UNCHARTED - UNDERSTANDING, CAPTURING AND FOSTERING THE SOCIETAL VALUE OF CULTURE

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Abstract - UNCHARTED is a Research and Innovation Action funded by the Horizon 2020 Programme of the European Commission under the topic "The societal value of culture and the impact of cultural policies in Europe". The project is led by the University of Barcelona with the participation of partners from seven European countries, representing eight academies and one professional company that supports communication, dissemination and exploitation planning. Society, culture and economy became intertwined in a complexity of values and roles. UNCHARTED project aims to explore the social values associated with culture, focusing on the valuation practices of the actors involved in cultural life.

INTRODUCTION

Three areas are targeted in the research: cultural participation, cultural production and cultural administration. In each field, various actors participate in the creation of the value dynamics: citizenship is the protagonist in experimenting and implementing participatory approaches, the professionals of creation and preservation are the ones who take the initiative in the heritage domain, experts and politicians decide about cultural administration.

Considering the participation of these actors in the mentioned areas, a range of factors determine the development of policy lines in the European sphere, demonstrating often tensions among the values that the different actors represent, with a need to gain a better awareness of the rationale and of the implications of these processes. For this scope, the UNCHARTED project takes the three areas of cultural participation, cultural production and cultural administration and the basic typology of the involved actors as the starting point to structure its research.

The factors studied in UNCHARTED can be grouped as it follows:

1. Gender equality in European societies matters
2. Urban development and the social processes of gentrification, touristification and segregation have consequences on urban heritage preservation and on the society at large
3. Globalisation and digitalisation have a strong influence on choosing future directions for cultural valuing
4. Neoliberalism affects the cultural policy regimes of the thirty European Countries (the EU 27, plus Switzerland, Norway and the United Kingdom)
5. Historical and political experience in the last 20 years plays a relevant role in shaping cultural values in Europe today

Along these factors, the project is working towards four main objectives. The first objective is to examine how the values of culture are shaped in Europe. The second objective is to identify the plurality of values that emerge in cultural practices, including economic, public and personal dimensions. The third objective is to understand the tensions relating to how the different actors in the cultural field construct, measure, compare and rank the values they attribute to culture. The fourth objective is to assess the strategies and effectiveness of cultural policy.

The project has a four years duration and completed its first year of work in January 2021. This paper aims to illustrate the review conducted during the first year, looking at research literature and existing data. The resulted analysis synthetises, in a global view, the circumstances that are producing the emergence of values of culture in Europe, reflecting on the configuration of a value order and on the political impulse that these values can generate.

On the basis of this review, the first policy brief has been delivered. This policy brief is part of a series of three documents that the project aims to offer as 'food for thought' to policy makers who have a stake in formulating or influencing policies about valuing culture in all its forms.

The capacity of the project to exploit its outcomes and to deliver its impact depends on the results of the project being available to the widest audiences. UNCHARTED targets the whole value-chain of the cultural sector, from the academic research to the widest civic society. The audiences therefore include public and private funding bodies and programme owners, research infrastructures, cultural and creative enterprises, memory institutions, artists, researchers, education sector, practitioners and amateurs. Representatives of these interest groups are invited to participate in the UNCHARTED network of common interest.

The UNCHARTED portal [1] is the main entry point to the information and services developed by the project. Multiple outputs are provided through the portal: evidence-based policy reports and recommendations for the use of policy makers, a wide range of practical resources made available to researchers, guidelines and examples of good practices for communities engaged with production, management and use of culture.

Mechanisms to target the public are put in place to increase the awareness of citizens, young people, students, artists, practitioners about the new opportunities available through culture and to encourage them to engage in new cultural experiences.

The private sector is targeted, too. In particular, the results of the research are of interest to small and medium enterprises working in the digital economy, especially those at the forefront of innovation in software development, web design, serious gaming and the creative industry overall.

Keeping stakeholders and potential users constantly informed will be useful to create a leaving network, which is eventually instrumental also to prepare the exploitation of the results at the end of the EC-funding period. In this light, one important outcome is the plan for a major public event, to be held after the conclusion of the project. Such planning will be the occasion to reflect on the most effective ways to advocate the adoption of the UNCHARTED recommendations by policy makers, to continue the research and to promote the UNCHARTED results beyond the academic sector.

Shift in the values of culture

A shift in the values of culture is occurring today in Europe. Along the five groups of factors indicated in the Introduction, in the previous section, the project is exploring the following challenges.

