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Cultural Darwinism and the Perils of Privatization: The Case of American Museums

By

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The basis for understanding public support for the arts in the United States is the absence of any precedent for direct national involvement (Larson, 1983). The American approach to culture has rejected any collective state intervention. Cultural institutions, such as museums, originated as the preserve of private philanthropists. This philanthropy emanated variously from the desire for social capital, civic pride, personal altruism and an obligation to broaden the vistas of the working class (Adam, 2008). Cultural patronage also benefits from a tax code that provides significant incentives for contributions to nonprofit organizations. The funds raised from ancillary activities, such as gift shops, enjoy significant tax exemptions.

With the encouragement of tax-deductible contributions, cultural visions are privately conceived and reflect the wishes of the donors. This represents the basic principle of the American philanthropic system: one that is facilitated by a tax policy, not a cultural policy. As Milton Cummings observed, "until the 1960s, at least, the indirect effects of policies designed primarily for other purposes had a greater influence on the art world than did government actions which were consciously designed for their impact on the arts" (Cummings, 1995: 75). Moreover, the demand for necessary operating funds have caused both public and private museums to cater to philanthropists with personalized naming opportunities, solicit corporate sponsorships with prominent signage for popular exhibitions and to increasingly promote commercial ventures such as large gift shops, among other ancillary activities, with mail-order catalogues. As an overall reality, this can be termed 'merchandising museums.'

Any effort at justifying public culture must realize that success is predicated upon political acceptability and be consonant with the values of a particular political system. American cultural patronage reflects a general skepticism of public involvement in social policies. Limited public subvention demands the generation of private philanthropy and earned income for museums and other organizations in the cultural sector. The basic model for cultural funding is one that rests heavily on non-public subvention. The concomitant argument is that such market management insures greater efficiency and better reflects individual preferences. This ideological view point, which may be termed a 'lassiez-faire' model, has become enshrined as the conventional American wisdom, as with many other societal beliefs, in essentially ceding pride of place to the private sector in the subvention of culture. Necessarily, any argument for public culture will be of a 'laissez-faire' variety that uses tax incentives to stimulate private philanthropy and earned income with limited public subsidy. The privatized nature of American culture reflects a broader ethos about the limited scope of public policy in general (Mulcahy, 2003).

At root, laissez-faire is a philosophy or practice characterized by the deliberate abstention from direction or planning by the state. It is a policy of non-interference especially with what is seen as individual freedom of choice and action. The belief is that the free market is the best means for allocating values. This ideological stance is often criticized, however, for failing to address questions of representativeness in a heterogeneous society. Support for public culture, by contrast, typically argues for policies that would promote greater diversity in the nation's cultural life with enhanced accessibility for broader segments of the public. What will be explored herein is a study of the implications of a 'laissez-faire cultural policy' for museums in the United States and the resulting specter of Cultural Darwinism from this privatization.

I. The Public Interest in Museums

It may be that the highly diffuse nature of American society—multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-linguistic—argues against any effort to formulate a national cultural policy. The frequent use of the metaphor of a 'melting pot' to describe American society is especially misleading where the concept of culture is concerned. Instead of homogeneity, there are sharp cleavages that would militate against any cultural policy that would seem to dictate universal aesthetic standards. Seen as a 'cultural mosaic', with no commonly agreed-upon definition of a national heritage, a public cultural policy must respect the realities of a variegated society. Indeed, the problem with formulating a singular American concept of culture is perhaps the defining impediment to any national cultural policy. Accordingly, no consensus has evolved regarding the legitimate relationship between government and the arts in the United States.

Lamentably, many efforts by public cultural agencies to broaden the range of aesthetic visions and offer alternatives to the artistically commonplace have been viewed as a waste of the taxpayers' money, when not deemed patently offensive. Even as these agencies have sought to support cultural projects that steered clear of political controversies, these have come up with alarming frequency. Aesthetic values are typically seen as a matter of individual preference and cultural activities as essentially entertainment choices (Gans, 1999). As such, publicly-supported culture in the United States has been met with guarded acquiescence. Public culture in the United States has been difficult because of the resistance by large numbers of Americans to the concept of 'big government' in general and a 'culture state' in particular. Given a political tradition that has not conceptualized a public interest distinct from the interests of publics, the concept of a public policy for articulating universal cultural values would be decidedly at odds with America's prevailing political ideology (Mulcahy, 2000).

