Enhancing Cultural Democracy: From national to global cultural democracy in cultural policies

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From national to global cultural democracy in cultural policies

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"Cultural Democracy", like many cultural policy themes, has different meanings, relevance and importance depending on the political, economic, cultural and social contexts in which it is applied. "Democratising culture" – implementing strategies to increase access to and the dissemination of ideas and values – has certainly been aided by the arrival of the internet, but it remains those with resources, with networks, with expertise and historical privilege, who are best able to assert their values, ideas, beliefs and ideological assumptions: what hopes then, for a more democratic world order, in which everyone – or at least the majority of people – may be able to project their views, traditions, values and perspectives into the "global market of ideas"? My reflections on this theme will be informed by my South African experience, by my serving as part of UNESCO's technical facility on the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, and my work within cultural policy across the African continent. I will begin this reflection with reference to my home country, South Africa, as a metaphor for the world.

The South African experience

Much like colonialism, apartheid South Africa had as one of its premises, the idea that white people were more fully human than black people, so that people of darker hue were essentially forced to serve as cheap labour to create wealth and support the lifestyles of their white counterparts. The post-apartheid Constitution however, affirmed all citizens irrespective of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, etc. as equals, with the same fundamental rights and freedoms, so that our country's first Arts, Culture and Heritage Policy, adopted in 1996, was premised on cultural democracy principles: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts" as per Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and "The doors of learning and culture shall be open", a clause in the Freedom Charter, adopted by Nelson Mandela's African National Congress as their guiding document from the 1950s.

Whereas censorship was a key feature of preserving the apartheid status quo with music, theatre, literature and films that were critical of the regime or which conflicted with the conservative religious values of the ruling party being banned or restricted, freedom of creative expression is now enshrined in the country's Constitution, along with other features of a modern democratic state.

Implementation of cultural democracy

To give effect to the principles of cultural democracy in our new society, initial cultural policy, premised on principles of human rights and freedoms, sought to democratize culture through the following strategies:

a. public funding to support the creation and distribution of creative work would be made available and channelled through an independent arts council and an independent film and video foundation that existed at arm's length to government; these would be governed by respected individuals within the arts and film sectors, who would make decisions about the allocation of funding on the basis of artistic merit primarily
b. cultural infrastructure in the form of multi-functional arts centres would be distributed throughout the country, particularly in areas marginalized by apartheid, with such centres providing infrastructure both to creative practitioners to create and distribute their work, and to audiences to access visual art, theatre, dance, music, film, etc. that would tour such centres
c. arts education would be introduced at school level for all learners to educate and develop new audiences as well as provide the basis for vocational training for individuals who might want to engage in professional careers as artists
d. the governance and management of publicly-funded institutions such as museums, theatres and galleries would reflect the demographics of our country in terms of race and gender, thus ensuring that the aesthetic and cultural programming of such spaces would serve all South Africans, rather than only a white minority.

To concretize the practice of freedom of expression, access to funding, to infrastructure and the governance of publicly-funded institutions were to be democratized, and for people to enjoy and participate in the cultural life of the community, access to appropriate infrastructure to present such work, was to be decentralized.

An integral feature of the democratization of cultural policy at the time was the participation of independent civil society organisations and professional bodies representing the creative sector in the research and formulation of, and advocacy for these cultural policies: no longer were artists to be the subjects of policy created by government, but within a democracy, they had the right to determine the policies, and participate in the structures and funding mechanisms that governed their lives.

Twenty-one years after the adoption of the original cultural policy, our Department of Arts and Culture is in the final throes of updating our cultural policy. Rather than the human rights premises of the 1996 Cultural Policy, the current draft foregrounds the creative and cultural industries as key contributors in addressing the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality (much like international bodies have emphasized the creative and cultural industries as key instruments to promote economic growth and thus the realization of first the Millennium – and now the Sustainable – Development Goals).

After two decades of the promise of a better life for all, the South African reality is that 55% of the population lives below the poverty line. The official unemployment rate is 26%, but – unofficially – it is closer to 38%. South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world where the top 20% of citizens earn 70% of the national income and the bottom 40%, less than 7%.

