

Should the Government Subsidize the Arts?

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When Sinclair Lewis wrote *Babbitt*, middle America regarded the arts and humanities as an effete Eastern indulgence appropriate at best for women and college professors. *Tempora mutantur et nos mutamus in illis*. The *New Yorker* magazine is now eagerly read by the little old ladies in Dubuque, for whom it was not meant. More than forty percent of the relevant age group attends college; many students come out with a vague but strong feeling that art is more creative and romantic than business and science; it also seems to go better with pleasure and sex. The arts now are madly in fashion throughout the country. Artists readily become media celebrities.

The government has jumped into the arts with both feet (not an inept metaphor); it has decided that the arts require subsidies and a bureaucracy to administer them. Our government is convinced that everything good ought to be subsidized. Not even sex is an exception; the federal government subsidizes courses in sex education — teaching, at least, how not to do it. The government always concerns itself with problems — usually by means of subsidies — when a constituency can be discerned or created. Now there is one for the arts. Hence, Presidents, congressmen and senators can acquire cachet and reputations as cultivated and sensitive intellectuals by advocating more federal expenditures on the arts. President Kennedy started much of the rhetoric; President Nixon increased the budgetary appropriations. Ever since, the federal budget for the arts in all forms has grown by leaps and bounds. Although they deplore high taxes and huge benefits, the Congress and the Executive have been remarkably generous to the arts. The matter raises some questions:

(1) What is the role of the arts in American society, and what can it be? What should it be?

(2) What is the role of the government in the arts? What should it be? Do Americans want their tax money to be spent for the arts by their representatives? Or, would they prefer to decide individually how much money to spend on works of

art and on which works? What would happen without government subsidies?

(3) If the arts actually do require a government subsidy, what or who should be subsidized and by what selection procedures?

Although major philosophers such as Plato and Hegel were doubtful about their value, much can be said for the arts. However, it is essential to distinguish arguments for the arts and for their support from arguments for government support of the arts. This essential distinction is seldom made. Yet, whatever can be said for the arts is certainly not sufficient by itself to justify any government subsidies. To be sure, the arts give pleasure to some — a special quality of pleasure or, better, desired experience — and employment to others. But so do whiskey and religion. Hence, an argument for government support of the arts must indicate not only what characteristics make the arts socially (and not just individually) desirable or necessary, but also those characteristics that suggest why government subsidies to the arts are justified and needed while they are not for whiskey or religion. It must be shown that private funds are not likely to support the arts to the degree or in the manner justified by their social usefulness, while government subsidies can do so.

The type of argument required is familiar; it is used to argue for public support of parks, or beaches, or police forces: they are needed, useful and desired, but differ from other nice things that may be purchased privately; they benefit not only the individuals willing to spend money for them, but, to a significant extent, the community as a whole, including those who would not volunteer to pay or cannot afford to. An adequate argument for federal support of the arts must show, then, that they yield indivisible collective benefits (as does the police force). If the arts do yield such benefits and they are of sufficient magnitude, the government is justified in compelling individuals to pay taxes, compulsory levies, to pay for the arts, regardless of whether an individual taxpayer feels benefited. Further, the collective benefit yielded by the arts must be shown to exceed the benefits to be expected if every person were to pay for whatever art he wished and could afford to buy. Finally, there must be good reason to believe that the government will not be (much) worse as a patron of art than private individuals are. Note that whatever arguments there are for

public support of art probably could be made for subsidies to religion as well. Indeed, religion is subsidized in most European countries. But, for historical-constitutional reasons, no attempt is made to subsidize religion in this country. It has thrived nonetheless — which gives food for thought.

Historical Precedents for Subsidies

The argument for public support of the arts has been convincing since Pericles' time. Sculpture, architecture, music, painting, literature, as well as what today are called the humanities — historiography and scholarship — have been very largely supported by public funds since antiquity. Temples and statues of the gods were erected with public funds. *Mutatis mutandis* public funds were spent for the arts in the Middle Ages. The arts were used to erect monuments to shared beliefs and to celebrate communal feeling; they also celebrated royal houses (literally and symbolically), and the nations, regions and religions of which they were emblematic.

