

Inter-Cultural-Policy

Performing Arts as a Model of Diversity Development

Preface by Wolfgang Schneider

Germany is a country of immigration. But is this reflected in its cultural scene? Who represents whom? And to what extent is the personnel structure in the arts culturally diverse? This question of cultural policy has been asked many times in the last quarter of a century, and numerous studies have provided answers. Art institutions continue to be dominated by White men, the German language, and a primarily Eurocentric orientation. On top of this, the visitor structure of publicly funded theatres and museums lacks diversity, and the idea of plurality is rarely present in educational institutions. These issues have been the centre of many debates, and have indeed led to the launch of various diversity management programmes. However, at the same time, there has been a resurgence of the idea of *Leitkultur* in Germany, which has proven to be just as counterproductive for society as nationalism, xenophobia, and racism.

The summer of 2015 promised to bring change, at least at first. Close to one million refugees arrived in Germany after fleeing war and persecution in their home countries. The Chancellor famously announced, “We can do this!”; artists spontaneously put up “Refugees Welcome” posters, and projects were launched in towns and cities throughout the country to ensure refugees experienced a *Willkommenskultur* – a culture of welcome. Artists displayed their solidarity with refugees through their artistic practice. The focus was on participation; it was important for the institutions to respond, to show that they were paying attention, and their mutual interest was to establish some form of communication. At the very least, municipal theatres opened their foyers, and most of the independent theatres got involved in intercultural projects. A year later, additional funding was given to the performing arts throughout Germany. There was hope that cultural policymakers would use this opportunity to change their direction in terms of cultural diversity.

Artistic Work and Migration

Özlem Canyürek has been studying these developments. In her research *Cultural Diversity in Motion: Rethinking Cultural Policy and Performing Arts in an Intercultural Society*, she enquires about the contemporary relevance and inherent inertia of theatre, and looks at the potential for structural reform.

Despite the White, male, heterosexual domination in the German performing arts scene, the form of diversity investigated in this research is limited to migration, and the main focus is on unequal access conditions (including both the performing arts field and funding policy instruments) for the so-called people with a “migrant background”. (Canyürek, 2022, p. 17)

On the one hand, Özlem Canyürek’s research is designed to observe the role of art and culture in social transformation processes, while on the other, she attempts to generate insights into intercultural policymaking that may also light the way forward for cultural policy. This is why she examines certain theatre groups and public funding programmes centred around different facets of diversity development. More specifically, she asks the following questions: Why are these theatres engaged with immigration and displacement? How do they address immigration-related diversity in their productions? How do they interpret aesthetics and artistic forms? How are immigration and displacement manifested in their organisational structure? How are their strategies, artistic forms, and narratives received by their audiences?

A Critique of the Concept of Cultural Integration

The titles of the chapters alone are a testament to her extensive knowledge on cultural policy and, above all, the theatrical scene, the incisive use of key terminology a signifier of her dedication to the topic at hand and a quality-conscious linking of theory and practice. Özlem Canyürek draws on perspectives from sociology, cultural studies, and political science, takes on the role of observer in field research, and conducts interviews with relevant experts. The questions she poses reflect her profound understanding of migratory movements, the art of theatre, and a guiding epistemological interest in fathoming the connection between the social and the artistic, and identifying cultural policy structures. The key experiences of the actors are incorporated into the discussion as statements, then analysed and integrated into the results.

The initial consideration of the text is that the lack of diversity within the organisational structure of public cultural institutions is evident, especially in the

public theatre scene. The research is based on a critique of the theatre system as an arts business.

It searches for a concept of diversity that would provide a dynamic and fluid meaning that narrates the notion of diversity as an ongoing process *in motion*, in line with the contemporary understanding of cultural identity in a transnational world. (Canyürek, 2022, p. 77)

The author also examines the concept of cultural integration to uncover the motives behind the transition of policy discourse from multiculturalism towards interculturalism. “The research argues that the confusion around the multicultural perspective on a political level in Germany is also related with marginalising differences by focusing on ethnicity and religion.” (Canyürek, 2022, p. 85) A thread running through the dissertation is an examination of the notion of “us” and “them” in the public debate on integration, aiming to shed light on the interplay between diversity discourse and inclusion policies. She also criticises the concept of *Leitkultur* and the clumsy actionism of many projects in urban and rural areas, which all too often fail to be real partnerships of equals, or adopt a rather smug, paternalistic approach.

Özlem Canyürek investigates theatres working with refugees and trying to run participatory projects using public funds. “The future of theatre as a mirror of a democratic civil society entails participatory forms of theatre, in which citizens of various cultural affiliations have access to the creation and decision-making processes.” (Canyürek, 2022, p. 135) Her initial findings are somewhat critical:

This research demonstrated that, in a country of resettlement, accessing information and networking is vital for artists seeking refuge. It also confirmed what the policies promoting the inclusion of these artists into the cultural sphere are lacking in. Cultural policies and their funding instruments mainly focus on the development of projects for/with/by refugees but do not pay enough attention to identifying structural requirements and introducing strategies and support schemes coherent with these needs. (Canyürek, 2022, p. 144)

Criteria for Future Cultural Policy

Canyürek criticises the projects for their lack of sustainability and finds that most of the programmes have no impact on long-term funding. She notes that although the productions may be very avant-garde in terms of artistic expression, they have largely failed to establish networks among the actors or pave the way for future theatrical collaborations. And although, in theory, politics and civil society view cultural policy as an instrument for promoting unconventional artistic formats,

in practice it leaves much to be desired. It is possible to detect only rudimentary attempts at a strategy of changing cultural policy to reflect a changing society.

The artists alone have demonstrated what is possible under changing circumstances. By mapping out the practice of 140 performing arts initiatives engaged with immigration-related diversity, Özlem Canyürek identified a number of funding criteria for future cultural policy: dynamic engagement, awareness and openness, empowerment, artistic reflection, multilingual performance, and intercultural encounter. Drawing from the analysis of selected theatre initiatives, she highlights the following practices:

[The theatre collective addresses] the working conditions of professional refugee artists in their new localities. (Canyürek, 2022, p. 171)

The realisation of their [young refugee artists'] individual autonomy and the inclusion of the audience in productions are recognised as mutually transformative processes. (Canyürek, 2022, p. 189)

[The theatre initiative supports] the self-empowerment of performers not only in and for theatre but, more importantly, in their personal lives. (Canyürek, 2022, p. 196)

She draws a clear conclusion for cultural policy:

Both the findings of the casing analysis and the networking efforts indicate that the creation and cultivation of a new, pluralistic discourse for an equal, non-hierarchical theatre landscape are inherently linked to developing cultural policy strategies to support non-institutionalised structures. (Canyürek, 2022, p. 211)

Another noteworthy aspect of the research is that, based on extensive theoretical and empirical analysis, it introduces a new concept – *thinking and acting interculturally* – and identifies the essential features of conceptualising a change in mindset in the performing arts field. The conclusion then reads like an exposé for an intercultural concept of future cultural policy and defines almost two dozen points that should be borne in mind. It is this degree of specificity that makes this research remarkable. By taking a clear-eyed look at the theatrical landscape, Özlem Canyürek has not only managed to ask the right questions but, above all, has generated insights into how social upheaval can be accompanied by and reflected through artistic means, and hence contribute to strengthening democracy.

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