

M A R C I N  
N A P I Ó R K O W S K I

# Who Makes the Rules of the Game?

Cultural  
Institutions  
and Political  
Polarization

A BROCHURE  
*to* STIMULATE  
THE MIND



MARCIN NAPIÓRKOWSKI

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Cultural Institutions  
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**Introduction**

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## **Introduction**

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Many debates on cultural institutions and their audiences are fond of repeating: We're here for everyone. Marketing experts claim: You cannot be for everyone. What's good for everyone in fact suits no one. You need a brand, a personality. You need to know your audience, you really do... And the employees nod their heads: Yes, all right, we know, we understand, of course, the laws of the market... So who are you here for? For everyone...

There is a great deal of wisdom in this response, though it creates an impression of unbending resistance. Cultural institutes are financed by public funds, and thus are obliged to serve all of society; in their institutional honesty they cannot declare otherwise. They cannot consciously and voluntarily reject some in favor of others. They cannot single out better and worse, more or less needy, more or less valuable. They must see and hear all members of society.

Regardless of how well justified and precisely conceived their activities are at a given moment, cultural institutions

will always harbor a deep anxiety: Have we made the right choice? Isn't someone being overlooked? Have we forgotten about some group? Yesterday we held an exhibition for the elite, tomorrow we'd better do something more popular; we haven't got any international projects this year; we'd better invite XYZ to collaborate...

Obviously, classes for preschoolers will fail to attract teenagers, an institution with a Baroque art collection will not organize happenings, and a museum will not start lending out works of art as it does works of literature. These home truths will suffice. Yet perhaps even now, while reading this paragraph, a more defiant reader might think to themselves: But why on earth not? Why not run a project where teenagers show preschoolers around? Why not organize an exhibition of a contemporary artist inspired by Baroque art? Why not lend out works of art – maybe not the originals, but digital versions of them?

The questions an institution poses are signs of its vitality, authenticity, and understanding of its essence. The world around institutions is constantly changing, while they themselves are surrounded by a network of petrified injunctions and prohibitions. If institutions stop posing questions, they cease to carry out their basic function. Institutions should defend and respect the right to doubt. They should be aware, moreover, that this is their duty: to hesitate, explore, attempt, withdraw, and make several trial runs, always in a slightly different way. The profound essence of the cultural institution is to be forever facilitating dialogue, and this entails recognizing ignorance and

uncertainty as well as taking risks. Dialogue with the past and possible futures, dialogue with other cultures, dialogue with other points of view, or indeed a polyphony, to show how very complex our world is.

And when we have viewed the situation from a great many perspectives, then a choice has to be made. We must decide what is truly important to a society at a given moment. And begin to speak about it.



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# IS THE WORLD SIMPLE?

In 2002, *Cognitive Science* magazine ran an article with an innocuous title: “The misunderstood limits of folk science: An illusion of explanatory depth.” Social psychologists Leonid Rozenblit and Frank Keil described the results of a clever experiment: Participants were asked to evaluate how well they understood the operating mechanisms of certain devices with which they had experience. Why does a helicopter fly? How does a lock open? Most of the subjects believed they understood these mechanisms quite well. Yet, when they were asked to explain the principles by which the devices functioned, the task proved surprisingly difficult – after the experiment, most of the subjects rated their knowledge as far lower than before. Rozenblit and Keil called this phenomenon the “illusion of explanatory depth.” The results of their experiment confirmed the conclusions of a series of previous studies: Our tendency is to significantly overestimate our knowledge of the world.<sup>1</sup>

A little over a decade later, Rozenblit and Keil’s experiment had a curious extension. A group of scholars conducted a similar study, but with one crucial difference. Instead of mechanical devices they used “hot” political topics: sanctions against Iran, pushing back the age of retirement, changes in health care laws or tax laws. Much as with the helicopter or the lock, the subjects declared they understood the issues fairly well – after all, they had heard about them

in the media and had probably quarreled about them on several occasions in the office or at the dinner table. Yet, when they were asked to explain the various issues, just as in the original experiment, their difficulties in sharing responses led them to rationally doubt their competence.

But this is only the beginning of an interesting story. It turned out that the necessity of grappling with multi-aspectual problems not only reduced their (erroneous) convictions in their competencies, but it also (and far more importantly) lowered the level of political polarization measured by various indicators. Confronted with the complexity of the issues, people were less convinced of their own correctness, more inclined to discussion, and less deprecating of those on the other side of the fence. Polarization was further reduced by the necessity of a “mechanistic” explanation of the phenomena in question, without falling back on conventional political justifications tied to party adherence or values.