Public expenditures for the arts have begun to be questioned only since the Industrial Revolution. Until then, public funds were disbursed by religious authorities and by the courts of the nobility; no one was able to question them. The distinction between the prince's (or the bishop's) personal funds and those administered by him was vague. He could dispose of either to foster the arts if it pleased him. His expenditure was accepted as it was in antiquity; tradition indicated that the arts, as did religion, bind together, help make into a cohesive whole, the society in which they flourish. They are an essential part of what civilizes, of the meaning-conferring essence, the soul of the culture of any society — as was the religion the arts used to celebrate. (The word, after all, came from *re-ligare*, to bind strongly.) With the Renaissance the arts became more secular. But the princes — of church or state — who supported them were still regarded as the embodiment of the polity. Their taste and their expenditure were not questioned and the glorification of their reign through the arts was seen as the glorification of the polity.

Whatever their merit, these arguments scarcely justify tax-paid subsidies for the arts today, particularly in the U.S. The arguments are relevant neither to modern art in modern conditions, nor to ancient art in modern conditions, nor to any art in the U.S. Aristocracy and church have not been

sufficiently dominant in our political history and mixed up with the nation-forming process to justify replacing their support of the arts with a government subsidy. Nor did the arts themselves ever play much of a role in sustaining our national cohesion. They do not now.

Whatever the value of opera (I happen to be a passionate opera lover), it cannot be said, as it may be said in Italy or Austria, that opera has contributed to our national cohesion, history, culture, or consciousness — or that it has any chance of doing so now. Opera was an exotic import of and for the rich who were also willing to pay for it. The educated middle class is getting interested in it now. But, it is not clear why those who want opera are entitled to compel others to pay for it — even though these others, in the main, prefer unsubsidized movies or Broadway shows. A subsidy to opera supports or expands our national consciousness as much as a subsidy to the manufacture or the wearing of tails and top hats would.

What is true for opera is as true for classical music, for dance, including ballet, and, by and large, for the great works of art in our museums. They did not play an important role in our history or in forging or celebrating our national bonds — though they did in Europe (which, however, survived their export). We have marvelous things in our museums. But they did not get there through government activities and did not celebrate those activities or our national history, cultural or political. The contents of our museums have nothing to do with our national life, and they have not contributed to our national cohesion or identity. They are politically and socially irrelevant to us (whatever their aesthetic merit).

Tin pan alley, jazz, rock, or baseball are more important in the celebration of American values, not only in the working classes and among adolescents, but also in the upper classes and even among educated groups. They need no subsidy.

Subsidizations of Sports and TV

For quite a while, sports (and now TV) have been important elements in our culture and our cohesion, together with the automobile and the lengthening years of instructional and custodial care in schools imposed on the young. But the arts? Certainly not those in museums. Nor the modern artists the government is eager to subsidize. They may or may not be great. But they are at best marginal to American culture. It is

not likely that this will change.

If TV or if sports do play the role I have attributed to them, should they be subsidized? They seem to do quite well, thank you, without government subsidy. If the exclusive support of TV by advertisers is regarded as a hindrance to possible informational or aesthetic achievements, there is no reason that TV could not be paid for directly by the viewers, as books or magazines are paid for by those who buy them or are willing to subsidize them. Unsubsidized literature has done well in the U.S. The case for public TV is as questionable as the case for government-financed newspapers, magazines or books even though the federal and local governments insist on subsidizing public TV and radio.¹

Unavoidably, public TV is biased. The values presented are not those prevailing among Americans at large, but those of the producers and of the public TV audience, both middle-class liberal. In its more political presentations public TV is definitely "left" of the public that pays for it. (No conspiracy: the people involved find it hard to take seriously values other than their own.) Apart from everything else it seems hard to justify publicly subsidized TV, for it simply amounts to a tax-paid subsidy to upper middle class viewers dissatisfied with commercial offerings addressed to the less educated.

