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Culture, from factor of development to pillar of sustainability

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Culture, from factor of development to pillar of sustainability

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Notes for a genealogy of sustainability

As the human species, we live in the intersection between two spheres or systems in contact: the sphere of nature and the sphere of culture. If in the first we are merely effect, in the second we are basically cause. And if human action on nature increasingly obeys a "cultural" logic – environmentalism, in this sense, is none other than the consequence of a cultural look at nature – the growing importance of culture as a second habitat or vital environment of humanity requires us to think more and more about it from systemic or ecological perspectives.

As the human species, we live in the intersection between two spheres or systems in contact: the sphere of nature and the sphere of culture.

The relationship of our species with both spheres has been diverse and changing throughout history. As far as nature is concerned, for millennia we were hunters and gatherers. Scarcely 5,000 years ago had we begun to develop a relationship of dominance over the Earth, through its exploitation by means of work, conceiving it as a source of wealth accumulable in the form of surplus, and the human species became sedentary. Not even 500 years ago in our relationship did we discover how to substitute capital for work, capital which over the last 250 years, by means of machines moved by energy, allowed the gains to increase. Finally, it has been in the last 50 years that the differential in the production of wealth has been moving toward knowledge, fuel and raw material that is not natural, but rather cultural, for the first time in the history of humanity.[1]

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[1] See BREY, A., INNERARITY and G. MAYOS, G. (2009), *La sociedad de la ignorancia y otros ensayos*. Barcelona, Zero Factory, 2009.

Our relationship as a species with the second sphere, culture, is also significant. Beyond the classical – and somewhat arguable and surmountable – dichotomy between culture conceived in the anthropological sense as ways of life, and thinking and culture conceived in the sociological sense as artistic practice, for centuries on end culture remained apart from the logics concerning production and accumulation of wealth, firstly, and to the approaches linked to progress and development, later. It was not until the relentless advance of the cultural industries – the publishing industry, and later, the phonographic and cinematographic industries – which with regard to Frankfurt School thinkers (Benjamin, Adorno, Habermas) referred to the "loss of aura" of artwork in the age of its mechanical reproducibility and the relative disadvantage of "live" performance arts concerning their impossibility to substitute capital for workforce faced with the rising cultural industry,[2] when what is known today as "cultural economics" begins to become progressively normal.

Culture generates capitalizable added-value for the sake of economic, urban and social development; but if the benefits of this development are not reinvested to feed back to the subsystem of that which is cultural, the virtuous circle becomes a vicious circle, and development becomes unsustainable.

The gradual recognition of culture in economic terms constitutes a parallel process to the establishment of progressively intense relations between culture and the notions of progress, development and sustainability (cited strictly in order of appearance in the public arena). A process which, described *grosso modo*, begins toward the middle of the twentieth century and in which key milestones are constituted: the intergovernmental conference on cultural policies "Mondiacult," organized by UNESCO and held in Mexico in 1982, the first large world meeting on culture, in which some notions are officially expressed for the first time, such as "the cultural dimension of development" and the need for a "cultural democracy" (in the final declaration of "Mondiacult",[3] the echoes of May '68 and the uneasiness of the countries who are not in line with the rigors of the Cold War), the proclamation by UNESCO from 1988-1997 of the World Decade for Cultural Development which ends with the publication of the final report "Our Creative Diversity,"[4] also known by the name of the compiler, the Peruvian diplomat Javier Pérez Cuéllar, and finally, a new Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development, held in 1998, whose final result adopts the form of an Action Plan for Culture and Development[5] which is still in force in many senses.

[2] See the classic work from 1966 by W. Baumol and W. Bowen, *Performing Arts, The Economic Dilemma*, which is usually considered the foundation for a new discipline, Cultural Economics.

