

Listening to the State: Culture, Power, and Cultural Policy in Colombia

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The cultural studies project of textual deconstruction is partially based on a high valuation of the political importance of uncovering the power agendas in discursive formations.¹ Struggles against conditions of inequity as varied as feminism in different parts of the world or the transformation of oppressive class conditions in Latin America have often been based on the idea that a new politics of naming will bring about a transformation in the politics of identity and consequently in the practices that determine power structures. But under certain historical conditions and in specific institutional contexts the disjuncture between a politics of naming, new practices of representation and identity, and the emergence of new conditions of equity that this new naming is supposed to bring about, becomes painfully evident.

Latin American intellectuals in cultural studies (and other fields as well)² often have a role as mediators between critical discourse and the practice of the transformation of political structures through participation in NGOs, governmental committees or programs, involvement in development of public policy, or even assuming public office. This fluidity between a discourse on knowledge and public institutions is not new in Latin America, as founding figures of the nations have often played the role of leading figures in the history of Latin American thought (Ramos 1989; Von der Walde 1997). What is new is trying to bring together that dimension of critical discourse which opens the way for assuming “different or even divergent interpretations, escaping the need for substantive and closed definitions” (Telles 1994: 50) within an institutional framework or at an historical moment which demands the making of decisions that have historically been based on substantive definitions. It is one thing to deconstruct a text at the level of the symbolic; but applying these deconstructions to a daily praxis makes visible, as a quotidian work ethic, the complex locus of cultural policy as a matter of both institutional (administrative, legal, financial) and cultural (expressive, fluid, mobile) dimensions in the midst of societies characterized by a “contradictory and unfinished modernity” (García Canclini 1989). This confronts us with the difference between engaging with cultural politics solely

at the level of the symbolic, that is as “disembodied struggles over meanings and representations” (Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar 1998: 5) – which we often do as academics – versus engaging at the level where discourses and practices meet at a moment of profound redefinition of the public sphere in Latin America. It is the implication of this difference for the construction of critical thought regarding cultural policy in Latin America, that I want to explore in this chapter.

In 1997 I returned to Colombia from finishing my doctoral degree in the US and began working as an ethnomusicologist of the Music Archives of the Government’s office of culture, Colcultura. By 1998, all of the arts archives – Music, Theater, Dance, and Visual Arts – were united under one large conglomerate as Colcultura became the Ministry of Culture. I was offered and accepted the job as the head of these archives but quit the job in January 1999 largely due to frustration with inconsistent state administrative and bureaucratic practices. At that moment the Colombian Institute of Anthropology (then part of the Ministry of Culture), with the financial support of the Office of Regional Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and an Ibero-American NGO, the Convenio Andrés Bello, offered me the job of researching the effects of the major program of multiculturalism designed and promoted by the Ministry, a job I eventually accepted, not without hesitation. The transformation from the role of administrator to that of researcher entailed a transition in my mode of existence within the power structure of the Ministry of Culture that demanded a new form of listening to the complaints that characterize people’s involvement with bureaucratic structures. And this transition made evident the difficulties of mediating between academic discourse and cultural policy even in an institution (and at a historical moment) which has invited the active participation of critical intellectuals in policy-making. The (dis)juncture between critical studies and cultural policy in Colombia is quite revealing about both the institutional and historical determinants of “cultural studies” in Latin America and about the problems of building bridges between critical perspectives and democratization processes through cultural policy. The question that emerged as research progressed was what is the role of the researcher in public institutions that are increasingly defining “culture” through policy programs – from national ministries to international forums such as UNESCO? The question demands not solely the deconstruction of the uses of culture in public arenas but also a decentering of labor relations and of our role as academics in an increasingly interinstitutional sphere of work. I will begin by contextualizing historically the emergence of culture (especially cultural diversity) as a central theme of public discourse in the past decade in Colombia.

