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Katy Parry and Giorgia Aiello

## Culture and Democratisation

November 2015

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## 1. Executive Summary

This short concept paper introduces ideas for how MeCoDEM might bring 'culture' into the project. It sets out how diverse cultural forms are significant to the construction and negotiation of stories, narratives, frames, images and memories that circulate, especially for our interest, during times of conflict. It also highlights how culture contributes to the re-configurations of politics, identities and institutions in times of transition. We are especially interested in how cultural practices give voice or visibility to particular actors and constituencies through the media, how they may contribute to breaking down virtual, digital and physical barriers between individuals or communities, and what is at stake in mediated cultural outputs that start to form collective memory.

The paper presents:

- A summary on how expressive, artistic and symbolic aspects are relevant to studying political culture and communication.
- Four possible paths of enquiry which take seriously the cultural dimension: Intersections with popular culture; activist use of the arts; cultural projects that address identity and memory; and individual expressions of resistance.
- An outline of three possible overlapping approaches to the cultural dimensions of the research: Mapping existing cultural outputs; Artistic/photography projects; visual research methods.

## 2. Culture and Democratisation

The media – both traditional and new, understood as agents and technologies – constitute the central *independent variable* of the MeCoDEM research design (Kraetzschmar and Voltmer 2015); and within this model the role of the media is evaluated generally through qualities associated with journalistic media (frames and counter-frames, agenda-setting, salience of issues, sources for opinions) in order to understand its significance in a healthy public sphere and as a potential agent for democratisation and social change. If we start from this familiar terrain, to some degree we already implicitly recognise the cultural dimension in the mediated news arena in which political conflicts are contested. In Gadi Wolfsfeld's 'political contest model', designed to better understand variations in the role of the news media in political conflicts, competition between antagonists is examined along two dimensions: the structural and the cultural. The cultural dimension of analysis 'serves to remind us that political contests are also struggles over meaning' (1997: p.5). As Wolfsfeld writes, antagonists each construct their interpretive frames of events in the hope of appealing through media coverage: 'The media serve as *public interpreters* of events and as *symbolic arenas* for ideological struggle between antagonists' (p.54). In order to gain political legitimacy and to inspire support, antagonists' arguments must be skilfully packaged appropriate to the culture(s) of the political and news environments.

But in this paper we would like to step away from our central focus on the news media, and the social media variations that emanate from more opinion-led journalistic forms (blogging, tweeting), to consider the **civic role of other forms of cultural communication**. This short paper is designed to set out how other diverse cultural forms are significant to the construction and negotiation of stories, narratives, frames, images and memories that circulate, especially for our interest, during times of conflict and the associated re-configurations of political cultures, identities and institutions.

### ***What do we talk of when we talk of 'culture'?***

Culture is notoriously difficult to define and holds particular meanings dependent on the context in which it is used. In tracing its history and complexity, Raymond Williams offers three definitions for the noun 'culture': 'a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development'; 'a particular way of life, whether of a

people, a period or a group'; and 'the works and practices of intellectuals and especially artistic activity' (1976, p.80). Even in the above section we have referred to 'political culture'. In this case culture can be understood both in relation to a particular realm of experience and as the more pervasive accompaniment to the structural dimensions of the relevant institutions. To take 'political culture' as an example, Richardson et al. (2012, p.4) write that it 'can be used to indicate the area that surrounds the activities of politicians within the formal political system, to be a designator of "their" world', but it can also indicate 'the wider range of orientations, norms and perceptions within which a political system is embedded'. This highlights the dual meanings of culture – denoting the particularities of a certain sphere, but also a more 'diffuse area of meanings and values' that can be felt in the atmosphere that surrounds activities. Notions of culture can be used to delineate notional spaces and activities, but when used more broadly tend to imply the expressive, artistic and symbolic.

Political culture is undoubtedly important to the MeCoDEM project, in which degrees of freedom of expression, polarization of positions, manner of expression, respect for the political realm itself, and of media autonomy (see Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, pp.19-21) are just some factors which play a part in how conflicts are seen as legitimate disputes and how they are negotiated in the media sphere. But we would like to 'move out' from the sphere of political culture to 'culture' more broadly - the expressive, artistic and symbolic.

If we take aspects of culture most closely aligned with the political sphere first, we can recognise various paths of enquiry.

1. Where political culture intersects with popular culture and how publics might engage with politics (or democratisation conflicts) through entertainment-based broadcast programmes (Corner and Pels 2003; Richardson et al. 2012; Street, 1997).
2. Activist and social movement use of music, visually potent displays, and other arts.
3. Cultural projects that address identity, memory and notions of the social or public good.
4. Individual expressions of resistance or dissent (outsider art, graffiti, poetry) or commonality.

The list is not comprehensive but offers roughly defined areas through which scholars have explored aspects of ‘the political’ in more expressive forms. Moving down the list, characteristics of ‘the political’ become more detached from political structures and institutions and more associated with other public culture or civil society groups or individuals – we could say we move from the macro to micro levels. There is also a shift from acceptable to potentially more deviant forms, although of course this is dependent on each context. What is important for us to say here is that **each can be studied for how they question and rethink societal and democratic values and meanings through creative expression**. Beyond the news framework it is important to explore how stories are told; who gets their voice heard in public spaces; how collective memories are established; how identities form; and how certain places and memories become imbued with meanings and symbolism for (distinct) communities.