[3] See http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0005/000525/052505sb.pdf

[4] See http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001016/101651e.pdf

[5] See http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001139/113935eo.pdf

Although we should recognize that the impact of "Mondiacult," "Our Creative Diversity" and the "Stockholm Agenda" has had more to do, in thirty or fifteen years' time, with the theoretical formulations concerning culture rather than with the formulation of cultural policies at the state, regional and local level much more than oriented to social, urban and economic transformation, it is true that since then a certain conception has been established of culture conceived as a catalyst or as a factor subject to contributing to the development of territories which will be increasingly important over the years to come. In fact, a certain parallelism can be established between dematerialization of the economy, increasingly autonomous, and even more distant, in regards to the methods of classical-style production and industrial origin, the growing centrality of information, knowledge and culture in economic processes (to the point that the "brand," like the signature, is not peripheral in terms of economic value, but rather a central component in the production of wealth) and the idea that understands culture as a "magic wand" that is subject to causing enormous gains capable of impacting development.[6] A use which, in its intensified reiteration, and for lack of respect for a specific cultural logic, considers the risk of becoming an abuse, which ultimately questions the possibility of a virtuous circle: culture generates capitalizable added-value for the sake of economic, urban and social development; but if the benefits of this development are not reinvested to feed back to the subsystem of that which is cultural, the virtuous circle becomes a vicious circle, and development becomes unsustainable.

Probably one of the key challenges for humankind in the twenty-first century will be the gestation of this new awareness and greater respect towards the cultural sphere.

Certainly culture, transformed into raw material and essential fuel for the new economy, behaves in a very different way from the basic resources, of natural origin, that were necessary for the industrial revolution. In comparison with that which occurs with coal, petroleum and steel, imagination is not used up no matter how much it is used, but rather the contrary. But in the same way that, in the middle of the twentieth century, indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources over more than a hundred years, together with the appearance of global problems like pollution at first, and global warming or perforation of the ozone layer later, they gave way to the emergence of a new awareness of the depletion of natural resources and the need for the human species to progress toward greater respect in regard to the environment and our surroundings, probably one of the key challenges for humankind in the twenty-first century will be the gestation of this new awareness and greater respect toward the second sphere of its existence: the cultural sphere. Otherwise, the reiterated use of culture as an excuse, disregarding any logic of that which is cultural, may end up being a decisive factor of bad development. Somehow, this idea is at the base of movements such as that which gives rise to Agenda 21 for Culture.

[6] See George Yúdice: *El recurso de la cultura: Usos de la cultura en la era global*, Gedisa, Barcelona, 2003.

Hence, with the turn of the century and the millennium, cultural policies have been incorporating other contexts of reference and other logics: from conceiving culture as a factor of development they have gone on to contemplating the need to pay attention to cultural development as well, with the question of sustainability progressively emerging.[7] A term which, among other things, emphasizes the interdependence between the human, natural and cultural systems,[8] incorporates the notion of future and makes us manifest our commitment to future generations, from a cultural perspective as well. Over the past years this new context has been subjected to different declinations that complement one another:

- The approach from the perspective of diversity. The debate on the need to progress toward a necessary "cultural exception" which removes the inexorable logic of commercial exchanges from culture in a context of progressing globalization began to be relevant for international public opinion in the last part of the nineties. Even though it was the root cause of Francophone countries, the question of diversity was globalized through UNESCO and became the core of the Declaration on Cultural Diversity (approved by UNESCO in 2001) and later of the Convention on Cultural Diversity (approved by UNESCO in 2005).[9] Cultural goods and services possess a double nature, social and economic, which is why they cannot be considered merely another commodity. The Convention, approved by a large majority within UNESCO and nowadays endorsed by over a hundred countries throughout the world, constitutes a regulatory text to put an end to the unrelenting proliferation of cultural products, mainly media, of hegemonic cultures riding on bilateral or multilateral free trade agreements as well as establishing fundamental guidelines for topics such as artistic mobility and cultural cooperation.

