Cultures of Anyone
Luis Moreno-Caballud

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In some sense, perhaps those cultural ‘public’ spaces have never been completely public, because of their strong affiliation with the hegemony of the modern power/knowledge complex. At the same time, it doesn’t help that their process of ‘selling’ to the highest bidder in the neoliberal market was already much more advanced than in the case of hospitals and schools, since these turn out to be much less effective for promoting spectacular urban revaluation phenomena. All this has, of course, a series of fundamental consequences in terms of the type of cultural production that could be sustained in the absence of those ‘public houses’ of culture. I will also attempt to pose questions about some of these consequences, which might bring out neoliberalism’s effects not only on ways of supporting culture, but also on the ways of expressing and constructing meaning.

6.3. Between Institution and Experimentation: Why Hasn’t There Been a Marea de la Cultura?

6.3.1. ‘Everything is culture’ but there is a ‘cultural sector’

In the face of the bankruptcy of public cultural institutions, their invasion by private interests, their inability to create programming due to ‘lack of funds,’ and their invitation to all cultural agents, beginning with themselves, ‘to become a business or die,’ has often left many people who want to dedicate their time and energy to cultural production, simply put, out on the street. And it was on the street that the ‘We Are All Culture’ act was performed on March 9, 2014. This was part of something that was, in fact, called Marea de la Cultura or Marea Roja, but it has not yet achieved the intensity of other Mareas. In Madrid’s Paseo del Prado, nine platforms were built for this act, dedicated respectively to music, performing arts, visual arts, education, patrimony, literature, dance, cinema, and civic movements. In spite of ‘taking culture to the street,’ it seemed then that the logic of the group of professional associations that convened the event (who called themselves Platform for the Defense of Culture), perpetuated the type of sectorial divisions practiced by those same institutions whose privatization process was being condemned.

In relation to this compartmentalized and professionalized concept of culture, Carmen Lozano-Bright (2014) wrote a timely and critical article on the eve of the act in which she indicated:

They’re calling tomorrow ‘the first great mobilization of the world of culture.’ As if everything we’re living (particularly for the last three years) were not the greatest cultural demonstration and learning in decades: recuperation of unused spaces, urban community orchards,
Towards More Democratic Cultural Institutions?

What is here in the background, without a doubt, is the recurrent misunderstanding of, or at least the persistent tension between, the applicable ‘anthropological’ definition of culture, which considers as such all construction of human meaning, and the shortened version proposed by bourgeois liberal modernity, supported by the exclusivist conception of the production of meaning that I have been reviewing in this book. But the added complication, of course, is that this last conception, ‘sectorial,’ ‘professional,’ ‘specialized,’ is the one that has predominated in the institutions of the neoliberalist bubble, and therefore the one that has occupied its spectacular infrastructures, until these began to be drained of resources. Hence, when this type of sectorial understanding of culture ‘hits the streets,’ or reclaims part of the Mareas, there is no lack of critical voices like Lozano-Bright’s.

In fact, a polemical debate has been generated about this situation, which Víctor Lenore (2013) summarized in the title of another article: ‘Culture and 15M: A Stormy Relationship.’ In it he gathered the opinions of several cultural agents on the subject. In their opinions, mixed in with other comments, we can undoubtedly find critical reactions to the indelible marks that both the elitist tradition and neoliberalism have left on ‘the cultural sector.’

And so, for example, the musician Nacho Vegas said, intelligently relating both problems: ‘Many “creators” mistrust any collective movement as a matter of principle, considering them meek, as if following the hyperindividualistic dictates imposed by neoliberalism was not letting themselves be acritically carried away by the current.’ At the same time, as happened with Lozano-Bright, the support for the ‘transversality’ of culture was reappearing as a form of resistance against those abusive vices of the ‘authorial,’ ‘professional’ sector. In this sense, the writer Belén Gopegui stated:

Culture, it seems to me, shouldn’t be a section in a newspaper, but rather, should be imbricated in every one of the other sections. For the same reason, I don’t believe it should be a section in a movement, but an expression of it and thus be everywhere and nowhere.

