

CULTURE AND THE „DEPLORABLES”

Reconstruction of the talk given by Péter Inkei at the course on ‘Cultural policies in Europe in the face of integration challenges: citizen participation, active citizenship, and European identity’, organised by the European Academy of Yuste Foundation on 5-7 October, 2016.

At one point during the presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton suggested that half of Donald Trump’s supporters belonged in “a basket of deplorables” which she described as consisting of “the racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic – you name it.”

Clinton later apologised, but the remark was nevertheless not without foundation. Whether such “deplorables” are really half in the Trump camp or not, they have indeed reached a critical mass across the world. People who loathe too many alternatives, despise negotiated compromises; who favour clear, simple truisms instead. They are the fuel for populism, for illiberal, intolerant, simplistic theories in political power game; for nationalist and other kinds of collective egoism.

Were they born to be, or socialised early to be “deplorable”? No. Most of them are average citizens. Part of the silent majority. The masses. Working class and lower middle class. Their discontent is mostly latent but our era facilitates its conversion into manifest forms. We live in a crisis of values, former beliefs are shaken: progress, socialism, democracy, Europe, religion, venerated authorities. Hierarchic paternalism gave way to horizontal “distributed” structures. An age of risk societies, weakening frameworks.

A shift to the right? Not necessarily. A shift to the extremes with shades of left and right alike. “We are a small country, have only one set of mob” – went the saying in post-war Budapest, at the sight of the same people marching under Stalin’s portraits who used to be Nazi thugs months earlier.

A cohesive social class? A communion that can offer security, feeling of belonging, and collective self-leadership – gone with the wind. Some cohesion certainly persists, certain resentful pride (“Deplorable Me”) with a tacit agreement that half of Clinton’s supporters belong in a basket of detestables, consisting of the unpatriotic, migrant-lover, narcomaniac, pederastic, women’s libber, communist – you name it...

They are not *indignados* or occupiers, with focused aims; the deplorables are in a quest for focus to handle their discomfort.

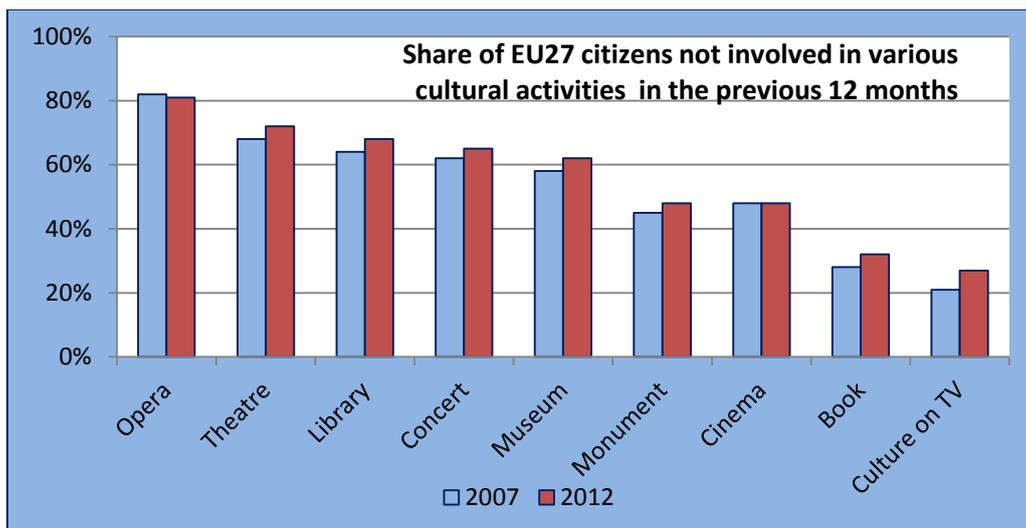
Displaced workers and those who perceive themselves as potentially displaced are the core, made disposable by globalisation, technological revolution and automation. Discontented, disestablished, vulnerable, socially deprived, insecure, precarious groups, losers of changes – frustrated underdogs.

These groups – labelled sometimes as “Forgotten People” – require special treatment in employment and social policies. Cultural policies, too, should be geared to their needs as well.

