

Public Support of the Arts in the History of Economics: Introduction

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This special issue of *HOPE* grew out of a series of meetings, in 2001–2, of an informal reading group of students and faculty at Duke University concerned with the condition of the arts in modern American society and the broad question of what should be the appropriate relationship between the arts and the state. The group soon narrowed its focus to the question of just why the state should bother with the arts at all. With generous support from the Henry Luce Foundation, we brought together historians and specialists in literary and cultural studies. But economists were predominant, in part because the discussion in recent years of public responsibility for the arts has centered on a number of economic arguments, even in countries where the arts have enjoyed a central place in the culture and generous support. If the conversation were to be advanced, it seemed, these economic arguments had to be confronted or at least understood well and taken into account. The group, the economists as well as the others, admitted a conviction, visceral as much as analytical, that the arts were a vital and enriching element in human life. To them, whether to support the arts was not a question like whether to buy a new car or take a vacation. But then why, we asked ourselves, do challenges facing the arts receive so little attention in the public policy discussion of our times? And why do the arguments for arts funding

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seem so feeble? Why, indeed, do the arts so often receive short shrift in policy making and implementation at every level?

The group's concerns in this regard were of the same kind, although not so intense or confidently articulated, as those of Robert Brustein, who writes eloquently of a coming cultural desert in America, laid waste, as his article title suggests, by "Four Horsemen of the Anti-Culture." Three of Brustein's (2002, 613) avenging horsemen destroy the arts by punishing various kinds of deviance and demanding cultural conformity:

The arts are under siege from three horsemen of what may be eventually seen as a cultural apocalypse, vigilante night riders who guard the right, left, and middle walls of the American castle looking for a deviant artist. From the right gallops the horse of moral correctness, determined to purify the arts according to preconceived standards of decency. From the left canters the horseman of political correctness, committed to laundering the arts of any perceived threat to racial, sexual, or ethnic sensitivities. And from the middle trots the horseman of aesthetic correctness, demanding that the arts conform to traditional, often conventional, rules of creative procedure.

But it is a fourth rider who worries Brustein most of all. "There is a fourth horseman laying siege to the arts these days, perhaps the most ominous of all, and its name is 'fiscal correctness'" (616). This is the horseman who, he believes, denies the arts their lifeblood of public funds by demanding a trade-off between the arts and other goods and services. It is with this fourth horseman, galloping in from the state treasury, rather than with the other three, that these articles are largely concerned.

Where did this "fiscal correctness" of which Brustein speaks come from? Undeniably it is the product mainly of the economics discipline, and therefore it is necessary to examine the history of the discipline, to see whether there were other roads the discipline might have traveled, and whether there are valuable lessons to be learned.

There are two familiar kinds of economic argument in British and American thought about the significance of the arts to society. The first is "macroeconomic," and while it often plays well with the public and in politics, usually it is not taken seriously by professional economists. It is that the arts stimulate employment and growth, strengthen the demand for services, increase the tax base, attract tourists, and help to achieve various other "macro" objectives. Therefore, the argument concludes,

the arts should be subsidized by the state. The problems with this argument are, first, that it can be, and is, made just as well for a variety of other segments of the economy such as athletics, tourism, and education, and second, that there are a range of better ways to achieve these “macro” goals without distorting the market system through subsidies.

But the significance of the arts to the economy can be explored also from a “microeconomic” perspective in a way that is far more credible to a modern economist and in fact lies behind most assertions of “fiscal correctness.” In the terms of the subdiscipline of “public economics,” it is possible that the arts may generate “public goods”—products that are “nonexcludable and nonrival,” meaning that their costs cannot practically be recovered through market transactions and that their use by one person does not reduce use by another. In these circumstances, a public economist concedes, the state may be justified in intervention.

