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THE INTERRELATION OF ART, CULTURE AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Jean-Pierre Saez

In each period of modern times there tends to be a reorganisation of the relationships between, art culture and social affairs, rearranging the positions of those involved in each of these fields with regard to this issue.

How, at this turn of the century, in which the European view of things is being subjected to a renewed dialectic between the local and the global, are relationships between these three areas organised?

It goes without saying that this is an extremely far-reaching question. It is probably also worded in too general terms. Rather than attempt to provide an all-embracing, standardised answer or attach too much weight to univocal theories which ignore these areas' distinctive characteristics, I shall endeavour to highlight impressionistically the interactions, paradoxes and contradictions to which these categories are subject today, with reference to real-life situations. The aim will be to uncover the logic behind the interplay of art, culture and social affairs and understand what aspects of it result from the positions and strategies of those involved and what remains outside their control or simply has not been conceived of.

I have in my mind a picture of two young people. Describing them may help us to understand the issues raised by a discussion about the relationship between culture (in every sense) and social fabric.

The first is a young woman who has completed secondary education but has no third-level qualifications. She is 23 and out of work – or rather, she has never been in work. Her mother has a job in a clothing store. Her 17-year-old brother is still at school. She has largely lost touch with the friends she had when she was studying at technical college. In certain respects, she is becoming desocialised. While attending the college (where she failed to finish her course) she mixed with students from different backgrounds and ethnic origins. She thinks, for example, of one former classmate – North African but resident in France since the age of four – who managed to get a job (30 hours a week for a take-home wage of FF 4500 a month) and has been working for a year-and-a-half. The young woman of my story admits that sometimes, feeling at a loss, she has wondered “Why her and not me?” Sometimes she has had to suppress the bitter question, “What if there weren’t so many immigrants?” She is quick to point out that she does not want to be prey to this type of thinking. She knows that it is pointless and, besides, in her neighbourhood she sees any number of young women and men of her own generation, of every origin, who spend their days killing time, in the same boat as herself - although none of that prevents her from feeling lost and disorientated at times. She has a passion for music “that’s alive”. She loves a rhythmic sound - world music, for example, mixing such diverse forms as afro-rock, pop-jazz and ethnic music. Salif Keita and Khaled are among her favourite singers. The last time I saw her she was wearing an iridescent T-shirt with African-style motifs.

The second individual who comes to mind is a young French-born North African from Les Minguettes on the outskirts of Lyon. He is interviewed in Jean-Pierre Thorn’s film *Génération Hip Hop*, where he talks about the empty days that he and young people like him while away, about their feelings of dejection and about hip hop. He is a break-dancer and hip hop is an escape valve, a means of expression and a hobby. It is popular among young people in his neighbourhood. They regularly get together for break-dancing contests with other groups of young people – for the most part like himself, from immigrant communities, for hip hop tends to remain a feature of the housing estates on the urban periphery. Recently the House of Dance in Lyon held its first hip hop event. Young people from different neighbourhoods were able to get together and spend a whole day in competitive dancing, putting on their own entertainment, essentially for themselves. But afterwards, it was back to Les Minguettes and life on the dole. Was it this young man or another of the hip-hoppers who told the film-maker – quietly and discreetly but with pride - that his parents’ faith was his faith too, that he was Muslim? Anyway hip hop attracts young people from every background. Answering another of the film-maker’s questions, the young break-dancer emphasised that, as far as he and his friends were concerned, they felt integrated: “We have no problem about

integration. We are like any other young people [...]”. His words and the silences between them conveyed the idea that he and the others in the group, whatever their level of ability as hip-hoppers, were fully culturally integrated, they had an original art-form through which to express themselves, they inhabited the same cultural worlds as many other young people, yet they felt a lack of recognition, they were wounded by the perceived indifference or hostility of people around them, they thought they were unfairly treated in many respects and felt generally that they had something to rebel against. Hip hop was helping this young man to survive, to signal his existence to the world and to develop an ethical sense.

