

## **THE DEMOCRATIC VALUE OF PARTICIPATION IN SWEDISH CULTURAL POLICY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Through an exploration of Swedish cultural policy, this article analyses how policy legitimates its support for the arts and culture, and how “participation” is made meaningful in this process, to discuss how different understandings of culture and participation relate to changing notions of democratic governance in culture. The article discusses how an overarching discourse of culture as good, and therefore an interest in and responsibility for policy, can be understood as two discourses: 1) culture is good as it enables good things and 2) culture is good as it prevents bad things. These two discourses rest on different logics and “fixate” the concept of participation in different ways but are constructed as if they were compatible. The meaning of democratic governance in culture is also differently interpreted in the two discourses – as either protection of autonomy, equality in access to culture, and participation as taking part, labelled a corporatist democracy, or as guaranteeing sustainable societies at risk, and participation as an equal possibility to influence, labelled populist democracy. This break in discourse is interpreted as a sign of diminishing legitimacy of a corporatist discourse of democracy where experts have had the power to decide the content of cultural policy. The article partakes in a discussion on the role of participation and democracy in cultural policy.

### **KEYWORDS**

corporatism; discourse analysis; policy analysis, populism

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## **O VALOR DEMOCRÁTICO DA PARTICIPAÇÃO NA POLÍTICA CULTURAL SUECA**

### **RESUMO**

Através da exploração da política cultural sueca, este artigo analisa o modo como a política legitima o apoio às artes e à cultura e a “participação” é importante para este processo, discutindo a forma como diferentes entendimentos da cultura e a participação se relacionam com as noções variáveis da governação democrática na cultura. O artigo discute de que modo um discurso abrangente de cultura considerado positivo e, por conseguinte, de interesse e responsabilidade para a política, pode ser entendido como dois discursos: 1) a cultura é positiva, pois promove coisas boas e 2) a cultura é positiva, pois evita coisas más. Estes dois discursos estão assentes em lógicas diferentes e determinam o conceito de participação de diferentes formas, contudo são construídos como se fossem compatíveis. O significado de governação democrática na cultura é também interpretado de forma diferente nos dois discursos – a protecção da autonomia, igualdade no acesso à cultura e participação como parte integrante são classificadas como democracia corporativista, ao passo que a garantia de sociedades sustentáveis em risco e a participação como igual possibilidade de influência são classificadas como democracia populista. Esta quebra no discurso é interpretada como sinal de redução da legitimidade de

um discurso corporativista da democracia, no qual especialistas tiveram o poder de decidir o conteúdo da política cultural. Este artigo integra a discussão sobre o papel da participação e da democracia na política cultural.

#### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

análise de discurso; análise política; corporativismo; populismo

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Participation is a widely used concept in cultural policy (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Ekholm & Lindström Sol, 2019; Jancovich, 2017; Sørensen, 2016; Taylor, 2016). It serves ambitions regarding a variety of cultural policy goals, such as attracting wider audiences and increasing user involvement (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Stevenson, Balling & Kann-Rasmussen, 2017). The concept prompts implications regarding questions of who culture is for, how public funding for culture should be legitimised, and what should be interpreted as the value and content of culture (Carpentier, 2009; Vestheim, 2012). However, participation remains an under-theorised “buzzword” that eludes exact definition, although it carries a positive connotation (Carpentier, 2016).

As a political concept, participation is discussed as a key element of democracy, both in terms of the people being the source of power through voting, as well as people being active agents in the exercise of power through dialogue and influence (Blomgren, 2012; Chhotray & Stoker, 2012; Pateman, 1970). The present-day popularity of participation is explained by the democratic potential it is seen to have, at a time where we are seeing a general “democratic deficit”; low trust in democratic institutions, growing authoritarianism, and declining membership of political parties and organisations (Chhotray & Stoker, 2012; Fischer, 2003; Vestheim, 2012). This crisis in democracy is often linked to major social transformation processes such as globalisation, individualisation and the transition from welfare state to workfare state (McGuigan, 2005; Fischer, 2003). In an attempt to define the concept of participation, Pateman (1970) distinguished between partial participation and full participation in response to scholars promoting a limited model of democracy – participation, she claimed, is essential for democracy. Similarly, Arnstein (1969) constructed the model of a “ladder of participation” to understand why certain governmental attempts at including citizens in participatory practices resulted in non-participation, or worse; manipulation. Carpentier (2016) discusses a model that explicates the differences among access, interaction and participation, where the latter refers to the involvement of the citizenry within institutionalised and non-institutionalised politics. Where access relates to the mere presence of participants (and technologies), interaction requires socio-communicative relationships, and participation requires co-deciding. All these theories link participation to power and influence over decision-making, which is why it has strong connotations to the exercise of democracy.