- The approach from the view of the three regulatory subsystems: law, morality and culture. In the city of Bogotá, at one time one of the most violent in the world, there have been some noteworthy trials related to the use of culture in processes of social pacification and eradication of violence. The philosopher of Lithuanian origin, Antanas Mockus, metropolitan mayor on two occasions, has developed a program of "citizenship culture" which, in synthesis, is based on articulating the three systems which regulate social interaction among citizens: law, morality and culture. Without culture, law and morality cannot obtain results. Killing is prohibited, just like killing is sin. But without the collective commitment, which is cultural, in favor of life and non-violence, the drop in the mortality rate is not relevant.[10]

- Finally, the approach from the logic of sustainability in itself. Here the most eloquent example is undoubtedly that of culture conceived as the fourth pillar of sustainability, as contemplated in the framework of Agenda 21 for Culture. According to the Australian Jon Hawkes, father of the idea of the fourth pillar, the traditional paradigm of sustainability is based on a triangle: social, economic and environmental areas of political action, which have been appearing successively throughout the past 150 years. But currently this is an incomplete model, because culture is not only a catalyst anymore for the development of the three traditional pillars, but rather constitutes a new, fourth pillar which complements and gives greater sense to the paradigm: without cultural development, development is not sustainable or is incomplete.[11]

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[7] Throughout this text, the concept "sustainability" is explicitly chosen over "viability" as another possible option, according to the Brundtland Report: Our common future (1987).

[8] See the article by Amareswar Galla: Locating culture in sustainable development, published in the report Culture, local governments and Millennium Development Goals, UCLG, Barcelona.

[9] See http://www.unesco.org/new/es/culture/themes/cultural-diversity/cultural-expressions/the-convention/convention-text/

[10] See http://www.iadb.org/wmsfiles/products/publications/documents/362225.pdf

[11] See http://www.culturaldevelopment.net.au/community/Downloads/HawkesJon(2001)TheFourthPillarOfSustainability.pdf

The dialogue between culture and sustainability occurs on multiple levels and is subject to different interpretations.

The dialogue between culture and sustainability occurs on multiple levels and is subject to different interpretations. The first interpretation, which is probably the most reductionist, tends to **equate cultural sustainability with economic viability** (a project is sustainable if it can be financed). We can consider, secondly, what we could call the **environmental impact of cultural action**; every artistic event can be measured or evaluated in terms of the impact it causes, resource consumption, carbon footprint, etc. The third focus has to do with **the consideration of ecological thought as something which is part of culture**. Finally, the fourth relationship, and possibly the most profound, derives from **the consideration of culture as an ecosystem**, and contemplates its relationship, in terms of sustainability, with the natural ecosystem and with itself.

If we agree that culture is not merely a catalyst of development processes, and that the conception of development in sustainable terms involves considering culture as one of its key pillars (together with environmental development, social development and productive development), it will not be long before we consider the relationship of culture with the development agendas existing globally.[12] This relationship, based on the principle of interdependence between human and natural ecosystems,[13] went significantly unnoticed in the context of constructing the Sustainable Development Agenda (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), in which only some references to the culture of indigenous peoples were manifested, as well in its sequel "Rio+10," a conference held in Johannesburg in 2002, where a roundtable was held on biodiversity *versus* cultural diversity with the participation of France, Mozambique and UNESCO. Concurrently, the Millennium Development Goals definition process begun in 2000 by all the entities of the United Nations System and a large part of the member countries did not grant culture enough importance, either. This circumstance was corrected as at the end of the first decade of this century, in the process of setting up the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund, largely thanks to the contribution of Spanish cooperation, a *thematic window* was established on "Culture and Development," whose purpose is to finance projects which are able to demonstrate how heritage and creativity can contribute to the achievement of the MDG. In four years, this initiative, endowed with 96 million dollars, has implemented 18 programs with over 8 million beneficiaries and the transversal involvement of 12 agencies of the United Nations System. In addition, in relation to the "Rio+20" conference held in Brazil in 2012, a seminar on "Culture and Development" included, among other important contributions, the participation of the UCLG Committee on Culture.

