

## PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE



### **The Politics of the Arts and French Republican Identity: The Living Legacy of State Cultural Policy since 1959**

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Given the wave of pessimistic assessments of French state cultural policy in recent years, one might imagine that we have seen the definitive end of a period of arts-centered social policy that began with the creation of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1959 in the early days of the Fifth Republic. Adapted to the different priorities of successive presidencies and vastly expanded during the tenure of François Mitterrand (1981–95), French state cultural policy from the mid-1990s on has been described as “a tired system” (Abirached 2005) characterized by “the exhaustion of utopias” (Donnat 1994) and “the end of a myth” (Djian 2005). We have arrived at “the twilight of the cultural state” (Fumaroli 2006). As part of efforts to re-think its mission, the Ministry of Culture and Communication recently drew on the input of the non-profit group Futuribles to complete a study devoted to possible futures for state cultural policy in France, ‘Culture and Media in 2030’ (DEPS 2011). In this study, the Ministry considers several scenarios, including the integration of cultural policy within the Education Ministry, the diminution of Culture from ministry to agency, and a reorganization of education, research and new technologies within a wide-ranging Ministry of Intelligence.

It is a good time then to take a closer look at the significance of Fifth Republic (1958–) state cultural policy in France across its 50-plus year history. Studies such as those cited above have criticized the Ministry of Culture for creating a bloated and self-serving bureaucracy and some have claimed that it is responsible for a surplus of artists in France (Heinich 2006). Perhaps the strongest and most frequent criticism heard is that the Ministry of Culture has failed in perhaps its most important objective of the post-World War II era: broadening the audience for the arts in terms of socio-economic status through policies of “democratization” (Donnat 1998). Social origin, profession and level

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of education continue to correlate with patterns of arts appreciation, even in an era in which the Internet and digital technologies have radically reshaped access to the arts (Donnat 2009). But if state arts policy during this period has not always achieved the lofty ideals it has claimed, what, in fact, has it accomplished? What is its legacy today? Here, I argue that the key significance of Fifth Republic state cultural policy in France is the creation of a broad discourse on politics and the arts that has helped to link state policies and local actors, and has served as a dynamic site for cultivating understandings of citizenship and republican national identity. The specific language of this discourse has changed, as has the role of the centralized state. But the network of artists and administrators created at the founding of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, as well as the terminology this Ministry came to employ, both had a powerful effect on understandings of democracy and civic participation in France. Policies of 'decentralization' were important not only in providing broader access to works of art, but also in diffusing a political 'grammar' (Poirrier and Rioux 2000) across the French territory. This language has been used by artists throughout France to situate the public meaning of their work in political context, both in terms of their artistic creations proper and, beyond it, in terms of their broader amateur and professional arts practice.

Drawing on ethnographic research on theater artists in southern France (Ingram 2009, 2011), this article examines the evolution of 'culture' in France both as an object of state policy and, for amateur and professional artists, as an interpretive framework allowing for the generation of models of community consonant with civic republican ideals. While the state's role may be

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even more dramatically transformed in the next 20 years, the influence of state cultural policy remains in the shared discourse on culture spread across France. This language is being drawn on by artists to shape new models of citizenship and belonging in ways that interpret republican values anew in addressing inequalities and distinctions in contemporary France owing to differences in ethnicity, religion, neighborhood residence and national origin. Further, beyond reflecting origins, these new models reflect possible futures and current collaborations, exchanges and synergies across the cultural boundaries of the past.

### **Decentralization and the language of culture in Fifth Republic France**

With roots in the Third Republic (1870–1940) but imbued with a new sense of urgency in the divided years immediately following World War II, the policy of arts 'democratization' or 'decentralization' has sought to broaden access to the arts to underserved groups as part of a nationally unifying civic agenda. In the 1940s and 50s, state-funded theaters, the CDNs (*Centres Dramatiques Nationaux*) were established in provincial cities. This network of theaters was later built upon by the first Minister of Culture, André Malraux, in 1959 and integrated within his efforts to transform rural France in line with the modernizing agenda of Charles DeGaulle's new Fifth Republic. But this extension of state cultural influence in the provinces was not just a case of the top-down imposition of a centralized state agenda. Local arts associations and elected officials helped the directors of the CDNs to establish a local base and audience for their work. In addition, the patterns of negotiation between these directors and state authorities introduced new terms and stakes to

French political discourse.

