Cultural Governance as Field Governance: Interest groups and the transformational work on cultural policy

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Abstract*

Evolving cultural governance theory provides a lens for exploring participatory governance practices in cultural policymaking in the field of nonprofit arts organisations (Schad, 2019; Bussu et al., 2022). Interest groups of nonprofit arts organisations are included in this field. Although they play a role in 'transforming the rules of the game' (Hinings et al., 2017), knowledge about how they do this is still scarce (Marx, 2015; Schad, 2019). A better understanding of the role of interest groups in the space between cultural policymaking and cultural production constitutes the key focus of our research. To inform our research, we rely on the theorising framework of field governance and institutional infrastructure (Hinings et al., 2017). This approach allows for situating nonprofit arts organisations as field actors (Hinings et al., 2017) and interest groups as 'units of collective action in society' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, p. 3) and enables us to provide new insights into the still young concept of cultural governance as a form of participative policymaking process.

In a process study conducted in Austria, we examined the strategies of interest groups that have gradually participated in cultural governance since the 1980s. They act in fields where public policy and funding dominate and where interest groups participate in a two-directional dynamic of accountability (Ebrahim, 2003). An analysis of field governance and institutional infrastructure transformation reflects the changing dimensions that characterise a field, such as logic, norms, and accountability (Ebrahim, 2003; Hinings et al., 2017). Our findings highlight the role of interest groups as political agents in cultural governance through the strategic and long-term nature of their participation. Accordingly, anchoring their sectoral concerns in governance arrangements proved key to developing a new movement that evolved into an established sector. The conclusion of our study establishes cultural governance as a negotiating framework that enables the transformation of traditional political systems by involving interest groups as agents long-term.

In the academic and grey literature, the concept of cultural governance encompasses different scopes and levels of action: for the behaviour of boards of directors (Rentschler, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2016; King and Schramme, 2019), for cooperative governance agreements (Gugu and dal Molin, 2016), and finally for field-level governance (UNESCO, 2014; Minty and Nkula-Wenz, 2019). The latter provides a broader context for research by considering cultural nonprofit arts organisations within an ecosystem (Renz et al., 2022) or actors in the field's infrastructure (Hinings et al., 2017). The field governance of nonprofit arts organisations may result from a participatory process that aims to take into account the different needs of the actors in the governance arrangements (UNESCO, 2014; Alasuutari and Qadir, 2019). Participation is a key element of collaborative and cultural governance (Ansell and Gash, 2007; Ansell and Torfing, 2016), bringing its nature and issues of effectiveness into focus. Scholars have criticised the quality of participation in cultural governance as politically ineffective when it takes place in arranged settings (Marx, 2019; Marx, 2020; Kaitavouri, 2020), while collaborative platforms are seen as a purposeful method in collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2017). Therefore, knowledge about the specific role of interest groups in cultural governance beyond arranged platforms also relates to how interest groups shape the nature of participation in cultural governance processes.

The background of the empirical research conducted in Austria goes back to the development of nonprofit arts organisations from the 1970s onwards. They pursued new concepts of contemporary cultural offerings and challenged governance norms of public funding. Cultural policy in Austria has been weighed down by the history of first the Hapsburg monarchy and second the importation of the Nazi tyranny, where modernist art was vilified as 'degenerate art'. As a result, contemporary art in Austria has required significant effort to become accepted. Nonprofit arts organisations have acted as a 'cultural avant-garde' (Lungstraß and Ratzenböck, 2019) in this field of tension. They have become crucial for the transformation of cultural policy (Marx, 2015; Lungstraß and Ratzenböck, 2019) and have developed a voice in governance processes through interest groups as their collective representatives.

To examine how sectoral interest groups pursue their concern for political participation, we carried out a process study of three inter-related interest groups from their founding in the 1980s to the present. We used archival documents from the first officially founded interest group and interviews with current leaders of interest groups as empirical sources. In the evaluation, we identified six strategies that positively impacted the participation process in governance. Progress includes becoming a field actor, anchoring the logic of the sector in funding criteria, becoming embedded in governance mechanisms like subsidy advisory boards and, recently, advancing by improving the working conditions of nonprofit arts organisations. To further explain how interest groups have contributed to changes in institutional infrastructure and cultural governance arrangements, we related the empirical data to dimensions of institutional infrastructure (Hinings et al., 2017). This allows us to show the sustainability of change processes at a more general level. Whereas a strategy alone, even if successful in the short term, cannot bring about lasting change, elements of change become more evident when dimensions of institutional

infrastructure are taken into account. Thus, through our approach, we could observe a transformation of logic, category labels, and norms aimed at increasing accountability in the field governance of nonprofit arts organisations in Austria.

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