On the other hand, a democratic society can arguably provide opportunities for cultural participation by as large a number of people, and in as many ways as feasible, in order for culture's essential merit to be better appreciated. In short, the arts and culture are merit goods that require public subvention to ensure cultural activities other than those produced by commercial enterprises (Caust, 2003). This argument recognizes that the entertainment business is not meant to provide edification or education. It has a fiduciary responsibility to create profitable mass-oriented commodities that increase shareholder value. This reality justifies public culture as a provider for those 'perfect moments' that are not profit based.

Public culture exists as a corrective for a market determined culture by seeking to provide greater conceptual representativeness as well as providing access to people from different geographic locales, socio-economic strata and educational backgrounds. The activities supported can include parks, zoos, aquariums, and botanical gardens as well as museums and the performing arts. This is a synthesis that can be termed a 'latitudinarian approach' to public culture; that is, one that is aesthetically inclusive and broadly accessible (Mulcahy: 1991). Such a cultural policy would remain faithful to the highest standards of excellence reflecting a broad range of aesthetic expressions as well as socio-cultural communities.

Similarly, public agencies can promote community development by supporting artistic heritages that are at a competitive disadvantage in a cultural world that is increasingly profit-driven. Excellence is viewed as the achievement of greatness from a broad-based perspective and a cultural policy as supporting the totality of these varieties of excellence. In conceiving of public policy as an opportunity to provide alternatives not readily available in the marketplace, public cultural agencies would be better positioned to complement the efforts of the private sector rather than duplicate their activities let alone challenge their legitimacy.

What is particularly debatable about the assumption that cultural representatives is best realized by private efforts is its denial that there is a public interest in cultural policy and how is it best determined (Mokre, 2006). This question is particularly relevant with regard to museums given their special role in preserving patrimony and defining identity. In particular, can American laissez-faire patronage sustain a public culture free from commodification and consumerism? American patronage practices do loom powerfully persuasive as what is called 'privatization' presents itself as a panacea for the problem of public parsimony. American museum management is transplanted internationally with what can be decidedly unanticipated consequences concerning who determines cultural policies and what aesthetic standards prevail.

Frequently referenced in this discussion is the Smithsonian as one of the 25% of museums that are public as compared to the 75% that are designated as 501(c)(3) nonprofits. Arguably, the Smithsonian may not be fully representative of other public and nonprofit museums given its size, scope and status. Regardless, its budgetary structure demonstrates the tripartite nature of American cultural patronage: a three-pronged formula of public support, private philanthropy and earned income. Its management practices, despite free admission and prominent public subvention in philanthropy and earned income, has pioneered examples to be adopted by other museums, both public and nonprofit. The nation's premier encyclopedic museum, the Metropolitan, has been a private, non-profit trendsetter. The practices of American museums have become a reference point in other nations for what may be recommendable practices given the harsh realities of public retrenchment in cultural subvention.

II. The National Cultural Presence

The foundation of national government support for cultural affairs was realized in Lyndon Johnson's Great Society policies of the 1960s. This reform movement sponsored a variety of political, social, health, and cultural initiatives that transformed the landscape of American public policy. In the cultural area, the creation of agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), and later the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) represented a commitment to a cultural policy with a national scope. Additionally, the NEA, and to a lesser extent the NEH, is buttressed by state arts agencies as well as local arts councils that are both public (25%) and not-for-profit (75%) in their funding structures. It should be noted in brief that the NEA has endured efforts for its abolition. In the aftermath of the so-called Mapplethorpe Affair in 1989, the governing board of the NEA was changed to include congressional representation. Most significant was the termination of any direct grants to artists and a funding shift to support grants in every congressional district and with more social urban renewals and arts therapy foci (Mulcahy, 2017).