The growth of the role of diversity and gender equity in determining cultural values. Short- and long-term socio historical factors and social movements transformed the values of culture, with new positive values emerging in the society. These values became part of the institutionalized culture - including cultural administrations and cultural policies – as well as of the citizen culture. Tolerance and respect towards ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious and sexual orientation differences have grown. Furthermore, the trend towards increased diversity of artistic and cultural contents and repertoires from different origins and their legitimization in consecrated spaces (such as museums, festivals, biennials, etc.) contributes to valuing culture, representing different existing diversity profiles in Europe.

The processes of urban regeneration is permeable to neoliberal logics and characterized by gentrification phenomena. Cities are becoming a "brand", involved in powerful marketing campaigns, in search for authenticity, but at the same time prey to standardizing concepts and commercial strategies. Houses, factories and traditional markets are rehabilitated and transformed into artistic residences and cultural centres. Consequently, public space is privatised and the former popular residents and workers are expelled from these places. Finally yet importantly, urban spaces are major hubs of human mobility, including migrations and growing tourism. They are multicultural places, where heritage, cultural industries and multi-ethnic neighbourhoods are economic assets of the tourism industry, while this trend is creating also socio-spatial segregation, as much as overtourism.

Globalization influences the configuration of the values of culture. Multiple and sometimes contradictory conceptions of cultural globalization exist. Does internationalisation – and the values it carries - imply homogenization of culture, hybridization, or even rejection through effects of cultural resistance?

The development of the internet during the 1990's, as a global access to information, gave new shapes to cultural globalisation. Digitisation increased the complexity of the values of culture, in particular relating to cultural administration, production and participation. Digitization of culture is perceived as offering new opportunities to take part in cultural expressions. Within the digital sphere, access is considered as a tool for inclusion, cultural democracy and democratization. Participation and engagement might lead to empowerment and identification at community level. On the contrary, from the angle of the cultural producers, the overall stance of digitisation risks to become more negative than positive: after an initial, mainly positive, attitude towards the early phases of digitization, the effects of technological development, moving towards robotization and AI, raised critical voices within the field of culture.

A broad correlation between the centrality of market-based logics in cultural policy and the importance of civic and politico-economic cultural values is recognised. The deployment of civic values increases with greater cultural participation, but it declines with increased expenditure on culture as a percentage of total government spending, and this impacts also the effects of Europe's subsidies to cultural fields. A challenging comparative analysis of cultural policy regimes in the European countries indicates that existing cultural policy typologies do not reflect either the hybridised nature of government intervention or the universal dissemination of market-based logics in the contemporary European cultural field. For Western European countries, the justification for state support of culture has moved from elitist conceptions of art's intrinsic value to a marketed regime of justification, which legitimatises state expenditure in the cultural field. Post-Communist Eastern European countries have also arrived at similar marketed justifications. Moreover, the European Union is explicit in promoting instrumental rationales for cultural expenditure across its member states.

Through a thorough analysis of a wide range of resources - scientific articles, books and research reports, press articles – numerous values emerge in the history of cultural policies in Europe.

Reflecting on this literature, shows that values already present in the 20th century are becoming increasingly important in cultural policies, without taking precedence over values with which they can compete or, on the contrary, find a form of compatibility.

Policy implications

Understanding how cultural values are constructed in European societies today is very important for the development of effective cultural policies. The notion of cultural heritage is more and more complex, moving from conservation oriented approaches (objects) to subject oriented ones (values). Furthermore, the number of heritage sites is growing and, at the same time, due to new concepts of cultural heritage preservation (intangible heritage, cultural diversity, sustainability, resilience), the range of values to be preserved is expanding as well. In this situation, the role of local communities and participatory approaches can help to avoid undesirable outcomes, such as gentrification.

Heritage can not only act as an enabler on transformation of cultural spheres but it is gaining an increasingly important position in contemporary political and professional discourse on urban development and on urban configurations. These processes are accelerated by the diffusion of globalisation and digitisation of culture, which is producing often-contradictory reactions by different actors, including cultural heritage institutions, cultural producers, researchers, students and the citizens.

The research in UNCHARTED highlighted four key aspects that have policy implications in the construction and definition of cultural values in Europe and the tensions that are implied:
  i.   Intrinsic values vs. extrinsic values
 ii.   Economic orientation vs. social orientation
iii.   Homogenisation vs. cultural diversity
 iv.   Impositions (top down) vs. resistances (bottom up)

With regard to the first point, it should be noted that the intrinsic values of culture, linked to the autonomy and independence of art, are losing centrality in favour of extrinsic values, linked to the instrumentalisation and use of art and culture for other economic and social purposes. This creates new opportunities for experimenting participatory approaches, but it implies also new roles and new competences that need to be developed in the cultural heritage sector. The experience of the pandemic has accelerated the reflection on this theme, in particular with regard to the role played by the digital experiences during the COVID-19 crisis where digital technologies proved to be a very valuable means to access cultural assets during the extended period of confinement.

