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Influences on Public Policies in the United States

Among artists and aficionados of the arts, it is commonplace to remark that the United States has no cultural policy. Like all truisms, this statement bears some relationship to social fact, but it does not tell us much. In order to know whether we have a cultural policy, one would have to be very clear about what one meant by "policy," and one would also have to wonder what the alternatives were.

It will be the argument of this chapter that the United States does have a set of public policies with relation to culture, but that it does not have a single policy. It will also be argued that many of the "public" policies are created in the so-called "private" sector, and that they display important regional variation. Finally, insofar as we do have a general policy or attitude toward culture, it is in fact the result of the push and pull of a multitude of con-

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flicting public and private policies, most of which were never specifically intended to impact upon the arts. All of this sets Americans apart from Europeans, for whom at least a plausible claim of national cultural policy might be made.

Historical Excursus: Origins of National Public Policy

It may help to take a brief historical detour in order to understand why the history of public policy in the United States is so curious, or at least hard for present day Americans to understand. The growing use of the term "public policy" to describe programs planned, supported, and administered by the federal government may conceal one of the most profound social revolutions in American history. The power of the federal government to command compliance with the aims of social reform, which vast majorities of Americans may agree are noble, rests on a legal authority that those same majorities, even a few years ago, would not have believed existed. Federal administrators, backed by federal courts, are able now not only to withhold money appropriated by Congress for support of local schools, transportation, and police and fire protection, but also to take private business firms to court to enforce social changes which may have played little or no part in the legislation which authorized the original programs. Even those who supported the need for social reform can be puzzled by the size and shape of the federal authority which has emerged to bring it about.

In some respects, the peculiarly American aspects of the problem of regionalism versus nationalism offer us the best historical point of departure. The major political debates of the first century of American government centered on the issue of the power of the federal government to control national policy. The hard fought battles which ultimately produced a measure of agreement on such issues as banking, currency, and the tariff also produced a Civil War which abolished slavery. Underneath what we now acknowledge as the limited success of such national crusades, however, was the commitment to government which began at home—in state legislatures, in traditional county and town systems, and in the growing urban governments. The compromises which followed the Civil War affirmed the limitations of the

federal government where the making of policy was concerned, but most of all in the formulation of policy on social issues. This was an important affirmation for the South in particular where "social issues" meant not only the treatment of Negroes but the whole problem of poverty in what was, in effect, an under-industrialized and recently defeated colony with relatively little industry. State and local governments were perceived as independent entities pursuing locally determined "public" aims pursued by other "publics" in other communities and regions. The term "public" itself was loosely applied, stretched to include the interests of business and professional groups whose concern with the health and well-being of the community, as well as its moral and charitable needs, could be defined by many different organizations and associations which no one would have called governmental.

Awareness of the need for some kind of national institutions and procedures for influencing the quality of the lives of all citizens came basically from two sources, one quite traditional and the other quite new. The older of the two, the charitable and religious beliefs and institutions which had served as the organizational base for national, educational, and social reform since the Jacksonian era, no longer appeared to be effective, even though for many the benevolent motive remained unchanged. The Civil War had taught a lot of lessons, among them the divisiveness of denominational interests and transience of religious enthusiasm. At the same time, however, the growing consciousness of the needs of the technological revolution under way had led some entrepreneurs and managers engaged in the building of national industry in the nineteenth century to see a new range of national needs in education, in scientific research, and in the relation of the two to human welfare more generally.

FEDERALISM

What made the combination of charity and technology unique in American society was the tradition of federalism—the unwillingness of Americans to give their national government the authority to set national standards of social well-being, let alone to enforce them. Part of the problem lay in the diversity of ethnic, racial, and cultural groups which had been affected dramatically by the successive waves of late nineteenth century immigration and the

unprecedentedly rapid expansion and settlement of the western lands. The traditional American idea of equality did not reflect a national standard according to which communities could measure the quality of education, medical care, treatment of the aged or the unemployed, even from neighborhood to neighborhood in the growing cities, let alone from state to state. For better or for worse, federalism in the nineteenth century had become a way of making pluralism palatable by confining unresolvable differences and accepting them.

From the vantage point of historical distance, one can see the problem more clearly than it was perceived at the time. Among a national elite of modern industrial reformers, a growing consciousness of the desirability of national programs of social welfare collided with a general political culture which would not accept a national government bent on such reform. It was a culture which would have been threatened down to its partisan and regional roots by any attempt to create a nationally unified conception of social policy. Not until the New Deal would the federal government move into areas dominated by private philanthropy and local government, and then only in a very limited form engendered by the Great Depression and accomplished by emergency measures that many believed would not become permanent. Even Americans who looked upon the social programs of the New Deal as the origins of the American welfare state still accepted the fact that solutions to such national problems as compensation for unemployed, the children of the poor, or the indigent and disabled elderly (not to mention emergency employment of artists) would vary widely according to the resources provided by state and local governments as much as by regional traditions.

