

A European movement for CULTURE IS A NECESSITY

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1. In space and time

The historical moment we are living in requires adopting broader perspectives, made of longer periods and wider spectrum of topics. What does the picture of today look like, where are we in space and time? What does the framework within we operate across Europe consist of? What responsibility has the culture sector in it? What can be our contribution in helping Europe's recovery from a turbulent season of its history? These and others are the questions to which honest answers should be sought so as to form a robust strategy for cultural advocacy in the coming years.

In 1810, 40 years was the average life expectancy worldwide. In less than 200 years, the world population life expectancy have dramatically changed. At present, the differences between the world regions in life expectancy seem wider although a clear convergence toward a longer life can be traced, except for Africa. Parallel to this enormous transformation, we have seen an impetuous growth of the world population and a substantial change in its distribution. When the western world decisions were shaping world destinies, its population was about 21,5% of the total in 1800 and about 30% in 1900. By 2050 this percentage will drop down to about or less then 10%, as China and India's share of the global trade will jump from 5% up to beyond 30%.

A period of almost continued western domination is coming to the end. New emerging transitional players and powers challenge the role of the national states as regulators of our lives and as embodiment of citizens' sovereignty. They also challenge all attempts to mitigating the effect of capitalistic economy on the inequality by redistributing the global wealth through what we call the *welfare*. Moreover, and it is of utmost importance, Europe is called to deal with the impact of an ageing population where the work force is producers are now a shrinking minority. The basis on which we built our wealth in Europe no longer exist: people living longer and those in work force are no longer the majority, the national States count less, job opportunities are becoming scarce, citizens sovereignty is endangered, and the natural resources are running out coupled with the erosion of the basic condition for life on earth. These conditions are not all reversible.

2. It is not a crisis, it is a transition

Since 2008, European citizens have been repeatedly told that we're living a **crisis**. We are told that to recover from the crisis, we need to restore the conditions for an

¹ Culture Action Europe (CAE) is the widest European network of cultural organization. Through its over 120 direct members CAE gives voice to about 80.000 organisations.

economic growth (a GDP increase in %) on which only basis a fair re-distribution of wealth can be achieved. Although every year, since this so-called crisis started, we have been told that it will get better eventually, reality has proven different.

The inconvenient truth is that we are not living a crisis but a **transition** which outcome is yet to be understood. Our society's fate is to change in profundity and if we want to progress on the founding values of the European project such as democracy, human rights and rule of law, equal rights and opportunity for all, peace and prosperity, good education and standard of lives, we must strive for and bring to life a new vision and narrative for our future.

This is Europe in the early part of the 21st Century: 500 million people on a turning point. A project and the peace it brought to the continent endangered by a growing distrust in its democratic institutions' ability to solve today's problems.²

3. Culture and Europe: our major asset

The European Union is the first and the most ambitious attempt at establishing a new form of democracy where local and global dimensions can coexist. It requires ancient and well-rooted countries and nations to reduce their sovereignty not based on the hegemony of one language, culture or religion, but on the willingness to organise cultural life around an intrinsically complex identity. Despite the fact that European integration has prioritised the economic dimension, its future depends on cultural factors in the broad sense: on how different countries and nations can come together around a single political, social and economic project based on and respectful of cultural diversities and the fulfilment of human rights for the current and future generations.

It is a possible future for which Europe has the needed **assets**, tangible and intangible (democracy, rights, rule of law, freedom of expression, welfare/solidarity, education, environmental sensitivity, public spaces, etc.). Equally important, Europe has developed a potentially suited culture to bring it to life.

For decades in Europe, the governments (some of them) have been redistributing accumulated wealth to their citizens to mitigate inequalities, support them and better fulfil their needs through public services and a growing private consumption. Nevertheless, over the last three decades and in parallel to substantial GDP raises, inequalities have kept growing in most European countries. The gap between the very few wealthy and the many whose standard of living slides progressively towards poverty has been widening. Measuring economic growth tells us everything, except for what makes life worthwhile.

² The European Union institutions show clear limits, however in most cases the responsibility for wrong or late decision lies on the national governments.