The aim of this article is to discuss the meaning of participation in relation to the governance of culture. Through a discourse analysis of Swedish cultural policy documents, the study argues that we are seeing a discursive change in cultural policy. Depending on the construction of participation, the concept may support or challenge normative notions of democratic procedures in culture. Thus, the article partakes in a discussion on the role of participation and democracy in cultural policy, requested by researchers such as Blomgren (2012), Sørensen (2016) and Vestheim (2009). The research questions are: what discourses regarding the role of culture in society, and by extension, about the “right” way to govern culture, appear in the cultural policy documents analysed? Is participation part of a discursive change? How do the discourses relate to issues of democratic ideals?

### THE GOVERNANCE OF CULTURE

Norwegian cultural policy researcher Geir Vestheim defined cultural policy as when “agents of the political system intervene with the production, distribution and consumption of cultural products, services and experiences” (Vestheim, 2012, p. 497). Although defining the choices governments make in relation to culture fails to acknowledge implicit policies (Ahearne, 2009; Gray, 2012), the above definition stresses the relation between the political system and the cultural field. In their contested but often cited text from 1989, Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey argued for a typology of four ideal types regarding the state governance of culture, namely the state as facilitator, patron, architect and engineer. The facilitator state regards culture as a private interest and governs mainly through tax deductions on private sponsorship. The patron state governs through support via arms-length art councils with the focus on artistic quality. The arm’s length principle, often exemplified by the British Arts Council, protects the arts field from undue political governance through a certain distance; politicians may not decide upon the content of cultural institutions, or who receives financial support. Instead, this responsibility is allocated to independent art councils who use art experts, and as in the Swedish case, arts organisations and unions to protect the values of the art world. This has shaped Swedish cultural policy in a corporatist manner (Mangset, 2009). The architect state governs directly via a cultural department and tends to link cultural value to social value. Finally, the engineer model state controls the means of production of culture and instrumentalizes cultural value according to political ideals.

Sweden is an interesting case for exploring participation in culture as a political concept, because of its cultural policy history. Swedish cultural policy is conceived of as a mix between the patron and architect state. The government established a cultural department in 1991 and the country has a long tradition of arms-length organisations that decide on the allocation of funds to culture (Blomgren, 2012; Duelund, 2008; Vestheim, 2007). The state is concerned with culture, popular education (*folkbildning*) and media,

where culture is defined narrowly as “endeavors in literature, the performing arts, visual arts, music and cultural heritage” (Proposition 2009/10:3, p. 12). The state governs through legislation in three areas; cultural heritage, public media services, and library policy. Traditionally, culture has been viewed as part of the Swedish public good and has thus been part of the expansion of the welfare state after WW2, with a responsibility for the distribution of support between state, region and municipalities. The economic crisis of the 1990s marked a halt to this expansion, and policy has increasingly focussed on effectivity (Johannisson, 2006). The main task of the national cultural policy since the adoption of the first national cultural policy goals in 1974 has been to promote the production, distribution and consumption of professional, high-quality artistic work (Duelund, 2008; Johannisson, 2006). Generally, in Sweden, the policies oriented towards fostering artistic works and expression has been labelled arts policy, while policies towards the dissemination of culture to the people, regardless of where they live or their social background, has been labelled cultural policy (Blomgren, 2012).

In Sweden, municipalities are free to formulate their cultural policies independently. Even so, they show remarkable consistency in formulating goals that mirror the national cultural policy goals (Johannisson, 2018). Still, in an analysis comparing local and national cultural policy, Johannisson and Trépagny (2004) found that regional and municipal policy documents more explicitly linked the value of culture to sustainable development in a social, economic, and environmental meaning. The regional and municipal cultural policy also stresses the need to transcend boundaries between public, private and civil sectors. As such, Johannisson & Trépagny (2004) argue that regional and municipal cultural policy in Sweden is closer to the architect model than is to the case for the state, which is closer to the patron model as formulated by Hillman-Chartrand & McCaughey (1989).

#### **PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL POLICY**

Bonet and Négrier (2018) argue that the participatory discourse emerged in cultural policy in the 1970s through the paradigm of cultural democracy, which emphasised amateur culture, empowerment of citizens and minority rights in culture. This paradigm emerged as a critique of previous paradigms in cultural policy for focussing too narrowly on the fine arts and for assuming a universal understanding of taste and quality (Evrard, 1997; Vestheim, 2007; Virolainen, 2016). The previous paradigm, cultural democratisation, was grounded on the goals of spreading high-quality culture to all, where audiences were largely understood as passive consumers of culture (Evrard, 1997). New technological innovation and changes in media and culture consumption are said to have pressured cultural institutions into finding new ways to engage audiences and let them influence the cultural content (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Virolainen, 2016). Participation does not produce a new paradigm in cultural policy but is rather to be understood as “a strategy that creates tensions within paradigms” (Bonet & Négrier, 2018, p. 70).

