

High cultures, ethno cultures, elite cultures

Far from being an easy target for popularising agendas, aiming for 'elite cultures' means taking the risk to acknowledge one's own people as the best resource one can have when dealing with cultural education and the promotion of cultural expressions.

The debate on what types of cultural policies states should envision and what types of cultural initiatives they should encourage is as old as states themselves. Europeans, and not only Greeks, tend to look back with pride to their common cultural ancestors in Athens and the democratic philosophies and practices Pericles and his contemporaries saw fit for the citizens of the Europe's first city state.

Closer to us, yet still around a century and a half ago, Matthew Arnold was adamant that a truly great British government be actively involved in the establishment of a sound education system to bring 'sweetness and light' to teachers and students alike. In the last century Paris was ablaze with André Malraux's views on the



'democratisation of culture' and the setting up of the *maisons culturelle* across municipalities in France. Before becoming more reactionary in the 1970s, part of the response to May '68 was revolutionary by seeking to include and value all forms of cultural expression irrespective of canon, convention and tradition. Actions in favour of 'cultural democracy' opened up vast canvases for creative people to take on a role as artists and arts practitioners and professionals and truly challenge the constructed palisade dividing high from low cultures.

This debate has not come to any definite conclusions, and happily so. Instances when states had a very clear idea of which cultures were allowed and promoted and had the means to implement their view, such as Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union are to be seen in their full terrible contexts and referred to as examples of very bad practice.

On the other hand, it is pitiful when states do without an institutional memory and address fundamental cultural concerns with naivety and good intentions.

High cultures

In her first interview as Maltese Minister of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, the Honourable Dolores Cristina stated that '[c]ulture must not be elitist put popular and popular does not mean inferior in any way but simply accessible to many.' Far from bringing in a breath of fresh air, such a statement betrays a view which does not even acknowledge that people *are* culture, in their various ways of being, expressing themselves and coming together to mark their own space and time creatively.¹ This view reminds us of the very first models used in Communication Theory, cursorily taken note of and eagerly discarded by today's students, where a unidirectional message is relayed between sender and receiver. If, as the title of the article itself claims 'Culture is us', one cannot accept government adopting such a simplistic view of its role in the field of culture as to be demeaning. It is also ironic how the state's efforts to raise the quality of the arts as well as improve the accessibility and encourage the participation in cultural life are splayed out, once again, across the high culture-low culture divide, as can be seen in the next statement (immediately following the first quotation above): 'We need to increase the quality cultural events and ensure they are enjoyed by a wider *swathe* [emphasis added] of the public and not by an infinitesimal section of aficionados.'

Matthew Arnold's vision of '[...] confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night'² helps bring home the danger inherent in such statements: in countries such as Malta the description of the armies of darkness does not necessarily apply to common citizens who act as hooligans, but to the state itself which abdicates its responsibilities to improve its citizens' quality of life and ensure their cultural expression. Finally, the statements above are rounded off by the following, which manages to encapsulate the state's sell-out in a nutshell: 'In order to address this cultural deficit we must design a policy aimed at *popularising* culture.'³ Forty years

¹ It is ironic, yet not surprising, that lifestyle outlets like Benetton and Nike have realised this long before Ministries of Culture. The most recent slogan at the time of writing by ESPRIT even states 'The world is our culture.'

² Read 'Dover Beach' at

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/arnold/writings/doverbeach.html>.

³ In the Minister's second interview to the press on 25 May 2008 to *The Malta Independent on Sunday*, the statement is confirmed in a slightly different manner: 'The main thrust of this policy should be to make culture more popular and accessible to the general public.' In

after the Parisian debates referred to above, the Maltese government not only is not interested in investing in its citizens and their cultural expressions by looking at ways of achieving a cultural democracy, but suggests the way forward is popularising culture.⁴

Ethno cultures

In spite of the discourse in favour of popularising culture and enabling access to the public, in practice an observer of Maltese cultural expressions would quickly notice another fence put up between people living in Malta: that is, between locally born and bred nationals and migrants. This is a line designed to exclude a growing number of people whose needs to cultural understanding and expression are not taken into consideration enough.