Through this slice of their lives and through their words and their contradictions, disorientation and hatreds, these two individuals – typical of young people today - illustrate many aspects of the problems we aim to discuss, and highlight the complexity of those problems. While neither is in a situation of complete social exclusion, both are moving between exclusion and inclusion. They have many ties with the rest of society and there are aspects of their cultural worlds that powerfully express inter-culturalism and reflect identities which, while distinct in some respects, are cultural composites. The identities of these young people are not sealed, they remain open to outside influences and cultural borrowing, and thus to “otherness”. Finally, their histories, styles, points of reference and ways of life also demonstrate how every problem of social cohesion has a complex and multi-faceted cultural dimension.

Leaving aside these two individual stories, I should like now to consider the issues before us on a more general level.

Signs of a civilisation undergoing change

A feature of late 20th century life in the most economically, industrially and technologically developed of the major democratic countries, and specifically of their towns and cities, is that, to a greater or lesser extent, people are being stripped of social status, social structures are collapsing and penury is increasingly prevalent. Social insecurity, poverty and unemployment are (once again) the lot of a significant section of the population in the so-called “advanced” countries. This stripping of status not only has, as we have seen, social, economic and civic implications, but it also assumes, in various multicultural contexts, a psychological dimension and a complex cultural dimension inasmuch as it leads people to stigmatise relationships with “otherness”, undermines marginalised people’s sense of themselves, gives rise to confused and paranoid ideas of the minority cultures represented by immigrant communities (the overwhelming majority of whose members live in depressed areas), and blocks any harmonious understanding of cultural identity movements that have more than one set of roots.

In France, these different aspects of the phenomenon reflect a weakening of the social fabric in towns and cities, and call into question what citizenship currently means; in other words,

they reveal how inadequate modern forms of citizenship are and highlight the need for the “public space” so lacking in urban fringe areas (see Roulleau-Berger, 1993).

The current situation as described, with its various overlapping causes, can only be understood properly if seen in the historic context of interrelated upheavals in the modern world. Explicitly or otherwise, it reflects a series of phenomena that together serve to explain how societies have assumed their current form.

- The much discussed crisis of the welfare state involves a paradox: on the one hand it has come about because policies for social redistribution and a managed economy have run out of steam ideologically and economically, yet, at the same time, European societies are generally expressing a need for social protection, ie for organised mutual support.
- The nature, pattern and purpose of work are changing and the values underpinning it are being reviewed.
- Modern urban planning is in crisis – the disintegration and fragmentation of modern cities into disjointed entities is the result of a long-term process, the roots of which lie largely in housing policies devised to cope with emergency situations, notably the 1950s’ programmes of high-rise development on the outskirts of major cities, which in too many cases set the pattern for the following decades.
- Value systems and ways of representing society have undergone a transformation. This is a vast subject, which I shall illustrate here by focusing on three major, interconnected and mutually reinforcing phenomena.
 - 1) Individualism, a trend that had been developing for a long time, *became radically apparent* in the second half of the 20th century. Reflecting the modern individual’s need for personal sovereignty, it is now a way of life, and one element in the process of deconstruction and reconstruction that contemporary society is undergoing.
 - 2) The decline of traditional forms of solidarity reflects an intrinsic weakening of classic systems of integration such as the army, the church, political parties, trade unions, schools and the family. At the same time, of course, a spirit of solidarity is finding expression elsewhere: NGOs, for example, are becoming more powerful, channelling a will to inject altruism, generosity and humanism into a dehumanised, unjust and coldly rational world; and informal self-help networks (such as those described by Michel Maffesoli in *The Time of the Tribes*) are on the rise.

- 3) There is a crisis of meaning, and individuals today move through a world of disillusionment. Mourning the loss of the great stories proposed by religious and political ideologies, they have lost their bearings and no longer wish to be part of communal projects for the general good. When they do express a fraternal impulse, it tends to be through practical initiatives, with evident, measurable results, which, rather than demanding any overall conception of society, simply help to restate a humanitarian or moral principle.
- It is a critical time for nation states: the models of integration that they offer are being undermined by a series of factors, some of which I have listed but which also include the increasingly rapid circulation of persons, images, information and cultural models, the fact that societies are becoming multicultural or intercultural, economic globalisation and the growing tendency for economic policy in Europe to be fixed supranationally at European Union level.

