

Introduction

Françoise Rivière

The equal dignity of all cultures is held to be a fundamental principle of democracy. But today the relationship between culture and politics, though close, often appears tense and occasionally contradictory. The phrase 'democratic culture' is much used. Might 'non-democratic' forms of culture exist? How is a pluralist identity created in multicultural nations? What is the relationship between the intangible heritage and democracy? Should we not see the foregrounding of the intangible heritage as a quest for new forms of governance?

The pages that follow contain consideration of all these issues, and many others that were debated at the international conference on 'Reinventing democracy: cultural diversity and social cohesion'. Mounted by UNESCO's culture department on 13 and 14 November 2007 in Rio de Janeiro on Professor Eduardo Portella's initiative, the event had the aim of stimulating international thinking about the challenges of public life at a time when the decline of the last century's ideologies and many technological and economic changes thrust cultural issues to the fore on the world's political stage. I would like most especially to thank the participants and authors included in this volume for their rich contribution, and also Emmanuel Carneiro Leão, Raquel Paiva, Beatriz Resende and Nizia Villaça, who chaired the debates, and the institutional partners, the National Library Foundation of Brazil, whose president is the writer Muniz Sodré, the Miguel de Cervantes Foundation, the Brazilian Academy and its president Minister Marcos Villaça and the Organization for the Development of Education, Science and Culture (ORDECC) – Colégio do Brasil.

On a personal note, the gathering echoed an experience that goes back to the late 1980s. At that time there was a wave of hope in the aftermath of the Cold War. Democracies were coming into being and re-inventing themselves in the east as well as the west, in the north as well as the south. Eduardo Portella, one of the architects of Brazil's democratic opening, had just been appointed Deputy Director-General of UNESCO and I was to become his closest colleague. So I was to witness with him that 'democratic spring' which made it possible for me, among other things, to organize an international 'Culture and Democracy Forum' in Prague that was

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designed to facilitate the first meeting between the 'democratic transitions' of the east and the south.

We have come so far since then, lost so many illusions and seen so many changes both in the world situation and in its interpretation. Might history have conquered democracy? In fact it is the world market, rather than democracy, that has without a doubt extended its influence. And culture, borne on that tide and assisted by the technical advance of information, is assuming a significant place in the world political arena. With regard to the digital society, culture is already seen as a godsend by some, just as technology was for the development of the industrial economy. After all, is the content disseminated by these so-called 'knowledge' societies not more cultural and highly subjective than cognitive, strictly speaking?

In all probability we have before us the start of a completely different history, the one Eduardo Portella (2000) discussed at the pre-millennium meeting arranged for the 1999 UNESCO General Conference. That meeting concerned the positive and negative aspects of a late modernity wrestling with the issue of alterity. And it resulted in UNESCO's 'Pathways of Thought' programme, which the ideas in this volume take further still. That programme, which is a locus of interdisciplinary thinking and intercultural research, involves the contribution of hundreds of scholars. It has produced around fifteen international conferences and a dozen publications. The narratives, ideas and histories of the human race constitute the field for research that aims to throw new light, from an international perspective, on issues of contemporary culture: the status of books and writing in digital, transnational arenas (Portella, 2001), the contribution of memory and forgetting to processes of reconciliation,¹ the unity and diversity of human rationalities,² the limits of knowledge at the frontiers of science and the humanities, the concept of knowledge societies,³ the threats and opportunities of technology, the need for, and excesses of, utopian thought,⁴ or the ways humanism and dignity are manifested when human societies are restructuring in line with worldwide changes.⁵

The current volume is the first publication to bring together work that has come out of the 'Pathways of Thought' since the programme became part of UNESCO's Culture Sector, which I head. So I am delighted to see collaboration becoming even stronger between our department and the International Council for Philosophy and the Humanistic Studies with *Diogenes*, a journal that was started by Roger Caillois, brought to maturity by Jean d'Ormesson and is now directed by Maurice Aymard.

Since I first took up my post I have seen my main task as ensuring that culture is given the importance due to it on the international stage. We often need to be reminded that culture is not the 'icing on the cake' – far from it. In fact the cultural dimension of every development process is now an established, well-recognized fact.

Amartya Sen had already pointed out that '... recognition of culture's importance cannot be immediately translated into ready-made theories about what works, what we should encourage and what should be protected. Extremely complex epistemic problems are at work in the impact culture can have or not have on the process of development. And the calming of diverse concerns raises questions of social choice that are indisputably ethical and political.' Like Amartya Sen, I do not see how programmes with cultural implications can be planned and implemented nowadays

without systematically involving the humanities – which highlight the meaningful practices on which ways of life are based – and ethical thinking. For though the impact of culture often falls outside the weighing and measuring of accountancy and statistics, the symbolic and highly subjective charge of the representations it carries is immense. However, it deserves to be studied, considered and put into perspective, rigorously and flexibly. I would even say that this is demanded by our times. Taking up such a challenge sometimes means abandoning, along the paths of thought, the comfort of reassuring convictions.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. *Diogène* 201, 'Horizons de la mémoire', 2003.
2. *Diogène* 202, 'Pour une rencontre des rationalités', 2003.
3. *Diogène* 197, 'Quels savoirs pour quelles sociétés?', 2002.
4. *Diogène* 209, 'Approches de l'utopie', 2005.
5. *Diogène* 206, 'Humanismes émergents', 2004.

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