

## THE CASE FOR CULTURE AS THE CENTREPIECE OF GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

By D. Paul Schafer

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*Culture, like freedom, is never something which once gained can be taken for granted; it is a matter of ceaseless effort.*

- Hugh Jenkins, *The Culture Gap*

Culture should play a central role in the world. This is imperative in view of the present state of the world and prospects for the future. Culture has a crucial role to play in coming to grips with many of the world's most difficult, demanding, and debilitating problems, including climate change and the wider environmental crisis, huge disparities in income and wealth, conflicts between different groups, races, countries, and civilizations, terrorism and terrorist attacks, the possibility of nuclear or chemical warfare, and the need to achieve more peace and harmony in the world.

Yet we are far from achieving this goal. Culture is seldom mentioned in policy debates. So the question arises, how should those of us in the field of culture make the case for its importance?

For centuries, the case for culture was made in terms of treating the arts as "ends in themselves." This was because the arts and culture were deemed to be synonymous, and were valued primarily for their intrinsic qualities. This included bringing happiness into people's lives, revealing the nature of the world, and inspiring people to reach above and beyond themselves in the search for the sublime. In the Renaissance and Romantic periods, especially, the arts were accorded high status and had great influence.

In more recent times, the case for the arts has been made primarily based on extrinsic values. After World War II, a powerful relationship was established between science, economics, technology, governments, and the political process in general. The publication in 1959 of C. P. Snow's book *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* described how the intellectual life of western societies was being split into two cultures—science and the humanities. The sciences came to be regarded as "hard activities" and the humanities as "soft activities." The sciences were valued for their ability to spur economic growth.

What was difficult for people in the cultural field to accept was that the flow of funds in the public sector and the private sector was strongly influenced by this practice. In the

governmental and educational fields, for example, there was a discernible increase in funding for scientific activities and a discernible decrease in funding artistic activities. This occurred first in the western world but then in many other parts of the world as well.

It didn't take long for people in the cultural field to get the message. By the 1970s, it was clear that the traditional case for culture, one based on the intrinsic value of culture, was rapidly losing ground. A new case had to be made, a case capable of producing more funding for culture and the arts from business, governments, foundations, and private benefactors.

The need for funding was acute. William Baumol and William Bowen in their 1966 book, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma*, observed that unlike other fields, the arts were not able to benefit from technological breakthroughs to drive down costs. It took the same amount of time and same number of players to perform a Beethoven symphony in the 1970s (and now) as it did when this symphony was first created, but the costs were much higher and funding was not keeping up.

While it was important to make a new case for culture to corporations, foundations, and private benefactors, it was particularly important to make it to governments. Governments were funding a variety of societal activities and were looking for "hard data" and "concrete arguments" to justify how they were spending the taxpayers' money. Those in the cultural field realized that to obtain government funding they would have to argue that the arts and culture produced economic benefits. As a result, numerous studies were conducted by people in the cultural field to convince governments and others that culture and the arts had economic value due to the construction of capital facilities, people's attendance at artistic events, and especially expenditures on hotels, restaurants, clothing, tourism, transportation, and communications.

A related development took place around the same time. It was the effort to prove that the arts were not elitist, but, on the contrary, engaged large numbers of people in the artistic process. This resulted in many studies designed to document the size, composition, and character of arts audiences. These studies also proved helpful to governments and other funding agencies in justifying their funding of culture, since they provided factual evidence that arts audiences were much larger and more diversified than was assumed.

While these studies served a useful purpose, they were not without their problems. In order to make this new case for culture, it was necessary to abandon the traditional approach of treating culture as an end in itself, and start treating it as a means to other ends. Culture lost value in and for itself and took on value for its ability to satisfy the interests and needs of other institutions, activities, and sectors in society. Most of these needs and interests were concerned with generating economic activity and maximizing economic growth.

This became apparent when the definition of culture was expanded to include "the cultural industries"—radio, television, film, book publishing, recording, CDs, videos, and so forth. The economic impact of these activities was many times greater than live artistic performances. A

strong argument can be made that governments, corporations, foundations, and international organizations only became interested in the economic potential of culture after this inclusion.

Not all people in the cultural field approved of making the case for culture in economic terms, especially when this didn't seem to deliver the results hoped for and expected. Advocates for the economic approach claimed that this was the price that had to be paid for generating more public and private support and it was naïve and simplistic to think otherwise. Others felt that additional arguments should be made for culture.