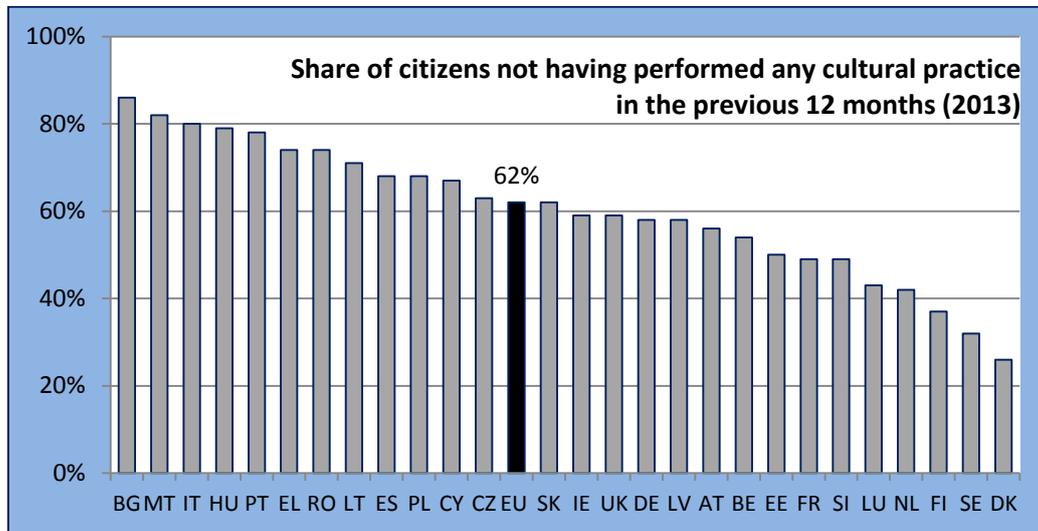
Cultural policies and the precarious

Many of the features that the “deplorables” share are “cultural”. They feel alienated from, and tired of the establishment, the established authorities; abhor intellectualism with too many nuances; liberalism where everything goes; political correctness where you must tolerate; democracy with complicated decision making and compromises; foreigners’ presence and influence. They argue for inherited merits (heritage!) as invested rights; they nurture the cult of force and myths; national rivalry instead of trans-border cooperation and shared identity.

Are they outside of culture; non consumers? Partly probably yes, although we have no precise knowledge about the cultural habits of the core supporters of populist politicians. European statistics present those who are left out by branches only and mainly by national or EU-level aggregations. Here is an example from Special Eurobarometer 399. (To explain, see the middle of the graph: in 2012 62% of interviewed European citizens admitted not having been to a museum in the preceding year – 4% more than in 2007.)