Lozano-Bright seems to be thinking about practices that are closer to what is routinely thought of as activism, frequently linked to physical spaces. However, it would be interesting to also map the proliferation of cultural projects from or about the 15M in the sphere of written culture (something to which I contributed with the article ‘Cuando cualquiera escribe: procesos democratizadores de la cultura escrita en la crisis de la Cultura de la Transición española’ (2014)).
Of course, the danger of taking to extremes that logic of the transversality of culture—a danger that, by the way, none of the aforementioned people incurs—lies in diminishing the need to materially support certain intensive cultural practices that would not otherwise exist. In other words, although of course everybody is in fact a cultural producer (everybody thinks and speaks, everybody gives meaning to what happens to them), some people dedicate their lives to intensely cultivating one or another aspect of meaning production. And they need to be able to ‘live on that’; that is, sustaining those intensive cultural practices is their livelihood, and having also to do other things to be able to support themselves to have a life with dignity would interfere with that.

Jordi Oliveras (2013), organizer of the Indigestio Forum and host of interesting debates on these questions in the magazine Nativa, synthesized in the following terms this conception of culture as something common and everyday, but that also allows ‘specializations’: ‘We would have to understand creators as specialists who work the cultural magma in an implicit process of social delegation, and the managers and structures of management—public or private—as instruments in the service of these processes, and not the reverse.’

Guillermo Zapata (Lenore 2013), activist, audiovisual scriptwriter, and promoter of multiple cultural and political initiatives, also pointed out something essential in relation to those ‘management structures’ that are due to the ‘cultural magma.’ He reminds us that in addition to public and private, they can also be community, but for that we need communities willing to defend them:

I believe that one of the keys to the Mareas is that they understand that the defense of the public sphere is no longer only a matter for professionals, but one that requires community participation. The questions raised are: What is community for Spanish culture? Can there be community if we have spent years treating people either like clients or like thieves?

In the paragraphs above, I have tried to offer an outline of how the world of Self-Managed Social Centers and some public cultural institutions especially permeable to community involvement, like Medialab-Prado, are perhaps most similar to those communities able to defend the intense processes of cultural production that Zapata demands. In no way are these exhaustive examples. Fortunately, there exists a plurality of cultural community self-management experiences capable of empowering all types of knowledge and abilities, and often these experiences do not depend
directly on what can be properly understood as CSAs. Nor do they depend on public institutions, or at least not entirely. Often they are cultural processes that experiment with hybrid forms of self-managed support, public and private, in the physical and digital spheres, linking unpaid collective work with the use of public infrastructures or even subsidies, but also with certain uses of the commercial sphere foreign to the logics of privatization and competition.

6.3.2. ‘Epistemic experimental communities’:

Without pampering there is no experimentation

It is true, in any case—and I think it’s important to make the distinction—that in among all that magma that Lozano-Bright talks about, it is worth identifying some projects or spaces that are dedicated with greater intensity to questions of learning, to working with language, with research analysis, and, in general, with experimentation in the production of meaning.

Thus, in a trilogy of articles essential to theorizing these questions, Tomás Sánchez Criado (2013a; 2013b; 2014) indicated that, in effect, the neoliberal crisis has simultaneously brought a crisis of the ‘institutions of knowledge’ that produce a widespread desire ‘to theoretically and practically articulate “who we are,” “what is happening to us,” to discuss “what has come down on us,” and “what we can do with it.”’ As he says about those ‘“institutions of knowledge,”’ [given that] it has been demonstrated that “they didn’t know” that this could happen, that “they couldn’t” do anything to avoid it, that “they didn’t predict” what would happen, or that “they didn’t want” to tell us that they profited’ from all the new forms of encounters that have appeared, some of them dedicated to somehow confronting the need to replace those fraudulent kinds of knowledge:

Splinter groups or great masses that mount their own environments for creating knowledge, that strive to create climates of debate and discussion, with a great hospitality for the unknown. An entire true ‘ecology of collective practices’ that it would require our best talent as naturalists to try to account for, to make the most of. (2013b)

Sánchez Criado builds a small catalogue and also proposes the concept of ‘epistemic experimental communities’ to theorize these collective practices. Of course wisdom and knowledge, the ‘epistemic,’ are always involved in any human activity, and in many of the political processes initiated around the neoliberal crisis this has been obvious, as I discussed in the last chapter. Sánchez Criado clearly recognizes this issue, but he also points out some lines to map, with no intention of establishing rigid categories, those
spaces or projects that have focused on that epistemic dimension of a more experimental form. In other words, those spaces, we could say, with a greater willingness to question the meaning of the reality that emerges from the neoliberal crisis, still at risk of not being fast enough about attaining specific changes in the institutionality that manages that crisis.

So Sánchez Criado speaks, for example, of experiences modeled around collective learning, such as those of the ‘University on the Streets,’ or the ‘People’s Summer University’ held in the self-managed urban space of Campo de Cebada. Such experiences, he says, could become related to the old traditions of popular barrio schools and the movements of educational renovation. He also mentions the breeding ground of the CSAs, some projects like the Observatorios Metropolitanos of Madrid and Barcelona, and the Common Notions, for which we could use the label of ‘activist research.’ Furthermore, he alludes to ‘hybrid institutional spaces,’ among which he includes both Medialab-Prado and the CSA Ateneu Candela, integrated from Terrassa into the Fundación de los Comunes. Finally, he mentions Intermediae, ColaBoraBora, and Zemos98, plus the ‘innumerable collectives of participatory architecture that have sprouted like mushrooms in recent years’ (2013b). An interesting addition to this list would be that of the interdisciplinary field of studies in science, technology, and society (STS), which has called attention to the ethical and political dimensions of science and technology, producing interesting encounters with activist practices, such as Sánchez Criado’s own developments around the ‘material politics of care’ (critical interventions in services and technologies related to the notion of ‘disability’).

Instead of the community/self-management/public institution axis that I have been using, Sánchez Criado here follows in particular the epistemic, experimental function of some current cultural projects. This is a function it seems essential to emphasize in order to understand the paths of the collaborative cultures emerging from the thread of the neoliberal crisis, and perhaps also to understand why they have not given rise to a mass Marea de la Cultura, like those for education and healthcare. So, besides the problem of the co-optation of public spaces by neoliberal competitive logics, it seems to me that we must also keep in mind the inevitable tension that always takes place between experimental forms and established processes.

Spaces that put the epistemic crisis in the forefront and confront it with an experimental spirit, without proposing preconceived solutions, also need to constantly reinvent themselves in some way. This is in no way incompatible with creating institutions, if we understand that their organizing and structuring tendencies can be flexible, but they do mark certain priorities in that sense.
In the third article of his trilogy, Sánchez Criado (2014) defends his use of the concept of experimentation analogously to the notion of the ‘experts in what happens to them’ proposed earlier by Antonio Lafuente:

I spoke, however, of experimentation not only because I like to play with words or simply to incorporate a cool word from the art world, but because of the proximity or vicinity of these means of knowledge production with the real practice of scientific laboratories (and not their mythical vision). Because in these spaces it becomes necessary for us to constantly explore the boundaries of our conventional ways of thinking and acting; taking charge of the changing, vibrant materiality that constitutes us, in complex worlds such as the contemporary ones, where we de/compose ourselves through our relations with microbes and very diverse somatic affections, communication infrastructures, climatic catastrophes, housing systems, intellectual property formats, etc. that enable the sociomaterial articulation of our agency. In other words, the things that allow or interfere with our particular possibilities of performance to take charge of what affects us. And I was delighting in the fact that the result of its union is a novel situation that has allowed the old guinea pigs of technocratic reason to explore and experiment with other life and existential alternatives, looking for ways to develop something like ‘self-managed guinea pigs,’ making ‘the revolution of bodies, from bodies, for bodies, in bodies …,’ in other words, from its radical diversity.

