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Introductory note

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TEMA

CULTURE, WELL-BEING AND HEALTH

by ANNALISA CICERCHIA* and CATTERINA SEIA**

On 18 September 2017, an issue of Economia della Cultura, edited by Carla Bodo and Pier Luigi Sacco, came out with the title 'Culture, health, well-being'.

That issue had put together an initial choral base of culture scholars to launch, within the discipline, the idea of cultural welfare, in theory and in practice. The editors had assembled a large group of international contributors (Rod Fisher, Daniel Fujiwara, Ricky N. Lawton and Susana Mourato for the UK, Kevin V. Mulcahy for the United States, and Jaana Erkkilä-Hill for Finland). Other authors who, three years later, would follow Catterina Seia in setting up the CCW-Cultural Welfare Centre (Pier Luigi Sacco, Enzo Grossi, Annalisa Cicerchia and Alessandra Rossi Ghiglione) had also participated in the venture, and many other¹ authors who, drawing on their experiences, had spoken about music and cinema, hospitals and theatre, Parkinson's dance and clowns, visual arts and Alzheimer's, statistical measures and evidence, policies, and experiments.

It was an unusual, courageous, but not reckless operation. In the UK and Scandinavian countries, the theme had been gaining ground since the mid-1990s. In Italy, the pioneers of cultural welfare were working, with studies and operational projects of great value, albeit discontinuous and insufficiently coordinated, at least since the beginning of the new millennium. As Sacco recalled in his contribution to that issue of Economia della Cultura, the journal The Lancet had even published a «Manifesto on Culture and Health» in 2014.

What did this idea need, to overcome the experimental and fragmented phase, to take off and gradually acquire the character of a real and new welfare policy strategy?

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Mainly – it was argued at the time – three things.

The first was to consolidate the evidence base for policy design, starting with a conceptual frame of reference appropriate to both the world of culture and the world of health and social service.

The second was the opening of a stable dialogue of the cultural and artistic sectors active in the field of well-being and health with the other sectors involved, and especially the system of health institutions.

The third was the move away from the occasionality of most experiences and their transition to validated and transferable processes, methods and techniques in the form of knowledge, skills and abilities of practitioners.

*Two years after the publication of the *Economia della Cultura* issue, at the end of 2019, the World Health Organisation offered the scientific and practice community of cultural welfare (not always aware of its own existence) a contribution capable of generating a decisive breakthrough. This is a systematic review of the medical literature in English and Russian, edited by Fancourt and Finn, entitled *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review*². The review of over 3,000 studies allows the authors to classify the main areas of benefit of regular and systematic involvement in specific arts and cultural activities: health promotion, and the prevention, management, and treatment of illnesses. From that publication began, within the World Health Organisation, a line of research and experimentation on the role of the arts in supporting health and wellbeing, which would give rise to a dedicated international centre and produce publications and manuals, such as the very recent one on social prescribing that we discuss in this issue, and projects such as *Music and Motherhood*, which tests the efficacy of regular group singing sessions to combat postnatal depression. In this issue, Calum Smith explores the new directions of this research, which aims to isolate the most important, so to speak, ‘active ingredients’ contained in artistic and cultural practices for well-being and health.*

*The perspective is reinforced during the harshest months of the pandemic, and a study conducted in some 20 European countries highlights the effectiveness of cultural or artistic practices, from reading to music and dance, in counteracting fear, anxiety and other negative moods and in creating opportunities for confidence, optimism and a sense of the future*³.

*Also in 2020, the Treccani Atlas of Culture includes ‘Cultural Welfare’ among its key headwords*⁴. It has been followed, in 2023, by one dedicated to *Medical Humanities*⁵.

The first Executive Master’s Degree Course on Culture and Health (Giulia Mezzalama talks about it in this issue) started in 2021 in Italy at the initiative of the CCW-Cultural Welfare Centre.

*In the same year, the European Commission co-funded a major preparatory action of evidence gathering and literature review, *Culture For Health* (see article by Zbranca and Damaso), which closed in summer 2023.*

*In 2022, the EU’s Open Method of Coordination for Cultural Policies programme, *Voices of Culture*, devotes one of its sessions to the contribu-*

tion of arts and culture to the well-being and mental health of young people (Caroleo and Cicerchia discuss this here).

Although still in an initial phase, the cultural welfare starts appearing between the research themes funded by the Horizon Europe program, besides Creative Europe and the European Institute of Technology.

The possibility – and responsibility – for the arts and cultural sectors to contribute to the well-being and health of citizens is reaffirmed, with a prominent place among the 21 axes, in the European Commission's Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026. The road travelled has been a long one, and Pier Luigi Sacco, who was one of its protagonists, proposes here a political and institutional synthesis of it.

This special issue of *Economia della Cultura*, in continuity with the work of 2017, confirms the goodness of its insights and orientations, and measures, to some extent, its progress.

Much has been done in the direction of making evidence available to policies.

New perspectives have been opened from the point of view of lifelong learning, as much on the side of the health professions as on the side of the cultural and artistic professions, looking at the necessary evolution of higher education.

Cultural institutions – theatres, museums, libraries – which have done a lot of work in the last decade on universal accessibility and audience development, are renegotiating their role, away from all 'do-goodism', and recognising the social impact in their missions, at a constitutive level.

Still very much in its infancy, albeit with beautiful and valuable firsts, is the creation of structural relationships between the health and arts and cultural sectors, as vigorously indicated in 2018 by the 2030 Agenda for Culture, which introduces the vision of cultural cross-overs, i.e. the value of the systematic and systemic relationship between culture and other once weakly interconnected policy domains, pointing to it as the way to adequately address complexity and as a pillar of policies in the coming decades.

This issue however testifies, with the plurality of viewpoints and actors involved – 36 authors! – how cultural welfare today is a perspective capable of mobilising energies of thought and action design, in the face of major social challenges, in an inescapable alliance between public institutions and social investors, cultural organisations, health and social services, for the construction of individual and collective well-being. Beyond the individual projects, for the design of policies within a framework of equity, for a plural society, starting with the fight against growing inequalities.

Because, if it is established that cultural participation generates wellbeing, it is necessary to «bring on board especially those who are not there»⁶.

Notes

¹ The other members of CCW – Cultural Welfare Centre, the first centre focusing on Culture and Health in Italy are: Antonella Agnoli, Andrea Bartoli, Emanuele Caroppo,

Cristina Cenci, Giuseppe Costa, Luca Dal Pozzolo, Elena Franco, Elisa Fulco, Irene Sanesi, Alessandra Venturini, and Flaviano Zandonai.

² Fancourt, D., and S. Finn (2019), *Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67. What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being? A Scoping Review*. World Health Organization.

<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/329834/9789289054553-eng.pdf>.

³ <https://art-wellbeing.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Research-Art-Well-being-during-Covid-19.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlane/cultura/Welfare.html>

⁵ <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/eol-medical-humanities/>

⁶ <https://www.icom-italia.org/definizione-di-museo/>

⁷ <https://www.aib.it/notizie/nuovo-manifesto-ifla-unesco-biblioteche-pubbliche/>

⁸ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371562>

⁹ <https://www.compagniadisanpaolo.it/it/le-nostre-sfide/obiettivo-cultura/parole-concettive-prospettive-della-partecipazione-attiva/>

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