

# Cultural Governance and the Crisis of Financial Capitalism<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Cultural policies in Europe were designed, albeit in significantly different ways national and ideological lines, as an additional component of the Welfare State. They were supposed to bring about democracy in cultural consumption by removing the obstacles on the road to giving access to symbolic goods. Since the '80s and the neo-liberal turn, this democratic imperative has declined, and was even labeled a complete failure, and new goals for cultural policy emerged: developing the conditions for a creative society, supporting city branding, and encouraging private sponsorship. This change in political justification created new contradictions and some disenchantment among the professionals who were, in growing numbers, employed in the cultural sector. The current crisis of capitalism has two main consequences. Shrinking budgets add new limits on cultural policy as culture tends to be identified as a “supplement of soul” when basic needs are no longer addressed and new claims for full democratic access to cultural resources.

**Keywords:** Cultural policy, creative society, neo-liberalism, democracy crisis, capitalism.

## Introduction

Cultural policy might not be the most important dimension of government action, but it encapsulates all the contradictions of public action. The development of cultural industries in a globalized world and the generalization of a form of “soft power” (Nye 2004), that no longer needs to go through the channels of cultural diplomacy, have deepened those contradictions. The relative weakening of the nation-state has increased the limitations of a national cultural policy, particularly in the European Union, where “national exceptions” are increasingly targeted by supra-national regulations. Cultural policy is split between democratization and creation, between the autonomy of the artist and the need to meet the cultural needs of a diverse population, between the necessary rationality of public choice and the arbitrariness of taste, between the universality of aesthetic values and the heterogeneity of various identity claims. Cultural policies may differ greatly from one country to another according to the different definitions of the public interest. However, these contradictions are present everywhere, albeit in different combinations. The current crisis of capitalism reveals the limits of our optimistic views on the “creative turn”<sup>2</sup> in contemporary societies and leads us to rethink the democratic potentialities of cultural life. Richard Florida’s creative society does not look as flamboyant as it used to. What is called creative society amounts quite often to precarious labor, growing unemployment in the cultural sector, and a huge amount of social frustration among the younger generations. What does the “right to culture” mean now, more than sixty years after it was introduced by the UNESCO Declaration of Human Rights in 1948? Is it still a collective and valuable ambition? In the first part of my presentation, I analyze the inherent contradictions that undermine the very notion of cultural policy. The second part is an overview of the consequences of the current crisis.

## Contradictory Models

If we remain at a very general level, defining cultural policy is very easy. It is about government action “with respect to the arts (including the for-profit cultural industries), the humanities, and the heritage” (Schuster 2003: 1). Things get more complex as soon as we reach more specific forms of action, not only because, as Mulcahy reminds us in his theoretical approach, it encompasses a vast array of activities, from fine arts to quilting and marching bands (Mulcahy 2006:321). Cultural policy addresses simultaneously the artist and the public, two social entities that can be at odds with each other since the growing autonomy of the artistic gesture and the end of the “art de plaire” conceived as the norm of aesthetic production. It combines profit and non-profit in a hardly decidable mix. It praises eternal masterpieces and popular culture in the meantime. It contributes to establishing hierarchies of taste and promotes the equivalence of all forms of cultural expres-

sion. Identity claims co-exist with the implicit acceptance of the effects of globalization. Of course, the definition of a cultural policy largely depends on the role of the state, the degree of centralization, the forms of governance, and the share of the private sector. In this respect, France and the United States can be opposed term to term. Historical and bureaucratic traditions matter: “many countries support what is known as cultural industries, or what would be known in the United States as ‘entertainment business,’ whether to preserve an old cultural heritage or to develop a nascent culture.” It is worth noting, since one of the main historical justifications of cultural policy is based on the distinction between “real culture,” viewed as a civic and emancipatory endeavor, and mere entertainment, defined as a form of passive consumption.