To summarize: the arts are not among the activities which contribute enough to social cohesion, national identity, or shared values in the U.S. to justify support by the government. On the other hand, the activities which would deserve support on these grounds scarcely need it. Sports and TV and rock concerts are doing all right without government subsidy. The schools already are amply supported, and they do incidentally support the arts by supporting artists, writers and other representatives of the arts directly and indirectly.

So far I have confined myself to denying that there is any justification for government subsidies to the arts under modern American conditions. The tacit assumption was that, whether or not a subsidy could be justified, the government could help the arts to flower by subsidizing them. This assumption must now be questioned: it seems unlikely that the government

1. New York City, teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, insists on taxing business to support its own radio and TV stations. (The cost is negligible, but why is it needed? As a tourist attraction?)

can help the arts by subsidizing them. Even though it does inflate the quantity of art produced, the government subsidy may actually harm the arts.

The most cogent argument against any form of censorship of art by the government² is, very simply, that the government is unlikely to be able to tell bad, worthless (pseudo) art from good. Wherefore, censorship would damage the arts by suppressing "good" as readily as "bad" art. If the government could distinguish valuable from valueless art and would get rid of only the worthless stuff, censorship would make everyone's life easier, as garbage removal does. But no one attributes such powers of discrimination to the government. Indeed, a major part of the general argument for freedom is that we cannot trust any government (democratic or otherwise) to tell vice from virtue, good from bad. If we could, we might not mind if the government subsidized virtue and suppressed vice. As it is, we prefer to leave such decisions to individuals (a few extreme cases excepted), because we have no reason to believe that the government could do better and much reason to believe it would do worse.

Well, if the government cannot be trusted to tell which art is so bad as to deserve suppression, how can it be trusted to tell which art is so good as to deserve subsidization? Either the government can or it cannot tell good from bad art. The answer is that it cannot. This seems to me just as conclusive an argument against government subsidies to art, as it is an argument against government censorship of art.³

In practice the government's subsidies to art unavoidably become indiscriminate. (This is how the government protects itself against criticism and creates a wide, supportive constituency.) The government cannot actually subsidize art. At best it can and will subsidize a wide range of organizations or persons who claim to be producing art.

Supporting Fool's Gold

Now, a lot of ore has to be mined to get a little gold. One may argue that a lot of subsidy has to be spent on many un-

2. Let me leave aside pornography here.

3. The traditional European subsidies (often combined with censorship) were given by taste-makers, by a cultural elite. Our government does not aspire to that status and we have no tradition conferring it. (*Deo gratias*).

worthy artists so that the few worthy artists can be helped. However, there are relevant differences between mining and subsidized art production.

One difference need only be restated. Mining is not subsidized. It pays for itself — the purchasers of the metal pay more than enough for the necessary processes, including the mining of the ore that has to be discarded. Gold mining, thus, is analogous to the private purchase of art or, if you please, the private subsidy given to art producers. It is not analogous to government subsidies. Subsidies suggest that whatever worthwhile art they help produce is not worth enough to the public to persuade it to pay for the whole process, including the worthless art that is being subsidized. Thus, the government compels the taxpayer to do what he does not volunteer to do. I can find no justification for this policy.

There is an even more important difference between mining ore and art production. Payments to the mining industry may lead to more exploration and mining. But they cannot increase the total amount of gold-bearing ore that nature provided. Above all, such payments will not encourage the production of fake or imitation gold since consumers (and even the government) are quite capable of discriminating. Subsidies to art also may lead to more utilization of talent, although they cannot increase the pool of artistic talent provided by nature. But — and this is the decisive difference — a subsidy to art will attract people who would not have become artists without it. Art, unlike gold, is not definable so that the government could exclude subsidies to the untalented. We are forced to subsidize the mining of fool's gold as much as the mining of actual artistic gold, for the government cannot discriminate. The more we subsidize, the larger *the proportion* of fool's gold, of pseudo-art, in the end product being subsidized.

Normally, art production is self-selective. Few people produce art for the sake of money. The main reward is intrinsic — *ars gratia artis*. Artists are willing to risk foregoing income for the sake of self-rewarding achievement however much they hope it will be publicly recognized and become materially rewarding as well. Not that hungry artists are better artists. On the contrary. But the high risk of low income deters those more interested in income than in art and leaves mainly those who are artists for the sake of art, whether or not they are able to produce anything valuable.

