

THE CASE FOR CULTURE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Culture, like freedom, is never something which once gained can be taken for granted; it is a matter of ceaseless effort.

Hugh Jenkins
The Culture Gap

I have worked in the cultural field for more than fifty years. During this time, virtually every person I have met working in this field has felt that culture should play a central role in the world.

Just how far we are from achieving this objective was revealed during the recent American election. Not only was culture seldom mentioned during the campaign, but also there was no mention of culture in the many speeches I heard Trump give about “making America great again.” This served as a reminder of how far we are from realizing this commonly-held conviction in the cultural field, as well as how important it is to persevere with the quest to have culture taken seriously throughout the world.

This is imperative in view of the present state of the world and prospects for the future. Clearly culture has a crucial role to play in coming to grips with many of the world’s most difficult, demanding, and debilitating problems, including climate change, global warming, and the environmental crisis, huge disparities in income and wealth, conflicts between different

groups, races, countries, and civilizations, terrorism and terrorist attacks, the possibility of nuclear or chemical warfare, and the need to achieve a great deal more peace and harmony in the world.

For centuries, the case for culture was made in terms of the arts and treating the arts as “ends in themselves.” This was because the arts and culture were deemed to be synonymous, and were valued primarily for their intrinsic qualities. This included bringing a great deal of happiness into people’s lives, revealing a great deal about the nature of the world and most things in the world, and inspiring people to reach above and beyond themselves in the search for the sublime. This case reached its zenith in the Renaissance and Romantic era, when the arts were accorded a high priority in society because they played an important role in people’s lives in both the individual and collective sense.

Things started to change in this regard when a powerful relationship was established after World War II between science, economics, technology, governments, and the political process in general and the publication of C. P. Snow’s book *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* in 1959 in particular. It wasn’t long after this that the sciences began to be treated as “hard activities” and the arts as “soft activities.” This practice was most prevalent in educational institutions, corporations, and governments.

What was difficult for people in the cultural field to accept was the fact that the flow of funds in the public sector and the private sector was strongly influenced by this practice. In the governmental and educational fields, for example, there was a discernible increase in funding scientific

activities, projects, programs, and courses and a discernible decrease in funding artistic activities, programs, projects, and courses. This occurred first in the western world but then in many other parts of the world as well.

It didn't take long for people in the cultural field to get the message. By the nineteen seventies, it was clear that the traditional case for culture was rapidly losing ground. A new case had to be made for culture - a case capable of producing more funding for culture as the arts from business, governments, foundations, and private benefactors.

By this time, the reasons why this funding was needed was readily apparent. As William Baumol and William Bowen stated in their book - *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* - the dependency of the arts on governments and other public and private institutions for financial support was not due to artists and arts organizations mismanaging their money as many people thought, but rather because they experienced a shortfall between their total expenses and earned income since they were unable to take advantage of technological gains the way most businesses, industries, and corporations can. As the authors pointed out in their book, it took the same amount of time and same number of players to perform a Beethoven symphony when their book was published - and still does today! - as it did when this symphony was first created. Meanwhile, the costs of performing this symphony have risen dramatically.

While it was important to make the new case for culture to corporations, foundations, educational institutions, and private benefactors, it was particularly important to make it to governments. This was because

governments were getting much more involved in funding a variety of societal activities and were looking for “hard data” and “concrete arguments” to convince citizens that spending taxpayers money on the arts was justified. It was political and governmental requirements like this - especially when they were combined with many other developments taking place in the world at this time - that convinced people in the cultural field that the case for culture had to be made in practical and quantitative terms.

In order to do this, it was necessary to convince governments that culture produced countless economic, commercial, and financial benefits. As a result, numerous studies were conducted by people in the cultural field to convince governments and other public and private institutions that millions of dollars were spent on culture as the arts due to the construction of capital facilities, people’s attendance at artistic events, and especially expenditure on hotels, restaurants, clothing, tourism, transportation, communications, and a great deal else.

It wasn’t long after these studies were completed that culture began to be treated as a component part of economics, especially when the new discipline of cultural economics was created to examine cultural issues and problems from an economic perspective. A related development to this took place around the same time. It was the commitment made to proving that the arts were not elitist, but, on the contrary, engaged large numbers of people in the artistic process. This resulted in many studies designed to document the size, composition, and character of arts audiences. These studies also proved helpful to governments and other funding agencies in

justifying their funding of culture, since they provided factual evidence that arts audiences were much larger and more diversified than was assumed.

