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HOW WILL WE LIVE TOGETHER?
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“Making Connections: Culture and Social Cohesion in the New Millennium”
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Introduction

The link between culture and social cohesion may be amongst the most challenging issues we will face in the 21st century. One of the greatest demands which will be placed upon us will be to find ways for people to live together on a planet growing more and more crowded by population growth, while shrinking because of cheaper travel. Intermingling of diverse cultures will be the norm, and culture may hold the key to finding an accommodation within all this diversity.

To see why this may be so, it is important to understand what culture is. UNESCO's definition of culture as "ways of living together"¹ is perhaps overly telegraphic and has been criticized by some as being too broad to be useful. On the other hand, culture in some circles is defined as the arts (and, by some, only as the so-called "high arts"), a definition which is far too narrow. The Standing Committee on Communications and Culture of the Canadian Parliament tries to find a middle ground by defining culture as "... a way of being, thinking and feeling. As a driving force in society it unites individuals by language, custom, habit and experience. ... For our purposes, cultural activities are the creative elements of our existence – expressions of who we are, where we come from, and where wish to go."² Taken together, this range of definitions suggests that culture is a set of tools to help us make sense of the world and relate to each other, and to define us to each other. The definitions also suggest that there is a creative and dynamic dimension to culture, which may have its most rarified expression as the "high arts", but which is more generally our source of experimentation, innovation, insight and understanding. Therefore, when we talk of culture as ways of living together, we are talking about the tools of culture as we use them day to day. When we talk of the arts, we are talking about the same tools but this time as we try to adapt them for new uses or for changed contexts. All "ways of living together" require and involve a degree of creativity and artistic expression ("high" and otherwise) and all our appreciations of "the arts" inform our ways of living together are. There is therefore no contradiction between these various definitions.

From this perspective, there are three ways in which culture holds the key to diversity. First, **culture is a way of building social trust and social capital**. Societies need social trust to prosper, and this will be especially critical in the increasingly anonymous and atomized world of the 21st century. Second, **culture is a venue for democratic inclusiveness and civic participation**. In an increasingly open society, with free flows of people, mechanisms for inclusion will become an imperative. Finally, **culture is a laboratory to experiment with social innovation and to test new symbolic resources**. Let us examine each of these in turn.

Culture as a means of building social capital

If economic capital is the tools and equipment needed to turn raw materials into consumable goods, then social capital is the institutional arrangements, and socially determined roles, and

¹ Javier Pérez de Cuéllar et al., *Our Creative Diversity - Summary Version (Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development)*, (Paris, July 1996), p.14.

² There are as many definitions of culture as there are publications on the subject. This definition is taken from the Report of the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, *The Ties That Bind*, (Ottawa, April 1992), p. 2. The definition is useful inasmuch its broad, anthropological statements are qualified by focussing on creative expression as the means of communicating distinctive values, languages, customs, experiences, etc.

behaviours needed to turn human energy into productive relationships. Robert Putnam³ has made a distinction between “bonding” social capital which reinforces between people who are similar to each other, leading to a society made up of small, exclusive tribes; and “bridging” social capital, which forges connections between people who are not like each other, leading to large, inclusive societies. Both kinds of social capital have been shown to be linked to improved health, greater personal well-being, better care for children, lower crime and improved government.⁴ Commentators sometimes have a tendency to equate “bridging” with “good” social capital and “bonding” with “bad” social capital, but the relationship is not as simple as that. As Putnam himself points out, when you are ill, the people who bring you chicken soup are those with whom you have formed the bonding kind of social capital. Connections tend to be very strong within bonded groups. The important thing about bridging capital is that the ties are weaker, but turn out to be of greater utility for the collectivity, as opposed to the individual. We may turn to people with whom we have weak ties for personal benefits, such as tips on where to find a job, but these weak ties are primarily useful for the collective “buy-in” that they promote among individuals. If a person is involved in the school council or coaching a soccer team or singing in a choir, he or she is promoting the welfare of the school or the well-being of the children or the vitality of outlets for creativity within the community. As a result, everyone in the community benefits.

Francis Fukuyama, in his widely read book *Trust*⁵, studied eight countries, four characterised by bonding capital and four characterised by bridging capital. The “bridging capital” societies achieved consistently higher levels of economic prosperity. Douglass North⁶, in a seminal book on economic development and institutions, makes a similar point, but includes social development as an additional benefit of this type of social capital.