The instrumentalisation of culture opens up a set of tensions between its social and economic purpose, which is reflected in the orientations of cultural policies and appears at the centre of disputes in the urban sphere and in the relationship between urban and rural territories. Understanding the key drivers of increasing territorial inequalities become fundamental to identify the policy factors, at different governance levels, that can determine more sustainable and successful interventions for tackling urban and rural decline. Also in these cases, the digital services play an important role and the development of wider and more equal access to the digital infrastructures become very relevant.

The emergence of a global culture, accentuated by digitalisation and the concentration of major cultural industries, is leading to the appearance of standardised cultural products. However, on the other hand, cultural diversity is legitimated in the field of specialised culture and cultural administrations. Authenticity of the cultural experiences, for local citizens and in the ambit of cultural tourism is a key factor in the development of innovative cultural policies.

The plurality of values in different cultural contexts often generates tension and conflict among the representations of their respective relevant values. These tensions reflect unequal structures between the social agents that participate in different cultural environments: actors with an interest in the status quo and actors with an interest in subverting the reference values. The development of European cultural policies, at local, national and trans-national levels should be based on a solid awareness of the implications coming from the transformations that are occurring in the contemporary society and those deriving from the trends and tensions discussed in this paper.

Research plan

The research focuses, in the first place, on the inquiry on the values of culture, by assessing and evaluating the practice of cultural actors and by starting from a basic structure of actors and their typical environments for action. The work addresses two areas of analysis: the social and historical factors of configuration of cultural values and the cultural policy strategies. Two basic objectives are identified: the elaboration of a general vision of the societal value of culture, and the elaboration of a road map for cultural policy action favourable to the plurality of cultural values.

The research design is complex and eclectic, for the variety and ambition of its objectives, as well as cognitive and practical, with an exploratory character, working on an almost uncharted terrain. A wide range of research techniques are used, mainly qualitative (interviews, focus groups, observation, documentary analysis, etc.), although statistical information bases are exploited and survey quantitative data are used when appropriate. For the rest, the research work has an eminent comparative character throughout its development, and an important participatory component of co-creation with stakeholders.

As a whole, the design of the research acquires methodological consistency through the structuring of the project in workpackages, as illustrated below:

- Workpackage 1 'Understanding the societal value of culture' is devoted to the analysis of the configuration of the values of culture, through an in depth literature analysis
- Workpackage 2 'Identifying the emergence of values of culture' analyses the emergence of values linked to culture in practical contexts, via a set of case studies
- Work package 3 'Measuring and imagining' works on valuation and evaluation practices of social actors within cultural information systems
- Work package 4 'Analysing Political Intervention and Impact' focuses on the comparative analysis of public intervention in culture

Workpackage 5 'Experimental demonstrations' organises a number of experiments and validation of the results produced in the other workpackages, in three specific contexts of practice, namely: Cultural strategic planning, Culture-led urban regeneration, Management of cultural information systems.

Networking and exploitation

The project brings together several communities to consider the complex relationship between research, practice and governance. Because of the nature of the project, networking with communities and exploitation of results is particularly important and it represents the necessary liaison between the two components of the Horizon 2020 project that is in fact a research and innovation action.

While the core of the research part is on the investigation described in the previous sections, the innovation part is implemented through the communication, dissemination and exploitation activities that include networking, online activities and exploitation planning.

Collaborations are established with other projects and initiatives, aiming at establishing a living network of common interest to share good practices, lessons learnt and success stories. The project's online presence is used to share information and results with the widest audience by the UNCHARTED portal, the blog and the social media channels. A solid plan for the exploitation of the project's outcomes is developed to foresee the continuation of UNCHARTED beyond the end of the EU funding period.

Main aim of the dissemination and exploitation activity is to engage stakeholders and users outside the project's consortium, to keep them informed and updated about the project's activities, to illustrate the results and eventually to maximise the project's impact by promoting and delivering its outputs to the widest range of audiences. This is achieved with specific mechanisms aiming, on one hand, to inform the project's audiences and, on the other hand, to seek their feedback and action.