Mulcahy points out what I would like to define as the paradoxical nature of cultural policy, wherever it is applied. A very limited share of the nation budget is associated with a multiplicity of tasks and a rare complexity of governance, particularly concerning the decision criteria and the action evaluation. Of course, policy goals have changed over time: One of the most striking turns remains Margaret Thatcher's redefinition of British cultural policy, which has set new standards for the neo-liberal turn in this domain, but less visible reorientations have occurred in countries less sensitive to that type of ideology (Alexander 2007). This is the case in France, where the “commodification” of great museums, particularly the Louvre, has been heavily debated and the public-private partnership enthusiastically supported by the state (even with leftist governments) in the last twenty years. The “privatization” of culture has become a common goal that transcends diverse types of governance and is to some extent a consequence of the success of cultural policies that have generated new forms of action, for example, equipping small towns with a set of cultural institutions or creating very big units with huge personnel and maintenance costs. The system has also created enormous social expectations in the population about “cultural careers,” either artistic or managerial. In very different countries, the increase in cultural employment goes with the increase in cultural unemployment, but the attractiveness of artistic and cultural occupations, no matter vague they are, has not diminished. Pierre-Michel Menger's pioneering work on artistic occupations can be recalled at this stage.

Artistic labor markets are puzzling and challenging ones for social scientists....Evidence of sustained growth in artistic employment over the last 20 years is amply documented by several surveys and Census sources, and trends are quite similar in most advanced countries. In the United States, over the period 1970–1990, the number of artists grew at a rate of 127%—much more rapidly than the civilian labor force, and the rate of increase has continued to be high...Obviously, fluctuations in supply and demand of artistic labor do not provide a satisfying explanation of what appears to be highly unbalanced growth (Menger 1999).

The present development of labor markets for the arts shows an apparently irresistible trend toward flexibility. According to Menger's assumption, this explains

the underlying process characterized by the pervasive uncertainty of artistic undertakings and careers. It gives an account of how individuals, as well as organizations, handle uncertain prospects and manage the correlated individual and business risks. This model is well-known now and seems to work in very different countries.

Of course, part of the situation is the consequence of a collective illusion: Believing in the increasing cultural appetites of the population and in the necessity of carrying people to the institutions is not entirely based on witnessing a precise or rapid change, if one leaves aside entertainment industries. Public support tends to blur the real situation, and young people continue to develop sincere hopes in the “culturization” of the world. In France, the spectacular success of the higher education offer in cultural management or intermediation (around 100 master-degree-level programs now) shows that, particularly for girls, the cultural world has replaced teaching as a model for occupational future (Dubois 2013). The more the younger generations are rebuked by the low salaries and what is seen as the stressful lives of teachers, the more they dream of being involved in cultural occupations. This is again a paradox, since it is difficult to conceive a form of sustainable cultural action that would not be based on education. There is a kind of social magic here, which has to do with the ideology of creative society.

This ideology has developed along with the neo-liberal turn. The extraordinary success of Richard Florida's theses can be analyzed in retrospect as a symptom rather than a consequence of their sheer explanatory power. Florida succeeded in creating an ambiance blurring the division of labor existing and increasing in the world of “thought leadership” and of the development of “meaningful new forms,” (Florida 2002) as if “problem-solving” attitudes were contemporary to the “rise of the creative class.” The so-called super-creative core was stratified and was as much an oversimplification as the “cognitariat,” this new proletariat of knowledge, invented by Hardt and Negri in *Empire* (Hardt & Negri 2000). Rather than those big frescoes, one should prefer more detailed analyses of the changes in the workforce.

In the more recent book *Le travail créateur*, Pierre-Michel Menger (2009) discusses the legend of artistic creation as subversive, solitary, and linked to anti-utilitarianism (artistic work being posited against labor) and shows that today artists develop their projects in the environment of new capitalism, although there is no such thing as a critical view in Menger's work. They fit completely into the model of hyperflexibility, acceptance of growing inequalities, teamwork, and short-term projects. Such a paradox stems from the fact that the post-industrial worker and the artist look alike, and that they melt into the type of the new “creative worker.” The artist is no longer an exception in the world of capitalism but becomes a kind of prototype who has integrated the changes in capitalism earlier than his or her fellow citizens. The Art worlds are a laboratory where the transformations may be observed. Thus, the division of labor is seen by Menger as a

functional division that generates interdependency relationships, from cooperation to conflict, but not frozen in a direct and organized hierarchy. The traditional forms of long-lasting and disciplinary authority and command diminish. The individualization of links gives more autonomy and responsibility to the subject. In the meantime, such an organization of work increases the chances of unemployment and failure as a result of the reputational inequalities. The division of artistic work has two great principles: individualism and risk. Here, the old philosophical question of the determination of artistic value re-appears. The individual creativity, expressing a unique talent, is evaluated by the market and the public. In the Art worlds, as well as in the Sport worlds, unbelievable differences in gains are celebrated and valued. Their markets are characterized by the most astonishing apology of inter-individual competition, most of the time as “winner takes all” markets. Achievement in sports is frequently based on a killer instinct, and a form of deadly competition tends to become the norm of individual action. Even in the realm of sciences, cooperation is less praised than the solitary achievement of the genius. Thus, what is labeled creative work allows a rather radical social Darwinian vision of the world.

