Networking, production, identity: Cultural manager experiences

Redes, producción, identidad: Experiencias de un gestor cultural

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ABSTRACT

By means of a biographical exploration in cultural management, this article examines the experience and development of the European Culture Association. Throughout the article, the author argues that we need to connect "action" and "production" to "identity", and to build the latter through the former in order to create a sense of belonging towards Europe. What these experiences show is that, instead of underpinning the construction of collective cultural identities in the past (that is, through shared memories, rituals and pre-existent modes of belonging), collective cultural identities are produced in the process of working together, of carrying out projects and collective activities, networking, and participating. It is only through investing in identity, by crafting it slowly with others, that a sense of belonging is generated.

Key words: Cultural identity, networking, cultural management, production, belonging

RESUMEN

A través de una exploración biográfica en organización cultural, en el presente texto se narra la experiencia y el desarrollo de la European Culture Association. Se argumenta que necesitamos conectar "acción" y "producción" con "identidad", para poder construir esta última a través de las primeras, y así crear un sentido de pertenencia hacia Europa. Estas experiencias ilustran que, en lugar de sostener la construcción de identidades culturales colectivas a través del uso del pasado, es decir, mediante memorias compartidas, rituales, y modalidades previas de pertenencia, las identidades culturales colectivas son producidas en el proceso de trabajar conjuntamente, de desarrollar proyectos y actividades colectivas, de establecer redes, así como de la implicación participativa. Es sólo a través de la inversión en la identidad, sólo a través de su meticulosa confección de forma conjunta con otros que se puede generar un sentido de pertenencia.

Palabras clave: Identidad cultural, redes, organización cultural, producción, pertenencia

> The possibility given to the individuals to contribute to the construction of their environments would create a strong feeling of belonging towards Europe

FOUNDING OF THE EUROPEAN CULTURE ASSOCIATION

This article upholds the idea that efforts, difficulties and getting involved create stronger feelings of belonging towards a place or a community than the identities created by related memories or narratives that one has experienced about that place or that community. But such creation of identities cannot be measured by consumption culture, because it leads the individual to be product- and result-oriented rather than process-oriented. Therefore, it is not the rich economic circumstances offered by the EU but rather the possibility of being active citizens, the possibility given to the individuals to contribute to the construction of their own future, the construction of their local, national, regional environments and the construction of the future of Europe which would create a feeling of belonging towards Europe, which would create a European identity.

Being a practitioner but not an academic, what I can offer in this article is to share my experiences and my conclusions related to the subject of this publication which may have a justifying or supportive function for the ideas of the researchers and academics. I am the president and one of the founders of the European Cultural Association (Avrupa Kültür Derneği), which is an independent non-profit NGO based in Istanbul. Its aims are to strengthen cultural communication, cooperation and exchange at local, national and international levels to raise cultural awareness and trigger development in the society.

The way that this organization acts and grows –by building up a network and connecting it to the existing ones– can be seen as a good example of building up a network society which is comprised of temporary communities of members with multiple identities. The tools for building this network are co-production projects. Every project builds up a new community with a new identity and enlarges the existing network of the stakeholders of past projects. The new members joined to the unofficial network may be potential stakeholders of possible future projects. Every potential stakeholder creates links to additional potential resources for the network. With each project an improvement is achieved in satisfying the needs of the community and developing content which shapes the network and future of the community.

The European Cultural Association was established in March 2003 by individual members from diverse professions who give great importance to the roles of culture within the society. Since its founding, the European Cultural Association has been dealing with the issues of cultural management and policies and focusing on strengthening the role of the non-profit, independent cultural actors within the sector by networking among themselves, by means of creating links with other disciplines and sectors; by building international links, integrating into European networks, producing and exchanging knowledge as well as advocating. The tools to achieve those objectives are meetings, conferences, seminars, forums, and artistic, cultural and educational projects.

The 40 associate members are all individuals from Istanbul, and therefore the organization is quite local. Members are not only cultural actors. Among the members there are also a lawyer, engineers, business managers, housewives, teachers, etc. They are members because of the social responsibility they feel. Some members are continuously active and dedicated to the daily activities of the organization, some are active only when there is something to which they can contribute. The diversity in areas of profession is what makes our association rich in potential new connections and therefore potential resources. That is the core structure which functions as a network in which those grids and nodes are active whenever they are needed. This core structure is expanding very slowly, but the network around it is expanding faster. The first circle of expansion included the cultural managers, as they are the ones who could change the cultural sector. We started with the Cultural Institutes' directors and consulates of the European countries in Istanbul as they had their own networks and many other resources.