In this same article, Sánchez Criado also recognized that the experimental practices of those ‘self-managed guinea pigs’ that emerge from the neoliberal crisis have been besieged by the aforementioned ‘technocratic reason,’ which has tried to integrate them into the world of ‘innovation’ and ‘learning,’ to fit them to the logics of neoliberal competitiveness. This is why he emphasized that it’s fundamental to attend to the vulnerability of these experimental practices, developing what he expressively called ‘pampering’: ‘that care and daily attention that requires experimentation with passion.’ And for this he proposed ‘new formats of institutionality,’ or ‘mimatorios [pampering places] where these experimental practices would be sheltered’:

[S]elf-managed spaces to be constructed where our experimental tasks could be carried out, where we would be able to control our support, keeping alive our knowledge bases of experimentation and their particular relation with materials, practices, ideas, tools, etc. But also spaces where these practices are pampered so that they result in a good deed, where they are proven and formats are experimented
with to equip them with minimum conditions of subsistence and compensation.

This need is none other than the one I have followed in previous reflections about the shelter and everyday support the ‘cultures of anyone’ can find, always with the expected difficulties, in self-managed or public spaces. But Sánchez Criado also emphasizes one of the essential characteristics of those intensive cultural practices, of that ‘specialization’ that takes place within the daily magma of the collective production of meaning: experimentation. I think this emphasis on experimentation as one of the important factors of the ‘cultures of anyone’ can add another layer to the debate on the possible marea de la cultura. It shows us that perhaps it is not only neoliberal harassment and its ‘enclosure’ of the public sphere that have complicated the existence of ‘public culture houses’ capable of inspiring mareas in their defense. Rather, it is the especially experimental—and therefore vulnerable—condition of the production of meaning itself during the neoliberal crisis—at this moment so strong with shared ‘not-knowing’—that complicates, or at least suggests special demands for, the institutional dynamics capable of creating such ‘houses’ from participative and community networks.

6.3.3. Collecting answers or posing questions: Between institution and experimentation

Let’s think again, for example, about the Fundación de los Comunes. Would this not be one of those ‘pampering places’ that must take care of the experimental practices of the ‘self-managed guinea pigs’ during the crisis of the neoliberal institutions of knowledge? It seems to me that the Fundación de los Comunes constitutes a privileged example because it captures a common tendency to demand the right to the public arena from a position within the self-managed spaces, analogously to what Rubén Martínez and Carlos Vidania suggested as a result of PECAM. The Fundación de los Comunes was created, as explained in its blog (Fundación de los Comunes 2013a), to

construct a territory of experimentation shared between, on the one hand, cultural or political institutions with a de-institutionalizing vocation, in the sense of not capturing others and of overcoming its limits (separation gaps with respect to truly alive social production) and, on the other hand, some spaces of independent cooperation with a desire to equip their practices with greater stability, consistency and impact; that is, overcoming, in turn, the precarization to which neoliberal globalization tries to condemn us.
In this sense, the Foundation tries to systematize or formalize these movements' collective desire for intervention in public institutions to escape that ‘sentence of precarization.’ And significantly, in doing so, it also appears as a legal institution with statutes, and above all, with a clear and to some degree instrumental discourse about its goals.

This is what I particularly want to highlight now, because it seems to me that when the vector of experimentation is introduced into the equation of ‘cultures of anyone,’ it becomes particularly obvious that there are more instrumental ways of producing meaning in these cultures, which share space with that experimentation. And such sharing can’t help but be a source of diversity in the models, and even of the tensions among them.