Cultural Diversity as a National Agenda

During approximately the past 15 years in Colombia, “culture” has increasingly become an arena of political concern, inviting, on the one hand, the critical

reflection of scholars and, on the other, the design and implementation of new agendas of cultural policy from different governmental sectors, creating a complex field of interaction between both.³ This interaction became more explicit through the debates and forums that led to the process of writing the Constitution of 1991. This was done by an exceptionally participatory National Constitutional Assembly that included persons from different political parties, ex-guerrilla members recently reinserted into civilian society, leaders from the indigenous movement, Christian groups, scholars from different fields of the social sciences, among others. The new Constitution marked a radical departure in judicial, administrative, territorial, and cultural terms from the 1886 Constitution that, with numerous reforms, was in effect until 1991. The democratization process in Colombia during the past decade has involved the difficult and often contradictory implementation of legislative and administrative reforms that seek to enact the new mode of definition of the state named by the 1991 Constitution. Also, in 1997, under the auspices of the Samper government, the governmental office of cultural affairs, Colcultura, was replaced by the Ministry of Culture.

Both the rewriting of the Constitution and the creation of the Ministry of Culture generated, in their respective moments, academic events organized either by the state or jointly with universities and NGOs, as well as prolonged and heated controversies in the press concerning the relationship between culture, power, and the state.⁴ Much of the governmental cultural policy developed during the 1990s is derived from these discussions as well as from the engagement of professionals (scholars and artists) that had historically been involved with other types of participatory processes (such as social movements or alternative artistic explorations) in the design and implementation of new programs of cultural policy.

The processes of public debate and writing that led to the 1991 Constitution and the General Law of Culture of 1997, whereby the Ministry of Culture was created, named a new sphere of cultural politics that has been crucial in determining state cultural policy in effect in Colombia today. The principal transformations named by these documents are:

1. Article 7 of the Constitution officially declares Colombia as a “pluriethnic and multicultural nation,” radically transforming the relationship between nation and culture prevailing in the 1886 Constitution, namely that of “a mestizo nation in the process of whitening, united under one God and one race” (Wills 1999). As a consequence, the Ministry of Culture adopted in 1997, in Title I, Article 1 of the General Law of Culture, a (still) much-debated definition of culture as “the distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize human groups and that comprehends, beyond arts and letters, modes of life, human rights, systems of value, traditions and beliefs.” The political gesture that this definition invokes is that of relativization – the usage of a definition of culture that allows ample possibilities of inclusion, leads away

from a notion of culture as a specific domain of expressions (historically in Colombia, in the form of high culture or patrimony as certain accepted forms of folklore), and thus opens the way for a transformation in the way the link between expressive culture and the construction of society is established through cultural policy by the state. This is a radical departure not only from the 1886 Constitution but from Colombia's historical relation to valid cultural expressions, which was mainly that of exclusion due to grammarian presidents that at the turn of the century obsessively sought to determine correct forms of speaking and writing (Deas 1993). Thus, even though this notion of culture is a definition much critiqued by scholars and professionals engaged in cultural policy-making, we still have to recognize the change of cultural politics it makes possible.

2. Multiculturalism is seen as the cultural dimension of a process of decentralization of the state that is principally enacted through administrative, fiscal, and territorial reforms. As stated by historian Orlando Fals Borda, who is largely responsible for the territorial and cultural dimensions of the new constitution, administrative decentralization and territorial reorganization are basic processes for the recognition of the cultures and cultural expressions of regions previously excluded by a highly centralized state structure (Fals Borda 1996). The deployment of specific projects of cultural diversity from the sphere of the state during the past decade has partially been the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture. This has involved not only the implementation of programs that seek to recognize regional Colombian culture in different ways (through community radio programs and networks, educational projects based on regional artforms, construction of stages that make local cultures visible to the nation, local awards for research and creativity, etc.), but also an administrative restructuring of specific aspects (such as decentralization of some financial resources) of the Ministry.

3. The discussions leading to constitutional and legislative reforms, in tandem with mobilizations enacted by social movements and the growth of critical discourse on cultural politics in Colombia, have generated a public forum in which the idea of culture as an essential domain for the construction of a civil society and, ultimately, of a peace process, is clearly recognized. In other words, the interaction of academic critical discourse, legislative reforms, and the effects of the growth of social movements in Colombian society, has entailed a redefinition of the domain of political culture; that is, "of the particular social construction . . . of what counts as political" (Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar 1998: 8). Thus, not only the Ministry of Culture but the municipality of Bogotá as well, have sought to bring about the restructuring of civil society through cultural policy in a country highly fragmented by political violence and with one of the highest crime rates in the world (Franco 1999).⁵ What is in evidence, at least in the design of many of the programs, is an increasing awareness in the public sector of a notion of culture as a communicative process that permits the transformation of social relations through a new politics of identity and recognition. This has

implied a transformation in a general conception of cultural policy as an instrument solely designed for *bringing services and giving access* (culture, libraries, theaters, etc.) in the regions of Colombia to cultural policy as an instrument that can also be used primarily for transforming social relations through *recognition and support* of local cultures and values.

