

RETHINKING CULTURAL POLICY

by Carles Duarte i Montserrat*

When it comes to defining itself and presenting itself to the world, Catalunya prioritises culture as a fundamental aspect of its identity. This option rejects the temptation to call on religion, ethnicity or jingoism to justify an affirmation of its collective personality.

It is true that language plays a key role in our cultural reality. It is important to remember that while Catalan was an independent language from Vulgar Latin by the eighth century, the first texts to be found solely in Catalan originate from the eleventh century. By the Middle Ages, Catalan literature had such noteworthy, internationally famous figures as Ramon Llull and Ausiàs Marc. The prestigious literary critic Joan Triadú refers to the twentieth century as a veritable Golden Age of Catalan literature.

Nevertheless, when we speak of culture we must go far beyond language and literature. It is important to highlight painting, sculpture, architecture, music, theatre, dance and manifestations of culture that are more linked to traditional culture. In other words, focusing on culture is, on one hand, a celebration of creativity, while on the other it is a conscious awareness of a precious legacy of artistic expression

inherited and enriched by successive generations.

Under Franco, the survival of Catalan culture experienced great difficulties. When the Civil War ended in 1939, for example, publishers were obliged to destroy all books published in Catalan and desist from publishing new ones. Nevertheless, the regime was unable to repress the resurgence of the desire for rebuilding that swept the country in a land that saw the bulk of its intellectuals forced into exile. Shortly afterward, therefore, publishers such as Selecta (1943) and Aymà (1944) were founded. Josep Palau i Fabre launched the magazine *Poesia* (1944), and shortly thereafter *Ariel* (1946), with Joan Triadú i Josep Romeu i Figueras. Theatres in Barcelona have also put on the works of Pitarra and de Sagarra since 1946.

Once the earlier, suffocating years had been overcome, the end of the 50s and the start of the 60s saw a period



of a cultural reawakening. This was the result of both private initiatives and the help of some Catholic institutions. One example is the publication of the article *Ens calen cançons d'ara* (We Need Songs About Now) by Lluís Serrahima in *Germinàbit* magazine. It was to form the beginnings of the *Els Setze Jutges* (The Seven Judges) and the *Nova Cançó* (New Songs) movements.

Another key event was when, in 1959, *Serra d'Or* (Golden Saw) ceased to be an internal publication of the Montserrat Monastery to become a cultural magazine available to the general public. We should also make mention of the creation of the publishers *Club Editor* in the 1950s, thanks to the work of Joan Sales i Núria Folch, which went on to publish *La plaça del Diamant* (Diamond Square) by Mercè Rodoreda, in 1962. The Catalan revival was increasingly evident and in 1961 Fèlix Millet, Pau Riera, Joan Vallvé, Joan B. Cendrós and Lluís Carulla cre-

ated *Òmnium Cultural*. The same year also saw the creation of *Cavall Fort* magazine, with *Edicions 62* and the *Obra Cultural Balear* joining them the following year.

The Catalan stand at the Frankfurt Book Fair, 2007

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The Franco regime maintained its desire to annihilate Catalan national identity, but the growing reality of an increasingly uninhibited cultural and political *Catalanism* with swelling popular support was incontrovertible proof that it was too difficult to control. What some had considered a victim of the Civil War and subsequent persecutions, not only refused to lie down and die, but also continued to flourish. Fol-

lowing the death of Franco in 1975, the period known as the Transition began, leading to the restoration of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (the Catalan autonomous government) in 1977 with Josep Tarradellas as president of an institution that was initially founded in 1359 and later revived during the Second Republic.

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The restoration of the *Generalitat* signalled the beginning of institutional policies in favour of Catalan culture that went beyond civil initiatives of a private nature. One such step was the nomination of Pere Pi i Sunyer as the first Minister of Education and Culture. In this first period of restored self-government it was necessary for the *Generalitat* to consolidate its role and authority in the country's cultural life. The *Generalitat's* cultural policies began from the start to reinforce the existing initiatives while establishing new cultural infrastructures that would allow the country to take a great leap forward in terms of quality and ambition. Some prime examples, exclusively promoted by the *Generalitat* or in collaboration with Barcelona council and the Spanish government are: the National Theatre, the Auditorium, the National Archive, and the reopening of the National Museum of Catalan Art (MNAC).

