

The Value of Cultural Diversity

Von: Irit Sholomon-Kornblit

Cultural diversity is a considerable wealth, an inherent resource to humankind, that needs to be perceived and recognized as such.

– Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO, 2009–2017¹

Introduction

Cultural diversity² is a polysemous phrase: it can alternately be a description of a given state of affairs (e.g., “India has a lot of cultural diversity”), a policy (“We must encourage Hollywood’s cultural diversity”), or a value in and of itself (cultural diversity as a “heritage” or “treasure”). In the framework of this short piece, I want to focus on cultural diversity as a value, and demonstrate how the use of this phrase as a universal, unquestionable value in fact conceals embedded layers of economic and geopolitical interests that were, and still are, the object of intense debate. This is accomplished, I argue, by mixing two distinct iterations of value: economic or political value in the sense of worth or utility, and ethical value in the sense of a quality or virtue. When economic or political value poses as ethical value, the speaker avoids – and evades – valid inquiry and reasonable critique.

Below, I examine the phrase “cultural diversity” in the context of UNESCO’s 2001 Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity,³ a milestone in the perception and discourse of cultural diversity to this day. I begin by reconstructing the concept’s journey to the Declaration through two distinct pathways, and show how each iteration of this phrase served its own interests and agenda within a larger political debate, and how all of the iterations ultimately found a broader meaning within the Declaration to respond to a wide variety of contexts and points of view.

The campaign for “cultural exception”

After World War II, the Bretton Woods Agreements laid the groundwork for a gradual opening of the market between the US and Europe. During the so-called Uruguay Round, the largest global trade negotiation in history, France attempted to negotiate an “exception” to the liberalization of trade for cultural products and services in order to preserve their economic advantage in the EU market in cinema and their global cultural status vis-à-vis the US. This quickly became known in the media as the “cultural exception” or “French

exception” campaign, with the French arguing that “culture isn’t simply a commodity.”⁴ French president François Mitterrand first used this argument in September 1993 while visiting Polish students in Gdansk, a few years after the fall of the Soviet Union:

I take this opportunity to proclaim it, as this is the right place to do so: the creations of the mind are not goods, the services of culture are not simple trades. [...] What is at stake is the cultural identity of our nations, [...] It [...] is [...] about preserving the universal idea of culture in the face of economic forces alone.⁵

Mitterrand created two binary dichotomies; in each, one side is presented as morally superior to the other. Culture is referred to as “the creations of the mind,” “the cultural identity of our nations,” and “the universal idea of culture”; while trade relates to “goods,” “simple trades,” and “economic forces alone.” The second dichotomy is more subtle, juxtaposing France, the seat of universal and humanist culture, with the US, bearer of the forces of globalization that will purportedly wipe out all of the world’s cultural identities. The uniformization that will follow the unbridled entry of US cultural industries like Hollywood and American TV shows is likened in the subtext to the forces of totalitarianism, with the president referring to Gdansk’s recent communist past.⁶ In this binary setting, culture, specifically French culture, gets the moral upper hand by being laden with value; it is the seat of nation’s identity, it is the product of human creation, and it represents universalist ideals.

As the French campaign that ensued at the GATT and later the WTO failed, the French transferred their campaign to a different venue, where they were more likely to succeed: UNESCO.⁷ World culture was one of UNESCO’s main preoccupations, the US was not a member at the time, and there was a very large Francophone alliance (all of France’s former colonies). As a result, it was a promising avenue, and the phrase “cultural exception” quickly made way for “cultural diversity,” which better aligned with UNESCO’s discursive history.

UNESCO’s understanding of “cultural diversity”

UNESCO had its own history with cultural diversity. Franco-Belgian anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the term in his 1952 composition *Race and History*,⁸ commissioned by UNESCO as one of its first tasks following World War II in order to address the issue of racism. In his struggle for the recognition of the value of cultural diversity, Levi-Strauss argued against a Eurocentric perspective on culture and for cultural relativism and the diversity of cultures, which together form the whole that is humanity. The purpose: making the universal idea of mankind coexist with the plurality of forms human life took throughout the world.⁹

This idea was to shape UNESCO's policies for years to come, and, in 1982, the Mexico City Declaration of Cultural Policies proclaimed the value of freshly decolonized nations' cultural identities a "treasure,"¹⁰ since "all cultures form[ed] part of the common heritage of mankind."¹¹ These nations' cultures were presented as an alternative source of wealth to Western cultural industries. The decolonized nations "proclaimed the value of their own cultural wealth, of their multiple accomplishments, which couldn't be measured in dollars or cents."¹² The metaphors of cultural wealth, treasure, and heritage represented a nation's valuable culture. The dollars and cents referring to Western – and, more specifically, American – culture, had a pejorative connotation of being of lesser worth, much like Mitterrand's dichotomization of culture and trade. The economic metaphor in the Mexico City Declaration transferred the economic value of wealth, treasure, and heritage to the ethical, universally recognized human right value of cultural identity, fulfilling a political purpose: recognizing the right to defend and preserve one's culture and heritage as a cultural right, a human right recognized within international law. This recognition thus also served as a political tool to give peoples the legitimacy for independence, as "the assertion of cultural identity [...] contribute[d] to the liberation of peoples" and "[c]onversely, any form of domination constitute[d] a denial or an impairment of that identity."¹³

A further source of "alternative" wealth for Global South countries lay in their biological diversity,¹⁴ which was significantly richer than that of their northern counterparts. The UN and UNESCO's discourse on linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity became progressively more entangled, with tables comparing linguistic and biodiversity in developing countries¹⁵ as proof of their wealth in "biocultural diversity," later defined as "the total sum of the world's differences, no matter what their origin."¹⁶

While the discourse on cultural rights of indigenous peoples was steeped in metaphors of the past as something to be preserved, the Brundtland Report (1987), named *Our Common Future*, included the more future-oriented notions of sustainable development, and the need to take into account the future generations. These new values prompted UNESCO to declare culture as one element that must be taken into account in sustainability policies.¹⁷

The merging of values

It is in this context that we must read the merging of the French campaign behind the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity with the preexisting UNESCO discourse on the topic of cultural diversity. The director-general of UNESCO at the time, Koïchiro Matsuura, stated that "the debate between those countries who would like to defend cultural goods and services which must not be treated as mere commodities or consumer goods and those which would hope to promote cultural rights has thus been surpassed, with the two approaches brought together by the Declaration, [linking] two complementary attitudes."¹⁸

Cultural diversity, in the Declaration, was “as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature” and “the common heritage of humanity”; it “should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present of future generations”¹⁹ in order to “to preserve cultural diversity as a living, and thus renewable treasure.”²⁰

The Declaration integrates preexisting values at UNESCO such as biodiversity, world cultural heritage, and sustainable development (the latter signaled by the reference to the “present and future generations”), and links them to the newly reintroduced value of cultural diversity. When cultural diversity is linked with this plethora of other values held in high esteem by the international community, it becomes entangled in a web of values that are impossible to refute; the Declaration’s origins in a campaign of economic and political character between two Western powerhouses is forgotten.

Cultural diversity’s polysemy, constructed over time, engendered a thickly layered “value” – one that consists of actual wealth when referring to cultural industries, alternative wealth when it relates to cultural heritage and biodiversity, and irrefutable ethical worth. Policy, economic interests, and ethics have thus become enmeshed in a way that makes cultural diversity a highly valuable – and entirely indisputable – concept.

References

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