In Latin America the redefinition of the relationship between culture and politics as a restructuring of both meanings and specific practices has often been analyzed by theorists dealing with social movements. Increasingly these theorists have called attention to the way the discourses, practices, and demands of these movements “circulate in weblike, capillary fashion . . . in larger institutional and cultural arenas” (Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar 1998: 16). What is particularly significant about the Colombian case in relation to cultural policy has been the ways in which a new politics of culture is mobilized from within the state in articulation with discourses and practices of scholars, newspaper columnists, and professionals with different institutional or group affiliations, who are working on designing new agendas for policy-making. This points to the fact that public space is not an autonomous sphere but rather a “zone open to unanticipated forms of participation”; or at the very least to modes of articulation between different spheres (Yúdice 1994).

However, this aperture in terms of culture discourse in the Colombian state has occurred simultaneously with neoliberalization policies that have radically increased levels of poverty and unemployment and minimized the social responsibilities of the state. This at a time of drastic escalation of the armed conflict from all armed actors involved in the war, to the point that the very legitimacy of the state has been questioned. We thus have an exacerbation of extremes – implementation of democratization processes through cultural policy or other administrative and legal procedures, coupled with neoliberalization and escalation of armed conflict – that generates a complex public space “where projects and values [and forces in the case of Colombia] in dispute are set one against the other” (Telles 1994: 43). Thus the apparent (or real) conquests of social actors in redefining public spaces through a politics of recognition and identity exists in conflictive ways with economic and military practices whose ethical and political relation to society is moving in exactly the opposite direction. Moreover, all of this takes place within an administrative structure that, despite recent reforms, is still partially defined by the personalist and clientelist dimensions that have historically determined “an oligarchic conception of politics” in Latin America (Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar 1998: 9). What we have then is an unequal and disjunctive process of democratization that is particularly revealing of the problematic ways in which a politics of culture is differentially and fragmentarily deployed in the public space through the enactment of cultural policy. A process whose more profound political implications become evident in the quotidian experiences of designing and implementing cultural policy in such a context.

Critical Discourse in the Public Sphere

When I was offered the job of researching the major multicultural program in the Ministry, I felt myself literally standing at a crossroads. *CREA: An Expedition through Colombian Culture*, was a program implemented by the government between 1992 and 1998, which sought to “rescue, value, promote, and divulge our [Colombian] cultural manifestations throughout the national territory.”⁶ In practice, the program consisted primarily, although not exclusively, of a series of “cultural encounters,” that is, displays of local and regional Colombian culture that were successively staged at the municipal, departmental, regional, and finally “national” (which significantly stands for Bogotá, the capital) levels. The movement from the local to the national terrain involved a process of selection of cultural expressions that covered a wide variety of creative milieus – from culinary delicacies to video production – that were to represent the different regions of Colombia in the capital and, in the process, “invert the cultural flow from the center to the periphery that had historically characterized Colombia,” create a “culture of dialogue and tolerance” in a country torn apart by armed conflict, and construct the scenario for the “multicultural and plur-ethnic” nation defined by the recently drafted Constitution of 1991 (Jaramillo ca. 1992). By 1998, two complete cycles of CREA had taken place. The first began in 1992 and culminated in 1995 with a “national encounter” that brought 1,687 artists from the regions to Bogotá. Prior to this, there had been 102 intermunicipal encounters, 26 departmental, and 6 regional ones. The second cycle of CREA which ended in 1998, took place on August 4, 5, and 6, on the days prior to the possession of the recently elected government of Andrés Pastrana, thus marking CREA as a policy clearly associated to the Samper government which had actively promoted the creation of the Ministry of Culture as one of its vanguard policies in a government marked by scandal and corruption related to narcotraffic. The second cycle of CREA consisted of 150 intermunicipal, 26 departmental, and 4 regional encounters which culminated in Bogotá with the presence of 2,235 artists from different regions of Colombia.

