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Commentary

European Cultural Policy: void or vision?

Geoffrey Brown, EUCLID

This comprehensive analysis raises some very interesting dichotomies, and provides a certain amount of 'good' and 'bad' news. The good news is that lots of money from various European Union (EU) sources has made its way to arts and cultural projects and activities in the UK over the past 10 years. The bad news is that this funding is not only being allocated, in many cases, in a policy vacuum but that large amounts of funding are being allocated to capital projects that are likely to suffer in the future – along with many lottery funded projects – from a lack of commitment to revenue funding which would enable them to survive and prosper.

In a sense, the funding of projects in a policy vacuum is the more interesting of these issues. This is partly because the issue of inadequate attention to future revenue needs is becoming a well argued case (even if it is not always argued successfully). But it is also the case that that vacuum results from a lack of policy context (or, at the very least, the lack of an appropriate policy context) across a range of bodies and levels. This includes the EU as well as from the various parties in the UK with influence (or potential influence) on the allocation of EU funding.

An issue linked to this apparent 'policy vacuum' is the evident lack of communication between those involved in the cultural sector in areas such as research and evaluation, policy making and resource allocation. This absence is, of course, not simply a challenge for the European situation – the goal of finding mechanisms to improve the communication between these spheres is now on the agenda of a UNESCO sponsored meeting to be held in Hanover in September 2000. As Graeme Evans and Jo Foord's chapter makes clear, there is a need to improve communications not only

'horizontally' between these spheres but also 'vertically' amongst those working at the pan-national, national, regional and local levels. In one sense, the allocation of cultural funds from the EU is one of the more spectacular examples of significant funds being allocated with little or no communication evident between the various parties.

There seems to be something endemic about the mentality of many of those working within the European Commission (EC) in that they only focus on their own particular areas of responsibility, and ignore anything that might potentially 'contaminate' their goals. While one would like to think this is due to a commitment to giving one's all to one's area of responsibility, it often feels that it is actually the siege mentality in full swing. The response of the EC's Culture Unit (hereafter referred to as 'ECCU' for the sake of brevity) to the existence of significant funds going to cultural projects from EC sources other than ECCU seems to be to raise the drawbridge rather than to attempt to build bridges between the various parties for the potential benefits that might accrue. This not only applies to the EU in terms of developing stronger and more coherent policy, but also to the arts and cultural sector itself across Europe.

There are two recent examples that provide depressing evidence of this: in 1999, the Connect funding programme was launched as a pilot by the EU. This was the first real effort by the EU since the Arts and Education Training Initiative in the mid-1990s to offer an integrated programme for arts and education projects. At the time, education and culture were still managed by separate directorates-general (DG XXII and DG X, respectively). And, although there were in fact two separate funds for Connect, and slightly different criteria, and one could apply to either the DG XXII pot or the DG X

pot, Connect was seen as a huge step forward in that it provided cooperation between DGs, a joint approach to two key themes, etc. Later in 1999, as part of the restructuring of the EC following the Prodi presidency, two of the existing DGs merged – education and culture became one Directorate (known as the EAC Directorate). The logical next step, one would have thought, would be for Connect, as evidence of cooperation already established, to be formalised and integrated as a single ongoing programme under the EAC Directorate. In fact, Connect appears to have been scrapped and there are no plans to revive it.

The second example concerns the Cultural Contact Points (CCPs), a network comprising individual agencies in each Member State, financially supported by ECCU (with match funding from the Member State), with the responsibility to provide assistance and support to artists and cultural bodies in that Member State in respect of applications to the Culture 2000 programme. This sort of network is replicated across most transnational funding programmes. For instance, there are a range of appropriate bodies in each Member State designated as the 'contact point' for each specific EU funding programme. Most CCPs, recognising that arts and culture is receiving most of its funding from sources other than Culture 2000, have therefore developed additional services to make people aware of these other sources – information and advice on the Structural Funds, education programmes, etc. and their calls for applications, deadlines, etc. However, the CCPs have frequently been rapped over the knuckles by ECCU officials for providing this information and support, as it is technically 'outside the terms of their contract from the EC'. ECCU would, thus, appear content to limit the available knowledge and

awareness of EU funding for the cultural sector rather than capitalise on the efforts and enthusiasms of its own sub-contracted agencies to promote the breadth of opportunities available, technicalities notwithstanding.

