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Brussel en cultuur

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Synopsis nr. 8

Brussels and culture

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Conference-debate:
2 february, 19.45

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I. Observations

1. *The general context*

With globalisation economic development has gradually shifted from the production of industrial goods to investing in intangible goods and services (copyrights, patents, tourism, event creation, creation of images and brands, etc.), in which culture has a growing role. Culture in the broad sense is clearly becoming a factor of development and attractiveness in today's competition between cities. Globalised cities are becoming increasingly multicultural and exposing their existing communities to issues of cohabitation and hybrid cultures. This rising multiculturalism henceforward requires that cultural policies should connect the aims of recognition with the redistribution and access policies that were gradually set up in parallel with the development of the Social Welfare State.

2. *Advantages that are often unutilised and/or countered*

a. Brussels is a small global city that is currently in a phase of transition. Whilst continuing to cling to its inherited reference systems, it has been caught up in the whirlwind of globalisation, and all the rankings show that Brussels is a major player in this globalisation.

b. Brussels is a metropolis, the urban reality of which extends far beyond its institutional boundaries. This fact is masked by the absence of a metropolitan governance scheme but also, on the inside, by the city's fragmentation into individual municipalities called communes (tantamount to boroughs).

c. Brussels is a capital city. Whereas the many functions of a capital that Brussels has taken on within Belgium's institutional reconfiguration do not truly support the project of building an integrated city, its status as the capital of the European Union

is an irrefutable advantage to the extent that the construction of a post-national Europe in a globalised world should send strong, innovative cultural expectations and demands in Brussels's direction, expectations and demands that distance themselves from the models of cultural centralisation and celebrations of culture that are traditionally linked to Europe's national capitals.

d. Brussels is a young, cosmopolitan, international city. It is highly connected in a context in which the growing importance of the area covered by flows of all kinds makes connectivity a vital factor of development. Its population is very international and multicultural. Historically a crossroads of contact between Latin and Germanic cultures, Brussels today is deeply multicultural due to the extraordinary mixing of cultures that resulted from and continues to result from recent developments (be it waves of immigration or the effects of Brussels's status as the capital of Europe). On the other hand, its demographics, boosted primarily by immigrants, is characterised by a large proportion of young people whose potential for dynamism is totally wasted for the time being.

e. Finally, Brussels is an international hothouse of art and culture. It has an impressive cultural network backed by an extremely rich tradition of action by associations that take an active part in the deployment certain public policies (neighbourhood contracts, outpatient mental health services, social real estate agencies, and the like). Brussels is also an international focal point in various branches of the arts, such as modern dance, opera, and, increasingly, the visual arts. Artists are moving into the city. The region also houses a growing concentration of recording studios and production companies, especially in the audiovisual sector. Brussels also has a network of internationally renowned art schools that draw high-level students from abroad in droves, students who often go on to start their careers in the town. Culturally, and despite its institutional cleavages, Brussels is above all an open city, one in which each and every person can invest and take initiatives, without having to kowtow to any one predominant cultural model.

f. Brussels suffers from the lack of an integrated vision. The division of cultural powers between the French-speaking and Flemish communities has led to a certain organisation and institutionalisation of culture in Brussels that can only be called "communitaristic", i.e., drawn along linguistic and cultural community lines. So it is for the places of culture (libraries, cultural centres, etc.), which are uselessly duplicated, or even the strategies to attach foreign populations or communities of foreign descent to one of the country's constituent cultural communities, as the creation of a Flemish Moroccan cultural centre, the institution of a Flemish African House, the French-speaking Community's monolingual social cohesion policy, and the ongoing struggles of "cultural colonisation" of first-generation immigrants or bilingual or bi-community cultural institutions illustrate with great clarity. This lack of an integrated vision is widening the gaps between institutional thinking, social reality, and emerging cultural practices, as shown by the following examples:

- The division of cultural policies along Community lines is increasingly out of step with the city's multicultural make-up. Even though belonging to the French-speaking Community remains dominant and French remains the major language of public communication (more than 95% of the population, versus 35% for English and 28% for Dutch), the population's multinationality and mul-

ticulturality are opening up more and more to mixing and “hybridisation” (more than 40% of the city’s households are multilingual).