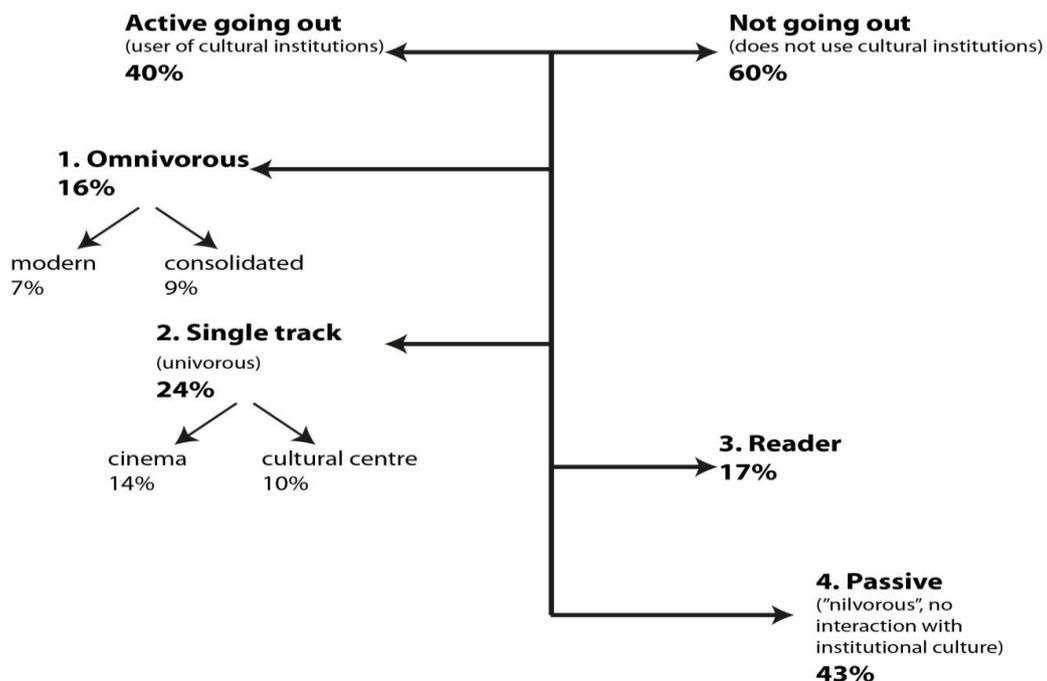


There is no combined figure about absenteeism from all these forms of cultural attendance; what we have from the same source is the lack of performing active cultural practice in the preceding year.



The graph shows that 62% of surveyed Europeans had not played music, acted on a stage, written a poem, painted a picture etc. in the past year (revealing enormous diversity between countries).

We have one piece of evidence from an earlier national survey (Hungary, 2003¹) about those who have not been involved in any sort of conventional cultural activity even as “consumers”:



¹ Hunyadi, Zsuzsa: *Kulturálódási és szabadidő eltöltési szokások, életmód csoportok*, 2005, Budapest: Magyar Művelődési Intézet

Are typical deplorables “nilvorous”? Do the population clusters in other countries that correspond to the 43% in Hungary contain the discontented?

As we guessed above, partly yes. We are aware, however, about great many leading artists (not just artistic celebrities) who are devoted fans of populist leaders. Concerts, theatre pieces, festivals etc. are organised under the spell of national, ethnic and religious intolerance, attracting large audiences, including animated deplorables. To identify them with cultural pariahs would be a mistake.

Also most of those, who remain indeed outside the remit of conventional cultural policies, massively consume commercial culture, seeking beauty, excitement and catharsis: physiological, not moral or intellectual. They tend to prefer comfortable effects, familiar canons, demanding limited efforts.

Culture’s role

Can culture prevent ordinary groups from sliding into the basket of deplorables? Should this be an explicit objective?

The question implies a value statement that needs no further explanation.

And it also implies *instrumentalisation* of culture. Which must be taken aboard. On the one hand, we fully acknowledge the innate, intrinsic value of culture in human life. Every effort is worthwhile that aims to share this value with every citizen, without any second thought. But on the other hand, in this context, we presuppose a set of societal goals (e.g. common European values), and expect culture to be instrumental about their prevalence. For the individual, culture is a value in itself, while for the society, culture may serve causes, in this case that of democracy.

The traditional thesis holds that the more citizens are involved in culture the better the society becomes. With the improvement of access to culture regressive forces can be checked and limited. The classical policy response is *democratisation of culture*.

Dissemination, culture for all, audience development, reaching out; cultural evangelisation.

Democratisation of culture has nevertheless limits and pitfalls. Its effectiveness decreases beyond a point, arriving at those people who resist due to age, status, mindset, location etc. – in fact some of the very core of the deplorables. Also reservations arise about implanting upper class values (something like what Pope Francis called “ideological colonisation” the other day). Furthermore, democratisation endeavours may appear as marketing activity in the interest of the sector. Finally, there is no clear evidence that improved access and increased “consumption” counters harmful populism. Some negative experiences of the ex-communist countries – which have respectable records in cultural democratisation – may prove the opposite.

Cultural democracy

Cultural democracy is one answer. Besides and instead of top-down dissemination of culture (performing arts, literature, films etc.) attempts to use culture for communicating with citizens, enhancing communities, building trust, enabling representation and self-management, increasing confidence and pride. Cultural democracy requires special skills from its facilitators, acting with empathy and patience.

Beware! What is listed here is tools. The content is vital. The same tools and skills are applied for spreading evil ideas and recruiting for evil causes. Here, we have in mind cultural policies and operators that wonder about culture’s potential in curbing the conversion of discontent into regressive forces.

