

Democracy and culture in Europe and the Mediterranean: the challenges of the European Capital of Culture model

'there is a gap between what an artist from Cairo is expected to produce and what an artist from Cairo actually produces'ⁱ

Introduction

On the ninth of March of this year, a section of the producers of olive oil in Italy protested to their government about the temporary increase in the quota of olive oil at zero-tariff the European Commission applied to olive oil produced by and imported into the EU from Tunisian producers. Italian producers, particularly those catering for a specialised clientele and afraid of the adverse effect of the increased quota, complained to their government that such competitive advantage was unfair and dangerous to their own survival. Interestingly, this commercial incentive was adopted by the Commission in September 2015, but became a matter of national outcry only months later, curiously coinciding with growing Italian concern at the threat various Arab military and terrorist forces were posing to Italian nationals. These included the murder to a young research in Egypt in February, and the confirmed death of industrial workers, alongside the escape of others, in Libya, in March, at the same time that news that IS forces infiltrating the Tunisian border seemed to be confirmed.

You may wonder what this anecdote has to do with the matter of the European Capital of Culture and the impact this model of cultural manifestation may have on relations in the Mediterranean. Such a position is understandable, especially if one adopts a non-commercial perspective on cultural expression. However, if one takes note of the importance, financial and otherwise, of cultural expression and production in the Euro-Med area, one can identify common links, by means of practices, between agricultural perspectives and other cultural ones. This is especially true if one focuses on the role of the individual, the relation of individuals to their communities, and the cultural rights they may share and try to assert.

The European Capital of Culture model in the contemporary Euro-Mediterranean context

The European Capital of Culture programme has, over the past 30 years, developed into an instrument whereby the European Union has attempted to address matters of cultural democracy through citizenship participation in cultural projects by promoting accessibility and diversity, achieving mixed results. Through this paper I propose to raise a few questions related to this process with a focus on Valletta 2018.ⁱⁱ The challenge of addressing local culture through an institutional programme will be addressed.

Preparations for Valletta 2018 started in earnest in 2011. The challenge has been a formidable one considering that this was when, in many countries around the world, including those in Europe and the Mediterranean, the economic and financial crisis which first struck in 2008, was still wreaking havoc with communities belonging to varied cultural contexts.

The year 2011 was, most notably, also the year which saw the so-called Arab Spring give rise to numerous grass-root movements of political protest; some of them have triggered dramatic change to the social realities in many Arab countries around the Mediterranean. It also challenged, to varying degrees, the Orientalist view instilled in many observers that cultural change, in Arab states, was not possible.

Through this paper I propose to ask how Valletta, lying at the southern end of Europe and below Tunis and just miles off the Libyan coast, can make the most of an opportunity to address the impact of global events on small, local realities. I wonder whether one can assess the relevance of the large geo-political context to the more defined local reality, and whether this can be done both for its negative results, as well as for positive ones. The former may come from a pervasiveness of bad practice and damaging influence spreading from global to local contexts and back again. The latter may come from changing landscapes which may give rise to new possibilities of change within, exchange outside and the transformation of inherited ways of living.

One of the most important changes which our contemporary age has brought about is that of access to culture. This aspect may be studied in light of economic and political changes, accompanied by others in technology and the media which also play a significant part in the events pertaining to the shifting political and social scenarios in Arab countries and the subsequent mobility of thousands of people in the Euro-med area.

Finally, one may also attempt to relate the European Capital of Culture experience of Valletta as a European and Mediterranean city to two other aspects of cultural action towards democracy. This assessment may choose to address different elements. Firstly, one may assess the role of international cultural organisations in supporting cultural participation, mobility and networking in the Euro-med area (e.g. the role of the *Institut français* and the British Council in Arab countries, and the position of non-state/independent arts/civil society organisations in relation to the state and the establishment). Secondly, one may look at to what extent have museums, as a prime example of cultural institution, and as a depository and vehicle for cultural narration and engagement, have regained lost relevance following sustained and mediatized attacks on key sites and their visitors.

MUŻA – from a national to an international museum of art?

I would like to make a brief direct reference to one of the most important infrastructural projects of Valletta 2018, namely the new museum of art, MUŻA, which however uses its structural side to reach deeper into the community it is embedded in.

The chosen name is indicative of where this project is heading and the key values which it enshrines. MUŻA is an acronym which stands for *Mużew Nazzjonali tal-Arti*. It also refers to the muses; the mythological figures from classical antiquity inspiring creativity and, in effect, the etymological source of the word museum. MUŻA is also the Maltese word for inspiration. The museum space has already started, physically and virtually, to engage with various individuals within a varied community in order to question the role of museums as depositories of narratives to be shared, exchanged and rediscovered in new ways and formats. The thematic approaches of the museum knit the stories of Malta with that of its wider European and Mediterranean contexts, and its model is one to follow in terms of weaving a common European and Mediterranean narrative that seeks commonality in its past, and more importantly strives to build new common stories for its future.

