

HUMAN RIGHTS AND CULTURE: FROM DATASTAN TO STORYLAND

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of the community – or rather of the different communities to which men belong (and that of course includes the ultimate community – mankind) – it follows that the authorities responsible for these communities have a duty, so far as their resources permit, to provide him with the means for such participation. [...] Everyone, accordingly, has the right to culture, as he has the right to education and the right to work².

→ | NEW DIRECTIONS

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RABBE

NACHMAN OF BRATSLOV

It is safe to say that Mr Maheu had no idea how questions of cultural rights would expand and multiply in the decades to come, how often they would generate fiery public debate³. For example, In 2006, then-Prime minister Tony Blair made headlines in Britain and beyond with his comments about Muslim women wearing the *niqab*, a face-covering veil with no opening other than slits for eyes.

“It is a mark of separation,” said Blair of the *niqab*, “and that is why it makes other people from outside the community feel uncomfortable [...] No one wants to say that people don’t have the right to do it. That is to take it too far. But I think we need to confront this issue about how we integrate people properly into our society⁴.”

Blair spoke of separation and discomfort, saying nothing about security concerns. But surely such fears are part of the subtext, rooted in the invidious habit of associating Muslims with terrorism,

else he would long since have reacted in similar fashion to others whose dress stood out as different. Similar controversies have arisen in France, in Italy, in my own country and elsewhere around the globe, almost inevitably focusing on one type of cultural difference: aspects of costume that proclaim minority religious identity.

Blair’s remarks on that occasion perfectly encapsulate the challenge of security in a time of rapid cultural change. Humanity is in the midst of a massive period of adjustment. Out of aspiration, coercion or necessity, people are moving from their home countries to other lands in unprecedented numbers, particularly from the global South to the North, with enormous impact on the places that attract immigrants. Where work prospects or social services are available to immigrants, communities are

THE RIGHT TO CULTURE IS A new human right, first articulated in the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948¹. Today, what began with these 18 words is transforming the world:

Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

Rights are mere abstractions without the means to implement them, as was pointed out in 1970 by Rene Maheu, then Director-General of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization):

It is not certain that the full significance of this text, proclaiming a new human right, the right to culture, was entirely appreciated at the time. If everyone, as an essential part of his dignity as a man, has the right to share in the cultural heritage and cultural activities

becoming much more diverse. We are seeing a process that Carlos Fuentes has described as “the emergence of cultures as protagonists of history,” calling for

*[...] a re-elaboration of our civilizations in agreement with our deeper, not our more ephemeral, traditions. Dreams and nightmares, different songs, different laws, different rhythms, long-deferred hopes, different shapes of beauty, ethnicity and diversity, a different sense of time, multiple identities rising from the depths of the poly-cultural and multiracial worlds of Africa, Asia and Latin America*⁵.

Until this new reality settles into normalcy, the old order will push back. So far, the methods typically employed embody a very old idea of security: if you can't build the barricades high enough to keep strangers outside, at least limit their liberty, keeping them under watch and under control.

Is it working? Only if a condition of perpetual fear is an acceptable way to live. Can we afford the cost? Only if we neglect everything that lifts human life above mere existence, everything that has been sacrificed in my country to finance the planet's largest defense establishment side-by-side with a prison-industrial complex with a population larger than some small nations. Indeed, the US prison population has tripled in the last twenty-five years, with more than seven million individuals – one out of 31 adults – in prison, jail or under correctional supervision⁶.

I have high hopes for the administration of President Barack Obama. But no individual has the power to instantly reverse decades-old policy trends, each with its own elaborate, expensive and self-perpetuating bureaucratic apparatus. The antidote to a culture that equates security with conquest and punishment is a culture that prizes connection and creativity. While we work toward this remedy, we must live through a period of enormous social imbalance and anxiety. The crusts of the old way of understanding crash into the tectonic plates of the newly emergent reality. We cannot say how long this will last, but to help it along, each of us must choose a role, consciously or by default, guardian of the old order or midwife of the new.

