

Co-creation and Cultural Policy in Europe

Policy recommendations from the
Horizon 2020 Traction Project

For different reasons, neither cultural democratisation nor cultural democracy can form a reliable basis for cultural policy in Europe. The first was conceived in another age and has exhausted its potential; the second is too large and general to guide decision making. Co-creation, the creative collaboration of professional and non-professional artists offers one way out the present impasse. A cultural policy that places value on co-creation can redefine relations between citizens and cultural producers and lead to new work that connects with today's Europeans.

co reimagining opera with
art communities & technology

Background

Cultural policy in Europe, whether at the level of Member States (which retain primary responsibility for culture) or of EU institutions, remains rooted in the post-war concept of **cultural democratisation**, itself a reformulation of older ideas of cultural patronage for the age of welfare states. Cultural democratisation is essentially an access policy, intended to bring the best of artistic creation within easier reach of the whole population.

This policy ensured the central place of public cultural facilities such as theatres, museums and libraries in the reconstruction of European towns and cities in the 1950s and 1960s. It encouraged new approaches to cultural education, outreach and marketing intended to attract new audiences. Since the 1990s, it has underpinned the strong growth in cultural investment by neoliberal economies, both in iconic infrastructure, such as the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum, and in cultural festivals like the widely imitated European Capital of Culture programme.

But who decides what is best, and on what basis, is a question that has usually been avoided.

Limits and problems

Since the 1960s, the policy of cultural democratisation has been criticised for paternalism and reinforcing unequal power distribution in the cultural sector and in society. At worst, say its critics, it protects privileged arts and groups behind the appearance of democratic intent. The cost, audience and symbolism of opera make it a primary target for such criticism.

In 1974, an alternative policy concept, **cultural democracy**, was promoted at a conference of European Ministers of Culture and Education convened in Oslo by the Council of Europe. The new policy recognised that people are not empty vases needing to be filled by state-approved art but that culture is already part of every person's life and that the artistic expressions of all social groups have a legitimate place in a democratic society.

Since the 1970s, cultural policy in Europe has been pulled between these positions, which might be loosely termed conservative and progressive. Cultural democratisation has been quite successful in preserving its advantage, because it is already embedded in the social and political institutions it helps defend, and because its offer is clear and attractive: bring art within easy reach of everyone. Unfortunately, research shows that decades of cultural democratisation have produced little change in the diversity of audiences or the profile of artists working in public institutions.

Cultural democracy remains the outsider, hampered also by the idea's complexity. It is not always easy to see what specific measures should be put in place to ensure that everyone has the same right to participate in culture life, despite it being enshrined in Article 27 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. On the other hand, cultural democracy has been strengthened by the new access to means of cultural production and distribution since the 1990s, driven by technology, education and consumer culture.

Today, at a time of ideological and political weakness, cultural policy in Europe is trapped in outdated models but unable to find alternatives that might escape the binary oppositions of the past or the financial power of commercial creative industries. In the absence of solutions, policy makers continue to pursue the idea of cultural democratisation, but often express it in the language of cultural democracy. 'Let's Create', the current 10-year strategy of Arts Council England might be said to fall into this trap—but ideological cross-dressing rarely ends well.

Co-creation and cultural policy

The Traction project received Horizon Research and Innovation funding to test whether co-creation and new technology could be a way out of this impasse. The focus was on opera, because of its primacy within the European cultural landscape, because of its reputation for exclusivity, and because if these approaches could work in opera, they would work across the cultural sector.

Between 2020 and 2023, a consortium of opera companies, research institutes and universities conceived and produced three new exploratory operas co-created with people at risk of social exclusion who had no previous experience of—or much interest in—the art of opera. The project developed two new web-based open-source digital tools to support the co-creation process: the Co-Creation Space to facilitate the process of co-creation and the Co-Creation Stage to enable distributed collaborative performances.

From a remote Atlantic Island to the multicultural streets of Raval, from a prison in Portugal to an

opera house in Barcelona, in schools, squares and studios, more than 1,000 non-professional artists co-created opera with professionals. The three new productions were acclaimed by audiences and critics. They expand the language of opera and change how it is made. They reconnect opera with the lives and concerns of today's Europeans by including them in its creation.

Professional and non-professional artists worked as equals on writing, composing, designing, rehearsing and performing opera. Together, they showed not only that opera can be made in this way, but that doing so transforms what happens on stage and backstage, in the auditorium and in the community. The institutions have been changed by the experience, and so have the people to whom they opened their studios. The relationship between cultural producers and the people whose taxes finance their work has begun to change.

What does this mean for policy-makers?

There are more implications than can be articulated in a short policy briefing but the key is that co-creation offers a way out of the exhausted opposition between cultural democratisation and cultural democracy. Enabling people from across the social and economic spectrum to work together in artistic creation, on the basis of equality while valuing their differences, avoids the 'us and them' paternalism that has so hampered the cultural sector's past efforts at social inclusion. At the same time, co-creation uses the artistic and material resources of great institutions to create work with exceptional power. Above all, perhaps, it provides a possibility for mutual understanding, making of social inclusion not a passing effort but a living and continuing experience.

Policy recommendations

Traction has pushed the boundaries of opera, co-creation and technology. The project has been very successful, but it does not have all the answers. More will come as others take forward the idea of co-creating opera, so Traction has produced a book, a website and a technical wiki to help with that process.

But in Europe, opera is publicly funded so change also rests on the policies and expectations of Ministries of Culture and elected politicians. The Traction experience suggests some recommendations to support that change. Specifically, policy makers should:

- Redefine the purpose of cultural policy as being to strengthen human capabilities, expecting that citizens themselves are best placed to choose the cultural experiences they need.
- Make the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community (UDHR, Art. 27.i) the foundation of cultural policy, expecting that citizens' participation will be active and creative.
- Put co-creation at the heart of cultural policy, expecting that recipients of public cultural funds will develop their own approaches to working creatively with their communities.
- Promote the development of a technological open ecosystem to facilitate the co-creation process, enabling diverse people to create and perform together.



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