Running through the perspectives numbered above, if we explore the intersections of the political sphere and popular culture first, we might address how mainstream entertainment forms contribute to political understanding, engagement or efficacy. In simplified terms the world of political rationality and the public sphere have traditionally looked askew at the more expressive, affective or emotional tendencies of the artistic or popular realm. This suspicion of the image, the spectacle and the symbolic can be traced back to early mass communication theory and the Frankfurt School’s anxieties about the use of aesthetics in the political sphere (Aiello and Parry, 2015), and concerns for the stylisation of politics remain (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Parry, forthcoming). But the idea that the embrace of the visual, the popular or the entertaining only contaminates politics and manipulates citizens has also been challenged (Pels, 2003; van Zoonen, 2005). Such entertainment programmes are not our main interest here; however, it is worth mentioning this literature for its embrace of the ‘cultural turn’ in political communication, in which other cultural factors and contested sites of meaning and identity are considered alongside political structures and the news; for example, in debating the role of comedy as a catalyst for civic engagement in various political contexts around the world (see special issue of *Popular Communication* edited by Geoffrey Baym and Jeffrey Jones, 2012), or the intersections of celebrity culture and political culture (Street, 1997). A turn to the emotional and the visual undoubtedly accompanies this



shift as scholars explore the communicative and civic potentials offered in the mode of address established across a variety of media platforms, formats and genres. For example, Janis van der Westhuizen (2008) draws on the narratives created around major sports events to show how political elites appropriate these 'spectacles' to reconstruct South Africa's African identity. In some cases, it is about rethinking the channels of communication so that the 'media' might encompass traditional forms of poetry or storytelling alongside new technologies and forms – especially where symbols of national identity and political stability are at stake (see report by Ducaale (2002) on Somaliland; also Stremlau (2013)).

Next we consider activists' use of the media and artistic expression. As authors such as Kevin DeLuca, Paul Routledge and Charles Tilly have observed, activists have long drawn on 'image events' and visually provocative forms of contentious politics in order to garner attention and make symbolic challenges to powerful institutions (e.g. Deluca 1999; Routledge 1997; Tilly 2008). For Alberto Melucci (1989), the form that activism or resistance takes is itself a form of media or message, operating through registers and signs which challenge the dominant codes. The activists' actions themselves announce another way of being, often exposing contradictions or corruption through exaggeration or theatre. Whilst embedding a media-orientation into their activities in a struggle for visibility and further mobilisation, the lived and immediate experience is also crucial here, and we have seen this stressed again in recent writing on the anti-globalisation movement, protest camps, Occupy and the Indignados (Arditi 2012; Feigenbaum et al. 2013). For example in his work on counter-summit protests (such as anti-World Bank and IMF in Prague), Jeffrey Juris calls this space to live and experience moments of freedom, liberation and joy 'affective solidarity' (2011), where the intensity of emotion can be used strategically by those hoping to mobilise support (Paul Routledge also writes of 'sensuous solidarities' (2012)). Others, too, have argued that the importance of the emotional and embodied experience for activists should not be under-played in the age of networked global communication (Gerbaudo, 2012). In terms of our own case study countries, the 2011 protests in Egypt have especially attracted scholarly attention for both how certain images became visual icons or symbols of injustice (Olesen 2013), and how the spectacle of protest contributed to an 'amplified public sphere' created through the complex interplay of the 'inter-related spaces of the physical (protests), the analogue (satellite television and other

mainstream media) and the digital (internet and social media)' (Nanabhay and Farmanfarmanian, 2011: p.573).

But whilst much of this work focuses on the harnessing of positive emotions and often a progressive form of politics, we can also observe how feelings of intolerance, hate and fear can also become mobilised by campaigners intent on scapegoating a section of society for identified ills (migrant worker, religious group, ethnicity, sexuality). Xenophobia and hate speech are covered in another paper so will not be further discussed here, other than to note that there is potential for both cohesive and divisive forms in theatrical protest (e.g. Golden Dawn in Greece; Pegida in Germany). In such cases, we might also see counter protests organised with the aim of debunking such claims, and so competing belief systems are enacted in the streets and risk becoming violent. Forms of music and dance can become intertwined with such movements: for example Marc Steinberg (2004) draws on cultural studies traditions to show how popular music can mediate and serve as a vehicle for social and political challenge in his study of social movements and student protest during Milosevic regime in Serbia in 1996/97 and 2000. Whilst rock music may have provided a form of collective political expression for the student protests, Robert Hudson (2003) explores the links between the folkloric musical forms and nationalism in Serbia, where he argues popular music conversely 'contributed to the estrangement, alienation and distancing of the Other' (p.158).

Cultural projects can emerge from different quarters and operate in different temporalities – whilst poems and photographs can provide an immediate artistic response to political events, reflections from cultural institutions take longer to emerge, and might take a more reflective stance – in terms of temporality, we are considering here not the immediate, but the reiterations of political subjectivities that tend to address identity, memory and notions of the social or public good in the longer term, for example in a theatrical performance, gallery or museum display.