In addition to the well-known NEA and NEH (1965), there are two other federal agencies with national cultural responsibilities. The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), established in 1976, is responsible for providing libraries and museums, predominately local entities, with technical and management assistance. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), created in 1967, serves as a conduit for providing funds for technical assistance to the various not-for-profit radio and television stations around the country that provide noncommercial cultural and public affairs programming. (It is beyond the competence of CPB to produce or directly underwrite such programming. This is the responsibility of the not-for-profit telecommunications sector: the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR), which despite the belief of many critics are not public agencies).

The Smithsonian Institution, which originated with from a gift of $500,000 by James Smithson, and was established by Congress in 1846, deserves pride of place as the first national cultural commitment and which today comprises an array of museums and science centers that may be intentionally nonpareil. The Smithsonian museums are free and all but one are located in Washington on the National Mall (The Cooper-Hewitt Design Museums is in New York City). Their operations are heavily, but not entirely, underwritten by the government.

The National Gallery of Art originated as a gift to the nation by Andrew Mellon (Secretary of the Treasury, 1920-1932) in 1937. Notably, he refused to have it named for himself, intending the Gallery as part of the nation's patrimony (Canadine, 2006). The National Gallery is not a subordinate part of the Smithsonian Institution, but instead is an autonomous museum with its own self-perpetuating Board of Trustees. The government appropriates funds for the operating budget, but any new acquisition or special exhibition must be from separate funds.

As administrative organizations, the Smithsonian Institution and National Gallery of Art represent administrative hybrids. They are eligible for private philanthropy and able to operate ancillary services that generate earned income because both are classified as quasi-autonomous public institutions. They are closer to public corporations such as the Postal Service that operate with revenues from user fees, as is the Smithsonian and National Gallery, organizations that are funded largely by the government, but are autonomous in their operations and governance,

III. Tax Exemptions and Private Philanthropy

A proper understanding of America's public commitment to culture must take into account the role of the non-profit sector. While cultural activities in the United States are not as directly subsidized as in other nations, the government's role is hardly negligible given its provisions of tax exemptions for cultural organizations and their benefactors. It is the role of philanthropic support for the cultural sector, as with 501(c)(3) nonprofits in general, that is the distinguishing characteristic of American exceptionalism in public policymaking. This enables a broad array of activities (that would otherwise be considered public responsibilities) that rely on private philanthropy, earned income, and a small public outlay (Schuster, 1989). The nature of the 'laissez-faire model' where public subvention is imbedded in the tax code's exemptions for nonprofit activities (Cummings and Schuster, 1989). The success of this system is associated with the tax advantages of philanthropic donations. The value of earned income is enhanced by the exemptions granted from sales taxes on what is bought and sold. Not unimportantly, public and many private museums sit on public land such as a park that are exempt from real estate taxes.

As has been noted, government support for arts organizations in the United States is decidedly limited; for the performing arts, it is distinctly minimal (6% public, mostly from local governments). All of the performing arts are private not-for-profit except for those which are commercial like Broadway theatre, Hollywood, Disney theme parks, which are businesses. Museums, however, are a more differentiated sector. In particular, 25% of museums are public/quasi-public. The 75% that are private, nonprofit institutions enjoy a more favorable subvention than the performing arts. The difference between the public and private museums is notable. Public museums are supported 45% by government, 11% by philanthropy, and 44% by earned income. If the more typical, not-for-profit museum is considered separately, government support is only 15% with private philanthropy accounting for 35% and earned income for 50%. (American Association for the Arts, 2016)

The financial significance of charitable giving, $350 billion overall, cannot be underestimated. The share of charitable giving for the arts, culture, and humanities has averaged 4.8% with only minor variations in the past two decades.

The Problems with Philanthropy

It should be noted that, while philanthropic giving increased by approximately 25% over the past five years, support for the 'arts, culture, humanities' sector declined by 0.2%. While this may seem a less than ominous decline, it has fueled skepticism within the cultural milieu about the likelihood of any significant improvements in private giving in the future. The marked increase in recent years in giving to organizations involved with the environmental and international affairs is perhaps an indication of the preferences of a new generation of benefactors who are less familiar with, and less supportive of, cultural values.

