A theory of art with instrumental value to the state, with case studies from the New Deal

WPA Pavilion at 1939 World’s Fair, Queens, NY USA

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A theory of art with instrumental value to the state

A shared ideology in the cultural economics research program is that art economists believe art contains value beyond, or in addition to, exchange-value (Weber 2017 Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology).
Arjo Klamer 2016 *Doing the Right Thing: A Value Based Economy* writes,

“David Throsby, a fellow cultural economist, is pursuing a value-based approach as well. In a discussion of cultural goods, like paintings and theatre performances, he lists an often-cited set of six value that pertain to such goods: aesthetic value, spiritual value, symbolic value, social value, symbolic value and authenticity. Each of these values point at a particular quality of the artwork (Throsby, 2001). This list demonstrates the multi-faceted character of an artwork. But when we are interested in the realization of values we need more” (55).
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What is not adequately addressed in the art economics research program is that art can have *instrumental value*.

The main point to our present research is that we use political economy to build a model describing how art can realize *instrumental value* for a self-interested state.
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Motivation for research:

Disappointment in the american project, allegedly designed to be first polity with limited government since the Roman Republic, now: largest debt created in history; more people per capita working for the state than ‘communist’ china; and, 100m people (almost 1/3 of population) receiving food aid

What changes Enlightenment ideals of self-determination (manifested with preferences as consumer sovereignty) into the modern welfare state?
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Motivation for research (cont):

Interest in value theory (axiology)

We start following Hume that all people have capacity for appreciating and realizing the aesthetic sublime

Political economy requires the use of fiscal sociology to account for a self-interested state, not possible with the orthodox economics view of the state as benevolent
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Motivation for research (cont):

Jason Scott Smith (2006, Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956) finds that the massive federal public works of the New Deal inculcate in the population preferences for a larger for the federal government in people’s lives, including the institutionalization of interventionist Keynesian economics, and, rule by experts.

We explore how the art created under the New Deal helps to accomplish the same
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Approach:

Research is heterodox cultural economics as attempts to theorize how preferences are formed, rather than accept preferences as given (and then revealed) as in most orthodox economics

Throsby (2001, *Economics and Culture*) and Potts (2014 in *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*) introduce shared preference-creation but do not build heuristics as to how this might be accomplished in political economy as we do here
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First we build a model of a self-interested state using public art for its own purposes (something we can call *art statism*).

Next we introduce examples of art-statism in the art production of the Roosevelt Administration during the New Deal and World War Two as found in the archives.

The case-study approach allows us to interpret *intent* in the state art-production.
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Our concept of the state starts with Max Weber [1919] *Politics as a Vocation* where the state in a democracy,

1) Claims a “monopoly of legitimate physical violence”,

2) Rules over others with this perceived legitimacy, and

3) Strives for power “for its own sake”
Further, Anthony de Jasay 1998 *The State* finds that the state has self-interest, where he “consider(s) the state as a live institution which behaves as if it has a will of its own and a single hierarchy of ends....”

A self-interested state seeks to grow its (legitimate) discretionary power,

Instead of saying, tautologically, that the rational state pursues its interests and maximizes its ends, whatever they are, I propose to adopt, as a criterion of rationality, that it seeks to maximize its discretionary power.
Richard Wagner 2009 *Fiscal Sociology and the Theory of Public Finance* creates a dichotomy and continuum for forms of government. A self-interested state seeks to move leftward along this continuum as it grows its discretionary power.
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State art production can use ‘fear’ and ‘hope’ in those experiencing public art to create preferences for a larger for the state in society.

“It is quite obvious that in reality this compliance [with a legitimate state] is the product of interests of the most varied kinds, but chiefly hope and fear” (Max Weber [1919] 2004, 34).
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Wagner 2007 uses binary structure of mind theory,

“I work with a bi-directional relationship between mind and society. From one direction, the interaction among minds generates and transforms societal formations; from the other direction, those formations channel and shape both the ends people choose to pursue and the means they employ in doing so” (21).
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Tastes can be transformed into preferences in those experiencing art in society, for example a museum exhibit, a play, public art

* Site of mutualism and/or conflict
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Public art does not always realize instrumental value to the state. It is only art-statism when the state is trying to grow its discretionary power while at the same time maintaining its legitimacy.