- The population segments’ cultural practices, especially those of young people, extend well beyond the boundaries created by organization by Cultural Community. The criteria that govern the frequentation of places of culture are not primarily linked to the cultural community and the various publics give themselves cultural standards by means that are less and less those of the subsidised cultural activities in which these community disputes are carried on.
- The cultural sector is freeing itself from bipolarity, for example by such practices and systematic translation and subtitling and by inter-Community exchanges of shows and activities. Some resolutely bi-Community and intercultural projects, such as the Zinneke Parade, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, BRXLBRAVO, and networks of various players, such as the Réseau des Arts à Bruxelles and Brussels Kunstenoverleg, which have signed a cultural agreement and are working together to develop a cultural plan for Brussels, are also taking shape.
- Other players that do not necessarily belong to traditional cultural circles (As-sises du tourisme, BECI, trade unions, and so on) are urging people to develop renewed cultural approaches that will turn culture into a lever of development and integration.

II. Questions-issues

1. *Culture's place in the institutional scheme of things*

When it comes to the institutional framework, the main question is that of the necessary conditions for the development of a true urban cultural policy thought out in line with Brussels's specific characteristics rather than on the basis of a primarily two-community framework, the horizon of which is the linguistic homogeneity of the federated entities.

2. *Thinking of culture with a view to Brussels's role as the capital of Europe*

The Treaty of Nice (2001) and Prodi-Verhofstadt Report (2001) explicitly recognised that the functions of Europe's capital went beyond the simple hosting of European institutions. In so doing, they thrust upon Brussels cultural responsibilities that have absolutely not been taken on to date. The question that one must ask is that of the cultural role of the capital of a burgeoning post-national entity within a globalised world in which Europe would like to make heard a voice that is open to the future but anchored in a heritage within which culture was able to carry ambitions that focused on the formation of the person, creativity, criticism, and emancipation at one and the same time.

3. *The place of creativity in urban development*

In a post-Fordist world, culture is more and more part of the market and socialisation is achieved increasingly by the consumption of beauty and expression. Today there is a far-reaching link between urban development, a city's international attractiveness, and a city's creative dynamism. It is thus vital that the political world should take stock of the importance of creativity, but also of culture in general, of education, and of R&D as having a potential for urban development.

4. *Thinking of the city as a "cultural medium"*

Today's urban mutations are also and perhaps first and foremost cultural mutations that must be taken into account: The city's uses are changing, urban time frames and rhythms are changing, the nature and composition of their populations are changing rapidly, and all this is accompanied by cultural changes that policies must take on and foresee. The question is that of thinking of the city as a true cultural medium that is doubtless best rendered by the term "urbanity".

5. *The importance of access*

Whereas the matter of having access to culture that lay at the heart of the cultural policies of the 1960s and '70s tends nowadays to be relegated backstage by the rise of the reference framework of diversity and multiculturalism but also by that of attractiveness, which gives the advantage to thinking about culture aimed at affluent, mobile, connected target populations who are part of a global society, a consistent cultural policy owes it to itself to put this issue back on the agenda. This is because the city is becoming increasingly dual and the new relations that are taking shape between culture and economics will tend to turn cultural goods into consumer goods, turn young people into prime targets, and give priority to cultural forms that are aimed at profitability alone.

6. *The stakes riding on connecting the various scales*

Brussels has both a rich local cultural network and a tradition of participatory culture envisioned primarily on the neighbourhood scale. That is an undeniable strength. The increasing importance of the reference system of internationalisation is raising new questions, giving rise to new institutions and players (e.g., urban marketers), redirecting cultural projects to cater to new audiences (tourists, conventioners, etc.), and calling for new large-scale infrastructure. This tension sets some high stakes, especially because the demands that are linked to internationalisation are likely to create an uncoupling from the remarkable achievements of the local culture that is one of Brussels's cultural assets.

7. *The multicultural stakes*

The question of the policies to wage in a context of multiculturalism is of vital importance today, especially in cities that, like Brussels, have to cope with it head-on. Far from assimilationist policies and communitaristic policies, but also far from the bi-communitarian practices that overlay Brussels's multiculturalism, there is the question of inventing cultural policies for Brussels, especially cultural policies based on intercultural dialogue and initiatives, mixing and hybridness, in order to turn cultural practices into areas of rapprochement rather than distancing.