And where, then, is our cultural democracy?
Cultural infrastructure remains largely concentrated in the wealthier urban centres, and although everyone may apply to the National Arts Council for funding (thus democratizing access to public funding), given the great need and the relatively small budget of the Council, recipients

receive hardly enough to support the creation, let alone the distribution of a project.

Government ignored existing professional and artists-created bodies to initiate the Creative and Cultural Industries Federation, a sweetheart body that supposedly represents the creative sector; democracy is undermined by the creation of a body whose leadership is dependent on government grants so that their critical voice is silenced.

As for addressing the needs of the poor through the creative industries, ironically, this market-driven approach continues to exclude the poor – still overwhelmingly black – who do not have the disposable income to spend on creative products. And it is those who benefited from apartheid who most have the resources, the networks and the markets to take advantage of publicly-funded infrastructure or to privatise cultural access.

So, while all citizens have the right to freedom of expression and to participate in the cultural life of the country, inevitably, it is those with resources, education, networks and recognizable brands that are best able to do so, thus making a mockery of the notion of cultural democracy.

Translating the South African metaphor globally

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "All are born free and equal in dignity and rights", and yet, in practice, this is not at all the case.

The cultural hegemony of "the West" developed through the colonial period and has been asserted more vigorously through globalization. Vast structural inequalities in economic, political and military power persist at global and regional levels. These instruments of "hard power" are employed to pursue and secure national or group interests, through means such as economic aid, military intervention and political sanctions. Culture is the domain of "soft power", but no less important in securing interests, for it is through culture that citizens internalise values, ideas and perspectives that support particular interests, hence the emphasis by some on "cultural diplomacy".

Whose values and ideas dominate, whose way of life is valorised, which perspectives on world events carry the most influence, which victims of terror are humanised, in other words, whose culture assumes hegemony, depends on who has global or regional reach through news and media outlets, audio visual products and distribution networks, and access to digital platforms.

If cultural democracy is about the equitable and free flow of ideas, values and perspectives that may compete for hegemony and for the hearts and minds of ordinary people, then a world characterised by huge structural inequalities, presents insurmountable obstacles to cultural democracy.

It is against this background that the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions has relevance. With the decline of the bipolar world in the nineties, the World Trade Organisation established global rules for trade that would facilitate greater market access, with nation states having little recourse to protectionist instruments to protect their industries. Wealthy countries such as France and Canada argued against the application of these "free trade" principles to the creative industries sector for fear that creative – particularly audio-visual – products from the United States of America for exam-

ple would flood their markets. Their argument centred around the need for cultural democracy, to spread and maintain a diversity of ideas, values and perspectives globally through creative products such as movies and television programmes, rather than the homogenization that – in their view – would result from "free trade" that would allow creative products from dominant countries to enter their markets with little constraint.

The 2005 UNESCO Convention aims to address this by allowing governments to support their creative industries with subsidies and other protectionist measures where necessary e. g. local music quotas, without these being regarded as unfair interventions in the market. The Convention also promotes fairer global trade in creative products with wealthier countries encouraged to invest in the creative industries of less-resourced countries, and to provide preferential access to their markets for creative goods and services from poorer countries. The aim is both to promote development through earning foreign exchange via the exporting of creative goods, but also to circulate ideas and perspectives from a range of countries and providing access to these for their citizens.

It is precisely because even within a cultural democracy also "cultural diplomacy" happens all the time (through engagement with values, ideas, beliefs and worldviews through cultural means) and through trade in creative goods and the consumption of such creative goods like films, television programmes, news channels, advertisements, etc. more resourced countries are favoured, that the Convention aims to promote more equitable diplomacy through cultural means.

Whether the Convention actually achieves this in practice – other than helping wealthier countries to protect their cultural turf against other wealthy countries – is moot. The reality is that the effects of economic recession on the one hand and increasing security concerns on the other have constrained support for international cultural co-operation to promote diversity as well the mobility of creative practitioners from the Global South to countries where, in terms of the Convention, they should have preferential access.

As with the South African scenario though, the Convention has largely served the trade interests of wealthier countries who may protect and promote their cultural turf locally, regionally and globally, while less-resourced countries continue to be consumers, rather than players in the global creative economy of ideas and values. According to the UN Conference and Trade and Development reports on the creative economy, Africa's share of global trade in the creative economy is less than 1% (a share attributed to a combination of 54 countries!).