We must be alive to all these converging or inter-connected trends of the times we live in because they are reshaping the entire fabric of our societies: this is now evident in the fact that our social cement is crumbling, our conception of the world has changed radically, as have our cultural reference points, and our culture of “otherness” is undergoing a new transformation.

Inclusion and exclusion in an urban environment

Inclusion and exclusion are phenomena that, to a greater or lesser extent, concern society generally – ie rural as well as urban districts – but their effects are particularly exacerbated in the poorest areas of towns and cities. The fact is that these areas constitute a social Gordian knot, powerfully combining all conceivable elements of a crisis situation: a diminution or absence of civic impulses, unemployment, run-down housing, severe poverty, underachievement at school, illiteracy, incivility, the non-recognition of minority cultures, everyday violence, indifference, ignorance, rejection or fear of those who are different (in most cases immigrants), and problems of identity among young people growing up in anonymous housing estates.

Nonetheless, to complete the portrait of the French urban periphery as a world apart, concentrating society’s contradictions, it is important to stress its positive side: it is a culturally diverse environment, in many cases a place of inter-cultural experimentation, it is a repository of living memory (social and cultural memory that is a valuable part of our heritage), it has spawned new forms of artistic expression and practice, forged social ties and produced examples of self-help at various levels.

There are many different challenges here and they involve most areas of public policy-making. The fact that the challenges are inter-linked means that public policies must be increasingly well co-ordinated. Thus, the fact that culture is a key aspect of social fabric has implications for all areas of policy.

Specifically, ought we not to tackle the recognition of cultural identities and practices in “problem” areas in a manner at once more determined and less stigmatising? It is now recognised that progress depends on treating groups of people in difficulty (young people from immigrant communities, for example) not as social problems but as potentially creative or challenging resources – in other words, as individuals. To allow their potential to be released, it is also important to provide a space - both symbolic and physical, connecting with and forming part of the urban community – that young people from particular neighbourhoods can occupy, colonise and transform, in co-operation with the municipality and its institutions or with other bodies capable of conferring recognition on their efforts.

Incidentally, is it not contradictory to complain about a lack of civility, which is a social life-skill, on the part of marginalised people many of whom lack either full citizenship or at least a share of public space and a place to express themselves - ie recognition? Surely facilitating participation in the urban community contributes to education about relating to others?

Art, culture and social fabric ...

Exploring possible connections between art, culture and social fabric raises a number of extremely complex philosophical, sociological and aesthetic questions. All I hope to do here is to consider these questions in a general way, indicating various positions from which the debate may be tackled. This should, at least, give us a measure of the theoretical and political issues at stake and may even enable us to assess their historical background in outline.

The social function of art

Twentieth-century art is obsessed with the question of its social function. Most of the countless theorists on the subject would probably support the basic proposition that art directly and indirectly influences people, or indeed society. But beyond this banal, if not platitudinous, quasi-universal assertion lie many different and fundamentally opposed conceptions of art and its uses. These fall into several major categories.

1. The idea of art and culture as vehicles for conveying messages to influence the world – an approach dependent upon a number of conceptions, in themselves varied and even conflicting, each of which merits full and detailed exploration:

- art as the servant of a revolutionary idea and a means of liberation from oppression. Revolutionaries and avant-garde thinkers of the early 20th century formulated highly eclectic versions of this theory – ranging from the surrealist and dadaist idea that art was revolutionary because it refused all attempts at institutionalisation and was an expression of spiritual forces, to the concept of proletarian art proclaimed by the tragic Mayakovsky; from the notion of “mass art” to its revolutionary opposite, the idea that art expressed a radical breaking away from society in order to criticise it;
 - art as the expression of a commitment to explain the world and to awaken people’s consciences and make them recognise their responsibilities – a theory associated notably with the philosopher, writer and dramatist Jean-Paul Sartre, whose notion of commitment was essentially confined to literature, excluding the plastic arts, music and even poetry;
 - art as an adjunct to a policy of social control – under various ideological trappings, versions of this approach have been used in the recent past to justify making art a tool of totalitarianism. Both Nazi art and socialist realism fall into this category.
2. Art for art’s sake - a gratuitous activity intended only to entertain and serving no social function other than the provision of enjoyment. Advocates of this theory have claimed that art is non-social, its only purpose residing in itself, in the aesthetic, sensory or intellectual pleasure that it gives to audience and artist.
1. Art as the expression of a critical worldview: this is a general approach shared by theorists from different political and philosophical backgrounds and it would not be inconsistent with a number of the movements and currents of thought described above.¹ It emphasises the idea that art helps us to see things – including our cultural universe – afresh. Art can thus perform a critical function or express a critical dimension, not by conveying any militant vision but simply by commanding or directing our attention, making us look at things in a new way that involves questioning their familiar order. Proponents of this concept of art stress, in particular, its power to destabilise, to open up new perspectives and to anticipate, and speak of its productive negativity. Some point, more simply, to the power of art as a means of exploration and discovery and its capacity to heighten people’s sensitivity and emotional intelligence, affording new ways of looking at life (see Patocka, translation 1990, Herder).

Connecting and breaking away: the ambivalent role of art

With modern art, the act of artistic creation became concerned with renewal and thus with breaking away. Yet the divisions created also suggested other forms of unity. For example, when Picasso and the Cubists sought inspiration in African art, the effect of their work was to

¹ To sum up the idea in such a general way obviously fails to take account of underlying differences and disputes in its interpretation. This is an area that deserves fuller investigation.

shake even the most progressive ideas about colonised societies, to attack the artistic community's own ethno-centrism, to highlight the deeply *artistic* nature of African art and to prove spectacularly that art feeds on what it borrows, that it is inherently intercultural and that notions of hierarchy in art are meaningless. This is the standpoint from which the sociologist Roger Bastide demonstrated in masterly fashion that art can both forge links and create divisions in society.²

Bastide presents, in turn, two complementary and opposing points of view. He first asserts that inasmuch as art is a language it is also a tool of social cohesion and because, moreover, it is a system of emotionally appreciated symbols rather than intellectually understood signs, it achieves closer cohesion than the spoken word, going beyond intercommunication between separate individuals, to establish spiritual interpenetration, a partial fusing of consciousness. He then warns against certain universalist prejudices and reminds his readers that there is no single "society" but rather a number of societies, and that each group has its art, which, while unifying the group internally, has the external effect of demarcating it: hence the divisions between national art and class-based art, between highbrow art and popular art. His conclusion is highly significant: that we must not overlook art's dual functions, of opposition and rapprochement, for to do so is to give philosophical theory precedence over empirical observation.³ Lastly, seeking to identify the interface between art and society – where art penetrates the human consciousness to transform social reality – he elaborates on a theme which, although already explored, informs our discussion at many levels, namely that art alters human sensibility, gives people a certain conception of the world, determines specific behaviour and shapes the human spirit, which, thus profoundly changed, dictates an external style of living, an *aesthetic understanding of its physical and social environment*.⁴

Bastide shows that, under certain conditions, art can be a major force for social cohesion in contemporary society. The argument is all the more persuasive inasmuch as we are increasingly tempted, in a disillusioned world, to ascribe a sacred function to art (or at least to overrate it) at a time when religion no longer seems able to meet the human spirit's urge for transcendence, that anticipatory intuition so powerfully described by Malraux in the light of 19th century German philosophical writings.