III. Policy options

1. *Institutional schemes that get political and cultural players to break out of the two-community framework*

Those who are calling for completely recasting cultural policies in Brussels can be divided roughly into those who are in favour of regionalising culture (and by extension all subjects linked to the person) and those who see a chance for increased collaboration between the communities with a dynamic of development of the multi-lingual, intercultural, bicomunitarian sector. The two positions are brought up sharp by the city's institutional reality, according to which the regional political bodies themselves are formatted in line with a two-community framework that includes the division between electoral colleges on the electoral level and thinking in terms of quotas or parity that is out of step with the regions social and cultural reality on the legislative and executive levels. To create the institutional conditions for opening up the existing schemes and practices to intercommunity arrangements (sharing infrastructure, libraries, etc.), but also for developing intercultural initiatives such as those that are cropping up more and more, the region's cultural and political players must accept to detach themselves from their exclusivist community ties. They must likewise position themselves as the guarantors of cultural development that is no longer limited by the horizons of their community ties alone, but instead tends toward an urban dynamics that transcends these divides. Such a shift could be facilitated on the political level by cutting the link between regional and municipal offices on the one hand and membership of the French-speaking or Flemish Community on the other hand.

2. *A cultural vision for the capital of Europe.*

When it comes to its cultural policies, the capital of a post-national Europe that considers itself to be a multicentric, networked capital, owes it to itself:

- to set its sights on being a positive cultural "image" and experience for all Europeans. To do that, it must be not only an important stage, but above all a driving force and node in the networks of cities (of capitals, for example) and the arts, an area for exchange, and a crossroads of cultural experiences (including, of course, for Belgium as a whole). This means strategies of co-production, export, and hosting of cultural productions and achievements. Winning true recognition as the capital of Europe calls for great ambition, such as that of striving to become the New York of Europe;
- to have internationally renowned artistic institutions;
- to take on the ambitions of critical reflexivity, to create a public area for forums and debate, especially about the conditions of cultural development, freedom of expression, hybridness, recognition, access to culture, a different world order, and so on;
- to create a space for hosting new cultural experiences. In today's context of cultural capitalism, moreover, this calls for strong-willed policies in favour of demanding experimental initiatives that cannot find a niche in a world that is dominated by the demands of profitability;

- to give cultural training a central position and to promote the development of high-level artistic schools – something that is already one of the region's remarkable strengths – by amplifying their international attractiveness. Working with traditional educational institutions, it must generate international areas for training in artistic excellence (workshops, summer schools, and so on).

3. *Making creativity a major factor of urban development*

Today, urban development depends upon the concentration of and connections that are established between various talents that can solve complex problems creatively, productively, and specifically. So,

- the number of talent hothouses and their mobilisation in the creation of urban conviviality is the best asset for “city imaging”, even “branding” or “city marketing”;
- it is becoming increasingly indispensable to develop a cultural economic policy that includes taking account of the market sector (even when it comes to the city's attractiveness) and placing the cultural industries and socio-economic potentials of interculturality at the centre of their economic policies. However, this also means thinking about developing regulatory policies, in addition to subsidy policies, given the increasing strength of the links between economy and culture. These policies could act upon taxation, the establishment of contractual arrangements with private operators, permits, the coverage of risk, etc. Otherwise, culture runs the risk of simply being used by the economy;
- special attention must be paid to providing support and assistance to improve the value, professionalism, and internationalism of initiatives that take form locally and have trouble achieving stability and growing;
- we should look to the cultural cluster or creative cluster policies that exist elsewhere for inspiration.

4. *Turning Brussels into a “cultural medium”*

Beyond the continuation and expansion of a policy of participation and cultural democracy, having the city become more of a “cultural medium” entails a convergence between the city's cultural dynamics and the forms in which the city is materialised: cultural network, links to forge between mobility and culture bearing in mind the cultural places' accessibility and the rhythms of their activities; extending cultural institutions' opening hours; creating the infrastructure that is lacking, especially specific types of large-scale infrastructure; and also creating areas that are open to young creators, cultural production spaces, etc.

More generally, if the city is a cultural area, this is also because it facilitates meetings with others and offers rich, welcoming experiences. This dimension, which is both obvious and often forgotten, requires the material aspects of the city to be thought of from such a cultural angle. That means, in particular:

- a policy of public areas, which is currently extremely sparse, even lacking, in Brussels. It also means maintaining an urban public area against strong trends toward privatisation. In this way, the public area becomes, in a way, a permanent cultural centre;

- a public art policy;
- an architectural policy that finally accepts contemporary architecture whilst setting requirements of quality, and does so through the generalisation of policies of international competitions that will foster public discussion, along with an architectural ambition that was greatly lacking in Brussels's recent past;
- a determined policy to combat the city's socio-cultural dualisation, which is also a cultural dualisation.

In a word, even though it is not under the region's jurisdiction, culture is henceforward expected to be at the heart of the city's strategic planning schemes, especially the Regional Development Plan.