Challenges and disconnections

Malta is very close to Italy in terms of culture, which is a consequence of the geographical and historical links between the two territories from the Roman era onwards. Hence, Maltese exposure to culture and communications from Italy is significant. Two brief interviews on

Radio Rai Uno on Sunday 22 November 2015 inspired me to make a further few reflections. One interview was carried out with the Director of the *Goethe Institute* in Rome. She discussed the role of culture in addressing European fears at a sense of disintegration and disaffection with regard to a European sense of community and a general feeling of suspicion towards others. She embraced the slogan ‘più cultura meno paura’ championed by the cultural sister channel *Radio Tre* by explaining how programmes and festivals addressing cultural diversity aimed at familiarizing Europeans with each other’s cultural expression. Understanding, dialogue and tolerance were hoped for. Unfortunately, my observation and experience tell me that cultural institutions struggle to establish their audience because of a high level of supply of cultural and entertainment possibilities, including films, concerts and gastronomic happenings. As a side note, even literary events are spun in a way that uses established names to attract particular audiences. But it is targeted audiences which are reached, and marketed segmentation does not bring in diverse audiences, particularly those not interested or worse, disaffected by what cultural institutions and events seem to be to the general public. In other words, the same audiences go to the same venues, with success being measured on the inclusion of individuals or groups who are out of but close to particular segments e.g. migrants who have integrated into the middle class. This is true of small cities like Valletta, where the ‘usual suspects’ are accompanied by an important but slow increase in diverse faces, particularly the young, but few migrants. The same can be argued for big city centres, where public or private spending on diversifying audiences is limited, as has been shown by Robert Hewison in a recent assessment of New Labour cultural policies in the UK.

Similar observations may be made with regard to EUNIC, the network of EU national institutes of culture: the work of the network is admirable and successful at developing a sense of Europeanness across communities. However, the impact is restricted to artists and literati who are already sensitive to this language. The general public, if accessed, may have its curiosity tickled, but rarely engaged (European Languages Day celebrated through posters in the Brussels metro come to mind).

ECOCs are also caught up in this ambitious yet underwhelming mission. The European Commission and the various monitoring panels set up to evaluate candidates and actual cities emphasise what is described as a European dimension. Rarely does this go beyond exchanges between artists and producers who have carved for themselves particular audiences and structures which are precious, important for the development of European culture, but largely insignificant to a wider audience, including the general public who may attend a big event, like an opening or an open-door concert, and then go back home to separate walks of life.

I also wanted to make reference to cultural institutions and museums since contemporary mission statements emphasise public engagement. Strategy-wise, such organisations aim at opening up their doors, shedding any stuffy image they may have inherited over the years, reach out to adults through their children through strong school programmes which clearly also instill in young people a sense of curiosity towards history and cultural matters, and mix their palette of content as well as partners. It is interesting and important to assess what type of headway is being made. One example which comes to mind is the *Institut du Monde Arabe*, which in the wake of the Paris attacks in 2015 is of particular significance. There seems to be a distance between the programming of such institutes and what is happening on the ground. An instance of this was the limited role of the IMA in the wake of the *Charlie*

Hebdo attacks in January 2015, with the march including the site in its route, and the silence after the attacks in November.

Conclusion

Allow me conclude with an anecdote which somehow recalls the one referred to at the start of this presentation, and therefore growing tensions, of a global nature, between instances of cultural expression that generate tension rather than understanding and tolerance. Once again, the example takes us to agriculture. In February of this year it was the turn of French wine producers to take up arms against the organisers of the *Tour de France* since a Chilean wine was selected as a sponsor of the 103th edition, taking place this summer. Strangely, this sponsorship deal had already been in place for the past two years, but had coincided with parts of the race in the UK and Belgium, rather than closer to the wine-producing areas in the southern neighbours of Spain and Andorra. Here again, this episode of fear and protectionism allows us to consider how the combination of cultural, including agricultural, and commercial, may make people feel threaten and closed to exchange and collaboration. Laws and commercial agreements need to grow deep roots of understanding with communities if they are to be accepted and contribute to any positive change.

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ⁱ Pablo Lafuente quoted in Noam Chomsky, *Occupy*, Penguin, 2012, page 102, <http://www.penguin.co.uk/books/occupy/9780241964026/>.

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