



european cultural foundation

The European Cultural Foundation & Editions Barzakh

Culture, market and democracy

The funding of cultural action: state disengagement and liberalism

Algiers, February 2007

Introduction to the seminar

Culture in Algeria: An overview, & some questions

In less than twenty years, the role of the State in Algeria has been transformed. Omnipresent, omnipotent, it was once the principal employer and source of revenue for the economy as a whole, compared to which the private sector was a poor relation, barely tolerated. Today, it is attempting to disengage itself from this position in favour of market economics, through a series of financial mechanisms. And if there is an area in which the disengagement process has been particularly spectacular, it is that of culture. Up to the end of the 1980s, the cinema, the theatre and the media were run directly by the government through publicly-funded, centralised structures in which the producers of culture were mere functionaries. The task of cultural activity was to popularise the "content of socialism", so as to "definitively shape our mentality" (cf. the Algiers Charter, April 1964, the founding text of independent Algeria). A "new man" was to come into being under the enlightened rule of the single party.

The fundamental task of culture was clear: to act as a vehicle for State propaganda, from songs in praise of the agrarian revolution sung by the tenor of the day, Rabah Deriassa, to the Golden Palm at the Cannes film festival, awarded to *Chronicle of the Years of Embers*, by Mohamed Lakhdar Hamina, who was also the head of the Centre Algérien de l'Industrie Cinématographique (CAIC).

With the fall of the Berlin wall, the failure of "real socialism", and the financial crisis that strangled the country in the mid-1980s, world history caught up with Algeria; and it was in a climate of violence that a new constitution was adopted in 1989, institutionalising the changes that were already sweeping through society and its institutions.

With the end of the single party, and the acceptance of a multi-party system, the State was unable to continue financing culture, and this led to profound changes. The dissolution of cultural institutions (which were also economic institutions whose role was to finance cultural production) spelt unemployment for hundreds of producers, film-makers, publishers, musicians, actors and writers, who had to invent new ways of living – or simply surviving – by their art, or at least adapt to a new world.

What role could there be, then, for culture, after the cutting of its ideological nexus with the single party, and the party's conjunctural appendages?

In a market economy, and without public funds, how was this unorthodox merchandise to be financed? The State, paradoxically, has continued to be the main financial backer of cultural activity through commissions, subsidies and, in recent years, major commemorations that mobilise the entire cultural apparatus for extended periods, e.g. "The Year of Algeria in France", or "Algiers 2007, Capital of the Arab World". And these, admittedly, have provided new sources of funding for cultural objects. But are we talking, here, about "culture" in the sense of "innovative works", not subject to the contingencies of circumstance, or new forms of propaganda aimed at promoting a "national image"?

That a ruling party should use culture for its own purposes, or bend it to ulterior media-political ends, is only to be expected. The main question is whether there can be any alternative to the public funding of culture.

In Algeria, private investment in culture remains marginal, with the notable exception of

music. And this is no coincidence. The music industry brings in short-term profits with little initial outlay, unlike other cultural activities such as the cinema, publishing, etc., which require large financial commitments and are profitable only over long time spans.

With liberalisation, firms have nonetheless begun to put themselves forward as potential partners for small-scale producers of cultural products, with sponsorship and publicity campaigns. But this type of funding remains too uncertain and unpredictable to give rise to enduring cultural enterprises. Besides which, it is not in the interests of private companies – national or international – to make waves in the art world; i.e., they are not prepared to take political risks that might undermine their commercial interests.

Between the State and the market – which also has its ideological imperatives, in terms of profitability, commercialism and "brand image" – is it possible to create anything other than self-serving discourses?

And for whom? In a country where culture was formerly subsidised, and indeed more or less free, are there people who will pay for it on a conventional consumeristic basis, given that, for the price of a pizza, the entire world can be brought to them by new technologies such as the internet, video, etc.? What audience, what function is there for the State? What roles exist for creative artists and industrialists as vectors of cultural production? These are new questions for Algeria, which is a test bed worthy of innovative ideas, while not overlooking the experiments that are going on in the rest of the world. It is in this sense that partnerships with other countries, now permitted, could become indispensable channels for cooperation and encounters with people of other origins.