Whether such a highly privatized system of patronage best promotes the public interest in public policy generally, and cultural policy specifically, is a highly debatable issue. In particular, does the quest for private support compromise an institution's public mission? As noted earlier, the merits of philanthropy need to be evaluated with regard to the concentration of decision-making about matters of public consequence in the hands of private individuals and institutions. This is neither fundamentally an issue of aesthetic quality nor of the goodwill of the benefactors, but of the representatives and public accountability of such cultural policy. A recent analysis of the board of trustees of the ten most visited American museums[1] noted that the philanthropy of board members accounted on average for 20% of operating budgets (*New York Times*, October 2, 2019). This would not exclude special gifts such as the newly designed entrance plaza of the Metropolitan Museum (the $65 million cost paid for by David Koch) and a $131 million gift for the new Whitney Museum from Leonard Lauder (for whom the building was named).

Unsurprisingly, board members are typically collectors themselves, sometimes on a grand scale. Some argue that there is inevitably a cozy relationship between board donors and curators, business that constitutes the arts equivalent of 'insider trading,' where knowledge of upcoming artistic trends can be learned to acquire new creations for personal collections, which, in fact, are not infrequently donated to a museum). Regardless, the board member acquires a major boost in valuable cultural as well as social capital (as the museum acquires not only needed funding, but an association with powerful figures, but an association with powerful figures in the community and practical financial advice).

Leaving aside questions concerning the source of a donor's wealth (the Sackler family connection with addictive opioids comes to mind), the influence of major philanthropists on the collections and policies of museums raises important questions about the character of cultural policymaking generally. Is something missing here? At the same time, the importance of philanthropy is its role in filling some of the financial vacuum created by the decline in public support (Callahan, 2017: 243-44). As indicated, this giving is largely the largess of the rich individuals rather than an accumulation of small donations or foundation support. "Along with the rise of broader inequalities in our new Gilded Age, civil society itself has become ever more

[1] As determined by a 2018 *Art News* survey: Art Institute of Chicago; de Young Museums; Guggenheim Museum; Los Angeles County Museum of Arts; Metropolitan Museum; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum of Modern Art; Whitney Museum; San Francisco Museum of Art.

dominated by the upper class" (Callahan, 2017: 33). The implication of such dominance (along with a commodified earned income) on the major museums will be discussed in the concluding pages. One recent judgment of the broad societal implications of philanthropic power can be considered.

> Philanthropy is becoming a much stronger power center and, in some cases, is set to surpass government in its ability to shape society's agenda. To put things differently, we face a future in which private donors—who are accountable to no one—may often wield more power than elected public officials who (in theory anyway) are accountable to all of us. (Callahan, 2017: 7)

Museums, as the custodians of a collective patrimony, might be particularly sensitive to any over-aggrandizement of private interests in determining the definition of what constitutes a culture. There is no support implied for cultural stateism to insist that there is a public interest to be considered. An enhanced public culture offers the best (if not most realistic) means to promote a degree of representativeness and accountability.

An example of the problems that can arise with the most well intentioned philanthropy can be found in the Smithsonian Institution's receipt of a $38 million donation by a private individual for a new, permanent exhibition hall mentioned earlier. The gift was for a Hall of Fame of American Achievers in the Museum of American History that was to be named in the donor's honor. The 'naming opportunity' was not so much the problem as was the donor's right to nominate a majority of the trustees responsible for selecting the individuals to be included in the Hall. Among those proposed for commemoration were Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart, as well as Martin Luther King and Jonas Salk.

Questions were raised about whether such an installation might be more appropriate in a Disney venue given its celebrity orientation, rather than in the nation's premier 'public' museum. A more appropriate focus might be on the collective contributions of those who serve the community in less-celebrated vocations. As the *New York Times* editorialized, "what is the curatorial rationale for a permanent exhibit that seems to open the door for commercial corporate influence?. . . At best, a celebrity hall of fame will simply echo the devotion to personal achievement that already permeates every aspect of American culture" ("Gifts That Can Warp a Museum," May 31, 2001: Sec. A, 26). It should be noted that the $38 million gift to the Smithsonian was withdrawn because of the negative publicity associated with the general concept of a 'hall of fame' in what was felt to be an inviolable public space.

