

Scholars at Risk – Cultures in Crisis

On the Impact of Research and Culture on Social Stability and Sustainable Development¹

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1. The ‘Cultural Turn’ in Politics

On April 18, 2018, Luca Jahier, the new President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), delivered his inaugural speech and presented his vision for a “sustainable European future”. Referring to the top priorities on his agenda for a sustainable Europe, Jahier announced his intention to strengthen “the role of Culture within the European political discourse.” According to Jahier, “culture has an enormous untapped potential to become a unifying and mobilising force for Europe.” In order to explain his reasons for this remarkable assessment, Jahier added: “We share a common European heritage, composed of shared history and values, which allows us to sense our belonging to a joint space in constant evolution and openness to diversity. ... Culture can help us overcome the current systemic, political and identity crisis in Europe and dare us to dream, to create new perspectives. It can play a crucial role in strengthening social and territorial cohesion, in creating growth and jobs, in engaging in dialogue and in re-building trust. Culture can bring Hope, New Narratives and a second Renaissance to Europe!”²

What an amazing statement! Usually, when we think of culture and cultural heritage, the first things that come to mind are not sustainable development, social and territorial cohesion, or the creation of economic growth. Rather, we tend to associate culture primarily with the visual arts, with literature and music, or with historical monuments and sites. In 1982, UNESCO coined a definition of culture in its “Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies”, understanding culture as the “whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs”.³

It is this more comprehensive concept of culture that has paved the way for a global phenomenon, which I would like to call the ‘*cultural turn*’ in politics. By that term – the ‘cultural turn’ in politics – I refer to the fact that there is a growing awareness with various political and

¹ Keynote speech at the Scholars at Risk Network 2018 Global Congress in Berlin (Germany), Freie Universitaet, 25 April 2018.

² <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/documents/inaugural-speech-president-luca-jahier>

³ https://www.ifa.de/fileadmin/pdf/abk/inter/unesco_mondiacult.pdf

civil society stakeholder groups on national and international levels that the impact of cultural practice and cultural heritage reaches far beyond the realm of culture. In its 2005 “Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions”, UNESCO emphasized that “cultural diversity ... is a mainspring for sustainable development for communities, peoples, and nations” and that “cultural diversity, flourishing within a framework of democracy, tolerance, social justice and mutual respect between peoples and cultures, is indispensable for peace and security at the local, national, and international levels”.⁴

Recent impact studies confirm that investing in culture produces tangible benefits also in the social, environmental, and economic sectors, thereby contributing significantly to the sustainable development and social cohesion of societies. Published in 2015, the final report of the EU-funded project “Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe” concludes, that “safeguarding cultural heritage works as a “multiplier” through which investment can have positive impacts beyond that initially intended, thereby increasing the level of benefit and sustainability of the initial investment. Moreover, ... potential future investment in cultural heritage from the mainstream policy stakeholders (e.g. job creation programmes, social enterprise investment, environmental services) can be seen in terms of “upstream investment” which has the potential to deliver significant “downstream benefits” ... This can be seen in a comparison with often unplanned but beneficial impacts of upstream investment in preventive medicine, for example healthier lifestyles, which reduce the downstream costs of treating illness and disease.”⁵

Accordingly, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations aims at ensuring “that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development”.⁶ In the very same spirit, the 2016 EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations focuses on “advancing cultural cooperation with partner countries across three main strands: supporting culture as an engine for sustainable social and economic development; promoting culture and intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations; reinforcing cooperation on cultural heritage.”⁷

Finally, on 24 March 2017, culture and cultural heritage made it onto the stage of global security politics, when United Nations Security Council passed resolution 2347, the first

⁴ <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/convention/texts>

⁵ http://blogs.encatc.org/culturalheritagecountsforeurope/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/CHCfE_FULL-REPORT_v2.pdf p. 16.

⁶ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E, Target 4.7.