5. *Rethinking the democratisation of culture*

Recent analyses have revealed the relative failure of the policies to democratise culture that were initiated in the 1950s and 1960s, but also the radical change that has come about in the forms of young people's access to culture (via the Internet, but also through a culture of brand image that runs deep through their socialisation). Brussels's social (strong dualisation), demographic (large number of young people), and multicultural characteristics pose this problem of access very acutely.

The following avenues of thought at least must be considered in this regard:

- First there is the problem of the infrastructure giving access to culture, especially the need to combat the digital divide.
- Next, all the analysts agree with the assessment that the policies of democratisation of culture that were initiated in the 1950s-1960s were concomitant with the widening of the gap between education and culture. The matter of access to culture cannot be reduced simply to its economic dimension. That is why putting strong cultural training back in our schools seems vital today.
- Finally, there is the development of a political horizon that takes both cultural policy and the social dimension on board and keeps at the very heart of cultural policies ambitions that see culture as a vector for building solid, critical identities and creating or bolstering social ties. This certainly calls for serious thought about the connections and continuities to create between the areas that are often referred to by such terms as "artistic" on the one hand and "socio-cultural", "continuing education", and "cultural democracy" on the other hand and many recent initiatives of which show rapprochements, which are reciprocal, moreover, but likely to be upset by the economic exploitation of culture.

6. *Connecting the scales*

We call for the cultural internationalisation of Brussels to rest upon the emerging cultural dynamics in the region (Réseau des Arts à Bruxelles, Brussels Kunstenoverleg, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, etc.) rather than its being built by players who are specialised in urban marketing only but disconnected from the current dynamics.

More specifically, it seems important to connect better the registers of local community cultural activities and programmes, those of municipal and regional impor-

tance, and those that have a supraregional scope, and to manage the bridges that enable one to go from participating in one register to the next. This also calls for better management of the cultural network when it comes to its spatial distribution and areas of concentration. Cultural activity is one of the city's major attractions. Consequently, there is a need to oversee the centrifugal tendencies of the activities that may accompany the processes of peri-urbanisation, which also correspond to an "exodus" of purchasing power and thus an exodus of the potential for cultural consumption to the periphery.

7. Avenues for thinking about multiculturality

An imaginary background that is very similar to the one that led to valuing the mixing of people as a factor of social cohesion in town planning policies, with, it must be added, mitigated results, lurks behind the increased value given to interculturality or hybridness. Whilst there is no argument over the need to defend intercultural dialogue policies as defined by the Council of Europe and consequently create the right conditions for such initiatives (notably multilingualism, initiatives to create contacts between and hybrids of cultures, exchanges, translation work, opening up to other publics, etc.), we must not necessarily underestimate the cultural importance of being with one's own. This raises some complex questions that are too quickly pushed to the side in the name of either the right to be different or the accusation of communitarism. When it comes to this issue, cultural policies should at the very least both dedramatise this remaining within one's group and promote determined policies of recognition of this tendency that aim for opening up and intercultural dialogue.

To counter communitaristic tendencies and foster intercultural dialogue, it is necessary to defend the promotion of the conditions of a public area where this dialogue can occur. This entails clear stands on positions that refuse such conditions in the name of cultural specificity. Cultural communities are possible and positive in an urban context only if they accept the existence of the Other in principle and in practice and subscribe to the necessary development of urban tolerance.

In addition, identifying language and culture is obviously out of the question. However, it is just as obvious that the development of all cultural dynamics is contingent on the ability to communicate and thus access to a common language (which at the current time is clearly French). This may mean either a shared language or translation efforts, or even multilingualism and, in all cases, determined education policies for which the European schools could provide a model.

We can wonder in certain respects whether the matter of surmounting cultural barriers is not taking place first of all in the emerging cultural dynamics, which often owes little to interculturalist determination. A large proportion of the cultural socialisation of today's youth occurs via the communication media, Internet, etc., and other areas where English generally prevails. This is where the public powers and cultural players alike must doubtless pay attention to these processes. Proposals to revise the city's/country's linguistic laws to take this fact into account are being considered, as are proposals to open up the situation to include this third language.

8. *Considering all the policies from a cultural standpoint as well*

As a rule, large cities are particularly hobbled the segmentation of public policies. Yet we know today that the cultural dimension must be taken into account in most public policies, be they social, health, tourism, education, prevention, economic, or other policies. In any event, many of today's policies recognise that, but usually they take the cultural factor on board independently, without being in tune with the cultural players who work on the same playing fields.

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