All museums, public and nonprofit are experiencing the same conundrum: the need to balance philanthropy (often with strings attached) and earned income (often involving corporate sponsorships, predictable 'blockbusters') against traditions of curatorial independence and the advancement of scholarship and connoisseurship. Cultural sociologist Vera Zolberg observed that as public support wanes, "these institutions are obliged to change their character: to organize blockbuster shows, enlarge their gift shops, and emphasize activities for fees that they hope may increase their profits" (Zolberg, 2000:23).

What follows is a survey of some of the devices used by American museums to enhance earned income.

IV. Examples of Earned Income

Franchising

The most famous example of museum franchising is the international distribution of the Guggenheim Museum brand. The Guggenheim Bilbao, the premier offshoot with an iconic building by Frank Gehry, put this economically depressed city in the Basque region of costal northeastern Spain on the cultural map. Since its opening in 1997, the museum has been discussed as an "iridescent structure," not just a new building, but a "cultural extravaganza' (Lee, *New York Times*, September 23, 2007). The 'Bilbao effect' has been a much-desired occurrence for numerous cities with poor economies that see becoming a cultural mecca as a solution to their problems or for cities to achieve international culture stature.

The licensing and franchising of the Guggenheim identity was pioneered by Thomas Krens. As Guggenheim director, he emphasized the concept of museums as spaces for broad public participation rather than only for aesthetic reflection and cultural education. This style of museum management is frequently criticized for its blatant commercialization. On the other hand, it can be argued that it reflects is a model of American pragmatism that accurately assesses the realities of contemporary culture. For Krens, his job description was to "manage a brand and that brand is the Guggenheim" (2000: 67). And, as with the blockbuster exhibitions to be discussed presently, the large audiences attracted by a strong marketing campaign does enhance earned income and can increase philanthropy.

Branding

Overall, a museum brand provides institutional identity as well as recognition and recall. Traditionally, the acquisition, display and education about a collection reflected the normative values and professional practices of the curatorial staff. Special exhibitions, while once rarer than now, also subscribed to the above criteria and their purpose focused on the advancement of scholarship. Three things have changed these criteria:

> Norms of organizing and displaying museum collections have changed from abstract scholarship to pleasing an audience and promoting its growth.

Audio-visual media have led audiences to expect a more stimulating museum experience rather than one that is highly specialized.

Public funding has become increasingly dependent on enhancing museum attendance as well developing sources for raising money and enhancing earned income.

Traditionally, museums invested little or nothing in marketing and advertising, and made few efforts to maximize earned income. Compared to commercial businesses, museums operated in the little league of promotion and marketing.

Now, however, more museums believe that brands can be highly effective in building audiences and generating alternative sources of revenue. When in possession of a positive brand name, museums can find it easier to enhance membership programs, merchandising, licensing, franchising, and private corporate giving. Moreover, brand recognition can realize an increase in public awareness, loyalty, and consequently earned income.

The criticism of museums whose policies have been deemed inappropriately commercial, gives way to the sense of museums as corporate entities with highly marketable inventories that can stimulate growth. Concerns that commercial interests might override museological traditions persist. There is a strong belief that ancillary activities are just that and should not presume to usurp museums core educational and cultural visions. From this point of view, a museum is not a marketable brand; nevertheless, no museum can afford to ignore financial realities.

Blockbusters

To the extent that their budgets permit, art organizations are increasingly in pursuit of a strategy for enhanced earned income with 'blockbusters' that can be heavily promoted to a wide audience and equipped with a broad array of merchandise (McCarthy, 2001:95). There are obvious limitations that come from an over-emphasis on income generation that puts crowd-pleasing over curatorial valuation. In the United States, there have been a number of blockbuster exhibitions that are heavily concentrated on Impressionism/Post-Impressionism and Egyptology or that have a 'Treasures of…' approach. Such exhibitions can unquestionably accommodate first-rate art, but often in a decidedly entertainment-oriented mode.

