

Do We Need Public Cultural Organizations?

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We are in a time when public cultural institutions are called much into question. It is an erosion that has happened over the last 20 years and more, part of a larger movement that, at its extreme, questions the very necessity of any public institutions and, at best, calls for a severe restriction of their role, functions and powers. It is a movement founded on the conviction that the state has encroached too much on our lives. It is not a homogenous movement but brings together many different kinds of groups, some odd bedfellows indeed. For some, limiting the state is not an absolute. It is that the values seen to be espoused by the modern liberal state are at odds with quite opposing firmly held beliefs. For others, libertarians, it is a matter of absolutes. The state should have at all times the most minimal role in the lives of individuals.

However, no matter the starting point of the minimalists, they confound two quite different things: one the role of the state and the other is the role of the “public” in civic life. It may seem a nuanced difference but it is fundamental and the confusion arises when what is public is articulated as an extension of government or state and thus necessarily subject to the same restrictions one might wish to put on the role of government in our lives.

The fundamental difference is that the role of the state is prescriptive: the “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” —defining the rules and norms of our social being; the role of the public is explorative—a dynamic ongoing exchange to understand the boundaries of who we are as social beings that can form the basis for how we then organize the state or government. The confusion arises when the public role is embedded within government or government-funded institutions. The questions that we must ask ourselves are:

Do we need any public institutions at all?

If yes, do they ever need to be supported by the state?

In the logic of the minimalists, there is no public realm; there are only individual and private realms. Private realms may include social groupings, whether a sports club or a religious congregation but their distinguishing characteristic is that they will establish their own rules of conduct and, crucially, of admission. The role of government is to facilitate the maximization of private choices. Anything beyond that it becomes intrusive. It undermines independence and limits liberty or it prevents the free exercise of what is deemed to be a necessary and morally superior way of life. It is a point of view that implies that values are only private and public values do not exist. Although, some such groups hold that if there are public values, they can only be the values that they hold true, fundamental and unalterable.

Failing their imposition of their absolutist values it is better to secede from the public realm and advocate for less government. The argument in its essence goes as follows: "Given that what I believe is the only truth and given that society refuses to recognize this truth I have no option but to withdraw from this society and society has no right to impose in any way whatsoever on me. I should be free to believe as I wish, act on my beliefs as I wish, educate my children in the ways that matter to me, and spend my money only on that which has value to me."

The assertion that there are only private and no public values is inherently contradictory because the assertion of limiting government and of extending private choice is in itself a declaration of public value. They are the presumed basis on which hard public policy decisions are made. So it has been the case in many countries which have at varying times and to varying degrees adopted elements of the minimalist stance. If there is a concession to public values it is a variant of Adam Smith's argument: private choices can best deliver public goods.

It is a debate that has raged since the late 18th century but in the cultural field even in the United States a mixed approach of public (e.g. museums) and private was deemed essential for a range of reasons that had to do with a vague understanding that "the public" could not be eliminated from society and the scope of government action.

In what ways is the public realm necessary and fundamental to our social organization and, if that is true, does the state have a role to play in supporting the public realm and, in particular, does the state have a role to play in supporting public cultural institutions?

The argument for a positive role is an argument about the limits of private choices delivering public value. This can be looked at in a range of ways and fields. Economists talk about externalities, such as the unintended negative consequences of private enterprise which are not part of their cost of business. For example, a saw mill will deliver economic benefits to a community but is not responsible for the pollution of the water sources on which it builds its business. The water is public; the cost of cleaning it up remains a burden on the public and the long-term impact of environmental degradation is a public burden none of which is borne by the saw mill. This is negative public value. One can make similar arguments in reverse. This leads to an understanding of market failures and the necessity of corrective action.

More fundamentally, the argument for public organization rests on the notion that government's prescriptive actions rests on an implicit understanding of what the public values and wants. Society is always in transition and changing. The ways in which conflicting values can be expressed, explored, debated and exchanged is through a range of public forums.

Essential to that, particularly in dynamic societies where change is driven by relentless technological innovation and demographic upheaval, the debate needs to be intense and ongoing and one of the most fundamental ways to do so is through culture. It is on that basis one can begin to build the case for public cultural institutions. This is very different from what is deemed to be the value of supporting culture. In fact, it is not culture that is supported but cultural industries and principally for the economic value that they render. The economic argument is prettified with the window dressing of a series of

banal and oft repeated motherhood claims for the value of culture. At the end of the day, however, it falls short because the economic calculus makes of culture a fungible economic activity which can be displaced by another that delivers greater returns. The economic argument may be useful tactically. It should not displace the search for a more fundamental basis on which to ground an understanding and support for the public realm.

Cultural activities and exchanges provide the necessary conversation for negotiating the ways in which we can exist as a society. It does so through the ongoing works of creation but it also does it through the continued interrogation of the past. This is an argument about time. Societies exist in time and over time. They can only exist in time through the public realm. It is there that continuity and societal memory is built—not to be locked in by the past but to be enriched and informed by our history. It is for that reason that even in the United States that museums are accepted as public institutions.

The strong arguments for public cultural organizations does not impede an analysis of the ways in which such organizations may drift away from their public purpose and how to deal with organizations that may have in their form lived beyond their usefulness and the need to develop new forms of organizations. Or how to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to counter drift when it happens. That is a separate series of arguments but which often come into play when the minimalists argue against the necessity of public cultural institutions. The questions must be posed but they are of a different kind than the questions about the necessity of a public realm.