The success of cultural democracy calls for familiarity with the target population. Some features of the social groups that are prone to falling into the “basket of deplorables” are shared across Europe: precarious socio-economic status, limited foreign language competences, mobility limited to existential basics (jobs).

Feelings of security, comfort and self-assurance being in deficit, those areas need to be best addressed. Enhancing pride and consciousness about identity, building trust and cohesion on various levels are in focus; activities that promote self-expression and co-operation.

Beyond such general traits cultural democracy facilitators explore the specificities of the communities to work with: their concerns, past experiences, own cultural habits, prides and aspirations. Individuals who never enter a cultural institution often excel in skills that qualify as culture in their own terms. And if not, those skills can be developed. These range from telling stories, doing acrobatic tricks, knitting and quilting, designing make-up, concocting innovative dishes, to social gifts like organising fan groups, cheering and comforting peers and other knacks of spontaneous leadership.

Cultural democracy agents are driven by missionary zeal (to promote good causes), but also by the recognised constraint of breaking up 19th-20th c. structures in case of museums, theatres, libraries etc. The boundaries between aims and tools of democratisation (audience development to expand the reach of culture) and of cultural democracy are blurred, which is not a problem so long as conscious attention is dedicated also to the latter.

Operators and institutions have lately developed a large arsenal of cultural democracy tools. Without a systematic survey presenting a list would be misleading. Actions to involve and activate citizens (especially children and the youth) occupy a broad scale that range from amateur art to classroom theatre, and from story telling to community animation.

The phenomenon of *socio-culture* must be highlighted in this connection. These are professionals and institutions that do not “reach out” next to their fundamental cultural pursuit (heritage, performing arts etc.) but where working in and with the community is the core of their activities. Houses of culture, local cultural centres and the animators that work in them are par excellence actors in socio-culture. There are tens of thousands of them across Europe, sidetracked or fully absent in cultural policies – true Cinderellas².

Three-tier policies

Emphasising cultural democracy is tantamount to advocating for *three-tier culture policies* on every level, be it a municipality, a region, a country – and of course the European Union itself.

One (on top) is to enhance cultural excellence. *Two* is democratisation, the dissemination of culture, the improvement of access. *Three* is a focus on cultural democracy, acting in and with communities.

The three layers are not in conflict with other dimensions, that go along the axes of cultural heritage – contemporary innovation in culture, domestic culture – transborder cooperation, conventional culture – creative industries etc., which can all fit to the three-tier approach.