Subsidies, however, will increase art production by attracting producers who, without the subsidy, would not have produced — those whose passion for art was not sufficient, without the subsidy, to induce them to risk sacrificing income. Subsidies may actually make it harder for true artists to succeed. Although more money is made available, there also is more competition for it. In this competition, the true artist is likely to be undone by those who, consciously or unconsciously, are interested mainly in money. They will be more worldly-wise, better competitors. After all, they are not distracted by artistic concerns and ambitions.

Lacking original talent, the pseudo artist will be more imitative and, therefore, more easily understood and more appealing — and more eligible for subsidies. A subsidy to something or somebody actually original and valid is harder to justify than a subsidy to something appealing, unoriginal and, therefore, more easily understood. Those in charge of subsidization will be safer by going with the fashion, not by helping unknowns who create new things. (This reasoning applies least to those matters which can be demonstrated, for instance, by experiment — and most to the least demonstrable things, foremost art.)

To speak of subsidizing art is, of course, to use a metaphor. One can only buy specific works of art or help specific artists. Since there are no generally accepted qualifications and no agreement on what or who is meritorious, government organizations must subsidize artists who have already been widely recognized — and need the subsidy least — or distribute their bounty so that every claimant supported by regional taste or by the taste of any major social group gets some. (This is, among other things, what Mr. Herbert Gans advocates in his *Popular Culture*.⁴) Aesthetically this is counterproductive. Bad art, as does bad money, drives out good.

Government subsidies, finally, are biased in favor of the performing arts. Officials feel they can measure quality by the dubious gauge of popularity; this is easier to do with an orchestra than with a composer. The performing arts also involve far more people — performers, support personnel

4. Basic Books, New York, 1975. Gans has a populist point; rather than rely on the government's aesthetic discrimination, we might as well give up aesthetic discrimination, a middle class prejudice, and replace it by some sort of popular vote.

and the public — than are involved in the lonely act of, say, composing a score or writing a critical essay. Hence, a large constituency. Wherefore, more and more subsidies go to the performing arts. The Metropolitan Opera or the Duluth Philharmonic is subsidized. The further natural bias of subsidies is toward popular performances and expansion of audiences at the expense of quality. It is in this way that political support can be secured.

Much more could be said along these lines. But the idea should be clear by now. (a) There is no good sociopolitical reason for the government to compel taxpayers to subsidize government-selected art; (b) to do so compels all classes to subsidize the middle class; (c) to do so is more likely to harm than to help in the creation of actual, valuable art.

Subsidies to Museums

What would happen if the government — local and federal — were to cease supporting the arts?⁵ What would happen to museums and galleries which have come to depend on subsidies?

Museums acquire, preserve and display art both of the past and of the present. (They also engage in scholarly and educational activities incidental to their task.) Since much of the acquisition funds of museums now comes from private donations, government subsidies here are unimportant. Even if museums, left without subsidies, ceased to buy art and use acquisition money for maintenance, there would be no damage. The migration of old art from Europe and Asia into the U.S. and from private into public hands would be slowed. (The prices paid for ancient art would fall.) Since most museums have far more art than they are able to display, no less would be displayed than is now displayed. The egos of museum directors and curators would suffer greatly. But there would be no other damage. Failure to buy modern art would reduce its prices somewhat and its production. Again, no other effects are likely. Art is not produced for museums. Nor should it be. But, let me repeat, most acquisition would continue since funding for this purpose is supplied by private donations.

Preservation of art, old or new, however acquired, is costly. So is the display of art under reasonable conditions. It is this

5. I distinguish tax exemption (not taking money) from support (giving money) and do not oppose the first.

cost, which museums incur unavoidably, that is largely paid for by public subsidies. There is an arguable social interest in preserving art for future generations; hence, some of the cost of preservation, as distinguished from the cost of display, may well be defrayed out of tax funds. However, there is no reason why those who are currently gratified by viewing art should compel others to pay for their gratification, no reason for museum visitors to contribute as little as they do now to the upkeep of the museums they visit. People are willing to pay, on the average, fifteen to thirty dollars to attend a Broadway show for two hours. There is no reason to pay less to attend a museum. (Preferred, habitual categories of viewers might be offered low subscription rates.) Would museums survive? Churches have survived by voluntary contributions without government subsidies. Museums could charge admission *and* expect donations. So could opera houses and symphony orchestras. They would survive — although their rate of expansion would be curtailed.

