

CULTURAL DEMOCRACY - PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE PUBLIC POLICY

For over 70 years a large and diverse group of civic leaders, scholars, artists and social commentators have been developing the theory and practice of cultural democracy.

Many artists have worked in communities around the world developing arts projects that employ the principles of cultural democracy.

The experience of these people is extremely valuable in helping artists everywhere to see how their work can instruct and influence public policy and community arts projects.

Cultural democracy can be defined as a commitment to the following principles: (1) Cultural diversity is a positive social value, to be protected and encouraged; (2) Democratic participation is essential to shaping cultural life (i.e. how cultural institutions are shaped, run and distributed); (3) Authentic democracy requires active participation in cultural life, not simply passive consumption of cultural products; and (4) Equity demands fair distribution of cultural resources and support throughout our society.

Cultural democracy follows close upon the other major trends in extending democratic rights to citizens. The movement for economic democracy (19th century) fought for a person's right for decent compensation and a say in economic decision making. The movement for political democracy (late 19th-mid 20th century) fought for a person's basic civil liberties, equality before the law, and a voice in the political decision-making process.

Cultural democracy guarantees each person the right to culture, to participate in the building of culture and a role in cultural debate and decision making.

The term "cultural democracy" was first used by J. Drachsler in his 1920 book, *Democracy and Assimilation: The Blending of Immigrant Heritages in America*. Drachsler was a pioneer of multi-culturalism. He advocated that different ethnic groups should have the right to maintain their identity as they entered America and that our public schools should operate programs which share knowledge of different cultural heritages.

This line of thinking was in contrast to the growing popularity of the image of America as a "melting pot" where new immigrant groups were (and still are) expected to leave their heritage, language, and lifeways at America's doorstep when they enter the country.

The roots of cultural democracy can be traced to the writings of social critics Horace Kallen and W.E.B. DuBois. Modern practitioners have been influenced by the work of Brazilian educator/activist, Paulo Freire.

Cultural democracy stands for the right to own one's past and one's community's past. It is the right to free and equal interaction between the cultures that now co-exist in America. And it stands for the freedom to choose the many cultures which we will constitute our pluralistic society of the 21st century.

What is the opposite point of view to this cultural philosophy?

The alternative is a Euro-centric perspective where the cultural forms and lifeways of 19th century western Europe dominate other forms and ways. These are the values we associate with the major arts institutions of America.

Most of these art forms are housed in imposing downtown arts spaces. Seemingly, every major city in America feels incomplete unless it has a major opera house, cultural palace or grand symphony space in the center of town.

Usually, these arts institutions receive the large majority of government funding, corporate support, attention of business and civic leaders, and private contributions.

Cultural democrats point out that America has always been a place of many voices. But in the past these non-Eurocentric voices have been painfully silenced.

Native American, African-American, Asian-American, and Latino cultures have all been suppressed and only recently has "mainstream" America been listening.

This is mainly due to the changing face of America. Chicago is now 62% non-white. Corporate America, sensing profits in this demographic shift, has finally begun to focus on African-Americans and Latino culture.

Cultural democracy says there is no one "official" American culture. We all have distinctive traditions, creative talents and precious life experiences. America thrives when we interact, respect and draw from one another's cultural experiences.

You might call this the "salad bowl" image of America, instead of the "melting pot." You can taste all the ingredients of the salad and each ingredient adds flavor and richness to the others.

The wonderful feature of cultural democracy is that is articulated, championed, and practiced by artists!

In future columns I will expand on this theme and explain how artists work in the arena of cultural democracy, and how our public arts policy might change to reflect this movement.

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Tom Tresser is a consultant, producer, educator and trainer who can help individuals, companies and communities leverage and amplify their creative assets in order to solve problems, create economic value and trigger civic engagement. Tom has been a long-time advocate for an increased appreciation for the role of creativity in the life of the community. In 1991 he started an organization that organized artists and cultural workers for political activism and taught "Arts and Public Policy" at Roosevelt University, where he organized a center for the study of cultural policy. Tom was Director Cultural Development at Peoples Housing, a nonprofit community development corporation operating in northeast Chicago, where he organized a community arts program that combined culture and economic development. Tom served as lead organizer for the Chicago Park District for two years in a pilot project that transformed a major regional park into a community cultural center. In April 2004, Tom was elected to a two-year term for the Local School Council for the Abraham Lincoln Elementary School in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. He lectures on "The Politics of Creativity" and conducts leadership training sessions for artists and creative professionals. He teaches classes on arts and civic engagement at DePaul University and Loyola University.



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