

Speech

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Cultural Age – Integration and Cohesion Seminar - Introduction

This paper is a transcript of the introduction to a seminar on ‘The Cultural Age, Integration and Cohesion’, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and given at Demos on 23 June 2008. It was the second of two seminars on ‘The Cultural Age’, the second being on ‘The Cultural Age and Education’.

[Check against Delivery]

Good morning.

This is the second of two seminars on what we are calling ‘The Cultural Age’: together, they address the changing importance of culture in the world today.

The first focused on education, and the need to build the skills to read different cultures, and it generated debate that raises interesting questions for today’s topic which is integration and cohesion in the cultural age.

The programme of work we are developing on the Cultural Age is about how we come to terms with a changing world, and what role culture plays in that.

It is also about how government and cultural policy makers can work with academics to establish a theoretical underpinning and healthy continuum of research to what must, in the long run, be a grand and long term project.

The Cultural Age refers to the greater intensity with which we encounter a more diverse range of cultures than ever before.

Building the skills to read and respond to them will be intimately related to integration and cohesion, and so much of what we'll talk about today is about planning for the future as well helping meet the challenges of the present.

We began the first session by looking at the broader context of a wider struggle to make sense of the world and the changes around us.

While we are witness to big challenges, from climate change to global security, we are also unsure as to how we will meet them.

The Sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, calls this Liquid Modernity: this refers to constant change and a questioning of the conventional as more and more that we took for granted appears less certain.

On the one hand, new technologies have made far flung places, ideas and peoples much more accessible, and we have developed the will to explore and find out more.

But, on the other, this has led us to question our identity, which - paradoxically - leads us to fall back on comfortable ideas like nationalism and the established icons that surround it.

So, in the midst of fluidity, there is a dangerous tendency to ossification.

Similarly, at the same time as we are fascinated by the rise of countries like India and China, we feel threatened by the changes they represent to the existing world order and how we perceive our position within it.

Furthermore, as many in the developed world become more aware of their global responsibilities, it is becoming equally apparent that the global structures we have devised ... from the UN to the WTO and even aid charities ... are inadequate to the task of governing the world effectively.

One thing that is becoming clear is that big issues like these are out of the hands of any one government, let alone any one individual, and tackling them requires collective action.

And that means that we will also have to respond to change on an individual level.

It is therefore increasingly important that we have the means and opportunity to make the choices by which to do so.

And, as we do, we will become even more interdependent.

This requires that we have the skills to respond and adapt to the choices of others.

And these are shaped by culture.

As a result, culture will be central in meeting all the challenges I just mentioned.

It's how we get a grip on other people.

A recent survey for the European Commission found that about 88% of European Citizens see cultural exchange as being central in learning about and understanding others.

On the most basic level, look at the rising interest in Bollywood, or Chinese fiction.

Similarly, declining faith in conventional politics has meant that disagreement and conflict are played out in cultural spaces.

One familiar instance of this is the rejection of mass – and, specifically, American - culture and all of the problems that that can cause, be it anti-globalisation protests in Genoa and elsewhere, or the contentious theory of the clash of civilisations.

But the kind of cultural change I'm talking about goes much deeper than that.

Globally, there are changes in patterns and cultures of consumption; changes in the cultures to which, over generations, we have become accustomed and around which we have established the structures and institutions that make up a public realm that no longer seems so solid.

And there are changes to our assumptions and perceptions of different cultures, too: China, for instance, has moved from the mysterious East to becoming an economic powerhouse - but it is still through films like *Crouching Tiger* and tourist sites like the Forbidden City and the Great Wall that we approach its values.

We are also becoming more aware of cultural variety and difference.

As a result of vast increase in media and communication, there have been dramatic changes in the frequency with which we meet different cultures.

Every second of every day, we encounter a multitude of very different cultural forms and attitudes.

Domestically, and with increased migration and diaspora communities, there are changes in the cultures around us. These are evidenced by changes in everything from the foods available in our shops and the clothes we see people wearing, through to the attitudes to public space and the architectural styles we see.