Raising the cost of attendance would thin the ranks of museum visitors (thereby reducing upkeep costs as well as paying a greater proportion of those costs). Lower attendance is regarded as a calamity by pedagogues who feel it necessary to make art available free of charge — even to stuff it down people's throats. Everything else — from bread to concerts — costs money. Why should art be free? There is, of course, no free art any more than there is a free lunch. Museum visits free to the visitor are paid for by taxpayers — largely by people whose incomes are lower than those of most museum visitors. I can see no justification for the shifting of the cost.

Reasonable entrance fees would solve a disturbing problem, deliberately neglected by administrators. Because they like popularity and wide support — which increase their power, their prestige and their subsidies and salaries — administrators pay no heed to the problems caused by crowding for those who actually come for the sake of seeing art. The treasures of the past are finite; the number of potential viewers is infinite. In each generation only a few can actually see them. But since museums are costless to visitors, they now attract crowds so big as to make it nearly impossible for any individual to contemplate and experience the art they display. Their popularity defeats much of the serious purpose used to justify subsidizing museums. People are herded through galleries —

they willingly trot by paintings driven by boredom and by others — so that everybody can satisfy his curiosity and gratify his sense of accomplishment.

If crowds were thinner, as they would be, if a visit to the museum were to cost as much as attendance at a Broadway show, those who would still go to a museum would be able to enjoy it. They would find the conditions which make possible the aesthetic experience a museum can help them to achieve.

The absence of subsidies would have similar effects on the performing arts. The price of tickets would rise. Attendance would be reduced. Fewer performances would occur if people would not voluntarily pay for all the performances now subsidized. There would be an additional beneficial effect. The wages now paid performing artists and supporting personnel would decrease with the demand for them: I do not see much reason for a subsidy that leads them to earn far more than those from whom the money is taken. This redistribution is as involuntary as it is undesirable.

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Making Policy in a Vacuum: The Case of Labor Relations

DAN C. HELDMAN

The United States Congress, executive regulatory agencies, and the courts have been creating policies affecting labor-management relations for more than four decades. As a consequence, the conditions of employment in this country are determined by laws, regulations, and judicial decisions which, taken together, have created a unique system of industrial relations.¹ Yet, to a remarkable degree, this massive body of policy decisions has developed without, or even in spite of, precise, definitive, persuasive, and accurate information. Time and time again, problems have appeared out of thin air, issues have been reformulated to avoid the most important questions, and relevant data have been unsought or ignored. The resulting policies may not necessarily be wrong, but they must be suspect. There is a need to rethink the appropriate questions.

If the necessary answers are missing, it is largely because analysts seem to find that asking the important questions is not professionally beneficial. Scholars do not investigate subjects regarded in their profession as settled, such as the relationship between the radius and circumference of a circle. The journals do not publish articles on those subjects; research funds are lacking. In the field of labor relations, scholarly analysis is vigorous in some areas, woefully inadequate in others. The field suffers, demonstrably, from what might be called the "Soviet scholarship syndrome," the practice of prefacing some tendentious or unsupported proposition with such assertions as "everyone knows" or "it is well known." In the legislative histories of numerous significant labor bills, in the texts of the resulting laws, in the actions of regulatory agencies, and in court

1. For ease of analysis, the primary focus here will be the period beginning roughly with the passage of the Wagner Act (1935); though hardly the first instance of a government action affecting labor (the Railway Labor Act was passed in 1926), this Act does effectively mark the modern age of labor relations. Occasional reference will also be made to the public sector of employment, and any references to federal-level agencies should be extended to include their counterparts on the state and local levels. By and large, these latter agencies follow the federal lead.