

International Mobility: A Prerequisite for Intercultural Dialogue

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Today, on the world stage, “mobility” and “intercultural dialogue” are an everyday phenomenon. However, given the urgency of policy, both nations and local authorities (or coalitions and networks of either) will not regret taking the time to study these terms, for any confusion as to their meaning could have costly consequences. Collectively, these authorities approach future policies in different, even antagonistic ways, and each level of power will have to quickly express its choices and strategies.

“Mobility and dialogue, yes, but with what aim?” is a burning question that calls for some political observation.

To attempt to make this indispensable clarification, one should examine everything that may have contributed to bringing about change since the point when unequal colonial relations were formally eliminated, a point that we can establish more or less precisely as the 1960s, which witnessed simultaneously – and this is not a coincidence – the independence of African countries and the emergence of Europe.

Paradigm Shift

This continuum is still underway, but, apart from the fact that it is driven by the increasing importance of cooperation tools, today it is impelled by two paradigm shifts, two outcomes that directly affect the subject of this article:

1. Particularly in the Mediterranean, the notion of “intercultural dialogue” has essentially been driven by inter-ministerial relations, a “dialogue of Culture Ministries”, rather than by a dialogue be-

tween Cultures themselves, as a sort of continuation of the “diplomacy of influence,” even recently evoked by the preceding French Foreign Affairs Minister (cf. Bernard Kouchner’s scoping document on cultural diplomacy, September 2009: “Globalization is accompanied by heightened competition in all domains. The prosperity and security of our country, the promotion of our interests and our values require a strengthened capacity to project our language, our culture, our ideas, our vision of society and the world,” in *Réforme de la Politique Culturelle Extérieure*, 26 December 2009). Furthermore, such intercultural dialogue is essentially organized around inter-State cultural relations.

Naturally, all logistics aspects associated with this level of exchange, and in particular, the funding of cultural or artistic mobility, have been traditionally integrated in the related budget lines. The aim of cultural mobility was clearly associated with the showcasing national or local cultures and rarely understood as a development factor.

But after two decades, in a nearly mechanical manner and as an effect associated with the construction of the EU, the political impact of regional development funds is reinforcing a certain empowerment of local and regional authorities, establishing a gradual convergence of local authorities towards a sort of differentiated federalism where the local cultural identity, possibly reinforced by the need to consolidate an “attractiveness for tourism,” plays an essential role, both for better and for worse.

In addition, in the era of the globalisation of conflicts, paradox would have it that a certain number of tensions, often associated with causes of a cultural order, seem impossible to regulate by the sole will of national diplomacies.

“Neighbourly discussion” is often the only key to thorny, age-old conflicts.

We are thus witnessing a downside of sovereignty and the emergence of a regional or local diplomacy alongside national diplomacy.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that one of the framework documents for local cultural policies, Agenda 21 for Culture, was produced by the global network of local governance, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

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2. On the EU level, the Treaty of Lisbon, instituting competitiveness and creativity, has reinforced the missions and goals of local officials in the matter.

In the face of their constituency, no local policy-maker, whatever their political colours, would dare to claim that creativity and power of attraction are useless for the local societal model.

It follows that the common future of the inhabitants of these local areas cannot be imagined without high-skilled, creative individuals, which also explains the acceleration of the “transfer of interest for the artistic phenomenon” from the State to local authorities, which, we must recall, were already the main funders in many cases.

This trend has been inevitably accompanied by an international, or more precisely, “extra-local” positioning of local authorities, this power of attraction being obviously oriented towards the outside world. Combined with the indisputable “European Cultural Capital” effect (promoting the local level, of which no State would wish to deprive itself, although candidacies have followed one another with uneven success), said

transfer of interest and goals would be consolidated through a certain number of international treaties such as the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (CCD, 2005), which also insists on the territorial dimension of Culture, as well as on its contribution to local development, or the Lisbon Treaty, which emphasizes the need, induced by competitiveness, for alliances among local authorities within the EU.

Like all international treaties, the latter two engagements are intended to be binding, and even if we can doubt whether they would be enforced, they are still wholly unambiguous symbols of engagement. Local authorities know this just as well as States.

What Has Happened over the Past Five Years in the Sphere of Mobility?

It is difficult to provide an exhaustive answer to this question, considering that the communication of the majority of mobility operators has been highly concentrated on the local area and their beneficiaries, without necessarily seeking global communication, and that it is difficult to know all the initiatives taken in this domain. It seems this level of purely factual information has not sufficiently nourished the fundamental debate emerging now.

Under the form of a colloquium, at the initiative of the Roberto Cimetta Fund with the support of the Institut Français, an important general meeting of mobility operators was held in Fez, Morocco, from 12 to 14 May 2006. It allowed the opportunity to set out several major shared principles, take stock of existing ones and present several foundational texts.