Very simply, the increased frequency with which we encounter different cultures means that cultural variation has become a feature of everyday and local contexts;

And, this has been emphasised as we travel the world more freely, and global communication brings different images, films, stories and attitudes into our homes.

Amidst all these changes, it is becoming clear that one of the things we are missing is the means to respond to cultural differences.

I said a few moments ago that we have become accustomed to structures and institutions on which our public realm is built.

One of these is language. Last year, I wrote a pamphlet on the English Language: it made a very simple point – English is spoken around the world by about a billion people and, of course, they all use it in different contexts, and in different ways.

And this will change the language and bring different values into it in the form of new structures and new words.

That means that one of the skills English speakers will need in the future is accommodation – the capacity to respond to these changes.

Not all that surprisingly, I suppose, this idea was met with howls of derision and outrage from large numbers of the British, and even global, press: we were accused of ‘corrupting the Queen’s English’ and ‘debasement Anglo-Saxon values’.

In itself, that criticism is symptomatic of the wider issue we’re tackling today.

The structures and assumptions on which our culture is built, and from which many of our political actions therefore grow, are simply outmoded and can, in their most populist form, be positively dangerous.

The problem is that these are also the structures within which we are trying to respond to change.

Of course, policy-makers, cultural professionals and academics all recognise this, but it highlights a significant issue: culture is at the heart of how we will have to respond to the grand changes we are facing in the world.

Understanding different cultures will therefore be vital.

However, this must be about far more than simply providing information about different cultures, be it through a festival, an exhibition or whatever else: these will speak to some ... but not all.

There are big questions to be asked about attitudinal change, and how to encourage wider response to difference, seeing it as a starting point for conversation rather than a point at which to draw a line.

It is only by having those conversations that we can renegotiate a more global public realm in which different values can co-exist and evolve alongside each other, and those conversations must be built on skills of accommodation, interpretation and reception of other cultures.

But there's a big question in this, which is 'what do we mean by culture'

The theorist, Raymond Williams, once said that culture is one of the most difficult words in the English language to define.

It can mean anything from the habits, norms and behaviour of a given group, through to a more commercially-based definition of the kind of cultural engagements and products that people consume.

That's a very wide spectrum.

The definition we used in the first seminar is helpful in trying to put culture more centrally in government and policy agenda.

It is of Culture, as the everyday calculus of histories, behaviours, consumption and production that has made us and makes us who we are, and identifies each one of us as being either different or similar to others.

It's evident as much in the artefacts we see in museums as it is in the objects and food we encounter in daily life and the products we create.

These are connected as a culture by the capacity to read meaning and identity in them.

The challenge now is to build skills in reading across cultures.

Too often, this is seen as a nuanced learning, limited to academic study, but it is becoming clear that it will be essential to how we co-exist and manage relationships in the future.

It even goes beyond the current idea of cosmopolitanism: surely, as the world becomes more and more dependent on inter-cultural dialogues and the renegotiation of cultural assumptions, cosmopolitanism must be thought of as a skill or capacity to be nurtured and developed more than as a characteristic of a few?

We need to find ways of making it more widespread: the simple fact is that we will all need skills of cultural interpretation and accommodation.

Solving major challenges, from global interrelation to community cohesion, will depend upon it.

The second thing to clarify is that culture is not a neutral space.

While exposure to cultural difference can be a means of informing, it can also be a flashpoint for argument.

It can also provide an important space for dissent.

In the first seminar, I used the now famous example of Jade Goody, Shilpa Shetty and Big Brother to show just how quickly inabilities to respond to different cultures can escalate via media and diaspora networks into global tensions and - importantly - how culture can be a space in which argument occurs

The irony, of course, was that – contrary to Orwell’s vision – the Goody/Shetty incident highlighted the degree to which the media and Big Brother *cannot* control.