Federal financial support was always deemed to be supplementary, encouraging rather than controlling state and local policies. Private organizations supported by associations of well-to-do citizens and religious groups worked jointly with agencies managed by local communities and bore the major responsibility for dealing with the condition of those unable to care for themselves. Such institutions as the numerous Charity Organization Societies, the Associated Charities of Boston, the United Hebrew Charities of Philadelphia and New York are obvious late nineteenth century examples of the phenomenon, forerunners of the modern Community Chest—United Way approach to local, private

provision for welfare needs. Schools run by various local committees and boards would continue to hold a widely differing range of powers to tax citizens within their jurisdictions and to distribute educational services the quality of which depended largely on the willingness and financial ability of citizens to supply the necessary funds. Wealthier communities would educate their children differently from less wealthy communities, while ethnic and racial distinctions would play their traditional roles in determining balances of quality. Needless to say, control of culture from music to museums (and especially including higher education) was quintessentially a local affair in the nineteenth century.

The point is that the emergence of the federal government as the controlling presence in the management of national public policy is a remarkably recent phenomenon. While in many aspects of social policy, most particularly those relating to relief, we can date the origins of a national, governmentally created public policy as a product of the New Deal, for most of us the enormous range of federal public responsibility for policy is really a phenomenon of the Johnson years of the 1960s. The Reagan reaction against "big government" is, from this point of view, really an attempt to set the clock back twenty years rather than a century. It plays upon and corresponds to the localist elite sentiments which characterized the formulation of public policy in the United States prior to 1964.

Public Policy and Culture

From the point of view of culture, the process is particularly difficult to disentangle and explicate. While localist sentiment made federal intrusion into the major areas of social policy unpalatable to most Americans, the twin pressures of reform politics and economic necessity achieved grudging acceptance of the need for, if not the desirability of, federal and governmental solutions to certain social problems. But this was almost never the case with culture, and it is not hard to understand why. The cynical might say that society requires bread to feed hungry mouths, but that it does not *require* sculpture, symphony, and ballet. There is some truth in this position, but it ignores the less obvious fact that Americans have defined themselves locally and regionally until fairly recently, and that they have been fundamentally committed

to the notion that culture in a republic is the product of voluntary patrons and societies, though animated by civic pride and civic duty.

Education and Public Policy

The clearest case here is education. Even when national government provided sustenance for education at the local level—by setting aside lands in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, or in the dramatic gesture of the Morrill Act of 1862 which created the land-grant universities—there was never any suggestion that federal government should set operational education policy. That was a task for the local electorate, or at any rate, the leaders of the localities. This feeling remains very strong today. One only has to think of the anguish of desegregation or expenditure equalization—national state policies imposed upon localities—to sense the depth of American commitment to local determination of the most important aspects of cultural life.

Setting aside the short-lived Work Projects Administration (WPA) program in the arts in the 1930s, this situation in the arts began to be transformed only by the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965. For the first time, significant sums of tax-based funds were available for expenditure at the state and local level in the arts. The situation any intelligent observer might have anticipated then came about: on the one hand, local artists and artistic groups eagerly competed for the newly available money, and, on the other hand, artists and philanthropists complained that national policy concerns ought not to guide the distribution of the newly available funds. The message was clear: "Give us the funds and we will determine what to do with them"; or, at best, permit the National Council of the Arts to determine the use of the funds without intervention from politicians and bureaucrats. The question was seldom asked, however, why the federal government should behave in such a way. Should federal tax monies be returned to individuals for local expenditure without undergoing distribution through ordinary political and bureaucratic channels? Is NEA a properly democratic method of allocating federal funds? Can culture really remain above politics once the federal government intervenes? Intelligent artists and laypeople interested in the arts have half-

perceived all of these problems, but they have seldom been faced up to with sufficient honesty.

The Metropolitan Opera Example

It may help to take a brief glance at a specific problem in order to make the point concrete. Consider, for instance, such an institution as the Metropolitan Opera. What would it mean to ask whether or not there is a public policy toward opera in New York City? On the surface, the question may seem absurd, since I take it no one would argue that opera in New York is the result of principled governmental policy directed specifically at the question: how is grand opera to be brought to the residents of the city?

