

THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE An overview...and perspectives after its end*

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Abstract: Taking into account the extinction of the Ministry of Culture in the organic of the current government of Portugal, this article analyses the course and the balance of cultural policies undertaken since 1995 until the referred extinction. It also outlines the main axes that should be considered in public policies for culture and equate to the prospects of the future we face.

Keywords: Ministry of Culture; cultural policies; role of the state; the future of culture

It is always satisfying to be able to discuss a subject which, as you can imagine, was and continues to be an important part of my life. It is a rare opportunity in Portugal, although now almost strange, given the fact that the Ministry of Culture has been dissolved. So I decided to extend the initial title – originally ‘The Ministry of Culture: an overview’, to ‘The Ministry of Culture: an overview...and perspectives after its end’.

This therefore a very attractive theme, albeit not straightforward, especially because I always try to maintain some reservations about the cultural policies which were implemented when I myself directed the Ministry of Culture, over a period of almost five years

The ministry was created following process of research and debate of policies to develop the country, under the "general statutes" devised by the Socialist Party in 1994/95. The "general statutes" were dealt with under sectors - Justice, Education, Science, etc... - measures that would be implemented if the Socialist Party won the elections. This strategy entailed close contact with the various sectors of activity, between their leaders, with institutions, etc.

In the past, there had been one or two periods in which a ministry of culture existed, but they were fleeting, essentially created as a tribute to certain personalities, in the case of Antonio Coimbra Martins and Francisco Lucas Pires, for example. However, there had never been a pre-election commitment to establish a Ministry of Culture, with its own mandate, which dealt with public policies for the sector.

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The prior research allowed the creation of an authentic Ministry of Culture in Portugal for the first time, in 1995. It is my opinion, which is certainly controversial, that the government of António Guterres, in his first term, was an excellent government. It is common in politics that there are people who occupy roles of great responsibility without any specific previous experience. I confess I do not understand how you can take up any roles in ministry without an extensive knowledge of the sector, without being familiar with the administration, records, etc ... It seems to me an undeveloped country in this aspect, and something quite bizarre in European terms.

In my opinion, it was imperative that the original idea of creating a Ministry of Culture had a strategic conception of the role of culture in the development of the country. This fundamental conception contradicts the very common idea that culture is a sector that is but the icing on a cake - put artists on committees, distribute some subsidies before the election - that culture is not really a concern for the country's policy makers. However, the creation of the Ministry of Culture was the first attempt to reverse this state of affairs: to integrate culture in the development strategy for the country.

This option had an immediate consequence of great symbolic value and great political impact. This was the decision taken yet in 1995, on the Côa Valley dam, suspending construction which had already begun, which allowing the preservation of a unique world heritage site.

This site, as you know, features 17 km of unique engravings, Palaeolithic etchings that are open to the skies. This was not a decision which could be taken lightly, it is only possible understand its significance and scope in the light of a certain idea of the country and how the cultural perspective, in this case, heritage, is integrated in a global vision.

Unfortunately, we know that many of the values and projects which were defended were later abandoned, but this was the concept promoted by the Ministry of Culture, while I was in office. To me this view was absolutely permanent and non-negotiable.

This concept not applies to the Côa engravings. The Côa was one issue, but there were also fixed book prices, the Network of Museums, internationalization, etc. Thus, this idea was always indisputable and of primary concern: culture was always at the centre.

Incidentally, this is why it makes sense to have a Ministry of Culture. Similarly, in the Council of Ministers, culture should be of equal importance to economy, finance, health, education, etc... However, in my opinion, it seems that it was not sufficiently integrated either by the country, by politicians or by political parties, and hence

occurred the 'fugacity' which we all recognise- what I personally, deeply regret, as perhaps we all do.

There were, in my view, areas of expertise on a cultural level which were central to the country, such as the promotion of books and reading, as well as supporting all aspects of creation.

Here, I refer to theatre and cinema, sectors that had previously received some support, but also other fields, which were rarely supported, such as dance, visual arts and photography. All these sectors were given better support, stabilized and provided with clear funding criteria.

Another key area was heritage, in terms of protection and enhancement. And also, an issue of great importance was decentralization, which was not particularly difficult given the size of the country. Decentralization was vital to the success of our policies: for example the network of archives, network of museums, and the library network, etc.

Furthermore, during this period, the first (and to date only, I believe) municipal cultural convention, a meeting I had with all municipal cultural councillors in the country, in order to articulate policies and motivate the country towards culture. The aim was to involve the country in cultural issues, and I think that was an important part of our political work in the best and noblest sense of the term.