I don't think artists are better or smarter than other people. No one can predict the future with accuracy, but many of us have developed skills of observation acute enough to read subtle signs. When I wrote the introduction to *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*⁷, I thought of the riots that had overtaken the Parisian suburbs in 2005 – violent clashes between young immigrants and the police. The *New York Times* carried an article by Alan Riding entitled, “In France, Artists Have Sounded the Warning Bells for Years.” Riding pointed out that musicians and other artists had consistently predicted this conflict, whereas newspapers and politicians had “variously expressed shock and surprise, as if the riots were as unpredictable as a natural disaster.” Once again, artists are pointing the way to what is emerging: a new understanding of reality grounded in human stories and connection, a new understanding of human rights grounded in cultures.

I have a name for the emergent paradigm, the unfolding reality that recognizes the importance – the sacredness – of culture, and that name is “Storyland.” In Storyland, artists work with communities to capture and use the stories that support resilience, connection and possibility. Every year, more and more artists work in community

cultural development, in participatory projects in which artists collaborate with others to express concerns and aspirations, recovering histories, beautifying communities, teaching, expressing cultural creativity as a universal birthright and a bottomless source of resilience. Conditioned on the values of Storyland, these community artists pursue the democratic interest in cultural life, promoting vibrant cultural citizenship rich with cross-cultural sharing, creating sites of public memory commemorating community history and pride, making works of dance and theater that deepen and refresh understanding, stories that heal, creating opportunities for young people to express themselves and learn through artistic practice.

Right now in the United States, we are engaged in a project of national recovery. Like most of the world, the US is in the grip of an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. Fear is epidemic, each day bringing new headlines to feed it. Calls for the spirit of citizenship are heard everywhere. President Obama has proposed a program of public investment in infrastructure, energy, health care, and education. He hopes that these, along with bailouts and regulatory interventions in the banking system, will revive the economy, unblocking the flow of credit, adding jobs and thus initiating prosperity. Realistic housing policies and close scrutiny of financial markets have been advocated to help to neutralize the laissez-faire mistakes that produced this crisis. But few have been looking very seriously at the culture's role in recovery, and so we are in danger of missing a very important opportunity.

In Storyland, we understand that the resilience that sustains communities in times of crisis is rooted in culture, in the stories of survival and social imagination that inspire people to a sense of hope and possibility even in dark times. Sharing our stories as song, drama, dance, in word or image supports resilience by showing people how others met similar challenges, survived and prospered.

We understand that through art, people prepare for life's challenges in the safe space of imagination, strengthening their creative judgment before it is tested. Artists expand social imagination, helping us envision the transformations we hope to bring about, stimulating our thoughts and feelings toward the new attitudes and ideas that will drive recovery.

We understand that anyone who wishes to make significant headway on a social problem or opportunity must engage with people's feelings and attitudes about it. For example, no financial intervention will save the economy unless confidence is restored. Challenges to social well-being must be addressed by cultural as well as practical means: whether it's promoting safer sex, reducing the incidence of diabetes, treating addictions, promoting green consumer habits – these and countless other public aims are helped by artists' skill at engaging people in considering their own views and communicating freely with others.

Consider El Teatro Lucha de Salud del Barrio⁸ in Texas, using theater to help immigrant families learn what they need to act on their very real health concerns, the epidemics of asthma and diabetes swamping our most economically distressed communities. In times of great economic pressure, those at the margins of society are burdened first and most,

bearing the brunt of environmental injustice. Whether on account of their cultural difference or because they cannot afford to remove themselves from the most polluted areas, every breath increases their very real insecurity.

In Storyland, we are imagining what could happen if every agency of government collaborated with community artists to tell the important stories in ways that bring policy goals home, showing people what they could do locally to improve their children's education, reduce environmental damage and create jobs.

In the United States today, as in every past moment of crisis, artists and cultural activists are once again ready to place their gifts at the service of democratic public purpose. Right now, they are demonstrating their readiness, hoping its potency will shine through cracks in the crust of the old paradigm, to be recognized by those who have the power to offer support. Their desire is to create the same opportunities for every community member that have always been available to the privileged, as Francis Jeanson expressed so beautifully in defining cultural democracy:

[I]ts aim is to arrange things in such a way that culture becomes today for everybody what culture was for a small number of privileged people at every stage of history where it succeeded in reinventing for the benefit of the living the legacy inherited from the dead.

The old paradigm is all around us every day too, the counterforce that co-creates our disequilibrium. My name for this old way of seeing is "Datastan," a flatland nightmare that worships hyper-efficiency, hyper-rationality, hyper-materialism and domination.