What does this mean? Political polarization feeds off our conviction that the world is simple. The authors of the study suggest that “political debate might be more productive if partisans first engaged in a substantive and mechanistic discussion of policies before engaging in the more customary discussion of preferences and positions.”<sup>2</sup>

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In recent years, in Poland and other countries where this sort of research is carried out, political polarization has

been rising at an alarming rate. Studies show that we increasingly consider people of opposing views as evil or stupid; that we are increasingly susceptible to “package thinking” – accepting or discarding arguments depending on what side of the political spectrum they come from. (In the USA, the power of political bias now surpasses the negative emotions generated by race or sexual orientation.<sup>3</sup>) There are many reasons for this state of affairs. The most important ones include the structure of communication foisted upon us by social media, promoting sensationalist content that is simplified, antagonizing, and using a language of moral outrage.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, the above research clearly suggests that the root of political polarization is the false conviction that we perfectly understand how the world works. Thus, if political polarization feeds off the illusion of explanatory depth, then the most effective way of combating it is organizing public spaces around rules of debate that encourage stopping, reflecting, and challenging what we know – or what we think we know. This means it is a flawed and harmful notion that, in a state of war, reflection is a luxury we cannot afford, and that cultural institutions have to stand up strongly for what is good or bad.

# A LUXURY WE CANNOT AFFORD

I have been studying political polarization for many years. When I say that we must work to change the rules of the game, to consciously rethink our system of communication, and, above all, to have the courage to raise topics beyond the sphere of current politics, I generally hear that these are pipe dreams. That in our day we have no time to stop and reflect. That there will be plenty of time for that when we've won. That respect is weakness. That understanding your opponent is a luxury we cannot afford when there's a war on and "they" aren't playing by the rules. That the situation is an exceptional one.

Meanwhile, there's always a war going on, and the situation is always somehow exceptional. A sense of "moral superiority" or even "righteousness" could turn out to be a terrible compass. Respect for other people's opinions and attitudes is not merely a magnanimous ethical frill to help us feel better. Respect for those with whom we disagree is a key tool in fighting for what is important to us. Rooting out bad ideas from "our side" and noticing good ones on "theirs" does not mean betraying our values, it means striving to evaluate the content of the dispute while minimizing the input of emotions and convictions tied to political affiliation.

This is why, if efficiency is important to us, we must all the more ask ourselves not only about our place on the map of

the present debate, but above all about our stance toward the phenomenon of polarization as such. We should not go with the flow of public debate, but consciously shape it. Cultural institutions can have a hand in this, working on a deeper level of debate and under slightly looser time constraints than the media or politicians. This is what makes them important and necessary.

Political polarization draws its strength from appeasing our fundamental need for order. The competition between political camps makes us live in a simple world, one where everything has its significance and its place in a comprehensible structure. This need is fulfilled by myths, which means we can safely say, in an anthropological sense, that political polarization is a mythological structure, a scattered tale in which we believe and which explains the world. Cultural institutions need not agree to be pawns in this game. They have the power to help create myths. They can change how we see the world. This does not mean we are constantly confronted with reality in all its complexity, but that its simplification is carried out in a conscious manner.

To explore new territory, we need an intelligently drawn map – if it were made on a 1:1 scale, it would be useless. A good map does not attempt to show everything at once. Yet it does give us a notion of the complexity of the world and tell us how little we know about it. It should be constantly updated, because the world is changing faster than ever before. It should be adapted to our needs and expectations, not limited to showing us what we already know.

If we want to change the world, and not just be changed by it, we need to create these kinds of maps. A lack of reflection upon the rules of the game is a luxury we cannot afford.

# CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AS A TOOL FOR THE INTELLIGENT SIMPLIFICATION OF THE WORLD

Cultural institutions are not an ornament; the icing on the cake; a refined accessory. On the contrary, they are a society's deepest infrastructure. Culture is the bedrock of education; the heart of a delicate network of social trust; out of it grows business and industry, even heavy industry. This is because cultural institutions support and pass on intermediary models and scenarios in simplifying and explaining the world. American anthropologist Ruth Benedict said, "No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking."<sup>5</sup> Institutions are bearers of what Benedict called "patterns of culture." The social simplification of the world takes on special significance in our present reality, in which each of us, every day, confronts a chaotic mess of stimuli, interactions with new people, and participation in global systems of dependency.<sup>6</sup>

Various forms of social solidarity, described in sociology since the days of Émile Durkheim, are based on synchronizing ways of thinking – sharing certain conceptions or

participating in particular rituals. Following up on Durkheim, Maurice Halbwachs showed that, among these conceptions, special significance goes to agreement on visions of the past. We might expand his reflections to include images of the future. Social frameworks are just as important as the social memory frameworks Halbwachs described. We might say we all look, remember, plan, speak, and think through institutions – this is why it is so important to tend to how institutions “think.”