Culture's social function

It is no easier to analyse the social function of culture than the social function of art. The fact is that discussing culture means exploring a wide range of meanings of that concept, all the more so because the boundaries between culture and other relevant but highly fluid concepts, such as civilisation and identity, are not clearly defined in scholarly writings on the subject. Given, moreover, that the anthropological approach to culture – however rich its potential for

² Roger Bastide, *Art et Société*, Paris, L'Harmattan, re-issued 1997

³ *Ibid.* p. 181 and 182

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 190, emphasis J.-P. S.

promoting an understanding of human communities, their symbolic bases and the ways they are represented – tends not to distinguish between social and cultural realities, there is infinite scope for confusion. One solution would be to focus exclusively on the impact of cultural policies on the fabric of society. But this would be to overlook the major cultural forces at work in society – in the sphere of communications, for example, or that of “social affairs” (I am thinking here of the problem of multi-culturalism). It would also mean failing to recognise how the scope of cultural policies has broadened since the 1960s. It is true that such policies are still based primarily, though no longer exclusively, on an understanding of culture that is concerned with creative works of all kinds and that their main aim is still to bring the largest possible number of people into contact with past and current artistic creation. However, in response to the “culturalisation” of society and its problems and aware, under the influence of modern cultural relativism, that a wider range of cultural forms old and new must be recognised as legitimate, they are also tending to embrace ever wider definitions of what constitutes culture.

How, then, are we to pull together the two concepts under discussion? How should we conceive of the relationship between culture and social fabric? I am concerned here less with formulating set answers to that question than with suggesting guidelines for a methodology. Three approaches are possible.

- 1) We can develop an understanding of what makes for cohesion, and what prevents it, by adopting the perspectives of various cultural “estates”. The next step would be to consider how “high culture” binds, splits or splinters society as a whole, and then to conduct the same exercise in relation to mass culture and class-based culture (for even in a social order that understands itself in terms of a class struggle it is necessary to explain why, despite class differences and indeed independently of the balance of social forces, there exists an overall entity - a shared space in which society represents itself – and to identify the common values underlying it).
- 2) The second approach involves retracing the attempts by certain major 20th-century “cultural movements” to influence social cohesion and examining how successful they were. This was, for example, what the mass education movement was all about. The successes and failures of such attempts (more clearly apparent in retrospect) may be understood by looking at the gulf between the ideology and the actual achievements of mass education movements at different stages in their history. Thus the generosity of the *universités populaires* [people’s colleges] in the early 1900s and their initial success must not blind us to the ultimate failure of that movement. Bringing together intellectuals and ordinary people, even if both sides are keen for the contact, does not automatically generate the right educational environment. And insisting that the education of the working classes must follow accepted cultural models ultimately reflects a one-way conception of cultural sharing. The “Manifeste de Peuple et Culture” [People’s Cultural Manifesto], launched in France in 1945, was a critical

offshoot of the *universités populaires*, its purpose being to “bring culture back to the people and bring the people back to culture”. But although they proclaimed the need for cultural exchange between the various elites and the masses, the movements associated with the manifesto were, with a few exceptions, no more successful than their predecessors in developing a clientele beyond the middle classes (see Guy Saez and Jean-Pierre Saez, 1990).

Under the same heading, it is reasonable to see cultural policies in France as a *cultural movement* with the aim of providing access to culture for as many people as possible. Here too, surveys and evaluations of practice show relatively little evidence of success in this attempted democratisation of culture based on a golden vision of bringing art to ordinary people, and operating on the principle of cultural supply, ie on the premise that the existence of artistic institutions is the crucial (if not only) prerequisite for winning the masses over to culture.

- 3) The third approach involves considering cultural forces that are at work across society, and studying their impact in terms of social cohesion or fragmentation. Exploration of this theme might, for example, highlight the role of information and communication technologies in the transformation of relationships at individual, family, social and national level. It might also involve studying identity-based movements and their capacity for restructuring or breaking down social, community, national and cultural entities.

