

The borders of my language

What Wittgenstein and Rorty have to do with cultural management

A conference synopsis

Welcome to the last panel of this fascinating conference on cultural management! I am sure by now you are tired of sitting and discussing the mainly theoretical aspects. I've heard you are keen partygoers so I hope you will be able stay on to enjoy the Berlin's scintillating nightlife. Unfortunately the conference is not finished yet. The synopsis is missing and that is my job...

Before I proceed let me tell you a little bit about myself:

I am not a cultural manager; I just have to manage myself.

After graduating from law school I started work as a political journalist for the weekly German newspaper „Die Zeit“, then furthered my education through various courses at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on themes such as „crisis management“, „Democratisation“ and „Rule of Law“. I then went on to work with judges and journalists in the so called „transformation states“.

What I saw, felt and experienced there took me further and further away from journalism.

And so, I became an author, wrote three books – a mixture of documentary and cultural history. Currently I am working on a fictional novel about my great-grandfather who grew up in the German Volga Republic and fostered my love for Russia, for Eastern Europe.

And now I am here as a conference observer.

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You know, we have been talking about cultural management for two whole days now.

Yes, we have considered the „how“.

But we've talked little about the „what“.

Do you know what is it exactly that has to be managed?

What is culture? What does it mean for you, for your organisation, your friends?

And why is it important for the development, the growth and the evolution of society?
Why should it be seen as one of the most relevant factors in development cooperation?

I would like to start off here and now on stage with my personal relationship to culture; why I think it's more than a leisure time activity but rather a foundation stone in the substance of society.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of my favourite German philosophers, once wrote: „The borders of my language are the borders of my world.“

I was always curious about the world beyond the horizon, so this sentence encouraged me to become a writer: somebody who is looking for a new wording.

If we talk about the world, we talk about our perception of the world – not the world itself.

We cannot honestly claim that we are „talking about the world as it is.“

The world we talk about is that thing that our brain constructs, assembles and creates. And we cannot talk about the world without words. The world as it is, is the world we are capable of describing.

And in doing so, everybody has their own vocabulary – a vocabulary which is the product of the era, the country, the society, the family one lives in, the education one enjoys, the books one reads, the people one meets, the journeys one undertakes.

Everybody's vocabulary is terminary, has limits. Thus we can't communicate with others about things we have no words for; words are conveyers of meaning.

Nor can we personally think about something we have no vocabulary for.

Culture itself is composed of a specific combination of words, of descriptions that define and form our imagination. Not to mention how it defines our feelings – or rather our expression of them.

In this sense every culture has a specific vocabulary, a certain capacity to describe the world.

So what we call a clash of culture or a cultural divide is in reality a clash of descriptions, a differing vocabulary for describing the world.

But culture is a living thing; its vocabulary is changing and evolving constantly. We have to keep track of new terminology if we want to remain part of our own culture; if we want to understand and deal with it.

That means: Every culture is in a constant state of transformation.

But a culture in a transformation state – such as Usbekistan and other successor states of the former Soviet union – is changing its vocabulary so rapidly that people easily get confused, feel alienated and excluded. They lack of vocabulary that would enable them to grasp the (changed) world around them.

With all foreign cultures it's the same: you are lacking the vocabulary to grasp them. Even if you know the words, you might not grasp the meaning they have for your counterpart. His or her vocabulary is beyond the borders of your world.

For example:

If you don't understand the concept of „irony“ in England, you will not forge deep relationships there.

If you don't understand the meaning of „guilt“ and „shame“ in German culture, you will not understand Germany; you will not understand German politics, habits, and sensibilities.

If you don't understand the role of „fear“ in Russia, you will not understand Russian society.

And if you don't understand what role grief, better to say, suppressed grief plays in German and Russian society you won't be able to understand the odd relationship the countries have maintained for centuries – an indecisive, an explosive mix of admiration and hatred.

Unfortunately the philosopher Wittgenstein said little about how to transcend these borders. He saw himself simply as the narrator, a describer of this limitation.

But there is an American linguistic philosopher named Richard Rorty who could give us a hand. Some of you may know his famous essay „Contingency, irony and solidarity“.

For me this book, published in 1989 – the year the wall came down – is something like a watershed in cultural cooperation, a manual for (cultural) border crossing.

His proposal sounds simple: Don't believe that the vocabulary you use to describe the world **is** the world. Don't consider it as universal, as absolute.

Stay curious! Learn new vocabulary!

Or better still: create new vocabulary yourself! Find new descriptions for the world!

This is, in another words is what the German artist Joseph Beuys meant by the sentence: "Everyone is an artist."

To say it with Rorty: "Everybody is able to create new descriptions of the world."

This is where cultural managers come in: they are needed to organize the distribution of this vocabulary, to make people curious, to help them to become familiar with it.

Yes indeed to enable mutual understanding of peoples, of societies with different vocabularies. To facilitate collaboration. To foster society's growth.

Economics don't facilitate understanding. It is culture, which really enables us to transcend beyond the borders of our individual worlds.

In this respect your job is also a political one. A political job which plays an essential part in international development cooperation.

So much for the philosophical theory....

Now let's get down to the synopsis of this conference, its results and possible impact.

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It is a personal wrap-up, not a general summary or an assessment. So I will concentrate only on a few agenda points.