Some difficulty in describing this mechanism comes from the fact that, in cultural and social studies, the term “cultural institutions” can have two meanings. Firstly, cultural institutions are established norms and ways of proceeding (such as the institution of marriage, language, and art); secondly, they are concrete agencies organizing cultural activities (such as the Museum of Ceramics in Bolesławiec). I will be focusing on cultural institutions in this second, narrower sense, yet I am interested in the functions they serve on the first level, i.e., structuring societies by simplifying reality. Though these two meanings may engender confusion, we should pay attention to them, as the tension between two dimensions of cultural institutions’ social operations would seem to be key to understanding both the dangers lurking in wait for institutions in a polarized world and ways of actively opposing polarization.

Both these meanings can be grasped perfectly from a semiotics perspective, for which cultural institutions are machines producing significance. The aim of their existence is to synchronize individuals’ efforts by setting prin-

ciples of cooperation. We might say that institutions in this first sense are rules of correctness (part of *langue*), and in the second sense are *texts* made according to those rules (part of *parole*). In the former understanding, we have dictionaries or grammar textbooks; in the latter, particular books or statements. In the first sense they establish a code through which communication will proceed; in the second, they generate specific messages.

Crucially, the very process of communicating within a structure, regardless of the contents, serves to uphold the structure and authenticate its rules. Every sentence spoken in the Polish language upholds its existence. Every program broadcast and watched on television enhances the significance of television as a medium. Aside from the content, the act of communicating passes on the code, building links or even trust between the two sides, enabling and permitting further communication. New content is always added on the basis of what has been agreed. The role of the cultural institution is thus to simplify the world and facilitate communication by ensuring a base understanding between participants in social life. This comes with essential limitations, for, as Umberto Eco writes in *The Open Work*, “the larger the amount of information, the more difficult its communication; the clearer the message, the smaller the amount of information.”<sup>7</sup>

Does this not contradict our previous assertions about the illusion of explanatory depth? If the role of the cultural institution is to simplify the world, then is it not always on the side of polarization? It is not. Institutions are

mechanisms by which society controls the simplification to which it will consent. In other words, it is institutions that regulate the actual explanatory depth in various spheres of life, channeling the collective conversation and emotions, managing cognitive resources. Of course, this is performed by institutions in the first sense, conceived as rules of the game. Yet the secret here is they have no material existence – they only exist through institutions in the second sense. The rules of the game in the art world emerge from the sum of the actions of artists, critics, and galleries; in politics they come from those of MPs, PR specialists, and ordinary voters; capitalism establishes them through the actions of the large brands, but also through distribution networks, consumers, etc. This means the rules of the game are not written in a separate handbook or dictionary; they emerge through thousands of tiny decisions we make every day.

Perceiving this dual nature of our cultural institution leads to the discovery that in disputes, plans, and actions what is at stake is never just “our museum” or “our library,” but the definition of a museum or library in given society. Cultural institutions carry out their jobs, running classes, organizing exhibitions, activating local communities, but also always fight to set the principles by which the rules of the game will proceed in the field of culture. That is not a matter of choosing between “doing our job” and “doing politics.” We should push for rules of the game that put “doing one’s job” at the heart of politics. “The key issue is therefore not a conflict between ‘instrumental’ versus ‘intrinsic’ values,” concludes Mark O’Neill, an experienced

organizer of cultural life and professor at the University of Glasgow, “but how expert institutions make their specialist contribution and at the same time foster the well-being of society as a whole.”<sup>8</sup>

It is on this level precisely that political polarization acquires special meaning, given that institutions from various sides compete to define the rules of the game. Politics (conceived as a dispute between parties) tries to subsume fields of culture; from one point of view, this could strike the institution as attractive. Crossing into the terrain of politics and playing according to its rules lets our museum, gallery, or theater do important things, so long as we accept an external definitions of what is important and we make the attempt to play for high stakes. This stance is easy to defend. We shouldn't be afraid of politics – after all, we have a duty to speak up, even on behalf of those who have no voice.

All this is true. But only in terms of content. And how do things look with regard to the rules of the game? Do we create institutions that uphold the illusion of explanatory depth, or ones that shatter it, confronting the public with the new and unexpected? Do we create spaces that will allow us to recognize how big and complicated the world is; how much of it we do not know? Are we simplifying the reality intelligently – in other words, consciously, controlling the reduction process – or is it the other way round: Is reality simplifying us, pressing us into molds, reducing us to pawns on a game board over whose shape we have no control? Do we have the courage not only to win, but

also to stand up for our participation in establishing the rules of the game?

