

BOLOGNA 9th July 2010
CONCLUSIONS OF THE ROUND TABLE

THE PRESENT SITUATION OF THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL OBSERVATORIES

HETEROGENEITY

There is a great difference among the European cultural observatories. Many of them have a regional scope / mission, and their context is very different (budgets, laws, priority cultural fields, typologies, etc.). This fact complicates the common work among cultural observatories. This heterogeneity is also reflected on the objectives. There are many different goals between the analyzed observatories. If it is taken into account the fact that the majority of the observatories are regional, the lack of agreement between the state and regional objectives become a bigger problem, and it makes more difficult the normal work of these organisations.

A large number of cultural observatories have been created in the last years, but if they cannot work together and share information, they will not be able to respond to the challenges of the current emerging society. Nowadays, we live in a contradictory society combining local goals and global views, where inter- and intrajurisdictional co-operation becomes crucial for the improvement of our quality of life. A good example of common framework is the Italian ORMA project, whose main aim is to create a collective space to share information among the Italian regions and between them and the Italian Ministry of Culture.

CRISIS

The majority of the European cultural observatories are public, and those which are private receive important public financing (idea of "anomalies", private entities functioning with public money, -Trimarchi-). The current economic crisis is a significant threat to cultural observatories due to politicians who do not see the intangible benefits of culture, and they tend to reduce the budget of this sector.

Politicians don't fully understand how culture can generate social cohesion and quality, proving consistent with their main goal: the attainment of stable consensus. But we must note that also cultural agents are quite reluctant to overcome the traditional, static and passive view of culture. Therefore, as the result of the lack of cultural inclinations of society, nowadays it is very difficult to obtain a sufficient degree of profitability from culture. If cultural observatories show the social benefits of culture to both politicians and cultural managers, it will be easier to achieve more consistent public financing.

AUDIENCES

There is a widespread perception of culture as something boring and tedious. Our society reads and writes more than any other in history, nevertheless society is often seen as becoming more and more trivial because it would tend to superficiality. People prefer to know sport results by heart, but they are not interested in literature, theatre or heritage.

The cultural observatories are mainly focused on quantitative data. This information is related to the people who enjoy the culture, but ignores those who are not interested and the reasons of their indifference.

FUTURE ROLE(S) AND CHALLENGES OF THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL OBSERVATORIES

A COMMON FRAMEWORK

It is necessary to develop more projects like ORMA, but at a European level. Although the observatories work at a regional level, it is interesting to do it with common methodology, indicators, means of diffusion, etc., in order to cooperate and to share their information and evaluations. Cultural observatories should try to find what is common among the different regions.

Another question is the function of the observatories. In Bologna it was questioned if the observatories have to focus their work only on collecting data, or they would have also to create knowledge and new ideas for supporting and improving cultural policies.

The main conclusion was that observatories have to widen their work and to create knowledge, not only to observe the cultural situation. In fact, there are public organisations that collect statistical data and it is not necessary to repeat the work. As an example, it is possible to mention the Basque case, where the cultural observatory does not collect the data, it just exploits the available information. And if the observatory needs any information that is not being taken into account by Eustat (Basque Statistics Institute), they provide Eustat with the specific indicators in which they are interested. So, it could be more interesting for the observatories to exploit the information and to develop knowledge, than to collect data.

CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

Nowadays everything changes very fast, so it is necessary to pay attention to these changes in order to face them properly. An important shift has occurred in how a cultural product is perceived; in the past, products were related to the supply of services and activities, although the current consumers tried to find experiences. This fact is of great importance in the field of culture where intangibles have considerable relevance. What turns an activity into an experience is the subjective part. Experience not only depends on the space, time, and resources, but also on the emotions, benefits, motivations, needs and values. Due to this, analyzing the qualitative data of cultural experiences turns into an important opportunity for cultural observatories.

On one hand, quantitative information can help to convince politicians about the importance of financing cultural education and research. It is a strategic tool to emphasize the benefits of culture, because benefits are different from profitability and sometimes it is very difficult to see them. They are closely related to human development, so culture can be a great driving force to avoid the previously mentioned superficiality. If it is possible to show politicians the social gains that culture can bring to citizens, it will be easier to obtain financing from them. The justification of public culture is the existence of a culturally oriented society, not the satisfaction of the interests of cultural agents.

While on the other hand collecting qualitative data can help to know the motivations of current consumers and to know the reasons of the missing audience. This information makes it easier to keep the current demand and to try to get new audiences. Qualitative data provides cultural managers with information about why people enjoy culture, but also why people do not. It is very important to know the negative perception of culture to change it. If it is possible to get the potential audience, profitability of culture will be larger and it will be easier to obtain financing.

Due to the importance of subjective data, European cultural observatories have to develop measuring tools for qualitative information.

Summarizing, the future role of cultural observatories is related to:

- Developing a common framework and methodology.
- Generating knowledge to improve cultural policies, rather than only collecting data.
- Creating tools and indicators to measure subjective features of the cultural experience.
- Trying to recover (or creating) the missing audiences.