However, most modern microeconomists do end up analyzing the arts as if they were ordinary consumption goods. To the extent that the arts are discovered to have public-goods properties, economists are willing to concede the case for public support, acknowledging that the proper amount of support is necessarily a subject for debate. Since, however, economists have not found any way to identify, let alone to measure, broader social benefits of the arts—whether for example they are essential to human progress and civilization—they continue to be evaluated like a vacation or a new car. And those who feel within themselves that the arts are special and exceptional feel frustration and dissatisfaction with the economists.

Public economists have, until recently at least, acknowledged the existence, in theory, of a category that they call “merit goods,” meaning goods that are socially desirable in themselves for reasons other than their capacity to satisfy individual human wants; in principle their social merit alone justifies public support for their production. The reason for special treatment of merit goods is deeper than that for externalities, since the nature of the social benefit is less well defined. Indeed the merit must be truly “exceptional.” Economists are typically skeptical about the presence of externalities, since every producer is inclined to claim them, but they are even more doubtful about claims to merit status, since the justification necessarily lies outside the Benthamite utilitarian essence of their paradigm; unlike with externalities, there seems no obvious way to specify in principle or in practice the optimum level of their production. Presumably the more the merrier! Meritorious status may be one way of

describing the case for exceptional treatment, but not the only one, and today it is deeply out of favor in economics.

With this understanding of the terms of the argument within contemporary economics, and within much of the public debate over the case for state support of the arts, we asked ourselves how should our group proceed? It seemed promising to probe how claims to special treatment for the arts had been made in the past, and we decided to explore some high points in the evolution of the debate over the relationship of the arts to society during the last three centuries to see what these stories tell us when taken together. We asked whether something had been lost from the current debate that was present in earlier discussions. Members selected topics in which they had special interest or competence and met in October 2002 at the Berry Hill Conference Center in South Boston, Virginia, to discuss their drafts.

In order to frame these issues carefully, this collection begins at the end as it were. The first article, by Gregory Besharov, examines a body of analytical work from the 1960s by two prominent leaders of the economics discipline, William Baumol and William Bowen. The two are widely credited with initiating a new subdiscipline called “cultural economics” and with providing a fresh rationale for public support of the performing arts through their discovery of a supposed “cost disease.” The concept is based on a presumption of slower productivity growth in the arts than in the rest of the economy. Besharov points out that the cost disease does not, in fact, yield a new argument for public support of the arts, and it may have been only the weakness of other arguments that led some to claim that it did. As Besharov notes below, Baumol and Bowen (1966, 377) admit to the “inherent value of beauty and the ineffable contribution of aesthetic activity,” but they do not explore at all the existence of externalities or the case for meritorious treatment. Besharov disagrees with the widespread perception that Baumol and Bowen’s 1966 *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* was the strongest case made to date for public support of the arts.

In the next article, Neil De Marchi and Jonathan Greene find that Adam Smith explored the relevance of the arts to the economy from two closely related perspectives: externalities and special qualities. First, like his friend David Hume and his mentor Francis Hutcheson, Smith was anxious to understand the complexity of human behavior. No simple optimizing model for him! Humans, he was convinced, had many springs of action, and by taking all these into account we could have

a better world. For example, he found that the arts could improve sociability among humans by dissipating some of their “melancholy and gloomy” humor (Smith [1776] 1976, 796). Smith and the other Scottish Enlightenment writers thought of the arts as attempts to imitate perfection, and in one of the arts at least, “the sentiments and passions which Music can best imitate are those which unite and bind men together in society; the social, the decent, the virtuous, the interesting and affecting, the amiable and agreeable, the awful and respectable, the noble, elevating and commanding passions” (Smith [n.d.] 1980). This may be one of the earliest lists by an economist of perceived externalities in the arts. Although the process was only beginning, Smith was deeply concerned about the industrialization of production and its effects on human nature. The arts, like elementary education, he thought promised to be a moderating influence. But for some reason he was never willing to make the strong case for public support of the arts that he made for education.