Lately, participation in culture has signified a means for cultural institutions to become more accessible through engagement/interaction with audiences, especially in respect to groups that are traditionally under-represented in visitor profiles (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Virolainen, 2016). Research on participation in culture often mirrors national cultural policy concerns regarding inequity in attendance to publicly funded culture (Stevenson et al., 2017; Taylor, 2016; Tomka, 2013). Numbers are showing that what is called participation rates, when they refer to attending the subsidised arts, are both falling and are consistently shown to be correlated with socio-economic background (Stevenson et. al., 2017; Taylor, 2016; Vestheim, 2007). This kind of non-participation is primarily a problem for the institutions that risk diminishing legitimacy and funding cuts, not necessarily for citizens. To frame non-participation as not attending publicly funded cultural institutions is a deficit model of participation, as is claimed by authors such as Sullivan and Miles (2012) and Blomgren (2012).

#### **LEGITIMATE DEMOCRATIC PROCEDURES IN CULTURAL POLICY**

Gray (2012) discusses four possible approaches to democratic procedures in cultural policy; direct democracy, representative democracy, deliberate democracy and democratic elitism or corporatism (Chhotray & Stoker, 2012; Fischer, 2003). According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, corporatism is “the organisation of a society into industrial and professional corporations serving as organs of political representation and exercising control over persons and activities within their jurisdiction”<sup>1</sup>. Gray (2012) claims all versions of democracy have anti-democratic tendencies. The democratic accountability and control over any of these systems are only as good as the policy frameworks for them provided by elected politicians.

As stated above, the corporatist democratic model of Swedish cultural policy is characterised by the arm’s length principle to protect the arts from undue political influence, as well as building on the influence of artistic unions and other cultural organisations. The system of allocating the decisions regarding support through arm’s length organisations and experts is a way to allow for legitimacy in democratic, political and bureaucratic structures (Vestheim, 2007). The principle defended is not only the classic liberal democracy notion of autonomy and freedom of speech, but above all the notion of artistic quality, operationalised in different criteria, as the basis of decision-making (Blomgren 2012). The influence from politics in this democratic model may stem less from overt control but from a “community of taste” between the members of the arm’s length body and the political elite (Mangset, 2009, p. 276).

The risk of bias and corruption in the corporatist structure of decision-making has provoked critiques on this system, which claim that it is inherently non-democratic, as

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/corporatism>

the public is excluded because of their lack of cultural capital and habitus that characterises the well-off and well-educated classes (Blomgren, 2012; Vestheim, 2007, p. 231). As stated by Mangset (2009), the influence of artist unions on arm's length organisations has diminished since the 1990s and the corporatist structure of Swedish cultural policy is therefore weakened.

What approach ought to replace the corporatist model in cultural policy is seldom discussed in Sweden, although it can be argued the recent participatory turn stems from a discontent with the lack of citizen influence (Blomgren, 2012; Vestheim, 2007, 2012). The argument is that autonomy, as a concept, also applies to individuals, and not only to institutions, which in turn implies that cultural policy should reflect the will of the people and seek its legitimisation from the people rather than the cultural elite (Blomgren, 2012; Jancovich, 2017). In this article, this desired "rule by people", going against the elitist structure of the corporatist model (Blomgren, 2012; Chhotray & Stoker, 2012), is labelled populist democracy. Populism is often denounced for its associations with extremist political movements, but both populist and corporatist democracy are "the mechanisms through which individuals can contribute to the making of decisions on behalf of all members of the political system" (Gray, 2012, p. 505). Ernesto Laclau (2005) understands populist notions of the people not as a threat to democracy, but as essential to its procedures. Populism is a "political logic" (Laclau, 2005, p. 117) or a way of constructing the political through demands towards the system, demands that in themselves presuppose deviance from the status quo, and therefore make possible the emergence of a "people". Both democratic approaches tend to be understood in terms of their extremes; corporatism as elitism, and populism as "tyranny of the masses" (Evrard, 1997).

In this article, the notion of populist democracy does not necessarily signify "an expression of class antagonism in relation to a dominant power bloc" (Torfing, 1999, p. 304). After all, strategies to diminish the corporatist structure of Swedish cultural policy have been initiated by the "powerful" themselves, such as the artistic unions, due to their wish not to exert undue influence (Mangset, 2009). Populism rather refers to the significance of participation in cultural policy, resulting in a shift in attention from the values and interests of cultural producers to the interests of cultural consumers, i.e. citizens/taxpayers (Bonet & Négrier, 2018; Sørensen, 2016). Arts policy has, since the 1990s, shifted from focussing on the supply end to the demand end (Jancovich, 2017). We have seen this shift in the discourse on participatory decision-making in general, and it is now seen as integral to legitimate political action in public policy (Fischer, 2003).

