Rhetoric and practice do not always meet in the implementation of cultural policies

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INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE 1/2019

The rich selection of papers in this issue of the *Nordisk kulturpolitisk tidsskrift* / *Nordic Journal of Cultural Policy* painstakingly illustrates how clear goals of national cultural policies often become obscured when they are implemented. Obviously, the diversity of executors and variety of implementation contexts have effect on how the end results turn out. Policies are realized via a muddy set of actions that take place in various stances and are carried out by diverse actors. It is not that unusual to end up with something that was not the original intention. Just think of how participation in the institutionalized forms of cultural life remains unequal despite the decades-long quest for cultural democracy.

This volume consists of nine refereed, scientific articles and a book review. In the first of the articles, Stine Agnete Sand shows how Norwegian national film policy becomes customized when filmmaking tackles global questions in local settings – and vice versa. Basically, local film companies and film workers face pressures from different levels: national application schemes promote national themes, regional investors emphasize the business and moneymaking aspects of filmmaking, regional film agencies demand local affiliation, and international distributors are interested in universal content that can reach international audiences. All this leads to productions that do not fully serve towards the goals of national policies.

The second paper by Ine Therese Berg demonstrates how the aim of Norwegian cultural policy to increase audience participation becomes distorted when professional theatre makers encounter their audiences. Rightfully, the author, referring to previous research, states how "participation is a strong legitimation for cultural agents, but … overlapping and competing cultural paradigms embedded in the sector complicate the implementation of a participatory agenda and create tensions among stakeholders." Overall, she identifies "a discrepancy between rhetoric and practice in Norwegian cultural policy. "I suppose this observation is valid in any of the Nordic countries."
Thirdly, Taija Roiha scrutinizes how class origin affects Finnish writers’ experience of authorship. Even in Finland, where artistic labor is relatively well supported by the public sector, the aim of guaranteeing equal opportunities to work as an artist has not been fully realized. Class origin simply influences the ways in which authorship is pursued. The fourth article continues with the theme of literature. Pål Halvorsen discusses the literature field in Norway by analyzing how literature critics reflect their position in the field. In this case, political ideologies seem to fade away, as the interviewees share a depoliticized conception of quality. Still, Halvorsen finds out that different types of critics have different perceptions of society and refer to different values. In the end, this might not be that far from how Finnish writers experience their field. In both cases, social variables explain qualifications of artistic content.

Each of the first five articles of this issue recognize different subjects and reflect their contexts against broader policy goals. This is notably evident in the fifth article, where Åsne Dahl Haugsevje, Heidi Stavrum and Mari Torvik Heian discuss how Norwegian children and young people are heard in cultural policy research. Their talk differs from the way the art world talks, and the authors conclude that policies have often been planned without asking the people it concerns the most (in this case, children and young people).

The last four articles of this issue are “more traditional” in their perspective in the sense that they analyze either laws or policy documents. Both kinds of data have been very commonly used in cultural policy research. This does not, however, mean that these articles would be not as interesting as the first five. In the sixth article, Anette Østerby brings new light into the understanding of public funding for the arts in Denmark and the way the arm’s length principle has been applied there. The author claims that “the roots of Danish government funding seem to have grown in a different soil than traditionally described and that the precise understanding of arm’s length has been unstable and negotiable.”

The seventh article continues with the theme of “unstable and negotiable” concepts. Anna Karlsson asks how the concept of cultural heritage (kulturarv) has been used in Swedish cultural heritage policy. She concludes that the Swedish government is trying to include a very wide range of things and uses under the ‘umbrella’ of cultural heritage simultaneously as it is trying to conceptualize a cultural heritage policy. This somewhat contradictory starting point is, understandably, not very easy. It seems to have led to vagueness in what in fact is “policed” by cultural heritage policy.

The last two articles move on to the international level of cultural policies. Ola Berge studies how the foreign cultural responsibilities and ambitions of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) have changed since the late 1990s. According to Berge, the MFA has delegated its policy powers to arm’s length bodies within the art sector. Despite this decentralizing process, the ministry keeps a firm initiative in foreign cultural policies, which is perhaps
not all that surprising, knowing how reluctant the ministries (at least in Finland) often are to devolve power. In addition, the article acknowledges that the reorganizing of administration has increased interest in strictly professional art and changed the way the concept of diversity is used in relation to foreign cultural policy.

Lastly, Geir Vestheim returns to a topic he analyzed also a year ago in this very same journal (see no. 1/2018): the role of UNESCO in generating national cultural policies. Last year, Vestheim wrote about UNESCO’s impact on Swedish cultural policies. Now he analyses the period he calls “the founding years of what was later called ‘new cultural policies’”. He explains how, through a series of conferences and meetings, UNESCO (and Augustin Girard) conceptualized culture and cultural policy in a way in which Western European liberal and democratic values dominate the aims and processes.

After the last article, Anders Frenander reviews the book *Kulturpolitikk. Organisering, legitimering og praksis* by Per Mangset and Ole-Marius Hylland. The book was published in Norway already in 2017, so it’s about time to have it reviewed in the NKT. In the book you can read, for example, more about the question I referred to in the beginning – i.e., whether cultural democracy has succeeded or not.

I’d also like to remind you of our Calls for Papers. In addition to the continuous general call, we are opening a new call for a thematic issue on cultural policy and instrumentalism to be published in 2020. Please see the last pages of this issue for more information about both calls and spread them in your respective networks.

I wish you a nice read!