Blockbusters must be crowd pleasers to guarantee the strong attendance necessary to justify the marketing costs as well as to reassure corporate sponsors. Contemporary works, as well as those that have a reputation for being 'difficult,' are less likely to be presented for fear of diminishing the large audiences necessary to justify the expense of the exhibition and the external support necessary to defray the expenses. The result is a Cultural Darwinism, where only large institutions are capable of mounting shows that maximize attendance and assuming the attendant financial risk.

In order to attract large audiences, museums must spend heavily on marketing and promoting blockbuster shows. Of course, more money must be spent on acquiring the splashier shows. This strategy in turn requires an even bigger audience to pay for the resulting cost increases and creates an upward spiral of financial risk. In such an environment, only the biggest institutions can survive, and survival is predicated upon existing institutional strength (McCarthy, 2001). The process begins to seem like a self-destructive arms race in which the quest for an end is compromised by the means.

Overall, it is the mid-sized arts organization that would seem to have the bleakest future in such a Cultural Darwinism. Decreases in public funding require cultural organizations to retain the traditional programming and mainstream artistic endeavors necessary to maintain their existing level of attendance and philanthropy. Since mid-size city museums lack the resources to take big risks; it is difficult to compete successfully with the well-established institutions located in major metropolitan areas (McCarthy, 2001, 105).

It should be remembered that these mid-size city institutions constitute the essential building blocks of a nation's cultural infrastructure. As the guarantors of a cultural presence, museums are centers of community pride and symbols of cultural excellence. Mid-size city arts organizations have a vital role to play as venues of public appreciation and promoting the local art scene. With the possibilities of greatly increased earned-income limited, medium-size cultural institutions must hope for increased, or at least stabilized, public subvention if they are to survive. Such a hope is not typically well-founded.

The blockbuster phenomenon has come to represent a dramatically new role for museums as well as marking a line crossed in what had traditionally defined the mission and responsibility of a museum. The King Tut show is judged to have started the Blockbuster phenomenon. Certainly, the exhibition was designed for maximum visual impact on the display of its unquestionably fine, if limited, collection of Egyptology. Tut was also meant to be a crowd-pleaser and, with its associated merchandise, a profitable one. There was unquestioned success in the realization of both objectives. The King Tut show was the first real demonstration of what has become the platinum standard for museum successes: the Blockbuster show. This is one designed for maximum attendance with special admission tickets, major earned income from gift shop sales, and high community visibility with associated prestige for the museum. Arguably, "Tut came to stand for a decisive moment in the history of the American museum exhibitions, a moment when curators surrendered—or at least compromised—their commitment to real scholasrship in favor of crowd appeal" (Harris, 2013; 216). The 1976 'King Tut' exhibition was a blockbuster with great success and sold numerous ancillary products. The show reaped large profits and altered the public's expectations of what could be realized in museological productions. The concept of the museum 'production'– high concept, popular subject, skilled technical values, lavish marketing campaigns –brought about a paradigm shift in museum management.

These large exhibitions demand subjects that are crowd-pleasers to generate heightened attendance as well as pleasing the corporate underwriters. This requires high-end production values to enhance the visual experience, and special, expanded gift ships filled with tie-ins to the exhibition ranging from lavish catalogues to bespoke key chains increase greatly needed Earned Income. On the other hand, those blockbusters can challenge the traditional ethos of curatorial connoisseurship that might explore little known, emerging or marginalized aesthetic expressions.

A note of caution is necessary to preclude an overly stereotypical conclusion. Scholarly shows, reinterpretations of canonical works, the introduction of new and often provocative art continue to distinguish museum activities. Yet, a shift to spectacle, the celebration of the familiar, the commodification of aesthetic values is undeniable. Museums, along with all cultural institutions, are very much about providing cultural instruction and insight. It is their *raison d'etre* and the basis for a 501(c)(3) designation.

In fairness, it should be noted that smaller museums are capable of presenting more modest mini-blockbusters tailored to the special interests of their communities. A personal example may suffice. Louisiana State University enjoyed considerable popular success with a show based on the life of Empress Josephine (First Empress), as well as another on the circle of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Both paid homage to the area's historically French tradition.

