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Culture and its capital role

Culture lies at the heart of the European project because it gives ultimate meaning to the great collective effort to overcome differences whilst, at the same time, affirming and defending them. The richness of the European project is found in the way in which many voices, languages and histories have been able to create a common and shared future. We must ensure that citizens understand the importance of culture in the social, economic, aesthetic and ethical development of society as a whole and of every corner of Europe itself. We want, need and are seeking out critical, demanding citizens. We want citizens who desire, protect and demand culture and who understand that culture is an essential part of our development as individuals and as a society.

The European Capitals of Culture project is based on the very beautiful idea that all cities are important, that there are multiple centres, and that culture encompasses all spaces, all municipalities and all of Europe. The project was launched in 1985 with the title “European City of Culture”, but since 2005 has gone by the name “European Capital of Culture”. The idea of capitals, which have traditionally been associated with political and economic power, has rightly been expanded to include culture. Each year, two European cities become the centre of European culture, and thus, the symbolic heart of the European Union. During that year, those two ‘capitals’ strive to highlight their shared values and the ties that bind them to the rest of the continent, while giving citizens a fresh look at their own identity in the shared context.

Going beyond traditional boundaries to include cities that are often peripheral, less well-known or far from the more traditional centres of power helps to spread the idea of Europe as a communion of cultures, as a collectivity of sensibilities, accents and colours, united by a shared history and, above all, by a common horizon. A made up of cultures to be discovered, protected and claimed. The choice of two different capitals of culture every year, changing the outlook and encompassing new destinations, is an excellent illustration of the European identity, reflected in people who claim a common history and a shared, diverse heritage, demonstrating that the European project is essentially a cultural and humanist project, a utopia of civic union. In 2023, we celebrated the centenary of the birth of Jorge Semprún, artist, intellectual, former Spanish minister of Culture and a reference

point for culture in Europe. Semprún was heard to say that the European project was based precisely on achieving “unity in diversity”.

It would be a unity upon which regional and local identities would be affirmed, “rather than dislocated or blurred”. Reflecting on those words helps us to understand how culture lies at the heart of the European project, because it gives ultimate meaning to this great collective effort to overcome differences whilst, at the same time, affirming and defending them. The richness of the European project is found in the way in which many voices, languages and histories have been able to create a common and shared future. With the cultural capitals project, each city, each capital, establishes a programme with its own particular accents, language, colours and tones. The programme is open to all European citizens, claiming culture as a space for meeting, affirmation, dialogue and collective construction.

Since the cultural capitals initiative was launched in 1985, four Spanish cities have held the title of European Capital (or City) of Culture (Madrid in 1992, Santiago de Compostela in 2000, Salamanca in 2002 and San Sebastián in 2016). Another city, as yet undecided, will do so in 2031. The four Spanish capitals became catalysts for a transformation capable of changing the image of the city, revolutionising the way in which their citizens related to their surroundings and increasing awareness of those cities on a European and international level.

While the echoes of war still resound and hurt in the heart of Europe, it is more relevant than ever to reflect on the – capital – role that culture has and should be playing in both national and European public policies. We should also reflect on how citizens assume and incorporate culture as a shared element, as a common heritage, as an essential public good and as a source of progress, knowledge, enjoyment and happiness. There is no doubt that the European Capitals of Culture initiative has contributed to bringing European culture and values closer to Europe’s citizens, underlining the idea of culture as a central pillar of our societies and as a long-term project that demands continual emphasis, renewal and innovation.

Political commitment to culture: Essential public good and global public good

Enhancing society’s view of culture has been precisely the ultimate goal of the policies we have developed in the Ministry of Culture and Sport of the progressive government led by Pedro Sánchez. All the public policies we have implemented have been developed under this umbrella. We have stressed aspects such as increasing the budget allocation of the Ministry of Culture, citizens’ access to culture and participation in cultural life, as well as improving the working conditions of cultural workers. We have to recognise that culture perfectly combines apparently opposing and incompatible dimensions: the physical, economic, tangible dimension found in studies and financial tables; and the immaterial, emotional, intimate dimension, which, though difficult to assess in quantitative terms, is capable of transforming the lives of those who allow it to embrace them. It is important

to stress that the most tangible dimension, the dimension that makes culture a tool for economic development and social transformation, is driven solely by the value that we as a society place on culture. Without that value, culture becomes mere decoration. And if culture is revolutionary, it is because it is our backbone, defining us, linking us to a common history, to a landscape, to a memory. Culture survives because it projects us towards the future, questions us and teaches us. And, of course, let us not forget, because it continues to be a powerful factor of social inclusion. Education and access to culture are among the most potent weapons we possess to help us achieve fairer, more inclusive, more egalitarian, more aware, critical and democratic societies.

Therefore, we must ensure that citizens understand the importance of culture in the social, economic, aesthetic and ethical development of society as a whole and of every corner of Europe. We want, need and are seeking out critical, demanding citizens. We want citizens who desire, protect and demand culture and understand that culture is essential to our development as individuals and as a society. Life without culture would be mere survival. In this vein, in September 2022, at the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies, held in Mexico 40 years after the previous one, 150 countries from all over the world unanimously set themselves the very ambitious goal of making sure that the UN sees culture as one of the sustainable development goals in the post-2030 Agenda. For the first time, these 150 countries are defining culture as a global public good, because culture belongs to citizens as a right. Recognising culture as a global public good means recognising that culture is a heritage that belongs to all of humanity. That we not only have the right to enjoy it, but also to protect it, to spread it and to benefit from it. Culture belongs to all of us, and we must move towards a culture of universal access and participation.