Smith made at least a start on developing an argument that the production and consumption of artistic goods were fundamentally different from those of other goods. Smith did not produce a single coherent essay on this question, but De Marchi and Greene suggest that from a variety of comments, the essence of his findings can be discerned and put together. Though Smith thought that reason alone dictated the decisions of the butcher and the baker and of those who bought their wares, he believed that passion as well as reason prompted poets, musicians, and their listeners. Music alone, he said, could readily change a mental state from “wanton and playful” to melancholy (Smith [n.d.] 1980, 196–98). Moreover, music could give to the mind not only “a very great sensual but a high intellectual pleasure . . . not unlike that which it derives from the contemplation of a great system in any other science” (205). For Smith this pleasure was surely not on the same plane with the consumption of a meat pie. That Smith did not make a strong case for public support of the arts, given his evident belief in their social significance, was perhaps because he thought there were better ways in the private sector to accomplish his goals, such as the Foulis Academy in Glasgow that he supported personally.

It is not possible to understand the change that occurred in the discussion of the arts and culture as we move into the nineteenth century without attending to what was happening across the scholarly disciplines. In political economy, the rich complexity of Smith’s thought was questioned by some who sought a more simple social theory on which to base

predictive models. Jeremy Bentham (1962, 253–54) was unwilling to accept behavioral complexity as the basis for exceptions to policy rules about usury laws and colonies, and, with the celebrated assertion that “pushpin equals poetry,” he disputed Smith’s cautious assertions of the superior qualities of the arts to other goods in the consumption mix. By implying that poetry, like the game of pushpin, was just another form of light entertainment, Bentham asserted that the arts deserved neither special analytical treatment nor favoritism in public policy. Bentham denied exceptional treatment for the arts, and most economists of the nineteenth century accepted his position.

Among thinkers in the humanities and the arts in the nineteenth century who attended more to history and literature than to the emerging social sciences, however, the ground remained fertile for exploration of the arts. Especially among critics of industrialization and its social and environmental consequences, the question of the unique role for the arts in society loomed large. The next articles in this issue examine the writings of three influential critics—Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and William Morris—who found the subject ripe for speculation. On the significance of art and culture for society, Matthew Arnold was the heir of Adam Smith. He too claimed to see public goods emerging from the arts, and he believed the arts deserved attention and support. But, Oliver Bennett argues, whereas Smith had seen the arts as medicine for the ills of a newly industrializing society, Arnold saw culture as a potential balm for the ills of democratization. The nineteenth century brought extension of the suffrage in Great Britain, and with it deep fears about the consequences for society. Would the violence and anarchy of the French Revolution be imported across the English Channel, or could the new voters be integrated smoothly into the responsible middle class? Arnold was optimistic that an infusion of culture could be the means to achieve a stable and productive economy and a society consonant with an evolving polity. He offered an explanation of culture rather similar to that of Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment. Culture was about the search for and imitation of excellence: “pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits” (Arnold [1869] 1981, 6). Arnold proposed a complex terminology to explain precisely what he meant. He envisaged humans facing a choice between two kinds of behavior that, borrowing from Heinrich Heine, he called “Hebraism” and

“Hellenism.” *Hebraism* meant unreflective attendance to duty and obedience, and *Hellenism* meant disinterested intellectual inquiry. “Culture” required a careful balancing of these two choices within societies and individuals, and leadership needed to come from those with special vision and insight. Pursuit of “the best” under the practice of Hellenism was an essential ingredient of social, and by implication economic, growth. Progress was not merely the accumulation of more and more goods and services. Without the necessary pursuit of culture, even if it were never reached in any absolute sense, what started out as apparent social and economic improvement could degenerate quickly into anarchy.

John Ruskin extended Arnold’s rejection of the notion that the arts were simply another set of consumption options. But, Gregory Moore tells us in the next article in this issue, Ruskin thought that the arts could be appreciated by the masses only after education and experience and through the leadership of experts. Ruskin described culture and the arts as dynamic, involving a steady improvement in the public’s taste and capacity to appreciate. The suggestion that humans were born with an innate preference for pushpin over poetry, or vice versa, made no sense to him. They required leadership to appreciate poetry. Ruskin concealed his ideas behind a terminology at least as unfamiliar as that of Arnold (for example, “illth” as negative wealth!). But to put his theory into a form that may be understood by economists today, one might say that he portrayed utility functions as subject to the same potential upward movement as production functions; just as the conversion of inputs into outputs may be increased by technical change, so the conversion of outputs into utility may be increased through the activities of those who can strengthen the capacity of consumers to appreciate what they experience. Ruskin’s picture of “valiant” consumers pursuing “life availing” wealth was understandably too moralistic and vague for political economists in the third quarter of the nineteenth century who were trying to give their subject the appearance of a “real” science. At the same time it is hard to avoid the sense that an opportunity was missed at this time to bring together the emerging social sciences with the humanities and the arts, from which they had begun steadily to diverge. Ruskin’s ([1862] 1905, 98) main point, as he said, was that “wise consumption is a far more difficult art than wise production”; this essentially economic idea, if developed, might have provided a powerful argument for support to the arts. Ruskin offered a rich menu of possible tasks for the state in relation to the arts, including quality control, distribution of products of the arts

among the populace, education in the arts, and construction of works of public art. This menu might have become the basis for constructive debate, but it did not.

Arnold and Ruskin were both respectful of an economy based on private property and free-enterprise capitalism, and their reforms were intended only to improve, not to overthrow, the competitive market system. William Morris, by contrast, brought Marx to the table. He pursued the psychological speculations initiated by Ruskin about the unique pleasures experienced by artists in the act of creation and by patrons from their exposure to the arts; he then went on to conclude that the psychological consequences of the arts were inextricably associated with morality, politics, and religion. Anna Upchurch, in this issue's next article, shows how Morris saw humans as moved typically by alternate moods of "energy" and "idleness" and the need to find relief from their inherent "restlessness." His theoretical speculations led Morris away from piecemeal support of the arts to the conclusion that only after the demise of capitalism and the emergence of a new socialist system could the artist find a rightful place in society. The art of his day, he claimed, was in decay because it was produced under conditions in which all workers were enslaved within a machine process and in which they were at war with the bourgeoisie. Morris was himself a successful businessman, but he was also a sentimentalist who was outraged by the injustices he saw around him, and he looked backward to the Middle Ages when, he believed, there had been a web of social rights and responsibilities, and the arts were securely embedded in the fabric of the community. The only solution to the problems of the arts, Morris was convinced, lay in revolutionary change of the circumstances under which the arts operated. Only then would the artists enjoy free expression and their audience recapture their capacity to experience beauty.

These writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the arts as a way to ameliorate various conditions of modernization: Smith industrialization, Arnold democratization, and Morris competitive market capitalism. Theirs was a view of externalities in the arts that could serve as medicine for ailments of national growth. A different view of the arts is found in the twentieth-century writings of the economist John Maynard Keynes and the art historian Kenneth Clark. Their admiration rests on a sophisticated case for exceptional treatment of the arts. Keynes and Clark shared intellectual roots in the Bloomsbury Group, of which

