

The Political Dimensions of Cultural Policy -

The need of policy analysis in the field of cultural policy by Michael Wimmer

A paper for the 3rd International Conference on Cultural Policy Research
Montreal Canada, August 25 – 28, 2004

Abstract

In the last years cultural policy predominantly has become a matter of cultural management while the political dimension - at least in the cultural policy research community - largely has been lost. Offering an interpretation from a middle-European perspective with a traditionally high influence in culture by the state, the thesis is put up that the current political efforts of “restructuring” of the welfare-state is going to change also the relationship between the state and the cultural sector considerably. This leads consequently to the question if there is still a decisive or specific role of the state (representing its conflicting political interest groups) carrying through a public claim in the representation and promotion of culture.

Even though cultural policy traditionally gives a picture of a vague and oddly assorted field, according to a lot of indicators, the expression of Karl Polanyi in “The Great Transformation” seems to be still valid, that culture has to be defined as a category of mainly politically driven public intervention and therefore cultural policy has to be seen as a public instrument to push through a political concept of culture.

To proof this appraisal, the recent changes of the Austrian political landscape stand at the beginning of an observation of the main episodes of Austrian history to light up the specific relationships between the state and its representatives on one hand and the cultural field on the other. And what we find are not signs to mainly improve professionalism and efficiency of the cultural sector alongside rational and transparent criteria but to enable immediate political influence in the definition what culture is and how political interests should be carried through by cultural policy measures.

The paper is therefore a plea to foster the scientific evaluation of cultural policy not only in economic and management terms but equally as an issue of political sciences. Thus we can avoid to exclude important dimensions of cultural policy and wrongly simplify our analysis. An adequate consideration of the political impact of cultural policy would be the necessary prerequisite to negotiate the manifold dimensions of cultural policy in a more systematic and by that also politically in a more effective way.

The Political Dimensions of Cultural Policy - The need of policy analysis in the field of cultural policy

The scientific discussion on cultural policy of the last years was highly dominated by cultural management issues. Due to the economic and social crisis in many western countries, cultural policy was narrowed to the pragmatic question how to run cultural institutions facing public saving strategies as efficiently as possible.

Saying that and being personally involved in the cultural business for many years I read the inaugural speech of the Austrian government in the year 2000, when the first populist right-wing government was sworn in: "Nobody has to fear to become prosecuted"¹, the chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel said addressing mainly artists and intellectuals, while thousands of them demonstrated in the streets against xenophobia and cultural and social discrimination.

To understand this cultural policy message economic terms are maybe not really helpful as the only relevant instruments of analysis. Instead of that there is a need to change the arena of interpretation. "Politics is back", was the slogan, that was often used in these times. For many observers it became clear, that these phenomena of new political accomplishment strategies combined with new ways of resistance cannot be explained exclusively with the pragmatic tools of cultural management.

More than that the new public controversy demonstrated painfully that in the discussions of cultural policy issues during the last years, maybe even the last decades, the scientific community avoided to articulate the political implications of cultural policy strategies, that means the cultural politics aspect. The result was a kind of blind patch that goes together with the evidence that cultural policy became an issue more of economics than of political scientists.

Looking at the university landscape of Austria, but also of our neighbouring countries - cultural policy is almost nowhere scientifically reflected by political sciences, no scientific chair for cultural policy on university level near and far and therefore no tradition in the scientific preparation of political decision-making processes in the field of cultural policy - and, I would like to add from a personal point of view - because of these unsatisfactory circumstances quite modest chances for scientific careers.

