

ABOUT THIS ISSUE – CULTURAL POLICY YEARBOOK 2020

Focus section: Urban cultural policies

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While a well-established tradition of studies has recognised cities as centres of cultural and artistic creation, globalisation has profoundly changed the way city policy makers manage cultural development. Diverse social sciences consider cities as cultural command centres of the world giving them the opportunity to embrace the "cultural turn" on the epistemological side and what meanings do they give to the "metropolitan turn" on the empirical side

Today, after a period of economic and cultural globalisation in which the "triumph" of cities seemed certain, the first cracks appear. On the political level the rise of nationalism, populism and the rejection of existing political systems put identity issues and their protection in the foreground. As a result, the central institutions of the territorial state regain power, to the detriment of city authorities. An anti-metropolitan and anti-cosmopolitan rhetoric (counterposing the supposedly wholesome and patriotic values of rural areas and provincial towns to the multiculturalism and permissiveness of large cities) is often part of the armoury of right wing populist politicians. The financial crisis that has weighed on local finances since the late 2000s led to the adoption of austerity policies and to a sharp decline in public subsidies. Culture is increasingly seen as the "adjustment variable" when public policies are facing crisis and funding cuts have to be made. In addition to these two contextual factors, we must consider the climate emergency mobilisation and the focusing of public opinion, NGOs and social activism on ecological and sustainable development policies. Large cities are increasingly blamed as the cradles and the emblems of a consumer civilisation. The many city rankings available show that culture is no longer the best indicator of liveability nor so high as a factor on the agenda of urban excellence.

Nevertheless the political attention given to the expansion of the urban-cultural political economy has led researchers to turn to analysing the main tensions at the heart of cultural policies. The purpose of this Focus section is to revisit, deepen and provide some fresh insights in analysing these tensions and their effects on the cultural policies of cities.

Given the context mentioned above a first issue is the capacity of a city to act by itself, without the mediation or control of central government, as a player in the process of cultural globalisation. Is there a shift in local-global relationships that would encourage cities to stop adopting internationally successful models of place branding (often based on cultural flagship projects)? The literature has shown that urban cultural policies tend to organise the local cultural field according to highly standardized norms and rules, a doxa largely embraced throughout the world.

Approaches focusing on private-public partnership show how structural changes within the cultural domain are related to the digitalization of creativity and to the effects of neo-liberal

ideology. Is this leading to an ever greater reliance on private financing and to the adoption of a managerial logic in the world of culture, once dominated by a public ethos? Are city policy makers able to deal with multinational corporations to protect their cultural assets and emerging artists?

Other cases of urban cultural policies show a profound break with the classical idea of 'culture' as an autonomous sphere of activity. Because of its importance in urban policies and in urban and regional development, the arts and culture are becoming increasingly heterogeneous. Cultural policies are losing their autonomous status as they are mixed with other policies or when they appear as parts or components of higher priority policies (for example, various types of economic local development). Many artists and cultural professionals are worried about this change while others see it as an opportunity to experiment with new artistic languages and new relationships to urban life.

Finally, it is also important to assess the changes in governance systems produced by new cultural strategies. Cities are forced to manage the potentially diverging logics of, on the one hand, international exchange networks (pursuing cultural diplomacy, international relations strategies, cultural tourism and place branding, often focusing on the cultural assets of city centres) and, on the other, of encouraging citizen participation. The claim for participation is deeply place-rooted; it aims to recognise the cultural rights of minorities, to produce empowerment, regenerate disadvantaged neighbourhoods and promote access to culture for the most deprived social groups. Prioritising the former policy orientation over the latter can be effective as an economic development strategy, but it often leads to growing inequality and exclusion.

We expect contributions to explore and grasp the many facets of the current uncertain situation for urban cultural policies. This could include, among others, the following topics:

- Global ambitions: the toolbox of internationally oriented urban strategies includes labels such as the European Capital of Culture and the UNESCO creative city, the organisation of other cultural mega events and iconic, grandiose and ostentatious architectural projects. These policies were implemented by cities in Western countries, and also in the Gulf, the Far East and Latin America, in many cases with controversial outcomes. Can we imagine an alternative approach to international urban cultural strategies for cities in the West and in less developed countries?
- In particular, how have the practices of European Capitals of Culture changed during the last four decades, including the following aspects: the changing relationships of ECoCs with urban policies; changing urban scales; new focus on small cities and regional hinterlands; changing role of heritage in cultural programmes and urban regeneration strategies; tensions between event-oriented and legacy-oriented goals; difficulties in carrying out independent and critical evaluations.
- The evolution of partnerships: do city policy makers control complex multi-level partnerships that involve regions, national governments, business and the cultural sector? To what extent is co-operation between different political authorities undermined or challenged by the financial crisis and by austerity policies? Do

partnerships lead to the emergence of alternative forms and sources of finance for local cultural activities.

- *Government of Fragmentation:* how do cities define the territories in which they operate to try to overcome the problem of “the government of fragmentation”? What are the cultural policy implications of adopting different models, such as ‘organised anarchy’ and supra-municipal government? Is an integrated metropolitan government likely to have more equitable policies encompassing urban centres, poorer peripheral areas and urban sprawl zones? How are rules and norms constructed to balance the needs of different territorial units that are very unequal in terms of population and resources within the same urban area? How do urban cultural policies try to ensure equity of access to jobs in the creative industries, and to prevent the displacement of cultural workers from regenerated areas? What is the gap between rhetoric and reality in the ‘inclusive growth’ debate?
- Cross-sectoral policies: are city authorities today better equipped to design and implement transversal policies (cutting across the divisions between different policy areas and professional specializations, including cultural management, tourism, economic development, place marketing, social policy, education and public health) than sectoral policies (such as those for the development of particular forms of cultural activity, like music, dance, theatre and literature)? How do cultural sector actors engage with transversal policies? How effective have the transversal policies of Agenda 21 for Culture (Pilot City, Leading City programmes etc.) been, with their focus on urban sustainability?
- The twilight of the creative city or the move to the smart city: since the beginning of the 21st century, the model of the ‘creative city’ has been an undeniable success among policy makers seduced by the promises of the supposedly expanding cultural political economy. The notion of the ‘smart city’ today tends to replace the creative city in a narrower but economically more promising niche, the digital economy. But on the one hand, more modest and arguably more realistic claims are being made today about the potential economic performance of the creative city. On the other hand, this discourse tends to ignore the social reality of urban cultural policies, which are much more diversified. A more participative policy is carried out at the community and neighbourhood level based on professional innovations (idea’s store, fab lab, etc...) and cultural activism (cultural brownfields).
- Other policies are candidates for legitimisation, especially policies based on cultural rights, the integration of immigrants and refugees and/or multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and interculturalism. These alternative policies are not addressed to the same artists and professionals or to the same audiences. Finally, a fundamental challenge for the future of metropolitan cultural governance is to know if it will be able to find bridges between these different strategies or if, in the contrary, it will let them follow their own logic at the risk of accentuating urban fragmentation and social segmentation.