With regard to UNESCO'S position, we should point out the importance of the conference "Culture: Key to Sustainable Development" held in Hangzhou, China, during the month of June 2013. It was the third large intergovernmental meeting in the history of UNESCO, after Mexico in 1982 and Stockholm in 1998. Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, emphasized in the presentation of the final declaration, that "*Culture is precisely what enables sustainability – as a source of strength, of values and social cohesion, self-esteem and participation*," demanding that in the Millennium Development Goals revision process, which should end this next year, in 2015, culture must occupy its rightful place.

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[12] See, in this regard, the works of David Throsby "Culture, Economics and Sustainability," Journal of Cultural Economics (2005) and "Culture in Sustainable Development: insights for article 13," UNESCO (2008).

[13] See the aforementioned article by Dr. Amareswar Galla.

To top it all off, it must be noted that in this global dialogue between sustainability and culture, undoubtedly sinuous and complex, the alliance of UCLG, and therefore Agenda 21 for Culture, along with three other international organizations, IFACCA (International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies), the International Federation of Coalitions for Cultural Diversity and CAE (Culture Action Europe, the great "network of networks" at the European level), are carrying out important and unprecedented lobbying activities with the purpose of placing the importance of culture in key global debates (meeting of ECOSOC of the UN in Geneva in July 2013, World Urban Forum in Medellin in April 2014, Habitat III Conference in 2016) which have to do with new perspectives on sustainable development in the context of the new post-2015 Development Agenda.[14]

Some contributions for a new Agenda 21 for Culture

First: Anchor Agenda 21 for Culture in the intersection between the anthropological conception and the sociological dimension of culture

The traditional conception of culture, sociological in origin, usually considered the repertoire of "fine arts," was surmounted at length by the conception referred to as "anthropological" adopted by UNESCO in the eighties and especially beginning at the "Mondiacult" Conference (Mexico, 1982), which conceives culture as the set of expressive forms, values, beliefs, practices, etc., present in human life. Nowadays another step forward is needed, situating the predominant interest of cultural policies in the crossroads between symbolism and expression, between sociology and anthropology. Phenomena like the interest of contemporary creators in involving their artistic work in community life, or the importance of the symbolic dimension of social and community practices are part of this intersection, on which we consider Agenda 21 for Culture should focus.

Second: Project Agenda 21 for Culture to respond to the need to articulate the cultural dimension as a market good and as a public service

The Convention on Diversity by UNESCO was later than Agenda 21 for Culture; it was based on the previous Declaration on Cultural Diversity, approved in 2001, but the Convention was approved by UNESCO at the end of 2005. The practice of enriching and harmonizing the contents of Agenda in light of the contributions of the Convention is something that is obviously necessary. Some documents and debates, within UCLG as well as within UNESCO, have been opportunely oriented in this regard. The reflection on how to locally guarantee the dimension of culture conceived as a universal public service, accessible to the population as a whole, without undermining its commercial and industrial nature, which is inevitable in a context of digitalization and progressing globalization, must be a key concept for a new Agenda 21 for Culture. Culture cannot be considered as mere merchandise. But the defense of the double nature which characterizes contemporary cultural goods requires new, specific regulation frameworks.

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[14] See, in this regard, the joint document "Culture as a Goal in the Post-2015 Development Agenda" at http://www.agenda21culture. net/index.php/es/?lang=es

Third: Progress in the definition of universal basic cultural services

All public policies are constructed from a reasonable and reasoned articulation between the recognition of citizens' rights, the specification of institutional duties and the provision of public services. In the particular case of cultural policies, especially locally, the determination of basic cultural rights has always been tremendously complex, due to the appeal to implicit diversity behind the concept of culture as well as due to the relative newness of such policies, if compared to the long duration of other areas of the public sphere, or even due to the ascertainment of a certain taboo in regard to "cultural dirigisme" (inexistent taboo, by the bye, if we refer to "educational dirigisme" or "healthcare dirigisme"). Nowadays, also, the logic of "rights" and "duties" is giving way to a new conception of the public sphere based on the idea of compromises between state and society. Progressing in the definition of basic cultural services should be taken into consideration in a new Agenda 21 for Culture. Not progressing in this sense (that is, considering a "least common denominator" approach impossible) means risking that culture may end up being (even if other possible social and economic inequalities are saved) not a factor of difference or distinction, but rather of inequality and social divide.