We all know that it is not an easy task to define a policy field called cultural policy to satisfy the necessary standards of an academic discipline. Recently I found a quote by Pierre-Michel Menger, saying "qu'en comparaison a d'autres politiques publiques, la politique culturelle se caractérise par la multiplication des activités, des domaines et des modes d'intervention, l'hétérogénéité des actions additionnées, l'indifférence, l'impuissance ou l'hostilité à l'égard de toute forme de rationalisation du gouvernement des hommes et des choses de la culture, qui supposerait la promulgation de finalités précises et concrètes, la hiérarchisation des priorités, la gestion rigoureuse des ressources et l'évaluation méthodique des résultants".²

¹ Inaugural Speech of the Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, February 2000 Vienna/Austria
www.wienerzeitung.at/frameless/pdf/regierung200002.rtf

² Menger Pierre-Michel 1987, L'Etat providence et la culture. Socialisation de la création, prosélytisme et relativisme dans le politique culturelle publique, in : Chazel Francois (dir), Pratiques culturelles et politiques de la culture, Bordeaux, p 46ff

So there are good reasons to doubt, that such « une multitude de métier et de formations plus ou moins institutionnalisée, pas d'expertise publique unifiée nie de groupe homogène, stable et bien identifié comme interlocuteur » is able to establish a consistent policy field.

Anyway, even though cultural policy gives a picture of a vague and oddly assorted field, the expression of Karl Polanyi in “The Great Transformation”³ is still valid, that culture has to be defined as a category of mainly politically driven public intervention and therefore cultural policy has to be seen as a public instrument to push through a political concept of culture.

It is one of the major achievements of the national right-wing government in my country, to make clear, that the relationship between the state and culture can't be exclusively evaluated in economic but also in political terms. Consequently the first measures of this government were not signs to improve professionalism and efficiency of the cultural sector alongside rational and transparent criteria but to enable immediate political influence in the definition what culture is and how it should be carried through.

Mr. Haider, one of the main European right wing populists, (some of you might have heard of him), started immediately after the implementation of the new government a cultural policy campaign (mainly in the direction of the arts and the media world) with the message that one is not allowed to bite my feeding hand. Otherwise the bitten hand will stop feeding”⁴. This political saying was not really a contribution to save public money (nobody really believes that cuts in cultural funding would be able to redevelop public budgets sustainably) but to start the biggest exchange of the elite since 1945 by political re-colouring (“Umfärbung” to use the Austrian term) of all management positions in publicly funded cultural and media institutions.

One of the consequences of this campaign is a severe break down of a public cultural debate because everybody who expresses his critical attitude publicly could be interpreted as somebody who is going to bite the feeding hand. And everybody knows what will happen after such an attack – in any case political disqualification followed by economic disaster.

What I want to strengthen with this example is my first thesis, that the lack of the political dimension in the cultural policy debate cannot be seen accidentally but as a result of an overall change in cultural hegemony as a major result of neo-conservative politics, that had found its way since 2000 also to the “Kulturland Österreich” (the Cultural Nation of Austria).

My second thesis is oriented to the fact, that main requisites to install cultural hegemony under neo-conservative auspices do not represent the vibrant and often

³ Polanyi Karl 2001, The Great Transformation, Frankfurt

⁴ Jörg Haider 8.3. 2000

http://www.ballhausplatz.at/johcgi/ball/TCgi.cgi?target=thema&thema=57&ID_News=942

controversial cultural life, that reflects our actual democratic standards⁵ but the sediments of pre-democratic social conditions or – to see it frankly – feudal practices. This specific approach is caused by an ongoing seduction of cultural politicians not to look forward but to look backward where a better past is waiting to be waked by the kiss of the prince called cultural restoration (“Restauration”) in the cloths of reform.

To give you another example: In these days a famous Viennese building re-opened its doors: the Liechtenstein-Palais, where selected parts of the famous collection of baroque art of prince Liechtenstein, (this is the prince who runs a bank shaped as a small country in the heart of Europe) is exhibited for a broader public.

In the years before the Liechtenstein-Palais was rent and used by the state cultural administration to show international modern art. But now times of obviously misappropriate democratic use have an end. The prince is back and with him the times of baroque glory, where the catholic church and the feudal state stood together to fight reformation and early rationalism.

