

書 評
Reviews

Les Dérèglements de l'Exception Culturelle. By Françoise Benhamou. Paris: Seuil, 2006. Pp. 352.

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The concept of “exception culturelle” (cultural exception) has emerged after the GATT Uruguay Round took place in 1986. It was then decided that cultural goods should be defined as merchandises subject to the rules of the GATT. To counter this, European countries have established juridical concepts which enable them to protect their national cultural productions. While other European countries favor a flexible approach to the problem, France has adopted one of the most radical stances by defending the concept of cultural exception. Cultural exception defines cultural goods as goods needing special protection and therefore evading GATT negotiations. A series of measures were implemented to protect French cultural production: quotas in TV and radio programs, subventions, aid for show business workers under short term contracts and with interrupted income flows (“système de l’intermittence”), fixed prices for books, etc.

The concept of cultural exception, however, has rapidly spread over the border of a strictly juridical or even political interpretation and fueled emotional debates on French identity in a globalizing world. Cultural exception is indeed based on a vision of culture that is rooted at the origins of the French Fifth Republic (1958 to today). It is therefore part of a long-lasting

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debate on state cultural politics. France's extremely protective position on cultural matters has probably also contributed towards radicalizing discussions at home on the very relevance of cultural exception as a policy. While some legitimize it as a defense of national identity against aggressive industrial strategies from the – American-dominated - international market, others argue that this policy lacks flexibility and isolates the French cultural scene from international tendencies. Furthermore, it is not rare that debates on cultural policies become infected with a most emotional rhetoric on some alleged cultural decadence.

It is in this heated intellectual context that Françoise Benhamou presents with remarkable distance the history of French cultural exception and the difficulties it has encountered recently. As a specialist of culture economics Françoise Benhamou, who is currently teaching at Université de Rouen (France), has acquired valuable experiences on the topic and is recognized as an authority in the field. After having published *L'Economie de la culture*¹ and *L'Economie du star-system*,² she offers a pondered and critical reflection on French cultural policies in her last book *Les Dérèglements de l'exception culturelle*.³ In this latter work, Françoise Benhamou adopts a rather critical view on recent cultural policies in France. However, far from endorsing the decadence argument, she tries to open up new perspectives for the debate. It is for example notable that she does not use the word crises but “dérèglements” (a word that can be understood either as malfunctioning or disorder), which implies that problems can be solved by readjustments.

Françoise Benhamou identifies six dimensions where “dérèglements” affect cultural policies: in her first chapter she examines strategies adopted to promote cultural democratization; she exposes then the conflictive relations

¹ Françoise Benhamou, *L'Economie de la culture* (Paris: Repères, La Découverte, 1996).

² Françoise Benhamou, *L'Economie du star-system* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 2002).

³ Françoise Benhamou, *Les Dérèglements de l'exception culturelle* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2006).

between public authorities and art field workers; in her third chapter, she studies the way local and central public authorities interact, and moves in the next chapter to the relations between public cultural authorities and private industries; in her fifth chapter, she reflects on conceptual weaknesses in the making of cultural policies based on the notion of diversity since the beginning of the new millennium, and in the last chapter, she resituates the French case in a European perspective. All these dimensions are considered within the frame of a broad picture of cultural policies during the French Fifth Republic.

In the first chapter of her book, Françoise Benhamou examines strategies adopted to foster cultural democratization. This latter concept is regarded as a fundamental mission by the ministry of cultural affairs since its installation in 1958. The first minister for culture, the famous novelist André Malraux, had promoted this concept as a way to give better and broader access to higher culture. However, since the 1980s, the concept of cultural democratization has evolved towards a broader recognition of marginal forms of art. Artistic activities eligible for assistance from the ministry have multiplied and criteria for selecting relevant projects have become more confusing. At the same time, cultural democratization has increasingly been understood as giving access to cultural activities of almost any kind to the broadest public possible. The ministry has therefore privileged cultural activities likely to attract crowds. Success rather than quality has become a priority. In the meantime, while delegating cultural distribution and promotion to private actors, the state has concentrated on the more prestigious aspect of what it considers its mission: artistic creation. All these evolutions have led to a situation where creators flourish outside any kind of selective frame but without corresponding structures to reach the public.

Having identified the problems caused by the evolution of cultural policies in the last two decades or so, Françoise Benhamou moves then to the problems it has introduced into artistic practices, mostly for the performing

arts. By privileging artistic creation, the state has contributed to a situation characterized by an overabundance of artistic projects as well as by a confusing notion of creator as more and more cultural actors want to be recognized as such. Lacking clear criteria to select relevant projects, the ministry faces heavy pressure from cultural actors asking for public assistance. This in turn further weakens the ministry's capacity to define independent policies. As for the overabundance of artistic projects, it has resulted in a more precarious situation for art workers as places and time to perform are limited. The ministry has therefore decided to grant more aid to workers under shorter term contracts on the basis of the "système de l'intermittence" (intermittence system). This system of aid allows show business workers to get subsidies while waiting for new contracts. But by reducing the duration of contracts making show business workers eligible for public aid, the state has simply encouraged them to sign shorter contracts; in other words it has pushed them to deliberately choose a more precarious situation in order to receive subsidies. This has led to the long "crise des intermittents" (intermittent workers crisis) when artists protest against reforms aimed at reducing the swelling costs of the system. After three years of protest, the ministry finally revoked its reform in 2006, showing how little room was left for independent policies. In addition, Françoise Benhamou remarks that lack of resources and network practices have finally led to a standardization of the performing arts. She therefore thinks that the state has to encourage a greater professionalism in the performing arts, and develop clearly defined concepts and criteria to help establish selective and independent policies.

