CHAPTER 3

Cultural networking: rhetoric, policy and practice in Portugal

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1. Introduction: network as a concept and a guideline

Network is a rather recent concept. Its general use dates from the 1990s onwards, especially with the publication, in 1996, of Manuel Castells' *The network society*. It may be seen as the outcome of convergent developments in both the organisational theory and sociology. It stands in opposition to hierarchy, closeness and rigidity, and this is perhaps the main reason for its fortune, both in analytical and in normative terms.

Network can be defined as a structure: the pattern of configuration and evolution of a given system. It proposes a less vertical description of the power and communication relations that constitute such a system, pointing out the horizontal interactions that cross-cut hierarchy and eventually transform it in a non-hierarchical form of managing people and coordinating resources and activities. Indeed, critical to the concept of network is the idea that exchanges can be facilitated and coordination can be guaranteed by players situated at the crossroads of multiple interactions – the nodes – and not necessarily located in the formal apex of a pyramid; and the idea that the multifaceted ties between elements – the connections – are more relevant to the structuring and performance of the system than the formal distribution of resources and authority.

Openness is the second key feature of this model of organisations and social systems. Network is an accurate term to characterise them whenever they do not require a strict delimitation of time-space and a univocal definition of borders, clearly separating the internal and the external, that is, the given system and its environment. It suggests that an evolutionary move, a dynamic and adaptive force and plasticity are basic organisational ingredients.

Flexibility is another trait assumed by the network model, for obvious reasons. If hierarchy is not a necessary condition for coordination and supervision, and if formalisation is not a necessary condition for stability and continuity, then the

patterns of structuring can change quite often and quite rapidly, according to the needs and goals at stake, and allowing multiple forms of adjustment between the players and their context. The size and shape can vary, network organisations being flexible enough to face physical, technological, economic or social transformations, endogenously or exogenously driven, in the most efficient ways.

Such structures do exist, and late modernity typically fosters their emergence. Horizontal, open, flexible forms of coordinating human beings and human agency have proven well in the field of firms and markets, communities and territories, cities and states – hence the current 'network society'. Network is a pertinent concept helping to describe and explain this new reality.

Additionally, it is a sort of device to implement it. By networking one enunciates not only the procedural dimension of network (networks-in-the-making), but also the strategy to build and maintain networks: the set of techniques put into practice to design the configuration of a given organisation, whatever its scale, as a reticular, open and flexible social structure. The normative joins the analytical.

Network and networking are keywords in current cultural policies, both as realities to describe and goals to achieve. It is worthwhile to reflect on their meaning. To be useful, the reflection should respect three stages: (a) the descriptive content of those concepts; (b) the evaluative assumptions and (c) the programmatic orientation associated with them.

When describing a cultural entity as a network, one generally emphasizes all or some of the following characteristics. The first one is territorial dissemination: network suggests some kind of spread throughout a territory and some sort of anchorage in that territory. It opposes centralism, that is, the concentration of resources in a single, central institution; and favours an approach based on more flexible geographies, that allows various nodes, connections and forms of interaction. So we speak of heritage sites network, or we identify the networking of theatre companies, in order to signal the multipolar territorial inscription of such cultural facilities and assets.

The second characteristic is expansion: a network is a non-finite structure that can include new elements, or lose others, permanently or episodically, meanwhile preserving its logic and potential. It opposes the conventional way of launching an administrative structure by legislation and formal, homogeneous, one-shot implementation, practising the alternative method of gradually consolidating an ensemble of elements that adhere and participate at different times and with different rhythms, thus progressing in the making. A regional network of museums, for example, can begin by a few of them, cooperating for a common objective, or sharing resources, or articulating collections and exhibitions, and then include other partners, in quite a flexible and dynamic movement.

Third, multi-level coordination is a key component of networks, as they aim to describe cultural realities. Instead of a circle, whose graphic representation indicates the clear existence of a single centre, that irradiates its energy through a bi-dimensional space and can progress through successive concentric circles, the image of a network suggests, not only multiple centres (the first characteristic) and dynamic spacing (the second one), but also the cross-section of different sources, paths and directions of energy. It underlines the interplay of multiple agents, at multiple levels of organisation and activity: for instance, the co-presence of national government, regional bodies and local authorities in the design and implementation of cultural policies; or the convergence of the institutional focus on heritage preservation and the economic approach to urban heritage as a driver for tourism development.

Closely linked to this characteristic is the fourth one: partnership. It adds a share of responsibilities, costs and benefits in governance to the coordination. Therefore, network stands in the opposite position of the pyramid, the hierarchical configuration that distributes agents into clearly defined levels of status and power, the upper ones being in charge of making decisions, planning and assigning tasks, and supervising the operations. Alternatively, the network governance takes advantage of the existence and articulation of different partners, such as national or local bodies, or cultural administration and artists, or cultural and urban development departments, and the like. Partnership means that ones will not be seen as the decision-makers and the others as the practitioners or the ones as the providers and the others as the clients, but that all represent stakeholders and players whose interests and activities must be globally taken into account.