With this common celebration of a better past we get - at least symbolically - back to the origins of the relationship of the authority and culture: it is the persistent feudal character that comes to light again with this opening.

Austrian history as a source for cultural policy research

Compared with other countries the relationship between public authority and culture is traditionally very narrow. Although the financial contributions to the cultural sector of all public bodies amount of just around one percent of all public expenditures, cultural policy always was seen as a highly prestigious field which gave the political elite an extraordinary opportunity to legitimise their activities also in other political fields.

What I want to offer you is a view on Austrian cultural policy as a kind of burning glass that might make visible the ongoing political dimension of what we are talking about. As – up to now – only few research work on this broken policy field has been carried out I can't present a systematic frame on this issue. But with my examples I would like to characterize cultural policy as an instrument not only to run a cultural infrastructure properly but to use this infrastructure to carry through specific social and political interests.

As I come from a highly traditional country with a lot of cultural continuities I would like to give you a short historic synopsis of the varying relationship between political power and culture in Austria. You will easily find out, that the prevailing political constitution delivered different definitions of culture and therefore also different cultural policy instruments. What I want to proof is the mutual relationship between the respective political system and the main objectives of cultural policy.

⁵ as the German political scientist Klaus von Beyme says in: Kulturpolitik zwischen staatlicher Steuerung und gesellschaftlicher Autonomie, Festspiel-Dialoge, Salzburg 2002

Culture as representation

Even if you do not know very much about Vienna, you might have heard of the Vienna State Opera (the former Hofoper) and the Burgtheater, maybe also of the Hofmuseen, like the Arts and the Natural Historian Museum.

Therefore I am going to start my walk through the cultural history of Austria in the second half of the 19th century when the “k&k Monarchie” was shackled by the European process of nation building. It was Emperor Franz Joseph the First who personally and publicly pronounced his will to construct this enormous cultural infrastructure Vienna is acknowledged throughout the world up to now.

This decision was not because Franz Joseph himself was so highly art affiliated, probably the opposite is true. Instead of that it he used culture for the representation of political power in an European Empire with more than 50 million people. To make Vienna a European cultural centre should make visible that the Emperor in Vienna is determined to play an equally important role in the European political arena.

This kind of instrumentalisation of the arts, of music, of theatre for political (and not to forget religious) purposes has a long tradition. More than that, the unquenchable need of political representation was satisfied not only on the battlefields but also on symbolic level of the arts. Quite a lot of Habsburg Emperors personally spent a lot of time to sponsor, to collect, to build and to organise their artistic grandeur. Many of them were remarkable artists themselves and prepared to act on stage not just because of fun but also because of the chances to use culture for political reasons.

You find Franz Josef the First in this continuity. But not only him – this approach works up to now: Also during the last national election campaign 2002 a huge poster decorated the Vienna State Opera with the picture of the leader of the conservative party to be elected playing cello while the trio of the chancellor, the minister for education and culture and the minister for agriculture played folksongs together to stimulate public singing. To make it short: He won.

One of the reasons, why especially in Austria persistent political seduction to search for a better cultural truth in the past is so strong, might be the result of the failing civic revolution in 1848. Therefore the Austrian bourgeois were structurally incapable to build a relevant political counterweight to the eternal feudal claims also in terms of cultural hegemony. Instead of creating an own civic cultural repertoire their representatives were highly oriented on the traditional monarchic aesthetic settings that became therefore relevant far beyond the official end of the Austrian monarchy.

To give you another impressive example: Some of you might have already listened to the “New Years Concert” that takes place in the Viennese Musikverein and is broadcasted all over the world. This Musikverein with its “Golden Hall” was established - more or less at the same time when the Emperor decided upon his cultural business - by wealthy Austrian bourgeois. Traditionally this concert ends with the Donauwalzer and the Radetzky marsch. The forgotten fact: When the bourgeois auditorium of today clap their hands enthusiastically in time of the music nobody reminds the fact that Mr. Radetzky was one of the major generals of Emperor Franz Joseph who put down the civic revolution 1848. The successors of the victims are celebrating the suppressor. But obviously, culture understood in terms of cultural

heritage of a better past is one of the major strategies how to make successfully forget the loss of their political influence.