Africa has been the primary beneficiary of UNESCO's International Fund for Cultural Diversity, consuming 46% of the funds allocated to date, but when the fund has only collected USD 9 million over more than ten years, 46% of that total is not even the marketing budget of one average Hollywood movie.

UNESCO's recently-launched 2018 Report on the implementation of the 2005 Convention, states "the mobility of artists and other cultural professionals is crucial to maintaining a heterogeneous world of ideas, values and worldviews…" but it goes on to report that there is a substantial imbalance in the flows of cultural goods with citizens in the Global South consuming far more cultural goods imported from the Global North (and so imbibing the values, views and ideas embedded within these goods) than the other way round.

As for the preferential access to Global North markets for goods and services from the Global South as promoted by the Convention, security concerns have severely restricted the entry of artists and other creative professionals from Africa, Asia and the Arab region into such markets. UNESCO's Report on artists' mobility shows that in two years there has been an increase from 70 to 75 countries to which Global South artists may – generally – travel visa-free, but this is still less than half the 156 countries to which creatives from the Global North may generally travel without a visa.

Trump's ban on visitors and refugees from six Muslim-majority countries is a cultural response to problems rooted in inequality. The rise of nationalism among Europeans in many countries is a culturally chauvinist response to a perceived threat to their identity, their way of life and their cultural values by an influx of refugees. While the language of cultural diversity informed cultural policy 10-15 years ago, there is now a distinct move towards greater cultural homogeneity in the Global North; this will have inevitable consequences for the role of culture in international relations, in funding and thus for cultural policies and cultural democracy worldwide.

More recently, the European Parliament passed a comprehensive resolution on culture in European international relations, highlighting "...the important role of culture in EU external policy as a soft power tool, a catalyst for peacekeeping, stability and reconciliation..." and "praises the fact that the EU Global Strategy of intercultural and interreligious dialogue in enhancing mutual understanding; regrets however that the intrinsic value of culture and art as restraints against radicalism and terrorism is not mentioned...".

While policies appear to emphasise „values", in international relations, in reality, it is also interests that shape international policy. The European Parliament resolution also emphasises the need to redefine the important role of national institutes of culture in intercultural exchanges, bearing in mind that some of these have long traditions with many contacts in third countries allowing them to serve as a solid foundation for cooperation and communication among various European players; points, furthermore, to their potential to promote and facilitate bilateral relationships between countries and to help develop and implement a European strategy for cultural diplomacy. However, there are only few if any such centres from less resourced continents in the Global North; for example, there is no African (other than North African) cultural centres in the capitals of Europe to promote African artistic production and collaboration and the projection of African ideas through the arts.

Within the traditional structures of cultural relations projects often take place in the context of inequality, particularly where they involve some form of artistic collaboration to promote intercultural dialogue. Within such projects, there are unspoken power relations. In a world characterized by enormous inequality with respect to economic, political, military and cultural power, it is those with resources who mostly determine the geo-political needs and focus of cultural diplomacy projects. It is also they that determine the aesthetic direction and nature of such projects, precisely because their counterparts are dependent on the resources and opportunities offered by the project.

Conclusion

The weak may have little leverage, and may only be able to offer resourced nations crumbs in the way of strategic, geo-political or other benefits, but given the current polarisation within the world and its potential for combustion, I believe that it is in the long-term interests of wealthy nations to engage more with the Global South from a position of quiet, to listen, to experience, to be more open to insights and reflections that may be challenging, that may not be easy and comfortable, but that may be necessary if we are to ensure a more just, more humane world order, in which we all feel safe and secure.

That the majority of South Africans are still marginalised by poverty, is unsustainable and will be a source of constant threat to the stability of society and to the safety and security of all, particularly the wealthy. Similarly, the structural divides in the world between rich and poor are unsustainable, and notwithstanding ever-increasing militarisation, the "haves" will constantly be under threat from those who are on the underside of history.

What we really need currently is a global dialogue about the challenges our world and the next generations face, and about how we will deal with this globally. However, within the creative and cultural sector, we tend to follow the leads of our governments or in the case of failed or failing states, of international donors, who themselves are subject to funding directives. There is a need to negotiate these dynamics more honestly and thoroughly, in the pursuit of cultural democracy premised on an inclusive humanity, and an affirmation of dignity and rights of human beings.

The author

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