

Liberal promotion of culture and patronage, sponsoring or corporatism

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What do promoters of culture promote?

«Culture by definition is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions, and beliefs.» That is Unesco's 1982 definition of culture. For the lawyer in me both the first and the second phrase are much too vague and too broad. But it is what you are likely to get from diplomats as well as from bureaucrats which have an interest in drawing the borderlines around their area of competence as wide as possible.

If you do not require a definition to fulfil its natural function, i.e. to be precise, but if you want it to serve as a base for activism, encompassing as much as possible, then Unesco's definition is state of the art. Let's but compare it to what the Ottawa Charter of 1986 proposes to be promotion of health: «Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. To reach a state of complete physical mental and social wellbeing, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment. Health is, therefore, seen as a resource for everyday life, not the objective of living. Health is a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources, as well as physical capacities.» Obviously, in this light, promotion of culture is also promotion of health. And vice versa. Or everything is at the same time everything else. It would probably be malicious and, thus, politically incorrect to denounce this as the interdisciplinarity of zeitgeisty verbiage.

Unesco's definition of culture might perhaps be helpful for discerning areas where cultural manifestations may be found. Still, when I talk of promotion of culture I'm looking at a more limited phenomenon: contributions to the shaping of the environment in which those parts of some work shall be created whose «net value added» is deemed not to be economical, or direct contributions to such works. The value created here is esthetical or identity related.

Such a framework is still quite large. The question whether and in which dimensions sports are also part of culture I leave open.

Government as promoter of culture

To-day the state promotes culture under a broad variety of titles. First and foremost he provides for public education which is an irreplaceable contribution to the shaping of cultural interests and standards. In Europe at least this function is not questioned. Even liberals make one exception from their disapproval of so-called basic social rights: public education or, to be precise, primary schooling. To be a responsible citizen you have to master some basic techniques like reading, writing, counting, logical thinking and reasoning. And both the assuming of personal responsibility as well as the development of an authentic personality presuppose some elementary knowledge of items like the broad lines of history, the basics of former generations' learning and, finally, the different approaches to cultural manifestations.

It is quite typical that the old liberal political constitutions of our continent made schools a state concern. Thus, article 62 of the Zurich constitution of 1869 stated: «The promotion of public learning and of republican citizens' education is of the competence of the state.»

Also, where the state itself creates works, as a builder for instance or as an issuer of postage stamps, cultural aspects are evident. Even if some administration building should completely renounce artistic embellishments it is a cultural manifestation and be it one of bad architectural taste. But, as a rule, such an occasion is used for some artistic manifestation, too. It would not really be understandable if government were prohibited from doing what citizens may do as a matter of course.

But here we have a problem. The modern state does not usually have artistic tastes. Fortunately so, we are tempted to say, if we think of the Third Reich or of Socialist Realism. Earlier states had artistic tastes, those of the ruler. From a cultural viewpoint this was not a bad solution if for instance we look at baroque or renaissance, styles which were largely promoted as state culture. But to-day the ruler are the people. This may be theory, and in such cases, as for instance in France, republican rulers, too, may build palaces according to their personal taste. If they dare have one. But people's rule may also be a reality as to a considerable extent in Switzerland. Then we are faced with the phenomenon of democracy in taste. Or, in other words, with the attempt to legitimize artistic decisions democratically.

This, quite often, is a miserable failure. The means used is usually the jury. And the result is mediocrity. Why, indeed, should it just be just here that the word of the camel being a horse which God had created by a committee should not be true? Culture by its very nature is no compromise. Art is arbitrary. It pleases some and does not please others. If you want to make sure that the things created are likely to please you you do it – as did the Medici – with the selection of the artist. But here, too, democratic governments make it difficult for themselves because it again is a group which have to do the selection. And as a group they tend to favour, without any personal involvement, «proven values».