### *He who is not with us is against us?*

The situation of the speaking subject alters the reception of the message. Who is speaking? From what position? What is the weight and range of their voice? Does the message come from a superior (and is thus an order) or from a subordinate (thus being at most a suggestion)? Is the institution speaking “one of ours” or “alien,” “trustworthy” or “suspect”?

From this perspective, political polarization emerges as a key structure organizing the public debate, making us prone to slot every conveying subject into one of two camps or in the increasingly narrow group of subjects striving to maintain neutrality. This sort of polarization may also, and increasingly does, concern the cultural institution.

Military metaphors for the work of cultural institutions (“captured,” “conquered,” “lost,” “fought back,” etc.) have a long tradition in Poland, connected to a lack of sovereignty. “Fights for truth” or “battles over memory” are always being waged; opening museums is sometimes called an “operation.”<sup>9</sup> It would also be easy to give a historical explanation for the popularity of the narrative of “retrieval”; it suggests another takeover after an “appropriation,” restoring a desirable state of equilibrium. Examples of such expressions over the past years or even months are

legion. Here are a few terms that have recurred in the media: “war over the Museum of the Second World War,” “conflict over the director of POLIN,” “battle for the Centre for Contemporary Art”<sup>10</sup>...

“War,” “battle,” “conquest,” or “recapture” might pertain to particular institutions, or even works, as well as more abstract issues, such as control over a narrative, dignity, or political agency. In a polarized society, whenever we speak from the standpoint of the custodian of values, a cultural institution either “belongs to us,” expressing and upholding our image of the world, or it “belongs to them.” Whoever is not with us is against us.

In this context, the phenomenon of “false friends” strikes me as particularly dangerous – the media or politicians playing advocates of one side or the other with no real interest in the substance of the debate. My analysis of the press reception of the debate around the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and Museum of the Second World War suggests, despite the growing media attention around these two cases, the amount of space given to the content of their operations is shrinking. In the periods of most intense debate, the only information that trickled down to the public concerned the struggle for the institutions.<sup>11</sup> A simplified and polarized vision of the world utterly obliterated what either museum had to say about history. In reporting the dispute over POLIN, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Newsweek* stood behind the man who had served as director of the museum, but spent far more time criticizing the Minister of Culture for refusing

to give the post to the candidate who won the competition than describing the successes of the institution under the director whose contract was terminated. In speaking of the quality of the original Museum of the Second World War exhibition, the supportive media confined itself to clichés and citing the opinions of foreign professors. In this way, cultural institutions lose their subjectivity and are reduced to rocks to be thrown at political opponents.

Though sometimes it may be tempting to speak up for one side or the other, we ought to resist. Or at least think up other positions that a cultural institution might occupy in a field where the two sides are separated by a wall of political polarization.

# WHAT OPTIONS DO WE HAVE?

What stances might be taken by cultural institutions in a politically polarized field? Below I give a spectrum of opportunities before us, starting with variants in which the cultural institution is the object in a dispute, and moving through those where it becomes its subject, actively creating the content, reformulating the rules of the game and dismantling the illusion of explanatory depth in a thorough-going analysis of reality.

Of course, we need not settle on one option once and for all. In various aspects of its work, an institution may choose various positions. It is important this choice is conscious and considered. At the same time, I encourage shifting “downward” as far as possible in this catalog of approaches, as I suspect it is in these understandings of the roles of cultural institutions that there are new, untapped, and still unacknowledged opportunities for action.

## *1. Joining one of the camps*

In this model, the cultural institution is an advocate for one of the political camps. The philosophy behind such a decision says: “Faced with conflict, we should not be afraid to step up and express our views. We should stand beside those who are right.” The basic advantage in adopting

this model is the opportunity to make use of a preexisting infrastructure that controls the stream of attention, support, and money. A museum supported by the government can rely on easier access to grants; a museum that builds its identity on opposition to the government can, in turn, rely on the support of those who want to weaken or overthrow it. Openly declaring support for one camp can be a powerful advertisement; an audience visiting “their” theater or gallery knows what to expect, and keeps their eyes peeled for allusions.

In choosing this option, the illusion of explanatory depth works in favor of institutions, which need not explain the world to their audiences, as they use ready-made cognitive patterns that are well established in the collective imagination. The critical potential of the cultural institution is turned against the “enemy” camp, while “debunking” or “deconstructing” mythologies always turns out to be a way of reinforcing a preferred mythology.

