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Diversity of Cultures vs. Unitary Culture in the Global Village

The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions

The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions went into force on March 18, 2007. It defines cultural diversity as an essential precondition for the full realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and asserts that states have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to adopt measures and policies to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions within their territory. UNESCO's commitment to cultural diversity is part of the global struggle to achieve a better balance between commerce and culture, to combat homogenization and commercialization of culture. This is meant to strengthen the efforts of individuals and social groups to create and propagate their own forms of cultural expression beyond the realm of globalized event culture.

Marlene Streeruwitz, in a much-discussed text entitled "Waltzes and the WTO" that appeared on December 9, 2006 in the Austrian newspaper *Die Presse*, added her thoughts to this discourse:

Emphasizing the importance of the diversity of cultures constitutes a clear rejection of the idea of a hegemonic culture and forced assimilation into it. This document addresses all people as human beings capable of acting in accordance with their own free will, and who ought to have the possibility of developing their own culture. On a theoretical level, the formation of a cultural identity is thus defined as a right. This is, first and foremost, abstract. This is, yet again, Western-style thinking. But in the overall flow of events, this is the consummate expression of respect. And it is an achievement.

According to the Convention, access to culture also has to pay due attention to the special circumstances and needs of women as well as various social groups, including persons belonging to minorities and indigenous peoples. States are called upon to establish framework conditions to encourage the active participation of civil society and cultural organizations in public policy-making in this area.

Gabriele Eschig, general secretary of the Austrian UNESCO Commission, stated:

UNESCO encourages governments to play an active role in systematically supporting cultural creativity and participation. This convention is an effort to strengthen freedom of political action, political responsibility for culture, and the implementation of administrative instruments to achieve these aims. Freedom does not just mean freedom for suppliers and providers, but for cultural creators as well.

Marlene Streeruwitz on global cultural sell-out:

So then, this isn't a matter of 'those people' there, somewhere over yonder. This has to do with us, right here. It's a matter of whether our own cultures can be passed on and developed further. Such cultures affect all levels of a society. Our society. (...) A struggle to gain control over expression is being waged (...) which means a complete

standstill in prescribed formats and no democracy. The culture and mentality that have been passed down to us are what define us. We have to establish a relationship to this definition and decide how we want to allow it to affect us. This is a lifelong process. Art and literature and music. Only new texts can describe and interpret this relationship. In the battle currently raging worldwide over who can know what. Who should know what. Who may know what. And who must know what. It's totalitarianism when the culture of everyday life is dominated by people living far away who are acting solely in accordance with material interests.

The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions provides a basis for participation in cultural life by men and women on an equal basis. So then, how can this justice with respect to gender that is mandated by the Convention be assured in reality? A brief elaboration on this issue has been provided by Professor Karin Neuwirth of the University of Linz:

The basic principles of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions can already be seen as a model of participation in cultural life by men and women on the basis of justice and equal rights between the genders and of recognition of women's cultural creativity. Indeed, this convention must first undergo domestic legal transformation within individual states; nevertheless, in its Introduction and especially in Article 2 Paragraph 1, it establishes concrete framework conditions for just such a process of implementation. These include basic principles like respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as other principles of international law. As far as equality between the genders is concerned, Article 3 of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women that was ratified in Austria in 1982) already calls for ensuring the full development and advancement of women for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men. Thus, an individual woman indeed cannot, in the absence of legal regulations, adopt a position with respect to concrete subsidies or assert violations of rights based on the Convention; nevertheless, the perspective of fairness with respect to gender certainly must be taken into account—for example, in the case of reformulation of subsidy criteria. The same applies to projects involving several sovereign states, whereby cultural diversity must be promoted to the extent that the above-mentioned principles are not violated.

The Convention also places great importance on the use of new technologies for information exchange and opinion formation. New technologies are key driving forces behind innovation. There is no doubt about new technologies' significance for development. But new questions arise: How technical change functions, what significance radical innovations have, what role different countries play, and what possibilities exist to manage these processes? There is much to suggest that, in spite of new technologies, old rules designed to maintain the status quo with respect to property ownership will prevent real progress. At the same time, these new communications technologies will also be used to restrict the individual's private sphere. The Convention offers no ready-made solutions for life in the Global Village, but the discourse has been opened ...

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald