

Cultural responsibility. Small steps to restore anthropology in economic behaviour. Interviews and best practices

Descrizione

1. Introduction

This article deals with the concept of Cultural Responsibility (CR) as an attitude that should guide human relationships and economic behaviour, in an anthropological sense. The current financial and economic crisis shows that economic behaviour which is only oriented to achieve profit may fail. What can culture do? Culture, in terms of anthropology, can help us rethink human and economic relationships in an ethical manner and consider development as a process of cultural growth before than economic growth. Thus, the cultural dimension of every economic process needs to focus on the individual and communities. By doing so, it will be possible to realize an economic and social context that is inclusive and cohesive.

After a short definition of the terms “culture” and “responsibility”, analysing the phenomena that characterize the globalized context, we take an in-depth look at the topic, examining best practices of organizations of cultural production and interviewing relevant cultural operators.

2. CR: Preliminary Remarks

CR combines the words “culture” and “responsibility”. According to Hans Jonas [21], responsibility is the ethical duty to care about present and future generations, to respect human beings and their integrity. Culture, in its anthropological sense, looks at man as a system of beliefs, symbols, imagination and rationality that allows the individual to represent the world around him in a continuous social interaction with other individuals [27]. According to Clifford Geertz [16], man builds his symbolic worlds within the social circles in which he is embodied, and culture is a web of meanings woven by men. This statement leads us to reflect, on one hand, on cultural capital, that is, according to Pierre Bourdieu [5], all that is acquired through different contexts of socialization, and, on the other hand, on intangible cultural heritage, i.e. everything that communities, groups and individuals recognize as part of their cultural

heritage(1) and it is constantly modified through their relationships with the physical world, the culture that precedes them and the practice of life(2).

CR is a respectful attitude towards different cultural expressions within a society characterized by globalization and the spread of knowledge-based economy, both of which offer new opportunities but also have unclear implications. That is what happens, for example, with the definitions of cultural and creative industries in many European studies [14-26-29]. As we read, they have, as their main goal, the promotion of economic growth by creating new jobs and fostering cultural tourism and cities of art with the aim of realizing the Lisbon Strategy and making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world [13]. Therefore, according to Guy Debord [10] and Daniele Goldoni [17-18] they contribute to the process of a sort of “aesthetization” or “spectacularization of life”, an environment where human relationships are mediated by images. In this “society of spectacle”, according to Walter Benjamin [2], masses want to satisfy their own needs to be socially recognized, and culture is reduced to a commodity [20], justifying the supremacy of “profit” and the power of huge corporations. Cultural industries are mainly interested in short-term environmental and economic impacts, at the expense of long-term social and cultural ones. These include the impact on life-styles, habits, cultural expressions, and the active involvement of the people living in the contexts in which cultural industries operate. Economic growth has to be realized even through the fulfilment of social needs and cultural requirements.

The modern social context is also characterized by the spread of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a form of self-regulation where the enterprise decides to take responsibility for the consequences of its behaviour [8]. A culturally responsible attitude has much in common with what is suggested by CSR: the attention to human capital, the stakeholders involvement, active citizenship and the concept of sustainable development, which is strictly connected with that of responsibility.

Sustainable development looks at development as a human-centred and not as a commodity-centred process. According to Amartya Sen [28], it is a “human capability expansion”, i.e. an enhancement of the capacities of people to live the sort of life they

decide, including their access to cultural resources and cultural participation. It requires the removal of major sources of lack of freedom, often caused by social and economic inequalities. Development is not only economic growth but also cultural growth. It has its roots in cultural diversity: it asks for all cultures to be respected and for there to be the principle of cultural freedom in a democratic context [33-34]. I agree with what is stated in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001): *“cultural diversity is a necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature (...) it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence”*. After economic growth, environmental balance and social inclusion, cultural diversity could be seen as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. Thought of in this way, culture could be a means to promote social cohesion and inclusion.

3. CR in Organizations of cultural production

Stating that culture could be the tool to foster social cohesion and cultural inclusion means giving importance to the “social value of culture” as the individual and collective welfare arising from exercising their cultural rights, as defined by the Group of Freiburg in 1998, and so closely related to the parameter of quality of life. As indicated by the Council of Europe White paper on intercultural dialogue: living together as equals, in dignity (2008), social cohesion *“(...) denotes the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization. A cohesive society is a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means”*.

A culturally responsible attitude respects, safeguards and promotes cultural diversity. This is what emerges from the UNESCO legal instruments concerning cultural diversity and cultural heritage. This respect becomes possible through intercultural dialogue, which means fostering a mindset open to other cultures and to the construction of truth and culture through negotiations [19]. Moreover, it is necessary to guarantee equal opportunity for cultural representation within a community, and democratic participation.