⁷ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016JC0029&from=EN>, p. 3.

resolution ever to focus exclusively on culture and cultural heritage, underlining that “the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage, and the looting and smuggling of cultural property in the event of armed conflicts, notably by terrorist groups, and the attempt to deny historical roots and cultural diversity in this context can fuel and exacerbate conflict and hamper post-conflict national reconciliation, thereby undermining the security, stability, governance, social, economic and cultural development of affected States”.⁸

2. No Culture without ‘Research for Culture’

As scholars, we are keenly aware of the fact that cultural practices as well as its immaterial and material expressions are invariably based on knowledge. Frequently, this knowledge directly derives from or is informed by research. At the same time, it is the immaterial and material expressions of cultural practice that may constitute additional evidence for existing research questions or trigger the formation of new academic fields. I tend to think that the close interdependence between culture on the one hand and research, on the other, is not acknowledged adequately in either sector. Nor does it receive the political attention it deserves, given the recent ‘cultural turn’ in both domestic and foreign politics. However, there can be no doubt that research is indispensable for not only the creation and dissemination of numerous cultural products, but also for the documentation, analysis, preservation, and protection of material and immaterial cultural heritage. By definition, this ‘research for culture’ is cross-sectoral and encompasses such diverse topics as the historical background of a novel, the painting techniques of contemporary artists, the scientific analysis of archaeological objects, the documentation of choreographies, the management of cultural heritage sites, or disaster risk assessment. Pertinent research designs may be disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary, depending on the research question.

With an increased political appreciation of culture as a facilitator of sustainable development and “peaceful intercommunity relations”, the demand for ‘research for culture’ surges dramatically. Additional knowledge is needed desperately, not only with regard to material and immaterial expressions of cultural practice and their individual specifics, but also with a view to the inclusion of culture in social and economic policies both on national and international levels. *The effective transfer of culture into other core sectors of society and assessing the impact of this transfer will be among the key areas of ‘research for culture’ in the near future.*

⁸ <https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/s/res/2347-%282017%29>

3. Current Challenges to 'Research for Culture'

There can be no doubt that the 'cultural turn' in politics and the research funding schemes inspired by it will offer tremendous opportunities for all academic disciplines ready to contribute to 'research for culture'. However, it is also understood that fostering the multifaceted academic expertise necessary to carry out this cross-sectoral research is a highly complex task even for economically successful societies in peaceful times. In the following, I will therefore outline four significant challenges to the progressive development of 'research for culture' that I consider to be of high relevance and that I would like to see addressed by all concerned stakeholders with the required urgency.

3.1. Freedom of Research

The first and most dangerous challenge to 'research for culture' is any threat to the physical, academic, and moral integrity of scholars. Where scholars have to fear for their personal safety, where the fundamental principles of freedom of research are questioned, or where the code of ethical academic conduct is compromised, the welfare and future of a society as a whole are at stake. What research and culture have in common is that they cannot thrive without pluralism, diversity, and uninhibited creativity. Any attempt to undermine or curtail these distinctive capacities of the human spirit will invariably pave the way for social unrest, economic failure, and cultural poverty. Successful societies protect and promote their scholars in their quest for new knowledge. Those who do not pay attention to this age-old political truth will eventually have to pay a high price for their ignorance.

3.2. 'Research for Culture' 4.0

The second determining factor for the future of 'research for culture' and the cultural sector as a whole will be the way in which their exponents as well as the institutions and infrastructures under their direction are prepared to both embrace technological innovations useful for research and teaching and, more importantly, become active players in the overarching process, which is commonly referred to as "digital transformation", a process that will bring about major disruptions in the operation modes of most, if not all, areas of our everyday life. While at present the fourth industrial revolution – usually termed "industry 4.0" – is gaining considerable momentum in many countries of the world, digital transformation projects such as 'culture 4.0' and 'research 4.0' are still in their early phases and not pursued with the same tenacity by their respective stakeholders. However, there is no doubt that within the next two decades, the ways in which we design, carry out, document, communicate, disseminate, and store our research will change dramatically due to the wider availability and enhanced

functionality of mobile devices, cloud services, digital applications and the so-called 'internet of everything'.