One of these arguments was put forward by the Council of Europe in its 1997 report, *In from the Margins: A Contribution to the Debate on Culture and Development in Europe*. As the title indicated, the report was based on the belief that culture should be brought in from the margins and play a more mainstream role in society. According to the authors of the report, this could be achieved by focusing on the "social contributions of culture," especially bringing people together, sharing experiences, reducing the global cultural gap, mobilizing people and communities, and working in societies based on the mass media and modern communications. The report was produced by a group of policy experts, researchers, and cultural managers, and, like many reports published at this time, relied heavily on statistics, indicators, and quantitative methods.

At this time, UNESCO was, also, involved in the quest to establish a new case for culture. It focused on the role that culture played in development. UNESCO actively engaged in the World Decade for Culture and Development from 1988 to 1997 and played a prominent role in the World Commission on Culture and Development from 1993 to 1995.

This commission, led by Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, former Secretary General of the United Nations, examined culture's role in the world and made recommendations for strengthening it. When the commission released its 1996 Report, *Our Creative Diversity*, culture was defined in even broader terms as the "total way of life of people and countries." The report emphasized creativity and diversity as two key elements in culture and the essential role they play in the world.

As far as creativity was concerned, this was manifested most conspicuously in the work of Richard Florida. He became well known throughout the world for his research and writing on "the creative class." His books and research on this subject—and especially his book *The Rise of the Creative Class: How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*—documented that creative people such as artists, designers, architects, activists, inventors, and advertisers were providing the impetus and innovations required to broaden, deepen, intensify, and enrich developments in urban life. His work was embraced by many people in the cultural field as yet another indication of the economic potential of culture and the role it is capable of playing as a generator of economic activity.

As far as diversity was concerned, it stemmed from a different set of factors and forces. This had to do with the trend that was taking place in the world around this time towards

uniformity, and with it, the threat to diversity that was evident in all parts of the world. Spurred on by Canada and France, UNESCO was so concerned about this threat that it created a worldwide movement that led to the signing, in 2005, of the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*.

This convention is a legally-binding global agreement that ensures that artists, cultural professionals, practitioners, and citizens can create, produce, disseminate, and enjoy a broad range of cultural goods, services, and activities—including *their own*—in every country and region of the world. It was adopted due to the urgency of establishing and implementing an international law that recognized the importance of cultural goods, services, and activities as vehicles of identity, value, and meaning and not just as commodities, consumer products, and objects of trade and commerce.

By the time the UNESCO convention was signed, climate change and the environmental crisis had become major international concerns, as was the need to achieve “sustainable development.” The origins of this idea can be traced back to 1983 when the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Brundtland Commission, was created. The commission’s Report, *Our Common Future*, was published in 1987 and was based on the belief that all future development in the world must be sustainable. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to take the needs and interests of future generations and the natural environment and not just the present generation into account. Many public and private institutions commenced working on the transformation in values, lifestyles, and individual and collective behaviours that were needed to achieve this.

One way was through the development of “the creative economy.” According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the creative economy is “an emerging concept that deals with the interface between creativity, culture, economics and technology in a contemporary world dominated by images, sounds, texts and symbols.” What was exciting about this idea for people working in the cultural field was the realization that culture and creativity were intimately connected, situated at the core of the creative economy, and seen as “driving forces” in sustainable development. As UNCTAD stated in its 2010 *Creative Economy Report*, “Adequately nurtured, creativity fuels culture, infuses a human-centred development, and constitutes the key ingredient for job creation, innovation and trade while contributing to social inclusion, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability.”

Another way was by recognizing culture’s role as the “fourth pillar” of sustainable development. The Brundtland report recognized pillars: economic environmental, and social. Social focused on alleviation of poverty, literacy, rights, quality of life, health, and equity, not culture. Since 2001, numerous groups have advocated recognizing culture as the fourth pillar. Jon Hawkes on behalf of the Cultural Development Network (Victoria) authored an influential booklet *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture’s Essential Role in Public Planning*. In 2010, the Executive Bureau of United Cities and Local Governments in the framework of the World Summit of Local and Regional Leaders – 3rd World Congress in Mexico, approved a policy statement called *Culture: Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*. UNESCO, Agenda 21 for Culture and the

World Summit for Sustainable Development among many others have supported culture as the fourth pillar.

