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Review of Philippe Poirrier (ed.), Pour une histoire des politiques culturelles dans le monde, 1945–2011 [For a history of cultural policies in the world, 1945–2011]

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Philippe Poirrier (ed)

Pour une histoire des politiques culturelles dans le monde, 1945–2011

[For a history of cultural policies in the world, 1945–2011]

La Documentation Française: Paris, 2011. 477 pp.

By Foivos Botsis

European Court of Justice

The historical comparative approach to national cultural policies is less than 40 years old. It was not until the mid-1970s that international or transnational institutions, such as the Council of Europe, Unesco and the European Union, adopted such an approach. However, this approach was used as a tool, which seemed action-oriented, that de facto focuses on the hard facts and undermines the role and importance of the historian.

It needs to be noted that even France, a country that served as a model for many European countries in the field of cultural policy, including Greece, inaugurated its “cultural observatory” – the Observatoire des politiques culturelles (OPC) – only in 1989. This body is responsible for observing, evaluating and analysing the international and comparative dimension of cultural policies.

This fact should be attributed to the following reasons: Firstly, the implementation of public cultural policies is closely related to the construction and consolidation of the nation-state, which unavoidably led to the elaboration of its history within the framework of national historiography. Secondly, the notion of the “cultural field” is hard to determine, as its content con-

stantly changes, thus constituting a considerable obstacle to the methodology of the comparative approach.

The celebration of the 50th anniversary of the French ministry of culture, which was founded by André Malraux in 1959, was the ideal occasion to hold an international symposium in Paris dedicated to the history of cultural policies all over the world. The present publication is the fruit of this symposium, which aspired to enrich the comparative approach of the history of public cultural policies.

The numerous contributions by eminent academics or practitioners cover the evolution of cultural policies during the second half of the twentieth century in most European countries, as well as in countries that adopted different and influential models of public intervention in the cultural field, such as Canada, the USA, Chile, Australia and Japan.

Public cultural policies, a pure expression of the welfare state, have flourished in the last 50 years, as had happened previously with social, educational and urban policies. Perhaps the most evident proof of this evolution has been the creation of administrative structures and bodies, both nationally and internationally, responsible for monitoring, planning and implementing cultural policies.

Despite the different evolution of cultural policies from country to country, due to different political, economic, social and anthropological factors, there seems to be a common denominator at the international level: the strong and consistent will to expand access to culture. This idea seems to inspire and motivate all the contributors to this collective work. Although each one of them focuses on a specific national cultural policy, they all take into account the profound interaction between these

models, which inevitably leads to some sort of "cultural loans".

Most writers emphasise the evolution of the reasons invoked by states to legitimise public intervention in the cultural field: these reasons vary from the democratisation of culture and national prestige, to the support for creativity, or the necessity to protect cultural diversity and accelerate economic growth. In addition, the book offers a comparative overview of the architecture of public administration as far as cultural policy is concerned; at the same time, it provides a comparative perspective of the main fields where public intervention takes place: heritage, contemporary creation and cultural industries.

The contribution of Myrsini Zorba, a lecturer at the Hellenic Open University, is of particular interest to the Greek reader. It elaborates, in a sharp and comprehensive way, the deficit of cohesive and targeted cultural policy in Greece.

Her starting point is that the necessity of public intervention in the cultural field has never really been challenged in Greece. Unfortunately, however, the implementation of cultural policy has been trapped in a traditional and, thus, inflexible approach. The writer notes that by giving priority to notions such as national prestige, national identity and state protectionism of the arts, cultural policy failed to embody in its vision new approaches recommended by social studies. Consequently, it failed to fulfil a large number of urgent social demands, such as increasing access and participation, promoting diversity and pluralism, globalisation, economic growth and the use of innovative international practices. Moreover, the writer stresses that despite the important evolution of the Greek social structures in the last three decades, most of which should be attributed to the more intense cultural mobil-

ity of the middle class and immigration, public cultural policy has remained a prisoner of the feeble political system, the incompetent public administration and the deviation between national and regional targets or even local conflicts of interest.

Zorba's main conclusion is remarkable, especially in view of the massive social and political transformations triggered by the present crisis: a public cultural policy which does not take fully into account social demands is bound to fail. In fact, it is necessary for cultural policy to be placed at the top of the political agenda; this time, however, not as a general and vague goal or desideratum, but as a specific course of action intended to strengthen the elements supporting social cohesion and one which will allow a more democratic redistribution of national cultural capital that satisfies the standards set by the public interest. This type of action would drastically redetermine the content of national cultural policy itself and would necessarily lead to a modernisation of its means of implementation. Last but not least, it would help relaunch the public debate on national cultural policy on a whole new basis.

In his concluding observations, Pierre-Michel Menger, the director of the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), tries to underline and categorise the tendencies that seem to have historically shaped the evolution of public cultural policy internationally: first, the construction of a systematic policy of supply based on a restrictive definition of culture and a vertical concept of democratisation through conversion; second, a progressive decentralisation of public action, which causes an increasing differentiation of its missions and functions and which contests the initial universal model; third, a revision of the legitimate field of intervention of public action, which declares as obsolete one of the founding con-

cepts of cultural policies – the proclamation of a “savant” art, which deserves to be protected by the state and is not subject to the laws of the market – in favour of a culture of divertissement, which is not entitled to such protection due to its massive appeal; fourth, an increasing justification of the necessity of cultural policy based on its contribution to economic development and in striking a balance between the social diversity of nations.

In an era of tremendous social and political change, and where the comparative approach has arrived at the heart of scientific research, the present edition is an “exercise of active memory”. It enables the exchange of valuable knowledge and experience at a high level of expertise in the field of cultural policy. It is certain that it will serve as a powerful instrument in the hands of everyone who seeks to determine what it really means to have a public policy at the service of culture and how this policy could be improved if seen in the light of international theory and practice.

Antonis Liakos

*Αποκάλυψη, Ουτοπία και Ιστορία:
Οι μεταμορφώσεις της ιστορικής
συνείδησης*

**[Apocalypse, utopia and history:
the transformations of historical
consciousness]**

Athens: Polis, 2011. 478 pp.

By Yannis Stavrakakis

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According to many accounts, we are currently going through a crisis of groundbreaking, even epoch-changing, proportions. The future of capitalism and democracy hangs in the balance, with the link between them – galvanised, in the west, by the welfare-state compromise – weakening continuously, opening the road to all sorts of unpredictable outcomes within an extremely volatile global picture. How can we imagine the future? Is there anything that guarantees the realisation of the desire invested in the products of our imagination? And how does our perception of the past influence this process? All these questions, brought once more to the fore by the global crisis, are hardly new; they have existed alongside the development of historical consciousness since antiquity. Examining how different societies and social groups, different eras and intellectual traditions (religious, political, scientific, etc) have dealt with such issues can prove an invaluable resource in assisting us in our present predicament. This is the daunting task that Antonis Liakos sets himself in this new book. And it is a task that he manages to bring to fruition with incredible erudition and attention to detail, by articulating a vast number of sources and accounts in a coherent, 480-page-long argument, which is both instructive and