For me always the breaks between the lectures are the most important part of a conference. In the breaks you make the sometimes life-changing encounters.

Yesterday after diner I had a couple of glasses with one participant from Belarus. During one lecture he had shown me the catalogue of his gallery. When I leafed through it, I got a flashback – cause I've been in that gallery at the perceived end of the world, in a small town in a beautiful landscape and an aura of desperation.

A town whose name is known abroad just for a catastrophe: the Chernobyl MCA.

When I asked the gallery-owner about his expectations for the future, what political impact he hoped for his project he said: „I saw two systems vanishing in my home country, and the current system... I can't even talk about it.

Now I believe just in the individual message, the personal expression of artists. To enable, display these expression ... this is what I am working for, I feel comfortable with.“

So his project I beard in mind, together with the fantastic projects from India and Africa; projects that illustrated vividly what Professor Mandel called „cultural entrepreneurship“.

For me the project-presentations were the highlight of the conference – because they had toched more than my brain. Yes, I had to blow my nose because the presenters, the people on stage reminded me on the atmosphere in East-Berlin right before the opening of the wall, on this mixture of awakening, solidarity and deeply burried longings.

A moment to forget the dictum of Hobbes: Homo homini lupus.

But the presentations gave also an impression of the social change, of moods and hopes in China, India, the Middle East.

Maybe it may sound colonialistic if I mention this as a European, but... the presenter's strong self-esteem, their energy, pride and faith in their values, their profession were impressive.

In a way I envied them for apparently not beeing troubled by the chronical European doubt, this intellectual and sometimes awkward heritage from enlightenment.

And I was enthralled to see so many tough women on stage. In political journalism, my professional field, it would be a sensation.

Maybe it is the profession of the cultural manager, but my impression was that women in emerging and developing countries were better prepared for the rapid

change, were more versatile, more adaptable to new living conditions and role models.

Percy Yip Tong from Madagascar said this morning European culture managers had to learn from their counterparts in developing countries. That's true.

But I think they made already ground with this conference: Instead of using whiteboards and beamers Goethe-institute disseminated modest cue cards in the workshops.

But just about that came a complaint from a participant from an emerging country: Why they didn't provide tablet computers. Why they made things so complicated, were so unprogressive.

If I had to defend this European effort, I would call it the postmaterialistic approach of Goethe institute.

This quarrel brought me to the topic of „different approaches to cultural management“:

In the presentation today also the question of the proximity of arts and cultural management to business was raised. To come back to Percy's peppery speech: That's only a question of the Western world.

Maybe. But in other areas of the world the term „return on investment“ seems to be also highly valued....That was the second complaint about the conference I heard at the corridor: That participants didn't get enough for their money, their undisturbed attention. Only few professors and no famous speakers. Too much chatting and amateurish drawing.

I would say this complaint was not only a question of different expectations but even a different approach to cultural management. These critics, I guess, saw it just as management, as a set of tools to sell, to advertise concerts and exhibitions.

A discipline like law, something you can learn by heart and apply – the opposite of the current European approach.

In Germany, in France, in Spain cultural-managers also to influence the content. Indeed, they are seen as co-creators of art, as designers and moderators of societal processes, as framers of cultural and educational policy.

That doesn't make it simple to measure the results of their work. What does success mean for them: Long cues in front of the museum? The applause their artists got after the show? Hymnic reviews in the arts section of leading newspapers?

And what does your profession mean for you **personally**? What do you work for? What is your professional aim, your hope, your aspiration?

Do you want to catch attention? Make an aesthetic statement? Do you want to entertain people, distract them from a harsh reality?

Or do you want to address social problems, inequities, fight for social change?

Is your chief concern changing the society? Or yourself?

You are cultural managers from all over the world, from different social backgrounds, with different education, values and resources.

Therefore the task of the workshops – designing trainings, joint projects and leading discussions about the future of cultural management – was not an easy one.

It could have ended up in heated-up debates, misunderstandings and quarrels.

Luckily it hadn't – not at least because you were aware of Wittgenstein's warning and Rorty's advice.

It hadn't because *you* transcended the borders of your language, learned and invented new vocabulary – like I had expected from participants of a serious Goethe-institute-conference....

I personally, as a novelist, would expect from a cultural manager that he exchanges ideas with me.

You know, while you are writing a book, you feel like the loneliest person in the world.

After a lonely year on the writing desk I am in need of someone who brings me back into society, into everyday-life; of someone who connects me with an audience.

Generally for me the role of cultural managers is a role of steersmen in troubled times. Steersman that not at least encourage artists not to lose faith in their profession; to encourage the society not to lose faith in culture at all.

As a German writer, let me finish with some verses in German.

It's a song-text from chanson-singer Hildegard Knef – just to get you an impression of the local culture, the wording of Berlin:

„Berlin, dein Gesicht hat Sommersprossen/
und dein Mund ist viel zu groß./
Dein Silberblick ist unverdrossen, /
doch nie sagst du: Was mach' ich bloß?/
Berlin, mein Gemüt kriegt Kinderaugen,/
und mein Puls geht viel zu schnell,/
nimmst du mich voller Selbstvertrauen/
an dein verknautschtes Bärenfell.“

Thank you for your – hopefully undivided – attention. And I hope the two days were worth it to support the Berlin-tourism industry!