More recently, on 13 September 2010, on the initiative of the European Commission and the Roberto Cimetta Fund, the essential organisations concerned with the mobility of artists and operators, whether from Europe, Africa or the Arab World, met in Brussels under the form of an informal “think tank” to compare one another’s modes of operation, but above all to compare experiences underway and attempt to define common issues.¹

¹ The organisations invited were the following, all of them involved on one level or another with these issues: the Roberto Cimetta Fund, Gulbenkian Foundation, Safar Fund, European Cultural Foundation, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, Arts Move Africa, the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, Felix Meritis Foundation, Young Arab Theatre Fund, Arab Education Forum, TransEuropéennes and the Ford Foundation.

Without great difficulty, a definite convergence has emerged around several principles. Their evolution should be understood as a logical consequence of the paradigm shifts discussed above. These principles all tend not to restrict mobility to a simple trip, none of the above-mentioned organizations wishing to be relegated to the sole function of “specialized travel agency.”

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These principles can be divided into two categories: those that directly protect human rights; and those that act specifically on site.

- In the chapter on rights, “equitability” requires balanced relations between operators and artistes from the South and the North. However, it must be noted that coordinators of cultural partnerships are all too rarely from the South, which means that the majority of projects are steered and therefore invariably influenced by operators from the North, even though they may demonstrate the best will. This is an unflinching indicator that, although it does immediately point to a real need in training and structuring, it also brings into question the legitimacy of a “Nordic criterization” in the face of a possibly different project culture in the South.
- By the same token, the importance of cultural mobility as a factor of peace, emissary of cultural diversity and facilitator of dialogue has been pointed out repeatedly by professionals in the sector, but does not seem to be perceived as yet in an operational manner by policymakers. They are yet to be convinced of the importance of the cultural phenomenon both in emergence and in conflict resolution.

- Finally, understanding hospitality as a shared investment rather than a charitable act is an idea difficult to grasp due to our traditional morals, both in the South and the North, and it is not surprising that this conservatism remains ignorant of the potential benefits that could be obtained from reciprocal visits. There is, however, apart from real economies of scale, the embryo of mutual respect, much more important than the flitting compassion generated by the media. Hospitality is a window of knowledge, an enrichment.
Turning these principles into concrete action in the field obliges the experts providing travel grants to comply with three conditions:
- The first most certainly concerns the imperative need to structure teams and territories. The beneficiary is no longer taking a one-way trip. Until very recently, the aim consisted in locating and attracting the best artistes in the South and relocating them to European terrain, where their creativity served the image interests of our leaders, or the material interests of our cultural enterprises. This *modus operandi*, which, after the different countries had won their independence, gradually took the place of real cooperation, emptied these countries of their “creative raw material,” impoverishing them as surely as the pillage of their physical resources, and, it must be said, often with the complicity of the political elite of those countries.

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A mobility grant can only be justified by the structuring effect that the recipients will bring to their countries of origin. The paradox of such a trip is that its benefits are measured more upon return of the traveller than during the trip.

- This need for structuring naturally implies a principle of returns on investment. One can thus consider the travel grant as a down payment, an instance of collective “risk-taking” as-

sumed by the financiers of the mobility funds whose objective is to work towards the emergence of international artistic collaboration. In this regard, it could be useful to attempt to quantify the “investment/benefits” ratio of such aid. For many artists and operators, an airline ticket can represent several months’ wages, but its cost remains an extremely good investment in view of the chain of benefits it can generate. We then move from the vision of individual benefit to that of a collective dynamic. It is always wise to put into perspective the amount of the travel grant and the amount of its expected economic benefits. In any case, it is a comparison of figures that cannot leave the experts concerned indifferent.

- Expecting benefits amounts to considering the time factor. Each trip occurs within a long term, within the continuum of development action. The experts in charge of the selection will no doubt be sensitive to this factor. Yet the sustainability and structuring of teams and territories cannot be combined or conceived without a project for a societal model. The individual journey should lead to reflection on the beneficiary’s position in the collective space, and should be understood as a privileged moment of political awareness. Conversely, the community must accept this individual perspective, made exterior by the journey, and accept the reform that could arise therefrom.

Conclusions

Let us conclude with this project for a societal model. Predicting the time frame also means broadening the debate. In the South Mediterranean, 70% of the population is less than twenty years old. When all of these generations are old enough to travel, thousands of artists and operators will assert their right to travel the world. Will we have to create an enormous international mobility fund to meet their legitimate claim? Or, on the contrary, will the principles of democracy have they given rise to real local cultural policies, developed in collaboration with citizens in order to meet their needs?

Will this societal model have the necessary linkage of biodiversity / cultural diversity / democratic pluralism built into its DNA? Will it have acknowledged the essential role of culture as a developer, peacemaker and liberator?

If the answer is yes, international mobility funds will become useless, for it will be the local authorities that will invent, adapt and control all expenses relevant to the local community, including investment in the mobility of its brightest minds, perceived as a shared process of enrichment.

If the answer is no, pressure and injustice will be so great that mobility will have given way to exodus with no return, administrative travel, ghettos and conflict. The issue is moving away from global competition between nations and it is the ensemble of local political decisions on a project for society that will definitively address mobility hopes.