Furthermore, culture could reduce social exclusion thanks to its ability to build skills and self-confidence and enhance self-esteem(3). Access to, and participation in culture, is an existential way of building and strengthening personal identity and assigning meaning to choices and experiences [24]. This is the reason why cultural projects and policies have to be planned through a participatory process that involves the recipients, realizing cultural inclusion [23]. In a society characterized by fragmentation, culture intervenes to fill the lack of a cohesive context of social relations, and it succeeds. This is the case in cultural organizations such as Teatro Del Pratello Società Cooperativa, Associazione Bibliobus, Teatro Valle Occupato.

The chosen organizations are small associations or social cooperatives that base their activities on building solidarity networks, involving public or private institutions and local communities. They produce economic value thanks to their ability to produce social value. Their cultural products are “experiences”(4) respectful of the symbolic worlds of all the stakeholders involved.

Moreover they:

- promote actions that respond to real needs;
- implement participatory planning so that their projects are designed from the bottom up and collectively. In doing so, they experiment with new models of governance and cultural production;
- support the development of “capabilities” in the users and promote intercultural dialogue;
- are generative: they produce other significant experiences;

Teatro Del Pratello [30] develops the Teatro Istituto Penale Minorile project: the theatre workshops with young prisoners. The project responds both to the need to establish meaningful relationships between young prisoners and the external reality, and to that of regaining self-esteem. It is also an opportunity for artistic experimentation, in a context normally excluded from city life. The project engages young people in both manual tasks, such as making costumes and scenery, and communicative and expressive ones, such as the writing of the script. Although the artistic result (the final show) is the primary objective of the work, the educational and therapeutic value of the theatre cannot be denied, since, by its very nature, it's capable of triggering processes of self-analysis and self-training. Theatre in prison is

also a journey through different cultures and allows intercultural dialogue [35]. The show, which runs for two weeks and is set in the prison's church, which has been adapted for the situation, involves local communities. Teatro Del Pratello has become a benchmark for theatre in prison both in the Emilia Romagna region and in Italy as a whole, demonstrating that theatre in prison favours the social reintegration of convicts, and protects their right to health in terms of physical, psychological and social well-being.

Associazione Bibliobus [3] is a voluntary organization founded immediately after the earthquake of the 6th April 2009. It provides continuity to the Bibliobus project, a travelling library that offers cultural entertainment to people in post-earthquake camps. The association manages Bibliocasa, a small but well stocked library open to all Aquila citizens, constantly updated thanks to the collaboration with the Ministry of Culture and donations from all over Italy. The Bibliobus and Bibliocasa projects have arisen from the need to offer a form of entertainment and social networking and the need to preserve Aquila's historic memory. They encourage artistic production involving active citizenship and organize events and courses related to the importance of the book as a means of access to knowledge, learning and social inclusion. The association operates as part of a network involving other local organizations and wants to become an example of raising awareness of how culture could be an instrument of social reconstruction.

Teatro Valle Occupato [31] is an initiative that springs from different needs: to think of new models of governance, involving citizenship, to give dignity to the work of the artist, to experience new models of artistic creation and use, strengthening the relationships between artists at both a national and an international level. It supports the political idea that common goods should not be part of the business market because they belong to everybody, and are incompatible with the private interests of profit and income. The theatre is a training centre for stage engineers, a space for drama, music, films, publishing, political and cultural debates. Its governance is based on equality between its members. This is the reason why the institution has launched the campaign Fondazione Teatro Valle Bene Comune, the objective of which is to raise 250.000 euros via donations, with each citizen donating the amount they can afford, in accordance with the principle "each according to his possibilities". Different artistic

directors take turns being in charge of the artistic direction of the theatre. All important decisions are taken and discussed in plenary sessions. All members are volunteers and those who come to watch the shows pay what they choose to. Teatro Valle wants to encourage the setting up of other similar initiatives.

These best practices are examples of cultural institutions opened to serve the needs of local communities, fostering a fertile ground for cultural participation and thus realizing active citizenship. They also encourage cultural democracy [23], ensuring equal opportunity as regards cultural access, participation, representation and expression [25].

4. Interview

An interview with some of the most authoritative cultural Italian operators was conducted in order to explore the concept of CR, its actual presence in cultural projects, and its implications in the governances and strategies of cultural organizations. I gave them four questions, four stimuli for reflection, in order not to guide or influence their contribution. In doing so, each interviewee felt free to speak about their own practical experience. The questions were given to them before the interview. The goal was not only to better focus on the issue, but also to provide practical suggestions and guidelines for organizations that believe in the ability of culture to improve the well-being of individuals and communities. The four questions/stimuli were:

1. What does CR mean?
2. What are the minimum requirements for defining a project as culturally responsible?
3. What are the necessary changes in the government of cultural organizations for CR orientation?
4. In your experience, have you been able to observe situations in which the practice of CR would have been highly desirable? Which aspects would you have investigated more?