While these studies served a useful purpose in justifying public and private financial support for culture, they were not without their problems. In order to make this new case for culture, it was necessary to abandon the traditional practice of treating culture as an end in itself and justifying it for intrinsic purposes and start treating it as a means to other ends and justifying it for extrinsic purposes. This set a dangerous precedent, since it meant that culture was no longer valued primarily for what it was, but rather for its ability to satisfy the interests and needs of other institutions, activities, and sectors in society. Most of these needs and interests were concerned with generating economic activity and maximizing economic growth.

This became apparent when the definition of culture was expanded to include “the cultural industries.” While most people in business, government, foundations, and so forth were prepared to admit that the arts made an important contribution to the economy and rate of economic growth, many felt it paled in comparison to the contributions made by many other sectors in society. In fact, a strong argument could be made for the fact that governments, corporations, foundations, and international organizations only got interested in the economic potential of culture after radio, television, film, book publishing, recording, CDs, videos, and so forth were added to the list. This was because the economic impact generated by these devices and industries was many times greater than the arts because they could be mass produced and were not “one of a kind” as most artistic activities were.

Not all people in the cultural field felt the case for culture should be made in economic terms, especially when this didn't seem to deliver the results many people hoped for and expected. While supporters of the new case for culture claimed that this was the price that had to be paid for generating more public and private support for culture and it was naïve and simplistic to think otherwise, others felt that additional arguments should be made for culture and not just the economic argument.

One of these arguments was put forward by the Council of Europe in its report *In from the Margins - A Contribution to the Debate on Culture and Development in Europe* published in 1997. As the title indicated, the report was based on the belief that culture should be brought in from the margins and play a more mainstream role in society. According to the authors of the report, this could be achieved by focusing on the “social contributions of culture,” especially bringing people together, sharing experiences, reducing the global cultural gap, mobilizing people and communities, and working in societies based on the mass media and modern communications. The report was produced by a group of policy experts, researchers, and cultural managers, and, like many reports published at this time, relied heavily on statistics, indicators, and quantitative methods to make its case.

By this time, UNESCO was deeply involved in the quest to establish a new case for culture. Not only was it actively engaged in the World Decade for Culture and Development from 1988 to 1997 - which was designed to focus on the role that culture played in development in general and the development of countries in particular - but also it played a prominent role in the World Commission on Culture and Development from 1993 to 1995.

This commission, which was headed up by Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, former Secretary General of the United Nations, was committed to examining culture's role in the world and making recommendations concerning its future development. When the commission released its Report - *Our Creative Diversity* - in 1996, culture was defined in substantially broader terms than the arts and cultural industries, and even as the “total way of life of people and countries.” As the title of the report revealed, a great deal of emphasis was placed on creativity and diversity as two of the most essential elements in culture and the key role they play in the world.

As far as creativity was concerned, this was manifested most conspicuously in the work of Richard Florida. He became well known throughout the world for his research and writing on “the creative class” and the dynamic role it played in urban development. His books and research on this subject - and especially his book *The Rise of the Creative Class: How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* - documented the fact that creative people such as artists, designers, architects, activists, inventors, and advertisers were providing the impetus and innovations that were required to broaden, deepen, intensify, and enrich developments in urban life. His work was embraced by many people in the cultural field as yet another indication of the economic potential of culture and the role it is capable of playing as a generator of economic activity.

As far as diversity was concerned, it stemmed from a different set of factors and forces. This had to do with the trend that was taking place in the world around this time towards uniformity, and with it, the threat to diversity

that was evident in all parts of the world. Spurred on by Canada and France, UNESCO was so concerned about this threat that it created a worldwide movement that led to the signing of the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* in 2005.

This convention is a legally-binding global agreement that ensures that artists, cultural professionals, practitioners, and citizens can create, produce, disseminate, and enjoy a broad range of cultural goods, services, and activities - *including their own* - in every country and region of the world. It was adopted due to the urgency of establishing and implementing an international law that recognized the importance of cultural goods, services, and activities as vehicles of identity, value, and meaning and not just as commodities, consumer products, and objects of trade and commerce.

By the time the UNESCO convention was signed in 2005, climate change and the environmental crisis had become major international concerns, as was the need to achieve “sustainable development.”