The artistic work offers also the best example of hyper-flexibility at every level of occupational activity: The traditional model of salaried work is disorganized. The worker multiplies short-term contracts; she becomes an autonomous professional, but at her own expense. The final question is: Are the artists the forerunners of a new social structure oriented toward the needs of new capitalism? The portrait of the artist as a worker might also be the sketch of the portrait of the worker as an artist, and of course, most of the time, as an unsuccessful artist.

This has to be compared with Boltanski and Chiapello’s thesis in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski & Chiapello 1999/2005). Although this book was written before Boltanski’s rather flamboyant return to a critical stance, the book contains more potential for reintroducing political issues (Boltanski 2011; Fabiani 2011b). I would simply like to point out the importance of the “artistic” critique in the ideological justification of new capitalism. Capitalism has the genuine capacity to integrate the artistic view of the world. Freedom, liberation, and authenticity are recognized as the core values of new capitalism. Here we are not far from the idea of the artist as a forerunner of capitalist justification or legitimation. However, Boltanski and Chiapello have added a new set of inescapable questions concerning the convergence of an artistic worldview and the reorganization of capitalism. Are not the ideas of freedom and authenticity void of their artistic meaning in the realm of new capitalism? Is the search for profit compatible with authenticity and with individual responsibility? Artistic critique is not yet the strength of social critique. But one can recognize quite a few signs of anxiety as a connected and entirely flexible world develops. The spread of new capitalism does not bring about the expected re-enchantment of the world that it seemed to promise. On the contrary, it seems to lead to huge difficulties in projecting oneself into the future.

The connected world is mainly connected to the present and to short-term involvements and relationships. The efficiency of the system may seem to provide the individual with more opportunities (more encounters, more exotic sex, more travel, more professional experience), but it increases the level of frustration. Of course, the implicit acceptance of risk and the taken-for-granted ideology of the successful genius now constitute a very powerful tool of symbolic domination. Individuals believe less and less in the powers of collective struggles, although the most successful artistic endeavors, as in the movie or television industries, are still characterized by the power of guilds or by the existence of strong unions. But it does not suffice to guarantee the smooth functioning of the system. More and more people, although increasingly connected and willing to be self-employed entrepreneurs, think that they cannot come to grips with their environments. Quite often, autonomy means anxiety, loneliness, and devaluation of the self. The world has become completely precarious. Short-term work assignments correspond to short-term life involvements when it comes to marriage and children. Richard Florida has defined gay educated people as a sort of cultural avant-garde, and his “gay index” has become the indicator of creativity in urban settings. However, the mobilizations for gay marriage in the most developed countries clearly show that contrary to the creative imagery, many gay people aspire to stable forms of social life. In addition, younger generations, who should more willingly accept the constraints of new capitalism, are more affected by dissatisfaction with life.

In its ideological history, capitalism has been constantly associated with freedom and autonomy. They are the main objects of its self-justification or legitimization process. And with new capitalism we seem to have reached a peak in this process. However, new capitalist liberation has very high costs. It has destroyed securities developed in the Welfare State (especially the security of employment), and it has developed diverse new forms of control, the most important undoubtedly the controls exerted by the self, giving a new meaning to the process of disciplinarization developed by Michel Foucault (1978). With new capitalism, we are like artists. We may play the role we want to play. Achievement reigns versus ascription. We are completely mobile and flexible; we can forget all our former links and develop new projects as much as we want. This process has generalized the commodification of all activities including culture and leisure, and, perhaps even worse, the commodification of human authentic qualities. It becomes difficult in our world to distinguish clearly between authentic and non-authentic values, since we have to constantly produce our own authenticity, to play it or to perform it, so to speak. Being commodified, the authenticity of goods becomes a sign of their inauthenticity, but in turn, capitalism is able to integrate the critique of inauthenticity and to provide the market with new “authentic” goods that will be quickly replaced by others. How can one be “authentic” and in the meantime completely flexible and available for all the mobility and changes of the self required in that world? The worker is an artist, in as much as he or she can play all

the roles needed by new capitalism. However, he or she has the duties of an artist (being versatile enough to satisfy the audience) but not necessarily the recognition of artistic prowess (being multiple by the deepening of the self or by the quest for intensity). The democracy of talents allowed by the new capitalism might be a world of simulacra or a huge ideological illusion.