Two last characteristics are also relevant for this analysis. Informality is more easily associated with network configurations than with hierarchies and closed systems. Whenever one observes the key role played by informal interaction between the members of a given system, or between those members and their counterparts in the respective environment, one tends to apply to that system, *ceteris paribus*, the concept of network. Networks are, of course, institutions, as they are sets of rules and forms of consolidating and reproducing those rules. But they are less formal institutions than the average ones, since they open space for the plasticity and vividness of informal communication and mutual adjustment of agents, in Henry Mintzberg's (1979, 2023) sense. Agency tends to predominate over institution.

The organisational and practical consequences can be very important. Networks constitute, virtually or effectively, collective actors. Their internal configuration as a complex of individuals, groups, routines, devices and institutions, may be 'translated' into practices and strategies that really influence social structures and processes.

Howard S. Becker's (1982) description of the cooperative, multi-professional nature of an 'art world' was already an insightful interpretation of such mechanisms.

Considering these six characteristics that are generally attributed to networks – territorialisation, openness, cooperation, partnership, informality and collective action – the frequent positive evaluation of networking and networks should not surprise. They are assumed as more 'friendly' structures (than the conventional, hierarchical and formal ones) regarding creativity and innovation. Ideas germinate, grow and circulate more easily through them. Procedures by trial and error are more feasible, exploring experimentation, assessment, rectification and gradual generalisation. Norms can be less strict and appeal to voluntary adhesion, instead of establishing orders and sanctions. In such an environment, it is more plausible to identify opportunities as soon as they occur, to admit different kinds of players and interplays, to discover new protagonists and to respond very quickly to unexpected events. Flexibility improves systemic adaptation. Heterogeneity increases the amount of available assets. And informal, horizontal relationship fosters the development and dissemination of that crucial resource for communities and organisations that we name as social capital.

My purpose here is not to discuss the validity of these assumptions, but only to alert the reader to their evaluative character. As such, they are important ingredients of cultural practices. But they cannot be considered as ontological or logical certitudes. Unfortunately, the confusion of advocacy and analysis is a rather common trait of cultural research. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that attributes like innovation, creativity or ingeniousness, far from being inherent to any network society or organisation because of their 'nature', are *possibilities* that may or may not be found in empirical realities – and that is a matter of empirical research to find them.

The same goes for the last stage of our preliminary reflection on the application of the concept of network to cultural domains, that is, its links with policy guidelines. In that context, and as it has been used in Continental Europe throughout the last decade of the last century and the first three decades of the current one, the insistence on networking is tied to the explicit or implicit laud of the Anglo-Saxon paradigm of cultural policies. Following the typology proposed by Chartrand & McCaughey (1989) and excluding, for its irrelevance in democratic Europe, the Engineer-State, this conveys the idea that the classic French-like model of the Architect-State should allow more space for the indirect, less centralised, less formal mechanisms of the Patron-State, as it happens in the United Kingdom, and of the Facilitator-State, as in the United States. Or, in the terms of Cummings Jr. & Katz (1987), networking would be more akin to the indirect administration of Anglo-Saxon countries than

to the direct administration of Continental Europe. Cultural policy and cultural management could benefit from a move towards the network approach, precisely when the general trend seems to be the weakening of national governments, the permanence of budget constraints, the decrease in state funding of arts and the blatant need for cooperation and partnership between the various levels of public administration and with civil society (see Bell & Oakley 2015: 109-140).

Again, this is quite a different approach, compared to the analytical framework provided by sociology and organisational theory. Here network becomes an argument, a rhetorical and logical means to justify a more or less structural change in political paradigms. This does not mean any depreciation: rhetoric is really a vital component of the democratic debate. But one should not blur the boundaries between analytical and normative discourse, and should not treat moral or political assumptions as if they were straight logical or empirical evidence.

The sociologist's duty is not to forget the intersection of knowledge and action, nor to ignore the ideological devices embedded in action. However, he or she must not take these devices for their apparent value, considering them as well-established principles or concepts. Network is both a conceptual tool and a political motto; as a motto, it must be submitted to theoretical and empirical analyses. It should not be taken for granted, but critically scrutinised. What does it mean, in the political and artistic discourse? How does it constitute a guideline for cultural policy and administration, and how does this guideline effectively influence real policies and real management? As a Weberian ideal-type, how can it help to understand different processes of social organisation? What conditions foster a network pattern of social and organisational structures, which strategies put it in practice, which outcomes may be pointed out?