What many cultural critics deplore is less commercialization to increase attendance than . the commodification of the museum experience where the paucity of the objects displayed is compensated by high-concept display spaces and lighting effects. Inevitably, the 'Disneyfication' of the museum values would be judged as a consequence of the blockbuster concept. Yet, there are also large increases in museum attendance and memberships as well as an expansion of those visiting. Unquestionably, the museum experience as exclusively an uncrowded space for the serene contemplation of an ensemble of objects reflecting curatorial scholarship is no longer a defining museological characteristic and arguably should not be. The museum's commitment to scholarship and connoisseurship can certainly be compatible with instructive and popular. Such a museological tightrope, however, may not be so easily mastered. Some blockbusters have been judged as 'devoid of substantive ideas' and making no significant contribution to aesthetic knowledge (Harris, 2013: 396). On the other hand, there are serious retrospectives (admittedly favoring the Impressionists and Picasso) that have had popular success. There is, however, the inescapable problem of the Cultural Darwinism that deters a museum from taking the financial risks of a blockbusters. Economic realities favor the powerful institutions in big cities that can put on mega-events. Yet, there are the mini-blockbusters with popular appeal for more specialized communities, especially unrepresented art of underserved cultural constituencies. This niche, if helped by public-private partnerships, and good marketing strategies, can offer monetary rewards as well as heightened communal recognition.

Corporate Sponsorship

Corporate sponsorships that underwrite a special exhibition can provide an important source of a museum's financial viability. There is, however, an important caveat to keep in mind. When a company makes a charitable gift, it is acting as a socially responsible member of the community by granting some of its profits as philanthropy to a cultural organization. A corporate sponsorship, on the other hand, comes from the marketing and advertising budgets as a form of corporate public relations. A philanthropic gift is made to a cultural organization as an institution; sponsorship associates itself with a particular exhibition. In the former case, grateful acknowledgement is made by the cultural organization along with all other donors. In the latter case, the placement, size and reproduction of corporate logos in any signage and announcements are central considerations. Corporate sponsorships are considered to be earned income for a cultural institution, rather than philanthropy, since there is a *quid pro quo* involved.

Cultural organizations are increasingly hard-pressed in enhancing ancillary revenue. As has been noted, only the strongest organizations will be able to make the investments in institutional loans, high production values and expanded marketing to succeed in these activities. Success does require showing what is unquestionably popular while maintaining cultural values. What must be decisively avoided is putting museums, the non-commercial media and performing arts on the same continuum as the commercial fare of Hollywood, Disney, and Broadway, as if these were all part of some 'leisure-time sector.' As Alan Horn, when head of Warner Brothers, pronounced with refreshing directness: "Our job is to make money for our shareholders. I like to think we are producing entertainment. These are not teaching tools. We're providing mass entertainment for mass consumption" (Holson and Lyman, 2002).

The non-commercial cultural sector, by contrast, is, or should be, distinctly mission-driven rather than profit-maximizing. Public and nonprofit cultural institutions have an overriding commitment to their aesthetic mission (albeit in a cost-effective manner) and the general public to whom they are responsible. They are part of a public culture that enjoys a principled exemption from the vagaries of popularity and the necessities of commercialization reflected in their 501(C)(3) designation.

Gift Shops

The development of gift shops has been a particularly striking development in the commercialization of museums. Sometimes large retail operations, with the biggest museums having mail-order catalogues, the gift shops are important sources of earned income. No longer restricted to posters, post cards, and books in small spaces off the lobby, the merchandising has become more aggressive and freewheeling. It has become commonplace for gift shops to be structured so that they constitute the only means of exit from the museums; for a blockbuster show, there will be several merchandizing outlets to navigate. On the other hand, gift shops are often placed so that entrance to the museum is not required in order to optimize retail opportunities.

