

THE MALAISE OF CULTURE

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I would like to add some considerations to the rich debate in defense of cultural entities dependent on the National State, some of which would disappear while others would see their budgets drastically reduced, according to the Draft Law of "*Bases y Puntos de Partida para la libertad de los argentino,*" better known as the "Omnibus Law."

Although every human subject does so, those of us who produce and consume culture in a conscious, programmatic, and sustained manner are in a position to explain why, even in economically adverse circumstances, it still makes sense to invest in cultural development. Indeed, I have heard statements claiming that culture in general and the arts in particular do not constitute a priority necessity, such that the services of artists would not be required in a state of emergency; therefore, governments like ours, which should organize their policies around more pressing problems, contradict themselves by awarding state prizes to the arts while maintaining a poverty rate of 40%. The problem with this type of common-sense assessment is not only the dilemmatic opposition between one thing and another, but the misunderstanding of both the nature of culture and the human condition. Certainly, since our species became self-aware, culture emerged as its immanent attribute because it enabled the construction of "community" with shared norms, values, objectives, identity, and a sense of belonging, thereby limiting the deployment and satisfaction of also very human self-destructive drives. Thus, like health, education, and security, access to culture should also be understood as an absolute right, and that is why it is naive and useless to establish hierarchies in the distribution of the national budget, since social processes always develop in an unequal and combined manner. In fact, our way of knowing, far from functioning as a straight line that addresses the complex and secondary from the simple and priority, functions more like a multidimensional network that does not allow for water-tight chapters in delimited areas of knowledge. Likewise, the human experience cannot be reduced to a line because it is susceptible to redirection, sprouting anywhere and in any direction, making possible—amidst unrest—the birth of sensibilities and cultural processes capable of leaving great traces in the history of humanity.

I am tempted to share the emotion of witnessing "Clowns Without Borders" deploying their art among children in a refugee camp in North Africa. Instead, I choose several examples that will allow me to establish a thread of meaning to better explain the vital importance of national States promoting the cultural expressions of their territories.

I will begin with the well-known case of the conditions under which Dmitri Shostakovich composed his Symphony No. 7, subtitled *Leningrad*, in 1941. The year of its creation and the title of the work refer to the terrible blockade with which the Nazis punished that city between 1941 and 1944. On August 9, 1942, the symphony was performed at the *Orquesta Filarmónica* hall in Leningrad during the worst moment of the city's siege. Even the rats had disappeared, swallowed by humans who stood in long lines in front of libraries to receive their ration of paper in order to eat. The musicians were famished because, as can be inferred, although they wished to perform the symphony, their conditions of subsistence could not be worse. Even so, the concert was held, and the performance was broadcast by radio through loudspeakers, which meant that the Germans also heard it; they tried, unsuccessfully, to stop it by shelling the venue where the musicians and the audience were located, for they knew that Shostakovich's creative gesture would illuminate the nationalist spirit of the Soviet resistance.

Almost simultaneously, in a prisoner-of-war camp, the Italian Alberto Burri began to paint with whatever he had at hand on discarded hospital sheets. Released in 1946, he abandoned his profession to dedicate himself fully to art, the only way to exorcise the horror lived and witnessed. When he finally consolidated himself as an artist, he did so under the powerful influence of American Informalism, whose emblematic figure is the great Jackson Pollock. And if I was interested in highlighting the importance of culture and artistic manifestations as ways of sublimating personal guilt, dissatisfaction, and suffering, I now take advantage of the figure of Pollock to exemplify how sophisticated democracies, such as that of the U.S., have used and use their "cultural heroes" as tools for the construction of identity and belonging, but also as means of penetration and domination. Such is the example of Pollock through which—taking advantage of the dominant position in which the victory of World War II had left it—that country strongly influenced all Western painting of its time, of which I only mention the case of the Italian Burri. Without forgetting jazz or Hollywood, in the middle of the "Cold War," it is undeniable that the U.S. took advantage of its cultural productions to impose them as an example of Western "freedom" against the rigid aesthetic and ethical precepts of Soviet socialism.

I am an artist and independent cultural manager from a provincial scene. I am a teacher and researcher at the public and free university (*Universidad Nacional de Tucumán*). These privileged circumstances have allowed me to see the talent of dozens of lower-middle and lower-class youth flourish, who were able to insert themselves on a national and international scale while preserving the color of their own voice; that is, working with the resources provided by hegemonic scenes and simultaneously making visible their "other-reality" in the periphery. The case of Gabriel Chaile is emblematic for the Tucumán art scene, as the tickets bought with the money from the sale of the *bollos* prepared by his mother took him not only to the Facultad de Artes, but to the Venice Biennale

in 2022. From there, as if projected from an acoustic chamber, resonated the minority language of his enormous clay pieces associated with the pre-Columbian iconography of our **NOA** (Northwest Argentina).

I speak of symbolic values that account for different identities, among them that of the Argentine North, where I live. But for those who find it complex to understand the surplus value of a good granted by its creative dimension in the realm of ideas, I also provide the good news that through valuations, investments, and even speculation, a large part of the culture and arts system is involved in the economic regime of any country on the planet.

None of this is possible without the State.