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# A Voice for the Voiceless

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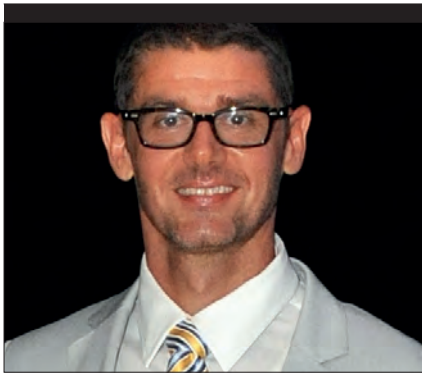
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A voice for the voiceless The South African government uses culture and art as a way of achieving togetherness, mutual understanding and respect and as a means of overcoming the long and heavy legacy of colonialism and apartheid. In Brazil, music is commonly used to lure youth away from drugs and crime. Percussion, in particular, seems to offer the additional side-effect of channelling frustration and aggression into harmony. What else can culture do?  
*By Bernd Reiter*



For many social scientists, cultural phenomena are peripheral – a mere reflection of the really important factors that determine life: economics, assets, the ownership of the means of production, and the political power that has its roots in this material base.

According to Karl Marx, it is material conditions that determine the society and culture of an era. For Marx and his followers, whoever holds the money and power can define what is right, beautiful and just, and cultural life is a mere reflection of these basic power and wealth constellations. There are countless examples of how

powerful and influential elites have radically restructured the ‘lifeworld’, and this framework is still able to provide us with many revealing questions and answers. However, like any theoretical framework, it provides just one way of looking at reality.

Another was developed by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). In his Prison Notebooks, he pondered the autonomy of culture that at one time was established and defined in a certain way. Later authors, in the tradition of the German/Austrian Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and the Austrian Alfred Schütz, gave more detailed accounts of how culture, once institutionalised, can become autonomous and withstand some of the direct changes in material conditions.

It was Gramsci who introduced the idea of ‘cultural hegemony’ – a situation where one version or definition of culture is imposed on material conditions, influencing, structuring, and restricting people’s actions and thoughts. For Gramsci, the content of cultural hegemony was almost always shaped by the ruling classes and it restricted the opportunities of poor and working class people. Schütz, in particular, set out the conditions under which certain

behavioral patterns become institutionalised, thus gaining some degree of autonomy from material living conditions. Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), who was writing around the same time as Gramsci, believed members of the “leisure class” only engaged in conspicuous and unproductive consumption in order to set themselves apart and reconfirm their elite status. According to him, elite culture was empty and meaningless, and it was mostly aimed at maintaining and reinforcing status rather than contributing to general welfare. It did not merely grow out of and reflect material conditions, but rather culture and customs affected these material conditions.

“Art, however, is social not only because of its mode of production, in which the dialectic of forces and relations of production is concentrated, nor simply because of the social derivation of its thematic material. Much more importantly, art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art.”

Theodor W. Adorno

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Norbert Elias (1897-1990), a German sociologist of Jewish descent, took this analysis a step further by demonstrating that the upper classes constantly invent new cultural forms and manners in order to set themselves apart from the rest – who then seek to imitate these latest mannerisms. This starts an endless game of cat-and-mouse that results in forms of behavioural

and cultural expression that are ever less practical, rational, and functional.

“Such a public sphere, we believe, creates a space whereby the critical models of artists, theorists, philosophers, historians, activists, urbanists, writers, and others working within other intellectual traditions and artistic positions could productively be represented and discussed. The public sphere imagined by these collaborations is to be understood, then, as a constellation of multifaceted platforms in which artists, intellectuals, communities, audiences, practices, voices, situations, actions come together to examine and analyze the predicaments and transformations that form part of the deeply inflected historical procedures and processes of time.”

Okwui Enwezor

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All these theories and frameworks point to the autonomous power of culture. Culture, once created and institutionalised, has an effect on people’s thoughts and behaviours, determining what they perceive to be right, beautiful, and proper.

Furthermore, all the authors mentioned above agree that culture tends to be biased towards the ruling classes, but also that it influences the lives of ordinary people by channelling and restricting their options in their efforts to achieve upward mobility because they emulate the habits of the rich. In other words, status maintenance is to a large extent performative, and cultural forms allow it to create, maintain and reinforce its separation.

Such a framework also allows consideration of the liberating potential of culture and cultural production. If culture is to some degree autonomous and if it affects people's options and values, then it also has the potential to impact and change their lives in negative and positive ways.