Furthermore, it is extraordinary to note that, of the relatively vast amounts of funding going to arts and cultural projects from EU sources, probably less than 5 per cent is allocated by the only part of the EC (that is, ECCU) which is acting in the light of any EU-sponsored policy debates and agreements (limited as they may be) about actual cultural policy. Other transnational funds that may end up supporting cultural projects (for example, from education or environment or IT focused sources) make no reference to cultural policy in their guidelines or decision-making. Funding for cultural projects from the Structural Funds may well be guided by some cultural policy context, but this is likely to be locally or regionally focused rather than conceived in the light of national policy, and often even ad hoc (or at least 're-shaped' in the light of the Structural Funds being seen as a new source of 'cash for culture').

Interestingly, Graeme Evans and Jo Foord's chapter emphasises 'investment in and promotion of cultural tourism' as facilitating both the fostering of a common European cultural experience and the promotion of urban-based regional development. I wonder if this, perhaps, also over-congratulates the European policy-makers for acting within a policy context that no longer exists. It is depressing to note that previous specific cultural tourism initiatives from the Tourism DG (XXIII) of the EC have either ceased or have been put 'on ice' in recent years; and that the Council of Europe (with extremely limited resources) appears to be becoming the only body with any commitment to policy development

in this area. This is not to suggest that the Council of Europe does not have the commitment or the ability to take a leading role, but rather that it seems unfortunate for the EU to be playing no part at all in developments in this area.

There is little actual evidence of any of the EU's specific cultural funding programmes (as decided by the EC from Brussels) acknowledging the value of cultural tourism, although there is evidence of this from the local and regional level (where decisions on the allocation of most of the Structural Funds are made). Graeme and Jo's chapter suggests that the EU cultural budget sees 'promoting cultural tourism' as a key means of fulfilling the exchange of cultural experiences. While this may well be so in conversation with MEPs or officials, you have to look very long and hard to see this actually expressed in print. In fact, in the two calls for tender for Culture 2000 that have so far been issued (May 1999 and March 2000), for example, there is absolutely no reference whatsoever to 'cultural tourism' in the general objectives nor in the specific guidelines and criteria for projects.

The real emphasis on accessing Structural Funds for cultural projects (many of which had a tourism potential – rather than being primarily tourism projects that involve buildings that could function as venues for cultural and other activity) seems to have begun about five years ago. There appears to have been an (uncoordinated) pincer movement from a variety of players fed up with existing opportunities (or lack thereof): a combination of the pittances available from the EU transnational funds (for example, Kaleidoscope, Raphael, Ariane), and the lack of UK sources of major investment for imaginative cultural projects at the local or regional level. At the same time, there was both a growing awareness of the potential for

arts and culture to play a role in economic development, regeneration and employment, and a dawning awareness that strange things called 'Structural Funds' existed with pots of money attached, whose aim was to address issues of economic development, regeneration and employment.

In the early 1990s, a group of Merseyside based cultural workers, led by the cultural consultant Keith Hackett, made several trips to Brussels and persuaded the chiefs responsible for UK Structural Funds (in what was then DG XVI) that cultural projects should be included within the criteria for the new Merseyside Objective 1 funds. This led to some pressure from the EC for such criteria to be included in the Single Programming Document (SDP) for Merseyside, and thus to the funding of many cultural projects in the following five years (several of which are referred to in the chapter). There was effective local lobbying for similar criteria in the SPDs for many of the Objective 2 regions (notably in the East London and Lee Valley region). And the situation now is that most regional and local cultural agencies are well primed and heavily involved in endeavouring to influence the criteria for the new batch of SPDs for this round of Structural Funds. Interestingly, this latest round of Structural Funds has seen a diminution of the role of the EC in influencing the SPDs, and while it is to be hoped that all the local decision makers are now sufficiently apprised of the benefit of the cultural sector in economic development, regeneration and employment, to ensure that cultural projects have a sufficiently high profile, there is the possibility that a more enlightened EC (or at least, certain more enlightened officials in the Regional Policy Directorate) will be over-ruled by less enlightened local bureaucrats in the UK, who choose not to listen to

advice from better informed UK cultural advisory bodies and agencies.