Datastan is conditioned on the scientism that was one of the most bizarrely reductive features of twentieth-century culture, borrowing methods and ways of thinking from the physical sciences and misapplying them to highly complex human endeavors, where they don't work at all. If you can arrive at solid truth about the behavior of minerals or gases by measuring them, this line of thinking goes, you should also be able to reduce human stories to quantitative data, and this should enable you to understand and control them.

Scientism is not science, which entails as many creative leaps as measurements. It is another thing altogether: the misguided and distorted view that human beings, in our infinite complexity, ought to behave just like computers, or at least allow our behavior to be controlled by computers.

Scientism is the US No Child Left Behind Act, our primary Bush-era federal educational legislation, where the phrase

"scientifically based research" appears 111 times, premised on the idea that the quality of education can be measured best by control-group research that yields quantifiable data. Scientism is arguing that babies should be exposed to Mozart because it makes them grow up to score higher on IQ tests.

Scientism is the mountain of money that has been wasted by public and private agencies in the US, trying to come up with "hard" justifications for public arts subsidy, such as the "economic multiplier effect" of arts expenditure, which means that when people buy theater tickets, they also spend money eating and parking, multiplying the flow of capital. The trouble is, exactly the same economic benefits adhere

to football tickets or a shopping trip.

But such studies keep being subsidized, because part of Datastan's orthodoxy is that economic arguments are the only valid basis for cultural development expenditure. As the director of a national arts research program told me, "Legislators love these charts. Gotta speak their language." Nor has this conviction been shaken by countervailing evidence. For instance, the budget of the National Endowment

for the Arts (NEA), the chief federal cultural agency, was US\$ 159 million in 1981, just after Ronald Reagan took office. Correcting for inflation, it would take US\$ 372 million in 2008 dollars to equal that allocation. What is the 2009 NEA budget? US\$ 155 million. Another US\$ 50 million supplement was included in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, the "stimulus bill" passed by Congress just after President Obama took office. Add them all up, and we discover that all those decades of "speaking their language" have yielded a net loss in real value of nearly 45 percent.

As Storyland emerges, encroaching on the old paradigm, knowledge from many different spheres reveals how culture is key to creating the conditions that enable human rights and therefore, security rooted in caring rather than coercion. Let me offer a few examples.

Science is showing us the critical role creativity plays in personal and social development. For our brains to serve a humane future, we would be wise to develop our creative imagination and empathic capacities through arts participation. Antonio and Hanna Damasio of the Brain and Creativity Institute and the Cognitive Neuroscience Imaging Center at the University of Southern California are leading brain scientists who have become advocates for arts education. "[M]ath and science alone do not make citizens," they said in a speech at the 2006 UNESCO World



Conference on Arts Education. “And, given that the development of citizenship is already under siege, math and science alone are not sufficient.”

The Damasio explain that rapid, significant changes in the way we spend our time, the way we communicate and process information, have created

[...] a growing disconnect between cognitive processing and emotional processing [...]. It has been classically claimed that cognition and emotion are two entirely different processes for the human mind and for the human brain. And that, somehow, a rational mind would be one in which cognitive skills developed to a maximum and emotional processing would be suppressed [...]. We have to tell you that not only do we not agree with this claim but that everything that has occurred over the past 10 years of cognitive neuroscience reveals that this traditional split is entirely unjustified¹⁰.

They point out that cognitive processing constantly accelerates as we interact with computers and other machines, but that emotional processing cannot keep pace, with the result that young minds are emotionally underdeveloped, leading to a loss of moral compass, of the emotional sense and imagination that guide a well-rounded human being. Through the imaginative empathy that is the essence of art, through stories, theater, songs and visual imagery, it is possible to build needed emotional and moral capacity. As many eliminate arts classes to focus on the science, math and reading prioritized in federal educational legislation, American schools are treading a deeply dangerous path.

Cognitive science has shone a light on Storyland. Indeed, as we discover more about our brains, our understanding of the role of cultural expression deepens. Observing the brain in action demonstrates that when we remember or imagine experience, our brains behave very much as they do when we enact the same experience with our bodies. Athletes have learned to train in their imaginations for the physical feats they will perform in actual competition. Artists have always known this: when we weep at the suffering or rejoice at the triumph of a character in a book, play or film, it's because, having allowed ourselves to enter imaginatively into the story, our capacity for empathy and compassion activates the same neurological impulses as when we experience a real loss or gain in our own lives.

