

The value of culture. Neverending debates need views and tools

Within the rich and complex vocabulary of culture the word value is certainly overused. It is always associated with culture, however we prefer to define it (which is already a challenging task). Even those who hate culture, since they fear it, say that it has no value. Even when conventional metaphors are adopted, describing the cultural galaxy with examples from the food system (it feeds, it must be preserved, it decays, it may lead to greedy action, etc.), the perception of its value is crucial.

If we just observe the meaning that the debate gives to the concept of value as applied to culture we may find a few interesting views, often conventionally shared and accepted, able to reveal the eternal struggle between opposite factions: those who believe that culture is a ritual and hermetic realm where only the initiated have the right to speak (and to act), versus those who consider culture as normal as any other product, being therefore subject to simple economic norms and mechanisms.

Exploring this controversial map, where culture is pulled and stretched to endorse much wider and visceral views, we discover that culture appears powerful in providing individuals (and sometimes communities) with some ethical strength; it can make us competitive (?); it manages to favour and facilitate international trade convincing foreigners to accept our evident superiority; it generates flows of income encouraging people to eat at lunchtime and sleep at night, and maybe to buy some souvenir; it can provide us with noble education through the memory of facts, names and dates.

From an ethical drive to a commercial fallout the width of the possible interpretations is quite infinite, certainly indefinite. The value of culture is confusely perceived and defined simply because we still believe that the economic and social paradigm in which we were grown up is the golden age: the rise of manufacturing capitalism needed a strong mandate, since it was impossible to rule by God's grace and Nation's will. They needed to earn the past, the only thing they did not own. They invented culture as the object of social and economic exchange. Its value could only be ethical.

To make a long story short, we can observe that until cultural production and exchange could be granted by a combination of private and public funds with some market revenues nobody argued about the weakness of this ethical bias (when aesthetics and ethics marry they generate ideology, this was the bourgeois strength). Then public resources started to decrease, private companies kept their reluctant position, and the ghost of failure appeared closer and closer. Culture needed something more than its feeling of chauvinistic superiority.

Values were quickly shifted from the ethical cloud to the commercial performance. It implied a radical change in criteria and evaluations, ending up to establish a sort of competition among cultural institutions and organisations, where the financial outcomes and the budget equilibrium were clearly prevailing upon strictly cultural values: how many individuals are coming back? Will they bring somebody with them? Will they be inclined to participate with ideas, projects, voluntary work? Will they spread a positive word-of-mouth? All of this was simply ignored, just focusing upon revenues and cash-flows.

The growing importance of financial values induced many cultural organisations to craft special effects able to attract mass visitors or spectators, with the effect of raising the cost of each project to hire superstar ingredients, of emphasizing the isolation of cultural spaces within the urban grid to welcome blockbuster audiences, of expanding the gap between temporary and seductive projects on one hand, and

permanent activity on the other hand. Of course the presence of some special effect, although expensive and schizophrenic, did not exert any impact upon the cultural choices (how to exhibit pieces in a museum, how to stage a show in a theatre).

The progressive loss of a self-sustained connection with the perceptions and expectations of a rapidly evolving society was the predictable outcome of such a passage between the two extremes in the range of values, from a purely spiritual to a concretely material one. And now? The present situation appears to be quite complex. On one hand the mainstream culture is still refusing any evolution, hiding itself behind the comfortable screen of a supposed – and never proved – growing ignorance: once the world was much more cultivated, this is the diffused lie which ignores the rising sophisticated urgencies of a society where the dimensional obsessions are fading away.

On the other hand, while complaints multiply many emerging creative artists, project leaders, organisers, art consultants are elaborating and often crafting new and unexpected ways to offer cultural products to a multidimensional exchange system, activating new markets, depending less upon external sources of funding, establishing alliances with non-cultural organisations and milieus where culture can bring useful drivers of growth and expansion. The paradox is that such a non-conventional humus develops thanks to its invisibility: since it is not included in the official cultural realms it can build its future without eliciting any suspicion or resistance.

The question is: what is the value of culture? And the answer, although uncertain and timid, can be based upon a simple and logic view. We do need culture only because it provides us with some benefit – be it emotional, cognitive or even material – that no other human activity can give us. The key is: what is non-fungible in culture? In such a way we can accept the complexity and variety of what we define culture (from archaeology to contemporary art, from ancient music to hip-hop), but try to connect its unique content with our metabolic reaction. We need to understand and possibly evaluate the weight of culture in contemporary society. Our ancestors may have been certain about what they looked for, but we cannot replicate their orientation, we are simply different (and possibly new).

Such values can be carefully built, keeping an eye on what happens in the real world; perhaps in a few years society will appear strongly different even from what it seems now. The definition and measurement of such values should consider both the internal exchange and diffusion of culture as a powerful and unique driver for awareness, critical view, reciprocal listening, creativity and innovation, social inclusion and social quality; and, at the same time, the external flows of benefits and meanings that only culture can generate expanding its languages and contents in the rest of the world: handicrafts, production of commodities and services, international relationships.

Alessia Palermo and *Giulia Gulotta* face the two sides of this delicate issue, showing that we should accept the challenge of understanding and managing the value of culture paying attention to the audience, the social views, the educational seeds, and also to our international relationships and the opportunity to set a fertile dialogue with places and cultures that we do not need to conquer, but just to explore and fertilise. As a weapon or a muscle culture is useless, if we want to fight we better rely upon military or commercial strength (and it would only be a stupid waste of energy and talent). As a driver of welfare and happiness culture cannot be substituted.

In omnibus requiem quaesivi, et nusquam inveni, nisi in angulo cum libro.



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