To summarise in a single sentence: if networking does matter in current cultural policies, practices and discourses, it has to be addressed as an issue of research.

2. Networking as a device for national cultural policy

The purpose of this chapter is then to examine the content and functionality of the concept of cultural networking, considering the context of dense social and institutional processes and drawing on available empirical data. The assumption is that fruitful sociological comparison needs the consideration of real and specific cases, if one wants to avoid the mimesis of administrative jargon or the ritual repetition of empty generalities.

For this test, an interesting case can be found in Portugal. As in other countries, the idea of network and networking has been critical there, since the 1980s, for the definition and implementation of cultural policy. The accumulation of three charac-

teristics gave it a certain singularity. First, in 1986 Portugal joined the European Communities (now European Union), and this was a turning point for public policies, both in terms of guidelines and financial resources. Cultural facilities were also qualified to benefit from European funds; and eventually, in 2000, an entire programme dedicated to cultural investment was designed. Second, after a period in which the main concern had been the response to basic needs such as water and energy supply or urban infrastructures, the municipal authorities (democratically elected since 1976) could turn their attention to educational and cultural affairs. Their role as partners for cultural policies gradually increased, and we can speak of a qualitative change from the late 1980s onwards (see chapter 4). Third, the national government saw in this new role of the municipalities and in the developmental prospects associated with European integration the possibility to undertake a systematic coverage of the territory with public facilities like theatres, libraries and museums.

The consequence of these facts was the centrality, in action as well as in discourse, of the concept of networking and network. The meaning was quite conspicuous. A 'cultural network' would be (a) a set of facilities disseminated throughout the territory, (b) according to a common broad framework, translated into (c) some rules of construction, equipment, activity and maintenance. The rules were (d) defined by national departments and according to professional and technical patterns. Critical to the implementation of networks was (e) the cooperation between national and local authorities, based on (f) voluntary adherence and (g) the share of legal and financial responsibilities.

So the networking strategy pointed to territorialisation, partnership, technical regulation and variable-geometry. And this was really the guideline for the first national programme, launched by the government in 1987, and called the National Network of Public Libraries. The libraries, to be constructed or rehabilitated, were owned and managed by the municipalities. The national normative framework adapted UNESCO's rules, determining the requisites to be complied with, regarding size, content, professional staff and public services. The application of the programme was voluntary, and municipalities could benefit from a state funding covering a maximum of 50 per cent of the total construction costs. The responsibility to coordinate the Network, assessing the compliance with rules, providing training, circulating information and launching additional incentives for content development and computerisation, was assumed by a national department. In 2022, 303 of the 308 municipalities of Portugal have public libraries, and 245 of them are affiliated with the National Network (Neves 2024: 158-166).

The Public Libraries Network quickly became the benchmark for a new generation of cultural policies appealing to multi-level public administration, aiming to

cover the whole territory, based on voluntary participation and cooperation, and implementing a soft national regulation, aligned with international standards and investing in knowledge, training and the dissemination of best practices. Successive programmes followed this inspiration, in the inter-century transition. Closely linked to it is the National Network of School Libraries, launched by the Ministries of Education and Culture in 1996, and developed by the former. From 1987 until 2008, it has incorporated 2,077 pre-primary, primary and secondary schools (Costa 2010: 47-48); in 2017, it covered 2,461 schools (Castro Filho 2018: 24).

Meanwhile, the most ambitious programme has been, since the year 2000, the Portuguese Museums Network. It was preceded and prepared, in 1998, by the first extensive survey ever undertaken in Portugal. The survey revealed that only 29 per cent of the total number of 530 entities claiming to be museums complied with a minimal technical standard (and only 9 per cent observed the full set of the museological criteria, see Santos 2000: 156-159). Consequently, the launching of the national network was part of an exhaustive programme of accreditation, this double nature defining the singularity of the Portuguese experience, in international terms (Camacho 2014a: 255-256; Camacho 2014b: 226-231).

Differently from the Public Libraries Network, the Museums Network was not primarily concerned with physical construction and equipment, but instead with the professional management of the collections and exhibitions, and with the range and quality of the services supplied to visitors. The existence of educational departments, of curators and other professionals, the public access to collections and in accordance with museographic norms were among the preconditions for participation in the Network. Adherence was, of course, voluntary, and there was no distinction due to the property or nature of the museum: the 165 museums currently members of the Network include public and private entities, be they classified as national, regional, or local, or being under the responsibility of national government, autonomous bodies like regions and universities, or municipalities (Neves et al. 2022). The dissemination of information and the supply of training courses and materials are also crucial to the Network. Its coordination is assured by the national heritage department, but this does not mean any kind of formal authority over the members that do not belong to the state.