The work of historian Pascale Goetschel (2004) has shown how many of the demands voiced by activists of May '68, the language that they used, and indeed some of the key actors were products of theater decentralization policies of the 1950s and 60s. Malraux's ministry helped to legitimize a discourse on the political stakes of arts policy through the use of distinctive terminology and the creation of a contractual system linking artists and agencies of local governance (municipalities, departments, regions and, later, inter-communal partnerships) with the centralized state. As Philippe Poirrier and Jean-Pierre Rioux have argued, the rules and practices that evolved after World War II constitute a kind of 'political grammar' and a field of reference for the discourse of culture in France. It is inside these networks and through this grammar that members of cultural networks have been able to "elaborate their requests, arguments, and justifications" (Poirrier and Rioux 2000, 58).

The diffusion of this political grammar is one of the most important legacies of Fifth Republic state cultural policy. It is important not only for the most recognizable symbols of arts decentralization in France, such as the Avignon Theatre Festival, for example, or the regional offices of the Ministry of Culture, the *Directions Régionales des Affaires Culturelles* (or DRACs). It is also important for amateur and professional artists throughout France who have made use of the terminology and the institutional support of the state in order to define their arts practice in ways that situate it within a national politics of culture. This is especially true for the world of theater, both because theater has been the single most important art sector in policies of decentralization

and also because the thriving world of amateur theater in France tends to be less age-specific and more diffused to a broader non-student audience than in the US, for example, where liberal arts colleges are one of the most important sites for non-professional productions.

#### **A. 'Culture' in local perspective: An amateur theatre troupe in rural Provence**

Throughout France, amateur troupes have drawn on the terminology of state cultural policy and made it meaningful in local terms in their arts practice. The *Théâtre Rural d'Animation Culturelle* (TRAC) of Beaumes-de-Venise is one such group. Located in the rural north of the Vaucluse department, this troupe's artistic practice has been a site for cultivating models of citizenship in three ways. First, the troupe's rehearsals and administration emphasize egalitarian and socially inclusive ideals. Founded in 1979, the troupe is an association (Law of 1901) with a democratically elected president, a volunteer-staffed Council of Administration, and an annual General Assembly, at which the year's agenda is discussed and set and in which all members may participate.

Second, the TRAC's works express the troupe's perspective on current social and political issues. For example, a 1989 production devoted to Louise Michel was the troupe's choice in presenting its own perspective on the Bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution that year. The choice of Louise Michel (a late nineteenth-century activist for the rights of workers and those of the indigenous New Caledonian subjects of French rule) was intended to highlight the troupe's promotion of an active engagement with civic issues. A more recent production in 2007, *eXXiLs*, expressed the troupe's

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perspective on immigration, an issue central to the presidential election of that year eventually won by Nicolas Sarkozy, who had already worked hard to limit immigration as Minister of the Interior. The TRAC's production emphasized the North-South economic divide and the condition of exile and exploitation faced by immigrants. Although it included songs in several languages, the play did not celebrate the specific heritage and national origin of one group. Consonant with French republican values stressing the unity of the national community over 'communitarian' groups, the production highlighted collective ensemble work and the cast as a whole, which was exceptionally diverse in terms of age and immigrant origins.

Finally, the troupe's international touring has always been important to its mission as a troupe of 'popular theater'. This touring is often held to signify exchange and collaboration in broader geopolitical terms rather than simply meetings between groups of individuals. For example, in 1992, the troupe toured to Hungary with a medieval farce, *La Fiorina*. In the context of the impending vote on the Maastricht Treaty of the European Union, the troupe emphasized the production's European elements, including the multiple languages spoken in the show. The poster was in the blue and yellow colors of the European Union and the troupe viewed the story's focus on a poor peasant particularly appropriate given its view that the Europe under construction neglected the poor. Troupe members were, like the French more generally, split roughly 50/50 on whether they would vote in favor of the treaty, but they saw their own trip to a small rural town in Hungary as part of a European invitation to a Hungary recently freed from Soviet occupation. A more recent trip to Algeria in 2008 with a production of Molière's *Dom Juan* was similarly framed as part of an increasingly important (and desirable) emphasis on the Mediterranean dimension of contemporary France, especially evident in the North African heritage of most of France's immigrants in the past 50 years.