Thus we begin to see that an analysis of the links between culture and social fabric, which readily invites apparently obvious but erroneous conclusions, in fact opens up a field of study that is hard to delimit. The question is complicated by the fact that the more broadly societies define their processes of exchange and the more open they become, the greater the volumes of people and material and immaterial goods in circulation, and the greater the tendency of individuals to adopt more than one culture and indeed more than one identity. This idea is a development of Edgar Morin’s contention that in historically established societies - and most particularly French society – cultural systems are becoming juxtaposed and overlapping, even within individuals.⁵ We might well go further and see them as inter-connecting, clashing and combining, all at once. Indeed, Morin goes on to describe culture in our society as a symbiotic-antagonistic system of multiple, individually non-homogenous cultures. On this basis, he proposes a conception of culture intrinsically linked with the fabric of society, seeing it as a system of metabolism, ie of effecting exchanges (of various kinds in different cultures) between individuals, between the individual and society, and between society and the cosmos, for example, and he adds that this system must connect with the overall social system.⁶ In other words, the concept of culture embraces that of social ties; culture *creates ties*. But this dynamic conception of culture must be properly interpreted: it does not exclude antagonism

⁵ Edgar Morin, *Sociologie*, Paris, Fayard, 1984, p. 349, extract from “De la culturanalyse” (1970)

⁶ *Ibid.*

or dislocation between cultural systems. Indeed, there are examples in history of situations where a culture enjoying supremacy (a national or dominant culture) has found itself incapable of effecting exchanges with, or between, cultural worlds that cohabit under its aegis, and examples, too, of particular cultures attempting to resist or evade a “metabolism” that had previously connected them with global society, because its relationship with them had become negative. The idea which emerges from this analysis is that of culture as a means of expression for conflicting relationships with otherness and difference. Thus it sometimes functions as a common basis of reference and a tool of liberation for human communities resisting political, economic or cultural oppression; sometimes as a repository of identifying symbols for a threatened and/or threatening community, a self-sealing symbolic world that encourages individuals or groups to be inward-looking; and at other times as an *open* system facilitating exchange with others and promoting empathy.

It is useful to clarify matters here by restating a *fundamental* point of methodology. While sociology may help us to decode cultural systems and the principles on which they operate and to understand different cultural “estates”, and while it is thus concerned with exposing realities and social representations, it is no part of its role to indicate what basic direction culture should take or to formulate cultural ethics, however potentially informative or inspiring its contribution in this respect. The point is that culture is primarily a matter of commitment, conscience, philosophy and choice. It is a *struggle* reflecting an explicit or implicit will to establish a particular relationship with the world and with others.

This brief excursion into the theory of art and culture is intended to show how multi-layered and complex the issue of culture and social fabric is, and how much scope it offers for further thinking. Modern fears of further social dislocation have led us to pin our hopes on culture as a means of reorientating society and reinvesting it with meaning and a sense of sociability. This is a particular challenge for cultural policies and it comes at a key time in their history, just as they are expected to respond to the relative failure of cultural democratisation some four decades after the founding of the French Ministry of Culture, with Malraux at its head.

But we need to be clear. While culture and cultural policy certainly have a social impact, it is necessary, in addressing a theme so pregnant with “imported” implications, to disentangle real possibilities from utopian aspirations and attempts at wizardry; and we ought not to focus obsessively on cultural authorities in a situation where society in general and its decision-making bodies have no answer to cultural, economic and social breakdown or other forms of dislocation. We should also be careful to respect the autonomy of artistic processes, ie to resist the purely ideological temptation of requiring art and culture to justify themselves in social terms. This does not mean, on the other hand, absolving those involved in art and culture from all social responsibility, for they themselves make demands of the wider community. But there may be a case for adopting a more pragmatic approach to the question that concerns us – exploring, for example, the possibilities of a different type of artistic education, or looking at how amateur art is supported. Bluntly – and to head off the

temptation to deliver any sort of “vulgate” – it must also be said that art has never been a remedy for unemployment or violence. At the same time, I would argue that it can offer *some* young people an advantage (see Hartmann-Fritsch, 1996), providing them with a reference point that makes them better able to face the world.

I should like to finish by pointing out that the question of how culture and social fabric interact, as it is posed in public discussions, requires (to draw on Edgar Morin) both a *residual* and a *total* understanding of culture. In terms of the latter, the question we have to address is that of human co-existence in society. The title of Alain Touraine’s latest book - *Can we live together [...]?* - eloquently expresses this concern. Clearly, what is at stake extends beyond issues of cultural policy.