If our higher purpose is to develop societies securely grounded in possibility, compassion, and connection, our task is to collectively imagine these things. There is no more powerful way to do that than by making art that rehearses the future we wish to help into being.

Scientists are also learning how our brains process trauma, how we do or don't recover from psychic injuries. They tell us it can be healing for a traumatized person to tell his or her story in fullness and in detail, so long as the telling is received in a way that stands in strong disparity to the original trauma. A traumatized person is disrespected, used, harmed, shamed, blamed, made to feel worthless and dispensable. In retelling the story, if those insults are restimulated, the result is more likely to be a repetition of the injury than its healing. For healing to begin, the story must be received with respect, presence and caring.

The same is true in healing social trauma. There are many sore spots in the global cultural matrix, aching wounds where people have been told they are less than full citizens of the world, even less than fully human. One of the highest tasks of community cultural development in this time is to help heal those injuries.

I am inspired by work such as the Documentary Project for Refugee Youth¹¹. It was designed as a collaboration among young refugees, the Global Action Project, the International Rescue Committee and other community organizations and artists in New York City. The twelve young refugees comprising the project's core group were from Sierra Leone, Bosnia, Burundi and Serbia. In September 2001, the group began working together to share and understand their own experiences, collect testimonies from others, learn photography, write and create powerful short films. Here's how one participant described the healing and empowering impact of this work on her own life:

I felt like there is no person who suffered more than me. But then, talking to other people and finding out that it's not just me, that it's half the world. Before I didn't know there were so many conflicts and wars, and now that I know, and have the opportunity to do something about it, I want to let other people know.

Oral historian Mary Marshall Clark described an experiment in “theater of witness”:

[T]he group Theater Arts Against Political Violence brought artists and survivors of political torture together to explore dramatic uses of testimony. Oral histories were conducted with torture survivors as a way for others to enter into the experiences of remembered torture, but in a broader landscape than one-to-one therapy (or oral history) could provide.

The actors modeled the experience of torture through their bodies, symbolically transferring the words into a lived experience that would be witnessed by the public to break down the conspiracy of silence that often confines the survivor in a world of isolation [...] The project developed in close collaboration with those who lived through political torture. The project included three testimony sessions held in a group setting to avoid re-creating isolation. In between, the theater company met to develop and rehearse scenes from the stories. The goal of the production was to give the torture survivors the ability to stand outside their own experiences and to witness the transformation of their suffering on stage in the company of friends and fellow survivors. The survivors became the critics, and ultimately the authors, of the transformation¹².

Spiritual teachings, too, reinforce what we learn from nature, from cultural diversity, from science and from politics. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslov, the great 18th century Hasidic teacher, said, “The antidote to despair is to remember the world to come.” How can we remember what has not yet occurred? I believe he meant that the antidote to despair is a taste of a perfected world, imagining the experiences that remind us what it is to feel entirely alive and connected. One of the most powerful ways this can happen is in the flow of creativity, when – as Paulo Freire taught us – we speak our own words in our own voice, when we name the world, when we proclaim our desires and visions. When we make art.

When we make art ourselves, and when we teach, support and invite others to dive into the ocean of creativity, we administer an antidote to the epidemic fear and despair we can catch from Datatan. We help our fellow human

beings to imagine, rehearse and prepare for the world of beauty, connection and meaning we all wish to inhabit.

Cultural action can create the container that enables people to face each other and to enter into dialogue even about the most polarized, heated issues. In the body politic as portrayed by the US commercial media, most issues are reduced to a simple pro and con. But issues are complex. The flourishing of civil society requires us to create genuine meeting-places and promote genuine dialogue instead of the media's angry tennis match.

Artists are doing this better than anyone else. Consider the Thousand Kites project¹³ (in prison jargon, to "fly a kite" is to send a message). In 1999, Nick Szuberla and Amelia Kirby were volunteer disc jockeys at WMMT-FM, "Listener-Supported, Consumer-Run Mountain Public Radio," the radio station of Appalshop, a multidisciplinary arts and education center based in Whitesburg, Kentucky, a remote and economically stressed rural region. As co-hosts of the Appalachian region's only hip-hop radio program, "Holler to the Hood," Szuberla and Kirby received hundreds of letters from inmates recently transferred into nearby Wallens Ridge, a new "Supermax" prison built as part of one of the United States' remaining growth industries, installing prisons in regions facing economic decline. (In this case, new prisons and prison jobs were proposed as an antidote to Appalachia's shrinking coal economy.) The Supermaxes are panopticon prisons where inmates typically remain isolated in cells for 23 hours a day, constantly under armed guard.