Keynes was a core member and Clark a close associate. The Bloomsburys had intellectual debts to, among others, John Stuart Mill, Sigmund Freud, Thorstein Veblen, and Leo Tolstoy. Persuaded by Keynes ([1930] 1972) that through “science and compound interest” economic scarcity might vanish in a century or so, they concluded that the human race had an opportunity ahead “to live wisely and agreeably and well” and to achieve true “civilization.” In this the arts could have a central role. Humans would have a choice, they thought, about how to use their abundant resources. Keynes laid out three choices: first, to satisfy decently, in less and less time, the biological needs of citizens and then to live in idleness; second, to support wasteful activities that included warfare, unchecked population growth, and emulative spending (to satisfy “the desire for superiority”); and finally to enrich the “imaginative life” (the life of the mind). For the last of these alternatives, writers and artists were essential. The Bloomsburys argued that the advance of civilization, which should be the true objective of humankind, required that as many resources as possible after satisfaction of biological needs be directed to the arts, for the arts’ own sake and not as catharsis for some social ailment. Not unreasonably, the Bloomsburys presumed that a rich imaginative life must for a while depend upon a relatively small proportion of the population made up of artists and aesthetes (for this they were often excoriated as “elitists”), but they insisted that one measure of progress in achieving civilization would be the speed with which this proportion could be increased. In order to suggest that without the constraint of limited income some people might still have to be persuaded that a cultured life was preferable to mere idleness, Keynes ([1930] 1972, 327) recounted part of the epitaph on the tombstone of an old charwoman:

Don't mourn for me, friends, don't weep for me never,
 For I'm going to do nothing for ever and ever . . .
 With psalms and sweet music the heavens'll be ringing,
 But I shall have nothing to do with the singing.

In response Keynes observed: “Yet it will only be for those who have to do with the singing that life will be tolerable—and how few of us can sing!” (328). Indeed, it would be the responsibility of those who had gained experience in the arts and culture to teach the others how to sing: “it will be those peoples, who can keep alive, and cultivate into a fuller perfection, the art of life itself and do not sell themselves for the means of life, who will be able to enjoy the abundance when it comes”

(328). And this education in the arts should begin soon: “there will be no harm in making mild preparations for our destiny, in encouraging, and experimenting in, the arts of life as well as the activities of purpose” (332). This description by Keynes of the critical role of an aesthetically sensitive elite in an advanced economy is similar to Matthew Arnold’s emphasis on increasing the number of what he called “aliens” in society.

The Bloomsbury vision required a commitment to exceptional treatment for the arts, and the writings of Bloomsbury members are full of appreciation of this reality. Sometimes they insisted that they knew from introspection that engagement with the arts was different in kind from biological experiences, and they searched in the discipline of psychology for confirmation of the difference. Roger Fry and Clive Bell, the principal aestheticians in the group, made the point repeatedly that aesthetic sensations were different from others, and there was general unanimity on this point among them. Maynard Keynes ([1930] 1972, 134) rejected Benthamite utilitarianism as a guide to value and to policy in the imaginative life, and he deplored the selfish features of biological human nature, such as avarice, that happily would not be necessary in the coming era of affluence. The Bloomsbury policy toward support of the arts was that it should be left, whenever possible, to the private sector, and here there were endless opportunities for experiments with different devices to accomplish this end. Keynes, Donald Moggridge notes in his article in this issue, was enthusiastic about the potential of public art to increase civic pride and social unity, and in his own career he spent much of his spare time on private endeavors in the arts such as the London Artists’ Association, the Contemporary Art Society, the Cambridge Arts Theatre, and Covent Garden. Like the other Bloomsburys, Keynes was enthusiastic about the new technology of radio as a way to give the masses access to the imaginative arts.

Perhaps because Kenneth Clark’s career was wholly in the arts and Keynes’s was not, Clark puzzled more often and openly about the place of the arts in society than did Keynes. Of all those thinkers examined in this collection, he addressed most directly the case for treatment of the arts differently from other goods. As I discuss in my article on Clark, Clark was influenced by Arnold and Ruskin but most by the Bloomsburys whose close friend he was. For Clark and for his mentor Roger Fry, the arts seemed to involve opaque psychological phenomena related to religion, to magic, and to mystery. The arts were for them not just another set of consumer goods, constructed to meet demand and capable of

being understood by straightforward application of market models. Indeed the arts could be thought of as an escape from materialism, not part of it. Clark agreed with Morris that all aspects of the consumption and production of art were inextricably related to the social context in which they occurred, but he rejected the revolutionary implications drawn by Morris.