In Cultural Heritage Studies, e. g., research on objects will increasingly become non-invasive and mobile through online repositories of three-dimensional digital object models, while exchange and interaction between scholars will be strengthened through social media tools tailored to the specific requirements of editing and annotating digital object models. The more precise and metrically accurate these object models are, the more useful they will be for the preventive documentation, conservation, and restoration of monuments and museum collections. Moreover, augmented reality applications will revolutionize such diverse sectors as the management of collections and programs for inclusive education in museums. At the same time, the documentation and dissemination of immaterial heritage may benefit immensely by the opportunities provided by virtual reality applications. Finally, highly detailed digital models of landscapes and settlements will be used for simulations of complex situations and processes, enhancing our understanding of environmental and cultural dynamics in societies past and present.

For the time being, 'research for culture 4.0' remains an ambitious vision for the digital future of our societies. Today, the implementation of this vision needs to be pursued with effective strategies addressing various challenges, such as harmonizing, synthesizing, and rendering sustainable the numerous digital data repositories created since the late 1980s, integrating research data relevant for the cultural sector into national and international strategies for the creation of long-term digital data infrastructures, and establishing digital research and teaching methods as an integral part of pertinent university curricula. Finally, we will have to aim at diminishing the digital divide existing not only between states on a global level, but also between cultural institutions on a national level. The benefits of the digital transformation of science and research can only take effect, when access to the pertinent expertise, technologies, and infrastructures is as widespread and equally distributed as possible.

3.3. Cultures in Crises

The third type of challenge 'research for culture' is facing today is one that may have the most profound impact on the credibility and thereby on the future of the pertinent academic disciplines. It is certainly a type of challenge that, at present, is felt by many to be the most palpable and the most pressing one. In essence being a societal challenge, it is reflected in the question how research institutions and the academic community as a whole react to the massive humanitarian and cultural crises in several regions of the world, and what role they choose to play in emergency response and post-conflict rehabilitation programs. In my

opinion, experts in 'research for culture' have a pronounced, twofold responsibility to get actively involved in measures focusing on cultural heritage preservation and protection:

1. The destruction and looting of archaeological sites, museums, archives, and libraries immediately affects the core of countless academic disciplines, as it damages, diminishes, and displaces their very research subjects.
2. Protecting the material and immaterial heritage of humanity and creating environments in which this heritage can benefit local communities and foster cultural diversity cannot be achieved without the knowledge and experience of scholars, as argued earlier. As crucial as it is to create the policy frameworks in which cultural heritage protection can thrive, it is the scholars who are indispensable in national and international efforts to assess existing damages; carry out conservation and restoration measures; curb illicit trafficking in cultural property; build civil-society capacity for the sustainable conservation and preservation of monuments and sites; develop international standards of engagement, and raise public awareness of the inherent value and social relevance of cultural heritage.

However, scholars with expertise pertinent to 'research for culture' are not necessarily specialists for fighting organized crime or for staging awareness raising campaigns. Moreover, given the already sparse human and infrastructural capacities typical of many relevant disciplines and institutions, how can they provide the additional capacities that are required to design, assist in, or carry out corresponding programs? I strongly believe that these considerable obstacles must not dishearten us, but should be seen and treated as a unique opportunity for the pertinent academic disciplines to expand their topical and methodological scope and to increase their social relevance and public visibility. This unique opportunity derives from the fact that protecting cultural heritage in situations of conflict and building capacities for a sustainable preservation of cultural heritage in times of peace are tasks for which many academic fields not only in the humanities possess a considerable, inherent potential for the transfer into society of their research results and expertise. By doing so, the pertinent disciplines follow the distinct call by society and politics for an innovative kind of research that addresses overall societal challenges and therefore possesses a specific transformative power, a call that has been growing louder and more vigorous over the past decades in all areas of science of research.