The articulation of networking and accreditation was indeed the very key for the success of the early stages in this network's development. The horizontal, voluntary, cooperative and incrementalist framework repelled rigid hierarchies and the bureaucratic tendency to treat formally and equally very different and plastic realities; and it allowed for interactive practices of sharing problems and resources and of reciprocal learning, with the technical support and professional leadership of well-

known and respected museologists. In a context of conspicuous political engagement, this provided the conditions for both quite a rapid expansion of the network and a qualitative jump, in a short lapse of time. In 2002, a new survey would indicate a notable progress of the standards of Portuguese museums: 56 per cent already met the minimal standard (they were only 29 per cent, four years earlier), and 22 per cent met the full set of rules (9 per cent in 1998) (Neves 2005b: 64-66). Of course, this progress is not a direct outcome of the Museums Network, whose implementation was at the very beginning; but it is an outcome of a broader political push of which the Network was a crucial element.

The comprehensive nature of cultural networking, as a public policy, is also to be found in failed experiences. That was the case of the first attempts to launch the National Network of Theatres (not to be confused with the national theatres managed by national government). After a sporadic move in the early 1990s, it was formally launched in 1998 by the Ministry of Culture. It got its inspiration from the basic principles of the former Libraries Network: cooperation between the state and municipalities, in order to rehabilitate existing facilities or to build new ones, throughout the territory, aiming to provide a set of appropriate venues for music, drama and dance, as well as for cinema. The Ministry funded up to 50 per cent of the construction costs, the local authorities being responsible for the other part, both with the support of private sponsorship and European funds. The Ministry also funded the first season of each theatre. Subsequent management and programming responsibilities would belong to municipalities, the legal owners of the venues (Centeno 2010: 118).

Several theatres were built or rehabilitated in the context of this policy, in the 1990s and 2000s, increasing substantially the scope and rhythm of earlier attempts to regenerate the Portuguese assets in this domain (29 new or rehabilitated theatres, in the first stage and the two lines of the programme, see Vargas 2011: 3-4). Yet, unlike the inspiring model, no common set of rules was previously defined, concerning physical structures, professional management, services to audiences and guidelines for season planning (Vargas 2011). On the other hand, the variable costs, namely due to the production and presentation of shows, concerts and plays, are much heavier than in libraries and museums, whose activity depends mainly upon collections, estates, and other permanent resources. Regarding performing arts, the critical dimension of networking is not the training and compliance with professional standards, and the mutual exchange of experience and information, but the circulation of companies, artists and works, as well as the practices of coproduction and other strategies to obtain scale economies. This is the core where the cooperative

nature of networking can prove the best, and its aggregate effects can impact the whole territory.

In 2000-2002, the Ministry of Culture launched a new programme, named Diffusion Programme in Performing Arts, addressing this issue. Again, it was a networking strategy, involving the joined effort of the state and municipalities. A platform was constituted, under the auspices of the National Department for Performing Arts, collecting the contacts and proposals of artists and companies wishing to publicize their services, on a strictly voluntary basis. On the other hand, the interested municipalities registered their requests in the same platform. An intermediation was then put into practice, trying to match supply and demand, taking into account agendas and prices, and profiting from the possibility to organize itinerancies through several local theatres in order to cut costs for the buyer and to maximise advantages for the supplier. The national authorities also co-funded part of the costs of each show that exceeded the 50 per cent necessarily covered by the concerned municipality. The logic of this co-funding was degressive, that is, the part committed to the Ministry would gradually decrease along the programme.

This was really a network: voluntary adherence, decentralisation of decisions, coordination and dissemination of information, soft regulation, interactions between multiple agents and in different directions, territorial coverage, partnerships, and variable-geometry. According to the evaluation commissioned by the Ministry (Santos 2004), this was indeed a successful methodology. But it did not survive the huge budget constraints of the first years of the new century. It would eventually reappear, in 2006, under the same philosophy but on a smaller dimension, as a new programme 'Territory-Arts' (Centeno 2010: 333-334). Consequently, without the commitment to a common standard, with no institutional body invested in regulatory and coordination responsibilities and without a strong funding system to support programming and itinerancies, the Theatres Network did not manage to constitute a network, despite its name and purpose (Centeno 2010: 333-337, based on her analysis of 12 theatres).

Lessons were learned, and eventually, in 2019, a new National Network of Theatres and Cinemas was created by law, and then effectively launched in 2021. Two elements were decisive for its implementation: public funding available, on a competitive basis, to support programming, and the formal accreditation of each facility as a sine qua non condition for belonging to the Network and benefiting from funding. In 2023, the National Network of Theatres and Cinemas comprises 85 facilities, located in 78 different municipalities (Neves 2024: 171-173).