This is the status quo with respect to the case for culture. It is being made largely in terms of culture as the arts and cultural industries, a means to other ends rather than an end in itself, and valued mainly for its extrinsic qualities. It is also being made primarily in terms of culture as a component part of economics, a generator of economic activity, a driver of the creative economy, and one of the four pillars of sustainable development.

The problem is that the status quo is not enough for culture to play the role it needs to play. There is a growing awareness throughout the world that humanity cannot go on doing things the way they have been done in the past or are done at present. Things must change—and change dramatically—if environmental sustainability and human welfare and well-being are to be assured in the future. Culture possesses the potential to bring about the most essential change in the world of all—namely a major transformation in the relationship between human beings and the natural environment—and also it possesses the wherewithal to create a new course for humanity.

In order to do this, two developments are imperative. The first is to adopt an all-encompassing “holistic perception of culture” as a complex whole or total way of life. The second is to treat culture as an end in itself as well as a means to other ends, thereby valuing it for both its intrinsic and extrinsic properties.

In combination, these two requirements provide the foundations that are necessary to make a quantum leap in the case for culture in the future. It is a leap based on the belief that culture has a central rather than marginal role to play in the world. For what these two requirements do is change the context within which all developments throughout the world take place. Not only does this make it possible, since context determines contents, to change the contents of these developments, but also it makes it possible to realize culture’s full potential and ability to play a central role in the world. Surely this is what Léopold Senghor, first president of Senegal and a distinguished poet and cultural scholar, meant when he said, “Culture is the alpha and omega of any sound development policy.”

The challenge of the future is to develop culture in breadth and depth, position cultures effectively in the natural, historical, and global environment, and achieve balance and harmony between the component parts of cultures. Developing culture in breadth means taking advantage of all the various ways culture manifests itself in the world, from the artistic and humanistic to the ecological and biological. When this occurs, there is very little in the world that is not concerned with culture or affected by culture. This includes all activities people engage in—from the artistic and social to the economic, political, and environmental—as well as all citizens, groups, organizations, towns, cities, countries, nature, the natural environment, and other species.

Developing culture in depth means opening up a commanding place for culture's most cherished ideals at the very heart of development, especially the quest for peace, order, equality, and justice, the necessity of freedom, migration, and truth, the priceless value of the cultural heritage of humankind, the search for beauty, unity, and the sublime, and others.

Positioning cultures effectively in the natural, historical, and global environment is equally imperative. This is necessary to reduce the huge ecological footprint we are making on the Earth, learn from our past mistakes, and correct these mistakes in the future; come to grips with the cultural baggage we have inherited from our ancestors and previous generations, overcome racism, violence, oppression, prejudice, terrorism, and hate, and interact, share, and connect with other people and other cultures on a more human, humane, and harmonious basis.

Achieving balance and harmony between the many component parts of cultures is also essential. The distinguished cultural historian and scholar, Johann Huizinga, following his evaluation of numerous cultures throughout the world, gave us a profound insight into the necessity of this when he said "the realities of economic life, of power, of technology, of everything conducive to man's material well-being, must be balanced by strongly developed spiritual, intellectual, moral and aesthetic values." Not only is this the solution to realizing a great deal more well-being in the world, but also it is the solution to establishing the arts, humanities, spirituality, learning, and ethics as the "gateways" to culture and cultures.

Many benefits and opportunities would derive from developments such as these. Most fundamentally, humanity's demands on the natural environment would be substantially reduced because many spiritual, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic activities are labour-intensive rather than material-intensive, and therefore do not make as many demands on the natural environment and resources of nature as industrial, manufacturing, and technological activities do.

Nor is this all. Putting a great deal more emphasis on spiritual, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic activities would produce more caring, sharing, and cooperation in the world. This could have a positive effect on income distribution in the world, activate a major shift away from material and monetary wealth and towards human and spiritual well-being, and help the oppressed and less fortunate peoples and countries of the world.

Culture needs to be the centrepiece of the world system and principal preoccupation of municipal, regional, national, and international development. Let's get people and institutions in all parts of the world talking about this and planning for it. For this is what the case for culture should be all about in the future. It should be about ensuring that culture plays a central rather than marginal role in global development and human affairs in the years and decades ahead.