Making Connections: Culture and Social Cohesion in the New Millennium

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Abstract: An important stream of cultural policy thinking in recent years has concerned the cluster of public policy interests often subsumed within the term “social cohesion,” yet conceptual and analytical examination of the linkages between social cohesion and culture (and, by extension, cultural policy) is young and underdeveloped. To address this situation, cultural researchers from Canada and Europe came together in Edmonton, Alberta, May 26-27, 2000, to participate in a round table entitled “Making Connections: Culture and Social Cohesion in the New Millennium.” The round table was co-organized by the Canadian Cultural Research Network (CCRN) and the Cultural Information and Research Centres Liaison in Europe (CIRCLE) and sponsored by the Department of Canadian Heritage. This paper briefly reviews the main themes and ideas presented during this event.


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The three “posts”—postindustrialism, postmaterialism, and postmodernism—are often cited as forces that are fragmenting societal relationships, and a good deal of policy research is taking place on ways of counteracting their centrifugal influence. In recent years, the issue of social cohesion has ascended political agendas both in Canada and in Europe as a multifaceted horizontal policy issue. As researchers have worked to define, understand, and measure the manifestations and impacts of social cohesion (or lack thereof), research on social cohesion has taken off in a number of disciplines.

Meanwhile, a major rethinking of the basis of cultural policy has been taking place in many countries and multilateral organizations. In response to concerns initially raised by the World Commission on Culture and Development in its 1996 report entitled Our Creative Diversity, many organizations, such as the Council of Europe and the World Bank, have undertaken fundamental reviews of traditional assumptions behind development and the well being of societies. In seeking to build culture into broader development strategies, these organizations have begun to view cultural policy and cultural policy research as important elements of a cluster of public policy interests often subsumed within the term “social cohesion.”

As defined by the federal government’s Social Cohesion Network, social cohesion is “the ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians” (in Jeannotte, 1999, p. 5). In this definition, the process is as important as the outcome. The focus is on the non-coercive relationships that hold us together (Stanley, 1997). According to M. Sharon Jeannotte (1999), the term “social cohesion” as used by the network is an outcome of investments in social and cultural programs and in social capital. Thus, social and cultural programs and policies can be allocated central roles in this process.

For cultural policy researchers in Canada, the concept of social cohesion provides a social counterbalance to the economic- and market-oriented perspectives that were so dominant during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This, in part, has fuelled its appeal. As well, the concept of social cohesion provides an avenue through which to examine and address related sociocultural issues such as social inclusion/exclusion, cultural (and other) diversity, and social connectedness.

Yet while linking social cohesion with cultural policy has formed an important stream of cultural policy thinking in recent years, the conceptual and analytical examination of the linkages between social cohesion and culture (and, by extension, cultural policy) is young and underdeveloped. To address this situation, approximately 50 cultural researchers from Canada and Europe came together in Edmonton on May 26 and 27, 2000, to participate in a round table entitled “Making Connections: Culture and Social Cohesion in the New Millennium.” The round table was co-organized by the Canadian Cultural Research Network (CCRN) and the Cultural Information and Research Centres Liaison in Europe (CIRCLE) and sponsored by the Department of Canadian Heritage.
Objectives and expected results
The round table was intended to serve the following objectives:

1. To build connections between European and Canadian cultural researchers and to encourage the exchange of information and the sharing of ideas;
2. To develop an overview of cultural and related policies pertaining to social cohesion in selected countries; and
3. To survey existing research on culture, connectedness, and social cohesion; to identify research gaps; and to make proposals for future research to fill these gaps.

The expected results of this exploration of culture, connectedness, and social cohesion were the following:

1. Enhanced understanding about the role of culture and cultural policies in building connections between citizens;
2. Better capacity to identify the cultural policies and connections that tend to reinforce or to weaken social cohesion in European and North American societies; and,
3. Identification of research gaps and recommendations to policymakers on further research on these issues as well as on measures that should be taken to reinforce the cohesive role of cultural policy.