So, as both a rhetorical label and a methodological tool, networking has achieved a pivotal position in the array of instruments used by cultural policies, in Portugal

as in many other countries, from the 1980s onwards. Besides libraries, museums and theatres, it was put into practice in other domains concerning heritage and arts (see Silva 2004; Garcia, 2014: 15-17; Neves 2024: 157-182). Only to mention the networks that are coordinated at the national level, by the Ministry of Culture, there is a Portuguese Archives Network, since 2008 (in a certain sense anticipated by the Municipal Archives Network initiated in 1998): in 2022, it included 46 archives, in 34 municipalities. And as recently as 2021, a new Portuguese Network of Contemporary Art was legally created, and is being implemented since 2023, joined by 66 entities located in 36 municipalities.

The three main cases that were analysed, concerning libraries, museums and theatres, seem to demonstrate the possibilities and limits of networking as a national policy in quite an eloquent way. It was an effective step ahead in the 'multi-level governance of cultural policies' (Bonet & Négrier 2010: 50), inaugurating a fruitful partnership between national government and local municipalities, and eventually evolving to additional specific cooperation between municipalities belonging to the same region. It generated important scale economies, enabling the promoters to reach new and important sources of funding – namely, European funds and private patronage – and improving the cost-effectiveness and territorial range of public investments in cultural facilities. It compelled the national authorities (headed by a minister of Culture in 1995-2011 and since 2015, and by a secretary of state in 1987-1995 and 2011-2015) to move towards more flexible and inductive regulation (therefore less vertical, rigid and bureaucratic). It pressured institutions and agents to invest in qualification and compliance with higher technical standards. The overall effect is notably positive.

As other strategies, networking can use the available resources more productively and mobilize more easily the stakeholders. But it cannot make up for their absence or fading. When budget cuts dramatically hit cultural policies and departments, networking could in fact soften, but not *eliminate* their impact. There was also a fatigue in the course of implementation, the pace of expansion slowing down through the years, because of the diminishing marginal gains, the supervening cutbacks and also because of the discursive saturation of such a labelling (see the evolution of the Museums Network in Table 3.1, and the evolution of compliance with museological standards in Table 3.2). The turning points occurred when, in the context of fiscal austerity, the government's appeal to public/public and to public/private partnerships and the implementation of principles derived from New Public Management were viewed, especially by artists, as tricky arguments for reducing public expenditure, downsizing public administration, privatizing cultural services and de-prioritizing cul-

tural policy. Networks, which emerged in Portuguese cultural policy, in the 1980s and 1990s, as fruitful mechanisms to multiply and articulate participants and to improve efficiency and impact, turned out to be sometimes denounced as a screen disguising sub-investment and privatisation.

Table 3.1.
The evolution of the number of institutions participating in the National Public Libraries Network and the Portuguese Museums Network, 1987-2022:

Year	The Libraries Network, launched in 1987	The Museums Network, launched in 2000
1990	7	–
1995	54	–
2001	106	64
2003	119	114
2011	194	131
2015	209	142
2022	245	165

Sources: Silva 2004; Neves 2013; www.rcbp.dglb; www.patrimoniocultural.pt.

Table 3.2.
The evolution of the museums, 1998-2009 (%):

% of museums complying with:	1998	2002	2006	2009
Minimal museological standards	29	56	62	58
Full museological standards	9	22	22	–

Sources: Neves 2005b, 2013.

3. Networking as a strategy for cultural resilience

The implementation and evolution of national networks of cultural institutions, in Portugal, documents in a rather sound way the ambivalence of such a tool for public policies. It has initiated a new form of articulating national and local policies, stressing the very entrance of municipalities as key players in the field of cultural policies. Indeed, from the mid-1990s onwards, municipalities would represent the main source of public expenditure in this domain (see chapter 4). The networking

discourse has also been a powerful impulse to motivate institutions, professionals and the administration to fully engage in communication and cooperation, jointly addressing modern and international standards of quality and efficacy. The networking strategy reformed traditionally rigid practices of central administration, making regulatory actions more flexible and supportive. It was the main instrument to promote decentralisation and territorial coverage, and, in that sense, it can be related to the policies of 'devolution' of powers to territories that emerged in Great Britain and Continental Europe, during the 1990s. However, networking is mostly a methodology: it has to do with the way of doing things. As such, it can maximise opportunities and resources, but it cannot replace them. So, when the upward trend of cultural policies stopped, in the first years of the 21st century, after a very short period of expansion, and Portugal returned to rather mediocre levels of symbolic, political and financial investment in culture, the functionality of the networking slogan to justify public retraction and push privatisation became also apparent. As an emblem for progressive and ambitious national cultural policies, networking lost a great part of its previous charm.

