COMMENTARY

Cultural policy research in the Nordic countries: the State of the field

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ABSTRACT

This article is a short reflection on the general state of the field of cultural policy research in the Nordic countries. It is written primarily on the basis of the Nordic Conferences on Cultural Policy Research, especially the latest conference, which was held in Helsinki on August 2017, and thematically focused on “Migration, Culture, and Nation”. Over the last 20 years, cultural policy research in the Nordic countries has matured into a more diverse research field, integrating perspectives from several other fields and disciplines. Cultural policy now appears to be in a state of change. This is a time of increasing migration, globalization, economization, and cultural change. These are changes with which cultural policy research can only keep up with and understand if it continues to develop, integrating new perspectives, while at the same time finding new ways to use the experience we have already gained in studying the interface between the cultural sector and politics.

Nordic Journal of Cultural Policy has now existed for twenty years, and the 1st Nordic Conference on Cultural Policy Research (NCCPR) was held fourteen years ago. This could thus be a good time to say something about the current state of the field in the Nordic countries. Personally, I attended my first NCCPR in 2005. At that time, most cultural policy scholars, myself included, were occupied with the history and models of national cultural policy, and with trying to define what constitutes cultural policy as a policy field, and as an interdisciplinary field of research. Nowadays, cultural policy research in the Nordic countries has developed into broader, more mature, and more diverse field of research, but it still maintains both its interdisciplinary nature and a relative cohesiveness as a field. Judging from the NCCPR conferences, there remains a core group of researchers who relate to the interdisciplinary field of cultural policy as one of their academic home communities. There are also many who primarily identify with their home discipline, or with other interdisciplinary fields, and only occasionally turn up to present papers at cultural policy research conferences, or publish in cultural policy journals, either because they are
attracted by a particular thematic issue or conference theme, or because their objects of study happens to connect to cultural policy. This combination can be both a strength and a weakness in a research community.

This year’s NCCPR, in Helsinki, was thematically focused on “Migration, Culture, and Nation”, a focus which provided a link, both to other academic disciplines and to current events. Cultural policy in many European countries is currently being reshaped by political parties viewing culture as directly related to national identity. At the same time, many cultural institutions, organizations, and individual artists are finding more outspoken roles in the public debates which have surrounded the migration issue. This year’s NCCPR was opened in the Ateneum art museum in central Helsinki, very much a national institution dedicated to consecrated ‘high’ art. Yet, this institution had earlier this year found itself in the midst of the Finnish migration debate, after displaying a reproduction of the artist EGS’s work *Europe’s greatest shame* (2017) on its façade. The conference theme was noticeable both in the keynote lectures, such as Karina Horsti’s lecture on artistic responses to the ongoing crisis in European refugee reception, and in individual papers, e.g Linnea Linsköld’s paper on the uses of the term “multiculturalism” in Swedish cultural policies (Lindersköld 2017). Issues relating to migration and multiculturalism have long been a topic for cultural policy research in the Nordic countries, and several of the papers reconnected this theme to cultural policy in a more narrow and traditional sense.

The old discussion about what cultural policy is, could, and should be, has continued. At this year’s NCCPR, Per Mangset, one of the founders of the research field, presented a paper entitled “The end of cultural policy?” (Mangset 2017). While the title was deliberatively provocative, it is easy to agree that it is far from self-evident that a policy field which has existed in its present form for about half a century will continue to do so forever. It is debateable what would come instead of “cultural policy as we know it”. The policy field, as established in the post-war years was largely characterized by a combination of two, somewhat opposed, normative concepts; the autonomy of the arts, and the democratization of culture. Both have been questioned within cultural policy research from various theoretical points of view. As Roger Blomgren (2015) has pointed out, the arts as a field builds on the idea of quality, but its claims to autonomy is in conflict with any actual democratic (or market-based) popular influence on it. In this sense, the established idea of cultural policy is not democratic. Similarly, Geir Vestheim (2015) has argued that cultural policy cannot be democratic unless its end is for the good of the people. Starting from a different view of democracy, it could be argued that liberal democracy and the open society not only presuppose each other, but also rest on the precondition that autonomous fields, such as art and academia, exist and can both, reflect independently on the rest of society, and serve as the base for

1. This topic is also discussed in the last chapter of Mangset’s and Hylland’s recent book *Kulturpolityk: Organisering, legitimering og praksis* (Mangset & Hylland 2017).
the participation of intellectuals in public discourse. This argument has, for example, been made by Pierre Bourdieu in the postscript to his classic study *The Rules of Art* (Bourdieu 1992). While governments are very likely to continue to try to influence the culture of their citizens or subjects, as well as to try to gain legitimacy and prestige by supporting arts, and by using heritage, it remains an empirical issue whether they will do so using methods respecting the arm’s length principle, or the goals which has so far guided cultural policy. Bourdieu (1992) argued for defending the autonomy of the fields of art and academia with what he described as a “corporatism of the universal”, but this corporatism does not now appear to be fully successful in its self-defence, even in the Nordic countries.