4. SPRING 1968

On 18 March 1968, at the *University of Kansas*, Robert Fitzgerald Kennedy (RFK) gave a ground-breaking speech that for too long has been forgotten.³ In his speech, RFK stressed that *“Even if we act to erase material poverty, there is another greater task, it is to confront the poverty of satisfaction - purpose and dignity - that afflicts us all. Too much and for too long, we seemed to have surrendered personal excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our Gross National Product, now, is over \$800 billion dollars a year”* but [...] it *“counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage.”* [...] *“Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials”* and concluded by saying that *“It measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans. If this is true here at home, so it is true elsewhere in world.”*

Despite his prophetic and crystal clear words, 47 years later we still seem incapable to remove the GDP from its centre-stage role in the mainstream political discourse and narrative, as well as in common misconceptions.⁴

5. Just 50 years later

New challenges stand in front of European governments: today they are called to ensure the individual and collective wellbeing (WB) in Europe. The WB is not only resulting from the redistribution of economic means but also from ensuring the necessary condition for social cohesion, human rights fulfilment, trust in the institutions, justice, and health. Adopting a WB perspective leads to questioning if the priority given to the economy over the people actually results into disguising the attempt by a very few ones to keep control over the life and destiny of a large majority.⁵

This historical moment calls for radical swifts in Europe. Unless prioritising the human and therefore, the need to build on our society’s shared **assets** and invest in adequate skills and mindsets, this urgent call for radical change will go unanswered.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77IdKFqXbUY>

⁴ Despite the odds and evidences, many still believe that socio-economic data reflect “hard facts” even if it should be a common understanding that anything referring and relevant to human behaviors can’t be considered as such.

⁵ The Economics is a cultural production, nevertheless we keep assuming that we shall adapt to it rules (laws!) in order to build a healthy economy. Questioning and where necessary changing that rules to provoke economies better fitting to human development appears blasphemy while it should be obvious.

Ultimately peace in Europe will depend on that. A new social agreement based on the fulfilment of human rights for the current and *future* generation can be achieved if men and women are equipped with suited cultural attitudes/skills/competences (**cultural capabilities**).⁶ It can be achieved if they are empowered to enhance both their personal and our collective **social capital**, which ultimately depends on the quality of their everyday life experiences.

A completely new approach not only based on economic factors is necessary. Enhancing people **cultural capabilities** such as co-operation and creativity, openness to diversity and curiosity, lyricism as much as logical thinking is essential to develop a fully sustainable society where human rights, civil liberty and shared well-being can be achieved.

Art and science powerfully contribute to the enhancement of such capabilities as well as education and research or architecture and civic engagement do from another angle.

Ultimately the experiences we live impact on our cultural capabilities and the generation of social capital.

It is of strategic importance to acknowledge that cultural participation plays a critical role in the development of the capabilities requested to build today a better and sustainable tomorrow and, in parallel, has a tremendous positive impact in people wellbeing.



6. Towards a European movement for culture

For too long we have surrendered to a short-term approach to work in politics even to our private life. For far too long, we have accepted that everything can be replaced by something newer and more efficient, shiny, and smart, leading to us being more and more incapable of nurturing our human relations. It is time to be aware that a broader discourse around the **development of the societal cultural assets** is needed and

⁶ Future implies including the environmental sustainability in the equation.

concerns all and each of us as well as most of the policy which impacts on the public sphere.

For a quite long period most cultural networks and operators have worked to influence decision-makers by providing advice and valuable knowledge on most matters concerning *Cultural policy*. Their analysis, debate and action too often evaded focusing their responsibility towards the society at large and therefore progressively disconnected the sector from the rest of the civil society.

Despite good will, political decision-making is still much more about balancing demands coming from different and often opposed constituencies than taking a rational long-term decision. Building the case is essential to foster new constituencies to recognise themselves as such. However, in order to impact on the processes of decision-making, we need to organise wide and engaged constituencies demanding to place culture at the core of the decision making.

A new way of talking culture is a necessity. A Europe-wide movement for culture is more than ever needed to help our society to step out up from its depression. Our strategies and actions shall pave ways to its surge. In order to bring the notion that culture is a necessary element for development, much closer to the core of decision-making and public debate, it is now time for the cultural operators and their representative organisations to:

- place the role they have in fostering the societal cultural development at the core of their reflections and actions; and
- unite with citizens' organisations and the civil society at large in search of convergences (the impact of each on to the accumulation of social capital – as described above).

Since 2014, CAE's traditional advocacy has been integrated with a new large set of actions: from being an advocacy platform for the cultural sector to making CAE an issue-oriented civil society organisation and thus, providing a platform all people that care for culture. CAE's transformation can help the voice of the people of Culture to spread and better impact on the public opinion and decision-making when it comes to shaping meaningful lives. That's is CAE's commitment, this is where you will find us.