But the story does not end here. The need to find a way through hard times of fiscal austerity and political periphery compelled many agents to revisit the inspirational and branding effect of networks and to act according to networking rules. These agents include public and private ones, artistic and political, central or peripheral in their respective fields. If one draws on the useful model proposed by Bonet and Négrier (2010: 42-44), distinguishing four types of agents influencing cultural policies – institutions, markets, the non-profit cultural sector, and the political sphere – and reading these policies along the dialectic standardisation/differentiation and legitimacy/efficiency, the renewal of networking discourse and practice, in recent years, can be easily interpreted.

First of all, several political and managerial initiatives to reduce costs by rescaling activities and organisations can be, and in fact have been, conceptually presented as 'networking'. The initiatives included, among other ingredients: the formal cooperation, or even fusion, between big public institutions, as national theatres or companies, or central management bodies (see Vargas, 2021); the orientation towards multi-level public partnerships, involving for instance cultural and touristic departments, or national, regional and local authorities; the incentive to public/private partnership, shifting for example the legal nature of public services to foundational or other non-exclusively public regimes. This defensive or adaptive strategy, trying to compensate the financial restrictions with resource-sharing, is one of the observable procedures, noticeable at the political, administrative and institutional level.

Second, the outcomes of precedent interventions, that upgraded the available public cultural facilities, mainly theatres and concert-halls, but also museums, galleries and multidisciplinary complexes, and the training and certification, by arts schools, colleges and universities, of a younger and wider group of cultural professionals, like interpreters, directors, choreographers, managers, curators, technicians, or other sorts of artists, agents and mediators, set up new conditions for programming, producing and performing. One of the ways to develop such a work in a hostile fiscal context was exploring the possibilities of mutual communication, information exchange and partnership. The attempt to establish a scale of production and circulation of works and performances that could be more efficient and profitable, and the routinisation of joint efforts – involving, in the field of performing or fine arts, co-productions of plays, concerts or exhibitions and their itinerancy throughout multiple locations – logically led to the gradual configuration of common platforms, that is, networks. In the first two decades of the 21st century, one could identify these networks, in Portugal, in the field of heritage, fine arts, music, drama and dance.

Three traits differentiated them from the centrally promoted national networks of the 1980s and 1990s (resumed and renovated in 2019-2023). One was their bottom-up nature, designed as they were by the increasing practices of cooperation put into action by the institutions themselves – as it was the case with the co-production networks joining one or two state theatres, municipal venues and independent companies of various cities in the country – or by municipalities belonging to the same region, some of them already used to collaborate in other domains. The second distinctive feature was the predominance of horizontal cooperation, along a 'branch' of the world of art or a regional space, over the precedent asymmetric relationship between a municipality or agent and the central public administration. And the third difference lay in the context, a context of difficulties and survival, and not one of development and expansion.

The fact is that, methodologically, networking can prove effective both in periods of growth and crisis. It has been an effective strategy to cope with the severe financial situation of arts in Portugal, during the period 2011-2014 (a period of dramatic constraints to national and local budgets, due to the Adjustment Programme imposed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund – see chapter 10). But it was already in place before that period, applying the logic of territorial decentralisation that had inspired the Libraries Network and the Museums Network, and responding to the less developmental stance regarding culture that characterised national governments, in the first decade of the 21st century, by means of stronger engagement from local authorities and increasing cooperation between art institutions. And it remained an adequate tool for the consolidation of a

world of art, in Portugal, after the end of the Adjustment Program. One can actually observe the survival and improvement of several networks, and the launching of new ones, since 2015.

Let us take a few examples. The first one is *Artemrede – Teatros Associados* (*Art-innetwork – Associated Theatres*). After the conclusion of the rehabilitation or construction of a certain number of venues, the Development Department of the Lisbon Region (a government body) proposed to several municipalities a cooperative scheme to improve the planning of the activities of the new theatres. In 2005, an association was formally constituted; in 2018, it included 15 municipalities (see Lopes 2019: 83-96), 17 in 2025. Its role is being an interface in the supply-demand chain between these theatres and the artistic milieu, assuring coherence, cost-effectiveness and economies of scale to the theatres' programming. Thus *Artemrede* provides annually a catalogue of plays, concerts and other artistic shows, to be performed in at least three venues. Besides this function, it also commissions artists for specific productions and participates in co-productions with other partners. It organizes training for municipal and theatre staff, and cares for local education services and community projects involving amateur dramatics or other forms of popular engagement. So, a small technical staff guarantees the coordination of the management and programming tasks of several independent municipal theatres, acting as 'cultural mediators' (in their own words), facilitating contacts between theatres, between theatres and artists, and between theatres and schools, associations or local institutions. Simultaneously, the scale constituted by the union of 17 different municipalities represents an asset regarding applications for European funds (one of the main sources of revenue for *Artemrede*, the other being the contributions of the associates). This is rightly conceived as networking (see www.artemrede.pt; Lopes 2019).