The magnitude of CREA was unique in the history of Colombian cultural policy. The research involved major topics I had been interested in – the relationship between culture, power, and the state; the effects of cultural display; multiculturalism as democratization; the effects of displacement of local cultures; the relationship between culture and the peace process. What made me hesitate? Looking back a year and a half later, I realize the movement from Director of Artistic Archives of the Ministry of Culture to researcher of CREA involved a redefinition of my role within the power structure and implied a change in quotidian labor relations. That is, I went from being a competitor for attention from the high administrative offices in order to get financial resources and political space for mobilizing policy programs, to being a person who undertakes the exact same institutional field ethnographically and is being asked to come up

with a proposal for addressing the problems of a polemical program. One of the major reasons why the Ministry undertook the CREA research was because they did not know what to do with it. Some people thought the program was the best in the Ministry – it involved new participatory and democratic dimensions; others, that it was the worst – a space for the spectacularization and abuse of politics. I was being asked to be a mediator in this conflict through my research. This was not the classical move from “insider” to “outsider” so often cited in anthropological literature. This was a redefinition of my labor relations *within* the same institution. As I realize today, one of the major changes that took place was a redefinition of the mode of listening to the state, or to the daily problems of working in the public sphere.

I had to learn to listen to the complaints of my colleagues (and to my own dissatisfaction in working with the state) under a new light. This “new mode of listening” did not suddenly appear. It emerged throughout the year as I progressively established new forms of communicative relations determined largely by the fact that I was no longer a competitor in the power scheme of the Ministry. Two elements were crucial for this to take place during the research. One, I had a knowledge of the quotidian practice of public policy-making. I was aware of the coexistence of illogical administrative practices and personal favoritisms as well as sincere and knowledgeable efforts, on the part of many program directors, in designing and implementing policies that aimed at the construction of new democratic spaces from within their work positions. But I had to go beyond the frustrating tautological logic that often permeates bureaucracy and its accompanying scheme of complaints (Herzfeld 1992) and listen to my colleagues and my own frustration with the state in a new way. It was not just a matter of denouncing unjust administrative practices. It was a matter of locating the contradictory relations between a “culture of politics and a politics of culture” in the quotidian interaction of practices and discourses within the specific work sphere of the Ministry. Second, my new role as a researcher made me a relative outsider, but “insiders” knew who I was and related to me as a person located within the Ministry. It was clear that even though I had the responsibility of the research, we were all in the business of trying to handle the contradictions of thinking and implementing cultural policy programs.

The research agenda was partially designed with what I already knew. The Ministry is structured as a series of areas (*Direcciones*) each of which has major divisions which carry out a variety of programs. This structure was largely inherited from Colcultura. Although new areas were created (cinematography, for example) and others changed with the creation of the Ministry, hierarchies of work remained largely the same. The most important areas through which policy programs are deployed include Arts, Communications, Youth and Infancy, Regional Development, Patrimony, Awards and Scholarships.⁷ As is obvious by this list, the criteria for creating areas vary from one to the other: in one case it is population (Infancy and Youth), in another territory (Regional Office), in another expressive media (the arts), in yet another the nature of the policy

(awards). This responds largely to the fact that most of the areas grew slowly out of Colcultura and became more solid as the programs within the divisions of each area developed. Due to this history of relative independent development, most areas are handled with little or no connection with others. Thus, the Ministry of Culture (initially Colcultura) has slowly been structured through the implementation of programs that became long-term projects that eventually and in articulation with other reform processes in the state (notably those of the Constitution and the creation of the Ministry) have become cultural policy agendas. The interaction between guiding abstract words of the new decade (decentralization, participation, multiculturalism, democratization) and the practice of cultural policy is determined largely by this institutional structure and history.