Cultural projects also have the 'space' to place current events in historical context and play a role in forming collective memories, and possibly revising and addressing historical injustices through creative practices. To be included within institutional settings of public culture, and to *recognise* yourself as part of that culture, is significant for how communities self-identify and feel valued. Museum studies have also embraced the cultural and affective turns seen across social science and

humanities research. For Eileen Hooper-Greenhill the museum emerges as one of the first institutions of the mass media (2000: p.132), and where its pedagogical agenda has mirrored the transmission model of early mass communication theory in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, museums now also embrace the audience or public's role in rethinking the selection of artefacts and what counts as worthwhile knowledge.

'By viewing museums as a form of cultural politics, museum workers can bring together concepts of narrative, difference, identity, and interpretive strategies in such a way as to create strategies for negotiating these practices. In the post-museum, multiple subjectivities and identities can exist as part of a cultural practice that provides the potential to expand the politics of democratic community and solidarity.' (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p.140)

Museums can be part of a participatory digital culture, offering a space for 'multiple subjectivities', but outsider art and community projects are also important in offering alternative spaces and places where independence is cherished. The open spaces of public squares, the shade of a tree or the streets can also nurture creative and sensorially rich experiences. Finally, then, we note creativity at the individual or micro-level which is not necessarily even loosely organised as a social movement but provides an expressive understanding of recent events or experiences. This might take the form of graffiti, music, poetry, a novel or a memoir in material form. Less easy to capture are the intangible ways in which language, dreams and identities adapt in times of struggle; in the ways that individuals perform their everyday activities and practices. Over a longer period, we might see how new proverbs, metaphors or symbols reflect understandings of events, senses of allegiance or exclusion. In each of the above, there are likely to be contradictory forces at play, and we should avoid thinking that any artistic project captures the entirety of any cultural context.

***How is culture important to the MeCoDEM project and how might we capture the civic role of other forms of cultural communication?***

In recognising these differing intersections between politics and culture, and the importance of culture in understanding how people experience conflict and democratisation, we now turn to how the MeCoDEM project might integrate supplementary studies into the main project objectives. Is there a way we can

capture this admittedly more diffuse and expressive understanding of recent experiences?

There are two main questions that can guide our selection of activities and methods in relation to this 'culture' strand:

1. Which of the four pathways outlined above on page 2 fit best and how could they be linked to existing activities within particular 'work packages'?
2. How were contested interpretations of citizenship (or democracy, community, etc.) in the selected conflict case represented visually in the media and/or what forms of cultural expression did political activists or social movements use to communicate their ideas?

The MeCoDEM team are continuing to explore various ways to bring 'culture' into the project. We are especially interested in how cultural practices give voice or visibility to particular actors and constituencies through the media, how they may contribute to breaking down virtual, digital and physical barriers between individuals or communities, and what is at stake in mediated cultural outputs that start to form collective memory, or 'cultural memory' (Shevchenko 2014, p.5). Below we outline three overlapping approaches to the cultural dimensions of our ongoing research.

**1) Mapping existing cultural outputs:** Here we envisage a mapping exercise to see what already exists in the cultural institutions or the cultural outputs of the country or locale which attempt to deal with the conflict case study. This gives us a sense of the cultural environment and the value placed on different forms. Are there already efforts to collect poetry or other cultural forms in a gallery or museum space? Are certain forms gendered or classed or regionalised and therefore revered or degraded? Here is the approach we envisage: a reflective ethnography around a museum space involves two or three researchers or a curator walking around the space and being captured on film perhaps – reflecting on the main themes of the exhibition and how certain discourses or narratives are promoted, and through what means.

**2) Artistic/photography projects:** Another idea is an artistic project such as a mural design, tree of memories, which could just be in a single country. In terms of organisation, this could give us more of a central practical role, as it would be quite time specific. This could also be captured for display on the website. For example,

are there certain days of remembrance, celebration days, etc. where we could arrange something like this? Likewise, there could be a photography competition that could be run centrally, and communicated through local universities and contacts, with prizes for single images and visual essays. We could use prompts or key words and questions to guide categories. We are interested not just in conflict and traumatic memories, but in hope, resilience, future plans. We are aware that this might only really attract those with cameras and with access to educational institutions and the internet, so there is a concern here that it would appeal to a certain narrow class in society.

**3) Visual research methods:** This idea would be closest to an academic research project, with clear methods and expertise (such as photo-voice, photo elicitation, re-photographing, collaborative video making) (e.g. see Wang and Burris 1997; Harper 2002; Moletsane et al. 2009). But this would depend on the interests and expertise of existing members, and might be most applicable to those conducting the ‘civil society’ element of the project. For example it could be specifically related to the notion of place and how people attach memories and hopes for the future to places that were central in contexts of conflict or democratisation (e.g. the shopping mall in Kenya, square, markets, etc.). Or how people feel included or excluded in certain urban environments (marginalisation, deprivation, privilege, gender). Such projects are often less about the visual content per se and more about how it is explained and interpreted by participants.

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