The interviewers were: Antonella Agnoli, Andrea Baranes, Bruno Bernardi, Walter Dondi, Giuseppe Gherpelli, Daniele Goldoni, Sandro Lombardi, Virgilio Sieni, Simone Siliani and Mario Guglielminetti.

From the interviews it emerged that CR is a shared sensitivity, that has probably not been transferred to a normative plan. It concerns the horizon of human relations, both in a learning and in an experiential context. Moreover, it starts considering culture as a common good, so that cultural activities have to be planned in such a way as to involve local communities and citizens and have to respond to the specific cultural needs of the audience they are addressed to.

CR is an attitude that has different implications depending on the point of view adopted. From a political point of view, it requires the organizing of cultural events based on continuity, persistence and resilience, that look at culture as a vertical dimension that embraces all the areas of human development.

From the point of view of whoever has a management role in a cultural organization, it implies some duties. First, because of the importance of culture in the growth of civilization, it is a duty for cultural institutions to provide services that ensure the growth of communities in terms of the increase knowledge and the improvement of skills, education and lifelong learning. Secondly, cultural institutions are obliged to provide spaces where people can meet and exchanges can take place, where cultural production occurs as a participatory process and to develop management skills related to the function of cohesion that culture exerts. Finally, cultural managers have to make decisions that are transparent and communicable to all the stakeholders involved.

From the point of view of the artist, it means responding to everybody's vocation and restoring dignity to the work of artists. To conclude, CR is an attitude that doesn't look at culture as a consumer product; it is connected to a creative attitude, which means being able to change oneself, letting go of prejudices. There was an awareness that culture could favour social inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable development.

5. Towards an anthropological economy

Beyond the different meanings which the concept of CR can have, a common element could be identified: the centrality of the individuals/communities and of human relationships. CR means encouraging the cultural growth of each individual, whatever social setting they belong to, and producing a socially inclusive context. Because economic relationships are preponderant in this historical moment, we should try to identify what their purposes might be. The starting point is that in a free market society, characterized by the exchange of commodities, the symbolic worlds of individuals remain central. According to Giulio Sapelli [27], there is an interdependence between the social practices of economic behaviour and cultural representations, that is accomplished through what he calls “economic anthropology”. As a consequence, it is necessary to give more weight to anthropology, studying the cultural reasons that drive human actions. Moreover, economic behaviour should be more respectful of symbolic worlds and the free market system has to be fairer and more ethical.

The respect of symbolic worlds must also affect organizations’ behaviour and we could affirm that this is realized through the practice of CSR. Moreover, according to Hans Küng [22], to combat the negative effects of capitalism it is necessary to found economic development on human and moral development and promote a social market economy where the principles of the free market match those of social equalization. Besides, it is necessary to foster, in economic behaviour, the same values that give success to human relationships (trust, cooperation, solidarity). Thus, what Christian Felber [15] defines the “economy of the common good” and Stefano Zamagni and Luigino Bruni [6] the “civil economy” would be realized.

In recent years concrete examples of organizations and initiatives that are anthropologically-oriented has been increasing. A good example might be Banca Popolare Etica [1].

It is a bank founded on the principles of ethical finance: transparency, right of access to credit, efficiency and attention to the non-economic consequences of economic action. Its purpose is to manage savings by directing them towards socio-economic initiatives characterized by full respect for human dignity and the realization of the common good. Savings and operations of microcredit and microfinance are directed to

create social, environmental and cultural advantages, supporting human, social and economic activities in weaker sectors of the population and in the most deprived areas. Furthermore, the cooperative legal form enables the strong participation of its members in the capital of the bank and in democratic decision-making.

6. Conclusion

CR is an attitude that should affect economic behaviour by making it more respectful of the symbolic worlds of individuals and communities. Thus, conditions can be established that allow everyone a shot at happiness. Furthermore, CR is an implication of CSR, because it refers to one of the three aspects of the triple bottom line of CSR: people. As a consequence, the practice of CSR forces organizations to look after economic growth through the satisfaction of social needs, environmental protection and cultural requirements. CR has to be translated into standards of conduct and values, the main ones being humanity and reciprocity [22]. These values must be respected by all organizations and they need to be taught in schools from an early age.

Endnotes

- (1) This is the definition of intangible cultural heritage stated in the *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Paris, 17 October 2003.
- (2) As stated by D. Goldoni during his speech *The rise of the hermeneutic approach to knowledge* at the international workshop Creative Milieus in Europe, Venezia, 12 luglio 2013.
- (3) Among the researches, it is worth to mention the study of the Northumbria University, *The role of culture in preventing and reducing poverty and social exclusion*, commissioned by the Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs of the European Commission in 2005.
- (4) See the concept “art as experience” stated by John Dewey.

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