

**SERVING DEMOCRACY BY SERVING
THE ARTS AND THE HUMANITIES**

(Traditional Perspectives, Unique Modern Conditions)

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An essay prepared for Creative America, a report by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities describing the system of support for cultural life in the United States today

The relationship of the arts and the humanities to a free democratic society -- its diversity and pluralism, its manifold liberties, its openness and flexibility -- is complex and often problematic. The arts can flourish in democracy but have often developed with remarkable vibrancy as part of a culture of dissent or rebellion in autocratic societies. Democracy needs the arts (and the humanities which they anchor), for they constitute a crucial element in civil society's cultural infrastructure. Yet the democratic impulse has sometimes found itself at odds with artists and felt threatened by the avante garde or anti-majoritarian or the aristocratic in culture.

Ultimately, democracy perhaps needs the arts more than the arts need democracy -- although there is an obvious and vital symbiosis between the two in a well-functioning free society. For a free society gains its liberty and its democratic vitality from civil society, and the arts and humanities invest civil society with its creativity, its diverseness and its liberating spontaneity. What complicates the relationship is the market, with which civil society is sometimes conflated. The market offers free and private space to art and culture and thus insulates it from official governmental direction and censorship. But because market space is commercial space it draws the arts into commerce and exchange and can imperil artistic autonomy from a different quarter.

Historically, the relationship between the arts (which I will take here as paradigmatic of the larger phrase "arts and humanities") and society has taken

a number of different forms: some of those forms have seen the arts as mimetically reflecting society's norms and mores or even cheerleading for its official conventions and ideologies; others segregate the arts from society or give it a romantic rebellious character. Among the possible perspectives are:

THE CLASSICAL
THE ROMANTIC
THE REALIST (DISSENT VERSION)
THE REALIST (OFFICIAL VERSION)
THE AESTHETIC (LIBERAL)
THE ARISTOCRATIC (HIGH ART)
THE DEMOCRATIC (POP ART)
THE COMMERCIAL

THE CLASSICAL perspective treats the arts as a way of seeing (theoria or spectatorship) that, because it competes with religion, philosophy and political philosophy, either reinforces or rivals their visions of the social and the political. The tragic poets saw themselves as allies of the new democracy, for example, while the comedic writers of later Athens were critics of philosophical aristocracy (Aristophanes ridiculing Socrates in *THE CLOUDS*). Aristocratic philosophy saw itself engaged in the same competition and so, Plato felt constrained to ban the poets from his aristocratic *REPUBLIC*, protesting that "artists craft phantoms" at a third remove from reality and are likely to corrupt justice in a well-ordered commonwealth.

Crucial to this perspective is the insistence on the absolute interactivity of art and politics. For better or worse, the two are regarded as being engaged in a single enterprise: that of fashioning a common vision for a people to feel,

think and live by. In the Athenian world, art had explicit public functions and was, for example, well represented in religious and civic festivals such as the Olympiad -- the forerunner of today's more narrowly construed athletic competitions. The great tragic trilogies of Aeschylus and Sophocles were written for these festivals, and were regarded less as mere entertainments and more as reflections on the civic and spiritual life of the Athenian polis.

The neo-classicism of the Enlightenment reflected the same intertwining of aesthetics, politics and truth. It supposed the three to be bound up together in much the same fashion. Keats' certainty that "truth's beauty and beauty's truth" and Shelley's wish that poetry might be the world's true legislator were nothing if not Athenian in their unitary aspirations.

THE ROMANTIC perspective lies at the other end of the art/society spectrum, although it also posits art as a profound form of power. It treats it, however, as an expression of inner vision -- a journey to the interior of the soul -- that is necessarily at odds with the norms of conventional society and its officialdom, whether they are democratic or autocratic. As a function of radical individual imagination, especially as it emerged immediately before and after the French Revolution, romantic art implacably opposed the ordinary and mundane. Because its sense of justice was personal and individual, it rarely could make common cause with social movements, even when they were conducted in justice's good name. Society could appreciate the products of the romantic imagination, but got no quarter from romantic artists who saw

themselves not as society's true teachers but its eternal rebels -- its outlaws and outcasts.