Contexts matter

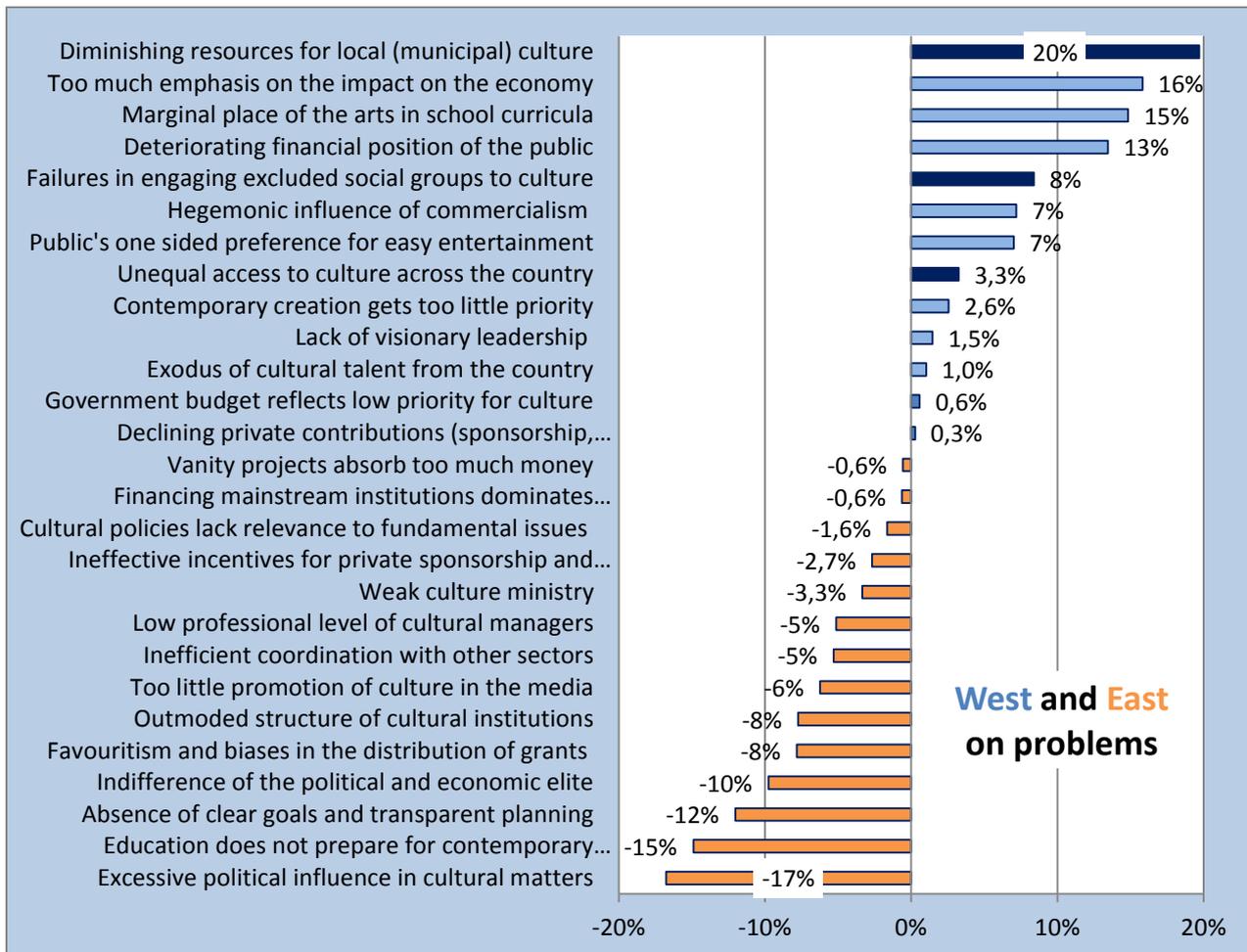
Explicit reference to the enhancement of cultural democracy – the third layer – is by far not generally present in official culture policies and strategies. The contexts, in which the aims of using culture to counter the advances of undemocratic forces are defined, can vary from country to country, or city to city. In some places such efforts are part of the official policies, or realising such actions does not go against the prevailing power. If, however, illiberal populism has the upper hand, partisans of common European values have a more difficult case. They need help from “normal” corners of Europe.

Obviously, cultural policies and professionals in the sector are not enough to achieve lasting impact. Culture can only complement other factors, most importantly education and media; models and values communicated by them. Measures complement one another if the prevailing models suggest progressive values.

The cultural policy barometer carried out by the Budapest Observatory suggests that in western countries chances are better. Western experts participating in the survey attributed greater importance to all three socially laden (“ideological”) items among the 27 aspects in the barometer than their colleagues in the post-communist countries: they care more about equality of access, the involvement of excluded groups and the support to local culture. It is at this last issue where attitudes diverge the widest between east and west³.

² See <http://www.budobs.org/files/socioculture.pdf>

³ See <http://www.budobs.org/files/concisereport15.pdf>



In conclusion

In the past ten-twenty years large societal segments have turned receptive to ideas that go against the principles contained for example in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. These groups appear “deplorable” in the eyes of the defenders of democratic values. Unless the objective causes of discontent make such attempts entirely hopeless, culture can be instrumental in turning the tide. By improving access, culture may help individuals redress balance in their lives. More proactive interventions of cultural democracy can help to safeguard democratic values or re-conquer them. This requires civic action as well as policies that – besides nurturing excellence and disseminating culture – explicitly care about cultural democracy, policies that support cultural interaction with the displaced and precarious groups of society.

(An end note: The titles of the twelve refugee integration culture projects awarded in the frame of the Creative Europe call, disclosed after the course in Yuste, suggest a representative set of cultural democracy actions.)