Similar to this model is *5 Sentidos* (*Five Senses*). This network was launched, in 2009, by five 'cultural structures', that is theatres and art centres, totalling, in 2014, 12 entities. According to them, the aim was 'to promote networking in cultural programming and artistic production'. The main outputs were, on the one hand, (a) co-productions of plays and performances and (b) artistic residences and workshops, and, on the other hand, (c) 'presentation circuits', meaning the itinerancy of works among the network's members. Two differences distinguish *5 Sentidos* from *Artemrede*: its nodes are theatres of various natures – state-owned, municipal or independent structures – and not the municipalities as such; and it is a thematic, not a regional network, ranging from Lisbon and Porto to North, Centre and Alentejo Regions and even including the Azores Islands (for a research focused on the first stage of the project, see Ferreira *et al.* 2016). On a rather different scale, as it comprehends five small municipalities of the Northern Portugal and, as a participant and the main sponsor, a local private en-

ergy utility, the *Comédias do Minho* (*Minho Comedies*) presents another distinct feature: in this case, the municipalities joined together to create, in 2003, a new professional theatre company (see chapter 6).

If one moves to heritage, another resource of cultural networking will be noticeable: its linkage to economic activities, especially tourism. Take, for instance, the Romanesque Route. In 1998, the six municipalities of Vale do Sousa, a sub-region in the Northwest, began to plan the joint exploration of their rich heritage in mediaeval churches, chapels, monasteries, towers and bridges built in Romanesque style. The formal launching of a professional team to coordinate the network occurred in 2006. Three years later, it was admitted in Transromanica, the Romanesque Route of European Heritage, an international network headquartered in Germany. In 2010, six other municipalities from a neighbouring sub-region joined the Route. Meanwhile, it was qualified for European and national funds, financing the rehabilitation and preservation works in several monuments, as well as the production of information and tourism materials. 'Cultural and landscape touring' is an explicit target of this inter-municipal initiative, and the provided services include visits to the monuments and sites, information on local history, folklore and gastronomy, roadmaps and practical tips for open-air activities, and the indispensable aid to tourists. 58 monuments and three interpretation centres, located in 12 municipalities, are currently part of the Route (see www.rotadoromanico.pt).

Other similar historical routes are being established, taking advantage of the richness of Portuguese heritage. Normally, municipalities act as protagonists, in partnership with the property owners (generally the Catholic Church, when it is not the state), with other levels of the cultural administration, with schools and universities, and also with official departments and private entrepreneurs in the appropriate segment of the tourism market. Archaeological sites (organised, since 1996, into a regional circuit in Alentejo and Algarve, see Neves 2024: 54-55); military defence lines and fortresses or groups of monuments territorially dispersed, but assembled by style (like the Cistercian Route, since 2019) or historical background (like the Jewries Route, in the Centre Region), are examples of this strategy. Within the Museums Network, several regional networks were also established (see Neves 2013: 27-29; Camacho 2014a). Again, network is an adequate classifier, used by promoters as a concept and an emblem: horizontal cooperation, joint efforts, a minimal common structure and soft regulation, multi-partner governance, openness and flexibility, technical benchmarking, and economies of scale.

Therefore, at this level of cultural policies – regional and local policies put into practice by multiple social and political actors, in quite a bottom-up manner – net-

working resisted a certain exhaustion of its former use as a key instrument of national, comprehensive and expanding cultural policies. Furthermore, it resurged as a pertinent micro-meso strategy to foster cooperation and gain critical mass. One of the terrains in which this resurgence is clearly observable, and in a positive outlook, is urban cultural policy (Bell & Oakley 2015: 76-108). It has to do with the governance of cultural 'districts' or 'quarters', assembling arts and creative industries in urban environments, and putting together, usually under the umbrella of a common brand and with the support of local authorities, individual artists and creative entrepreneurs, professional and economic associations, and public departments and policies. The two main cities, Lisbon and Porto, are the centres of such 'creative networks'; but they are spreading, in recent years, throughout the chain of middle cities (see chapter 4; Costa 2008).

4. Concluding remarks: networking and collective cultural action

The analysis of the Portuguese situation points out a balance between two main uses of the concept and method of networking. Adapting the terms of Valentina Montalto (2010), this is a balance between 'macro-policies' and meso/'micro-practices', between predominantly top-down and predominantly bottom-up strategies.