Finally, the internationalization of culture was another structural dimension of our action, a responsibility shared between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was continued by the Instituto Camões, which has also somewhat disappeared recently.

These were the structural foundations of everything that was done at the Ministry of Culture, over the almost five year period in which I was responsible for directing the Ministry of Culture.

During that period, a set of ideas and practices, values and projects, was established and consolidated. At present, so much has been lost. For example, the library network should have been completed in 2003, had this project continued at the same pace at which it began. But the truth is that since 2000, bids for new libraries have not been invited, and the museum network has also been forgotten...

Apart from the networks and the scale of what was being done, the specific nature of each of these projects should also be considered. The museums, for example, can not be

thought of as mere depositories of objects. Every museum should have an educational service and a research centre, developing its role within the community.

My experience at the Ministry of Culture tells me that all these goals are achievable: mobilize people and resources appear, because these resources are easy to obtain, compared to those needed in other sectors.

The important thing was always to act with a view towards providing the country with conditions that could institutionally stabilize the cultural sector. Naturally, it was important to take a certain kind of intervention in the field of public policy. This intervention, however, never interfered with cultural agents, creating different creative conditions in each sector, trying to correct the imbalances caused by the market. We must be aware that cultural support is different for a market of 10 million or a market of 500 million people. From my point of view, the mission of the Ministry of Culture is supporting without wishing to interfere, lead or guide creation itself. I think this was achieved during those years.

Beyond the strategic vision, teams are very important. Human resources are badly treated in culture, in terms of production, assessment and skill management. It is, in my opinion, a domain assaulted by illusions of management. If managers choose their sectors in all other areas, culture should be no different: the best managers are the producers and creators of culture, but the idea persists in Portugal to select businessmen, bankers, etc., to manage cultural institutions.

Various examples which illustrate this idea that agents of culture are the best managers of their own area spring to mind. Over the five years that I directed the Ministry of Culture I remember, for example, José Mattoso, who was already retired but was willing to come to work in the archives in Torre do Tombo, motivated by dedication to public service, but there were also the cases of Ricardo Pais at the National Theatre of S. João, of Carlos Reis at the National Library, of João Zilhão at the Portuguese Institute of Archaeology, and many, many others ... They were people of enormous skill and tireless dedication.

Teams are a big part of the secret of success for any institution. If there is a clear political orientation, if there are dedicated teams and sectoral policies, the results will organically appear in time. Because everything is done in its own time – which is what happened in our case.

Furthermore, I believe that motivation is key: I met weekly with the director-generals, and every three months with all officers from the Ministry of Culture, because there is a

sense of complicity in this mission that needs to be nurtured, in order to stimulate work of this nature.

And then, of course, we also worked with the media, regularly commenting on the status of what was promised and what was going to be done, as well as presenting the sectoral budgets of all organisms.

From my point of view what has been lost in culture - as perhaps in many other sectors - was this idea that an institution must have clearly-defined objectives, means and timings. To give a specific example, the cinema: the objectives were perfectly defined and quantified, with a goal to produce 14 feature films and 40 short films per year. And, albeit in the past, another example is the establishment of objectives regarding national coverage of municipal libraries, as we had determined the exact pace at which it should grow to achieve this goal.

This planning is critical in order to have a budget estimate. I would however stress that not all issues boil down to budget problems, contrary to what is sometimes believed...

Today¹, looking at the budget for culture gives me a chill as it was set at €200 million and it is expected that further reductions will reduce it to €180 million. When I left the Ministry of Culture, almost 12 years ago, the budget was €250 million, at a time when there were fewer institutions, museums, concert halls, etc... This budget is now but 0.2% or 0.3% of the General State Budget. It is a very meagre budget to fulfil the government's responsibilities for culture. To provide a context, we must remember that Paris Opera has a budget of €180 million, of which €110 million is guaranteed by the state and the remaining €70 million provided by private institutions.

Sometimes it is stated that in the 90's there was a lot of money. However, this idea is false: what happened was a progression, as the investments made were always justified by the public interest...When the Ministry of Culture was formed, its budget was 35 billion contos, which, over five years increased by 43% to 50 million contos. Growth was gradual, rising from 0.5 to 0.8%. With the creation of the Operational Programme for Culture, which was endowed with 72 million contos, the budget was able rise above the mythical bar of 1%, which I think is a dignified amount for culture.

However, regarding this percentage, 1% of the General State Budget, I should stress that understandably, the budget for culture fluctuates depending on the country's economic state. But I also wish to point out that I believe this to be the minimum threshold in order for the state to perform two different functions:

¹ Conference that took place in April, 2012

- The first function is the strict obligation of the State, in its central institutions: it is unthinkable that the state should be unable to meet its minimum obligations to the National Library, the Torre do Tombo, the National Cinema, the National Theatres, and Opera.

