

Participatory Arts and the Agile Citizen – Spain and Identities played out through culture.

By Chris Baldwin

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2005 marked the 400th anniversary of the publication of the First Part of Don Quijote, a work hailed by the philosopher Michel Foucault as the first modern work of literature. Foucault claims that Cervantes discovered that the relation between words and things is, in many respects, arbitrary. With this discovery Cervantes ushered in the modern age (1). A revolutionary document of its own age, Don Quijote confronts us with the complex history of multicultural Spain with its Moorish, Jewish, and Christian cultures. But it is not just the commemorative reprints of the Cervantes novel or the thousands of commemorative theatre productions which has offered contemporary Spanish citizens an opportunity in recent years to re-examine notions of cultural and historical identity.

During the twenty five years of restored democracy Spain has seen a huge increase in the level of cultural participation and cultural activity. Much of this has reflected a need for Spaniards to find social contexts in which to re-examine notions of their own identity or, to be more precise, identities, as Spain is in many respects a far more federal state than Germany. The popular interest in recent and ancient history, folklore, eating and wine culture, attendance of festivals, theatre, music concerts and museums, or the learning of the country's various languages in formal and informal educational contexts are just a few examples. One could also cite the public funding of archaeology and the development of the thousands of heritage sites into tourist attractions and "interpretation centres" as being not just reflections of an increasingly sophisticated definition of internal tourism but also an indication of the increase in the self esteem of Spain's seventeen Autonomous Communities (2).

For a country which experienced such brutal repression and significant delays in development throughout most of the 20th Century the speed and ferocity of both economic and cultural development can be somewhat difficult comprehend for a significant sector of the population. All the more important therefore that cultural facilities and more importantly policies are developed and managed in a spirit of openness and honesty. Cultural participation and the use of cultural activities (such as theatre, participatory arts programmes, museum going, popular fiestas – indeed almost any cultural pastime which attracts public funding of one form or another) are opportunities for communities to explore their past, build common understandings about a shared heritage and even rehearse methods of working together in problem management contexts. In other words cultural policy as a metaphor for and parallel to transparent and democratic governance (3).

But cultural and economic development is not evenly spread across the country. Again, due to the power devolved to the Autonomous Communities, some are economically powerful and have public and private sectors which can be compared to the richest European regions, whilst others have

sectors more akin to the poorer regions of Greece or Portugal. While in some Autonomous Communities rural areas and schools have access to sophisticated networks of public theatres and touring cultural products others receive only sporadic, less strategic offerings (4).

Across Spain this cultural boom, while unevenly spread, has nevertheless led to opportunities for new interpretations of the past to emerge. Young people, especially those born after 1975, seem less fearful in the way they re-examine the complexity of their origins and identities than older generations. However such a change has been far from a gentle one. Spanish politics are often characterised by visceral and deep rooted confrontations regarding the relationship of the Autonomous Communities to central government, the centrality of Castilian Spanish in relation to the Catalan, Basque, Galician and Valencian languages, changes in the definition of family, abortion and Gay and Human Rights. And there is also Basque and radical Islamic terrorism to contend with. Perhaps unlike other European states there seems to remain a significant difference between the political Right and Left agendas, at least on the social if not so clearly evident on an economic front. And on many occasions the implementation of cultural policy, in particular the development of heritage sites, theatre and cultural projects have reflected political agendas and aspirations, especially in the context of the emerging identities being promoted at Autonomous Community level.

Since the mid 1990's, this traditionally homogeneous country has become an open-door laboratory on immigration. Spain has absorbed more than 3 million foreigners from places as diverse as Romania, Morocco, and South America. More than 11% of the country's 44 million residents are now foreign-born, one of the highest proportions in Europe. Spain is Europe's best-performing major economy, with growth averaging 3.1% over the past five years. Since 2002, the country has created half the new jobs in the euro zone. Unemployment has plummeted from more than 20% in the 1990s to 8.6%. The government attributes this performance to immigration (5).