Following this initial period of normalisation and recovery, and while keeping in mind the decisive nature of culture for our model of a nation, it was

worth rethinking the role of institutions and creators in cultural activities conducted by official bodies. In doing so, one should consider the evidence of other countries, such as Great Britain. The consequence of this reflection and wide, inclusive debate has been the creation of the *Consell Nacional de la Cultura i de les Arts* (National Culture and Arts Council). Democratic systems are based upon the participation of the citizens in the election of the representatives to councils, parliaments and so on. Once elected, governments need to carry out their responsibilities in accord with the programmes which have received majority support from the voters and with respect for opposing viewpoints.

It is necessary, therefore, to start with an understanding of the legitimacy of the councillors, ministers and MPs charged with overseeing cultural matters by the various public administrations. Of course, this is not to say that their decisions are not to be disagreed with as openly as ones wishes, while not meaning to question their authority. It is worth emphasising this point, as otherwise it is possible to fall into the temptation of substituting the principles that characterise a democratic society, with posts that are elected every four years, for a unionised model where teachers have the last word in education policies, or business people have the last word in institutional decisions related to business. This is by no means to say that teachers and business people do not have the right to be consulted by the government in their respective specialities when they are defining their main lines of approach. The creation of the National Culture and Arts Council was, as I have mentioned, preceded by a long, laborious, complex debate as to its structure and functions. Indeed, some people referred to the white paper leading to the creation of the Council as if a coup were being planned to steal power that

is illegally exercised by political figures in order to return it to representatives of the professional associations of the various sectors. According to this view, they were seen as the only group with any legitimacy to carry out cultural policies.

A viewpoint that is commonly espoused is that in spite of the strenuous efforts made since the restoration of the *Generalitat*, insufficient public resources have been assigned to culture. This is especially so if one takes into consideration the significant influence of the cultural component in Catalunya's creative dynamism, in its intellectual maturity and the aesthetic sense to which we aspire, as well as culture's role in economic activity. It is also true, however, that our national cultural institutions have received a significant boost. In any case it is necessary to celebrate the creation of the National Culture and Arts Council in 2008 because it signifies the clear expression of the Catalan Parliament's desire to recognise culture's key role in our country. Furthermore, it involves key individuals from various sectors and the concession of public support to the promotion, creation and diffusion of artistic endeavours, as well as the awarding of the National Culture Prizes. The diversity found among the members elected to the Council and the way their profiles unarguably complement each other, guarantee that it will be a useful tool and that its actions will not suffer at the hands of party politics or sectarianism.



Behind this decision is a desire to reaffirm the central position of culture in Catalunya's self image. It is to be hoped that the Council will act with freedom and independence, but we must also ask that it does not try to act as a substitute for the Culture Department or weaken its authority. We need to build a framework that combines generosity in its institutional vision, with rigor, ambition and honesty in its way of working.

***CARLES DUARTE I MONTSERRAT**



(BARCELONA, 1959). A POET WHOSE WORKS HAVE BEEN TRANSLATED INTO VARIOUS LANGUAGES. AS A LINGUIST HE HAS COLLABORATED WITH PROFESSORS ANTONI M. BADIA I MARGARIT, FORMER RECTOR OF THE *Universitat de Barcelona*, AND JOAN COROMINES, WHO HE HELPED BETWEEN 1979 AND 1989 WITH HIS *Diccionari etimològic i complementari de la llengua catalana*, IN TEN VOLUMES. DUARTE HAS PUBLISHED WORKS ON HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES. BETWEEN 1981 AND 1995 HE WAS IN CHARGE OF LINGUISTIC AND EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES FOR THE *Generalitat de Catalunya*, WHERE HE WAS SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE PRESIDENTIAL DEPARTMENT BETWEEN 1999 AND 2003. HE DIRECTS THE *Fundació Lluís Carulla*, IS PRESIDENT OF THE CULTURE COMMISSION OF THE BARCELONA ECONOMIC SOCIETY OF FRIENDS OF THE COUNTRY AND IS SECRETARY OF THE CIRCLE OF THE BARCELONA HISTORY MUSEUM. HE IS A LECTURER IN LEGAL TRANSCRIPTION IN THE FACULTY OF LAW AT THE *Universitat Pompeu Fabra*, MEMBER OF THE ARTS AND SCIENCES LEGION OF HONOUR OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC AND HAS BEEN AWARDED THE SAINT GEORGE'S CROSS BY THE *Generalitat de Catalunya*.