In 2003, just after its founding we brought together the directors of the Institutes and the cultural attaches of the countries which do not have cultural institutes to create a collaboration platform called "Europist", which then met once a month to develop and produce European projects together. At the beginning nobody was quite sure how to move ahead, as in their official policies it was written that they should also act as European institutions parallel to their main missions, which is to promote their own national cultures. It was theoretically the case, but in practice this was not true. It took a long time to fulfil the expectations of many European partner institutions. At the end eight of them could stay in and contribute to the working group actively. A lot of problems arose before this working group got into action, as it was something unusual to establish a working group with its own identity, even though it was innovative. There was only one such platform in Europe before, which was in Brussels, since EUNIC did not exist yet. There have been legal issues, conflicts of interest and leadership competitions. Our attempt bore fruit in one-and-a-half years.

ENHANCING THE NETWORK THROUGH SPECIFIC EVENTS

The first organized project was a European marching band festival. To implement this event, we involved local authorities such as the district mayor's office, the mayor of the greater municipality of Istanbul and the Governor's, office as well as the tramway organization that was intensively involved with the important issues such as issuing all the necessary permits, as well as providing public security, health, cleaning and street lighting, all free of charge. A Dutch bank, a local travel agency, a local hotel were the sponsors. All the partner institutions were actively engaged with their management teams and staff. The mayor of Beyoğlu District and the consuls themselves led the marching bands along the streets. The festival was a big success, with thousands of people following the marching bands, and there was high media visibility before and after the event. This hard work of bringing these different stakeholders with great difficulties was finalized with the decision to continue its activities. The partners who were very unsure of collaboration at the beginning were now devoted to the idea of this working group. New projects followed and their popularity grew with each new project until those people left for their home countries. Today, this platform is still meeting and developing projects together. Through the joint effort that the stakeholders made for this project, a bond was established between the European national cultural institutes, which are still meeting to develop common projects, and our network has grown another circle, to now include the mayor of Beyoğlu (now the mayor of Istanbul) and the Vice City Governor (now the director of Fine Arts in the Ministry of Culture). These partners opened our networks up to European grids on one hand and to local grids on the other.

The second project was the development of a common virtual platform – www.europist.net – which was not only a tool to promote the European cultural events in Turkey collectively and to develop new audiences, but also an interactive communication tool to keep network members in contact and promote the network to potential members. Later on, after many years, this platform also grew to become a much bigger platform, under the link www.citizensofculture.net, and which is more interactive.

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TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE THROUGH CULTURAL LINKS

In the meantime, I took part in a seminar at the Felix Meritis Foundation in Amsterdam on "Innovative strategies in international cultural cooperation" which linked my organization with important European cultural actors from Central and Eastern Europe. I was connected to a new network called "People Network" which later on became part of a new initiative called "A Soul for Europe".

My participation in the seminar in Amsterdam inspired us to organize the cultural management programme, a capacity building program for young cultural managers in Turkey, together with the interested partners from our Europist working group. The project was announced to the target groups by means of the virtual platform www.europist.net and an advisory committee of 25 people was formed in order to involve the whole sector. The aim was not only to train young cultural managers in new subjects such as cultural policies, financing of culture and international networking, but also to develop a network between them and with European cultural actors in order to promote cooperation at local, national and international levels. It was a very intensive programme lasting seven weekends, in which participation to 90% of it was obligatory. Therefore the fifty participants from different organizations and institutions, who had to work for their organizations all week, had to set aside all their weekends for this programme. At the end of the programme all participants jointly organized a huge international meeting named "International Forum on Turkey-Europe Cultural Relations" to which European cultural networks were invited to meet cultural managers in Turkey. With the in-kind contributions provided by the participants' organizations, a project of almost €500,000 was realized with zero budget, and attended by 75 participants from Europe and 300 participants from Turkey. The production of a 3-day conference, 21 performing arts productions, a huge exhibition and screenings was all organized and promoted within just one month. This showed the cultural managers themselves who organized the event the potential power of the network they had established. The four-month adventure of sleepless weeks and great efforts created a strong network of young devoted cultural managers who are now the leading actors of the cultural sector in Turkey, and who are shaping the future of the sector. Through this project, we have expanded our network both nationally and internationally and gained more recognition. We have built new links with CCPs, with the Turkish Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Delegation of the EU in Ankara, the universities offering cultural management programmes and new European experts in cultural management.