I’ll centre this seminar around another example that I mentioned briefly last time round.

Early last year, a film was released that dramatised the popular American comic book, *300*.

It was based ... loosely ... on the battle of Thermopylae in which 300 Spartans held out against a vastly greater force of Persians.

In itself, the mythology of this story derives from Herodotus and so comes with heavy warnings about bias and Grecian preference.

However, for our purposes, the film and the reaction to it highlight the importance of the Cultural Age, some of the challenges it throws up and some clues as to how we might meet them.

The film was controversial because of its depiction of the Persians.

In contrast to the heroic - and, noticeably, white Spartans - the Persians in *300* were sybaritic, brutal and barbarous.

It didn’t take a conspiracy theorist to make the connection between fictional Thermopylae and a 21st Century so-called ‘War on terror’.

Not surprisingly, the many Iranians in the US who first came across the film took strong offence.

Their complaint was not only about the misrepresentation of Persians, but also the fear that – because Persian history is not on the curriculum – many children would *only* learn about Persia through the depiction in *300*.

The response and the form of protest taken reveals much about why culture must be taken seriously across all areas of government.

On the internet, a network of protest formed very quickly.

Bloggers were quick to denounce the film, and it soon came to the attention of global media networks like the BBC and the Washington Post.

From there, it was soon being discussed at the level of international politics, with an Iranian filmmaker and adviser to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaking publicly to denounce the film.

To recap, just like Big Brother, a piece of popular culture rapidly became a point of international argument.

In policy terms, the story of 300 has lessons for education, culture, communities, foreign relations and a wide range of other areas.

What is still more interesting is the action some bloggers took.

They created what is called a 'Google Bomb'.

The more technologically-minded in the room can correct me on this but that basically means that, by linking repeatedly to a given site, you can rig Google's famous search engine to divert traffic away from another site.

So, the plan was that a search for 300, pretty soon took you not to Warner Bros' website, but to a protest website called Project 300.

The new site didn't just denounce the film: it took the opportunity to provide images of Persian history as a counterpoint.

And it did so by illustrating artefacts and linking to museum collections of Persian cultural production around the world, as well as contemporary Iranian cultural forms like music, films and theatre.

A year and a half on, and the combination of Wikipedia and Warner Bros have knocked it down to 12th, but it's still there if you want to find it.

Project 300 reveals not only the impact of culture on how we get along, but also the volatility of cultural reaction in a world in which information is vastly more attainable, much more easily sent and so is open to far wider interpretation.

It also demonstrates the importance that people place on cultural artefacts and cultural heritage as a means of expressing their values.

This makes culture very important indeed in the agenda of integration and cohesion.

Last year, cultural provision was mentioned by the Commission for Integration for and Cohesion as a means of engaging people and communities in expressing and showing their values.

We know from DCMS figures that large numbers engage in cultural activities each year.

What is the potential of going still further, and building the skills to read, examine and interpret different cultures and the values that lie behind them?

Simply expressing difference can serve to reinforce it. What skills are needed to overcome cultural difference ... and where are they going to come from?

How can policy-makers, educationalists and cultural professionals work together in the future to build these skills?

Before I hand over to Rushanara [*Ali, Associate Director of The Young Foundation*] to get her thoughts ... I'd just like to pick up on something that emerged in the first seminar

One of the speakers, Angharad Wynn Jones, who is the Director of the London International Festival of Theatre, spoke of her experience of working with children of many different cultural backgrounds in East London.

She made the point that in addition to seeking to *build* skills in reading across cultures, in fact, we have much to learn from the children who have grown up doing exactly that.

Her point was that those skills are not reflected in many of the institutional and structural assumptions that I mentioned earlier and which will govern those children's later lives.

So, I'd like to kick off this discussion with a few thoughts.

How can we rethink the role of cultural institutions in these terms?

What is the role of cultural institutions in building cultural literacy?

And, in particular, how can cultural thinking of this sort be factored into policy-making more widely?

Samuel Jones

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