Progressing in the definition of basic cultural services should be taken into consideration in a new Agenda 21 for Culture

Fourth: Look into building excellence through a new dialogue between proximity and visibility

The search for excellence tends to be considered one of the goals, either explicit or implicit, of every cultural policy. From this search a series of operations is derived which is oriented toward visibility, often forceful and effective, despite having a scarce or null social basis. Together with visibility initiatives, in pursuit of excellence, we usually find cultural actions in cities, generally with low visibility or none at all, with indisputable social roots: we are referring to what is known today as "culture of proximity" (formerly socio-culture?) generally frequent in small localities and peripheral neighborhoods of large cities. Contemplating the possibilities of building excellence through a new dialogue between proximity and visibility from the perspective of a new Agenda 21 for Culture is undoubtedly important. Cultural projects "with an uppercase C" that have a better social or community basis are needed, just as much as cultural projects "with a lowercase c" that are subject to greater and better visibility are needed. This would prevent a dichotomy which, definitively, generates cultural policies which are dual, divided and autistic in the same locality or area.

Fifth: Place creation and citizenship at the center of local cultural policies

The majority of territorial cultural policies are usually based on logic of distributive character. What this means, in these cases, is to "bring culture closer to the territory," to "put culture within reach of the population"; in sum, to practice "cultural dissemination" as an essential strategy for the democratization of culture. From Agenda 21 for Culture's own perspective, we should be able to invert the terms, that

is, to position creation and citizenship at the center of our action, as if they were generating poles of the electric arc of cultural action, granting dissemination, or distribution, a necessarily instrumental function or a fairly subsidiary role. More culture within reach of the population does not necessarily mean greater or better appropriation of the available cultural capital[15]: those who are more culturally equipped are also more capable of accumulating greater doses of the culture offered. It is necessary to combine the offer with other more proactive logics. Likewise, in the pole of creation, nowadays the safeguard of the freedom of expression is not enough. What good does being able to speak do if no one listens to me, or being able to write if no one reads what I have written? This is extreme Darwinist logic: many quit or fail; only a few succeed and survive. In the words of Eduard Delgado: *"recognition is the key problem of the knowledge society."*[16]

Sixth: Diversify diversity

Cultural diversity has become a phenomenon that, while this may appear redundant, is increasingly more diverse. It is not the same to talk about cultural diversity in migratory contexts, about stateless nations or where there are original settlers. On the other hand, identity has ceased to be a regulatory precondition of community existence and its construction nowadays has become a key factor of the collective project. From a point of departure, identity became a negotiable destination. Conventional intervention models are finished due to saturation (such as the American melting pot, English corporate multiculturalism or French republican secularism),[17] and the contemporary approach to diversity requires the integration of multicultural strategies (the recognition of cultures existing in the territory), intercultural strategies (the promotion of conditions for dialogue between the groups that contribute these cultures) and transcultural strategies (promoting the right to indifference as a new necessary condition for citizens, complementary to that which is derived from the recognition of the right to difference).

Identity has ceased to be a regulatory precondition of community existence. Its construction nowadays has become a key factor of the collective project. From a point of departure, identity became a negotiable destination.

Seventh: Support organized cultural citizenship

In reality, appealing to the cultural civil society still means too frequently to refer to guilds and corporations which personify old and new professions of culture: artists, curators, administrators, managers and dealers. There is not, *sensu stricto*, a cultural citizenship similar to that which we can recognize in areas as heterogeneous as ecologism or sports. Phenomena such as cultural consumerism, the rights of the cultural citizen-consumer, etc., are still incipient. Culture is usually conceived as a sector of sectors.