To be sure, the directors of specific divisions design their own policy programs according to the general state guidelines mentioned above. But how these abstract words get translated into actual practice is very much up to the directors, not even of each area, but of each division. This means that the ultimate definition of what cultural policy is, gets done at the level of division directors with loose connections to either top administrative guidelines or to other divisions and areas in terms of conceptualizing the relationship between culture and the ideas that guide the democratization process. To take an example. The Arts Area in which I worked as Director of Artistic Archives includes the arts archives, music, visual arts, theater, and dance divisions as well as the National School for Dramatic Arts. The music division has favored the implementation of programs dealing with education in and organization of (creation of networks of interaction) different types of music throughout the country: symphonic music and choirs, local wind bands, traditional musics. They thus cover both popular and elite expressions and their main mode of action is educational and organizational. The visual arts division, however, works almost exclusively with expressions associated with Western visual arts (no crafts), and its main activity is organizing the National and Regional State Exhibitions of contemporary artists. This difference responds both to the historical factors mentioned above and to the philosophical and political orientation of division directors who choose one mode of action or one sphere of culture over another. This means that the Ministry of Culture is not a monolithic institution but one with great variables in terms of conceptualization of cultural policy and the practices derived from it.

While this type of structure generates a certain flexibility in the implementation of programs (something which can be positive if used creatively and critically), it also generates problems. On the one hand, the fact that the dialogue across areas is highly fragmentary (if not non-existent) leads to cross purposes and difficult encounters when disparities regarding the design and deployment of programs becomes evident. This often happens when difficulties emerge in the coexistence of different programs in the same region of the country. At the moment of implementing programs in the regions (not inside the Ministry), directors of different divisions (or their assistants) often meet for the first time, and it is there that the differing views of how to work in the country get exposed.

This can be very conflictive when the programs involve the same population or area of influence. Moreover, the conflict is generated not only by the lack of internal dialogue and discussion about cultural policy but also because much of cultural policy design and implementation is based on tacit assumptions about the relationship between the transformation of society and culture. For example, for some division directors, educational and organizational agendas are crucial in transforming civil society, an idea very much inherited from appropriations of a Freirean discourse. For others, popular culture speaks for itself and is by its very nature a sphere of construction of civil society. For this group, the exhibition of local culture then naturally leads to creating social dialogue. The question that is never asked is how social transformation actually happens through cultural policy enactment. The frequent and informally stated idea within the Ministry, that “the Ministry of Culture does not have a clear cultural policy,” speaks not so much of differences in modes of action or population objectives in the different programs, but of the unexplored assumptions underlying these agendas. Not only do we have an institutional history of fragmentary development. We also have the gradual consolidation of cultural policy programs that in the contradictions that have been generated have played a role in creating a set of questions regarding cultural policy. That is, cultural policy emerges as a critical field not only out of academic interest in the topic but also out of the contradictions that begin to be more visible as culture becomes increasingly accepted as a political arena.

Second, the decisions that determine the financial distribution of resources handed from the Ministry of Finance are taken in the upper echelons of the Ministry, and this is partially mediated through personalist and favoritist relations, thus creating an unclear and in some areas unjust distribution of finances without explanations for program directors, an issue that obviously affects internal relations. For example, CREA was designed initially in 1991–2 as one of the major programs of the Office of the First Lady, Ana Milena de Gaviria, during the Gaviria government (1992–8). By the time CREA arrived from the First Lady’s office to become Colcultura in 1992 (after heated polemics) it practically became a parallel structure within the Arts Area, and later in the Regional Area to which it was moved in 1996 due to the magnitude of the program. CREA began, comparatively speaking, with a larger budget than other areas in the Ministry, one that received direct approval and/or had direct communication channels to other financial resources, due to the support of the First Lady’s office. Also, the design of CREA involved a long process of consultation. But this process did not include people within Colcultura who were already implementing programs of a similar nature in the regions on a much smaller scale – notably the Jornadas de Cultura Popular led by anthropologist Gloria Triana in the previous administration.⁸ A privileged place in the public sphere thus gets confounded with the unexplained lack of continuity of previous programs. This mode of insertion of CREA into Colcultura (later the Ministry) largely determined labor relations between people in CREA and people in other

areas of the Ministry for a long time. By the time I was asked to do the research in 1998, the discontent inside the Ministry of Culture was due not only to very contradictory effects of the program in the region (by then highly visible both in positive and negative terms) but also to the type of labor relations established by the mode of existence of CREA within the Ministry. This is compounded by the fact that effects of programs are not evaluated democratically by external figures.⁹