Freely using Boltanski and Chiapello's ideas, we have thus reached a critical point about creative society. At least, we have seen that there was a contradiction between the dreams of a connected, creative, and free society and the reality of short-term commitments. Of course, those criticisms do not take into account what Menger stressed, the growing acceptance of a higher level of risk, the recognition of the unequal distribution of talents. I tend to ignore the development of safety nets in what could be a redefined Welfare State associating flexibility and security. These safety nets are not evenly provided in each country. Post-socialist countries lack the most in this respect. This is why they are sometimes considered more vulnerable to the ideologies of creative entrepreneurship. In France, a form of cultural Welfare State emerged after the Second World War. Two of its most original features are now under attack. The first is the "*intermittents du spectacle*," these very numerous workers, artists and technicians, employed in show business on a casual basis who can collect unemployment benefits on a disdainful scheme, with fewer hours worked. The other one is the advance on earnings (*avance sur recettes*) in cinema that allows more French movies to be produced with funds collected from a tax on theatre tickets, ironically mainly bought to watch US blockbusters. Both schemes were created to alleviate the risks of cultural endeavors, and they have been quite efficient for more than sixty years. But they cost taxpayers, and do not fit the ideology of neo-liberalism. Artists are portrayed as assisted people or even parasites. Diverse governments, right and left, have not yet made radical choices, since it would undoubtedly weaken the cultural activities in France. But it shows that the cultural sector is now the heart of violent ideological fights in the name of "liberalizing" and "privatizing" artistic activities. French neo-liberalism is deeply ambivalent regarding culture: While praising the autonomy of the artists, it aims to dismantle the institutional tools that led to its development. This attitude is a very good example of a broader trend. Cultural activities should be aligned on the economy as a whole. The current crisis has increased this trend and offered new justifications for radical change. We must turn now to the analysis of the first consequences of the crisis.

### **The Effects of the Current Crisis**

In the last sixty years, culture has been to some extent a constitutive element of the welfare state in the West. Culture has provided many new facilities to citizens. Museums, libraries, theatres, and festivals have blossomed. In spite of the strong inequalities of access to cultural goods, these institutions have become common

features of the cityscapes. They are considered an index of what a good life can be, notwithstanding the educational benefits attached to their regular use. In socialist countries, culture was ideologically central on somewhat different grounds and played a very important role in public life. After the fall of the Berlin wall, the communist cultural world brutally fell apart and had to be reshaped along new policy lines. Thus, culture is undoubtedly a central feature of the contemporary public sphere and has even, as nicely shown by Jim McGuigan, become a cultural public sphere of its own (McGuigan 2004, 2011). In all countries, cultural institutions are oriented by public funding and public policy. Cultural public policies have two major dimensions. The first is public support for the arts and the democratization of access to cultural goods. The second is the regulatory aspect of the government activities and deals mainly with the control of cultural industries. Thus, the shrinking of state and municipal budgets as a whole has had a direct and immediate impact on cultural life, since it depends so heavily on public expenditures. Luis Bonet and Fabio Donato think that the former socialist countries have an edge in this respect.

Nowadays, this is paradoxically an advantage for them, since they know how to face processes of radical change better than Western European countries. They are more aware of how to deal with instability and how to move to a very different political, social and economic system. (Bonet & Donato 2011).

This, of course, remains to be seen, but is a very interesting idea as the austerity packages are not likely to fade away in the near future. Thus far, there have been no major changes in most countries since the beginning of the financial crisis. We witnessed more adjustments to the situation than promises of structural change. In some countries, where the issue is extremely touchy, as in France, there has been no major change in public funding yet. If the crisis deepens, it is very likely that decreasing public budgets will have major consequences on cultural choices. In the past few decades, two trends have coexisted: the funding of very big institutions viewed as nation or city flagships and the dissemination of small cultural units created to serve the everyday needs of local populations. In the near future, contradictions between the two sides of the cultural policies might grow. Less money will imply drastic political choices, and is very likely to lead to the shrinking or even the closing of some institutions. A sort of cultural rust belt might even appear. This is not pure speculation. Last fall in Germany, some people expressed the wish to significantly reduce the number of cultural institutions in the country. There seem to be no possible relief from the private sector, for three reasons. The private sector can handle a few prestigious endeavors and cultural flagships but cannot handle the democratizing aspect of public policy. The crisis had an impact on firms' funding capacity, and the public-private partnership has not always been very efficient. Households must now pick up the bills for cultural bounties if they want to benefit from them. However, it is very doubtful that average households can replace traditional philanthropists.