Fukuyama tells us, however, that this bridging capital is not, as we might expect in a modern, inclusive, society made up entirely of systematic, rational, efficiency-oriented, objective institutions like contract law and trade protocols. These institutions can work because they are underpinned by subjective, tradition-rich, value-laden institutional structures, the ones that sustain sociability, that actually carry the trust. He concludes that

Modern institutions are a necessary but not sufficient condition for modern prosperity and the social well-being that it undergirds; they have to be combined with certain traditional social and ethical habits if they are to work properly (Fukuyama, p. 11).

What role does culture play in all this? If we define culture the creative elements of our existence – expressions of who we are, where we come from, and where wish to go, then culture is the very thing which stores and carries those subjective, tradition-rich, value-laden institutional structures that undergird the sources of our well-being. Culture is how we transmit those trust bearing structures to one another and to future generations. Our cultural artifacts – the languages, literary works, films, music, parks and heritage sites, museums, and historical accounts – are the blueprints or templates of those structures.

³ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*. (New York, 2000).

⁴ OECD, *The Well-Being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital*, (Paris, 2001).

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, (New York, 1995).

⁶ Douglass C. North, 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. (New York, 1990).

It is important to emphasize that contemporary cultural expression always arises out of the collective memory. Collective memory is, in turn, embedded in communities and is an articulation of the values and ideals which anchor both imagination and the social framework from which cultural expression arises. One of our leading Canadian intellectuals, John Ralston Saul, said in a recent speech⁷

The past— memory— is one of the most powerful, practical tools available to a civilized democracy... Without memory, we are a society suffering from advanced Alzheimer's.

Ralston Saul's key point was that the Canadian tradition of "moderate conduct" and of compromise (which in Canada is not defined as "trade-offs", but as moderation in the light of the basic principles of democracy) is not an historical accident. It is the result of 200 years of a tradition of "finding ways of living together". This is not to say that we have not had failures, but rather that we try to find a way to learn from them and to ensure that we are not one of those societies that is destroyed by what Ralston Saul calls "the accumulated weight of their self-inflicted wounds". When we attempt to preserve our culture and to share it with others, we are not only expressing who we are, but also how we live together. Therefore, by promoting our culture and our heritage, we are maintaining a strategic resource every bit as important as any nuclear arsenal or oil reserve.

Culture as a venue for democratic inclusiveness and civic participation

Democratic inclusiveness is fundamental to participation in a society, since the excluded can not be equal in any real sense of the term. Lourdes Arizpe, the Chair of the scientific committee of UNESCO's World Culture Report, made this point when she said that⁸:

The global cultural commons must be explored, mapped and furnished with global standards. It is crucial that cultural heritage be thought of as an historical process to which many individuals and cultures have always, and will always, contribute. And the increasingly inescapable multiculturalism of the village—the consumers and publics for cultural heritage—must change perceptions, so pride in cultural heritage may be shared by more people across cultural differences (p. 37)

That is not always easy to do. Robert Putnam⁹, examining social cohesion in the United States, has found that practically every indicator of civic participation is in decline. Attendance at public meetings and serving as an officer in a voluntary group have declined by 50% over the past 50 years. Church attendance has declined by 25% between 1975 and 1995. Even measures of social connectedness, such as playing cards and having friends over for dinner have declined dramatically in the past 25 years (by 65% in the latter case).

We lack the empirical evidence in Canada to examine whether the same trends are taking place here. However, while we have not seen the types of declines in volunteering, giving and participation as in the United States, there are signs that much of the volunteering activity is accounted for by a "civic core". Only 28% of Canadians provide 83% of total volunteer hours,

⁷ John Ralston Saul, "How Will We Make Canada Ours Again?" , *The Baldwin-Fontaine Lecture*, March 23, 2000.

⁸ Lourdes Arizpe, "Cultural Heritage and Globalization" in *Values and Heritage Conservation*, (Los Angeles, 2000).

⁹ Robert Putnam, *op. cit.*

77% of all donations to charity, and 69% of all civic participation¹⁰.

This is where culture comes in. People find attendance at a public meeting a chore, particularly if, like most urban workers, they spend a great deal of their time in meetings. They will often, however, participate in arts and cultural activities, such as choirs, bands, amateur theatre, book clubs and historical societies because they are recreational and not a chore. Culture is more fun. And it is the most fun when you participate. There is a reason why culture is closely associated with entertainment. Cultural consumption and participation also have a way of opening minds. When people are engaged in these activities, even passively, they are most open to the “other” and most receptive to trust building messages.