- The second function refers to supporting cultural activity in a country the size of Portugal, with the kind of integration they have in Europe, but articulated in Portuguese, which is absolutely vital.

I would like to mention yet another type of financial support with which we worked. In addition to having the support and cooperation of highly motivated local authorities, we also encouraged the emergence of sponsorship, of significant value..

I remember, for example, that for the foundation of the Centro Cultural de Belém, the patrons had small holdings - coercive patronage - a few thousand contos. This was the case, for example, of the BCP, which would later support the National Theatre of S. Carlos with a million contos. In national theatres, at the time, we had the support of 100 million contos per year. I refer to these values in contos, because all this was before the euro, and that's how I have "archived" in my mind....

The creation of the Network of Cineteatros (cinema-theatres) is another example, as it resulted from a partnership between the Central State, the local Councils and Tabaqueira, (with a patronage of about 1.5 billion contos), which was a milestone, as at the time it was the largest amount ever given to support culture. I do not know if this has been topped...

It is very important for the market and civil society to complement each other. To achieve results, we need two factors: good examples to motivate patronage and economic growth. A very common idea in the cultural sector is that in times of economic crisis, more sponsorship should be sought, which is very misleading. Because, of course, when economic activity recedes, the first thing that recedes is also patronage. There was never a solution for such a difficult economic period - there may be help, sympathy for this or that institution, but patronage is an activity which stems from economic growth.

Today, the situation is very different. That's why I decided to add to this statement of my overview of the ministry of culture "perspectives after its end." We are certainly in a very different situation now than between 1995 and 2000.

I see those five years as a period of construction for public policies in these areas, facing the well-known difficulties in Portugal, regarding political class and the elite in culture. After 1999, it seemed desirable to have a period of consolidation, but also innovation. Incidentally, this was the reason why I accepted a second term, and also then why I spent only 10 months in the fourteenth government.

My understanding of innovation concerned the articulation with the audiovisual, in the area of communication. Portugal never had and still does not have a communication policy. There has been a great deal of political propaganda from various governments and from all parties, but there has never been a real communication policy. However, in countries which have a communication policy, it is linked with culture, a connection which I defended many times. Similarly, I always advocated that there should be a Lusophone link, a topic which has become a common theme regarding public life.

To my surprise, nothing happened - neither then nor later. Thus, in 2009, in March I think, I published a long article in the *Diário de Notícias* about the rebuilding of cultural policies in Portugal. In my opinion, it was a lost decade, during which the state increasingly abandoned their responsibilities in the field of culture. Many bodies, which were weak and precarious (five years do not allow policies and bodies to become institutionalized), eventually disappeared.

I think that it is at least curious that the government of the Socialist Party has, between 2005 and 2010, dissolved all agencies established in 1995. All, without exception: the Portuguese Institute of Archaeology, the Portuguese Centre of Photography, the Portuguese Institute for Conservation and Restoration, the independence of the Portuguese Institute of Museums, the separation of the Portuguese Institute of Literature, etc.. All the innovations made by the government of António Guterres were destroyed by the government of José Sócrates. This shows how things are not simple in terms of political parties...

Today, we have a cultural administration that is comparable only to the New State; it is not even comparable to that which existed between the 70s and 90s, whether in terms of budget or in terms of disorganization.

This was certainly why Pedro Passos Coelho, the current Prime Minister, announced the termination of the Ministry of Culture and the creation of a hybrid body, which basically is a Ministry of Culture, as the Secretary of State does not have a place in the Cabinet.

It surprises me how our elite, particularly the universities, do not react against this extravagance, that there is a Council of Ministers where culture is not present. In Europe, this does not happen in any other country. In Hungary, for example, where there is a Ministry of Culture, the Secretary of State is also in the Council of Ministers.

It seems to me that the cultural community and the country as a whole, has not given due attention to the significance of this eradication. It was as if, to solve a problem in education, the Ministry of Education should be eliminated. Or, education should be dissolved in other areas under the guise of its transversality, etc...

In Portugal, and this must be clearly stated, neither the college community nor the cultural community have spoken about this situation. I cannot understand this silence of academics, cultural agents and creators, unless as a symptom.

There were many people from abroad who asked me, "but are there no petitions, no protests?" Indeed I may be being unfair, but I honestly have not seen any. And so the culture disappears, due to a political decision, the centre where the budget and how the country faces its problems are decided.