Immigrants have been on the whole welcomed in Spain and are, without doubt, weaving vitality into Spanish society. In Madrid, Barcelona and Zaragoza Ecuadoran bakeries, Polish mini-markets, Moroccan furniture shops, and the inevitable €1 stores called Los Chinos, because they are usually owned by Chinese, can be found in abundance. But outside the major cities the picture changes. In the villages immigrants are often highly visible but often less able to take root in the communities as a result of living on fixed term contracts and moving on to new jobs at short notice. The notion of multicultural education, or the acknowledgement at curriculum level of various cultures and languages within the school communities, is still a more or less a foreign concept.

In summary, Spain is one of the most socially dynamic countries in Europe. Huge growth in the economy, mass immigration, a still recent history of oppression and denial of the right to develop cultural and democratic competencies has meant that the country is still highly susceptible to economic shocks and political manipulation. The three areas in particular where this seems to manifest itself is in the delicate position in which many immigrants find themselves, environmental degradation caused by massive water shortages, building development in sensitive areas often

involving political corruption and the way in which cultural participation is often a pawn in the hands of local political agendas rather than being a means by which participatory cultural competencies can be extended.

Cultural Identity, Heritage and Cultural Participation

There is a place in the far south east of La Rioja, Spain called Contrebia Leucade. In this dry mountainous desert, stripped of the forests which would have covered the landscape a thousand years ago this archaeological site, dating back to 1000 BC, can be seen perched upon its mountain. Its main interest for archaeologists today is the fact that this walled city was a Celtiberian settlement, later attacked by Romans and eventually Romanised. The final centuries of Imperial occupation, the 4th and 5th AC, was a period of political and social decadence. But after the disappearance of the Roman order the city was transformed again, and from the 7th century a new period of intense economic, urban and cultural activity continued for a further two hundred years or so during which a significant Visigoth and later Muslim presence can be identified. Thus Contrebia Leucade, the city literally cut into the white rock of the mountain, can be seen by modern inhabitants of the region as an cultural and historical emblem for the Iberian Peninsula as a whole; a palimpsest marked by waves of immigration and a shifting, edgy need to continually reassess notions of identity.

How to combine archaeology with theatre has been one of Spirals' major lines of enquiry over the last three years. The Company is has built a reputation for actively managing projects across Spain which bring together museum services, archaeologists, artists and theatre practitioners with those responsible for regional rejuvenation and tourism.

However some 70 kilometres south of Contrebia Leucade is another important archaeological site. The city of Numancia is famous for the way its Celtiberian population resisted Roman attack for many months until its inevitable collapse. From the 19th Century onwards, and particularly through the Franco period, Numancia was a potent nationalist symbol. Its ability to reinforce notions of Spanishness and resistance to invasion was used by the Franco regime to legitimise and justify their hold over the country for forty years in the light of the perceived threat from Communism and other anti Catholic or regionalist tendencies.

Two archaeological sites. Two interpretations. Two interpretations of what it is to belong. At the centre of the equation between people, cultural memory and land is an investigation into both time and space. Where cultural interventions occur, in particular where theatre, music and dance actively combine with heritage, history or archaeology, it seems to be that the underlying reason for doing such work is usually associated with the struggle to define local and contemporary identities. If underpinning notions of Romantic nationalism is usually a cultural attachment to land then it can be expected that archaeological sites are often seen as disputed terrains. They are also opportunities in which the complexity of identity and history can be pleasurable explored rather than simplified into a more recognisable Romantic nationalist rubric.

From the cultural historical to the cultural mythological

While identity and understandings of history are being played out within heritage and archaeological contexts it is far more common to see similar debates being expressed in the form of popular fiesta across the whole of Spain. It is not unusual to encounter local fiestas lasting between a few days to a week long, involving significant alteration of both public, official and private timetables, the closure of buildings, schools and shops, and the involvement of major sections of the community in communal celebrations. In many cases such events involve paying homage to a local Saint, rituals with animals (bull running and fighting), grand eating and drinking opportunities or even re-enactments of famous moments in the history or “myth-story” of the village.

