What we experience even in highly advanced societies is an increasing tiredness against democracy. We are confronted with an increasing influence of anti-democratic (and by that also Anti-European) forces. In countries like Hungary they already took over, in others like Austria or even France they are massively knocking on the doors of the government buildings.

Has the age of representative democracy passed?

The Irish political scientist Peter Mair in his last book "Ruling the Void" even goes a step further, when he explains that "the age of party democracy has passed": "Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present meaning."

If this is true, than at the current stage of the European development the political system itself undermines and by that destroys what has been the prerequisite of its functioning. No wonder when this kind of dysfunctionality does not any more fit for Non-European political communities as a model. It is easy to understand that this anti-democratic trend within

Europe makes it less and less attractive also for those forces suffering and opposing old and new versions of authoritarianism in their countries.

If this antidemocratic trend also in Europe the question comes up what has been the role of cultural policy in this game? Programmatically their propagandists started after the Second World War promising contributions to democratic awareness raising. But obviously the opposite became true when democratic engagement is constantly decreasing. Accordingly the waning willingness of the state to support arts and culture might also be interpreted as a general loss of a political belief, culture could or would be able to maintain the production of the common meaning. Instead it is going to be destroyed in the frustrating political procedures of self-elimination in which culture does not play any role.

In this respect I would very much enjoy a critical analysis where and how cultural policies in Europe lost its political claim in defending, maintaining further developing democracy.

Why does this happen? Maybe we have to look closer at an additional term which originally also came from Europe: liberalism. Originally directed against the absolute power of the old elites it meanwhile advanced in a hegemonic way eliminating each kind of ideological approaches as a basis of perceiving of and acting in the world. For Fukuyama the comprehensive implementation of liberalism would more or less automatically lead to comprehensive democratisation. And indeed the result was a general liberalisation from historic constraints allowing in particular educated citizens to prevail individual self-determination over traditional bindings. But it also led to – what Peter Mair defined “political void” - to an unexpected extent. Yes we are living in a liberal era. Disconcerting is the fact that like in any other authoritarian regimes their advocates make us believe that we are without alternatives.

Liberalism kills alternatives

And then nevertheless alternatives appear which do not meet our ideas, convictions or feelings of autonomy. And we are surprised, frightened, even horrified but we have no interpretation that it is the result of our own alternativelessness.

In his contribution “Liberty is not everything” Mark Miller, professor for humanities at the Columbia University, explains that liberalism is not based on reality. It knows no past and no future. Instead of that it relies on the simple assumption giving the individuals the liberty on all aspects of their lives and everything will be fine. Miller describes the consequences of pure liberalism as the last remaining dogma as a way of comprehensive devaluation of European principles – which might bring us back to culture.

The cultural sector is confronted with quite contradictory consequences of this kind of liberalism. The good thing is that it gives artists and other cultural activists the basis for

doing what they want to do. On the other hand liberalism does not allow justifying a particular or even privileged position of arts and culture in society. It is just one of an unmanageable number of offers on the market of attention when it is solely the right of the individuals to choose what is of interest for them and what is not.

Hoping not to use the term “neoliberalism” too much as a stereotype the hegemony of liberalism is mainly about economics when all aspects of living become a commodity on the markets. But if this transition is accepted (and I do not see the big opposition forces) it also produces retroactive effects on culture, which is no longer seen as a public good (of which we increasingly doubt its existence) but a business following the logic of the market.

The consequences can be seen in the integration of cultural institutions in the economic value chains of cities, the reinterpretation of the political claim of “culture for all” in the marketing strategies of cultural institutions or in an increasing division between a few big players and the many others acting in more or less precarious conditions. Not to speak of the content production of digital media, which raises the question, if the idea of European culture as an universal attainment can be maintained at all.

The research tried to detect commonalities but also differences in the national cultural policy approaches, which often lack an embedding in political and societal analysis. My short presentation can be just an invitation to take the respective context in which cultural policy takes place more seriously. You may find a lot more details and also recommendations in the full text (http://iccpr2014.de/wp-content/uploads/papers/paper_sessions/161paper_long.pdf)

Towards new trans-continental alliances

I would like to close with experiences of one of my colleagues evaluating cultural programs in some regions out of Europe. Most remarkable was the existence of some intellectual and at the same passionate young cultural activists burning for democracy and prepared to fight for it. Being endangered in their cultural practices political analysis is their daily bread. They are not the mainstream of their national societies. But they would urgently need partners and so they make me ask if and if yes how European cultural policy once again is able to ignite the fire for that what we are going to lose by that falsifying those who made their peace with the “Dwarfing of Europe” with and without Burgtheater.