

Dear participants of the conference,

Thank you for inviting me to this conference.

Culture, as a field, is a dynamic one – full of confrontations and negotiations, Not unexpectedly: Within it, a particular kind of power is at stake, namely “the power to define, to give meaning to things” (Hall 1982).

Who gives meaning to things today? It takes only a quick overview of the current horizon of actors around us to note who are the “global giants” of the field. Google, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft, Netflix etc., are visible and recognizable from every point of the globe. They are culture industries, mechanisms that generate meaning. They are decisive both in the public and in the private space.

The ascent of such cultural giants had been announced before the turn of the century. Scholars and intellectuals who cultivated the “cultural turn” had already described the situation that was under formation. It was difficult, though, at the time, to grasp the scale of the upcoming change.

Because, if we admit a new transformation (to use Polanyi’s term for the transformation of the West) that has taken place in the recent decades, this is one that has affected, literally one that has caused a shift to the axis of cultural attitudes and habits and, therefore, politics and economy.

Today, we ought to think of the Gramscian term “cultural hegemony” not at a national, but at a supra-national level. This is the scale on which it is accomplished. By saying supra-national I mean it both in terms of globalisation, and of infiltration: at every laptop screen and in every consciousness, without the mediation of the national state and what it represents as national culture, national education ctr.

Allow me now to make some observations from the position of the Minister of Culture of a Left government, following an extended crisis in Greece.

What did we come to realize during this crisis?

The crisis, besides all the measures of austerity, has caused a moralistic discourse of societal control, a discourse of blaming and self-blaming. It's main goal was to challenge the notions and values that had been established in the citizenry of Greece after the Fall of Dictatorship in 1974. In this context, transition to democracy and the culture it produced, was blamed for the crisis. The new discourse that emerged focused on the survival of the fittest and the excellent. This neo-Darwinian and neo-liberal attitude became the canon in economic and social policy. It was normalized into the compass of the "desired" social, economic and political reformations. This policy was realized by the Troika, which represented the European institutions and the lenders and by the Greek governments until 2015. The popular response to this implied rule, was on the one hand the extensive occupy movement of 2011-12, and on the other the rise of fascism (Golden Dawn). At the same time, the crisis caused a huge movement of solidarity and a cultural spring with small arts groups, creative initiatives, solidarity networks etc. The extensive anger of the society had transformed to both directions, the first in cultural creativity and to the old and new social movements, the second to the rise of the extreme Right, nationalism and racism.

What, then, must we do now? How to proceed? What to do?

The politics of austerity have caused the shrinking of the personnel of the cultural organizations and the shortage of resources since 2010. Thus, private cultural institutions based on huge resources by leading ship-owners, covered the gap and emerged as powerful new players in the field of cultural policy.

What is at stake here is the formation of cultural subjectivities, of cultural citizenship and youth's attitudes on their life and choices, visions and expectations.

In this framework, the main concept upon which the Ministry of Culture has focused and developed its policy is that of **cultural democracy**. This is a fundamental term of reference, closely connected to political democracy. Democracy cannot develop in the restricted and narrow framework of political representation. Without cultural meanings, political life remains out of the prospect of people's lives and experience, and therefore distant and indifferent to citizens. It is received, so to say, as a "parallel reality". The new social movements have brought to light precisely this distance, this cultural asymmetry, which duplicates social inequalities with cultural discriminations. This articulation of cultural asymmetry and social inequality is what is at stake and this is what we aim to address with our policy.

We have an active intervention in what regards the audience of cultural events and institutions, not only to include gender, racial, religious, sexual and any other form of discriminated communities, but we have oriented our intervention to the **non-audience**, to those which are absent, without possibilities to participate to the cultural life.

We are concerned from the fact that young people, at least some of them, adopt xenophobic and nationalistic attitudes. How to intervene?

What worries me is the chronic lack of engagement with similar phenomena and the lack of intervention not just by the state but by academic community. Whether it has to do with sexism, with bullying in the school communities, with violence in the sports stadiums or with xenophobic, racist and nationalistic attitudes, we have researches and analyses, but not strategies of response, not suggestions for alliances, not connection between our cultural strategies and the big mass living in their problems of material and cultural austerity.

Some years ago, in a big neighborhood of Athens, with a dense concentration of immigrants from Asia and Africa, and an intense and violent racist campaign, one of the most prestigious cultural institutions of Athens organized a concert of classic music, inside a church of this neighborhood as an event of protest. People coming from the middle class neighborhoods of Athens, came, attended the

concert, and then left after the end. The neighborhood was left intact, exactly in the same position it was before.

Is this the cultural intervention we need?

On the other hand, not far from this place, in a similar neighborhood divided between immigrants and fascists, a center for children was organized, with the participation of parents, both immigrants and natives, mainly from the lower economic classes, poor. After some time, the fascists disappeared, because this grass roots activity deprived them from the opportunity to mobilize the poor Greeks against the poor immigrants. The cultural activity of the centre, day by day, for years, have been able to infiltrate this part of the city, enriching the leisure time of the people with cultural events.

We need cultural policies with powerful and swift reflexes for dealing with such phenomena, we need a peripheral organization of culture with solid grassroots support. This is what we are working on now and we will soon make available with legislative interventions.

I wish you success of the conference and we are awaiting your suggestions for the needed debate on cultural democracy.

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