

Culture and Democracyⁱ

A systematic analysis of cultural policy in Austria

By Michael Wimmer, EDUCULT director

To understand the logic of Austrian cultural policy, it makes sense to go back to the founding myth of the Austrian cultural nation. It becomes soon clear that much of what the world regards as the epitome of Austrian culture has its roots in the representation needs of the declining Habsburg Empire. The feudal investments in culture were not aimed at enabling the citizens to participate in public affairs; on the contrary: they were meant to keep them away from the political sphere by all cultural means, by offering them a splendid, but politically irrelevant alternative terrain.

In 1918, the long history of loss and losing of Austria, by then reduced to a small state started. „L’Autriche, c’est qui reste!“ was the description for a state in which the insecurity of political survival mated with the remaining overdimensioned cultural infrastructure in an exemplary way. It was mainly the conservative and Austro-fascist powers who instrumentalised this exceptional cultural infrastructure for their political aims by reconstructing an idealized past based on an antidemocratic identity.

This political instrumentalisation can be observed in the post-war time, when it was the task of the cultural institutions during the “Austrian Restoration” not only to distract the citizens from the consequences of the war but also to present an image of “innocent Austria” to the world. “Culture” should make forget the involvement of many Austrian artists in the national-socialist terror regime and, beyond that, contribute to the development of a national identity as a “Nation of Culture”.

In retrospect, one has to admit that this strategy was fully successful. Mozart and Strauss became symbols for the Austrian “Lebensfreude”, the pleasures of life which the world could share at least on New Year’s Day (honi soit who remembers that the New Year’s Concert was actually an invention of the Nazis to distract the people of Vienna from the approaching war front). During the rest of the year, the audience is invited to admire the sumptuous cultural heritage in its catholic-baroque splendor.

Of course a price had to be paid for this myth-construction: the massive discrimination against contemporary art, supported by laws such as the “law against dirt and trash”. Therefore, the US-American cultural analysts I interviewed a few years ago are probably not exceptional in stating that Vienna would be the representation of a former civilization”. Do you need proof? Name five classical composers from Austria. And then take a breath and name five contemporary composers...

In terms of cultural policy, this political instrumentalisation of an overdimensional public cultural sector had sustainable effects as it survived the various, at times dramatic changes of political systems during the 20th century in its inner structure and logic almost unharmed. It was only the neoliberal policies that during the 1990ies led to changes in the public cultural sector by transforming it to partial and then full legal capacity. The – probably unintended – result was a disempowerment of cultural policy, left disarmed of any significant steering capacity besides the decision-making on the leadership of cultural institution.

This concession to the gradual economisation worked well as the original political mission could be regarded as fulfilled: After the Waldheim-affair, the Nazi past of many Austrians is nowadays regarded differently, the cultural brand "Austria" is well-established, the post-war debris is cleaned up and the national identity of most Austrians is firm.

What is left is a strong position of a few arts and cultural institutions in cultural policy decision-making. Still the biggest part of public cultural funding goes to a handful of institutions. This development has been intensified by the savings of the state household in times of crisis. To say it frankly: not much remains for independent artistic production (and its mediation).

It is no coincidence if the leaders of cultural institutions are steering the cultural policy course of the country, leaving not much leeway to democratically legitimized cultural politicians. Like this, a new form of cultural asynchronicity emerges: while Austria perpetuates the production of glamour in its feudal architecture with significant public means, parallelly new and fluctuating "cultural spaces" emerge that can hardly be described in an adequate way as trends towards market-orientation, interculturality or mediatisation.

As any public debate is lacking (or limiting it to the malversations of individual autocratic directors of museums and exhibition halls), a cultural policy bound to the established public cultural sector is less and less able to become aware of new trends, not to mention the anticipation of new cultural programmes.

The result is a gradual musealisation not only of Austrian cultural production but also of its cultural policy that seems to be retreated to sunbathing in the dawn of an idealized past. A world confronted with more and more insecurities approves this attitude. The ones who suffer are those who are not satisfied by an once-in-a-lifetime visit of the Vienna State Opera but who are interested in creating new cultural spaces, unnoticed of the so-called cultural policy.

ⁱ This text is based on Michael Wimmer's study "Kultur und Demokratie - Eine systematische Darstellung der Kulturpolitik in Österreich", published in 2011. The full book – in German – is available at Studienverlag, Innsbruck/Wien/Bozen. ISBN-13: 978-3706550123 or via Amazon.