Graeme and Jo's chapter expresses concern over the fact that the Structural Funds allow the decision-making process to 'bypass' national policies – thereby creating yet another example of the lack of any cohesive policy approach. Indeed, but it needs to be emphasised that in the early 90s, when Keith Hackett and his colleagues were storming the bastions of DG XVI in Brussels, there was no national policy for culture in the UK that addressed in any depth the issues of economic development, regeneration and employment. There was nothing to serve as a national 'beacon' for regional and local developments. There had been some books and research papers, but little of this had been translated to policy guidance or action at national, regional or local level. The DCMS's first *Creative Industries Mapping Document* came out in 1998. It is only very recently that such issues are actively becoming major themes within policy action plans, and existing resources are being re-allocated towards these goals. There is plenty of evidence that suggests that these arguments have yet to convince certain policy makers or those that have the power to influence cultural budget allocations.

In the European context, it must also be recognised that the UK has often led the way in such debates and discussions. There is more research activity and awareness here on such issues than there has been to date in most other Member States. While everyone in Europe, from Thessaloniki to Lapland, is actively applying to every possible EU source for funds, there are few Member States that are doing it in any policy context that encompasses the breadth of policy issues addressed by the UK, even if the UK approach itself appears uncoordinated. Perhaps

understandably, since they have more World Heritage Sites than anyone else, countries like Italy and Greece are perfectly happy to prepare their applications in the context of traditional cultural structures and needs – admittedly, often with the inclusion of the 'cultural tourism' argument.

Graeme Evans and Jo Foord note that the EC has seemed keen to promote a pan-European (mainly Renaissance) culture as common culture, although I would suggest this might better be termed common 'high' culture. There is also an argument that Europe's popular culture is, of course, heavily influenced by American popular culture. Graeme and Jo suggest that this has led to an emphasis on a 'shared core of Europe's cultural history' which has led to 'national claims for identity and autonomy being bypassed and more contemporary and diverse cultural activities ignored. These have arguably been replaced by a Europeanism which validates a normative notion of what it is to be a member of Europe'. I feel there is some evidence, however, for the counter-argument, based on the fact that the majority of the EC's funds for culture have come from the Structural Funds (which involves local decision making) and the lesser amounts from the transnational funds such as Culture 2000 (with decisions made in Brussels). It has, in fact, been Culture 2000 that has been emphasising the 'shared European cultural traditions' and the 'common cultural heritage' through specific criteria in its calls for proposals. The Structural Funds – especially in the UK – have mainly been funding projects that often seem to have little to do with any common European heritage, which rather seek to promote contemporary cultural activity (for example, the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, the Lowry Centre and the Tate Liverpool): Culture 2000 and its

predecessor programmes, on the other hand, have continually been criticised (although not by the Italians) for being stuck in 'heritage' mode and have been accused of focusing only on the classical composers and crumbling frescoes which apparently comprise the (or perhaps a particular?) 'European common cultural heritage'.

The notion of a European cultural policy seems very distant. Practically, this notion is anathema to the principle of subsidiarity and the will of the various Member States. Philosophically, this concept gives rise to the notion of some homogenised Euro-culture-mess – as the ubiquitous souvenir mugs say: the perfect European is one who cooks like a Brit, is as sober as the Irish, organised as the Greeks, controlled as the Italians, humble as a Spaniard, humorous as a German, drives like the French, and as famous as a Luxembourger. Anyone left to insult? In spite of the relatively vast amounts spent on culture by the EC, it is debatable as to whether the majority of such amounts will be ever be spent in the context of policies that reflect anything other than local or

regional priorities. The changes are more likely to be: that local and regional policies may reflect shared national perspectives (and perhaps even policies); and that policies and action from one Member State may well come to take into account those of others in Europe, simply as a result of an emerging congruence of policy and perspectives across Member States (especially in the current context as countries like France, Italy and Germany start to cut taxes – and by default, government spending and subsidies) combined with the slow but sure process of greater awareness and communication amongst researchers, policy makers and resource allocators across Europe. Apart from allocating its meagre pan-European resources from transnational pots such as Culture 2000, the EU/EC could have a productive (and non-threatening) role in stimulating, assisting in and contributing to this process. However, current evidence suggests it is more likely that this role will be taken on by other bodies (UNESCO, Council of Europe, groups of independent researchers or think tanks) and the EU will itself be the body being bypassed – again.