For example, is placing the US Constitution in the US History Museum in Washington DC (and making admissions free) a form of art-statism or only national culture?
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Bourdieu 1984 finds that social realism is readily decoded by the working classes.

This art creates Fear.

Ben Shahn’s “The Meaning of Social Security” (ca. 1940), Washington, DC
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Hope: The state solution to the social problem
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Fear:
The social problem(s)
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-letter of Mar. 9, asked S. for sketch because 20 or 3 mag's are interested in reprinting poster

I have been thinking in terms of a poster depicting a young-looking boy in uniform under extremely unsatisfactory looking combat conditions—perhaps a soaked, shivering young recruit diving into a wet-dielded all-female escape-a-stranger's bullets and muttering fervently, "I hope the gang in school are putting $50 into War Bonds."

I am quite clear on the objectives of this poster and not necessarily prejudiced against any one means of achieving those objectives.

I certainly will appreciate it if you can give the problem some thought and let us have a sketch as to what you think would be a good solution.

Sincerely yours,

Daniel Walcher
Acting Director
Education Section
War Finance Division

Dear Seni,

Let me put in writing the details of the poster we need.

I am asking our administrative office to send you a purchase order in the sum of $90 to cover the rough sketch. If you then go ahead and make up any on the basis of an approved sketch the finished artwork I will arrange for another purchase order in the sum of $570.

This seems to be the way to handle things from the red tape viewpoint and so I recall our conversation it is an arrangement you approve of.

What we are thinking of is a poster for display in high schools to appeal to boys and girls who are working and earning pretty good wages. In many schools 70 or 80 percent of the kids are working and often earning from $1.50 to $3.00 a week. This summer they'll probably go on a full time basis.

Too often these students are looked down on in the plant—the same percentage as the family man. They then come to school and explain that they have done their part.

Another phase of this is where the feeling among the boys "Tell 'em away! I'm doing and planning to go into the Air Corps at the end of the year, I guess I'm doing all everybody could say!"

We would like to get across to those young ears as these posters: (1) some parts in the service you'd wish to God you had improved your chances by investing the limit when you had the money; (2) You'll hope that the kids still in school are investing $50 instead of $10; and (3) you owe it to your older friends now in service to beat them to the limit.

TREASURY DEPARTMENT
WASHINGTON
January 27, 1944

Mr. Sam Dahan
Jersey Homesteads
New Jersey

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“Our theory would not be a social theory if it had no sting in its tail, no indirect, roundabout secondary effects and no “feedback loops.” Thus, it is entirely likely that once the state has made people observe the cult of Bach, and they have in due course taught themselves to like it, they will “identify” better with the state which gave them their tastes [preferences, sic]. Likewise, the splendor of the presidential palace, the achievement of national greatness and “being first on the moon” may in the end implant in the public consciousness a certain sense of the state’s legitimacy, a perhaps growing willingness to obey it regardless of hope of gain and fear of loss. Hence, they may serve as a cunning and slow-acting substitute for buying consent” (Jasay 1989, 270, emphasis in original).
**Conclusion:**

To say that *some* public art is art-statism is not say that *all* public art is art-statism. It is only when the state seeks to increase its discretionary power in a democracy using art as the instrument that we have art-statism.

Some public art may be national culture-building, helping to legitimize the state, not seeking increased state discretionary power.
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Conclusion (cont):

• Although the difference between national culture and art-statism may be a subjectively fine-line, it is anticipated that this research may bring value to the art economics research program which to-date has underestimated the role that public art can play in creating preferences for more state coercion in society to the detriment of voluntary and personalized cooperation.
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Public art must maintain its legitimacy under the guise of voluntary acceptance.