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Culture vs. Policy: Introduction and Summary of the Research

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Abstract

This summary provides a descriptive overview of SIAP's research from 2003 to 2005 in metropolitan Philadelphia. The authors argue that the papers produced by the Dynamics of Culture project document an early 21st century American city with a flourishing cultural sector--a community infrastructure full of vitality and promise, in spite of social policy, not because of it.

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Public Policy | Social Welfare | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments

SIAP

**Social Impact of
the Arts Project**

University of Pennsylvania
School of Social Policy & Practice
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DYNAMICS OF CULTURE:
A Report to the Rockefeller Foundation

CULTURE VS. POLICY:
INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

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Miguel Trelles, "Paisaje Canario (Canaries Landscape)," 2004

This painting of the Puerto Rican landscape reflects a "respectful and well-informed appropriation" of landscape paintings from China's Sung to Ming Dynasties. It appeared as part of an exhibit at Taller Puertorriqueno's Lorenzo Homar Gallery from October 2005-January 2006. When asked about his series of Chino-Latino, Trelles stated, "Columbus set sail for India and landed in the Antilles, I am setting sail for the Antilles, with a scheduled Chinese detour." Reproduced courtesy of Space Other (Boston), Taller Puertorriqueno, Inc. (Philadelphia), and the artist.

Introduction: Culture vs. Policy

Over the past decade, the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) has sought to develop methods for examining the character of Philadelphia's cultural sector and understanding its impact on the region and its neighborhoods. The Dynamics of Culture project, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, is SIAP's latest and most ambitious effort. Over the past two years, we have sought to refine and replicate our earlier investigations and develop new methods for understanding the role of artists and the informal sector. During this period, we have begun a process of using our research to generate a broader public conversation about the roles that the arts can play in promoting the well-being of Philadelphia area communities.

Dynamics of Culture, then, has moved ahead in a number of directions simultaneously. During the past six months, as our individual studies of cultural participation, the spatial dimensions of the cultural sector, the character of artists' networks, and the economic status of artists moved toward completion, we sometimes felt that we were caught in the thick undergrowth of a forest, unable to remember where we started, unclear about what lay ahead, hoping to take a rest but unable to find a place even to sit down. Then suddenly, as if we had entered a clearing, our work came into focus.

In the following pages, we document a cultural sector that is full of vitality and promise. The American city of the early twenty-first century provides a very favorable ecology for the cultural sector. Our great cities have over the past two decades regained a vitality that seemed missing during the height of the 'urban crisis.' As new groups have seen the city as a location of choice, the mix of existing and newer residents has prompted an explosion of social diversity—ethnic, economic, and domestic. This 'radical juxtaposition' (to use the late Susan Sontag's phrase) of people of different classes, ethnicities, and life-styles has elicited two responses. Some groups and individuals have met this new diversity with a desire to reaffirm their identity, spurring the expansion of groups and organizations devoted to cultural heritage. Others—and sometimes even the same groups and individuals—have seen this new social milieu as an opportunity to embrace a new hybridity based on mixing seemingly unconnected cultural traditions. It was this latter impulse, for example, that found us traveling to a Latin American cultural center in North Philadelphia last year to see a Sufi classic by a Persian poet performed in Spanish (by a company made up of actors from no fewer than five different countries).

In the ideal world, public policy—including the elusive cultural policy—would be enabling and propelling this new vitality. Yet, in the pages that follow, we discover a very different story. The broader public policy environment is, in fact, pushing hard against this expanding diversity. A host of social forces, including the 'winner-take-all' phenomenon we explore in Part III, has increased the degree of social inequality in our society, with consequences that constrain, rather than encourage, new forms of cultural

expression. Within the nonprofit sector, at the same time, a relentless effort at 'marketization'—the adoption of market principles by nonprofit organizations—has pushed the larger nonprofit cultural organizations to act increasingly like their commercial cousins, while smaller organizations have been placed in an increasingly untenable position. Take together, the new inequality and marketization have acted as a brake on the flowering of the community cultural sector. This is the story of culture versus policy that is told in this report.

Part II of the report focuses on replicating a set of analyses that SIAP completed in the mid-1990s as a means of measuring change over time. "The Dynamics of Cultural Participation: Metropolitan Philadelphia, 1996-2004" uses data on over 800,000 cultural participants in 1996 and 2004 to examine changes in patterns of cultural participation over these years. We discover, first, a consistent pattern in which areas of metropolitan Philadelphia with a large number of cultural organizations are those most likely to have high rates of cultural participation. This connection between institutional presence and cultural engagement was one of our first discoveries in the mid-1990s, and it remains one of our most durable and consistent findings. In terms of change over time, we discover a seeming paradox: participation became *more* tied to both social class and ethnic diversity. The answer to this paradox lies in the new urban reality; as ethnic groups have become more economically differentiated over the past decade, high-income, ethnically diverse neighborhoods have become more common. It is these neighborhoods that are now the ones with highest rates of cultural participation. At the same time, a pattern we had uncovered in the 1990s—what we called alternative cultural participation that linked socially diverse audiences to newer, more experimental cultural production—seems to have withered over the decade. By 2004, the former 'alternative' cultural organizations had participation patterns that were identical to those of more 'mainstream' cultural organizations, a trend we attribute to the increasing importance of market-orientation within the cultural sector.