Another change in the current cultural policy is the focus on arts as a tool for social inclusion, an approach rooted in an instrumental notion of cultural policies in the '80s (Stevenson et. al., 2017). According to McGuigan (2005), the translation of social policy issues into cultural policy is a distinctive feature of neo-liberal developments in the public sector, together with commercialisation, and is especially noticeable in national

broadcasting. The extent to which the neo-liberalisation has reached cultural policy in various national contexts is contested, with evidence for strong remaining commitment to principles of *bildung* ideals and resistance to attempts at instrumentalisation (Ekholm & Lindström Sol, 2019; Virolainen, 2016).

#### THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

To discuss the significance of participation in cultural policy, this article uses the theoretical framework of discourse theory, mainly as discussed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), Torfing, (1999), Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2002). In discourse theory, meaning is attributed to phenomena such as culture or participation through language (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The understanding of discourse employed in this paper is a meaning-making system of practice that shapes world-views and understandings of what subjects and objects are and can be. Discourse fixates meaning by constituting a framework for what can be said and done (Torfing, 1999). Discourse theory helps us see different understandings of the meaning and value of phenomena such as governance of culture as negotiations between actors struggling to gain acceptance of a certain understanding of the social order (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Torfing, 1999; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

The main argument of this article is that there is an ongoing negotiation regarding the governance of culture, i.e. the interest of the state, regions and municipality in supporting and taking responsibility for culture and the arts, which has resulted in change. The surge of interest in participation plays a role in this change. The discourse that presupposes policy interest in culture is that culture is good for societies, a moral-philosophical trend that can be traced back to Aristoteles' *Poetics* (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). Culture is made meaningful as good in different ways; for social inclusion, citizen health, entertainment, leisure and contemplation, and for its potential for learning and *bildung* (Ekholm & Lindström Sol, 2019). According to Belfiore and Bennett (2007), this discourse is dominant but overlaps with two other discourses that have legitimised the interference of policy in culture; the articulation of culture as bad (need for censorship, tax on certain cultural expressions deemed negative) and the articulation of culture as autonomous and in need of protection, which relates to the arms-length system in cultural policy, that was discussed earlier. The discourse of the autonomy of the arts presupposed the hegemonic position (as in the dominant discursive formation) of democracy as corporatist (Torfing, 1999). This article will discuss how the overarching discourse of culture as good has two components; 1) culture is good as it enables good things and 2) culture is good as it prevents bad things. These two discourses rest on slightly different logics and fixate the concept of participation in different ways.

Discourse theory does not – nor should it – offer a clear and simple way to apply it in empirical studies (Torfing, 1999). The theory provides us with key ideas about

discursive formations and then positions the researcher as a “bricoleur” in the analytical endeavour (Lindsköld, 2013). Below, I will briefly outline the main theoretical concepts used to analyse the meaning-making of the democratic governance of culture and the role of participation in the material, namely myth, social imaginary, subject position, nodal point, and floating signifier.

A myth does not pinpoint something as untrue but helps unpack assumptions that legitimate meaning-making in discourse (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Myths are often embodied in sets of norms, values and presuppositions and are sometimes transformed into social imaginaries – the condition of possibility of any object (Torfing, 1999). Laclau (1990) exemplifies the social imaginary as progress in the enlightenment, and the classless society in communism. The role of both myth and social imaginary is hegemonic; to form objectivity regarding how something is possible to understand and what (political) actions are desired and possible. Myths and social imaginaries deny contingency, i.e. they deny the idea that things could be different.

Discourses offer forms of identity that subjects may identify with. This process often forms the subjects’ space for political acts and political subjectivity. Subjects are subject positions in a discursive structure (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Torfing, 1999). A discourse can have multiple subject positions. As an example, Terning (2016) identifies three subject positions — or three articulations of the student subject position — regarding the student in Swedish educational policy; the free and successful student, the individualised and solidary student, and the loyal and adjustable student.

Nodal points are privileged signifiers in discourse that serve to partially fixate meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). As an example of the nodal point, in Lindsköld’s (2013) study on the meaning of quality in policy regarding state funding of literature, quality is a nodal point tied to other signifiers such as original, modern and provoking. Nodal points are especially capable of fixating the meaning of floating signifiers, signifiers that overflow with meaning and are articulated differently within different discourses (Torfing, 1999). Participation is analysed as such a floating signifier which in itself becomes a nodal point in national, regional and local discourse of cultural policy.