While current Nordic cultural policies are largely the product of consensus politics during the second half of the 20th century, many cultural policy scholars have also shifted their focus from the idea of an art-centred cultural policy established in the post-war years, to viewing the history of cultural policy as a longer development, which still has consequences for how cultural policy is understood, and should be understood today. My Klockar Linder (2014) has described the origins of Swedish cultural policy in the early 20th century, and in ambitions not only to give the people access to quality culture, but also to change the entire culture of the people through broader government policies on public education and culture. If one takes a less historicist approach than Klockar Linder, this would mean that the origin of explicit cultural policy could be better understood in the context of more general cultural politics, or implicit cultural policy. When the early history of cultural policy has been studied (which has not been rare in Nordic cultural policy research), it has generally been evident that its origins be traced at least back to the 19th and early 20th century, and that they have often been closely connected to nationalist and separatist politics. Many of the major cultural institutions have been part of that history. This also means that when culture and cultural production are becoming increasingly transnational in nature, due to migration, digitalization, marketization etc, and when the role of the nation-state is consequently starting to change, this could also impact the role and the nature of cultural policy as such. There is, in other words, a renewed need to discuss and study the general concepts and core ideas of cultural policy, as well as its responses to these challenges.

The methodological nationalism which once characterized the field is also increasingly challenged by alternative foci, now including a growing body of research on local and regional cultural policy, as well as on the cultural policy of the European Union, and on the impact of these. Since the early 2000’s there has, for example been an increasing interest in urban cultural policies, and cultural politics on the city level. This is also a field where cultural policy research intersects with e.g. geography, urban planning, and critical heritage studies. There is still a tendency to treat the cultural policies of the Nordic countries as separate from each other. This may have led to underestimating the tendency for trends and ideas to spread across national borders, or to appear simultane-
ously in several Nordic countries. It may also be that we underestimate the differences. Nordic cultural policy researchers have always been aware of the benefits of comparative research, but large scale comparative studies have remained fairly rare. The conferences have to some extent counteracted the negative effects of this by providing a space for researchers to compare results. From this perspective, it also has to be considered very positive that the Nordic conferences are now also increasingly including scholars from the Baltic states, and research on cultural policies in the nearby formerly Communist states, forcing us to look outside of taken-for-granted assumptions of what cultural policies have to be.

During the last few decades, cultural policy research has dealt with cultural policy’s growing interest in the creative industries, and with the connection between culture and business. In this case, the research field has often remained skeptical, even in the face of great interest especially from regional and local policy makers, instead describing the spread of this new discourse and normative approach in Nordic cultural policy. This has, in many ways, been the main trend in Nordic cultural policy described by Nordic cultural policy researchers the last few decades, and towards which these researchers have often taken a critical approach. Now the trend may reverse as even some of its originators are losing faith. As has been pointed out by cultural policy researchers (e.g. Bille 2016), this may, in turn, lead to problems with legitimacy for cultural policy actors who have previously used such arguments. Trend reversing may, on the other hand, lead to a better environment for new research on the interface between culture and business, as well as for studying cultural policy and cultural administration with the help of perspectives originating in business administration and organization studies, e.g. cultural leadership (which will be the theme of an upcoming thematic issue of this journal).

In general, it would appear that cultural policy research is opening up, both in terms of historical depth perception and in terms of connecting to the wider areas of cultural politics and current issues. This is not only a good development, but in fact a necessary one, at a time when social, technological, and political developments are changing the world around and within the cultural sector, the conditions under which the cultural sector has to work, and under which – and in response to which – it is formulated. The challenge for us as cultural policy researchers is to analyse these developments, and at the same time keep the research field connected to its core object, to cultural policy in a narrower sense, and to make our own research experience, competence, and previous results relevant to the wider issues which we may now address, as well as to use connections to these wider issues and trends in order to continue to improve our understanding of cultural policy, and of the interface between politics and culture.
REFERENCES