ABOUT "MARGINS OF EUROPE"... AND THE EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE

One year after this forum, we organized another forum called: "Margins of Europe" with the partnership of IETM, which is the biggest cultural network in Europe. The previous partnerships enabled us to apply for an EU fund, and we got it. We expanded our network with new links to an additional 18 European networks, which multiplied the number of nodes of our network. We asked for help from the Turkish Businessmen's Association, we organized a session with cultural journalists, and another session with European Capitals of Culture representatives, which created important new nodes for our future activities. Meanwhile, the initiative "A Soul for Europe" organized the first Berlin Conference in 2004, which brought together about 400 individuals from the European civil society and many national and EU politicians. Young European cultural actors were invited to take part, and I was one of them, representing my association. This node opened up to a growing network of politicians.

Istanbul's application to ECOC was accepted and I was on the advisory committee. My association wanted to contribute to this action by means of activating the network created so far for the benefit of Istanbul ECOC. We organized a series of seminars and workshops called "From the past to the Future ECOC" which staged discussions on how actively cultural actors can take part in project development and the decision-making process and connected to a new network of past and future European Capitals of Culture. With the approval of Istanbul as European Capital of Culture in 2010, my association's mission was identified by a much wider part of the cultural sector, as our mission was very suitable to what the European Capital of Culture had to achieve.

In the process of ECOC's development, there were some problems of inclusion-exclusion. The process that had begun as a bottom-up civil society action became stuck later on because of the exclusive attitude of some of the initiators. For example, the fine arts academies were not included, and yet these have always been leading cultural actors in the Turkish society. So, we encouraged the oldest academy of arts to take the lead in encouraging Turkish and European art academies to contribute to Istanbul 2010 within the frame of the City and Art Project that we had developed. A forum was held in Istanbul for 350 art and design academicians, and art workshops in five cities: Istanbul, Mersin, Malmö, Vienna and London. 120 Art students from all over Europe worked together in groups, explored their cities and produced art works together in the public space. The project was an extraordinary experience for the teaching staff and for the students. The project was quite challenging for the teaching staff from the universities, involving as it did completely different ways of education to collaborate in building up a common concept and a common action plan. It was also challenging for the students to

work in teams made up of students from different countries and with different mentalities. It was a challenging project in all, as it was experimental in many ways, especially because the works were mostly public artistic interventions. A few serious problems occurred as some young artists tried to push the legal, cultural limits of the public space and the organizational limits of the EU-funded project. This project expanded our network with the involvement of the European art academies and gave us the chance, this time, to learn how to manage a larger amount of funds.

COMMUNICATE, CONNECT, GROW: THE *SINOPALE* AS CULTURAL LABORATORY

As the continuation of europist.net, within the framework of the City and Art Project, we have created two interconnected social networks for European cultural actors called artacademia.net and artcitizens.net. These are very useful communication tools for individual artists or cultural managers to help make themselves visible and communicate with a wide range of target groups. These communication tools expanded the target groups we are reaching Europe-wide.

This is how our network is growing. Although what we have achieved to change or influence the cultural sector is quite clear, it is difficult in a huge city like Istanbul to see the concrete results of such actions. Therefore we have been very much in favour of transferring our experience and knowledge for the development of a smaller city, such as Sinop, which is a city of 20,000 inhabitants on Turkey's Black Sea coast. The International Art Biennial Sinopale, which aims to boost local development through culture and the arts, has taken place for the third time in 2010. Sinopale has become a laboratiry for us to experiment with the impacts of the project on stakeholders. As the project is to be carried out with very limited financial resources, the production is to be done by several cooperations and by means of small in-kind contributions from many local, national and international partners. Therefore, we are making use of the network we have been building so far as much as possible.

In the biennial, artists are required to produce artworks as the result of working together with the local community and/or to make artistic interventions in the city. As it is a very low-budget event and the production needs in-kind contributions of the local community, therefore the local authorities and almost all the small businesses and NGOs are somehow involved in the production in one way or another (by providing materials, venues, human resources or/and equipments). Artists don't only need to develop their

ideas locally with the local community, they are also in some way obliged to cooperate with the people involved in order to make things happen in a very short time. It is a very challenging way of working, with a lot of uncertainties and under hard conditions and time pressure. And it is voluntary work. Which also describes the working circumstances of all the other project staff, who are also volunteers.

Imagine that a diverse profile of people, international artists, local activists, children, shop keepers, barbers, the mayor, the governor, NGO representatives, city planners, architects, craftsmen, women, ambassadors, cultural attaches, designers, curators, journalists, students, academics, musicians, carpenters, print shop owners, school teachers, the minister of culture, and many other actors (French, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, Argentinean and from whatever country) were to gather temporarily to work and produce together. The reasons of participation may be completely different than one another but it is certain that all are ambitious to contribute, and not just before they have experienced the difficult working circumstances, but also after. The guest goes back home with a great sense of connection after all those difficulties that one has faced. The common wish of almost every visitor is "I will come to Sinop once again just to visit and do nothing", but actually the reason for this sense of connection is the effort they have given to the city and to that temporary project community.

