3.3 Cultural agents

by Alfonso Martinell Sempere

This chapter focuses on the actors of cultural life as essential subjects to develop cultural policies. Their great differences, the need to adapt cultural management to their specific characteristics, and the need to identify and know the map of cultural agents of the intervention territory are discussed.

1. Cultural agents

Each community, city, or society organises their cultural activities and life based on their history, cultural forms, and current reality. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that the participation in cultural life of people is an essential right. In addition, modern societies have based their intervention in culture on the structures of the nation-state (central, regional, and local government) with their specific legislative regulations.

Cultural right first guarantees individual freedom and participation in cultural life. Every person, as citizen, tries to meet their cultural needs. For this purpose, social or shared aspects are required to fulfil their rights and aspirations completely, so there are complex processes of social structure in culture.

Actors (individuals, groups, institutions, etc.), both in a certain context and a defined period or time, are considered cultural agents. Cultural agents are the result of the progress from individuals to groups through processes of social organisation and structure based on the values, the tradition, and the rules of their context. They widely contribute to the cultural life of their environment by intervening together from their own interpretations of reality and are essential to articulate social and cultural policies in a democratic state, independently of the dominant ideology of governments. However, cultural agents also operate outside the political structures. They are a dynamic variable of the territory who change and develop throughout time according to development conditions and their territorial distribution. Also, they constitute both a determinant to consolidate social intervention and a guarantee to defend democratic principles.

From the perspective of cultural policies, we understand that public institutions are required to establish their cultural action by considering specific agents or actors (or through them), who will be in contact and assume responsibilities related to the interests and objectives proposed by the policy itself. In some cases, the agent could be a unique promoter, but other agents assuming collective roles, which are more or less active, are involved at the same time such agent acts.

Agents build the referential of a policy, that is, the creation of concept images determining the perception of the community’s problem, need, or interest. They also provide proposals and solutions to their response or decision-making. On the one hand, some authors refer to them as “mediators”. On the other hand, M. Bassand (1992) defined them as “bearers of daily murmurs” who should be considered in cultural policies because they perceive the reality of cultural life and distribute it to competent bodies to be aware of them. They perform not
only a horizontal and transversal communicative function, but also upward and downward between citizens and the political power.

Agents or mediators play a crucial role in the design of a policy and in application strategies because of their participation, commitment, and the lack of consultation by those responsible for policies. Agents are fundamental to citizenship for consolidating or appropriating a social activity, and they represent a considerable democratic and competitive potential for development.

If a territorial reality has various agents, then it acquires one of the main conditions to be socially, culturally, and economically developed. Also, it has elements constituting a specific potential available for policies:

- A map of agents distributed in the territory and at different levels (neighbourhood, city, region, country, etc.)
- A consolidation degree of such agents based on their tradition, history, career, etc.
- A critical and intellectual capacity, and mainly a competence to give answers to the needs of their environment
- A capacity of an organisational relation and structure to talk to bodies for decision-making and to maintain communication with broad social sectors.

Cultural agents are structured according to both their own goals responding to values and principles which make sense of them and their social functions given by the regulation of a state based on their rules. Such rules determine the ways in which governments interpret the right to participate in cultural life and their relations with other agents, thus implying possible disagreements and differences of positioning with the agents’ functions in a certain reality. The role that cultural policies give to cultural agents and the regulatory framework of a country show a first general view to see and analyse both the role of each main agents and the guaranties for citizens regarding cultural rights.

Functions and competences of cultural agents are developed in parallel to the social reality of their context and become important according to the role given to them in the approaches and contents of public policies (through grants, jobs, tax exemptions, etc.). They can also have a leading role from their social initiative by using their resources and can constitute an element of lobbying and influencing governments’ structures. The role of cultural agents can therefore be considered as an essential factor to build and give importance to society’s cultural requirements and problems.

Without the intervention of the state, social agents apply their own policy many times, which can be the same or not of that of the public administration but can intervene to the reality of their context more effectively. Such relation is not free of tensions and disputes, which are sometimes positive.

2. Functions of cultural agents

Cultural agents have a leading role according to the principles, goals, and values they choose and develop, and such roles can be summarised as follows:

- Cultural agents analyse and perceive the reality of their environment and society by giving their perspective of cultural life. They give answers to their problems or requirements and self-organise services to achieve their goals.
- Cultural agents make possible and channel the participation and incorporation of groups and individuals in the action for their community, thus easing a process from the public and social action.
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- Cultural agents bring together and create opinions on the issues they are concerned with and on the conditions required to spread their options, with the aim of considering a certain issue.
- Cultural agents can be helpful to structure and build social, cultural and educational requirements concerning individual or group situations, which are collectively transferred to organisations and the administration of the state.
- Cultural agents are platforms to promote the self-organisation of services and the assumption of public responsibilities through delegation systems in relation to service provision or by own initiative.
- Cultural agents carry out a prospective function by finding out and proving new society’s requirements or problems as well as by raising concerns on such issues in official establishments.
- Cultural agents are an organisational platform of the private and commercial initiative from the establishment of own organisations.
- Cultural agents are essential actors to dynamize and guarantee the right to participate in the cultural life of democracy.