Why is it good that a minister should decide all matters of the Council? The economy is reflected in culture, the finance minister can reflect on education, and so on. A Council is a collective, a collegiate body. I think that this idea got a bit lost and probably therefore the disappearance of culture in the council of ministers in Portugal was not given due importance, with the exception of Europe.

Today the key question is to consider what the public policy of culture should be, in retrospect. But how can you build something without a foundation and in a state of mere survival? On the other hand, today we can not view public policy culture as it was in 1995, in 2000 or 2004. The context is completely different, those who follow the current policy debates of culture in Europe are aware.

Today, factors to consider in culture involve problems such as gratuity, the economy of culture, new systems of publicity, privatization of audiences etc. In effect, there is a set of problems that are on the European cultural agenda, but which are virtually ignored in Portugal.

The fact is that due to the lost decade, culture seems to have lost its élan... I remember when I came to the office, the first thing I wanted to know was: what is good and can be continued? Furthermore, this must be the concern of any minister. I had many

problems with some socialists, for frequently praising Teresa Gouveia and her initiative regarding public libraries.

Hence, I believe the greatest failure of this period in which I directed the Ministry of worship was, in the end, the lack of continuity, even under the same government, and, more than that, by losing unique opportunities. In the decade from 2000 to 2010 the cultural sector has seen a great deal of research in European terms. In Portugal, Augusto Mateus showed the role of the cultural economy, its contribution to GDP, its contribution to employment, etc... All this was lost. This was a once-off, and links with the creative industries resulted in some projects in the north of the country, but this never truly featured in the political stakes, and furthermore, we entered into a recession.

Today it is necessary to bear in mind the agonizing situation of the sector, with huge amounts of creative strength in all areas of culture, but without public support or cultural patronage, which are vital to its consolidation and its external projection. I believe that only with a very clear sense of where we are and the challenges we face, can we reverse the situation.

In my opinion, the challenges include an understanding of our social situation, as we are clearly in the midst of a paradigm shift, exhausting the paradigm of the unlimited, whether in terms of energy, in terms of consumption or in terms of credit. This is all linked with the creative industries and cultural industries. And, in the case of art, spoken of less and less.

The role of the State Welfare must also be considered. Today, we often forget that the word growth, linked to the economy, only emerged in the 50s, and treat it like an acquired human history, when the first study on the growth dates back to 1960, entitled *The Steps for Economic Growth*. Interestingly, it was subtitled "a non-communist manifesto". It was a reading of growth according to the impact of the Marshall Plan, of 1947-51, the four years in which European GDP grew 30%.

We staged a revolution in 1974, but unfortunately the international crisis began in 1973, when the difficulties of that paradigm began to reveal themselves, which as it turns out, were slow to fully manifest themselves.

In this context, it seems that you need to think in terms of rupture, and to seek new solutions. You need to combine these two elements: firstly, without any illusions about the difficulties of our current situation. On the other hand, we realize that today there is

no solution, not for culture, nor the economy, nor in any other field, whilst we go through what politicians generally call the relaunch, the recovery.

There will be no solution found in trying to make things as they were. Some things have been depleted, others destroyed, and in this context, we need to invent solutions.

The emerging paradigm lies in facing a new reality, which Gilles Lipovetsky calls the world culture, a topic that I have discussed many times with him, and that relies on a proper diagnosis of the current situation, full of paradoxes, full of impasses but which deals with the very articulation of culture and consumer society in the context of the culture and dematerialization of a revolution that changes all marketing channels and diffusion of culture. It is from this perspective that in the future, we will have to consider public policy culture.

I would just like to emphasize one last point - this global transformation which we are experiencing at a cultural level, is it is almost completely deregulated. Now, we only consider financial deregulation, but if we think reflect further on the current state of affairs, we find that globalization has dimensions of deregulation that nobody talks about.

In the case of culture, when discussing the issues of copyright, it is precisely by evaluating the impact brought by new technologies and new devices. The issue will be to be able determine whether there are solutions to these problems. Almost all European countries are intensely debating these issues. In France one of the more lively debates involves the question of whether to change sanctions and measures regarding abuse of copyright, according to the law that established a set of limitations. Germany has also had this debate and has taken steps, as well as Belgium, Austria and Italy. In Portugal it is a subject in which the only point of view that seems to exist is that of the consumer.

I think it is in considering these challenges, without illusions of miraculous or easy recoveries, but with the premise that you cannot build anything without a good foundation, which must be taken into account for future cultural policies.

My wish is that the cultural community will assume these challenges, that I can't see politicians facing up to. If we could be coherent, perhaps we would be entitled to some optimism. And will finish with the words of Agustina Bessa-Luís, which gives some sense to my optimism: "what remains is always the happy beginning of something."

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