Like Fry, Clark was very concerned about the future of patronage in the arts, not just because it was a source of revenue but because the patron, unlike the typical purchaser of consumer goods, often had a close and creative relationship with the maker of the artistic good. A full understanding of all the dimensions of patronage, Clark was convinced, would require a complex social and psychological investigation, but he felt certain that the development of a new stable of patrons of the arts, both public and private, was critical for the survival of the arts in the modern world. Clark provided an unusually rich discussion of public art, using many of the ideas familiar to economists. He wondered why the quality of public art had declined so much over the past century and speculated that the increasing use of cost-benefit analysis might be the explanation; it was so much more difficult to measure the benefits of the arts than the costs.

The last two articles in this issue deal with thinkers whose ideas can be understood from their deeds as much as from their words, and from their demonstrations of ways in which the arts may be used as tools of public policy. The first of these is Nancy Hanks, the second chair of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), who expanded spending for the arts dramatically under conditions that were seemingly most inhospitable. Shauna Saunders explains that Hanks was not an intellectual but was a savvy Washington insider, and her story is mainly of how she used a number of public and private studies to portray successfully the arts as producers of public goods worthy of public support to a government that might never have reached this conclusion on its own. Under Hanks, first through her work with Nelson Rockefeller and at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and later at the NEA, the arts came to be recognized as a bulwark against communism, a response to urban violence, a counterweight to materialism, a device to stimulate open discussion everywhere, and a means to enrich American democracy. That these arguments were successful is attested by the increase in funding of NEA. What is significant here is that Hanks's success at portraying the arts as public goods rested on her capacity to tap the deep-seated concerns of the moment.

She created a case for exceptional treatment of the arts that responded perfectly to the circumstances of the time.

Another case study of a policy maker in action is of Lionel Robbins, a prominent figure in twentieth-century economics who was also one of the most energetic and successful advocates for the arts in Great Britain. In his youth Robbins had hoped to become a poet, and he rejoiced in the visual arts, the opera, and the ballet. His efforts on behalf of the National Gallery, the Tate Gallery, Covent Garden, and other beneficiaries are legendary. Susan Howson, in her article, points out that Robbins expounded the full range of neoclassical economic arguments for public support of the arts. He explained that some artworks, at least, may be seen as public goods, and because of the particular character of the external benefits to society that they yield, they will be underproduced if left entirely to the private sector. He also favored public access to the arts on grounds of equity. But he struggled with the eternally challenging question of whether the arts are truly exceptional—different in kind from other goods. Clearly he thought they were, but he recognized that economics could not help him very much to make the case. He thought the matter was one of “ultimate values.” The arts impart “quality and meaning to life on this planet by reason of their mere existence” (Robbins 1963). Like Ruskin, he thought that through public education and exposure, and thereby through taste formation, the public could be led to levels of appreciation that would not otherwise be attained. Robbins supported use in Britain of encouragement to private support of the arts through tax concessions to private donors, and he made a case for emergency public purchase of great works of art at a time when large private collections were being dispersed.

Are there ideas lurking in this set of essays that might be useful today and that might be extended? The single theme that emerges again and again that shows continued promise is that human progress, especially in its more advanced stage, is not simply a matter of capital accumulation, technical change, and increased production of goods and services. Progress also involves a fundamental redirection of resources, and more particularly a movement toward the arts on the way to “civilization.” Increased attention to the arts is not merely a natural choice after biological needs have been satisfied (that is, income-elastic demand for works of art). The arts facilitate progress. An uncivilized society will have far more difficulty in breaking a cycle of poverty than one with at least some foundations in the arts. These are complex and contentious questions,

and profound ones that must be raised always if we are to make sensible judgments upon the proper relationship of the state to the arts in our own time.

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