A revolutionary democratic society may be assisted at its birth by romantic culture, but almost as soon as it becomes institutionalized and constitutionalized finds itself the target of its erstwhile romantic allies. Byron may have hoped to liberate Greece and put into practice Shelley's dream of poetry as the true Legislator of the world, but romanticism has succeeded as society's conscience and prod rather than as its constitution.

Eric Bentley referred to artists, approvingly, as "desperate characters," while John Cage has defined art as "criminal action." In the romantic vision, the artist is an outlaw of the mundane who pushes against limits, revolts against convention, and makes war on reality itself. "The weapon of poetry," wrote Ortega y Gasset with only a hint of hyperbole, "turns against natural things and wounds and murders them." Romantic artists are thus often viewed by society as self-lacerating madmen; they in turn treat social reality as a form of conventional madness (see the charming inversions of the film *King of Hearts*). No wonder that such artists may feel homeless in the mundane world, and see their journey (Eliot's words) as one of "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."

THE REALIST perspective (in its **dissent version**) has much in common with romanticism, but is outer- rather than inner-directed: rooted in a sociological concern with justice in the real world and concerned with the

individual as a member of communities of class, race and gender. It is thus fixed on reforming the world and its actual constitutions even if that means the refashioning of human souls. In writers like Ibsen, Zola, Shaw and Brecht the world's injustices are uncovered and revealed. Art's program here is liberation, not just of the unfettered imagination but of individuals as social beings. Nora's plight in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* models realism's concern with coercion and freedom and its quest for a way out. Like Romantic art, Realist art has a hand in democracy's generation. Unlike romanticism, however, it is less skeptical of the social products of its imagination -- which leads it sometimes into imprudent alliances with states putatively founded on social justice, realism in its official version.

THE REALIST perspective in the **official version** -- realism after the revolution, as it were -- portrays culture as a critic of corrupt, autocratic societies but as a friend of democratic or socialist government or national socialist governments. Indeed, it is their handmaiden since, when successful, such governments supposedly incorporate the ideals in the name of which the revolution has been made and liberation won. The stubborn rebel may here become the mindless cheerleader. A visionary realist like Gorki thus becomes a supporter of the Soviet State after the Bolshevik revolution just as a realist critic of bourgeois society like Brecht becomes a cultural apparatchik of the East German State after the Communist accession to power there.

If justice and liberation are the true aims of art, the realist argument

insists, then a "just" state legislating for a supposedly liberated society can presume to call upon artists to legitimate and communicate its ideals and order. Socialist as well as national socialist realism made exactly these claims. Even genuine democracies have enlisted artists in their cause. Democratic artists like Whitman, Frost and Langston Hughes, even as they protested the unjust and thus "un-American" features of the United States, have written 'patriotically' about America as a potential land of liberty.

THE AESTHETIC perspective assumes the traditional liberal separation of private and public that insulates art from official society. It has no truck with officialdom, whether democratic or tyrannical. It assumes that art has private, aesthetic ends that are neither for or against democracy (or any other regime form) but simply irrelevant to it. Art is what artists do. It is to be prized for its integral aesthetic standards and its universal affect rather than judged on its relationship to the politically particular. "My art," said Nabakov, "bears no messages. I am not a postman." Irving Howe, often regarded as a moralist, nonetheless wrote: "There are kinds of beauty before which the moral imagination ought to withdraw." Even the realist Brecht decided, towards the end of his life, that art finally could have no other justification than itself, than "*Spass*" or simple fun (entertainment). In this liberal view, the only responsibility democracy has for art is to guarantee it private space in which it can flourish. The only thing art demands from democracy in turn is to be left alone. True liberals are unlikely to think state subsidies for the arts are any

more legitimate or desirable than state censorship. A high wall between the two that guarantees art security from the democratic 'tyranny of opinion' (Tocqueville) and guarantees society security from political and propagandistic interventions by politicized artists is, from the liberal perspective, the only prudent policy. When at the end of his life Joseph Papp of the New York Shakespeare Festival decided he could no longer accept funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and preserve his aesthetic liberty, he was adopting a classical liberal posture.