In considering this possibility, we ought to go beyond a “self-evident” vision of the cultural institution as a passive exponent of the ideology of one political camp, a tool for communicating certain values or even propaganda. Cultural institutions can, after all, serve as local or national think tanks, where new ideas are developed and values transformed into projects. We need not consent to politicians governing museums. Museums themselves can actively create an inspiring agenda for politicians.<sup>12</sup>

## *2. Standing in between*

This model, which today's journalists often describe as "symmetrism," hinges on the conviction that institutions ought to level out the political conflict. An advantage to this approach is the chance to critique many political camps without unambiguous committal to any of them. This provides a sense (or illusion) of objectivity.

A drawback to this solution is an attachment to a simplified and often erroneous cognitive model that says the truth is somewhere in between. "The-truth-is-in-betweenness" is particularly dangerous in debates over positions that are essentially unequal in terms of content, such as those tied to science and communicating its findings, and especially with the social perception of risk. Issues like the anthropogenic nature of global warming or the advantages of mass vaccination programs are, on the one hand, subjects of general scientific consensus, and, on the other, causes of widespread skepticism and anxiety, which are potent fuel for politics. We might make similar objections to xenophobic content based on hatred, prejudices, etc. In such cases, maintaining a "central position" means giving equal credence to fundamentally unbalanced sides.

Yet there are ways of allowing various voices to resound so as not to create the illusion of their equivalence: placing statements in a context, requiring that sources be cited, etc. We should work on them. Undoubtedly, it is a weighty task, deciding who to give voice and on what grounds –

cultural institutions should not ignore this duty in the name of a misplaced sense of openness to all.

### *3. The third way*

Another model involves carrying out the dream of the “third power,” which sets us free from polarization conceived as a duopoly. For several years, the ideal expression of this fantasy on the European scene has been Emmanuel Macron, whom many politicians in other countries would like to emulate.

A contemporary rendition of the idea of the “third way” links a few concepts. Firstly, the world has changed, and the old political system no longer works. Secondly, the essence of the old world was “alternating politics” (duopoly), as well as “the same faces and the same people who have been around for so many years.”<sup>13</sup> Happily, however – this is the third point – people are wiser than politicians and can choose to change. The essential difference between this model and the centrist “in between stance” has been perfectly expressed by Ismaël Emelien, one of Macron’s closest collaborators: “Our task was not to stand in between; to create a new, radical center. Being in the center means, by definition, to position oneself in response to others. We reject this. We do not want to be centrists.”<sup>14</sup>

In the version for cultural institutions, the vision of the “third way” involves condemning politicians and longing to create a new quality by taking a step back from the ongoing

debates. As with our first model, we should stress the role of cultural institutions as potential think tanks, which may give rise to ideas which inspire new political movements. Although this stance toward polarization would seem to be firmly rooted in active politics, the “third way” option could also adopt the narrative of the “apolitical” cultural institution. After all, the dream that Emmanuel Macron so effectively offered the French (for the time being, at least) was of politics-free politics! This is a dream that could swiftly become a nightmare in reality. In the public space, total freedom from politics could only be achieved by retreating into private life and refusing to speak one’s mind on pressing issues. Yet we can imagine a (greater) freedom of the cultural institution from politicians. And this dream is surely worth pursuing.

#### *4. The mediator*

This model is focused on agreement. It considers the original sin in politics to be the shattering of unity – breaking up a community originally meant to be based on consensus. This is, of course, a classic example of imagining a paradise lost, characterized by the fact that it is long gone – it exists only as an ideal state projected onto the past. A perfect community based on a national consensus has never existed, and for this no politician is to blame.

Although a total understanding is (fortunately) impossible to achieve, the institution as a mediator might play a vital and positive role in a highly polarized public sphere.

The mediator creates a safe space in which the sides of the conflict can meet, express their opinions, and listen to one another. They also have a set of tools for facilitating communication and achieving a rapport. The mediator demonstrates their neutrality, criticizing neither side for their involvement in the debate (this distinguishes the mediator's approach from the "third way"). Their work to a large extent deals with rules, not messages.

Trying to ease the conflict, or at least to manage it in a way that brings more benefit than harm, the mediator helps either side reformulate their statements and recognize their unconscious aims and interests. Many opportunities also come from the search for various realms of satisfaction. Apart from the substantive satisfaction resulting from achieving one's goal in a conflict situation, the satisfaction might also be emotional (Was I heard out? Was I treated with respect?) or procedural (Do I understand what just happened? Were the principles for resolving the conflict transparent?). The creation of a space for the losers to be heard and appreciated, in which the sides will be able to confront not only one another but also the rules of the dispute itself, is an important and ambitious task for a cultural institution. Perhaps one of the most important tasks in a democracy is creating spaces of satisfaction for those who consider themselves to be losers and do not feel represented by the present government. If there are no such spaces, each subsequent election will lead to a cold civil war.