Mostly African American and Latino prisoners were shipped into Wallens Ridge and its sister Supermax prison, Red Onion, from overcrowded prisons elsewhere, bringing millions of dollars into the state's general fund. The prisoners were far from home and family, guarded by white former coal miners and National Guard members for whom the jobs were a simultaneously desired and resented last resort, and a double-edged opportunity to re-enact the rituals of domination in which they had previously played the part of victim. Thus, what was proposed as an economic development scheme for Appalachia wound up as the bleeding edge of a culture clash, affecting families and communities close to home and thousands of miles away.

"Holler to the Hood" became an on-air meeting-place for prisoners and their distant loved ones, broadcasting heart-breaking messages from families too far away to visit and letters from prisoners reporting human rights violations and racial conflicts between prison staff and inmates. These letters inspired H2H's founders to investigate. Szuberla's and Kirby's resulting documentary film, *Up the Ridge*, explores the domestic prison industry, particularly the social impact of moving large numbers of inner-city prisoners to distant rural settings.

From response to the radio program and film, Szuberla and Kirby and their colleagues at Appalshop realized there was a much bigger task here, to surface all the facets and layers of this incredibly complicated story to a larger society unaware of the effects of the US having become "Incarceration Nation," with the globe's largest prison population. The Thousand Kites project is a multiyear partnership between H2H and Appalshop's Roadside Theater, collaborating with prisoners and prison employees, their families and their

communities. Roadside has a long track record of participatory play creation and presentation. Their main research modality is holding story circles with those directly involved. The *Thousand Kites* play, based on the highly specific stories of these two Appalachian prisons, has been adapted by and for urban and rural communities that have been touched by the prison-industrial complex. Through its Web portal, organizers and participants around the world have been able to link up, share stories and access a huge array of tools and artworks.

Storyland's approach to security is to recognize that the mutual recognition, interaction, sharing and connection that can be nourished through the exercise of artistic creativity are more powerful guarantors of peace than any number of prisons, weapons systems and human rights restrictions.

This insight carries tremendous challenges, not least of which is stretching our hearts and minds to embrace the types of difference that daunted Tony Blair in 2006. In truth, the tolerance for diversity that is being demanded of western societies – and which is often denounced by Datastan as a retrograde demand to honor outmoded customs – is in fact a call for liberty far beyond that available in some of the countries that originated the customs of dress Blair condemned.

In the grand scheme of things, a controversy like this is minuscule. Yet just such human stories, such specific demands for cultural rights, provide the true test of our capacity to inhabit the future Carlos Fuentes described: to undertake "a re-elaboration of our civilizations in agreement with our deeper, not our more ephemeral, traditions," conditioned on "the emergence of cultures as protagonists of history. This is why, in the interests of true security, such demands should be granted.

¹ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 27, section 1.

² Quoted in Augustin Girard, *Cultural Development: Experience and Policies*, UNESCO, 1972: 139-140.

³ Indeed, he could not foresee how dated and grating his gendered English would come to feel even a few years later, nor the transformation in understanding of gender and sexism that would produce that result.

⁴ Alan Cowell, "Blair Criticizes Full Islamic Veils as 'Mark of Separation,'" *New York Times*, October 8, 2006.

⁵ Carlos Fuentes, *Latin America: At War With The Past*, Massey Lectures, 23rd Series, CBC Enterprises, 1985: 71-72.

⁶ Pew Center on the States, *One in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, March 2009).

⁷ Arlene Goldbard, *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, New Village Press, 2006.

⁸ John Sullivan, "El Teatro Lucha de Salud del Barrio: Theater and Environmental Health in Texas," Community Arts Network, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2005/10/acrobats_of_the.php.

⁹ From Francis Jeanson's "On the Notion of 'Non-public,'" quoted in *Cultural Democracy* (February 1982), 19.

¹⁰ Download Antonio Damasio's speech from UNESCO's website: http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=2916&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

¹¹ www.global-action.org/refugee.

¹² Mary Marshal Clark, "Oral History: Art and Praxis," in Adams and Goldbard, *Community, Culture and Globalization*: 102.

¹³ www.thousandkites.org/. ■