THE ARISTOCRATIC perspective (defending 'high art') takes art to have an aristocratic function in a democratic society: to preserve the finer things in a vulgar world, to represent the taste of the cultivated minority in a mediocre majoritarian arena. Here beauty and truth are thought to represent independently grounded standards that can be used to mark off and judge the practices of a democratic culture (there is thus an element of neo-classicism here, since the high art perspective is not indifferent to the society by which it feels compromised and demeaned). Journals like *The New Criterion* have purveyed this aristocratic perspective with verve and Allan Bloom made it the keystone to his arch critique of democratic culture in his *The Closing of the American Mind*.

The art for art's sake complaint against government subsidized art is less the liberal fear of censorship as it is the aristocratic fear of a levelling mediocrity. To yield to a democratic government's well-intended cultural

ministrations is to acquiesce in what Tocqueville called the powerful "empire of opinion" that can only corrupt a pure cultural vision. The aristocrat eschews government 'meddling' in the arts not out of respect for the liberal wall between private and public but out of disdain for a (by definition) 'debased' democratic public realm.

THE DEMOCRATIC or popular art perspective is in some ways the mirror image of the aristocratic perspective. It takes art to be an expression of the dominant popular culture, and thus privileges as art those forms of popular expression that best reflect the majority's tastes. Art is not something distinct from or 'above' society but society's aesthetic expression. It represents not some elite's abstract standards but whatever artists -- understood broadly as anyone who is engaged in self-expression and communication -- do. There is no distinction here to be made between pop art and high art other than the 'pretensions' of those who purvey the latter.

In concrete terms, this perspective appeals to the "artist in everyone," and leads to 'democratic' arts policies aimed at arts education and programs of fair distribution that spread the cultural wealth -- art and art subsidies -- to every part of the country rather than leaving them to a narrow coterie of so-called "elite" institutions. Its egalitarianism (depending on your point of view) both popularizes and vulgarizes art. Some claim that it also relativizes art by equating one "taste culture" (Herbert Gans) with another and, in the post-modernist fashion, declaring all aesthetic visions and all cultural texts equal.

In a popular arts perspective, government intervention is a natural outgrowth of art's public and popular character.

THE COMMERCIAL perspective treats art as a commodity no different than any other commercial product of the free market. To the degree democracy is reduced to free market philosophy, the commercial perspective may appear as an economistic version of the democratic perspective. It measures art by its capacity to attract consumers and pay for itself in the market's hard currencies. In doing so, it blurs distinctions between art and entertainment, between culture and commodity, and between self-expression and consumption. It treats popular (pop) art as conventional: fully embedded in the market. The commercial perspective can be understood as one particular dimension of the democratic perspective, but because it has serious consequences for policy (the commodification of art), it requires its own category and has policy entailments that may differ from those of the pop art perspective. Government, from this viewpoint, may wish to offset the constraining effects of markets and try to guarantee diversity against the market's uniformity, for example.

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Historically, few societies have represented only one of these ideal types, least of all, the United States. In practice, they overlap and intersect. Most polities are characterized by some variable and evolving combination,

often in contradictory ways. In America, there has been some movement historically from liberal and aristocratic perspectives (in the nineteenth century), through romantic and realist/dissent perspectives (from the twenties through the sixties in this century), to a rough dialectic of aristocratic, democratic pop art and commercial perspectives in recent years. However, it would not be hard to demonstrate that aspects of nearly all of the perspectives noted above can be detected today in American struggles over arts policy and discussions of censorship, funding and arts education. Is there a state council for the arts where aristocratic advocates of pure art do not confront democratic advocates of art for everyone? where zealous supporters of culture's necessarily subversive (romantic) role are not arrayed against patriotic boosters of an official art sanctioned by and supportive of conventional cultural norms? Indeed, these ongoing arguments are themselves an expression of the pluralistic character of the 'culture of culture' in the United States.