The role of the centralized state in supporting amateur groups such as the TRAC has changed in recent years. For many years, the troupe took advantage of 'production workshop grants' from the Ministry of Youth and Sports to support productions, including *eXXiLs*. But as part of the General Public Policy Review intended to reorganize the centralized state and decrease its personnel in order to make it more efficient, Youth and Sports was changed from a ministry to a secretariat. Without the production workshop grants, the TRAC has turned more to the department, acquiring new support and responsibilities by becoming a departmental cultural pole of development (*Pôle de développement culturel*). This lessened dependence on centralized state support in favor of departmental funding is parallel to the development of a more collaborative model for the relationship between local governance and the Ministry of Culture. Philippe Poirrier has identified the Mitterrand years (1981–95) as both the high point of a national politics of culture and a crucial shift "from a tutelary state, very selective in its support and responsible for protecting a national vision, to a partner state that encourages and institutionalizes little by little the forms of partnership" (2002, 13).

### ***B. Cultural policy in the service of Euro-Mediterranean aims in Marseille***

This lessened role in cultural policy for the centralized state is also evident in Marseille, where arts groups have turned to new sources of funding. The Friche la Belle de Mai is a former tobacco factory that was converted to an arts center in 1992. Unlike the TRAC, the Friche is primarily devoted to professional artists. But like the TRAC, the Friche was governed by an association (Law of 1901). In 2007, the association was transformed into an SCIC or a Cooperative Company of Collective Interest, a new type of private but non-profit company that combines the structure of a business with certain aspects of cooperatives and the goal of the general interest in that an SCIC must demonstrate a focus on

its local community. In its founding documents, the Friche emphasizes its commitment to cultivating the relationship between the artist and his or her city.

While the Mediterranean has long been central to Marseille's identity, this theme has become more important for the Friche and in different ways than in the past. In 1995, the Friche was designated the "major cultural axis of development" of the Euro-Mediterranean project, an extensive urban renovation plan that draws on funding from the European Union, the centralized state, the municipality and other local sources. The Friche has also been important to Marseille's successful campaign to be named the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) for 2013. A vast project of economic and artistic exchanges, ECOC defines the 'Euro-Mediterranean' dimension of Marseille and the broader Provence area in alignment with European Union cultural policy, the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean. In its ECOC bid, Marseille presented itself as the ideal bridge between Europe and the Mediterranean.

Central to Marseille-Provence 2013 are the goals of social and 'democratic' collaboration between local associations and others in Europe and across the Mediterranean. One of these was proposed by a troupe named the *Théâtre de la Mer*. The project centers on three plays created simultaneously in the peripheral neighborhoods of Marseille, Casablanca and Amsterdam. It will involve collaboration, touring and exchanges among the groups in each city, thereby helping to make some of the most disadvantaged parts of Marseille part of the 'Euro-Mediterranean' dimension of the ECOC project. This is also an area where the Friche

has a long history. It has in recent years promoted Arabic-language theater in Marseille as a way of reaching out to underserved populations, and has worked to bring to Marseille the former director of the National Theatre of Algiers, Ziani Chérif Ayad. Both the Friche and Marseille-Provence 2013 draw on – but do not depend exclusively on – the centralized state to legitimize their civic agendas. They represent the kind of partnership between local cultural policy and the centralized state described by Poirrier. These Marseillais initiatives share the democratizing and animating goals of earlier French cultural policy, but rather than define them with respect to national society and territory, they place these in broader European and Mediterranean frames.

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### **Conclusion**

It seems clear that we have reached the end of one era of centralized state cultural policy in France, at least with regard to the ambitious social policies of the past. The local role of the state

has changed from the directive model of the past to a more collaborative relationship with local artists, administrators and elected officials. But it would be wrong to assume that this means that the influence of the centralized state has been seriously weakened. Here, I have focused on the significant legacy of state cultural policy in shaping a national discourse that has served to articulate models of citizenship and civic belonging, and an interpretive framework that has allowed for the adaptation of republican values to changing social, political and economic conditions. In recent years in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, we have seen a more self-conscious attempt to emphasize Euro-Mediterranean themes in arts initiatives and policies. This has been most evident in Marseille-

Provence 2013 and in projects such as that of the *Théâtre de la Mer*, but it is also present in the TRAC's touring to Algeria and the trans-Mediterranean projects of the Friche. In these examples, we see the adaptation of a discourse on culture to a new transnational context. The role of the centralized state is different, but the new transnational

initiatives continue to be framed in terms of the discourse of culture shaped by Fifth Republic state cultural policy. This language is being drawn on today to craft new models of civic participation and creation that point toward possible futures of greater trans-European and trans-Mediterranean cooperation and exchange.

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