The role of culture in managing conflicts has long been recognized and appreciated, particularly in the realms of

international relations and studies on ethnic relations.<sup>15</sup> Yet scholars mainly focus on cultural institutions' involvement in disputes directly tied to interpreting cultural heritage or healing trauma, stressing the necessity of leaving room for interpretation, multiple narratives, and active work with local communities.<sup>16</sup> This reflection can surely be extended to the everyday activities of cultural institutions that play a key role in the life of communities of varying sizes. The space of mediation can take the form of intelligently moderated debates between adherents of various views, but also workshops, educational activities, and art or museum exhibitions – as long as the polyphony they involve is moderated to stress harmony and encourage a search for a community of experience.

### *5. The guardian of the rules*

The guardian of the rules model takes the mediator model to the next level: the cultural institution still operates as a place where various viewpoints collide, but its value is less agreement (“national consensus”) than the coexistence of diversity. The aim is not to supply a language to facilitate agreement, but to find a language that can describe the conflict.

A fine example of this approach is the idea of the “difficult past” at the core of many memorial museums.<sup>17</sup> A theoretical guide to this vision of a cultural institution could be Michael Rothberg’s concept of “multidirectional memory,” while the opposite standpoint is found in Jean-

Michel Chaumont's "competition of victims,"<sup>18</sup> in which the multiplicity of narratives is put forward only to force the audience to take sides. The first approach posits looking at a single phenomenon from many points of view and letting a polyphonic narrative ring out. The second is based on competing perspectives, pointing out that one side must have suffered more, be more in the right, be morally correct, and so on.

"Competitive memory," writes Rothberg, "is a notion of the public sphere as a pregiven, limited space in which already-established groups engage in a life-and-death struggle. In contrast, pursuing memory's multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others: both the subjects and the spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction."<sup>19</sup>

The institution as a mediator focused on mollifying the conflict; the institution as a guardian builds the rules for the peaceful coexistence of diversity. Here we might speak of a process of "civilizing" the dispute, which the work of the institution gives a cultural framework for expression.

## ***6. Redefining the political***

The last model – the most directed toward reworking the rules of the game – focuses on redefining the political by

introducing new topics. It presupposes active participation in current politics, but by proposing new rules of the game, it primarily prompts reflection upon the things we say.

There are undoubtedly political topics that should be non-political, since there is no conceivable solution, and debating them will never be productive. Yet another question seems more important: What topics are presently non-political because they do not exist in the collective consciousness?

Our polarized political scene is increasingly dictated by polls and focus groups suggesting that “the voters don’t want that” or “viewers are not interested.” Meanwhile, frequently a lack of “need” for this or that issue in politics comes from a lack of public awareness that it exists. Here we find a field for the cultural institution, which could mark out new horizons.

The vision of time that prevails in politics surely requires expanding or reformulating. One can work on a spectrum of attitudes toward the past, presently serving as prime fodder for political dispute, but also on the future, which ought to return to its key role in the collective imagination. Cultural institutions should be places for holding debates from perspectives that go beyond the immediacy often constricting politics and business, and thus beyond the threshold of a few-year term or annual shareholders’ reports.

It is equally essential to chart new spatial horizons. As part of their mission, cultural institutions working on a state

or national level may ask: What are the state and nation today? What should be the relationship between them? Local institutions, in turn, should grapple with new definitions of locality and globality in today's highly complex world. One option opening up interesting possibilities is glocality, which involves cultural institutions reaching out to one another over the heads of national governments.

Finally, there are new social horizons. In our day, cultural institutions must ask themselves again, with renewed vigor, to whom they are really addressed. Digital media create new forms of immediacy and spaces for new social interactions. This means they open up whole new opportunities for wider audiences well beyond wealthy urban areas to encounter the works or accomplishments of great artists, leaving behind the vicious circle of reproducing cultural capital. The same mechanism might also work in reverse: cultural institutions can give the floor to those who have had no voice in the public space – people whose fears, concerns, and dreams have no outlet, or are known only in their closest circles. New media allow cultural institutions not only to reach out to *specific audiences* who have been denied access to many goods, but also in forging and strengthening local interpretive *communities*.

There is no better way to upset the illusion of exploratory depth than by confronting what is different from us. But how to create platforms whose users will really want to encounter something unlike themselves? How to counteract the magnetic appeal of filtering bubbles, which are, in our day, a major source of political polarization?

Why should someone want to confront a different point of view, given that one already has a choir of voices all saying exactly what one wishes to hear?