This merchandising activity by museums has been criticized as peddling expensive *tchotchkes*. Regardless, the money making opportunities have proved extremely lucrative and led to expanding existing retail spaces, the opening of offsite stores, and developing products derived from the museum's collections and special exhibitions. In all this merchandising, gift shops seek to avoid the special federal tax on unrelated business operations. Museum merchandise must have some relation to its collection, however tenuous.

An ever escalating demand for earned income corporate sponsorship and revenues from ancillary activities (not just gift shops, but restaurants and private events) divert cultural institutions from their primary purpose which is to serve the public's interest. Typically, this mission is realized through a commitment to artistic excellence and aesthetic diversity without an exclusive concern for profitability and popularity. In this sense, a public cultural policy exists to mitigate the distortions in representation and deficiencies in availability associated with an exclusively market-determined cultural system. To compensate for the commodification of culture that virtually defines the entertainment business, cultural valuation is publicly addressed by public culture through policies of cultural democracy and the democratization of culture. Public support makes possible the existence of more spheres of discourse that allow the voices of the marginalized to be heard than would be possible with an exclusively privatized culture.

If Earned Income becomes an end in itself, there is the decided risk that commercialization will dictate the aesthetic decisions of cultural enterprises. Yet, if carefully maintaining the traditional protocol of curatorial autonomy and artistic scholarship, the necessity of enhancing Earned Income may not be incompatible with a museum's purpose.

VI. The Cultural Public Intent

There is certainly much to recommend the American model of cultural patronage. The American system, however, accords primary importance to philanthropy and earned income. Whatever the promise of enhanced income, success can prove extremely problematic and is most likely achieved by the financially strongest, best-known institutions. Most important, an over-emphasis on commercialization endangers a museum's *raison d'etre*: supporting aesthetic scholarship while enhancing local public accountability. There is a strong movement internationally to privatize state-run cultural institutions and to reconstitute them as nonprofit organizations along American lines. A market-based approach to financing the arts becomes more attractive as governments end the traditional practice of direct subsidy. The cultural sector is increasingly counseled to put more emphasis on the management and marketing aspects of their operations such as the aforementioned fundraising, corporate sponsorship, expanded gift shop, restaurants operations. This is the result of a seemingly inexorable demand that the arts carry their own weight rather than rely on a public subsidy to pursue art for art's sake.

The cultural sphere is not simply the money-losing end of the entertainment business. The corporate sector, whatever its concerns about social responsibility, must be primarily concerned with profitability. Public cultures, on the other hand, can support activities that are important aspects of individual self-worth and community definition even if these are not profitable as measured by the economic bottom-line. This is not to suggest imposing a taste hierarchy, but to maintain the distinction between the commercial and non-commercial milieu. Where the former is predicated upon profit, the latter seeks to sustain diverse spheres of engagements.

Educational, aesthetic and scientific spheres, which are neither legitimized nor validated by profitability, provide opportunities for the expression of values that are often resolutely at variance with that which is commercial and commodified. In a sense, the entertainment business gives us what we 'want' in large part because of its familiarity and profitability; while the cultural sphere, provides opportunities to consider what we may 'need' and what might be unfamiliar and transgressive. This sphere provides spaces for the articulation of a variety of values that are not possible to represent in mainstream entertainment, but which are necessary for the diversity of expression associated with a healthy civil society. These include expressions of the contrarian, contentious, avant-garde and adversarial aesthetics as well as those of people who are marginalized because of class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and geographic location. These goals become endangered as culture becomes predominantly privatized.

Cultural organizations are right to emphasize their communal contributions when seeking public support. It is the cultural sphere, as enabled by indirect subsidies, direct subvention and tax-exemption, that can undertake the unconventional, marginalized, even transgressive expressions. There is a strong argument that investing in public culture yields positive returns. It provides immediate return in improving quality of life and future returns in building stronger communities. Considered as providing opportunities for civic dialogue, public culture makes good sense valuationally and politically. Regardless, the financial realities necessary for institutional survival cannot be ignored. Given any highly unlikely increase in public subsidies, museums of all sorts must rely on philanthropy and the revenue generated from ancillary activities in which the strongest and largest are most advantaged. This Cultural Darwinism is not an unintended accident, but a direct result of the American system of privatizing the public

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