As the first available data show, the budget cuts have direct consequences. There has been a decrease in new cultural productions and an indirect decrease in cultural consumption (EUROSTAT 2011; see also Inkei 2010). It is very likely that this situation will diminish the level of risk taking among cultural operators and increase the amount of “popular” programming. It will also make the race for private sponsorship even more intense. As we know, those trends are not new, and they have tended to shape the policy of big institutions since the neo-liberal turn. Margaret Thatcher’s policy, even as reshuffled by New Labour, has been a case in point, but it is undoubtedly a larger trend, as the numerous controversies about the “commodification” of the Louvre in France clearly show. The battle against the Abu Dhabi extension of the Louvre opposed two types of cultural actors: the new managers, who think that anything goes as long as it brings prestige and money, and the traditional curators and art historians, who think that their first aim is to preserve the heritage from the aggressions of time but also from the demands of the market.

Pierre-Michel Menger, as we already know, has shown that the number of people engaging in cultural occupations has increased more quickly than the slots available in the sector (Menger 2002). Will the deepening crisis reverse this strong and long-term trend? The budget cuts affect the weakest actors in the field first: young people who make their debuts and have no established reputation, small theatres with scarce audience, and the most “experimental” parts of artistic life. But it can be the other way, too. Poor prospects in the overall job market can attract young people to an impoverished form of bohemia by allowing them to postpone confronting harsh realities. This depends of course on the possibilities of what will remain of the welfare state. Thus, two situations can coexist: the survival of the fittest, the talented, the connected, and so on and so forth and the “artistization” of the multitude. However, impoverishment of the sector can lead to aesthetic changes. Smaller budgets can lead to new forms of “poor art” and to seeking new forms of relationships with the public. New forms of justification are about to appear. Some forms of philistinism or cultural conservatism are already flourishing. They are not new in the landscape, of course. The National Endowment for Arts is characterized by a long history of protest against the public funding of “obscene” or pornographic art that has not prevented its success (Shockley 2011). The former president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, is famous for a statement he made at the end of a play at the Comédie Française: “One does not come to the Comédie Française to get bored.” This is common, but in a time of crisis, the conservative may become more vocal as the shortage of money seems to give more weight to cutting budgets for superfluous or elite endeavors. More generally, the new constraints on public choice will generate an awareness of the limited possibilities of public action in the cultural sector. This is particularly true when it comes to heritage policy. In the last few decades, we have witnessed what I call the “heritagization” (patrimonialization) of everything as identity claims and de-

hierarchizing of cultural values have made every single object, building, or now intangible items a potential candidate for local or worldly recognition.

Against a form of cultural pessimism that is likely to occur when one thinks of the dangers ahead, I would like to end with a more positive tone. Since the neoliberal turn, the deepest meanings of the idea of a cultural policy have been lost. Absurdly believing that a Bilbao Guggenheim could be easily planted in every declining seaport of the world and bring fame to the city was the most salient effect of the so-called cultural turn. The MUCEM (Museum of the Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean) in Marseilles is a case in point (Bias & Fabiani 2011). The controversies that have arisen in this city about the public funding of the Cultural Capital of Europe in 2013 are extremely interesting, because they show the structural contradictions of cultural policy: either allocating funds to local initiatives or contributing to city-branding. Again, these disputes are not new, and they accompanied the development of the Guggenheim in Bilbao, but the funding shortage will redefine the terms of the debate. Who can define the public interest in culture? Is culture equipped with emancipatory properties? How can they be reassessed in light of the current situation? How can a cultural public sphere be consolidated? I propose to put these questions on the new agenda of cultural policy makers.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this text was presented at the International Conference on Cultural Policy Research as a keynote address (Barcelona, July 2012)
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Florida's creative society (2002) is undoubtedly the most striking example of an ideological construct, with the dimension of a self-fulfilling prophecy. According to Florida, metropolitan regions with high concentrations of high-tech workers, artists, musicians, gay men, and "high bohemians", correlate with a higher level of economic development. The creative class is by such attractive: it has the power of fostering cultural and economic growth. Business is attracted by culture: the creative class is oriented towards openness and personal development. Attracting the members of the creative class is the surest way of securing continuous development.

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