## **DATA AND ANALYSIS**

This analysis is focussed on how the policy documents construct (1) the role of culture and by extension, legitimate and meaningful governing of culture, (2) the definitions of participation in relation to the meaning-making of governance of culture (Vestheim, 2007). It considers four cultural policy documents outlining cultural policy goals and ambitions in Sweden (see Table 1). The focus on discursive work in official cultural policy documents adds valuable knowledge to how certain policy is legitimised, and why (Wedel, Shore, Feldman & Lathrop, 2005). Taken-for-granted assumptions, norms and normative notions of what kind of society and behaviour is deemed to be “good” and



“wrong” are articulated in such documents (Lindsköld, 2013; Vestheim, 2007; Wedel et al., 2005). According to Vestheim (2007), official policy documents tap into discourses that express intentions about the effects of cultural policy. This study thus considers what Jeremy Ahearne labelled “explicit cultural policy” that is acknowledged by policy organs such as the Swedish *riksdag* (the national parliament) or the city executive board (Ahearne, 2009, p. 142).

LEVEL	CULTURAL POLICY DOCUMENT
National	Proposition 2009/10:3: Tid för kultur [Time for culture]
Regional	Västra Götalandsregionen (2012): En mötesplats i världen [A meeting place in the world]
Municipal	Göteborgs Stad (2013): Culture Programme for the City of Gothenburg
Municipal	Kulturnämnden Göteborg (2018): Budget for the Cultural Affairs Council Gothenburg

Table 1: Empirical material

Local cultural policy tends to be overlooked in cultural policy analysis, especially in a Swedish context (Johannisson, 2006, 2018). In this study, the analysis considers the cultural policy of the city of Gothenburg, Sweden’s second largest municipality with approximately 500k inhabitants. The city is interesting for analysis as it is known for having an ambitious cultural policy and was one of the first municipalities to implement cultural planning, where the arts and culture were implemented as aspects of a more general social policy of the city (Johannisson, 2006). The cultural goals of the city of Gothenburg are divided into three sub-areas; arts policy, cultural policy and cultural planning. The budget of the cultural affairs council of Gothenburg is analysed as it is formulated with a vision of how culture as a policy area should best be governed.

## RESULTS

The analysis outlined the articulation of two components of the culture-is-good discourse in the analysed documents; 1) culture is good as it enables good things; 2) culture is good as it prevents bad things (see Table 2). All policy documents contain variations of both, but in general, the first is more prominently found in the national and local cultural policy goals, whereas the second is more prominently found in the regional cultural policy goals and the local budget. For convenience sake, the two components will be labelled “discourse” in their own right. Both discourses rest on different myths, social imaginaries and nodal points, as well as the accompanying subject positions of politicians and inhabitants in the nation, region, or city.

The first discourse stresses the role of autonomy; culture can act as an enabler, but then art needs to be free. The regional cultural strategy has five dimensions; democratic

openness, artistic quality, social relevance, economic potential, and regional profiling. In discussing the second dimension, the importance of the intrinsic value of the arts in policy is made clear: “the second dimension, artistic quality, corresponds to what is often called arts policy, that together with democratic openness above all safeguards and creates prerequisites for the intrinsic value of art and the freedom of the artist” (Västra Götalandsregionen, 2012, p. 6).

The meaning of culture and art as free is above all manifested in the continuous respect for the arms-length principle and in stating the value of culture as a policy area in its own right: “culture and the content of culture should not and cannot be governed by political decision-making, but society can, through a well-executed cultural policy, create prerequisites for a strong cultural sphere that can develop and bloom on its own conditions” (Proposition 2009/10:3, p. 9).

The second discourse stresses the role of the arts and culture in creating a better society. This is expressed in terms of social justice, economic importance and societal sustainability:

in the era of global competition, it is a survival condition for a small export-dependent country like Sweden - not to mention an outward-looking region like Västra Götaland - to pursue an aggressive cultural policy and to work for increased participation in cultural life. (Västra Götalandsregionen, 2012, p. 11)

If we imagine society as a car, the “culture as counteractor” discourse understands culture as the airbag and the economy as the engine. The road is full of obstacles or threats why there is a need for safe driving. These threats are globalisation, inequality, segregation, stagnation, and insignificance (McGuigan, 2005). In the “culture as enabler” discourse, culture is rather to be understood as the steering wheel. This image tells us of the position of the driver: either as someone who gives the car the possibility to move forward or someone more cautious and powerless against the dangers of the road. Participation can be understood at a minimum as an invitation to ride along or to be involved in deciding which way to drive. The understanding of those who do not join the ride (non-participants) is that they are hindered to do so and would if they could; alternatively, they have possibly not understood just how important the ride is. These discourses on the importance of culture and thereby the importance of policy to take responsibility for culture follow classical lines of an intrinsic or instrumental value of culture and the arts: culture as a value in its own right or as a means to something beyond itself (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Blomgren, 2012; Vestheim, 2012).