As can be imagined, the tensions that are generated by differences in conceptualizing cultural policy, by the lack of communication between areas, coupled with the presence of a personalist structure in determining, at least partially, the distribution of resources, creates an unstable and often difficult and unjust work environment which program directors have to mediate constantly. The implementation of cultural policy thus involves not only establishing an agenda for cultural transformation but also the mediation of a politics of culture through institutional structures and quotidian work practices. CREA was the major program promoted as a decentralization and participatory strategy in an administration largely concerned with these issues. And undoubtedly, it had transcendent consequences in this respect, an aspect I am not dealing with in this chapter. But what I wish to point out is that the decentering of notions of culture that has led to the design of new programs and ways of implementing cultural policy is not accompanied by a decentering of quotidian work practices and of tacit political structures, and this ultimately affects the possibilities of constructing the democratization processes that the notions of decentralization, participation, and multiculturalism invoke. It is in the contradictory interaction between institutional structure and the practices that determine a quotidian work sphere, and the new modes of policy-making based on the idea that culture can transform society, that some of the disjunctures between critical theory and public policy-making are located. The problem of democratization through the implementation of new cultural policy agendas then not only involves constructing new scenarios for cultural mobilization. It also implies addressing the contradictions inherent in state structures at the level of quotidian work practices and how these influence the possibility of implementing much-desired reforms.

Bridging the Gap between Critical Theory and Quotidian State Practices

During the past two years, Maria Adelaida Jaramillo, the director of the National System of Artistic Education, an office that was created with the Ministry of Culture, has brought together the different division directors in order to try to solve the problem of extreme fragmentation and create a space of dialogue at least around the educational dimensions that the different programs have. This has been an important space where many problems began to be aired and shared. But the task has not been easy. On the one hand, the purpose of the meetings was partially to construct a shared policy for the Education Program based on

bringing together the notions of education that each had. For many this involved an extra work agenda which was difficult to incorporate in the face of already excessive work schedules which were largely determined by the immediacy of production of documents demanded in public spheres. Also, since the meetings – as most public policy meetings – had specific purposes in the production of documents that showed results, there was no time to clearly deconstruct the different (and often unconscious) assumptions about public policy that often got in the way of resolving differences between people. Moreover, discussions were often mediated by the coexistence of different power hierarchies, many of which could not be explicitly addressed, or if addressed, could not be transformed.

These different problems that emerged in the process of attempting to redress the problem of fragmentation of the Ministry, point to a characteristic of communicative practices within public institutions. “There is no time to think” is a complaint commonly heard, not only in the Ministry but also beyond. Not only is there no time. The quotidian work agenda structures the communicative sphere in such a way that for program directors, critical thinking is practically impossible to do simultaneously with designing and implementing policy. In most meetings people have to mediate some sphere of recognition of their program and this makes it very difficult to assume critical thought as an integral dimension of the practice of public policy. Martín Barbero (1995) has stated that cultural policy assumes (not always explicitly) a communicative theory at its basis. But this not only pertains to the way the transformation of society is assumed to take place through a politics of culture; it also implies the way cultural policy is determined by communicative practices within the workday politics and hierarchical structures of the institutions that implement policy.

Even with these structural difficulties, getting together to talk was a major first step that two years later is bearing fruits in the way certain programs have been able to come up with shared objectives. Largely based on the obvious need to construct spaces of dialogue between Division and program directors that the experience with the Education Office had made visible, as well as in accordance with my research needs, I created – as a research methodology – a biweekly seminar where division directors could meet to discuss issues related directly to the problem of implementing cultural policy programs in different regions of Colombia. As a researcher it was important for me to have a comparative perspective based on the experiences of different policy programs. The seminar on Region, Culture, and Cultural Policy was largely designed to provide a space to talk about these problems. It revolved around issues that I knew were important for the directors largely due to my previous work within the Ministry – notions of region, implications of the transformation of local culture, effects of globalization in the regions, modes of action in cultural policy, etc. Contrary to an academic course, the idea was to keep reading to a minimum due to the lack of time that state functionaries have. Also, each person was supposed to analyze and question a problematic dimension of their own program. I had been assigned the

task of shedding new light on CREA through critical theory. Why not let each director bring critical theory into her/his own program?