In the national networks launched by the government since 1987, municipalities and local cultural institutions have been invited to join in partnership, in a win-win interplay framed by national and international standards. Territorial coverage, institutional consolidation and national regulation based on cooperation were the key goals. In the regional and/or thematic networks that emerged or became more visible in the 21st century, the protagonists are either local political bodies and facilities, or specific cultural and artistic agents (individual or collective; coming from the institutional sphere, the non-profit sector or even from the cultural or touristic market). In many cases these two kinds of players do cooperate, with one another and all of them with national authorities. Territories, themes and/or personal relationships are the most important links that structure the networking. During the several critical circunstances experienced in the first two decades of this century, this qualitative rescaling was felt to be indispensable to survive the huge financial cuts and the general retraction of state and patrons regarding heritage and arts. But it also proved to be suitable for developmental strategies, before and after the big financial crisis of 2011-2014, both at the national and local levels of cultural policy. At the same time, because of its flexibility and gradualism, networking appears to cultural agents and institutions as an effective way of sharing assets, diminishing costs, maximising social impact and political lobbying, and organising cooperation. It also seems to be the most appropriate governance to improve and manage the urban 'creative industries'.

This is, of course, a matter of discourse. The rhetorical might of words like network and networking is not negligible. They are fashionable, suggesting familiarity with the trendy ideology of information technologies, connectivity, social networks, digital economy and online politics. They anticipate the promised land of individual autonomy, horizontal relations, informality, cooperation and creativity. There is a fresh manner to exhort people to join and act together. They annul spatial friction, allowing for close contact and interaction even when people are physically distant. None of these discursive effects should be depreciated, since argument and debate are at the very core of democracy. But one must not assume them as necessary characteristics that exist whenever the 'network society' is at stake. They have to be put in relation with many other dimensions of social action and structure, such as empowerment, dominance, hegemony, inequality, hierarchy, tension and conflict (Castells 2007). And the resultant complex of social factors and outcomes must be investigated in concrete empirical figurations (in Norbert Elias' sense of the word, that is, as singular multi-dimensional situations, see Elias 1978).

Meanwhile, being an emblem, networking is more than a simple rhetorical device. It also defines a policy: it is a guideline and tool to implement a certain kind of public policies. Whatever the level from which originates, it distinctively attempts to articulate multi-level governance and to implement flexible organisational forms, generally territorially anchored. As such, it really constitutes a fruitful methodology for cultural public policies, in times of expansion as in times of restrictions. Its richness lies in the possibility of combining distinct political players – state, regions and cities; administrative bodies and institutions; market and non-profit sectors – and to cope in a more elastic way with the dialectic centre/periphery and standardisation/differentiation that so strongly informs cultural policy (Bonet & Négrier 2010).

Networking is also a practice. Conceptually, this is indeed its crucial element: a form of collective action based on flexible links and common goals. This action is distinctively embodied in a structure that opposes the classic pattern of hierarchical, closed systems – well defined and delimitated from the external environment, and led by clearly established instances of decision (the pyramid's apex) – adopting the alternative pattern of open systems of social relations that crosscut vertical with horizontal fluxes, and allow for simultaneous and conflictive directions in the allocation of resources and authority, the communication flows and the exercise of influence and power. (Please note that a network does not imply the absence of power, but a specific 'geometry' of power relations).

These are, of course, Weberian ideal-types, the real situations being more or less distant from the abstract, general description, and usually combining the two models in hybrid mixes. But all the analytical and normative comparison of network and hi-

erarchy turns around this point: what is the most favourable framework for collective action and what is the most adequate governance to structure it?

Governance is therefore a key issue (see Stoker 1998). At the minimum, a network may only be a way to connect people, allowing communication between them. It is one of its basic functions, and one can easily see this in the increasing number of European and international networks, linking artists, art institutions and cultural agents (see Minichbauer & Mitterdorfer 2000: 2-4). It would be tedious to detail the obvious and numerous examples. Second, a network may be an organisational platform – a locus for contact, resource pooling and sharing, information exchange, reciprocal learning, and more or less continuous and wide-ranging cooperation in the activities of fundraising, artistic and technical production, economic management or in the circulation and distribution of goods and services.

But a network can also be an alternative way – alternative to the hegemonic institutional arenas – of constituting and developing a 'coalition' of cultural agents and cultural forms. In this sense, networking contributes to moving peripheries towards the centre or to transform peripheries into new centres. It may better preserve differentiation and diversity from standardising inputs, and counterbalance hegemony with strong social and territorial anchorages (see, for Latin America, Delfin 2012). In this case, the network tends to act as a *specific* player – not as if it were an individual, uniform subject, but as what it really is: an internally plural, heterogeneous, variable, yet coherent entity or movement. Both as a concept and a guideline for action, the networking idea proposes a form of structuring and a model of governance that draws the energy from plurality and diversity to propel collective praxis. That is why it deserves detailed empirical analysis and careful theoretical elaboration.