However, especially within the humanities, there is an ongoing, heated debate whether this call for research activities oriented toward societal issues and favoring the transfer and application of research results is justified and in line with the treasured principle of freedom of research. My own thinking on this is very clear: As the global challenges to the sustainable development of humanity become more evident, as many regions of the world face the consequences of climate change, social inequality, and violent extremism without adequate

mitigation or protection mechanisms, publicly funded research must not close its eyes against these challenges, but attempt to develop ethical frameworks and research strategies enabling them to address these challenges, not as a substitute for, but in addition to the basic research they have been carrying out traditionally.

Considering the sustained, large-scale threat to the integrity of the world's cultural heritage, the academic community is called upon to team up with non-academic experts and various stakeholder groups to design and carry out *trans-disciplinary research projects* aiming at strategies, policies, and instruments for the sustainable conservation and preservation of cultural heritage. These projects would be trans-disciplinary in a twofold sense: 1. their design invariably integrates academic and non-academic expertise and individuals to draw on the broadest possible knowledge base required to address complex societal challenges (Schneidewind – Singer-Brodowski 2014); and 2. they contribute to the epistemological and methodological foundation of an emerging field of research, where innovative project designs or unconventional combinations of expertise contribute to answering new research questions (Samida – Eggert 2012).

3.4. Precarious Knowledge

Finally, let me highlight briefly the fourth type of challenge that 'research for culture' is up against. This challenge is of a political nature, as it concerns the actual ratio between the tasks to be fulfilled by the pertinent academic disciplines in the areas of research, teaching, and transfer on the one hand, and the personal, financial, and infrastructural resources that can be committed to these tasks by their professional exponents, on the other hand. Frequently, 'research for culture' is carried out by so-called 'rare disciplines' or 'small disciplines', which means that the available resources are usually sparse, if not precarious, and that the concerned disciplines and the bodies of knowledge contained therein are prone to extinction or serious incapacitation, when individual positions or facilities disappear. In addition, we can often observe distinct asymmetries on a global level in the availability and number of individuals and public institutions dedicated to research and teaching in these small academic fields.

It has always been a considerable challenge to drum up political support for academic fields that have virtually no potential to thrive outside of universities and other research institutions. Given the high numbers of students and the relatively low numbers of teachers in many of the more sought-after disciplines with a broader array of post-degree career opportunities, it does take very good arguments to convince the president of a university to invest in a field, where the average class does not have more than ten participants. In several countries including

Germany, this has led to intensified efforts to develop political concepts for monitoring and promoting rare and precarious disciplines on a national level. However, so far there is no reasonable answer to the crucial question what the minimum infrastructural requirements might be to keep a 'rare' or 'small' academic discipline operational and innovative. In addition, existing global asymmetries within many precarious disciplines have not led to any palpable response on an international level.

4. Shared Stakeholder Responsibility

If we agree that culture is the fabric of social cohesion and the rhythm of sustainable development, it is our common task to acknowledge these considerable challenges and deal with them in a constructive manner. Specific responses need to be given by both the academic community and by those who create and implement the policies governing research and culture. However, let us make no mistake: The more resilient 'research for culture' turns out to be in the face of these challenges and the more successful its exponents are in fighting off illiberalism while embracing rapidly advancing technologies and unforeseen social-political processes, the stronger will be the political determination to sustain and promote the pertinent academic disciplines in the future.

At the same time, the international community must step up its efforts to urge political leaders all over the world to make an unconditional commitment to the freedom of research, to adhere to the principles of ethical academic conduct and to create an environment in which scholars may contribute to the advancement of humanity without having to fear for their lives or those of their loved ones. *Without knowledge, there is no culture; without culture, there is no society.* Therefore, protecting scholars at risk and creating sustainable networks of experts for culture on a global level is not only a humanitarian obligation, but an indispensable investment in the future of our planet.

Literature

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