Like other observers and critics, I have my own generic views about the relationship between art and politics generally, and the arts and humanities and American society as it exists today. I suspect in general that art and culture are a good deal more resilient than most worriers allow. Absent subsidy, absent even democracy, and in the presence of the conformist pressures of either political autocracy or majoritarian mass opinion, the arts survive. For they are rooted in indelible human genius and an irrepressible need for authentic self-expression and communication that surface under

almost every imaginable condition, including the Gulag and the extermination camps of Nazi Germany. They are as difficult to root out and destroy as the human spirit itself.

At the same time, there are important and quite distinctive practical consequences that flow from the several perspectives portrayed above. The ultimate survivability of art is not an adequate reason to avoid addressing tough questions of arts policy in a democracy. Perhaps most importantly, the common linkage of democracy and the arts to a robust civil society demands careful attention. Democracy is not just a matter of formal governing institutions and a constitutional framework of popular sovereignty. A free press and a ready sense of rights are necessary but hardly sufficient conditions for democratic practice. As Dewey noted, democracy is as much a way of life as a form of government, and its success rests on the existence and heartiness of the civic domain -- understood as distinct both from the government and the private commercial domain.

Civil society is constituted by free voluntary institutions that are also public in nature. Foundations, civic associations, charities, schools, religious institutions and the free media are all part of this domain -- along with the arts. Indeed, the arts are civil society's driving engine, the key to its creativity, its diversity, its imagination and hence its spontaneousness and liberty. As democracy depends on civil society for its liberal spiritedness, so civil society depends on the arts. And in this manner, democracy ultimately rests on the

arts' commitment to free creativity, liberal diversity and unfettered imagination. A government that supports the arts and the humanities is not engaging in philanthropic activity but assuring the conditions of its own flourishing. This is perhaps the most important single argument in favor of a democratic government playing some role in the arts: not in the name of the needs of the arts, but in the name of the needs of democracy.

Under normal circumstances, however much a democratic way of life depends on the creativity and critical imagination generated by the arts and however much it is enhanced when it rests on a robust civic infrastructure nourished by the arts, the arts can survive without democratic support – indeed, without a democratic constitution. Our circumstances today are not entirely normal, however. Under the adverse conditions of pervasive mass commerce, and as a consequence of our growing ambivalence about diversity and pluralism in what some fear is a hyper-pluralistic society, the arts may both be at risk and be necessary in unprecedented ways. Consequently, there may be some specific arguments in favor of a modest government presence in arts education and an argument for incentives and subsidies for creation and performance beyond the general relationship posited above between democracy, civil society and the arts. In particular, there are two conditions that have altered the landscape today and offer special justification for government intervention. The first is an ever more overweening commercial environment, the second an ever more diversified and (some fear) fragmented

society. Let me briefly address each of these crucial issues and how they may impact on arts policy.

COMMERCE: Art may have more to fear from the uncoerced and largely invisible constraints of commercialization nowadays than it does from a too pushy or censorious government. Artists in turn, although they certainly have the "right" to isolate themselves from society and pursue their muse free from interference, may discover that by assuming responsibilities for arts education and civic engagement, they contribute to a climate that is as tolerant and pluralistic as liberal philosophy says it ought to be. Artists as artists are responsible only to their art; but artists are also citizens, and as citizens they have a particularly responsibility to contribute to and nourish an arts-supportive civil society. In doing so they serve both democracy and themselves, their fellow citizens and their art.

Advocates of "privatizing," suspicious of government meddling in the arts, may think that they are supporting a liberal domain of the private when they call for laissez-faire. But in an era when civil society has been collapsed into the commercial market sector, privatization may turn out to mean commercialization and the arts will not be "left alone" but subjected to the harsh interventionist dynamics of commerce. Under such conditions, neither high art, rebellious art nor even ordinary amateur art (community theater for example) are likely to thrive. The market pushes towards uniformity of taste, a levelling of standards, and the commodification of art product in ways that

will satisfy almost no one -- whatever perspective they represent. Magazines trump books, newspapers trump magazines, tabloids trump newspapers, television trumps tabloids, MTV trumps television -- until not even popular culture in its full diversity can survive, let alone the more fragile arts found on the margins of the conventional.