The history of the Met, however, demonstrates that its current status is the result of a series of policies formulated and effectuated over nearly a century's time. If I understand the matter correctly, the Met was initially a profit-making enterprise for small groups of individuals. Ticket revenues almost sufficed to pay the singers and musicians, as well as the other technicians involved. The Met served a constituency of wealthy New Yorkers who made gifts from "the incomes on their incomes," but whose major contribution was through the purchase of season subscriptions. Even before the depression, however, it was no longer possible to sustain the operation of the Met largely from ticket sales, and its more modern incarnation as a philanthropic activity emerged.

That is to say, the Met was now run by a board of trustees who, through their own contributions and their efforts at soliciting others, made up the operating deficit left at the close of each opera season. The position of the company changed again with the emergence of the Lincoln Center effort in the 1960s and the building of the new opera house. Today the board of the Met is considerably more diverse than in earlier years, and it relates a little more directly to the government of the city, but the non-profit corporation's function remains that of making up the shortfall between revenues and expenditures that is the lot of any modern opera company. The audience now, however, is no longer composed primarily of the New York social elite, but is rather a heterogeneous middle-class group drawn from within the city and from large numbers of visitors. Through radio broadcasts and

television, the company of course since the thirties is in fact carried on a regular basis throughout the country and even occasionally abroad.

The Met is big business, even if it is unprofitable; it has a major cultural impact nationally and internationally. Who gets the credit—or the fault? It is relatively easy to understand how in the early years of this century the decisions were made which led to the creation and the sustenance of the original Metropolitan Opera. It was the desire (policy) of certain members of New York's social elite to have such a company, and their demand coincided with a sufficiently attractive entrepreneurial prospect to result in the creation of an opera company. Thus it was not only social policy on the part of an elite, but also a response to the current business policy of the United States in the environment of New York. When for various reasons the situation was transformed, however, and the market could no longer suffice as an incentive to maintain the company, a new set of imperatives took over. The opera became primarily a philanthropic enterprise, in large part at the behest of the descendants of the original elite patrons. The preservation of opera in the city became an aspect of local philanthropic cultural policy. The board felt that the city (and they) needed opera, and they supported the effort financially. The fairly narrow initial group of private patrons was augmented after the 1930s and 1940s by significant new individual patronage and by the substantial support of the large philanthropic foundations, especially Ford and Rockefeller. While the private philanthropic framework remained in place and essential in the period after the Second World War, cooperation, material sustenance, and even advice from other public groups became an essential part of the operation. The trustees still set policy, but they were different sorts of people responding to different sorts of pressures.

The Modern Met

The most obvious example of this process is the creation of Lincoln Center. How would one describe the policy which led to such a development? Surely not in unitary terms. One could think of the Center in terms of urban renewal and the reclamation of the neighborhood, for instance. One could also think of it in terms of the preservation of the entertainment revenue of New York

City. One could think of it in terms of the need to coordinate musical and theatrical culture in the city. And one could also think of it in terms of the artistic and educational needs of the city and the nation. Each of these motives, and policies, was involved, and the resulting Center (with all of its implications for the Met) was the result of a series of negotiations and compromises rather than any set of policies designed purely to establish operative policy for New York City. Any newspaper reader with a good memory of the sixties can recall the complexity of the process: conflict within the cultural elite; negotiation with city, state, and federal governments; relations with the residents of the neighborhood in which the Center was to be built; decisions by national and local foundations; the national investment climate; and so on.

These distinct conflicts which produced the results which led to Lincoln Center were the result of a process which resolved an almost infinite series of conflicting social policies and goals. By the 1960s, private cultural policy in a city was inextricably bound up with governmental policy at local, state, and federal levels. It was also complicated by the fact that culture in this country is no longer dominated by a small and self-contained elite, such as the small group of patrons and entrepreneurs who began opera in New York City. The city itself is composed of a constantly changing set of people and cultures. Equally obviously, singers, orchestral musicians, conductors, directors, scenic designers, radio and television executives, and a host of others all have their own agendas and the resources to effectuate them, when it comes to an institution like the Met.

Another way to look at the problem would simply be to think of the policies which result in the actual activity of the Met in any given year. How can one describe the policy which led, for instance, to the programming of the 1984 season? Surely one could gather quite a lot from understanding the taste and intentions of Mr. Bliss, Maestro Levine, and the trustees, but one would have to be naive to think that they were the only, or even the principal, determinants of the season. Think only of the financial constraints under which such a company is managed, and the sorts of artistic decisions which are made under the pressure of money. What will sell season tickets? What will stimulate single sales? What will Texaco prefer for radio broadcast—and what will television de-

sire for "Live from the Met"? What will the response of the major newspaper and magazine critics be to particular productions? What will generate revenue from recordings and other promotional sales? What will bring in grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, from the Gramma Fisher Foundation, from individual donors? The offerings of a season must be constructed with all of these constraints in mind, and these constraints are the result of the policies of a wide variety of interested groups. There are other obvious factors. What productions can be borrowed at reasonable costs from other companies? Who is available to sing and conduct? What are the preferences of the musicians and craftsmen unions? They all have policies of their own.