It is important to point out that we live in times when culture is more necessary than ever. Uncertain times call for courageous cultural policies to face the challenges of the future. At a time of war, inflation, climate crisis and rapidly rising populism, there can be a temptation to see culture as a luxury or an ornament, as something dispensable in times of upheaval. However, culture embodies the values that make our ways of life valuable, and we must fight hard against the temptation to undervalue culture. We must defend its crucial importance in coexistence, in democracy and in the construction of freer, fairer, more egalitarian and more sustainable societies.

Culture is the DNA of our society. If we lose culture, we lose democracy, history, memory and development, ultimately weakening our coexistence because culture and art are crucial in the promotion and consolidation of plural, inclusive, participatory and socially cohesive societies.

This commitment to raising the social status of culture is, therefore, the strategic direction taken by the Ministry of Culture and Sport. As a result, the central theme of the recent Spanish presidency of the EU in the field of culture has been “culture as an essential public good, as a global public good”, driving a process capable of bringing together all member countries and their representatives and civil society around culture. A process that recognises the social and economic relevance of culture and promotes a real qualitative leap in considering culture as a state policy, making it a driving force for change for all citizens.

The commitment undertaken at the UNESCO summit has permeated the government's action as a whole and has been very precisely specified in the line of work that Spain has set for itself in the field of culture as it took its turn as president of the Council of the EU. This means enhancing society's view of culture and improving the living and working conditions of the cultural sector.

Accordingly, Spain has promoted the signing of a text to put this European political commitment to culture in black and white. During the informal meeting of Ministers of Culture, held in Cáceres last September, the 27 countries of the EU unanimously approved the Cáceres Declaration, a text in which we celebrate culture and make public our commitment to it, pledging to give it the highest political consideration. Poetic in spirit, inspired by the streets of a city that has been a world heritage site since 1986, the text is a hymn to culture as the driving force of the EU, as the tie that binds and as the heart of one of the greatest projects of coexistence ever attempted in the history of humanity. The Cáceres Declaration embodies the commitment of all European countries to a project rooted in a shared culture and a common history. It ends with the words:

Culture is, in short, a right of citizens that public authorities and all individuals have an obligation to safeguard. That is why we are making this commitment today, so that culture will henceforth be considered an essential public good, and a global public good, at the highest policy level.¹

If there is one thing the declaration acknowledges, it is that culture is the beating heart of Europe. This declaration is indeed a milestone, because, for the first time, the 27 countries of the EU have signed and made a strong joint statement in favour of culture as a crucial element of European politics and identity, as a defining element in the meaning and future of democracies.

Commitment to creators and cultural workers

This commitment of the progressive government to culture has been translated, in the first place and from a practical point of view, into reforms aimed at improving the lives and working conditions of all those who have made culture their way of life. There is, after all, no art without artists and no culture without cultural workers. A society is indeed portrayed, in part, by the way it regards and treats its artists and by the way it values its culture. As public authorities, we must work to favour and improve the lives of creators, artists and workers in the cultural sector.

We have set up what we have called the Artist's Statute, a series of measures recognising the cultural exception. Because the working, social security and tax conditions of culture are exceptional, ordinary legislation must adapt to these, rather than the other way around. We have moved forward in this respect during the last parliamentary term in Spain and have sought to drive further progress at the European level.

¹ <https://spanish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/caceres-declaration/>.

We believe it is possible to improve the lives of creators across the continent. We clearly cannot talk about culture and sustainability without facing the fact that cultural workers, with some honourable exceptions, rarely make a living from their work. This is why we seek to be ambitious and would like to move towards common legislation for artists within the framework of the EU.

We are promoting legislation to ensure that the common phrase “*por amor al arte*”, used when someone does something in good faith without expecting anything in return and for the pure pleasure of doing it, is no longer so intimately linked to cultural work. We are aiming to ensure that the love of art is not synonymous with instability, precariousness and uncertain salaries, but rather with the future, progress and development.

Committing to the future of culture: Guaranteeing and promoting access

Culture is always written in the future tense and public policies of real impact are always those projected forward to ensure that citizens can integrate culture into their daily lives. In this respect, following the example of France and Italy, in 2022, Spain launched the *Bono Cultural Joven* (Young People’s Cultural Voucher), aimed at young people as they come of age, helping them to enter adult life accompanied by culture in all its diversity.

In the case of Spain, the programme involves a card preloaded with €400 that young people can use exclusively to pay for cultural goods and services. Between the first and second editions of the card, more than half a million people all over the country have seen the doors of culture open with a project that has mobilised millions of euros, money that goes directly to the cultural sector and creative enterprises. The programme has two objectives. It seeks to universalise and facilitate access to culture, helping young people discover culture and creating new educated, critical, free citizens, while at the same time aiming to strengthen and support cultural enterprises by creating thousands of new spectators, readers and listeners. These young people are coming of age hand in hand with culture. They can buy books and films and go to the cinema, theatre and opera. They can open the doors of culture and enjoy it in all its richness and diversity. And what’s more, they can do so independently and freely.

The voucher relates to three categories of expenditure: live culture, material culture and digital culture. The young people themselves are free to decide where to spend it, so they can make their own decisions, form their own opinions and find their own tastes, as they discover the culture around them.

Bringing culture closer to citizens and enabling young people to incorporate it into their lives, demanding more culture, will make for a better, freer, fairer, more egalitarian, more critical and, I have no doubt, happier society. This is the reason for our work and must be the driving force of public policies: to achieve an educated, participatory citizenship and to build an egalitarian, inclusive, open culture. Because culture is part of the landscape of our daily life, of our history and of our heritage, but also part of the future. Culture should always be capital. That, and no other, is the dream and the meaning of a united Europe.