Defining Culture and Cultural Policy

19. 3. 2009   Simona Škarabelová

Culture

- long time discussions about definition of this topic
- An international debate centered in UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) since 1960s
- Synonym for the perfoming and visual arts
- Culture was a bulward against mass society
- Not in the resticted sense of belles-lettres, the fine arts, literature, and philosophy, but as the distinctive and specific features and ways of thinking and organizing the lives of every individual and every community

Conference on Cultural Policies and Development (1989)

- „…the concerns of the state must encompass cultural well-being as part and parcel of social and economic well-being"

- „…the cultural policies should encompass new challenges in the arts….yet…embrace human development and the promotion of pluralism, as well as the fostering of social cohesion and creativity"

Cultural Policy

"Cultural policies reflect the fact than [humanity] today is faced with the choice between seeking a purblind and despairing escape in nihilism, or resolutely confronting the future."

Augustin Girard with Genevieve Gentil
Cultural development: experiences and policies,
2nd ed. (Paris: Unesco, 1983), p. 186

What Is Cultural Policy?

- cultural policy describes, in the aggregate, the values and principles which guide any social entity in cultural affairs.

- Cultural policies are most often made by governments, but also by many other institutions in the private sector, from corporations to community organizations. Policies provide guideposts for those making decisions and taking actions which affect cultural life.

- Cultural policy is sometimes made explicitly, through a process defined by an agency charged with this responsibility. For instance, a ministry of culture or arts agency might draft a policy articulating its goals and operating principles in supporting theater companies in various regions. Very often, however -- and *most* often in the case of the United States -- cultural policy is not formally defined. Instead, what we have are the cultural effects -- sometimes unforeseen -- of social action.

- This kind of *de facto* cultural policy, amounting to the "side-effects" of social action taken without consideration of cultural impact, can always be deduced from the actions taken by a state or organization.

Augustin Girard of the Studies and Research Department of the French Ministry of Culture put forward this definition of cultural policy in his book *Cultural development: experiences and policies*, a seminal work in this field:

A policy is a system of ultimate aims, practical objectives and means, pursued by a group and applied by an authority. Cultural policies can be discerned in a trade union, a party, an educational movement, an institution, an enterprise, a town or a government. But regardless of the agent concerned, a policy implies the existence of ultimate purposes (long-term), objectives (medium-term and measurable) and means (men *[sic]*, money and legislation), combined in an explicitly coherent system. *(Girard, pp. 171-172)*

When government agencies in the industrialized world define cultural policy, for instance, they generally limit themselves to the most specialized expressions of culture:

- ➢ media and communications,
- ➢ the arts,
- ➢ education,
- ➢ and in some countries, sports.

The measures taken to implement policy are quite varied. Grants to artists and institutions are common approaches, as are public service employment programs, building and maintaining cultural facilities, encouraging and financing historic preservation, and regulating the airwaves.

Recognizing the "Right to Culture"

- The "right to culture" has been a key foundation of cultural policy. In 1948, soon after the United Nations was established, its members declared a "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" which asserted that
- Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community.
- Everyone, accordingly, has the right to culture, as he has the right to education and the right to work..... This is the basis and first purpose of cultural policy.

Cultural Policy Around the World

- The challenges to democratic cultural development outlined above are global, but they manifest in different ways from place to place, depending upon local social and political conditions.

- For developing societies, the crucial question has been how to preserve and extend indigenous traditions, which root them strongly in the past and provide their deepest sources of energy and inspiration; and at the same time, to take what's best from the industrialized world without being inundated by it.

- Most developing societies have been struggling to overcome a long history of cultural colonization -- the fact that their theaters, libraries, and airwaves are dominated by the cultures which colonized them centuries ago.

- But they want to avoid retreating to mere nostalgia, creating an equally artificial culture which has nothing to say to the real conditions of contemporary life.

- They want to find the best ways to shape modernization when it comes. For instance, in the developing world, it's often not a question of how to reshape existing broadcasting systems, but how to develop mass media in the first place.

- For industrialized societies, the challenges are at once similar and different.

- For instance, when cultural policy-makers in Europe first began their post-War program of "democratizing high culture," they tried many different approaches: blockbuster museum shows were promoted like movies, to draw big crowds; ticket-subsidy programs were designed to lure less affluent people into the concert halls; or artists were bused out to perform for captive audiences in schools and hospitals; to name a few examples.

- But no matter what was tried, the segment of the population which voluntarily participated in prestige arts activities remained the same: a very small percentage of the public, highly educated, financially well-off, and middle-aged or older (just as in the United States).

- Facing the indifference and hostility of the vast majority of their populations -- sometimes referred to as "non-publics," to indicate their disinterest in establishment culture -- European policy-makers reinterpreted their own roles.
- They began to see themselves as needing to address the many cultures within their societies, not simply promoting the traditional "high art" culture favored by wealthy patrons in the past. Instead of focusing on how to lure people into established arts institutions, these cultural ministers turned to a set of much broader social questions:
  - How can we begin to overcome the already-entrenched alienation of modernization?
  - How can we retrieve and preserve relevant traditions?
  - How might we facilitate cross-cultural communication, even cooperation?
  - How can we help animate community life?

- It was at this stage that cultural democracy emerged as the leading edge of cultural policy in Europe, at least in policy-makers' rhetoric. From the mid- to late-'70s, it looked as if cultural democracy would become the primary strain in European cultural development.

- These trends accelerated through the Nineties, with governments throughout Europe and around the world "privatizing " functions formerly considered essential aspects of the public cultural commonwealth.

Historical Roots of Cultural Policy

- The ideas which have informed cultural policy come from many sources -- from traditional practices in diverse societies, from philosophers and theoreticians, from accounts of history and utopian speculations.

- Courts, churches, legislatures, and patrons have for many centuries made decisions about whether, why and how to support work in the arts and cultural facilities; about the language and religion of a society; and about such issues as proper dress and behavior. Philosophers and historians have had a good deal to say about the conduct of a society with respect to culture. In every society and every period of history, people have made choices about the culture they would build, how to express their aspirations and fears, how to embody their values in rituals and celebrations. But the concept of a special socio-cultural responsibility for democratic governments is a relatively new invention. The idea of cultural policy as such came into currency after World War II.

- In the discourse which has since ensued, the idea of cultural democracy has emerged as the major innovation in cultural policy. Cultural ministers throughout the world became interested in the idea because of their alarm over social trends that are being felt globally: the proliferation of electronic mass media, urbanization, "modernization," along with the individual alienation and deracination which accompany them. Taken together, these phenomena have come to be known internationally as the "Americanization" of culture. These factors coalesce to breed a pervasive social passivity dangerous to democracy, eroding traditional cultural activities, and replacing them with mind pap like *I Love Lucy* in forty-seven different languages, emanating primarily from U.S.-based cultural industries.

- Of course, these same forces have been at work far longer within the United States than anywhere else -- for so long, some would say, that most of Americans are oblivious to the domestic cultural imperialism that dominates their national culture. It is therefore unfortunate that this discussion was conducted in terms of "Americanization," as it tended to obscure the deep domestic effects of this complex of cultural forces in the United States and, eventually, to excite U.S. opposition to Unesco altogether

- Whenever this topic is raised, you'll find people defending the U.S. against the charge of cultural invasion with the argument that nobody's forcing people into the cinemas -- everyone wants our art, clothes, food, and television quite simply because they're the best.

- Meanwhile, our own regional, local, and minority traditions are endangered by the same unfettered commercial culture. We stand to gain a great deal by involving ourselves in this global discussion, for the light it can shed on how to keep the multiplicity of our own cultural traditions alive.