Plural Influences

There is not really time to go into detail, but if one thinks about the matter in the abstract, it becomes apparent that an almost infinite variety of policies need to be taken into account in running an organization as complicated as the Met, and not all of them are policies which were intended to have an immediate or primary impact on an opera company. The policies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations toward urban renewal, and those of Mayor John Lindsay, for instance, obviously had almost as much to do with the decision to build Lincoln Center as did the inclinations of John D. Rockefeller III, Charles Spofford, and the Ford Foundation. The laws on copyright have an immediate impact on cost and choice of artistic works. Federal income tax policy with respect to deductibility of charitable contributions has an obvious effect. Direct subsidies from the National Endowment for the Arts and the policies of the National Council of the Arts and the chairman of the NEA may have an immediate bearing upon activities at the Met. More indirectly, in terms of the participation of foreign artists in the training of American artists, national policies with respect to immigration, foreign labor, and educational-cultural exchange will be very important. These are classically "public" policies, but the Met will also respond to "private" policies, ranging from trends in aesthetic taste through the network of interrelationships among the several national opera companies, and extending to the incentives offered

by corporate donors and sponsors. It is all very complicated, and it is very hard to see how it could be otherwise.

The Emergence of a National Policy?

What we do not have, however, is what exists in some of our European counterpart societies—a governmental ministry of culture which sets explicit policies for opera, ranging from the determination of subsidies for particular companies to the financing of artistic education for singers and musicians, and in some cases extending even to the determination of the actual works of art to be performed. We have all heard about the number of local opera companies in Germany or the centralization of artistic policy making in France, but whatever one thinks of German opera or French theatre, the centralized solutions are not possible in American political culture. We prefer to do these things locally and privately, just as we have preferred to locate social reform locally. We think of them as exclusively private and artistic in their origins, even in the face of evidence that since the early seventies at least, cultural policies are affected not only by the private patron and the private philanthropic sector, but also by a congeries of local and national governmental policies. American pluralism and regionalism create a constant pressure for the decentralization of cultural public policy which increasingly runs athwart steadily mounting demands for nationalization of cultural policy. How long will it take for the implementation of the nationalizing pressures beyond bureaucratic and legislative manifestos is impossible to guess.

GOVERNMENT POLICY

To speak for a moment of government policy, it is obvious that there are relatively few areas of direct state or federal cultural policy making. I have already spoken of the NEA (and I could mention its state analogues, the arts councils), but such examples of direct and intentional government policy making are few. More often, governmental policies which have a critical impact on cultural decision making are indirect and unintended, whether they emanate from legislation, judicial action, or the executive branch. The most obvious general area is perhaps tax policy, for

it must be clear to all of us that the structure of taxation has an immediate effect on the financing and therefore the policy making of cultural organizations.

What would the situation be, for instance, without state and federal deductions for charitable contributions and, indeed, without the whole structure of our legal system of inheritance? So much of our cultural activity is predicated upon philanthropic principles that it is hard for us to imagine a system which does not run on some combination of the market and philanthropy, despite European examples to the contrary. But of course we need not have charitable deductions, and in fact current proposals for tax reform envisage the possibility of doing without them. Such a "flat-tax" policy might have the most dramatic impact on cultural activity. State and federal policy with respect to education, to name another obvious area, clearly has a great deal to do with the training of young artists and with the employment of mature artists. The federal government has played an increasing role in creating a national educational policy going back to the National Defense Act of 1965, but states and localities have nevertheless always been more centrally important in education. Certain federal policies designed for more general purposes have occasionally had a dramatic impact on culture—the WPA is only the most obvious example, but others could be cited. In analyzing the situation of the Met, I have already referred to a wide variety of governmental policies which have an obvious relationship to the cultural life of this country, even though we have no ministry of culture and even though we have no cultural policy as understood by European standards.