DISCOURSE	MYTH	SOCIAL IMAGINARY	NODAL POINTS	SUBJECT POSITIONS	FLOATING SIGNIFIER: PARTICIPATION	FLOATING SIGNIFIER: DEMOCRATIC VALUE IN CULTURAL POLICY
Culture as an enabler of good things.	Culture can only be a good force if the arts are free. All would participate in culture if they could.	Furthering democratic society through guaranteeing artistic freedom.	Freedom (respecting). Equality. Openness (to the force of culture). Taking part.	Those enabled to take part, those unable to take part.  Those who seize the possibility to exert influence and those who cannot.  Cultural policy and institutions that provides culture and possibilities to participate.  Special groups in need of support to be creative (youth and children, overlapping).	Participation <i>is</i> – (intrinsic definition) Access, to be an audience and to experience (culture), to learn, expand the mind, develop skills. ( <i>Take part</i> )  Engage in dialogue, cooperate, influence and create (overlapping). ( <i>Participate</i> , Carpentier, 2016)	To protect the autonomy of the arts.  To guarantee equality in access to high-quality arts and culture.  (Cultural democratization) (Corporatist)
Culture as counteractor of bad things.	Societies are in a process of rapid change. Without culture, we are exposed to risk.	Furthering democratic society through the use of culture and the arts.	Change (openness to). Adaptation. Risk. Possibilities. Influence.	Those with possibilities and those without.  Those left behind and those in the forefront.	Participation <i>leads to</i> – (instrumental definition) Increased accessibility (for certain groups), sustainability, social cohesion, innovation, lower thresholds, open societies, less discrimination, and attractivity in a changed society fraught with risks and challenges.	To guarantee sustainable societies and equality in possibilities to exert influence among the people.  (Cultural democracy) (Populist)

Table 2: The two discourses of cultural policy

### THE MYTHS GROUNDING THE TWO DISCOURSES

Earlier, myth was pinpointed as the assumptions that make the meaning-making of the discourse possible. The myths of the “culture as an enabler” discourse are that the arts can be beneficial if they are free, and that all would participate in cultural life if they could – if the arts and culture were more accessible. This also allows us to see the meaning-making of cultural policy and the subject position of politicians and civil servants in the arts sector; if they did not provide culture with infrastructure and support, fewer would participate in culture: “in the efforts to increase accessibility to culture, the cultural affairs administration is also prioritising to find diverse ways to prevent obstacles for people to take part in culture on more equal terms” (Kulturnämnden Göteborg, 2018, p. 15).

Arguably, the myth grounding this discourse relates to the cultural democratisation paradigm in cultural policy outlined by Bonet and Négrier (2018); culture needs to

be spread to the people to ensure equality in access. As the arts can only function if they are free, the social imaginary of the discourse is a society where politicians further democratic values through the autonomy of the arts.

Conversely, the myth of the “culture as counteractor” discourse is about culture as a provider of factors that prevent risk and threat, especially threats of sustainability, either in the nation, the region or the city:

- “investments in culture can, inter alia, contribute to social cohesion through meetings, increased understanding and strengthened dialogue among people”. (Göteborgs Stad 2013, p. 11 [Culture programme])
- “how to develop the cultural sphere of Västra Götaland region as a space with an open border, a meeting space for all? How can we deal with the strains of segregation, class division, unemployment, exclusion? How to take advantage of the possibilities of creation, experience, provision, intercultural dialogue and democratic participation that form part of the expanded societal role of culture?”. (Västra Götalandsregionen, 2012, p. 7)

The myth tells us that without culture, we would lose opportunities to develop openness, understanding and respect for each other, and without the efforts of politicians and civil servants to provide culture to the inhabitants, the nation, region and city would risk stagnation, loss of innovation, and increased segregation. Thus, the social imaginary of the discourse is a society where prosperity and democracy are enhanced by using culture. The imaginary would arguably relate to the cultural democracy paradigm in cultural policy with its focus on empowerment of citizens (Bonet & Négrier, 2018).

#### **SUBJECT POSITIONS IN THE DISCOURSES**

The discourses are organised according to similar, sometimes overlapping, but still different signifiers (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Terning, 2016). Youth and children are an important subject position in all policy documents and both discourses, representing a group needing special interventions, together with those deemed to live in vulnerable areas of the city (Ekholm & Lindström Sol, 2019): “the administration will also work to find strategical methods and new ways of working to reach new target groups and thus increase accessibility for certain groups or geographical parts of the city” (Kulturnämnden Göteborg, 2018, p. 17).

Some citizens are thus seen to be enabled by cultural policy to take part in culture, but some are still left out, and these groups need attention in the policies.

In the “culture as enabler” discourse, the public funding of culture is fixated as unquestionable, as it is a “societal responsibility” [Göteborgs Stad, 2013, p. 4 (Culture programme)]. Alternative funding from private and EU funding is possible, but “all such initiatives must be conditioned by the guarantee of the integrity, autonomy and intrinsic value of the arts” [Göteborgs Stad, 2013, p. 4 (Culture programme)].