Recently a village in Valencia, Bocairent, was reported in the national newspaper *El País* (6) as having decided to abandon its ancient custom of packing the head of a dummy representing Mohammed with fireworks after seeing the angry response by Muslims to a Danish newspaper’s publication of cartoons of him. Bocairent’s mayor, Antonio Valdes, said blowing up the Mohammed dummy was offensive. It was reported later that while the village may not have blown up the wood-and-cardboard Mohammed dummy it still threw it off a castle wall at the fiesta’s climax in the following February. Hundreds of villages and tens of thousands of villagers all over Spain hold annual festivals to commemorate the “Reconquista,” the reconquest of Spain by Christians from the Moors, which was completed in 1492 after more than 700 years of Muslim rule in much of the country. In many respects the notion of the re-conquest of Spain is at the centre of the struggle over the definition of Spanish identity. A country or place can only be re-conquered if its previous identity was similar. In the case of Spain the peninsula before the Moorish invasion was a series of countries or areas inhabited by tribes. The Catholic monarchs’ expulsion of the Moors led to the unification of Spain in 1492. Less a re-conquest than a forced unification (7). However to this day the myth that the Catholic monarchs re-conquered Spain is used in national political discourse.

As such these “re-conquest festivals” represent a potent part of a popular and participative culture which serves a multiplicity of functions. Firstly they act as an opportunity for the communities to come together in elaborate ceremonies often the result of months of preparations. This is in much the same way as one might see carnival in London’s Notting Hill or in Rio Janeiro in Brazil. But these ever increasingly popular and expensive (and increasingly publicly funded) processions and accompanying events also act as a means by which the notion of “the other” can take fancy dress form even in the increasingly absurd context in which Spanish Muslim communities watch these events from the sidelines. Almost exclusively these events promote a sense of identity based on the similar Numancian myth of needing to defeat the outsider; in these cases not Romans but an even more potent folk enemy, the Muslim (8).

It might be one thing were these cultural and participative events to take place as community expressions of folklore or hyper tourist events. But their potency for promoting images of cultural identity are not lost on some national politicians who on occasion add to the myth building by using

metaphors and nationalistic illusions directly taken from the same seed bed of the reconquest.

Referring to the Moorish conquest of much of the Iberian Peninsula from the eighth to the 15th century, the former Spanish prime minister Jose Maria Aznar said: "It is interesting to note that while a lot of people in the world are asking the Pope to apologise for his speech, I have never heard a Muslim say sorry for having conquered Spain and occupying it for eight centuries (9)."

The Herald Tribune went on to quote Aznar as saying, "We must face up to an Islam that is ambitious, that is radical and that influences the Muslim world, a fundamentalist Islam that we must confront because we don't have any choice. We are constantly under attack and we must defend ourselves...I support Ferdinand and Isabella," in reference to the medieval Catholic monarchs who drove the Moors out of Spain in 1492.

Participation and Cultural Policy

In general term this paper has argued that the increase in cultural participation in Spain over the period since the emergence of democracy has led to the increase of culture as a means by which to investigate notions of identity. Some examples seem to reinforce nationalist "myth-stories" while others seem to place emphasis on using cultural participation as a means by which the complexity of identity can be explored in a way which enables citizens to become more agile and able in the way they define their contradictions.

But what criteria can we apply to the area of participatory culture to explain, defend and develop their worth to a community ever sceptical of public investment in culture? According to the Canadian, Catherine Murray, there seems to be three different paradigms vying for dominance.

The 1990's interest with social cohesion has now been supplanted by a social and cultural capital approach to policy - perhaps reflecting the unfettered dominance of market led terminology since the late 1980's. In this analysis attempts are made to identify which cognitive, cultural or interpretative skills convert into more mobile social capital. How can skills developed as a result of cultural participation projects be transferred into others including democratic and civic participation contexts or even the workplace?