Premises and themes
The overall theme for the round table was “culture, connectedness, and social cohesion.” As a common basis to begin the discussions, the following definitions were used:

- **Connectedness:** Ways that citizens connect to each other and to the rest of the world through intricate networks of social, economic, political and cultural ties (Government of Canada definition).
- **Culture:** Ways of living together (UNESCO definition).
- **Social cohesion:** The capacity to live together in harmony with a sense of mutual commitment among citizens of different social or economic circumstances (Senate of Canada definition, based on a review of common elements in various national definitions). (CIRCLE/CCRN, 2000, p. 3)³

The common thread running through these definitions is that they are fundamentally about relationships among people. Culture, as defined above, plays an important role in maintaining a sound social fabric of communities, societies, and nations. Indeed, the fabric of societies can be seen as a result of connectedness and culture, that is, of social networks and symbolic patterns.
Following from this, a number of key assumptions related to the role that culture plays in the social fabric of communities and nations were presented to participants to explore:

1. Cultural policy can help to ensure that the interplay of different perspectives to social relations contributes to a creative, resilient, and socially cohesive society.

2. The connection of citizens by means of cultural expression serves an important civic purpose by reinforcing the social cohesion of communities and nations.

3. Culture acts as a connector between individuals in a way that counteracts the fragmentation associated with global markets and the imperatives of global capitalism.

4. Diversity is one of the strengths promoted by connectedness, but is not necessarily recognized by the commercial cultural milieu.

5. Connections between citizens, both within and among nations, can promote civic and global harmony.

During the round table, a number of key themes with cultural-policy implications were identified and discussed by the participants, including the concept of social cohesion itself; the impact of culture, and cultural participation/consumption practices, on social cohesion; and concerns related to the development and use of cultural policies for social cohesion. During these discussions, participants also examined the state of research on these issues and recommended avenues for future research.

**Summary of the proceedings**

The round table was organized as follows: an opening plenary and three panel discussions on the first day, followed by four panel sessions and a closing plenary on the second day.

In the keynote address, Dick Stanley (Director, Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate, Department of Canadian Heritage) presented a detailed analysis of the impact of culture on social cohesion in three areas: culture as a means of building social trust and social capital; culture as a place for greater democratic inclusiveness and equity; and culture as laboratory for social innovation and experimentation with new symbolic resources. He foresees a temporal progression in these uses of culture. Social capital is like a bank where deposits are built up over time, cultural inclusiveness prevents the opening of fault lines within society, and experimentation opens new avenues for the future development of society.

In her address, Ritva Mitchell (President, CIRCLE) pointed out the differences between the situations in and orientations to social cohesion in Canada and Europe. In Europe much more attention is paid to economic problems and especially to the effects of unemployment. In the European Union policies, social cohesion is seen as transversal to all policy areas, but because the main policies
Pertain to economic growth, stability, and employment, other aspects are mostly neglected, among them the potential impact of culture on social cohesion. As the continent is culturally highly fragmented and social cohesion problems are very diverse, using culture as a “means” to enhance social cohesion at the European level is extremely difficult. Consequently, political means are often used, as in the case of the Balkans.

In the opening plenary, Jane Jenson (Université de Montréal) presented the results of recent conceptual work carried out on social cohesion within the framework of the Social Cohesion Network. The network has developed a typology of social cohesion that varies along five multidimensional lines: belonging/isolation; inclusion/exclusion; participation/non-involvement; recognition/rejection; and legitimacy/illegitimacy.

Following Jenson’s presentation, three European case studies on cultural policies and social cohesion were presented by Lidia Varbanova (Balkan Arts Foundation, Bulgaria), Jordi Pascual (INTERARTS Observatory, Spain), and Rod Fisher (International Arts Bureau, United Kingdom). They gave good illustrations of the diversity of social cohesion issues in Europe: the problems of societal reconstruction in the new democracies; the problems of overcoming potential political and regional fragmentation and determining whether state intervention to fulfill roles formerly assumed by communities or families actually precipitates the erosion of social cohesion in some Mediterranean countries; and the problems of the variety of definitions employed in social exclusion. Attention was drawn to the interesting cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approach adopted in the U.K.

There were three panel sessions on the first day:

- Citizens versus consumers: Connections to what? Recent research on cultural diversity, cultural identity, and cultural pluralism
- Tending to society: Cultural connections and the formation of young minds
- Global connections: The good, the bad, and the ugly

The first of these panels mapped out the crucial fault lines in the fabric of our societies and discussed the role of original European (domestic) television fiction in maintaining social cohesion. According to M. Sharon Jeannotte (Department of Canadian Heritage) and Greg Baeker (independent consultant, Canada), more research is needed, for example, on relations between cultural policies and hybridized/multiple identities, on the relationship between diversity and new institutions and the new media serving diverse communities, and on rebuilding communities by altering established social relations through “bottom-up” processes. According to Celestino Spada (broadcasting researcher, Italy), there is, for instance, a need to study the impact of the mode of television program production on audience formation instead of focusing only on the traditional commercial–public divide.