"Natural Cultural Districts: Arts Agglomerations in Metropolitan Philadelphia and Implications for Cultural Planning" pulls together all of the regional databases that we have developed over the past decade—nonprofit cultural institutions, for-profit cultural firms, cultural participation, and information on artists—to examine the cumulative impact of culture on the physical form of the cities. Building on a 2004 'public conversation' on "Arts In Place: Philadelphia's Cultural Landscape," co-sponsored by SIAP with the University of Pennsylvania Urban Studies program, the paper studies the emergence of clusters of cultural engagement—what we call 'natural cultural districts.' It suggests that a cultural policy based on a 'bottom-up' approach—fostering the development of 'natural' districts—might be more effective than the usual 'top-down' approach at encouraging both cultural production and participation. This approach, however, would suggest the focusing of resources toward artist-based and smaller cultural organizations and away from larger organizations, a pattern that runs against current practices.

Part II concludes with a paper, "Truly Disadvantaged? An Exploratory Analysis of Nonprofit Organizations in Urban Neighborhoods" authored by Lindsay Taggart Rutherford, that uses SIAP's larger social organization databases from 1996 and 2004. Ms. Rutherford confirms an earlier SIAP finding—that poor neighborhoods in the city of

Philadelphia are not necessarily institutionally 'deprived'—and suggests that the literature on concentrated poverty must find a way of understanding this pattern.

One of the major conclusions of our earlier work was that a full account of Philadelphia's cultural sector needed to bring the roles of artists and informal cultural activity into sharper focus. Part III presents our first efforts to pursue this insight.

Thanks in large part to the work of Joan Jeffri of Teachers' College, we know much more about the lives of artists in America than we did a decade ago. Our work on an artist-based approach to the cultural sector builds on Jeffri's work both substantively—her interest in their economic well-being—and methodologically—the use of respondent-driven sampling.

Although there has been work on the relative economic well-being of artists, there has been little work on economic inequality among artists. Inspired by Ann Markusen's use of the census to examine artists, "Artists in the Winner-Take-All Economy: Artists' Inequality in Six U.S. Metropolitan Areas, 1980 – 2000" examines this question in six large American cities. We use Frank and Cook's concept of 'winner-take-all' labor markets to explain why artists' incomes are so unequally distributed and why they became more unequal over the past twenty years. As Frank and Cook conclude, these 'winner-take-all' labor markets have a variety of negative impacts on the development of fields, implications that should be at the center of cultural policy and planning. Yet, in contrast to the debate over a similar phenomenon in the sports world, this conversation has been virtually nonexistent in cultural policy.

The most ambitious data-gathering aspect of Dynamics of Culture was our survey of Philadelphia area artists using respondent-driven sampling. Using data on 270 artists, "Artists and their Social Networks, Metropolitan Philadelphia, 2004" provides a profile of how artists construct and use their social networks. This paper documents the size and complexity of these networks and the variety of uses to which artists put them. It also confirms some of our earlier conjectures about how an artist-centered view of the cultural sector would look very different from the conventional organization-centered perspective. Indeed, the *marginality* of nonprofit cultural organizations to artists' networks is one of the major conclusions of this paper.

After we completed the artists' survey, we realized that it could be used for another purpose: estimating the importance of the 'informal' arts sector. Because this sector is difficult to track organizationally—except for those informal groups that morph into formal organizations—we have had to rely on qualitative research. "Gauging the Informal Arts Sector, Metropolitan Philadelphia, 2004" uses the survey of Philadelphia area artists to provide a profile of informal arts from the artists' perspective. We find that the majority of artists have some involvement in the informal sector each year although only a small proportion of all of their projects could be classified as 'informal.' The paper concludes with suggestions for how to build on this research strategy to improve our portrait of informal arts and its ecology.

Part III concludes with an earlier paper, "Institutional Networks Serving Artists: A Look at Philadelphia," on the role of artist-serving organizations in the cultural sector. The study found that the institutional-artist network appears to operate, by and large, as a market with artists functioning as individual "buyers" in an environment of limited

resources and imperfect information. Some parts of this network, however, operate more as social service agencies for groups of artists—many of them earning low-incomes—who because of race, immigration status, or location are cut off from mainstream culture.

Part IV provides a summary of the 2004 public conversation on "Arts In Place: Philadelphia's Cultural Landscape," a series co-sponsored by SIAP and the University of Pennsylvania Urban Studies program. The series included a 'tour' of Philadelphia that examined how cultural resources come together in different ways in different neighborhoods. Each presentation in the series was based on three perspectives: urban theory, artists, and 'engines' of change. The stories uncovered show the diversity of cultural districts within the city. They range from districts initiated by commercial enterprises to those started by government, from large nonprofits to grassroots organizations. Most importantly—complementing "Natural Cultural Districts"—the public conversations demonstrated that place matters to the arts.

Taken together, the product of Dynamics of Culture tells a story of culture flourishing in spite of social policy, not because of it. It suggests that we need an agenda for research, policy, and practice on the arts and urban communities that would make cultural production and participation a central element of urban revitalization based on strategies that reduce social inequalities rather than reinforce them.

While working on Dynamics of Culture, Mark Stern was also collaborating with Michael Katz on a study of America in the twentieth century, *One Nation Divisible: What America Was and What It Is Becoming,* that will be published in February 2006 by the Russell Sage Foundation Press. Many of the ideas developed in that study influenced our thinking about contemporary cities.

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