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[15] We refer to that which analysts call the *Matthew effect* in allusion to the Gospel reference of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount": *"For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."* (Matthew 25:14-30 NIV), notion transferred from the analysis of natural systems to the area of sociology and culture.

[16] Eduard Delgado: "Hacia una nueva articulación de los espacios lingüísticos y culturales" in the journal Pensar Iberoamérica no. 6. OEI, Madrid, 2004.

[17] Jude Bloomfield and Franco Bianchini: *Planning for the Intercultural City*, Comedia, London, 2004.

Consequently, whoever becomes involved in literary, musical or theatrical activities will hardly consider they are part of something greater called culture. Is it the task of the administered society (the state) to contribute to a bigger and stronger cultural civil society, to support organized cultural citizenship? In regard to the logic of Agenda 21 for Culture, it is the only way. Building citizenship, which is cultural in this case, is part of local action.

Eighth: Create conditions for dialogue between tradition and modernity

The author comes from an environment, characteristic of the Catalan culture, where the dialogue between tradition and modernity has been part of the logic of the artistic and creative sector for a long time. Some consider that this is characteristic of bordering cultures. Catalan culture is known throughout the world thanks to a long list of innovative figures who have made this dialogue the center of interest in their creative work. These include Gaudí, Miró, Mompou, Comediants, La Fura dels Baus, Carles Santos and Cesc Gelabert as proof. The fact is that, with very few exceptions, the guiding principle of the relationship between tradition and modernity is still instilled almost all over the world as "don't touch," when it should be exactly the opposite, and based on "do touch." Tradition which does not converse with modernity becomes static, fossilized. Inasmuch as the avant-garde which is not able to be fertilized by tradition suffers an incomprehensible uprooting. The great Gaudí said, "To be original is to return to origins." But this process never occurs automatically and it is necessary to create the conditions for this through cultural policies.

Local governments should contribute to a bigger and stronger cultural civil society

Ninth: Incorporate new parameters of governance

Addressing governance (definitively, both "good governance" and "shared governance") has become commonplace in the context of contemporary policies, even local ones. It is generally assumed that the new paradigm incorporates three fundamental conditions: the sum of forces of the different levels of public administration (multi-level governance), the improvement of departments which are traditionally stagnant and sectorialized (transversal governance) and the constitution of public-private alliances, with special attention to the agents belonging to civil society (multi-actor governance). These are three circumstances which should also be reflected in the governance of a local cultural policy. In addition, cultural policies have decided to give rightfully-deserved importance to a new trilogy for governance, that which is established between the "agendas" (and what better example than Agenda 21 for Culture!), the "networks" (a phenomenon which is particularly exuberant in the sector) and the "agencies" (observatories, laboratories and different types of platforms), like tugboats which are able to materialize that which is imperative of the agendas in the everyday action of those who belong to new and old cultural networks alike. All these elements are part of the panorama of a new governance which should be reflected in the reformulation of Agenda 21 for Culture.

Tradition which does not converse with modernity becomes static, fossilized. Inasmuch as the avant-garde which is not able to be fertilized by tradition suffers an incomprehensible uprooting

Tenth: Favor initiatives with a high capacity of modelling, demonstration and transfer

From the UCLG Committee on Culture, an entity which ensures the smooth functioning of the initiatives regarding Agenda 21 for Culture, importance has been given to the recognition and dissemination of good practices concerning the Agenda itself. In fact, we are faced with the convocation of the first international Agenda 21 for Culture award (co-sponsored with Mexico City) and soon a first repertoire of good practices from around the world should be on Agenda's website, organized in a file which permits relative comparability of experiences. The fact is that, in the future, the new Agenda should focus its action, considered a strategic element "from" the document itself, on the promotion and stimulation of local cultural initiatives which satisfy this three-fold condition: having a high capacity for modelling (that is, they are able to be constituted in a formal, clear and precise description), as well as having a powerful effect of demonstration (which inform of their objectives and results with the best possible exemplariness and eloquence) and finally, being highly transferrable, reproducible or replicable in different cultural and territorial contexts.