There is also a cultural diversity approach, given weight by UNESCO. Bennett argues that within this paradigm, there are four main overlaying principles:

The first consists of the entitlement to equal opportunities to participate in the full range of activities that constitute the field of culture in the society in question. The second consists in the entitlement of all members of society to be provided with the cultural means of functioning effectively within that society without being required to change their cultural allegiances, affiliations or identities. The third consists in the obligation of governments and other authorities to nurture the source of diversity

through imaginative mechanisms, arrived at through consultation, for sustaining and developing the different cultures that are active within the populations...The fourth concerns the obligation for the promotion of diversity to aim at establishing ongoing interactions between different cultures, rather than their development as separated enclaves”.

The final approach, and one finding more difficulty emerging, yet in my view the most useful, is the cultural rights-based approach.

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights sets out the right to participate in the cultural life of the community as a cultural right. According to Murray the right to participate in has a range of meanings:

- Expressive – implying that people have a basic right to tell stories in their own language or to practice everyday life in different ways, to create and disseminate their work in the language of their choice (UNESCO: UDCD Article 1).
- Normative – referring to the civil values of treatment with respect, tolerance, or establishing the security of being, that is the right to live in freedom from fear of arbitrary cultural genocide (UNESCO UDCD, Preamble)
- Instrumental – compelling the state to provide the informational tools, education, or capacity to function as cultural citizens in a manner that fully respects their cultural identity. Conversely, the State may guarantee access to cultural resources to all regardless of income or geographic location.
- Procedural – including grounds for protection of minorities an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity. It implies a commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the rights of persons belonging to minorities and those of indigenous peoples.
- Deliberative – that is, setting out the principles of recognition of cultural status, representation in cultural decision making, or control over cultural self-determination.

Theatre practitioners, historians and archaeologists generate meaning and pleasure or fear and rigidity in the way they handle definitions of cultural memory. These powerful combinations have not gone unnoticed by politicians of both the modernist and romantic tendencies. Increasingly European politicians and policy makers see the “useful” role artists and historians can make in sharing these meanings with a wider public, especially when the public is paying for the work in the first place. In many respects theatre practitioners, historians and archaeologists are locked together in an interpretative nexus – responsible for the generation of material and knowledge and for the transmission of this knowledge in a way which can be complicating, truthful, useful and enjoyable or manipulative and nationalistic. But unless a transparent cultural policy framework underpins the way cultural interventions are designed and implemented they remain highly susceptible to either simplified market forces or even more explicitly anti democratic tendencies.

Endnotes

1. The Death of Man (p74) by Canguilhem G. in Gutting G The Cambridge Companion to Foucault 2005
2. For statistical information relating to culture in Spain visit <http://www.mcu.es/culturabase>
3. Francois Matarasso's papers examine this area in various contexts. <http://homepage.mac.com/matarasso/FileSharing15.html>
4. This observation is based on personal experience and discussions with cultural policy makers and practitioners across Spain. Also visit <http://www.mcu.es/culturabase>
5. Carol Matlack How Spain Thrives on Immigration Business Week May 9 2007
6. Sep 26, 2006
7. Juan Lalaguna A Travellers History of Spain 1990
8. Max Harris, in his book Aztecs, Moors and Christians in Mexico and Spain, (2000) importantly stresses the subversive elements in popular fiesta. While his argument is important and valid I wish to emphasize the role these re-enactment festivals help define the territory in which contemporary debates about romantic nationalism take place
9. Jose Maria Aznar was defending Pope Benedict XVI's comments about Islam, saying that the pontiff had no need to apologise and asking why Muslims never did. 22nd Sep 2006 Herald Tribune
10. Cultural Participation: Toward a Cultural Policy Paradigm (Nov 2003) Canadian Cultural Research Network