In the “culture as counteractor” discourse, the subject positions of the people being given and policymakers and civil servants as giving opportunities to participate in culture are there, with a slightly different understanding of those left behind. In the first discourse, those left behind have not been given enough attention by politicians, while in the second discourse, subjects such as citizens and regions risk being left behind for more intangible reasons: “the intensified globalisation means competition on a world market that is merciless to the losers. Nothing suggests that the part of the world that used to be the richest can expect to continue to be so” (Västra Götalandsregionen, 2012, p. 7).

The subject positions found in both discourses are above all those who enable/are enabled by the participation in culture and those who do not enable/are not (hindered from being) enabled. The “blame” for non-participation or non-involvement is usually not put on the subjects themselves but explained by external, often vague forces that are beyond their control (Stevenson et. al., 2017), which, in turn, legitimises political intervention.

#### **NODAL POINTS AND FLOATING SIGNIFIERS IN BOTH DISCOURSES**

The “overflowing meaning” of the concept of participation in cultural policy is no surprise. Because of the historical tendency towards soft steering and respect for the arm’s length principle in Swedish cultural policy (Blomgren, 2012; Mangset, 2009), keeping concepts multi-layered is a way to avoid undue political interference (Carpentier, 2009).

The nodal points were earlier discussed as important signs that partially fixate the meaning of the floating signifiers. Important nodal points in the first discourse are freedom, equality and taking part. These signifiers affect the floating signifiers of participation as access and democratic value as protection of autonomy and equality. Openness is another nodal point that refers to the ability to be open to the (positive) force of culture. Openness is also a nodal point in the second discourse, but more in relation to being open to change. The society in a state of change is the important link between this nodal point and the social imaginary of this discourse. Other important nodal points are adaptation (to change) and the duality of risk and possibility that accompanies the change. This nodal point partially fixates the floating signifiers of participation as a means to societal ends, and democratic value as sustainable societies and equality in possibilities to influence.

In both discourses, the signifier “cultural participation” ranges from a more passive (taking part) to a more active meaning (participate as relating to power, Carpentier, 2016), from accessing, being an audience and to experiencing (culture), to learning, expanding minds, conversing, cooperating, influencing and creating. The “culture as counteractor” discourse generally employs the meaning of the results of participation, ranging from increased accessibility (for certain groups), to sustainability, lower thresholds,

better workplaces, less discrimination, and attractivity in a changed society fraught with risks and challenges: “Gothenburg is today one of the most segregated cities in the country. The city’s work to implement its cultural and arts policy, as well as its cultural planning, is crucial for the goal of developing a sustainable city” (Kulturnämnden Göteborg, 2018, p. 9).

One articulation that both discourses have in common is that participation is something the inhabitants are primarily invited to, or hindered from, rather than something they engage in themselves.

The discourses fixate the floating signifier of participation differently. In the discourse on culture as an enabler of good things, participation is made meaningful as a democratic right. For example, the principle of the right to participate in culture is supported by the UN’s declaration of the rights of children and young people in all documents. When this discourse attempts to stabilise the meaning of participation as a means to an end, it is often in terms of “contributing to reflection and critical thinking” (Proposition 2009/10:3, p. 19). In the discourse of culture as a preventer of bad things, participation is made meaningful as instrumental; as a means to democratic ends (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). The enemy of the first discourse is undue political influence over culture, whereas the enemy in the second discourse is global insignificance and the societal throes of social exclusion. Both discourses claim their relevance through resting on democratic ideals, as these examples show:

- “another way (to guarantee artistic quality) is to assert the principle of arm’s length distance between politics and art. Democracy demands that the integrity and critical ability of art be defended”. (Västra Götalandsregionen, 2012, p. 14)
- “democratic openness – that is, contributing to creating equal opportunities for all (...) – to participate in culture as creator, audience, and discussant. More arenas are needed to enable all citizens to participate in the discussion on the future of cultural policy”. (Västra Götalandsregionen, 2012, p. 14)

The arms-length principle is therefore made meaningful as a relationship concerning the necessary distance between policy and arts, not between the arts and audiences/citizens. Another floating signifier is the democratic procedures in cultural policy, which different discourses give meaning to, and struggle over. The first discourse struggles to fixate the meaning of democratic value in cultural policy by defending the autonomy of the arts from policy, whereas the second discourse struggles to fixate the meaning of democratic value in cultural policy by giving citizens the possibility to influence. Just as the overarching discourse of culture as good for societies and, therefore, a task for policy has reached a hegemonic position, so has the discourse on the necessity of policy actions to rest on democratic ideals.