Promotion of culture and bureaucratic self-service

The myth of the need for democratic legitimization and the realization of being overcharged with cultural decisions have, in Europe, brought about a state of affairs where promotion of culture is outsourced to specialist organizations with budgetary autonomy. Thus, boards, foundations, councils etc. are created. These, then, create their own infrastructure. And immediately a microcosm of colourful bureaucracies flower. But don't let us be duped: Just as a department for economic affairs is not made up of entrepreneurs, in the same way cultural officials are not artists. They only farm artists, thereby diverting part of the latter's prestige to bolster their own self-esteem.

It may be that in larger countries this does not produce too much distortion. But in smaller ones, as in Switzerland, it may become quite problematic.

It is obvious that there will be personal relations between those who give money or commissions on the one hand and those who create culture on the other. But it gets even more complicated: The decisions are often made on the base of recommendations of experts' committees made up of representatives of the arts involved. Again, the smaller the country the smaller the numbers of writers, painters, entertainers, film makers, sculptors etc. who may be called upon to assume experts rôles. The result is something which in Switzerland is called *felt*, the game of I give you and you give me. In some bigger country the result may also be competition. But not here. And this leads to a self-service buffet or, what is even worse, to the exclusion of those who do not conform to the standards of the reigning cultural corporatists. Rarely does this have positive results as it did with the Viennese secession in 1897.

Obviously, corporatist promotion of culture has a side-effect very much liked by those profiting from it: Their works do no longer have to conform to the aesthetic tastes of the plebeians. On the contrary. The latter's abhorrence serves as a yardstick for the work's cultural value. Because culture is not the slave of mass taste. It is the language of the initiated. And thus we get the films, nobody sees, the comedies, which do not have more than three presentations, the paintings disappearing in the attics etc. But the perpetrators, they are assured of future commissions.

In Switzerland, this cultural merry-go-round displays an additional curious specificity: Whilst in the countries around her there is a clear distinction between organizations charged with promotion of culture and those for the promotion of the country's image abroad, the leading Swiss player, Pro Helvetia, is charged with both. This not only falsifies the priorities of what should be cultural public relations abroad, it also means that artists, depending on their position in the give-and-take network, have another privileged access to government money or are excluded from the trough.

Private promotion of culture

To a great part promotion of culture is still private and ruled by the imperatives of its specific markets. Although we are not too far away from it, we are not yet in a situation where culture is defined by what the government promotes as such. Competition, here too, creates diversity. He may find it quite difficult in the beginning but eventually every talented painter finds somebody who likes and pays his pictures. And nearly every author who is a really good writer finds his editor. But this world also has its specific problems.

Some of them are obvious where we talk big money both for the production as for the proceeds. A typical case is Hollywood. Yes, the (relatively) low budget as well as the sophisticated film still exist. But commercial interests all too often kill artistic ones. There, too, we are talking culture. But its authenticity is small. These films are copies, the triggering of known reactions. I like this with the art of cooking. Rather less in films.

A related phenomenon – and at the same time an illustration of cultural promotion in a grey area between public and private – is television. Here also commercial interests drive out creative diversity at an ever increasing pace. And we get the ga ga game productions. Still, consumers have a choice amongst ever more providers. And it is likely that more and more small scale producers will make use of the internet's possibilities for low cost programmes. What this will bring about we do not yet know. There, certainly, will not be pearls of culture only.

The classical promoter of culture for centuries was the patron. Now he has been largely replaced by the sponsor. This development corresponds to the replacement of the rich land owners or of the private entrepreneurs by the managers of limited companies. The patron used and uses to shape his cultural engagement so his personal tastes (sometimes with a more or less oblique glance to the impact on his social environment) the sponsor is interested in creating a favourable image for his brand or product (sometimes with a more or less oblique glance to getting in contact with the famous and the beautiful). The goal in the latter case is obvious: cultural covering fire for commercial interests. It is therefore only logical that, for instance in Switzerland, sponsoring is taxed (VAT) whilst patronage is not.