Not just high art and rebellious art, but popular culture too needs the incentives and balancing support of government and arts council subsidy in a market that, while "free" in theory, is in practice often monopolistic in ownership and conformist in taste. "Public" television has offered a place on the broadcast spectra where "other" tastes -- some 'high,' some 'popular,' but in any case not necessarily likely to flourish in a pure market environment -- can have a chance to educate, cultivate and entertain audiences. I can think of no good reason why so modest a presence, had for so modest a cost, should be seen as either a harbinger of government-sponsored taste or a usurpation of an otherwise quite nearly sovereign set of commercial market mechanisms.

DIVERSITY: Ours is not only a democratic market society in which commerce plays an usually powerful role in conditioning other features of the social landscape; it is also a pluralistic society that in recent decades has become so diversified and differentiated that historians like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. have begun to worry about the disintegration of our cultural fabric (see *The Disuniting of Democracy*, for example). The arts have a special role to play in

this domain because they have the capacity simultaneously to offer expression to the particular identities of communities and groups (including those that feel excluded from the dominant community's space) and to capture commonalities and universalities that tie communities and groups together into a national whole. The Southern novel did not fragment America: it helped define an American perspective. The Hudson River School of painting represented an emerging American taste in the nineteenth century, just as New England transcendentalism helped create an American philosophical perspective. Jewish culture in New York helps tie the city together even as it gives special expression to particular identity. African-American music and theater have offered American blacks a unique avenue for particularistic cultural expression (see most recently *Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk!*) and at the same time stamped our national culture with much of its common identity. Jazz, tap, and blues (and the broader popular music culture that finds its roots in them) at once define America and define the special contribution of African-Americans to America.

Thus, perhaps uniquely, the arts have the power to give voice to and hence to empower and recognize the marginalized and the minorities, and at the same moment to constitute from them an inclusive common culture from which none are excluded. This is their special contribution to an era in which hyper-diversity has become a problem, and a special reason to consider offering unintrusive support to them from independent government bodies

such as arts and humanities councils even though under more normal circumstances such support might seem unnecessary, superfluous or perhaps even undesirable.

Finally, let me recall that art and democracy share a dependency on one extraordinary human gift, imagination. Imagination is their common link to civil society. If imagination flourishes in the arts, democracy is benefitted. If it flourishes in democracy, the arts and the civil society the arts help ground also benefit. Imagination is the key to diversity, to civic compassion, and to commonality. It is the faculty by which we stretch ourselves to include others, expand the compass of our interests to discover common ground, and overcome the limits of our parochial selves to become fit subjects to live in democratic communities. The democratic citizen needs critical imagination to ward off tyranny and defend liberty. The artist needs critical imagination to ward off convention and defend creation. Ideally, in serving imagination, the arts serve democracy and democratic citizenship; and ideally, in supporting the arts, democracy serves itself -- even where the arts it supports defy convention, outrage taste and flaunt democratic mores. It is only a mature democracy that fully appreciates these linkages. Ironically, youthful democracies that most need the arts to grow and mature, are least likely to support them. It has been a mark of America's maturity as a free society that it has sustained a supportive arts policy without becoming either proprietary or censorious.

To be sure, art will not perish even in the absence of active support and understanding from a democratic people and their government. Nor will democracy wilt and die in the absence of a robust arts policy and a correspondingly vibrant arts community. But democracy, depending for its liberty on a free civil society, will do better as the arts do better, and the arts will do better as democratic citizens and their governing institutions choose to support them (if not always underwrite them) and refrain from censoring them. Finally, though both benefit by the other's good health, it is democracy that has most to gain by cultivating and supporting the arts and the artists who are their creators. Though they remain stubborn, independent, cranky, rebellious, sometimes ungrateful and always subversive, artists cultivate and manifest the liberty that lies at the very core of democracy's liberal soul.

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