

# «Cultural Rights» as background for «building back better» participation?

Interview with Peter Bille Larsen\*

Questions: Boris Schibler

## How did the term of Cultural Rights originate?

Cultural rights and rights of people to take part in cultural life are grounded in international human rights standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. If we talk about the right to participation overall in culture, which is an important policy angle for Switzerland as well, there is a basis for that in the international human rights system. And of course, it's also something that, to some extent at least, has been addressed in the Swiss constitution.

## What is meant by «Cultural Rights»?

The UN Special Rapporteurs in the field of cultural rights have sought to spell out the rights concerned. These include rights to human creativity and its diversity and the conditions for its exercise, development and accessibility. Then we have the issue of cultural identities and the choice of individuals and groups to participate or not in cultural life. Also, there's the right to enjoy and have access to arts, knowledge, scientific knowledge and cultural heritage. And finally the right to take part in interpretation or representation of cultural heritage and cultural identity, work that I am increasingly getting involved in.

## What does this mean in respect to Switzerland?

We have to ask ourselves: Do we have the adequate conditions for the exercise, development and accessibility of the right to culture in Switzerland? And here the COVID-situation presents enormous challenges revealing also a number of what I would characterize as cultural inequalities; how do we bridge the gap and unequal terms that many face for practicing and accessing culture? The other thing that this period has made me think about, is where does culture fit into our public life and our public space? How can we democratize the right to take part in sharing and shaping culture – and redefining cultural aspects of our public spaces? This whole pandemic situation is a moment for reflection for us about how we actually want to take this issue of cultural rights into practice, and not just sort of a nice thing to say. For now, culture is something we might talk a little bit about it after we've spoken about social and economic rights. We know it's important, yet struggle to recognize it in practice.

## How can we democratize the right to take part in sharing and shaping culture – and redefining cultural aspects of our public spaces?

## What should be the role of heritage institutions?

Here, the dialogue for me still remains far too limited to a few number of people. We in the heritage community often tend to speak a lot to ourselves and have troubles reaching out to others on this. We have a role, I think, as institutions, whether as scientific or cultural or heritage institutions, to take the dialogue forward and also to connect

both our heritage institutions and the acts of practitioners. Often, we're kind of happy and comfortable in our own world. Yet, how is heritage perceived, experienced and even rethought by new generations, new Swiss

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citizens or new forms of urban planning?

This gets us back to participation. Participation is not just about allowing people to come and have access to what we are doing, but meeting people where they are. We are still often caught up in old school notions of high culture and low culture and are still not out there connecting to cultural life and changing identities. There is room for making heritage more dynamic.

## That means we have to ask ourselves, not what do we bring to the people, but what do we want from them? Would you agree with that?

Absolutely. I constantly see that we're sort of struggling a bit between how to reconcile this relationship. We attempt to codify things, to have our inventories, to have our different systems in place. This is, of course, one important way to go about it and to have something that can be used in urban planning and decision-making. But at the same time we're struggling with the multi-faceted nature of culture, which is very difficult to freeze in one format. The cultural prosperity of Switzerland is not just about a rich cultural history, but a highly dynamic multicultural everyday life. We need to take this seriously. People who live with the heritage and are stewards of it are rights holders in that



conversation, not simply stakeholders. And this gets back to the issue of rights. They have a right to speak about and shape the future of our heritage. That whole discussion is not simply up to expert opinion alone, but also about taking into account the people who live with heritage areas and their aspirations for them. And in many cases, of course, we see that local engagement can involve dynamic local associations, high levels of pride and support in terms of preserving these areas or practices.

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I think that the international discourse has also shifted a lot towards seeing heritage as part of everyday life. When it comes to cultural life, it's all about connection. It's connection between different people. It's all the glue that binds us together, dialogue and allow us to reflect critically about the past, present and future. And in that sense it forces us as institutions to look beyond ourselves and engage. ■

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