The target audiences of UNCHARTED, in their various forms and channels, belong to the whole value chain of the research on culture and cultural heritage, including academies, scholars, cultural heritage curators, creative industry and interested citizens, belonging to associations, interest groups and the civic society in general. A number of organisations, projects and researchers have been contacted during the first year to present the project and to encourage collaborations. These collaborations are promoted on the project's website and on the blog, as terms of reference for new associate partners. Altogether, the organisations and the projects linked with UNCHARTED constitute its network. The promotion of UNCHARTED is carried out both on the UNCHARTED channels and on the channels of the organisations and projects that joined the UNCHARTED network.

Exploitation is the final purpose of the efforts spent in communication and dissemination. It is through fostering the interaction with targeted communities and through the actual exploitation planning that the UNCHARTED project aims to trigger the use and re-use of the project's results as much as possible, on a long-term perspective of research and innovation.

The contacts with organisations and projects that have an interest are very important to be established and to be kept alive by following up the initial contacts with customised communication actions. In addition to online bilateral contacts, both physical and digital encounters are at the basis of the networking activities. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all physical events planned for last period have been cancelled and this was a rather difficult issue to overcome. Online meeting have been attended by the consortium and new plans are made for the next year in view of a better situation.

Partners have already agreed and expressed their commitment to organize a large public event after the end of the EU funding period, to present and promote UNCHARTED recommendations to policy makers, and to disseminate the results of the UNCHARTED research both within and outside the academic sector. The event planning is a core component of the exploitation plan.

During the next periods of the project, being confident that the COVID-19 crisis will be over soon, a program of public events is already planned. The programme includes two workshops: the first one will take place in Porto in September 2021, focusing on the results of the project's case studies. The second workshop is planned to be held in Barcelona by mid-2023. The participation in the workshops is focused on scholars and researchers from the consortium, and other relevant organisations, to review the progresses of the investigation.

Another important element of the programme of the UNCHARTED events is the so-called 'central event' that is planned to be organised in London at the beginning of 2023. It is foreseen a large participation of key stakeholders in the research and cultural sectors. The event is the occasion to carry out a discussion about consistency, accuracy and scope of the research, involving

representatives of cultural information institutions, cultural administrators and other cultural professionals.

The creation of liaisons with policy makers aims to consolidate the relationships with interlocutors in the public administrations at various levels, with a focus on the European level. A policy seminar is foreseen in Brussels by the end of 2023, towards the conclusion of the project. The seminar will be the occasion to share lessons learned and good practices with policy makers. The seminar will target European, national and local policy makers, together with representatives of international organizations and Commission officials.

Results from other completed and current projects are promoted through the UNCHARTED stakeholders group, crossing social, economic, cultural, national and disciplinary boundaries. Special attention is devoted to connect UNCHARTED with existing projects and network, including those supported by the EC's programmes (Horizon 2020 and Creative Europe in particular).

Project's online presence

The project is promoted online, on its website, on the blog and through the social media channels.