The Fundación de los Comunes proposes itself as a think tank. This means that it must offer not only questions, but answers. Its coordinator, Marisa Pérez-Colina (Entrevista Marisa Pérez Colina, Fundación de los Comunes (FdlC), MUSAC 14 de mayo de 2014), has commented on numerous occasions that this means ‘elevating the discourse to the level of the conflict in the street,’ or, as explained in an article from the Foundation (2013b), listening and observing ‘the movements,’ because

the answer to the question ‘how do we win?’ will not come a priori from intellectual discussions nor from theoretical analyses. Only the movements have the answer, and it is inscribed on their bodies, in their practices, in their ways of doing. Today we have a myriad of interesting practices to learn from, new experiments, and it is necessary to listen to them and observe them, always from a position inside these practices. To the question ‘What can we do?’ we can respond with another question: ‘What is already being done—from the struggles?’

The think tank model means these questions must be considered valid to be able to formulate answers. Thus, more than asking what are ‘the struggles’ or what do they mean—or even what does it mean ‘to win,’ or perhaps even more importantly, in what kind of language do those struggles and movements speak and what would be the most appropriate way to translate their ‘bodies, their practices, their ways of being’ into ‘discourse’—a certain legibility is presumed, a certain access that will allow us to offer answers. Or at least, the experimentation, the not knowing, and the uncertainty entailed in that necessary ‘translation’ is not the focal point.

Ultimately, what I want to point out here, hand in hand with the concept of vulnerable experimentation proposed by Sánchez Criado, is that the ‘movements,’ if we include those ‘experimental epistemic communities,’ are not only going to provide answers, but also more questions. And thus the
‘translation’ the Fundación de los Comunes proposes will not always be an easy exercise. This, it seems to me, does not at all mean that institutions able to defend those cultures are not necessary; rather, just the opposite. But yes, perhaps these institutions will always have to reserve an important space for the not-knowing and experimentation, for things that can’t be immediately translated into the language of politics or institutional culture, which is not always easy.

Perhaps this difficulty of linking cultural experimentation with establishing practices capable of providing long-term support is more appreciated in the area of projects that have a vocation more oriented towards aesthetic questions, towards reflection on the forms of plastic, linguistic, audiovisual representations, etc.

In this sense, it seems significant to me that often when ‘the 15M culture’ is spoken of—and I myself have done it in previous texts—the projects that have been summarized have mostly been projects that can be more or less associated with traditional artistic or cultural forms, like cinema (15M.cc, Cine sin Autor), music (Fundación Robo), literature (Asalto), or even ‘the library,’ in the case of #Bookcamping. And then their relationship to the ‘spaces of life’ or ‘institutions’ have been theorized more or less indirectly, given that none of these cultural initiatives, unlike projects like TdS, are tied directly to permanent institutional structures such as CSAs, although some have occasionally been supported by them, and also by some public ‘cultural centers.’

Perhaps, I suggest now, beyond the traditional tendency to separate ‘culture’ and, even more, ‘art’ from the ‘social channels of production’ that nourish them, it is necessary to recognize that an inevitable tendency also exists in the most experimental aspects of meaning production, those usually associated with aesthetic or philosophical exploration, to work with a high degree of uncertainty. And this does not always fit well with the need for consensus and positive affirmations that occur in the construction of institutions.

In this regard, I am not trying to establish any kind of artificial ‘suture’; nor is it my intent to reduce to a single unit the multiple differences between these aesthetic projects, those more ‘epistemic’ ones, and the diverse experiences that ground them. What I want to do in what follows is to add a final reflection around the plural tensions and drifts that occur not only between the self-organized and the public spheres—both always subjected to the pressures of ‘extraction’ and neoliberal ‘enclosure’—but also between the experimental and establishing dynamics that run through both fields.

For this, I now want to explore briefly and as an open ending to my