Narrowing the field of politics in certain places and expanding it into others could be a fundamental role of cultural institutions. It could also restore their subjectivity. Cultural institutions should not only take the floor, but they should also decide what is being spoken about. Paradoxically, this assumption of taking the task of defining the rules of the game from the hands of politicians could have a very positive effect on politics itself! At present, politics is presently perceived as a self-absorbed domain, a dirty affair that comes down to a play of private interests. The slogan “we don’t do politics, we build bridges” remains in currency. Yet cultural institutions need not fear politics: they have the power to remind us that politics can – and even *should* – be vital. That bridges should be the most political of issues, inspiring debate, argument, and even conflict. For only the important things are worth arguing about. Let us not trust those who say that oncology should be a sphere of consensus, beyond all dispute. Let us trust those who remind us every day that we ought not to waste time debating anything else.

# FROM VALUES TO METAVALUES

We have grown accustomed to thinking that politics based on values is inherently good. Values guarantee permanence and integrity; they serve as a moral compass by which politicians and voters can make their choices. The fundamental problem with values, however, is that they are non-negotiable. Politics based on values is thus the politics of unresolvable conflict.

This is brilliantly described by Michał Paweł Markowski in his *Wojny nowoczesnych plemion* (War of the Modern Tribes): “Placing the source of a political conflict in the sphere of eternal values and anti-values is a maneuver which essentially eliminates human agency, reducing it to playing out a ‘time-honored pattern’.”<sup>20</sup> This is why we should move from a politics of values to a politics of interpretation, based on a social negotiation of meanings. “Truth is not an issue of revelation or faith, it is what society decides it is: until we begin considering it this way, we shall share nothing in this world. But to negotiate the conditions of coexistence, we must possess a certain skill that is crucial to functioning in the modern world. This skill is interpretation.”<sup>21</sup>

Interpretation could indeed turn out to be a key to redefining politics! Interpretation is not the art of guessing “what the author had in mind,” and it is certainly not a test

of one's charisma and skill at imposing one's reading of a text on others. It is a test of our convictions: In the text we are discussing, can we find proof to back up what we say? Thus conceived, the art of interpretation is a call to discard the illusion of explanatory depth and confront the complexity of reality. It corresponds to what the creators of the experiment with the helicopter and the lock called a "mechanistic" explanation.

The key to moving from a non-negotiable situation to a negotiable one is shifting the discourse from a dispute about *who is right* to a dispute about *where our sense of being right comes from*. To use a schoolroom example: instead of asking which poem is more beautiful, we should ask what we consider to be the criteria for beauty.

Paul Tough, the author of the popular book *How Children Succeed*, presents the results of research demonstrating that an important factor in young people's development is shaping their metacognitive abilities; not teaching them various facts, but how to learn as such. Persistence and understanding the processes of remembering and forgetting are crucial in educating young people, as is the knowledge of how tests and exams are structured – and an awareness of social expectations is a vital step toward meeting these expectations.<sup>22</sup>

Analogously, with regard to the cultural institution we might speak of the necessity of moving from a politics of values to a politics of meta-values, focused on analyzing and conscious co-creating of the rules that organize public

debate. Instead of a school that teaches that Juliusz Słowacki “was a great poet,” we need a school that poses a range of questions to problematize this quote: What are the national canons of literature for? How are they built? How do they change over time? How did Słowacki earn his place in the Polish national pantheon? Only this kind of school will allow us to truly appreciate Słowacki and understand what it really means that he was a great poet.

Instead of museums that give us facts like “Casimir the Great joined Red Ruthenia to Poland in 1340,” we should demand ones that prompt us to ask our own questions about those facts. Why ought we to know this date? How did historians establish it? Why is it important, and for whom? This shift from the sphere of values to the sphere of meta-values could concern all realms of public debate or political art. Instead of – or perhaps alongside? – cultural institutions fighting to defend life as soon as it is conceived or to uphold a woman’s right to decide about her own body, we need institutions that will allow us to rethink the rules of the debate over physicality and subjectivity, the limits of individual freedom or the construction of gender identities in contemporary culture.



***LET US GO FROM SIMPLE TO COMPLEX  
AND BACK AGAIN***

Let us recall that the world is complex and simplify it once more. Let us not support the illusion of explanatory depth; let us expose it. We should take special care to

show what makes the structure of the present political disputes.

● *LET US SHIFT FROM “SPEAKING ABOUT  
WHAT IS IMPORTANT”  
TO UNDERSTANDING THAT  
“IT IS IMPORTANT WHAT WE TALK ABOUT”*

Cultural institutions should inspire us; mark out new fields of debate – they can be a space for breaking through the dictatorship of the hasty judgment and the inertia of the media that “discuss what is being discussed.”