The website is both the cornerstone of the project dissemination strategy and the access point to the main outcomes. Furthermore, it serves as an internal collaborative space for the project's partners via the implementation of a reserved area. The landing page of the website is the access point from which all further navigation begins. The implementation is based on a very simple logic and a fresh web design, which is intended to drive the user's attention on the main function of the portal, namely: (i) the project, its research areas and outcomes, (ii) the link to the reserved area that serves as an internal collaborative space for the project's partners; (iii) the news area that provides a preview of the articles published in the blog.
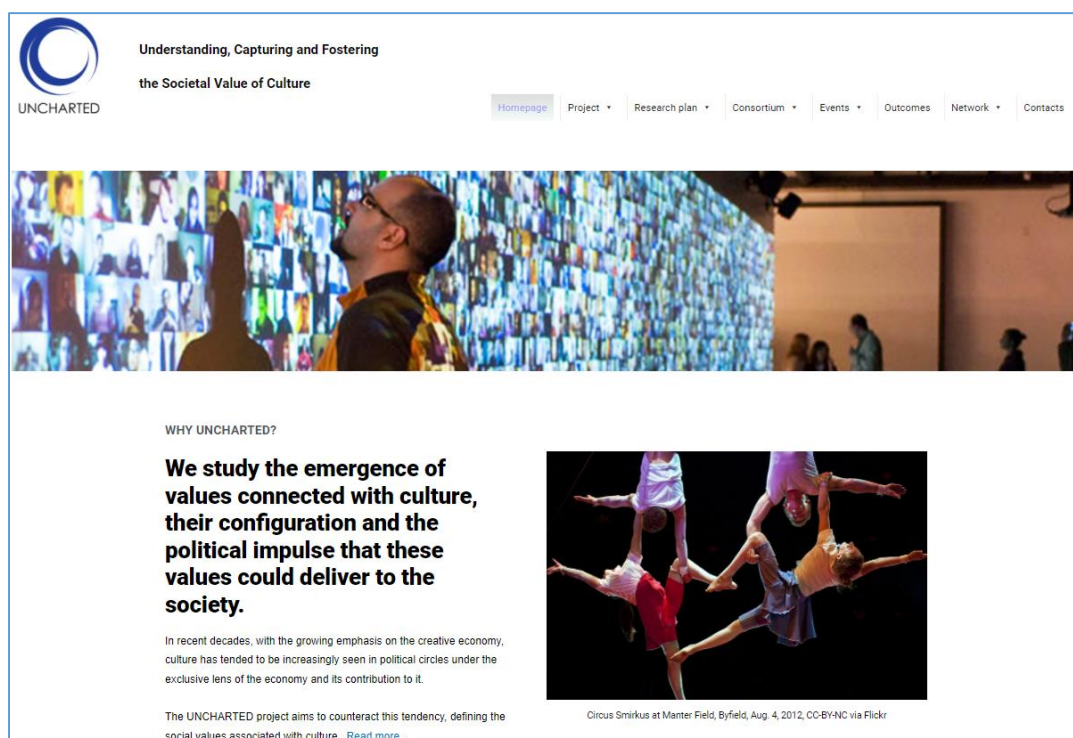

Figure 1 - Landing page of the UNCHARTED website

The project blog is hosted on digitalmeetsculture.net, the interactive online magazine of Promoter S.r.l. dedicated to the theme of digital technologies applied to cultural heritage and the arts. The UNCHATED blog promotes, of course, events and outputs produced in the framework of the project's activity, but also information regarding other projects and organizations that joined the UNCHARTED network and activities and initiatives of external parties, when the peculiarity of their themes and objectives raise a specific interest for the project.

Figure 2 – UNCHARTE blog on digitalmeetsculture.net magazine

The portal and the blog are linked to the most popular social networks. This facilitates the spread of information from the project to its target audiences. The outcomes of the project are made available on the portal and promoted in the articles published on the UNCHARTED blog, which are then rebounded on UNCHARTED's Facebook and Twitter page, opening the possibility to all partners and networked organisations to share/re-tweet and add comments to them.

Conclusions

The investigation conducted during the first 18 months highlighted a range of tensions that exist with regard to several aspects of the values of culture, and in particular in relation to their implications at social and economic levels. A range of basic tensions exist between the cultural sector and the other sectors of the society, which are reflected on the evolution of intrinsic values – such as those connected with aesthetics and cultural production – and the development of more general extrinsic values. This is the case for example of the relevance that economic values have taken on other values in the latest years.

A plurality of factors have emerged from the analysis of literature in the first year, demonstrating the need to combine different values and to contrast the risk of applying unidimensional foci. However, the initial results did not yet allow inducing general normative perspectives. Nevertheless, a wider recommendation is proposed to policy makers, that is to play attention to problems and contradictions that can be provoked by not-resolved tensions.

Further research conducted in the second year, in the context of specific case studies offered a better identification of the processes that bring to the emergence of values of culture from which more general extrapolations are coming. In particular, the next priorities of the research will focus on the investigation about of the grammars that are at the basis of valuation processes, in the domains of cultural participation in live arts, media, cultural production, cultural administration and heritage management. The behaviours of different actors will be studied in the cultural field, to explore how citizens, professionals and public administrators construct, measure, compare and rank the values they attribute to culture. Strategies and effectiveness of cultural policy and institutions interventions will be assessed in practical terms, to understand how they are taking full advantage of the potential benefits of culture for society, including in the digital sphere. These analysis and investigations will be demonstrated in a range of experimental actions that will be the occasion to engage in open discussions with the UNCHARTED community.

The core range of policy recommendations are distilled in three policy briefs that represent, in parallel with the research results, the main exploitable outcome of the project. A first policy brief was produced at the beginning of 2021 [3] and submitted as an open deliverable to the European Commission. The second and the third policy briefs are expected respectively by summer 2023 and beginning of 2024 to recapitulate evidences gathered via observations and consultation, and recommendations distilled from the analysis and investigation carried out in case studies, in road mapping exercise and through experimental demonstrations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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