The origins of this idea can be traced back to 1983 when the World Commission on Environment and Development – also known as the Brundtland Commission - was created. The commission’s Report - *Our Common Future* - was published in 1987 and was based on the belief that all future development in the world must be sustainable. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to take the needs and interests of future generations and the natural environment and not just the present generation into account. While it was realized that it would take time to produce the transformation in values, lifestyles, and individual and collective behaviour that was needed to

achieve this, many public and private institutions immediately commenced the search for ways and means to make sustainable development a reality.

One of these ways was felt to be through the development of “the creative economy.” According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the creative economy is “an emerging concept that deals with the interface between creativity, culture, economics and technology in a contemporary world dominated by images, sounds, texts and symbols.” What was exciting about this idea for people working in the cultural field was the realization that culture and creativity were intimately connected, situated at the core of the creative economy, and seen as “driving forces” in the development of this type of economy. As UNCTAD stated in its *Creative Economy Report* in 2010, “Adequately nurtured, creativity fuels culture, infuses a human-centred development, and constitutes the key ingredient for job creation, innovation and trade while contributing to social inclusion, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability.”

While some people in the cultural field felt that the focus of attention should be on culture’s contribution to the “creative economy,” others felt it should be on culture’s role as “the fourth pillar of sustainable development.”

This occurred when the idea of “pillars of sustainable development” surfaced after the report of the Commission on Environment and Development was published and embraced by many people in the corporate, governmental, political, and diplomatic fields. While economics was seen and treated as “the first pillar of sustainable development,” many people in

the environmental field felt that the environment should be seen and treated as “the second pillar of sustainable development,” and, as such, given a much high priority in public policy, planning, and decision-making. Not long after this, pressure was exerted to make social affairs “the third pillar of sustainable development.” And then, quite recently, culture was added as “the fourth pillar of sustainable development.”

Just as Richard Florida played a pivotal role in the development of the concept of the creative class which led to such notions as the creative sector and the creative economy, so Jon Hawkes played a pivotal role in the development of the concept of culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. His book *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture’s Essential Role in Public Planning* was instrumental in convincing many authorities in business, government, and politics that culture has an important role to play in global development and human affairs. This would not have been possible without a great deal of advocacy and the full support of UNESCO, Agenda 21 for Culture, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and others.

This is where matters stand at the present time with respect to the case for culture. It is being made largely in terms of culture as the arts and cultural industries, a means to other ends rather than an end in itself, and valued mainly for its extrinsic qualities. It is also being made primarily in terms of culture as a component part of economics, a generator of economic activity, a driver of the creative economy, and one of the four main pillars of sustainable development. While some people are making the case in social terms, this pales by comparison to the case in economic terms.

While these initiatives have played a valuable role in keeping the case for culture up-to-date with many contemporary developments, they tend to reinforce the status quo and existing way of doing things. The problem is that the status quo and existing way of doing things are not sustainable because they are making phenomenal demands on the natural environment, the world's scarce resources, and the carrying capacity of the earth.

It doesn't take a psychic to depict the kind of world that could result in the near future if this practice is continued, especially as world population increases, resources are used up, the earth's temperature continues to rise, and the carrying capacity of the planet is approached. Not only will this result in a great deal more environmental exhaustion and degradation, but also it will produce many more rifts and conflicts between the diverse peoples and countries of the world. This explains why there is a growing awareness throughout the world that humanity cannot go on doing things the way they have been done in the past or are done at present. Things must change – and change dramatically - if environmental sustainability and human welfare and well-being are to be assured in the future.

Can culture play a crucial role in this? Indeed it can. Not only does culture possess the potential to bring about the most essential change in the world of all – namely a major transformation in the relationship between human being and the natural environment – but also it possesses the wherewithal to create a new course for humanity.

In order to do this, two developments are imperative. The first is to adopt an all-encompassing “holistic perception of culture” as a complex

whole or total way of life. The second is to treat culture as an end in itself as well as a means to other ends, thereby valuing it for both its intrinsic and extrinsic properties.

In combination, these two requirements provide the foundations that are necessary to make a quantum leap in the case for culture in the future. It is a leap based on the belief that culture has a central rather than marginal role to play in the world. For what these two requirements do is change the context within which all developments throughout the world take place. Not only does this make it possible to change the contents of these developments since context determines contents, but also it makes it possible to realize culture's full potential and ability to play a central role in the world. Surely this is what Léopold Senghor, first president of Senegal and a distinguished poet and cultural scholar, meant when he said, "culture is the alpha and omega of any sound development policy."