PRIVATE POLICY: COMMERCIAL

The private sector provides a similar picture of a complex, interlocking, and sometimes conflicting set of policies with respect to culture. Consider first the commercial side of the private sector. The market itself is of course a powerful force in culture, whether we are talking about setting the agenda for symphony programming or helping to create the "New York Style" in painting. Print and electronic media are essential to the welfare of artistic institutions and individual artists, and I do not suppose that any of us would want to deny that these institutions are driven by

considerations which are not in the first instance aesthetic. The commercial entertainment industry itself, through the pressure of competition and the setting of public tastes, provides an important part of the environment in which cultural institutions must operate, and it surely impacts upon their decision making. Likewise, from the other side of the bargaining table, the organization of labor and the development of a labor agenda have also transformed the context of the arts. One need only look at the budgets of symphony orchestras before and after the onset of the unionization of classical musicians to see what a determining effect labor power has had upon musical life in the United States. I suppose that these policies and influences are self-evident, but we sometimes take them for granted.

PRIVATE POLICY: NONPROFIT

Even more obvious, though less understood, is the impact of the private not-for-profit sector. We are accustomed to recognize the importance of patrons in the development of cultural policy, but of course patronage, like so much else in American life, has now also corporate forms. That is to say that much of the finance and decision making in cultural life now comes via foundations and corporations, just as it traditionally came from individuals, churches, and voluntary organizations. The private patron is still the largest source of support, but the funding of artistic activity has been substantially driven by the policies of nonprofit organizations. And so, perhaps more important, have the education of artists and their sustenance throughout artistic careers. Decisions, for instance, about the nature and finance of musical conservatories have had the greatest relevance to the production of the great numbers of competent instrumentalists currently available for America's burgeoning orchestral sector. There has been no national policy on the creation of bassoonists, for instance, but it is no accident that 154 candidates turned out a few years ago when there was an opening for the first desk at the New York Philharmonic. Equally obviously, what Philip Morris or Exxon want to support in the way of art shows, dramatic television series, or Egyptian archeology is likely to have a very big influence over what is available to the modern public. Doing well by doing good is an old American tradition.

PRIVATE POLICY: INDIVIDUAL

It is harder to describe the behavior of individuals as one of policy making. The major patrons have had a clear impact on the maintenance and transformation of culture, but then so have volunteers and more modest individual donors. The same might be said for groups of individuals working through institutions ranging from libraries through civic associations. Voluntarism has indeed been a critical aspect of policy making in the United States, even if the coherence and independence of such groups have characteristically been exaggerated. And, finally, of course the artists themselves are the most important individuals involved. At least in the performing arts, however, it is very difficult to argue that most performing artists have been able individually to determine the conduct and texture of institutional culture in their own fields. Most artistic performance is driven by institutional imperatives, and not only by the imperatives of finance. It is largely upon such institutions that the varieties of policy making on which I have tried to elaborate have had determining effect.

Conclusion

As must be painfully obvious from what I've already said, I am not a professional student of the arts. My field is rather the history of public policy in the United States and, in particular, the history of philanthropy. Nevertheless, it does seem clear to me as an avid consumer of art (and the father of a bassoonist) that the dynamics of public policy formulation in the United States apply to artistic policy as well as to those areas of social policy with which I am more familiar. The lessons, I would say, are really four.

The *first* lesson is that to have no policy is to have a policy. That we do not have a national cultural policy, in other words, means that we have made a decision (this going far back in our history) to leave to private and local institutions the determination of the decisions most overtly affecting the creation and conduct of cultural institutions. *Second*, no public policy can be understood in isolation. We do not have a national cultural policy, but we have tax policies, urban renewal policies, immigration policies,

and a number of other public and governmental policies which limit the ways in which cultural institutions can operate.

Third, if by policy we mean the creation of norms according to which action is determined, the public-private line is not very helpful in determining "public" policy. The norms which have operational significance for artists and cultural institutions derive equally from private and public sources, and it is a mistake to think of them as primarily governmentally derived. Indeed, in this country, private policy making has been predominant. At this point in our history, the interconnections between public and private are so complex and so intimate that it makes little sense to try to polarize our understanding of the policy-making process.

Finally, the increasing involvement of American cultural life with the overt process of public policy formulation has costs as well as benefits. While most of us are appreciative of the growing amounts of governmental funds which have been made available to American artists, we must recognize that the price tag for this "public" support is a swelling demand for public accountability. There is an inevitable tension between high culture and democracy, and as cultural policy moves from the domain of the private, the elite, and the artist to that of public and popular taste, there will almost certainly be impacts upon the artistic process itself. The one sure thing is that this tension will produce a wide variety of responses in our localistic culture, despite the best (worst?) efforts of federal government to achieve a more unified national policy.

What we must do, then, is to examine the situation of the arts with greater analytical sophistication than has ordinarily been employed in order to understand the diversity and multiplicity of influences upon cultural decision making. It is only then that we will be able to identify the critical variables, and to try to affect them—assuming we can agree upon what an appropriate cultural policy might be.