3. Types of cultural agents

A group of three main agents are generally identified, and they can in turn be divided into others because of their broad characteristics. Based on the Spanish reality, their functions are classified as follows:

- The goal of the public administration is based on the interest.
- Non-profit or third sector institutions are focused on achieving the goals of their group, which can also be of public interest.
- Private institutions are based on fulfilling their economic objectives or maintaining their potential. It is also admitted, however, that the firm has an orientation or philosophy reflected in its career as well as in its corporate social responsibility or the jobs it takes.

![Diagram of Types of Cultural Agents](image_url)
4. Relations between cultural agents

Such three main agents create a wide social unity because of numerous interactions in which there are many organisations belonging to a long tradition or as the result of modern initiatives. According to various functions and rules, those organisations are constantly related, connected, networked, etc. and configure an important potential of a specific community or society within their context.

**Intersection areas between agents**

![Diagram of intersection areas between agents](image)

The relations or their lack between cultural agents are an important barometer to assess the social dynamism of the territory, thus giving very essential information for decision-making in public and private scopes. Such relations constitute both a good social articulation and the potentiality of implementing a fundamental map of action and contrast for development.

A set of organisations are constituted and structured in this map of possibilities with the aim of coordinating the options of the various agents to participate in the cultural life of their context.

Although the presence of agents has objective potentialities for a territory, their existence, complementarity, and simultaneity are not free of difficulties.

The main problems of the relations between agents basically arise from the following aspects:

- Common ignorance and recognition. They do not have information of their action and ignore the other agent, although they work in the same territory.
- Primitive ideas regarding the role of each agent and their complementarity required for social development. Very individual positions or tendencies to isolation and inbreeding.
Lack of a legislative and regulatory framework according to the social reality of the moment, thus causing little social structure and very informal positions.

Lack of a clear definition of the intention dominating the parties, particularly between the public administration and associations (distrust, manipulation).

Little tradition of stable relation, contact practice, and trading, as well as the existence of not very developed relational levels (confusion, dependence, dirigisme, opposition, passivity, etc.).

Very heterogeneous organisational models, not very professional in management and external relations.

Lack of relational bodies and instruments (committees, councils, federations, etc.) at a level of formal participation and of a more technical and practical contact.

Communicative difficulties because of using different languages and unchangeable positions.

Lack of competition in trading and mediation among the parties.

Attempts and projects technically not very developed.

As a result, there are some general characteristics defining and comparing agents, which could be useful to identify the fact that organisational structures and models are very influenced by the specificities of each agent.

Some of these characteristics are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administración</th>
<th>Asociacionismo Tercer Sector</th>
<th>Privado</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Un territorio administrativo de acuerdo con las competencias (local, provincial, regional, nacional, internacional, etc.)</td>
<td>Un espacio territorial amplio de acuerdo con el proyecto de la organización y con gran capacidad de cambio y estrategia</td>
<td>Un ámbito de acción sin límite territorial que se puede adaptar de acuerdo con las posibilidades de la actividad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un marco legal muy regulado a todos los niveles y con obligación de transparencias y rendición de cuentas al ciudadano</td>
<td>Una voluntad de constitución si fines de lucro de acuerdo con unos valores</td>
<td>Una estructuración de acuerdo con el interés promotor o emprendedor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sus actividades responde a unas competencias ineludibles o a unas funciones delegadas limitadas</td>
<td>Sus actividades responden a sus valores y posición de acuerdo con organización propia y participativa</td>
<td>La selección de la actividad responde a las opciones de los promotores pero en una organización centrada en la rentabilidad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha de responder al interés general y a la prestación de un servicio público excluyendo otras finalidades</td>
<td>Responde a un campo de acción que decide la organización de acuerdo con sus funciones y valores</td>
<td>Responde a la acción a través de un producto o servicio rebuscado que ha de conseguir calidad y sostenibilidad económica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La dirección responde a una representación política temporal de acuerdo con unos procesos electorales</td>
<td>La dirección responde a unos valores asociativos fundacionales y a la selección por parte de los órganos colegiados</td>
<td>La dirección es una decisión de la propiedad de acuerdo con la adecuación a la dinámica interna y al mercado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La relación con las personas relación administrador-administrado</td>
<td>Una relación asociación-asociado</td>
<td>Una relación empresa-cliente</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un modelo de gestión público muy controlado por los procedimientos jurídico-administrativos</td>
<td>Un modelo de gestión delegado por los promotores o socios y participativo en la toma de decisiones</td>
<td>Un modelo de gestión privada y reservada centrada en el rendimiento y la consecución de los objetivos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lógica pública</td>
<td>Lógica pública / privada</td>
<td>Lógica privada</td>
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Some final reflections:

- Cultural agents are actors who work in the spheres created by democratic policies. It is important to deeply think about the way they have acted in the local territorial framework and the consequences of not supporting their implementation.
- The huge increase in recent decades does not correspond with a modern legislative framework acceptable to the current reality. Many of these entities are still structured according to restrictive legislations, which are inadequate to participate in the public task.
- Many of such organisations are divided and individualised, thus making the creation of regulation and dialogue structures with decision-making authorities of social policies something of a challenge.
- The cultural and socio-economic development cannot not be implemented without a structure of agents in the set of the territorial dynamic.
- Agents represent an essential development asset of a territorial reality. Their interaction and complementarity are crucial elements to use the potentialities of their context.
- The previous table shows how the various cultural agents are or not related. The reality of a territory is a more or less stable system in which actors take part in the situation and wish to play a certain role. To make this happen, relations between agents should be promoted to develop more or less stable networks of social interaction. By analysing such interactions, this set of relations and contacts is known in detail, as well as their potential of development is evaluated.
- To design a cultural policy, it is important to know the agents involved according to their actions and implications in a certain sector, as they are social actors influenced by the action to be developed. Such data allow us to place the proposals in a broader field, to adapt the action to different perceptions or meanings of each cultural agent, by studying the desirable or not predicted repercussions, and to take part in permanent trading and regulation processes.
- New field of combined action are found out in such dynamics, considering their oppositions and conflicts as a field of complexity and of diversity.

5. Cultural agents, audiences, and consumers

Regardless of its dimensions, the contemporary reality of the cultural action requires to give other perspectives related to the most classical introduction of agents within the framework of cultural policies previously presented.

The complex reality of participating and organising the cultural life of current societies cannot be wholly placed within the parameters of cultural agents’ function. People interact individually and collectively through the various types provided by the cultural life of their environment and through the actual possibilities beyond the structured participation.

The diversity of activities, forms, media, and products by which artistic realities communicate and articulate with individuals leads to distinguish social or target groups from cultural action.

Coob and Elder (1972) suggested the relation between public policies and groups with the capacity of conflict or consensus, and distinguished between actors and audiences, thus allowing us to make a first differentiation by including a broader set of people to which a policy is addressed.
From this perspective, a third group is worth included: consumers. Without expecting to socially participate, and most of the times participating from individual positions, consumers are clear target groups of the artistic reality, with the capacity of promoting processes of approval and rejection of expressive forms.

As various forms of agents were suggested, there can also be different forms or typologies of audiences. From those most interested or specialised in specific cultural activities to audiences in general to which a cultural policy is potentially addressed.

New processes generating mixed or shared situations are found in such differentiations. We refer, for instance, to viewer’s associations, friends of museums, etc. who, from grouping a loyal and permanent audience, can become true actors or cultural agents related to a service or facility.

From the consumer’s point of view, there are not many experiences proving that the consumer of cultural products is protected as in other products or sectors. This line encourages to think about the relations between the cultural fact and individuals from a new perspective, which will become more important as the sensitivity and importance in the market increase. For instance, the creation of consumer associations in the cultural field: although they do not exist, they are part of the citizens’ demand due to the impunity of some products of the industry of culture and leisure that many times seriously disagree with the essential values and rights.

Without exhausting the possibilities of forms and typologies, we think that it is interesting to introduce new approaches to the classical readings of agents, audiences, and consumers, and these new approaches should be considered when managing and developing cultural policies. Maybe from this perspective, some elements could be provided to normalise the cultural sector even more.
6. Cultural agents in information society

To conclude, we should consider that information society, internet, mobile phones, apps, etc. have led to many possibilities for the cultural expressiveness and creativity and for the emergency of which some authors call as digital culture. These changes greatly influence the approaches of the role of cultural agents in our societies, but the most important fact is the large number of means and formats influencing the participation in cultural life.

In this way, cultural agents should combine traditional formats with new ways of action which modify and enrich the readings about the role of cultural agents. In this sense, information society has created a new framework of cultural interaction which notably affects the ways of action of cultural agents by including new variables to be considered by cultural management, such as:

- Increase of the potentiality in cultural interactions
- Quick communication
- Other ways of participation
- Change of audition and cultural consumption processes
- New value of both presence and live culture
- Change of the ways of structuring cultural organisations
- Crisis in the most classical cultural agents

So, cultural managers should consider the double dimension of cultural agents which goes from very traditional ways to new environments in which the role of new agents is going to modify the map and the ways of actors of cultural life.

For Reflection

- We propose to think about various issues:
  o Which are the most particular characteristics of each cultural agent? Which elements mostly influence: legislation, legitimacy, tradition, etc.?
  o In which cultural environments are agents better or worse developed?
  o How different is a management model of an agent from the others?
  o How important is each agent in the cultural life of your context?
- Search on Internet different works on cultural maps and then analyse how agents are discussed. es.wikipedia.org
- Do the same exercise by analysing documents on cultural statistics, studies on the cultural sector, or culture satellite accounts. www.mcu.es
- Analyse the importance of each agent from the citizens’ point of view and as an essential cultural right.
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Documents

1. Videos of the seminars on different issues of the Cátedra Unesco on cultural policies and cooperation. www.catedraunesco.com

2. Documentation Centre of the Barcelona Provincial Council. CERC. www.diba.cat

3. Cultural management portal of the University of Barcelona. www.youtube.com

References