The second panel discussed the problems of studying “the cohesion effects of the arts and cultural activities on the behaviour of young people” (Terry Cheney, independent consultant, Canada) and the fall of cultural participation among young generations (Cas Smithuijsen & Eva Brinkman, Boekmanstichting, Neth-
erlands). Both presented papers that indicated the lack of reliable information in these two areas for policy purposes.

In the third panel, John Hannigan (University of Toronto) indicated that we should study whether the globalizing forces operate at a regional level (making geographically bounded clusters) or as networks or as what he termed “de-territorialized global fluids.” He related his classification of these forces to Jane Jensen’s typology of social cohesion presented earlier.

Kazimierz Krzysztofek (Instytut Kultury, Poland) examined the features of global culture and threats to cultural identity posed by globalization, noting that commercially driven (entertainment) culture produces “diversity” when it pays. His presentation opened new vistas for world system research.

The themes of the four panel sessions on the second day were as follows:

- Cultural participation: Research on emerging trends
- Trouble and conflict in Europe and Canada: Cultural solutions?
- Culture and the quality of life of cities
- Hearing the third voice: Culture and civil society

In the first panel session, John Foote (Department of Canadian Heritage) and Pierre Mayol (Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Paris, France) discussed the following aspects of cultural participation: the effects of globalizing trends; the effects of new technologies; economic restructuring and demographic diversity; and the effects of isolation of some urban areas to overall cultural processes. Within these four themes, special attention was paid to the effects of the Internet, the changing tastes of the public, and the power of culture to transform our societies.

The second panel discussed the conditions that provoke or maintain conflicts and searched for cultural responses. Sanjin Dragojevic (Faculty for Political Science, Zagreb, Croatia) discussed the evolving conflicts of identity that are occurring in some European regions and cities. Frances Henry’s paper dealt with the multi-layered historical roots and latent conflictual nature of the Canadian discourse on multiculturalism. (This paper was presented by Joy Cohnstaedt of York University, from which Henry is retired.)

The third panel session discussed the problems of measuring the quality of life in cities and the issues related to including culture in these discussions. Michel de la Durantaye (Université du Québec à Trois Rivières) and Colin Mercer (Nottingham Trent University, England) gave some examples of indicators developed to measure this quality and how these indicators have been used.

The fourth panel discussed the triangle of culture, civil society, and the state with the private sector as their backdrop. Matko Meštrović (Ekonomski Institut, Croatia) paid particular attention to development where global risks are sandwiched between international treaties and institutions on the top and new radical movements at the bottom. He also pointed out an irony in contemporary societies: the state is called in to help in maintaining the civil society—its original controller. Catherine Murray (Simon Fraser University) emphasized that the cultural
sector needs to build bridges with other societal and equity-searching groups. This would broaden civil society and help to reform national agendas in Canada.

In the closing plenary, Andreas Wiesand (ERICArts, Germany) expressed misgivings about the implications of the term “social cohesion.” Although some people regard the concept as progressive, he thought politicians could also apply it in a repressive manner. He also questioned the desirability of putting the arts on the national agenda in every opportunistic way. He proposed that, in place of the goal of social cohesion, a better objective for cultural policies in pluralist countries would be to ensure that minorities have the ability to uphold their own culture, history, and identity in another (dominant) culture. Rather than striving for social cohesion, we should seek better means of governing our differences and managing conflict. He urged that we must value the particularities of culture. Society must preserve places for local and distinct cultures as well as new works of art, which may be controversial.

Robin Higham (University of Ottawa) addressed the issue of how to move culture in from the margins by proposing a martial arts approach to the task. He suggested: “If Jiu-Jitsu is about employing an opponent’s strengths to your advantage, why not a martial arts approach to pressing for a cultural priority in the policy arena?” Considering the centrality of the economic priority in political agendas, he proposed elements of a “strategic game plan” in which employing economic arguments would assist in reclaiming culture’s place on the policy agenda. He asked: Are any researchers equipping their cultural warriors to argue persuasively in the public arena that an enhanced cultural policy on both national and international agendas is essential for securing sustainable democracies and market economies?

Higham also reviewed the presentations made during the round table, focusing on the research needs identified by participants. He suggested the following subjects as fruitful possibilities for future research:

- Does too much economic liberalization harm social cohesion?
- Does too much social cohesion harm the economy by placing too little emphasis on the diversity of cultures?
- Does culture build national identity and a shared sense of citizenship?
- Does a healthy economy lead to social cohesion (or vice versa)?
- How can cultural policy be accommodated in other government objectives?
- What mechanisms are available for managing cultural diversity?
- What changes are needed in cultural institutions to sustain social cohesion and cultural diversity?

The following points were added during the closing discussion as major areas of policy consideration and research emerging from the two-day meeting:

- Research should address what degree of social cohesion is desirable.
  (Answers may vary from country to country.)
An unresolved issue underlying the round table discussion and deserving further consideration is which policy goal is preferable: to integrate the currently excluded (whether by poverty, race, ethnicity, gender, class, geography, etc.) into the mainstream or to widen the mainstream?

- The centrality of cities and local authorities in developing social cohesion and cultural diversity.
- The need to move beyond “symbolic multiculturalism” into real power sharing for those currently excluded.
- The “greying” and shrinking of the audience for the traditional arts (reported in country after country). The fact that young and minority citizens do not attend these art forms demonstrates, as one participant put it, “too much social cohesion around the high arts.”
- Globalized, homogenized culture presupposes citizens as consumers, rather than as participants.
- Many governments put most of their money into major arts and cultural institutions, but participation is best fostered in community and local arts movements.
- While recognizing that research must develop better quantitative measurements of culture’s impact on social cohesion and the quality of life generally, it is important to keep in mind that qualitative measures are and will continue to be at least equally valuable in this field.

Conclusion

The conference bore witness to two things: first, the relevance of the main theme and, secondly, its width and diversity. All presentations and debates brought forth new aspects and the need for information and further research. Consequently, it was very difficult to find clear foci despite the laudable pre-conference efforts of the organizers. On the theoretical level, the five dimensions proposed by Jane Jenson will certainly help to focus thinking on this topic; and, on the empirical level, the Canadian orientation to this issue could help to find new ways to tackle the highly variable European problems of cohesion/disintegration in their various cultural contexts.

As well, two common threads ran through most of the round table discussions. First, the issue of connections or relationships within postindustrial, postmodern societies appeared to be becoming more closely linked to the challenges posed by cultural diversity. Second, local cultural policies, particularly within cities, seemed to be playing a more critical role than ever in promoting connections among diverse groups of citizens. Underlying both threads was a sense that the increasing diversity of citizens and cultural markets was forcing a rethinking of traditional approaches toward both cultural policy and social cohesion.
Acknowledgment
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Notes
1. The Social Cohesion Network is a research network of the Government of Canada’s Policy Research Initiative. It is one of four research networks launched in 1997. Although the other three original networks have been disbanded, the Social Cohesion Network continues to function. For more information, visit the Policy Research Initiative’s Web site at http://policyresearch.gc.ca.
2. Founded in 1984, CIRCLE (Cultural Information and Research Centres Liaison in Europe) is a network of research, information, and documentation centres concerned with culture. It undertakes collaborative research and collects and disseminates information on research and documentation in the cultural field in member states of the Council of Europe. CIRCLE attaches particular importance to providing a bridge between researchers and policymakers, in order to ensure that information on cultural research is disseminated to those in a position to benefit from it. The Canadian Cultural Research Network (CCRN) was founded in 1998 as a forum for those with an interest in cultural research in Canada. Its mandate is to support dialogue and exchange among cultural researchers in different academic and professional disciplines and/or diverse work situations (e.g., academia, government, independent consultant, or cultural manager), between Anglophones and Francophones, and between cultural researchers and users of cultural research in Canada. Its activities have been modelled along the same lines as those of CIRCLE. For more information, visit the organizations’ Web sites at http://www.boekman.nl/circle and http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/ccm/ccrn.
3. An extensive conference reader (CIRCLE/CCRN, 2000) was prepared for the round table, which included 14 country reports on linkages between social cohesion and cultural policies as well as short introductions to the panel sessions. The country reports covered: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. An electronic copy of the conference reader can be obtained from CIRCLE.

References