The key factor in this equation is the content of culture and the values and preferences that it transmits. If it is normally the rich and powerful who load culture with their own preferences – preferences that are in themselves not genuine, but driven by the need for distinction – then a progressive or revolutionary culture and art aimed at producing social change, more democracy, more participation, more self-determination, and more justice, liberty, and equality can use culture and art to disseminate and instil values and preferences associated with these values. The resulting utopia is one of a 'culture and art of the people' – one that provides incentives for a deeper and more meaningful democratic praxis. After all, democracy renews itself through associations formed in the public sphere, as Jürgen Habermas has so insistently asserted, and culture and art are the

public expressions of this par excellence.

This is a utopia because, in reality, public spheres and the media that influence, inform, and even uphold them tend to be privately owned, thus representing particular rather than general interests, mostly of a commercial nature. But utopia or not, if it is recognised that culture and art can be autonomous and constructed by society, then they have the potential to bring about social change, and it also explains how and by which means such a change can come about.

In a truly democratic system, public spheres and the media that create and influence them should be geared towards democratic – meaning general – aims and they should focus on issues of citizenship, democracy, justice, and equality. If they were to do this, they would have the potential to create a democratic public sphere that actively disseminates and spreads a democratic culture, not least through the production and dissemination of democratic and educational works of art.

### *A world of democratic culture*

In such a world, democratic culture has the potential to influence all those who are exposed to it and who engage with it. In this way it has an impact not only on their thoughts and actions, but also on

“The Rwandan civil war clearly attests to the power of culture and the media in mobilising people and imposing analytical frameworks to guide people's thoughts and actions.”

their norms, values, and preferences.

We can grasp the power of culture and art by looking at its influence in most market-driven societies, where its main and hegemonic function is the dissemination of consumerism, individualism, and materialism. The culture of the market is indeed so pervasive and powerful that it ensures the continued working of market systems, constantly instilling new wants and needs and a restless drive towards consumption. Without it, markets could not work and constantly expand.

But what can culture achieve in situations of conflict? In a poignant article entitled “Civil Society, Pluralism, Goldilocks and Other Fairy Tales in Africa,” Leonard Markovitz (2002) argues that in situations of civil war and conflict, civil society (and as a consequence culture and art) are toothless. Where weapons speak the loudest, the often ephemeral voices of artists, neighbourhood associations, and civic activists are drowned. Similarly, where public spheres are emptied out by fear, hatred, and mutual suspicion, democracy cannot renew itself. Like other political realists, Markovitz, shows that states and state power need to uphold, enforce, and protect the basic civil rights of free speech and association, without which democratic culture cannot thrive.

Although this argument is certainly illuminating and explains many situations where culture and art are pushed to the fringes by guns, fear and violence, there are still many empirical examples that contradict it and perhaps provide an exception to this general rule. Taken all together,

these examples allow for some tentative deductions and generalisations about the autonomous power of culture and art in conflict situations.

One of the most telling negative examples of the power of culture and the media is the civil war in Rwanda. Here, radio stations were able to fall back on old resentments and actively disseminate a culture of hatred that was ultimately channelled into genocide. The Rwandan civil war clearly attests to the power of culture and the media in mobilising people and imposing analytical frameworks to guide people’s thoughts and actions. With the support of their organisations, ethnopolitical entrepreneurs were able to use and manipulate the media in order to advance their own agenda and spread dissent and hatred.

### *Platforms for encounters*

Beyond Rwanda, we have witnessed the brutal power of the media in shaping and forging cultural norms in Nazi Germany and everywhere else where particular frames of reference and ways of seeing things are propagated to the point where they become the new mainstream. However, this power does not have to be directed towards such negative ends, as media content is not in any way predefined.

A very positive example that points to the power of culture, media, art, civil society and the public sphere in overcoming division is that of post-apartheid South Africa. Here, immediately after the dismantling of apartheid, the new Department of





Arts and Culture set out to promote cultural and artistic events with the explicit aim of bringing together the different groups of South Africa who had previously been kept divided by law.

I remember meeting a representative of the new South African government in the late 1990s who told me that for the first time, South Africans of different ethnic backgrounds were able to come together. Culture and art provided the main platforms for these encounters. So it should not come as a surprise that in a society that is still strongly divided, culture and art are perceived as stages or platforms for the practice of togetherness, the exchange of ideas, mutual learning and respect. In June 2012, the South African Department of Arts and Culture presented a “National Strategy for Developing an Inclusive and Cohesive South African Society” (pdf available at: <http://www.dac.gov.za/reports.htm>). The first line of the report reads: “This is a draft National Strategy on Social Cohesion and Nation-Building of the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC).” Under the concept of ubuntu, which involves interconnectedness, sharing, and commitment to the greater social good, this report states the vision of the Department of Culture and Art as: “To develop and preserve South African culture to ensure social cohesion and nation-building.” It goes on to say: “This mandate derives from its role as public custodian of the diverse cultures, languages and heritage of the people of South Africa and as the national leader in providing public support for the development of innovation across the

full spectrum of the arts as creative, economic and social practices, and as bearers of a dynamic society. As a consequence, the department’s programmes cover the administration of arts and culture in society, language, heritage promotion, national archives, records, libraries and heraldry.”

The South African government is therefore using culture and art as a way of achieving togetherness, mutual understanding and respect and as a means of overcoming the long and heavy legacy of colonialism and apartheid. In doing so, it highlights the importance, relevance and power of culture and art. This power is considerable, as is shown by the example of integrated sport in South Africa. The symbolism and lasting impact of playing football, rugby or cricket together goes beyond the players themselves. It sends a powerful message to the rest of the nation and even to the global sports audience. It instils values of togetherness and celebrates unity, and in doing so it forges a new democratic, hegemonic culture that has a positive effect on people’s values, norms, and motivations and influences the material conditions of their lives.

There are many other examples of how culture and art have the power to instil democratic values that provide the direction and motivation for democratic action. Such values have the potential to influence material conditions. In Brazil, music is commonly used to lure youth away from drugs and crime. Many well-

“The symbolism and lasting impact of playing football, rugby or cricket together goes beyond the players themselves.”



known NGOs, including Viva Rio, Afro Reggae, ISER, Pracatum and Bagunçação, offer after-school music education as a way of engaging urban youth in positive and constructive activities. Music has proven to be a powerful tool in the struggle for Brazilian citizenship. Music is a way of increasing the self-esteem of groups that have historically been mistreated and disrespected: the victims of a deeply-ingrained institutional racism. As musicians, poor urban youth can gain a voice and a public platform, or in this case, a stage. By making their voices heard, they are able to break their imposed silence and overcome their invisibility. Their voices enrich the Brazilian public sphere in important and consequential ways, making it more diverse and a reflection of Brazil's multicultural society. Percussion, in particular, seems to offer the additional side effect of channelling frustration and aggression into harmony. The Brazilian impromptu percussion formation "O Zarabe", created and led by the Bahian musician Carlinhos Brown, provides a good example of this. In a TV interview given in the late 1990s, Brown explained that the 200 men who were running, drumming, and singing with him as they roamed the streets of Bahia could be using this energy to rob and steal in an "arrastão," that is, a mass robbery orchestrated by a band of thieves sweeping up whatever is in their path. Instead, Brown explained, O Zarabe was a peaceful, musical *arrastão* that channelled youthful male energy into music (O Zarabe is made up exclusively of young black men).

"Art has to do with life. Only from art can a new concept of economics be formed, in terms of human need, not in the sense of use and consumption, politics and property, but above all in terms of the production of spiritual goods."

Joseph Beuys

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The power of music to heal divisions and overcome separation can also be seen in the United States, where racial divisions and segregation are among the harshest in the world. In cities like New Orleans and Memphis, where African Americans dominate the music scene, we can see how integration is at work in bands and carnival floats. White Americans – who are normally the main orchestrators and beneficiaries of American racism – take part in forms of black cultural expression and in doing so become as one with their fellow black band members. New Orleans and Memphis both have a long history of black music and are unique in providing a kind of contact between black and white that is rare elsewhere. This contact seems to spring from their music scenes but it ends up characterising their societies, setting them apart from other American cities. New Orleans and Memphis show us how culture, music and art are able to bring together people and groups who are normally divided to take part in a joint project, whether it is playing in a team, forming a

band or simply coming together to enjoy cultural events such as carnivals. Whenever this happens, cultural praxis provides orientation, motivation, and practical examples of joint actions that bring together those who are so often separated.

### *Culture becomes political*

The Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel (2000) and his French colleague Jacques Rancière (2007) both argue that we need to rethink what constitutes “the political.” While Dussel argues that everything is political, Rancière suggests that most political problems are actually of social origin, but that they can be addressed by political means. In this essay, I have expanded the notion of the social to include the cultural. Most political problems are indeed rooted in social and cultural problems, but political solutions are not enough to address them successfully.

When culture is used as a tool to tackle social division, suspicion or even hatred between groups, then indeed it becomes political, as Dussel suggests. Enwezor Okwui, artistic director of the Documenta 11 exhibition in Germany (2002), explains this in his book *The Short Century* (2001), saying that culture and art have the power to make, unmake, and redraw divisions among people and groups. At a very basic level, inter-group conflict is the result of portraying certain people as different from, or better than, others, and thus justifying their privileges. Government action is often called for in crisis situations,

but such action cannot change the very definitions and frames of reference that pitched people and groups against each other in the first place. However, culture and art can do this.

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