In one of his most famous studies¹¹, Robert Putnam found that the strength and responsiveness of Italian regional governments correlated positively with the number of choral societies per capita in those regions. He included more than just choral societies in his correlations, of course, but his choice of the choral society as his sound bite was not accidental.

Studies conducted in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom suggest that youth participation in non-school arts programs leads to increased academic and civic achievements¹². This Round Table features workshops on cultural participation, participation and the formation of young minds, and culture and civil society. Study of these kinds of subjects will lead to a better understanding of the use of culture as a tool for building inclusiveness.

But beyond the seductive ability of culture to draw us unwittingly into greater civic participation and inclusion, there is yet another reason culture will be important to us in the 21st century, perhaps the most important. Culture is a laboratory in which to experiment with social innovation and to test new symbolic resources.

Culture as a laboratory to experiment with social innovation and to test new symbolic resources

Most of the really powerful ideas that have shaped our societies over the past two millennia have begun in the minds of artists and thinkers—the philosophy of Plato and Rousseau, the plays of Shakespeare and Molière, the art of Michaelangelo and Picasso, the music of Mozart and Stravinsky, the dance of Nijinsky and Graham. Even when these creators only reflect back what they saw in their societies, like Shakespeare holding a mirror up to nature, they still transformed our ways of seeing things and understanding ourselves and our relationships with others. In other words, they were providing us with new symbolic resources to make sense of

¹⁰ Paul Reed, and Kevin Selbee, “Patterns of Citizen Participation and the Civic Core in Canada” presentation given at the Social Cohesion Workshop, *What Will Hold Us Together?*, (Hull, March 1, 2000).

¹¹ Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, (New Jersey, 1993).

¹² See for example S.B. Heath and E. Soep, “Youth Development and the Arts in Non-School Hours” in *Grant Makers and the Arts*, Spring 1998

_____ (1999) “Big hArt throws youth a lifeline” *Smarts*, Issue 17, March 1999.

_____ “Big hArt”, *Youth Studies Australia*, Vol 16, No. 4

our world, in Peter Golding's felicitous phrase¹³. If culture is not creative and new symbolic resources are not incorporated into the social fabric, society becomes sterile and suffocating. We then develop the social Alzheimer's that John Ralston Saul spoke about.

And you cannot import it all. Some culture has to be home grown or the imports, however valuable, will not make any sense. In Canada, this is a continuing challenge, as Canadian television programs account for only about 38% of all TV programming, Canadian films occupy only about 5% of movie theatre screen time, Canadian music hold only about 13% of the domestic market for Canadian sound recordings and Canadian published material (books and magazines) have approximately a 30% share of the domestic market.¹⁴ New symbolic resources may come from anywhere on earth, but they cannot have a transformative effect if they remain outside the experience of the society.

In Canada, we have an example that shows very clearly the power of art to transform a society. In the late 1940's, a group of Quebec artists and academics, straining against the creative restrictions of a traditional and closed-minded society, published a manifesto entitled "Le Refus global", rejecting the academicism of the art establishment and launching a call for greater freedom of expression. Their active striving, both through their art and through their very public manifesto, for greater freedom to express themselves and to reflect the changing world around them was part of the process that began to precipitate change in their society. About a decade later, Quebec began what has come to be known as the "Quiet Revolution", a period when Quebec transformed itself from a traditional, agrarian and religiously conservative society into a modern and dynamic one. Activism by cultural practitioners did not accomplish this transformation alone, but it sowed the seeds, and the ferment in civil society which it helped to engender profoundly changed Quebec society.

Conclusion

All societies need the symbolic resources which only culture produces. We need those strategic resources to make sense of our lives and to enable us to connect with one another and form productive collaborations.

Cultural research, the productive collaboration featured in this Round Table, can tell us a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of our connections, about our social cohesion. We intuitively know that culture plays a key role in the dynamism and the cohesion of societies. However, more research and analysis is needed on the correlations between culture and connections, and on the cultural institutions and mechanisms that promote trust, social capital, democratic inclusiveness, participation and innovation in Canadian society. This evaluation will help us to formulate better policies, and equip us to face the challenges of the 21st century.

¹³ Peter Golding, Keynote address given at the conference *Citizens at the Crossroads*, (London, Ontario, October 1999).

¹⁴ Department of Canadian Heritage, *Culture and Heritage - Making Room for Canada's Voices*, (Ottawa, 1998).

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