Françoise Benhamou then examines culture financing problems. In spite of a remarkable increase in the ministry budget in the 1980s, the authorities regularly face a shortage of funds. This is in part due to the "grands travaux" policy of the 1980s when President Mitterrand's government launched prestigious construction projects, mostly in Paris. Maintenance of these buildings and additional staff swallow a great part of the budget. Alternative strategies have therefore been adopted to finance the increasing

costs of artistic creation and cultural activities. Other ministries have been solicited, making cultural policies less coherent and less transparent, according to Françoise Benhamou; projects have been delegated to local authorities, who often lack expertise in managing cultural affairs, and are more dependent on the tastes of their voters than the policies of the central government; they grow easily disappointed with cultural activities because the latter often turn out to be less economically profitable than expected; private funding has been encouraged, but without great success. No real long-term solutions seem therefore to have been found to cover increasing costs brought on by broad cultural policies.

Cultural exception has been conceived mostly in response to market strategies. New technologies and market trends have profoundly changed the rules of the game for culture producers during the last decade. Thus, the state must think of new ways to protect culture from pure market logics. Françoise Benhamou studies the fields of art market, cinema, book publishing, television and radio, and recorded music. She suggests different strategies in each case. But more generally she thinks that the state must focus on a clarification of juridical concepts while limiting material aids to selected projects. She provides a good example of this through her reflection on television and radio policies. Françoise Benhamou thinks that quotas and other regulations are excessive while aids are granted to too many stations and channels. This leads to a scarcity of funds as well as a standardization of programs. She suggests that the state focus on public stations and channels and believes that private stations and channels will naturally tend to differentiate their programming because they are often owned by huge corporations that try to cover the broadest possible market share by offering diversified products.

Françoise Benhamou also explores one of the latest trends in French cultural policies based on the concept of cultural exception. From the beginning of the new century, the notion of diversity as defined by the UNESCO's guideline of 2005 has given a new life to the concept of cultural

exception. The juridical concept of cultural diversity legitimizes indeed cultural protection. From there it is easy for governments to extend the concept to the protection of national cultural industries. Françoise Benhamou observes that, paradoxically, diversity understood as a defensive concept leads to a double standardization: standardization at the international level because each country tries to produce stars able to conquer foreign markets; but also standardization at the national level because excessive protection leads to an overabundance of national cultural goods which make it increasingly difficult for consumers to make choices. Consumers tend then to buy what they already know. Françoise Benhamou asks for a better defined notion of diversity and suggests applying this concept to cultural policies rather than to national productions.

Having introduced the idea of a system less based on defensive policies, Françoise Benhamou moves quite naturally to the question of French cultural policies in the European context. In the last chapter of her book, she first makes a broad survey of cultural policies of other nations in Europe. The wide diversity she observes there leads her to conclude that a coherent European cultural policy cannot substitute for individual national policies at present, although she deplors the fact that national productions circulate very little between European countries. While making comparisons between European countries, Françoise Benhamou does not try to find a model for France. She makes clear that every nation's cultural policy is related to a different reality. Rather, the perspective she opens up at the end of her book is most constructive in replacing the French problem in a broader context to think of new solutions.

Throughout her book, Françoise Benhamou produces balanced and convincing arguments. With great accuracy and subtle argumentation she makes apparent some of the main characteristics of problems affecting ongoing French cultural policies: overproduction and standardization of cultural production, increasing pressure from the artists on the state, lack of

clear definitions concerning the concepts on which cultural policies should be based, financial difficulties, disengagement from the state in promoting higher culture while focusing too much on creation, insufficient strategies to respond to cultural practices introduced by new media and technologies, and cultural policies based on defensive and nationalistic views.

It is remarkable that Françoise Benhamou always manages to keep away from the moral debate that surrounds culture and culture politics. But though she manages to keep non-emotional, it is evident that Françoise Benhamou bases her criticism on personal views. Her book does not only expose a problem, it suggests solutions. In this sense it is part of a debate. While obviously regretting the times when cultural policies were aimed at broadening access to higher culture, Françoise Benhamou seems to believe in a more liberalized system, in which the state should try to find a clear position along market forces rather than extending traditional actions to a broadening and increasingly more complex cultural reality. Françoise Benhamou insists on the need for clarification regarding cultural policies and juridical concepts related to culture production and diffusion. She also asks for a better definition of criteria enabling the state to develop selective policies. Such views are likely to have their opponents in France. It would have been interesting for the readers to be introduced more deeply to the arguments of other parties in the debate on cultural exception. By reading Françoise Benhamou's book one sees clearly that the core of the debate lies in the definition problem and also in the balance of power between different parties. But to do this she would probably have to turn her critical eye to another field. And it is certainly not the least merit of her book to open new questions for the reader.

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