Culture as a political weapon

The start of what we call a democratic state after the First World War was – not only culturally – not really promising, the permanent economic crisis generated a permanent political crisis. Consequently massively conflicting cultural concepts came on the political agenda with the result that the specific process of the constitution of social classes was not really beneficial to unfold cultural democracy.

Instead of that two hostile camps stood against each other, bound together by rivalling philosophies of life. Culture became synonymous for political ideology that was realised in specific settings of socialisation and supported by the respective political administration: On one hand social democrats mainly in the so-called “Red Vienna”⁶, in their quarters, in their buildings (“Gemeindebauten”), in their schools, associations, celebrated their feasts, sang their songs in their uniforms and demonstrated their camp-own culture. On the other hand there were the conservatives with their feasts, songs and uniforms, mainly in the rural areas, and massively supported by the catholic church.

This kind of cultural clash led directly to the civic war of 1934 that ended the First Republic and gave way for an authoritarian government.

Culture as manipulation

The conservatives shaped as “Austro-Facists” took over the full political power 1934 in a country, nobody really believed in. And their strategy to fight the appearance of the Nazi was to destroy the rests of democracy (by “Überhitlern”) and by the massive claim of political redefinition of culture in the kind of the former Austrian monarchy. As we know, this cultural policy strategy did not work successfully and was overwhelmed by national-socialist cultural modernisation that led in a terrible and barbarian uniqueness unthinkable up to now. Their representatives tried to get rid of everything Jewish (as emanations of “Entartete Kunst”) but integrated a lot of “un-political” artists in their regime to develop together with popular culture and new technologies a comprehensive concept of political manipulation.

Culture as political lie

After the Second World War, the two former hostile political camps promised to end their permanent struggles and to work together for the reconstruction of the destroyed country. But when it came to the necessity to again redefine culture politically in this small and rather burdened democracy, it soon became clear, that the feudal concept again became dominant: Already during the last days of the Second World War State Opera and Burgtheater reopened their doors, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra restarted playing Mozart and all involved tried to make forget,

⁶ Compare; Gruber Helmut 1991, Red Vienna – Experiment in Working-Class Culture 1919– 1934, Oxford

that many artists and other cultural representatives were involved in the cruelties of the Nazi-Regime. According to this fact the staff members of the cultural administration were the same as in the years of Austro-Facism to give the idea of continuity between 1938 and 1945.

One of our main feature writer comes to the conclusion, that the state in these days tried to direct a “Big Myth” of a cultural nation, that should be the proof, that culture and politics are two completely divided fields. Famous artists like Herbert von Karajan should be the example, that “real art” is politically independent; but to serve “real art” their representatives are constrained to find appropriate arrangements with every regime whilst they are immune against political occupancy⁷.

It was the first president of the Austrian Pen-Club, the author Alexander Lernet-Holenia, who got to the heart of the concept of the “Austrian Renaissance”: “Actually we just have to continue, were the dreams of a crazy guy interrupted us, actually we do not have to look forward but to look backward. We do not have to flirt with the future and start organising nebulous projects; we are, in our best and most valuable mind, our past”⁸.

And the big myth worked very successfully and the political liars have done – in their wish to convince the world that Austria should be mainly seen by its politically innocent artists – a good job. The cultural restoration became one of the major issues of a successful foreign policy, Austria is profiting - at least touristically - up to now

At the same time, Austrian Jewish artists, who survived the Nazi-terror in exile were not invited to return to their former home country to join the cultural reconstruction. Many Jewish cultural goods, “arisiert” during the Nazi-Era, were not returned (what became a problem in many cases up to now).