Dealing with culture in the all-encompassing, holistic sense the way most anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural historians do is imperative for other reasons as well. Most essentially, it confirms the fact that the world is made up of culture and cultures in the all-inclusive sense at its core and in its fundamental essence because the whole determines the parts and is greater than the parts and the sum of the parts. Moreover, it makes it possible to see the big picture; address crucial problems and strategic relationships in the big picture; facilitate the change that is needed in people's overall way of life by achieving a better balance between the material and non-material dimensions of development; and place the emphasis on bringing people, groups, countries, continents, and civilizations

together rather than splitting them apart because the focus is on the whole and not just the parts. Without these developments, and others, it will not be possible to solve the environmental crisis. Nor will it be possible to achieve sustainable development, realize unity in diversity, and create more peace, harmony, and happiness in the world.

It follows from this that the challenge of the future is to develop culture in breadth and depth, position cultures effectively in the natural, historical, and global environment, and achieve balance and harmony between the component parts of cultures.

Developing culture in breadth means taking advantage of all the various ways culture manifests itself in the world, from the artistic and humanistic to the ecological and biological. When this occurs, there is very little in the world that is not concerned with culture or affected by culture. This includes all activities people engage in - from the artistic and social to the economic, political, and environmental - as well as all citizens, groups, organizations, towns, cities, countries, nature, the natural environment, and other species. Everything is there in one form or another.

Developing culture in depth means opening up a commanding place for culture's most cherished ideals at the very heart of development, especially the quest for peace, order, equality, and justice, the necessity of freedom, migration, and truth, the priceless value of the cultural heritage of humankind, the search for beauty, unity, and the sublime, and others. Could there be anything in the world more important or urgent than this, given the state of the world at present and prospects for the future?

Positioning cultures effectively in the natural, historical, and global environment is equally imperative. This is necessary to reduce the huge ecological footprint we are making on the earth, learn from our past mistakes and correct these mistakes in the future; come to grips with the cultural baggage we have inherited from our ancestors and previous generations, overcome racism, violence, oppression, prejudice, terrorism, and hate, and interact, share, and connect with other people and other cultures on a more human, humane, and harmonious basis. This is what Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian poet and sage, had in mind when he said, “we must prepare the field for the cooperation of all the cultures of the world where all will give and take from each other. This is the keynote of the coming age.” Gandhi reinforce this conviction when he said, “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.”

Achieving balance and harmony between the many component parts of cultures is also essential. The distinguished cultural historian and scholar, Johann Huizinga, gave us a profound insight into the necessity of this when he said “the realities of economic life, of power, of technology, of everything conducive to man’s material well-being, must be balanced by strongly developed spiritual, intellectual, moral and aesthetic values” following his evaluation of numerous cultures throughout the world. Not only is this the solution to realizing a great deal more well-being in the world, but also it is the solution to establishing the arts, humanities, spirituality, learning, and ethics as the “gateways” to culture and cultures.

Many benefits and opportunities would derive from developments such as these. Most fundamentally, humanity's demands on the natural environment would be substantially reduced because many spiritual, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic activities are labour-intensive rather than material-intensive, and therefore do not make as many demands on the natural environment and resources of nature as most industrial, manufacturing, and technological activities.

Nor is this all. Putting a great deal more emphasis on spiritual, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic activities would produce more caring, sharing, and cooperation in the world. This could have a positive effect on income distribution in the world, activate a major shift away from material and monetary wealth and towards human and spiritual well-being, and help the oppressed and less fortunate peoples and countries of the world.

When culture and cultures are visualized and dealt with in this comprehensive and compelling manner, there is no doubt that culture possesses the potential to play a mainstream role in the world in both the theoretical and practical sense. Not only does this mean doing culture for culture's sake, but also it means treating culture as the centrepiece of the world system and principal preoccupation of municipal, regional, national, and international development. Let's get people and institutions in all parts of the world talking about this and planning for it. For this is what the case for culture should be all about in the future. It should be about ensuring that culture plays a central rather than marginal role in global development and human affairs in the years and decades ahead.

Endnotes

Lead Quotation: Hugh Jenkins, *The Culture Gap: An Experience of Government and the Arts* (London: Marion Boyers, 1979), p. 19.

2. C. P. Snow. *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (London: Martino Fine Books, 2013).