

## Justin O'Connor and cultural policy: what does it mean to understand culture as a public good?

### Justin O'Connor i la política cultural: què vol dir entendre la cultura com a bé públic?

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In his article Rethinking the foundations: Global cultural policy at the crossroads (2025), Justin O'Connor analyses why culture has been left out of major development agendas and proposes a new way of understanding it: not as an economic sector or as a vague anthropological definition, but as a symbolic system of “arts and culture” and as an essential public good. This text presents his argument and invites us to reflect on what it can contribute to the municipal perspective, within the framework of his participation in the Civic Àgora on 26 September 2025, where he will talk with Pau Rausell on Reimagining culture: from production to social value.

Culture as a public good: between the global scale and local concreteness.

When the Sustainable Development Goals were approved in 2015, culture was left off the list. This absence, O'Connor recalls, is not accidental: it shows the extent to which culture is perceived as marginal within global policies. When it is granted a place, it is usually in two forms that, paradoxically, limit its strength. On the one hand, the discourse of the “creative economy”, which reduces culture to an economic sector intended to generate GDP and jobs. On the other, the definition of culture as “a whole system of life”, too broad and abstract to guide specific policies. The result is a field stripped of centrality, relegated to ornament or instrumental justification. (O'Connor, 2025)

O'Connor's proposal is to recover a more limited and politically operative sense: understanding culture as the symbolic system of arts and culture, with its institutions, infrastructures and ecosystems. This definition allows it to be made into a real public policy, because it identifies a specific area and with specific actors. But above all, O'Connor insists on considering culture as a public good, on the same level as education or health. This means that it is not just an economic resource or an individual consumer good, but a collective right that requires public infrastructure and sustained policies. Libraries, cultural centers, artistic education, open media and a plurality of voices are, in this sense, fundamental pieces of a full citizenship.

Based on this framework, what can we learn from municipalities? First of all, that the idea of cultural rights is not empty rhetoric. When O'Connor speaks of culture as a public good, he challenges us to think about whether, at a local level, we really guarantee universal access and participation. City councils manage the majority of cultural facilities and are primarily responsible for putting culture within the daily reach of citizens. But this does not depend only on having open spaces, but on the way they are managed, what programming criteria are applied to them and to what extent plurality is built. Here it is important to note that O'Connor is speaking from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, where private ownership of facilities is much more common. In Catalonia, most cultural facilities are already public; the debate is shifting towards management models and the access conditions that these guarantee.

Secondly, the global reflection on digital platforms is fully upon us. O'Connor warns about the private concentration in the cultural and media sphere. Municipalities, with their local and community media, can be a counterweight that preserves spaces of proximity and diversity. Here the question is how to protect this plurality in a communication ecosystem dominated by large corporations.

Finally, his proposal highlights the need to see culture as an infrastructure of collective life. This forces us to move from offering to guaranteeing. It is not enough to simply schedule activities; we must ensure that everyone has access to them, that the working conditions of professionals are dignified and that governance truly incorporates citizen participation. This is where his global vision translates into a municipal challenge: to think of cultural policy as a policy of rights and not just as programming or service.

The dialogue that O'Connor will hold with Pau Rausell at the Àgora Cívica, under the title *Reimagining culture: from production to social value*, invites us to critically review some of the models and categories that have guided cultural policies in recent decades. It is about rethinking the frameworks from which we conceive of cultural production and value, addressing the tensions between cultural value and economic value and exploring ways to imagine other possible futures for the construction of a common cultural ecosystem. It is in this context that O'Connor's global reflections take on relevance for the local world: not to apply closed recipes, but to question ourselves about how to concretize, in each municipality, the idea of culture as a right and basic infrastructure of collective life.

It is therefore appropriate to ask ourselves: can we talk about cultural rights if public facilities do not incorporate real diversity in their governance? What legitimacy does the rhetoric of participation have if there is no capacity to influence decisions? To what extent can we maintain a local cultural sphere if the bulk of symbolic consumption goes through global platforms? And above all: are we willing to assume that culture requires stable resources and political protection at the same level as other essential services? These are the questions that, rather than providing immediate answers, should fuel the debate of the Civic Agora and place the local world within the great global challenges.