Especially young and critical artists were prosecuted, some of them were brought to court in a campaign against “dust and trash”. Culture had to be clean and it was the task of the educational institutions to carry through this politically narrow view.

You can imagine, that this rather hermetic approach caused a lot of frustration and desperation especially by those who were excluded. Many, especially young artists left the country, others tried to survive in “informal groups”.

Culture as liberation

They found their outlet during the turbulent days of May 1968, when the state cultural institutions run by a conservative elite were shacked by a youth that wanted to wipe off the old cultural cloths. “Slaughter the holy cows!”⁹ was one of the provocative slogans that wanted to make an end with the traditional cultural concepts of elitist

⁷ Compare: Löffler Sigrid 1996, Zum Beispiel Burg und Oper – zwei kulturimperialistische Großmythen, in: Kos Wolfgang/Rigele Georg (ed) : Inventur 45/55 Vienna, p 382 ff

⁸ Quotation from: Judy Michaela 1984, Literaturförderung in Österreich nach 1945, Vienna, p 59

⁹ Staininer Otto 1973, Schlachtet die heiligen Kühe, in: Zukunft, Nr. 6, Vienna

and hermetic high culture. The political fight was on the idea to reconcile culture and life (at least for artists), to make it one thing to live, to work and to celebrate. Many artists – suffering from conservative cultural policy - were on the very forefront of a social revolution that stood - at least – at the beginning of a new plurality of concepts of living.

Culture as social integration

1970 – at the end of the reconstruction after the Second World War - a new political era started that brought social democrats in power after the long years of cultural conservatism. Bruno Kreisky and his 1 400 experts started a comprehensive project of social reforms that was highly driven by cultural expectations. More than that, cultural policy became a major thriving force in changing the whole society. In retrospect one may say that during this era the first and only time a comprehensive political concept of cultural policy was formulated and at least partly carried through.

Theoretically political reforms should lead from “rule of law (Rechtsstaat) to welfare state (Wohlfahrtsstaat) and from there to a cultural state (Kulturstaat)”. This highly paternalistic concept made the state not only the power to guarantee the law, to distribute and redistribute money and material goods according the principles of solidarity and justice but also immaterial goods like culture, well-being or even happiness. This concept of a continuous success story of the state by permanent cultural reform should enable all members of society to take part actively in social life but also in cultural life.

Instead of former times now also young and critical artists were highly welcomed to take part in the realisation of this political concept. New ways of public funding made them active parts of the cultural business and no longer excluded. The principle of non-discriminate all-around distribution (in Austria we call it “Gießkannen-Prinzip”) was born. And by that many new ways of artistic realisation became possible mainly taking place outside the traditional institutions of “High Culture”. And so the political definition of culture indeed became broader and its instruments more varied (“weiter Kulturbegriff”).¹⁰

Culture as autonomy

The problem of this concept was that not everybody and especially individualistic artists did not like to become politically dependant. Therefore the conflicts with a new, autonomous cultural scene grew. Cultural initiatives all over the country wanted to act independently but at the same time using public money making visible a contradictory tension that could not be balanced successfully up to now.

More and more of the participants of this new cultural scene tried to escape the paternalistic reform project of the 70ies by having their eyes on the new, more emancipatory political group of the green-alternatives while the social democrats developed something like a strategy of repressive tolerance against rebellious artistic initiatives.

¹⁰ Compare: Hoffmann Hilmar 1981, Kultur für alle, Frankfurt

Culture as consumptive and investive market force

In the 80ies the political framework all over Europe again changed considerably. Due to the new economic world order of neo-liberalism not the “culturisation” but the economisation of the Austrian society became dominant. In retrospect one can say that while the consumptive approach also in the cultural field has been the thriving force in the 70th, the investive approach became stronger in the 80ies and 90ies.