## DISCUSSION – THE DESIRABILITY OF PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL POLICY

The argument of this article is that there is a break in discourse regarding the governance of culture. The limit to the analysis is the local, national perspective, but this change is discussed in various ways by other researchers (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Bonet & Négrier, 2018, Duelund, 2008, Jancovich, 2017; Mangset, 2009; Sørensen, 2016; Virolainen, 2016). This study adds an empirical, local example to this change with a discussion on the two discourses that fixate the meaning of participation in either more intrinsic or more instrumental ways.

A result of this break is that the discourse on culture is good as it prevents bad things, is gaining greater legitimacy in policy, because it has the capacity to give “discursive expression to underlying structural contradictions and strategic dilemmas in the economic and political system” (Torfing, 1999, p. 240 and following). These dilemmas above all relate to issues of social exclusion (Ekholm & Lindström Sol, 2019). This break in discourse can also be interpreted as indicating a diminishing legitimacy for a corporatist discourse of democracy where experts have the power to decide the content of cultural policy (Mangset, 2009) in favour of the more populist democratic discourse where the citizens or the audience are involved in co-deciding about cultural policy.

Discourses justify political responses and the two discourses found in the analysed documents give legitimacy to different ways of governing culture. The first discourse legitimises the continuation of state, regional or municipal support for the arts through the principle of arms-length governance, i.e. the *status quo* (Jancovich, 2017). The second discourse also legitimises the continuation of state, regional or municipal support for the arts and culture, but in a different way, namely through attempts for participatory governance, i.e. change. In a world with declining trust in democratic institutions and skewed/declining participation rates in publicly funded culture, the actualisation of participation (in cultural policy and in general) carries the hope for the deepening of democratic procedures. The value of participation lies in the way it legitimises the governance of culture in ways that correspond to the dominant understandings of correct political responses to societal challenges. What changes are legitimised? It might be too early to say, and the answer is not unequivocally demonstrated in the analysed material, but some changes we might see in the governance of culture concern redefinitions of the concepts of culture, quality, representation, audiences, and cultural spaces.

What is interesting is that the two discourses are not constructed as solutions to the flaws of the other; i.e. as in an antagonistic struggle for hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), but as if they were complementary. There is especially a tendency for the second discourse to recognise the importance of the first and to position itself as a complement, not as a perspective that should replace the first. What appears is a rather paradoxical cultural policy discourse regarding the understanding of democracy as governance (Vestheim, 2009). The potential hegemonic struggle is resolved through the traditional separation between cultural policy and arts policy in the analysed material (Blomgren, 2012).

In this separation, arts policy – with its focus on the autonomy of the arts and the state’s role in guaranteeing arts producers the ability to make high-quality arts – is safeguarded from cultural policy in a political landscape where publicly funded culture is put under pressure to alleviate social problems of inequality in the city/region/nation.

The question that arises is whether discursive change can occur without instating hegemony through antagonism. A reading of Laclau and Mouffe (2001) suggests a negative answer to this question, as they define hegemonic articulatory practices as produced through the confrontation with other articulatory practices, which gives it an antagonistic character. Perhaps the two discourses outlined in this article are compatible, which is why an acceptable and unacceptable instrumentalisation of culture can be argued to be defined relationally, situated on a continuum from thin to thick governance of culture (Torfing, 1999). The argument of this article is not that one discourse should cancel out the other; neither does the article argue for a more specific definition of participation in cultural policy. The issue of participation – and democracy – is more complex than that, and the purpose of the analysis is to point out how the struggle for interpretation reveals struggles in interpreting the social order and appropriate political responses.

#### IN SUM

Through a policy analysis of empirical data from a Swedish cultural policy context, this article aimed to discuss the meaning of participation for understanding the legitimate governance of culture, and its relation to notions of democracy. The analysis outlined two discourses regarding the societal meaning of culture; either it enables positive phenomena, or it counteracts negative phenomena in the nation/region/municipality. The two discourses fixate the meaning of cultural participation roughly according to an instrumental or intrinsic logic – as a means to an end or as an end in itself. This mirrors a rather classic instrumental/intrinsic logic in cultural policy (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007; Blomgren, 2012; Vestheim, 2009).

The two discourses also fixate the meaning of governance in culture differently – as either protection of autonomy, equality and participation as access and taking part (a corporatist democracy), or as guaranteeing sustainable societies at risk, and participation as equality in the possibility to influence (a populist democracy) (Blomgren, 2012; Mangset, 2009). These two understandings of democracy (interpreted as the role of the state regarding culture and the arts) proposed in the analysis are not treated as if they were antagonistic in the empirical material, but as compatible. This compatibility is possible through the meaning-making of “arms-length” a matter between the arts and policy, not the arts and audiences/the people. The policy documents also tend to separate arts policy and cultural policy and thus employ different discourses regarding legitimate governance of culture (Blomgren, 2012). ✍



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