

Towards a Cultural Politics of Visible Multiplicity

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To begin with, I must apologize for my Spanish which is quite good enough to order my food in a restaurant – but to give a presentation in Spanish means considerably stretching my capabilities. I still hope that it is easier for us all if I try to do it in this way and ask for your indulgence.

I have been thinking about cultural politics since the 1990s. And also, since this time I use a quotation which, in my understanding, perfectly describes the realms and, thus, also the pitfalls of cultural politics.

“Whose culture shall be the official one and whose shall be subordinated?
What cultures shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden?
Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten?
What images of social life shall be projected, and which shall be marginalized?
What voices shall be heard, and which be silenced?
Who is representing whom and on what basis?
This is the realm of cultural politics.”
(Jordan/Weedon 1995, 4)

I think it is important to keep these functions of cultural politics in mind as, frequently, cultural politics are rather seen as an unimportant policy field or else, as an addition to another policy field.

I come from Vienna and, there, cultural politics have traditionally a more prominent position. Austria is very proud of its cultural heritage and likes to describe itself as a “cultural world power”. One could understand this self-description as a weak attempt to safeguard the glory of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy – but I will not go into that now.

This approach to cultural politics has for quite some time led to two main assumptions of cultural politics: (1) Culture and the arts are defined as “a good thing” without any further need to argue their value. (2) The lion’s share of public support for culture and the arts goes to the cultural heritage. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly these two assumptions are linked to a concept of Austrian identity based on a common past and represented in the cultural heritage.

Rather obviously, this is a problematic approach. On the one hand, the assumption that culture and the arts are necessarily a good thing absolves cultural politics from specifying their aims. This means, among other things, that it becomes very difficult to evaluate cultural politics – as it is not clear what they actually should achieve. But not only does taxpayer’s money go into the financing of culture and the arts (and in the case of Austria, quite a lot of that) but, more importantly, cultural politics influence on a high degree the perception of a country or a city by those living there as well as by their visitors.

Furthermore, the focus on the cultural heritage and its link to a stable Austrian identity rooted in the past leads to highly problematic connotations of these unspecified cultural politics, especially against the background of considerable popularity of anti-immigration politics.

However, these unsatisfying approaches to cultural politics opened the possibility for cultural political contestation. And we could observe this contestation in Austria since the 1970s, when the Socialdemocrats took over Austrian government, and especially in Vienna, a city governed by Socialdemocrats since the Second World War. The starting point of these contestations was that culture and the arts are not necessarily per se good but that they must be interrogated for their concrete political impact. Furthermore, all concepts of identity have been contested – by deconstructing identities and by cautiously re-constructing and affirming non-hegemonic identities. Of migrants, of women, of queer people ...

The recognition of a multiplicity of possible perspectives on and uses of culture and the arts led to a multiplicity of artistic and cultural initiatives. Independent theatre and movie productions, political arts projects in the fine arts and as crossovers of fine and performing arts, lecture performances and other intersections between arts and sciences ... Most of these artistic endeavours have been temporal and gained their specific value and impact precisely out of their temporality. Still, some kind of sustainability has been warranted to them by stable locations which have acted not so much as institutions but as enabling territories or shells for a broad variety of activities.

Maybe, the oldest of them is WUK, the House of Workshops and Culture, founded by the end of the 1970s in a former locomotive factory in a nowadays central part of Vienna. One of the most important qualities of WUK – apart from its outstanding stability as a location and as a programmatic force – is that it combines and unites artistic activities (spaces for expositions, artistic productions, concerts, rehearsals) with socio-economic and political ones, such as children groups and an alternative school, a bicycle repair shop, various independent groups and institutions, especially of migrants, such as the Association of Turkish Youths and Students or the Iranian library, or also one of the best legal counselling organisation for asylum seekers in Austria. It would be a lie to say that all these different activities lead to continuous synergies – but, still, they stimulate each other and those visiting the house. And they show which role culture, and the arts can play in a heterogeneous, diverse context adequate to the multiple population of Vienna.

WUK is a place many Viennese know – but probably not many tourists. Tourists usually visit the worldwide renowned sights of Vienna and, maybe, one or the other big festival or event. These are the cultural activities and institutions generating income for the city. This commercial side of culture and the arts has been continuously more emphasized since the 1990s. One could argue that, in fact, Austrian and Viennese cultural politics have undergone a paradigm shift which can be globally observed and is related to the concept of the cultural and creative industries or, also, the economic impact of the arts and other creative activities. The transfer of this global trend was certainly enhanced by Austria's accession to the EU (which only happened in 1995) and the EU's understanding of culture and the arts as an economic factor. And while it has considerably changed the cultural and artistic scene in Austria, many features have remained the same.

Since the time of the Austro-Hungarian emperors, a major part of the cultural budget has been allotted to a very few big cultural institutions. This is still the case – but conditions for financing have changed. While, for a long time, it was enough that the Museum of Arts History existed and possessed worldwide unique collections, nowadays, numbers of visitors are counted and earned income is calculated. This is not entirely bad. I still remember times when the stunning collection of ancient Greek and Roman artefacts of the Museum of Arts History were less presented than stored in the museum, obviously arranged according to size and without artificial lighting so that visits had to stop once the sun went down. Now, you see there an impressive presentation.

In other regards, this new policy is less satisfying. To attract many visitors and to earn income, Austrian museums buy blockbuster exhibitions which are touring around Europe. In this vein, the Albertina housing one of the most important collections of graphic art worldwide features exhibitions of paintings from other parts of the world, e.g., recently by Modigliani. And, in many regards, museums which are also research institutions on the arts and institutions preserving and restoring art are reduced to exhibition halls. Important tasks of museums are, thus, neglected as they do not generate income.