● *LET US MOVE FROM CREATING FARMS  
OF THINKING TO CREATING  
FORMS OF THINKING*

Internet “like farms” operate on a basic principle: they breed support through sheer affirmation. To gain our attention, they tell us exactly what we would like to hear, then they sell us paid content skillfully woven amid what amuses, pleases, or incenses us. This reinforces the bubbles on which polarization is based, drawing immeasurable benefits from it. The polarized political media have been reduced to this role, as have more and more cultural institutions, recognizing that their mission is, above all, to take one side or the other. This means renouncing the greatest power cultural institutions may have – the power to form the collective imagination.

Shifting the role of the cultural institution toward actively helping to create the rules of the game in no way means ceasing to struggle for what is important to us. On the contrary – it is only this move that will make the struggle effective! Digging in one's trenches and wallowing in a sense of moral superiority leads to neither defeating nor convincing one's opponents.

The form of politics is its content. If we want a better world, we must seek better methods of political struggle. Cultural institutions that seek to change the world must fight not to win the game, but to change its rules.

## NOTES:

- 1 Leonid Rozenblit, Frank Keil, “The Misunderstood Limits of Folk Science: An Illusion of Explanatory Depth,” *Cognitive Science* 2002, Volume 26(5), pp. 521–62.
- 2 Philip M. Fernbach, Todd Rogers, Craig R. Fox, Steven A. Sloman, “Political Extremism Is Supported by an Illusion of Understanding,” *Psychological Science* 2013, Volume 24(6), p. 935.
- 3 See: Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, Yphtach Lelkes, “Affect, Not Ideology. A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2012, Volume 76(3), pp. 405–31.
- 4 See: Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, Princeton 2018; Roger McNamee, *Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe*, New York 2019.
- 5 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, New York 1960, p. 18.
- 6 See: Steen Bergendorff, *Simple Lives, Cultural Complexity: Rethinking Culture in Terms of Complexity Theory*, Lexington Books 2009.
- 7 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni, Cambridge 1989, p. 57.
- 8 Mark O’Neill, “Museums, Professionalism and Democracy,” *Cultural Trends* 2008, Volume 17(4), pp. 289–307.
- 9 See, for example: Jacek Zygmunt Sawicki, *Bitwa o praw-dę: historia zmagania o pamięć Powstania Warszawskiego 1944–1989*, Warsaw 2005; Agnieszka Sopińska-Jaremczak, *Operacja Muzeum*, Warsaw 2014;

Renata Kobylarz, *Walka o pamięć: polityczne aspekty obchodów rocznicy powstania w getcie warszawskim 1944–1989*, Warsaw 2009.

- 10 “Spór o dyrektora POLIN: ministerstwo kultury odpowiada na oświadczenie Dariusza Stoli,” Onet.pl, 11.02.2020, <https://bit.ly/3ql9A3m> (accessed: 30.03.2020); “*The New York Times* zaniepokojony sytuacją w warszawskim CSW. ‘Kolejne pole bitwy w polskich wojnach kulturowych’,” Gazeta.pl, 10.01.2012, <https://bit.ly/37MTRE1> (accessed: 30.03.2020).
- 11 See: Marcin Napiórkowski, *Turbopatriotyzm*, Wołowiec 2019.
- 12 See: Michał Łuczewski, “Kontrr rewolucyjne pojęcie. ‘Polityka historyczna’ w Polsce,” *Stan Rzeczy* 2016, no. 10, pp. 221–57.
- 13 Emmanuel Macron, *Revolution*, trans. Jonathan Goldberg, London 2016, p. 5.
- 14 Quoted from: Sophie Pedder, *Revolution Française: Emmanuel Macron and the Quest to Reinvent a Nation*, New York 2018.
- 15 See: Kevin Avruch, *Culture & Conflict Resolution*, Washington D.C. 1998.
- 16 See, for example: Simona Bodo, “Museums as Intercultural Spaces,” in *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, edited by Richard Sandell, Eithne Nightingale, New York 2012, pp. 181–91.
- 17 See: Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, New York 2007.
- 18 See: Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes: génocide, identité, reconnaissance*, Paris 2017.

- 19 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford 2009, p. 6.
- 20 Michał Paweł Markowski, *Wojny nowoczesnych plemion: spór o rzeczywistość w epoce populizmu*, Krakow 2019.
- 21 Ibid., p. 13.
- 22 See: Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed*, Boston 2013.

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**[Małopolska Institute of Culture in Krakow,**  
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Three words describe us in short:  
Region, React, Rethink!

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