Partners without borders

Given that the experiment is still quite a new one, it is still too soon to measure the impact of foreign funding, whether public or private, in Algeria, where, for ideological reasons ("national sovereignty", or "cultural independence"), it was once strictly forbidden for individuals and private bodies to seek this kind of funding. One thing is already clear, however: any outside force that helps to remove "mental, economic and legal" barriers is vital to those producers and creators of culture who are trying to do original work on the fringes. As an example, we might mention the numerous Algerian and Franco-Algerian film-makers who have received public funds from countries such as France. But nothing is simple, and there is another side to this new life that has been breathed into the Algerian cinema, in that one of the strings attached to such funding is the use of French as the main language of communication. Ideological prejudices aside, such constraints raise questions as to the audience that is being targeted.

It remains the case that foreign funding, while still marginal in Algeria, is already having an undeniable impact, making it possible to finance projects on themes that are out of phase with the official, moral line, and to set in motion creative processes that are not subject to national inhibitions, either political or religious. But the main point is that partnerships are an invaluable stimulant to encounters with other universes, other histories, other preoccupations; and this experience of otherness can be used to build bridges between Algeria and the rest of the world.

It would be interesting, in our workshop, to discuss the role these sources of finance might play as a locomotive for novel, ambitious, experimental projects that could contribute to the construction of a cultural avant-garde by breaking down taboos or contributing to the disengagement of the State. The sharing of ideas with other countries in the Mediterranean basin, the Arab world (Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, etc.) and elsewhere (Turkey, for example) should help identify that which unites, that which differentiates, and that which

enriches.

In cultural terms, Algeria occupies a particular place in the Mediterranean world. It is the only country in the Maghreb to have dabbled in authoritarian socialism, then suffered fifteen years of internecine violence. Burdened by this kind of legacy, what position can be aspired to by men and women of culture who want to remain free, critical voices in a country caught between State control, Islamist ideology and a liberal-consumerist world model?

What support can be expected from partnerships with other countries? And is it certain that such partnerships will not, in turn, prove alienating?

These are among the questions that were at the centre of our debates in Algiers on 17 February 2007.

Programme

Salle des Commissions, Bibliothèque Nationale d'Algérie
Saturday 17 February, 9:30-5:30

9:30 – Opening: Sofiane Hadjadj, director of Editions Barzakh, and Odile Chenal, director of the European Cultural Foundation

10:00 – Problematic: Mohammed Sari, academic and writer, and Ghania Mouffok, journalist and moderator, "Cultural policy in Algeria"

1. Culture and the market

10:15-10:30 – An alternative: Basma El Hussiny, director of *El mawred el thakafi* ("The cultural resource"), Cairo

10:30-10:45 – The Turkish experience: Mine G. Kirikkanat, journalist and writer, Istanbul

10:45-11:00 – The Moroccan experience: Omar Brouksy, journalist, Casablanca

11:00-11:15 – The Jordanian experience: Lamia Raei, the King Hussein foundation, Amman

11:15-11:45 – Debate

2. From the State to the market: Algerian experiments...

11:45-12:00 – A film-maker: Belkacem Hadjadj, director of feature films and documentaries

12:00-12:15 – A publisher: Daho Djerbal, historian and director of *NAQD*, a critical, independent social science review that operates without government funding

14:00-14:15 – Music: Réda Chikhi, producer, "Producing music today"

14:15-14:30 – The State and culture: Hassan Bendif, head of publishing for "Algiers 2007, capital of Arab culture": "What role for the Ministry of Culture?"

14:30-15:00 – Debate

15:00-15:30 – Coffee break

3. Finance and cultural strategies

15:30-15:45 – A State strategy: Pierre Barrot, cultural attaché to the French Embassy in Algeria, "France and the role of the Centres Culturels Français"

16:00-16:15 – An NGO: the European Cultural Foundation

16:15-17:00 – Debate and perspectives