CONCLUSION: INVEST, PRODUCE, BUILD IDENTITIES

The conclusion that I have reached from these several experiences is that the feeling of belonging to a place or to a community is created not by the related memories or the narratives themselves that one has experienced, but by the efforts, difficulties and other prices that one has paid towards that place or community, and which make up those memories and narratives. This idea is based upon the general principle of Experiential Design: "one feels a connection to something which one has paid a price for and the level of connection is linked to the level of its price." The connection is therefore related not to what the place or community offers to the individual, but rather to how much value the individual has added to that place or community. That's why the connection is usually to the homeland, where one grew up, grew a garden or a field, built a house, made friends and brought up children. More connection comes from when one has taken part in the construction of that village, town, community or society, when one has paid high prices to gain or protect the land, the community or its independ-

ence. If the connection were only related to nice memories and narratives, or to the possibilities that a place proposes, one would rather be connected to a holiday resort, and even to one holiday resort during your whole life. But that is definitely not the case. This may explain why the feeling of belonging is much stronger in post-war periods and gets weaker and weaker in second and third generations.

The same principle explains the behaviour patterns of the members of virtual communities and social networks. It is not the technical possibilities that a virtual community offers to its members which make its members feel connected and active. It is the other way round. It is the activeness of the member and the value that the member has added to the virtual community which make him feel connected. That is why the most active virtual communities and groups are either the ones which are physical communities in the outside world or the ones which are producing together, using the social network as a tool for communication.

This principle may also create an argument as to why today's individuals have multiple identities with weaker ties to their local environments. Due to the communication and mobility possibilities that individuals have, they no longer pay a price not solely to the geographical environment, but to the other communities and spaces they belong to. One can be a farmer in a village in Portugal and at the same time work for a global environmental NGO and have strong daily contact with its members worldwide through virtual social networks. The feeling of connection is in this case divided between the farm and the NGO that the person is paying a price for.

One of the challenges of globalization is that migration from rural to urban areas is increasing immensely. Nowadays, most of the world's population live in urban spaces. Urban spaces are turning more and more into spaces of consumption. In most cities, physical production takes place at the city's edges, and the city centre is usually used for recreation, culture, tourism, etc. The global economy caused the ownership of production in society to change hands from the small business to huge companies – i.e. from individuals, from the civil society to the business sector. As businesses grow, individuals gradually lose their sense of directly adding value to their own societies, to the spaces they live in. Not consumption, but the production of added value leads to a sense of connection, and thus the connection between the consuming individual and his/her city gets weaker.

A lot of energy and money is spent on turning society into a mass of consumers. Culture is instrumentalized to disseminate lifestyles to serve this mission. False identities are created and feelings of connection are channelled towards these false identities. Football is one of the best examples of creating false identities for the sake of consumption. These false identities without content satisfy the need for the feeling of connection.

The consumer culture leads the individual to become a product and result-oriented rather than process-oriented. The individual in a consumer society spends most of his/

her time and energy on earning money in order to possess the products that have been dictated by the advertisements as "crucial needs" for living. Or in order to gain the power to be able to buy those "crucial products" for a "free life". The freedom to consume whatever one wishes is named as "freedom". One lives to earn money for the "freedom to live". The principle is that one feels a connection to something that one has paid a price for. And in this case the connection is developed with money. The individuals in a consumer society pay a price for their individual "better life" for short-term individual benefits, and thus develops a connection to his/her self being and money. These individuals create egoistic societies. Meanwhile, the individuals in a production society invest into the value that he/she adds through what he/she does. The daily life activities of these individuals are directly linked to the construction of his/her life, environment and society. The price is paid not to the results or products to be possessed at the end, but to the process of production itself and thus the sense of connection develops towards the process of production, towards what one has contributed to in his/her environment and in the society.

Therefore, it is not the rich economic circumstances offered by the EU, but rather the possibility of being active citizens, the possibility given to individuals to contribute to the construction of their own future, to building their local, national, regional environments and constructing the future of Europe which would create a feeling of belonging towards Europe, which would create a European identity. As Eric Corijn describes, "We should consider citizenship not just as a characteristic but also as a relation in that a citizen only has a potential citizenship in as much as he/she invests in a type of relationship, coalition, etc., so as a stakeholder and not as an individual."