Starting with the promotion of private sponsoring to supplement public funding the claim of cultural policy as a category of public intervention was increasingly politically challenged. While social democrats insisted in the achievements of cultural policy as an instrument of social integration, neo-liberal conservatives (we had to learn that this double attribution is not a contradiction) forced a concept of cultural industry, in which state intervention is limited to measures that improve the market orientation of the cultural business.

Culture as segregation

This reorientation of cultural policy objectives went alongside with new forms of inclusion and exclusion within society, now characterizing economically successful and economically not successful cultural projects. Not astonishing – this break in two is not just characterizing the cultural field. It is the immediate equivalent for a by and large social segregation that is taking place since then as a result of political weakness that finds no way up to now to sort out convincing answers facing the actual market dominance.

This social break between winners and losers of this cultural transformation is handing all kind of populists their political success on a plate. People like Mr. Haider are virtuoso concerting cultural resentments into political successes. The result is a climate of xenophobia and “Heimatgefühl” that is discriminating all cultural expression forms that are not belonging to the cultural mainstream.

Culture as resistance

This is the point where we come back at the beginning of my paper where I reported that the most of the Austrian representatives of the cultural sector were highly worried, when at the beginning of the year 2000 the conservatives built together with Haiders populist party a common government. And while the new chancellor announced publicly that nobody has to fear to become prosecuted, artists organised a demonstration with more than 200 000 people against the participation of the populist party in the new government.

At the same time most of the cultural institutions announced their resistance, artists declared their wish to emigrate and a lot of cultural initiatives created more or less fascinating acts to articulate their disapproval.

Conclusion: Cultural Policy – Re-politicised

Meanwhile we experience four years of new national-conservative government.

As expected from the neo-liberal point of view the cultural policy wording of the new regime went in the direction of public support of cultural industries. But up to now there are no signs of euphoria in this field. Instead of new economic incentives cultural policy became stuff policy, claiming immediate political influence in the organisation of the cultural infrastructure. While some political signs do defend cultural regionalism against urbanism are thrown into the public arena, most of small and independent initiatives on local and regional level, up to now publicly supported and representing an impressive variety and diversity of the field, are getting starved out with the result that they are not producing culture in the most efficient way but fighting unproductively for survival.

The major objective of the new approach of conservative cultural policy seems to be to end public debate on cultural policy. And again – like in the 50ies and 60ies their representatives seem to be successful in establishing their silent cultural hegemony.

One of the major reasons of this success seems to be the lack of political debate within the cultural sector itself. Obviously the economisation of culture has not only weakened the role of the state in cultural policy but also destroyed public debate on the political dimension of cultural policy.

The new conservative government has made evident that the forgotten phenomenon of cultural anti-modernity in western societies can be re-installed and the political will to instrumentalize cultural policy in this respect is still alive. Within a few months it became clear that their representatives are building up their cultural policy based on a long tradition to use culture to disguise social contradictions. The obvious objective of the now ruling cultural politicians is to distract with harmless cultural events (where at least some of the many well educated but politically unconscious cultural managers find a temporary job) from a political agenda that is carrying through the interests of their political interest groups.

This works the better the less both, the cultural sector and the political opposition are not prepared to stand this challenge. Because of the lack of a political concept the announced resistance of the cultural sector broke down within a few months when the government threatened with the withdrawal of public money while the opposition was unprepared to offer new alliances.

This rather drastic political defeat of the cultural sector should make evident that cultural policy is not just a matter of event marketing, efficiency, rationality and economy. It is still equally an important matter of power struggle of different political interests that have to be taken into account when there shall be a future for cultural policy.

Pierre-Michel Menger is right, cultural policy is a complex and manifold and thereby confused field. And what we find at the moment is a wild jumble of all the political efforts that I tried to distil. But nevertheless we should avoid to exclude important

dimensions to wrongly simplify our analysis according an unconscious contemporarity.

I just could offer some highlights where the political dimension of cultural policy in different historic moments becomes immediately evident. It is up to us to find the necessary prerequisites to negotiate the political dimension of cultural policy in a more systematic and by that also politically effective way.