Thus, the paradigm shift of Austrian cultural politics, replacing a kind of unconditional financing of what was understood as great art by very clear conditions and aims expressed in figures and economic output, has led to more problems than solutions. Institutions and organizations in the field of culture and the arts are complex in their aims – and a limitation to economically relevant aims leads to impoverishment of the sector. While this holds true for the big institutions, it does even more so for small initiatives experimenting with methods, tools, and contents. While even a highly problematic

political concept of cultural politics can open up space for contestation and debate, the limitation to economic factors closes this space.

What is, thus, necessary here is to re-open this space and, at the same time, to reframe it. This brings me back to my introductory quotation:

“Whose culture shall be the official one and whose shall be subordinated?
What cultures shall be regarded as worthy of display and which shall be hidden?
Whose history shall be remembered and whose forgotten?
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These are eminently political questions and, more precisely, they are questions to democracy. Democracy not understood as a stable political system based on majorities but as a horizon of political agency striving towards equal liberty for all concerned. The beauty of democracy lies precisely in the impossibility to create a stable political system, in the fact that the place of power is empty or, at least, not permanently occupied, that majorities change continuously. Thus, we cannot even speak of majorities and minorities in an essentialist way, rather, democracies, in general, and contemporary democracies, in particular, consist of a multiplicity of minorities. Hegemonic monocultural concepts as well as a purely economic understanding of the societal functions of culture and the arts make minorities invisible and silence them. But, on the other hand, culture and the arts are able to make minorities visible, in their fluidity and. And they are able to bring them into a multiple conversation with each other – if everything goes well, into a conflictive, heterolingual, infinite conversation continuously deconstructing hegemonies. And this is also important for democracies – the inability of groups with ever more rigid identity constructions to communicate are deadly for democracy as the Covid pandemic is teaching us right now.

Thus, culture and the arts as well as cultural politics need multiplicity. If I understand the intention of this conference correctly, this term was chosen in order to avoid the worn-out term “cultural diversity” which has become, on the one hand, a rather empty signifier and suggests, on the other hand, that we can clearly define and discern different cultures forming this cultural diversity. Obviously, this is not the case – instead, every culture as well as every individual and collective are multiple and multiplying themselves all the time.

Maybe, thus, the term “multiplicity” is more appropriate than the term “cultural diversity” to grasp the openness cultural politics need to further democracy. We cannot define the term “multiplicity”, it necessarily remains a contested concept – and the necessity and possibility to contest every existing understanding of multiplicity is part and parcel of the concept. It is meant to include ever more ideas, interests, individuals, and groups and to constantly question its own exclusions. But we can define the opposite of multiplicity, which is monoculture, a hegemonic, dominant culture excluding everything that does not fit into its concept.

As I have tried to show, multiplicity has never been the main aim of Austrian cultural politics. And this is something which has been continuously criticized over many decades by artists, activists, and also academics. Austrian politics have never tried to implement truly democratic cultural politics but, instead, shifted from a paradigm of uncontested collective identity based on the cultural heritage to an economic understanding of the aims of cultural politics. However, this paradigm shift was not an absolute one – paradigm shifts rarely are – and we find many traces of the former paradigm in the ways the actual paradigm is implemented. On the other hand, and more importantly, the former, rather fuzzy paradigm has opened space for contestations, for activities beyond and against this paradigm. And, luckily, quite a few of these activities (although not all) have survived the trend to economization up to

now. Especially in Vienna, this has also to do with the fact that the Viennese city government has frequently taken a more open position here than the Republic of Austria.

Now, you might wonder – and rightly so – why I have talked so much about Viennese and Austrian cultural politics here in the Casa invisible in Malaga. On the one hand, this is due to the limits of my own knowledge and hitherto academic work. While I have analyzed Austrian cultural politics for decades, my knowledge about the situation in Malaga is anecdotal at best. On the other one, however, out of my very limited knowledge of the situation here in Malaga, I assume that quite a few parallels can be found.

Although contemporary cultural politics in Malaga do not have such a long history as Austrian cultural politics, nowadays, they seem to strive to a similar aim as Austrian cultural politics, namely, to emphasize or even invent a cultural heritage which is, consequently, sold as a main attraction for tourists. At the same time, globalized cultural agents and events are used for the same aim. A double hegemony of a very specific form of cultural politics shall be created and stabilized by this move: The fuzzy concept of the identity of Malaga is translated into a commercialized strategy based on tourism – and this second aim can be evaluated on the term of figures – numbers of tourists, overnight stays, and income of the city due to that. The seeming possibility of clear evaluation and comparison makes it especially dangerous for all initiative not willing or able to fit into the commercial paradigm.

But, again similarly to the situation in Austria and, especially, Vienna we can find a precarious but, at the same time, vibrant cultural and artistic scene contesting hegemonic cultural politics by a multiple and, thus, democratic understanding of culture. Here, in the Casa Invisible, we are at the heart of this counterhegemonic strategy, at a place where hidden cultures are displayed, forgotten histories remembered, excluded images of social life projected, and silenced voices made heard. In short: We are here on a territory and in a framework making the invisible visible.

So, I hope that this conference – and, maybe, even my contribution to it – will heighten the visibility of the invisible, including the visibility of the Casa invisible, and that we can develop during these days counterhegemonic strategies towards a cultural politics of multiplicity.