But what is important for culture is the fact that sponsoring shows some of the same mechanisms of bureaucratization as does state subsidizing. Here, too, it is not the people in charge of the firm's success who make their cultural preferences felt (or with some very big prestige projects only). The grey mice do that. This holds even true to some extent for patrons of they use the mechanism of foundations and experts' committees. The big difference to

public grants is – at least in small countries – that the relatively great number of such private patronage creates more competition and, thereby, more spaces for cultural development than does the state.

Less state

It is only natural: Corporatist culture loves the state: much money, little control. For a liberal system of cultural creativity liberation from government crutches and incentives would be desirable. Robert Nef, one of the foremost liberal thinkers in Switzerland once said: «Let culture be culture's business.» That is to quite some degree true. But it is much more easily said than done.

And if we see that today's government is subsidizing an extraordinary amount of activities, it would be to some extent unfair if just culture were to be completely left out. Indeed, it is not so much the money spent which is annoying (this too), even more so is the bureaucratic corset the whole machine is gifted with.

There are several models to do away with such a state of affairs. There is for instance the Irish one, deeply rooted in the bardic history of the country: Artists do not pay taxes. This is a quite nice gift. But in to-day's world it is apt to raise a few practical problems. For one, it is all too easy to claim to be an artist. And also the fact that this tax immunity is misused by British rock and pop millionaires creates political opposition. Still, such an approach is feasible.

The American way is the generous tax deduction for cultural engagements. This, too, has much to do with the history of a country which never had a monarchical patron as head of state. This in a very efficient way encourages patrons to promote culture. Many American operas, museums, cultural foundations etc. owe their existence and their survival to tax deductions. But even in the United States government no longer escapes demands to directly sponsor culture. It is obvious that the European corporatist virus is contagious for American bureaucracies. Thus, nowadays it is accepted that expositions for instance are funded by about twenty percent government and eighty percent private moneys.

There has also been the idea that tax payers may decide on the actual attribution of the part of their taxes which are used for cultural affairs. I do not know whether such a system is already in use somewhere. But it strongly reminds me of the self-deception energy companies are propagating here when they offer to sell you, at a slightly higher price, solar energy. It comes from the same mains and uses the same plugs as atomic energy. Public budgets for culture and their instruments for distribution would probably remain the same, irrespective of the tax payers' individual preferences. Still, it would be possible to organize some such system similar to school vouchers. But in the highly heterogeneous field of culture this might be even more complicated.

The cumbersome way from A to B

If there is one question reformers hate it is the one about the way from A to B: How to get from to-day's woes to the land of plenty. But it is exactly here that lies the crux of the matter when the problem is not just the introduction of something new but the replacement of one solution by another one.

For reasons of general policy, for instance, I would be quite in favour to replace the Swiss Pro Helvetia monster by the American system of tax deductions. But Pro Helvetia exists. And everybody who has some experience with practical politics knows that to get rid of Pro Helvetia or a similar institution in another country with all the felt structures around is simply

impossible. It's daydreaming. You may reform them, you may remodel them, you may fusion them. In the end the same bureaucrats with their same boarders will have settled into some even more opulent mansion. It is very difficult to do away with developments conditioned by history.

But you may graft new solutions onto older ones. And that is what happens quite often. Only, there is the question about the sense of such a step, e.g. the addition of American tax deductions to European state involvement. If the aim is to massively increase promotion of culture without lessening the flow of grants this recipe may work. But in to-day's time of overstretched budgets this is certainly not likely.

Thus, realistically, all we may hope for – and even that may be an illusion – are attempts to get rid of some corporatist incrustations in the relationships of state and culture. To establish some sort of cultural governance: transparent procedures, reduction of the dominance of bureaucrats, short terms of office for committee members (but in small countries the reservoir to draw them from is small), access for the non-mainstream etc.

It's a pleasure to meditate on liberal promotion of culture. It's an illusion to expect to see it happen.