Initially, I designed this as a strategy for listening to the problems people were having in the regions. What was surprising for me (and the other people in the seminar as well) was that the seminar created a radically different space for listening than is generally present in the public sphere. On the one hand, I was not competing for a comparative position or for financial resources with them, which made me a comfortable, semi-outside figure; one who nevertheless could understand what was going on because of my previous administrative experience. On the other hand, program directors were personally assuming the responsibility of a critical discussion of their own programs. Not only did they bring a tremendous amount of experience and knowledge of the specific problems they had to confront but had no space to share without the pressures of public office: in directly assuming their own critique they were propitiating a communicative critical space that transformed the ambiguous and difficult nature of cross-criticism in bureaucratic spaces; especially in one institutionally structured by lack of communication between areas and by favoritist practices. This institutional structure obfuscates critical thinking. What is often disguised as the criticism of other people's programs is actually a tremendous frustration with unjust and/or ambiguous institutional practices. It soon became obvious that program directors were sharing similar problems. The effects of favoritist structures on daily relations and critical analysis were unmasked, and thus people began to distinguish between questioning the cultural dimension of a program and its internal mode of insertion within the institution. This of course did not transform the favoritist structure within the Ministry; this persists until today and takes new forms under each administration. But this was one small step in learning to listen to each other and begin sharing agendas of which we were not conscious before. Undoubtedly a small step in translating confusing practices into separate and more understandable dimensions.

Several issues about the institutional nature of Latin American "cultural studies," cultural policy, and democratization processes come up here. In the first place, it has often been argued that "much of cultural studies, particularly in the United States, continues to be heavily oriented towards the textual" (Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar 1998: 5), while "cultural analysis in Latin America is more directly part of the study of civil and political society than in the United States" (Yúdice, this volume). This has most often been related to the intervention of scholars in social movements. As such, a theoretical division predominates between social movements, which are seen as democratizing civil society, while the democratic reform of the state is analyzed as consisting generally of the "stability of formal representative political institutions and practices" (Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar 1998: 13). But what the Colombian case makes evident is that institutions are not monolithic structures but are rather permeated by the uneven flows that result from the effects of the interaction between the different types of groupings, associations, persons that characterize civil society, the social, and

cultural transformations brought about through their influence (such as the writing of the 1991 Constitution) with historically inherited modes of authoritarian politics. The implementation of new agendas of cultural policy from within the state involves a difficult negotiation between the opening of new democratic spaces in institutional politics and the persistence of authoritarian ones. Democratizing institutions (or formal state policy) is not solely a legislative agenda. It implies reforming the nature of the day-to-day work space. And as such, tactics that are apparently small (such as creating a critical space for discussing problems in a public sphere which does not have such a possibility) can be a step in creating more democratic working ethics within institutions and eventually may aid in destructuring undemocratic practices within them.

What we see, in the midst of this contradictory working sphere is “an emerging form of institutionality that opens up spaces of representation, interlocution and negotiation” (Telles 1994: 49) that were not formerly there. Undoubtedly, many programs in the Ministry emerged through the new sphere of cultural policy validated by the Constitution and the General Law of Culture. But one cannot be blind to the coexistence within the Ministry of authoritarian political and democratizing cultural practices. This means that not only the nature of politics or culture have been decentered in the past decades. We also need to address the way work itself has been decentered “due to the strong presence of conflict in the new forms that work is adopting” (Hopenhayn 2000). What one finds in the contradictory effects of many cultural policy programs in the Ministry is a difficult and unequal process of democratization that involves the inclusion of a highly conflictive agenda as a daily work ethic.

Here lies one of the crucial aspects of the interaction between critical theory and public policy. When deconstruction solely addresses the level of meanings, critical theory assumes a radically different form than when it is inserted in practical political spaces. Paul Bromberg, a philosopher-mathematician turned mayor of Bogotá, stated it by saying that when he assumed public office he realized that every time he took a decision, he created a problem. That is, the practice of critical theory is immersed in the contradictory dimensions that characterize public space. His statement points to a philosophical problem that underlies much of the relationship between critical theory and public policy: how does one translate the abstract principles which guide not only critical thinking but the ideological bases of public policy or democratization processes (decentralization, multiculturalism, etc.) into quotidian practices? As stated by anthropologist Michael Jackson, “Fieldwork experience has taught me that notions of shared humanity, human equality and human rights always come up against the micropolitical exigencies of ethnic, familial, and personal identity, and the dialectic between particular and universal frames of reference often dissolves into a troubled dialogue between the privileged microcosm of anthropologists and the peoples of the Third world whose voices, struggles and claims define with far more urgency the conditions that define our global future” (Jackson 1998: 5). One can easily extend this to the field of cultural studies and cultural