This is in defiance of Article 1 of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.⁵ It states that the objectives of the Convention are ‘to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions’ and ‘to create the conditions for cultures to flourish and to freely interact in a mutually beneficial manner’. Furthermore, Article 2 states that signatories have ‘the sovereign right to adopt measures and policies to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions within their territory.’ Therefore, Malta should exercise this right and support the cultural expressions of migrants in Malta. Sadly, and in spite of serious hard work by a variety of government agencies, civil society activists as well as members of the arts community, official policy does not encourage enough a process of exchange and mutuality between local and migrant cultural productions to take place. Fortunately, events like the 1001 Actions for Dialogue which saw a small number of local councils encourage just such an exchange as part of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 and in collaboration with the government agency St James Cavalier, are a happy exception to this rule.

her third interview, to *The Times* Showtime supplement, on June 6, the Minister even says she would like to be most remembered ‘for having “popularised” culture.’

⁴ It may be a blessing in disguise that following a 2001 Discussion Document on Cultural Policy in Malta issued by the then Ministry of Education, no cultural policy for Malta has been ever published.

⁵ Malta acceded to the Convention on 18 December 2006 as part of the European Community’s ratification. For the Convention see

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001429/142919e.pdf>.

Nevertheless, the general cultural landscape reflects what Kiwan and Kosnick present as the division between 'high culture' and 'ethno-culture' which separates conventionally accepted art from the cultural expressions of migrants.⁶ While Kiwan and Kosnick reflect on policy contexts in large metropolitan centres like Paris and Berlin one can witness a similar application of policy in Malta where 'at the institutional level of cultural policy it is presumed that non-'white' immigrants will, above all, engage in cultural or artistic projects which are tied to the notion of ethnic and social identities, and do not qualify as 'serious' cultural contributions of artistic value.' State policy reflects and reinforces many Maltese citizens' attitude towards migrants and their cultures. Government would be brave in choosing this as the right time to reverse this lack of disengagement and start acting upon the situation Dr Adrian Grima describes: 'Illum il-preżenza f'Malta ta' persuni Afrikani ftit l xejn teffettwa kif inħarsu lejn il-kultura tagħna. Jekk ikollna attitudni serja u pożittiva lejn il-preżenza tal-barranin f'pajjiżna, huma min huma, il-kultura ta' pajjiżna tistaghna.'⁷

Elite cultures



To conclude by referring back to Minister Cristina's view of popularising culture, what is called for is a policy which encourages people to challenge the harmful divisions between 'high' and 'low' cultures and does so not by 'dumbing down' and giving up on works of high quality or of an experimental nature, but by acknowledging the value and the diversity of people.

This can be done following the ambitious vision of Antoine Vitez (in picture) who, at the time of directing the Théâtre National Populaire called for an 'elitism for everyone'.⁸

⁶ Read research by Nadia Kiwan and Kira Kosnick in essays such as 'The 'Whiteness' of Cultural Policy in Paris and Berlin' in *Transcultural Europe: Cultural Policy in a Changing Europe* (2006: New York).

⁷ <http://www.illum.com.mt/2008/06/22/interview.html>.

⁸ 'L'élitisme pour tous: oxymore populiste ou exigence démocrate?', Espace de libertés, Décembre 2007.

From this perspective, far from being an easy target for popularising agendas, aiming for 'elite cultures' means taking the risk to acknowledge one's own people as the best resource one can have when dealing with cultural education and the promotion of cultural expressions. Envisioning one's cultural policy on the lines of 'high' and 'low' cultures reinforces such divisionary constructs and assumes that one is accepting the idea that some people are better than others. This is precisely something a state with its social and cultural welfare at heart should challenge.

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