policy. The interaction between critical theory and policy-making is crucial but not solely at the level of deconstructing meanings but of getting involved in the contradictory dimensions of daily practice. This does not necessarily mean that researchers have to hold public office. It rather leads to the need for trying to bridge the gap between the theory and practice of cultural policy from both sides: people who implement cultural policy should have the opportunity for open spaces for discussion of their problems within the structure of their working agendas, and scholars need to interact more closely in the day-to-day workings of transformation of the public sphere and not only in the construction of abstract, guiding principles in policy-making, crucial as they are. This would not only “pluralize the frontiers of academic authority” (Richard 1999) but also perhaps address some of the gaps in theorizing cultural policy, especially those related to establishing a link between the daily practice of bureaucracy and cultural deconstruction.

The democratizing practices made possible by the new space for cultural politics opened in formal institutions in the decade of the nineties in Colombia have been crucial in generating new participatory spaces that are having concrete effects in the regions despite the problems and contradictions involved, a topic I do not deal with in this chapter. However, these democratic spaces are fragile, fragmentary, and uncertain. In Colombia, as persons working within the spheres of cultural policy, we often feel trapped between the sense of hope, creativity, and democratization that some of the cultural policy programs seem to generate, and the very real and drastic limitations imposed by the extreme fragmentation of a society increasingly trapped by neoliberal policies and armed conflict. Maybe that is why in Colombia today many of the people involved in the daily routine of cultural policy-making constantly move between the different sides of that precarious balance between hope and disenchantment.

Notes

- 1 This chapter was written while I was a Rockefeller fellow at the Privatization of Culture Project in the American Studies Program, New York University. I would like to thank the Rockefeller Foundation, George Yúdice, and Toby Miller for their support. Evelina Dagnino provided valuable bibliography. Financial support for research leading to this chapter was provided by the Ministry of Culture of Colombia, The Instituto Colombiano de Antropología and the Convenio Andrés Bello. This chapter is dedicated to the participants in the seminar “Region and Culture” of the Ministry of Culture of Colombia.
- 2 The notion of cultural studies as a field in Latin America is constructed quite differently than in the US and is currently being questioned. See Néstor García Canclini, *La Globalización Imaginada*, Barcelona, México: Paidós, 1999; Daniel Mato, *Investigaciones sobre Cultura y Política en América Latina y Dilemas de su Institucionalización*. Paper presented at the Seminario de Estudios Culturales; George Yúdice, this volume.

- 3 From other sectors such as NGOs as well. However, in this chapter I will only be dealing with the interaction between government and culture.
- 4 The debates concerning the creation of the Ministry of Culture are gathered in: *Crear es Vivir, Gran Foro Cultural*, Barranquilla, abril 29 de 1994, Bogotá: Presidencia de la República, 1994. *Debate Cultural*, Coordinación Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda, Bogotá: Presidencia de la República, 1995. *El Trabajo Cultural en Colombia*, Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda, coordinador, Bogotá: Presidencia de la República, 1996. *Ministerio de Cultura, Ministerio de la Paz*, coordinador: Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda, Bogotá: Presidencia de la República, 1997.
- 5 For documentation and interpretation of statistics on violence in Colombia see Saúl Franco, *El Quinto: No Matar: Contextos Explicativos de la Violencia en Colombia*. Bogotá: TM Editores, IEPRI, Universidad Nacional, 1999.
- 6 *CREA: Una Expedición por la Cultura Colombiana*. Bogotá: Colcultura, 1997, p. 1.
- 7 The Ministry also includes the National Museum, the National Library, and, until recently, the Colombian Institute of Anthropology, among other units. These are not viewed as areas but as independent administrative units.
- 8 For a discussion of the effects of the Jornadas as cultural policy see Gloria Triana, compiladora, *Aluna: Imagen y Memoria de las Jornadas Regionales de Cultura Popular*. Colcultura, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, 1990.
- 9 A series of evaluations of CREA were done by the people of CREA in interaction with outsiders. But these evaluations are characterized by a notable absence of theoretical critique. All the problems are reduced to operational problems, a characteristic which in itself is quite telling of modes of questioning within public spaces.

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