

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

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*Abstract*

Weber (2017, *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*) proposes that the cultural economics research program has not adequately addressed a self-interested state using art production to grow the state's discretionary power. Although cultural economists have focused on art as a public good deserving state-funding and other values beyond exchange in the research program, instrumental value in use by the state can be better articulated in the literature. This paper contributes towards this research by modeling how a self-interested state might behave (e.g., Wagner 2009, *Fiscal Sociology and the Theory of Public Finance*), and then how the state might use art towards creating preferences for a larger role for the state in society. This model for socially-formed preference creation addresses Throsby (2001, *Economics and Culture*) and Potts (2014 in *Handbook of the Economics of Art and Culture*) on shared preference creation. After presenting this model of "art-statism" we give several examples from the archives illustrating how the Public Art Project under the New Deal in the United States uses art instrumentally. It is hoped that this research might motivate other cultural economists to explore the nexus between the state and art's instrumental value in socially-formed preference creation.

## *Overture*

### 1. Value in the art economics research program

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). This view that art has both monetary and non-monetary value<sup>1</sup> is a hardcore belief in the art economics research paradigm.

Arjo Klamer (2016, 55) in a recent book on value theory and value-realization, finds relevant for our discussion here,

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 are in need of more.

What is not adequately addressed in the art economics research program is that art can have *instrumental* value. Specifically in this research we claim that public art, or, state-funded art-production, can realize instrumental value for a self-interested state.<sup>2</sup> In the next section we discuss how a self-interested state might behave, then we build a model describing how art can realize instrumental value for a self-interested state.

Our research is heterodox cultural economics as attempts to theorize how preferences are formed, rather than accept preferences as given (and then revealed) as in orthodox economics. Here we build upon Throsby, who finds that group “identity and values shape individual preference patterns, and hence their economic behaviour” (2001, 63) and Potts who “drop[s] the assumption of exogenous preferences and allow[s] that preferences evolve...” (2014, 226),

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Meg Ekins who reviewed an earlier draft of this paper at the Fourth North American Workshop on Cultural Economics at CIRANO in Montreal in November 2017 for this insight, which can account for art-asset appreciations over-time (monetary values not yet realized in market exchange), “psychic income”, as well as the non-monetary values for art listed in Throsby 2001.

<sup>2</sup> We are using the terms public art and state art-production interchangeably in this paper, though one might rightly argue that not all public art is state-funded.

although neither Throsby nor Potts explore in detail how preferences might be endogenously realized in political economy as we do here.

After building a model of a self-interested state using public art for its own purposes (something we call *art statism*), we introduce examples of art-statism in the art production in the Roosevelt Administration during the New Deal and World War Two, as found in the archives. We use the case-study method here to illustrate art-statism in that our archival research has allowed us to study the intent of the New Deal art-production as it is occurring. We find that some of this art production correlates with the state's behaviour as predicted by our model. We find, however, that just because some public art may be art-statism, not all public art can be attributed to a self-interested state.

### *First Movement*

#### 2. A theory of the state

We use the work of Max Weber whose writings underpin our notion of the democratic state to help us develop the concept of art-statism. In *Politics as a Vocation* [1919] we learn of the state's monopoly on violence, that in a democracy the state must maintain a sense of legitimacy, and that those active in politics seek power and prestige.

Nowadays, in contrast, we must say that the state is the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a particular territory – and this idea of “territory” is an essential defining feature (33, *emphasis in original*).<sup>3</sup>

[T]he state represents a relationship in which people *rule over* other people. This relationship is based on the legitimate use of force (that is to say force that is perceived as legitimate)” (34, *emphasis in original*).

Whoever is active in politics strives for power, either power as a means in the service of other goals, whether idealistic or selfish, or power “for its own sake,” in other words so as to enjoy the feeling of prestige that it confers (33-34).

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<sup>3</sup> For example, there are more than 1,000 US military troops in 16 countries, <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-military-personnel-deployments-by-country-2017-3>.

If we find that public art conforms to Weber's categories for defining the modern democratic state, and, *importantly*, further that the art creates preferences for more discretionary power for the state (realizing instrumental value for the state), then we have art-statism.<sup>4</sup>

We now introduce the work of Anthony de Jasay (1998) to assign agency to a self-interested state, a state that, under democracy, must maintain its perceived legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> Jasay begins analysis by stating that there are two first principle ways to evaluate the state. The first is to ascribe the state as being an "inanimate tool, a machine" without ends, as only individuals have aspirational ends. In this view for Jasay the state is a tool manipulated by others for their own ends. The second way to view the state, and that preferred by Jasay, is to "merge the state and the people who run it, and consider the state as a live institution which behaves as if it has a will of its own and a single hierarchy of ends...." Jasay chooses this latter analytical lens "because it looks the most fertile in plausible deductive consequences." This is not to propose that the state and its representatives do not engage in what we might conceive as benevolence, only that it is not scientific to hypothesize that this is the state's only motive.<sup>6</sup>

The state seeks power of will, 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." The state pursues power beyond reproduction of its power as the state realizes it must gain in power in order to continue its privilege, its monopoly on legal coercion, on legal violence. However in doing so the state must "implant in the public consciousness a certain sense of the state's legitimacy." Jasay also believes that the state may seek increased power for

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<sup>4</sup> Frankel (2006) uses the term "print statism" to describe the US and British government publications of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Cohen (2006) describes the "worker statism" of the New Deal which came to replace the voluntary mutualism before the Roosevelt Administration.

<sup>5</sup> The discussion here on Jasay summarizes *The State* (1998, 266-273), "Towards a Theory of the State" subchapter. For ease of narrative we omit specific page references to the quotes used, which are all found in the noted subchapter.

<sup>6</sup> Further Jasay writes that even if the state was a benevolent dictator it could not pursue the general will and "the interests of its subjects unless they were homogenous." The reason for this is because the state's "adversarial relationship to them [its subjects, *sic*] is inherent in its having to take one side or another between conflicting interests," for example consumers (most everyone) versus domestic producers (certain people) in any industrial policy action preventing free-trade over the long-term.

*existential* reasons alone, “It would be rational for a state pursuing its own ends to escape from the treadmill where its power is used up in its own reproduction.”

Wagner (2007) develops a sociology of the state, and uses an ideal-type dichotomy to describe two forms of government, the “organization” and the “order,” see Exhibit 1 below. We find that state organizations have goals and the discretionary power to realize these goals, with the pole of an absolute monarchy on the left-hand side of the continuum. In the ideal-type an absolute monarchy does not have to negotiate its actions with the citizenry through catallactics. Juxtaposed with an organization we have the order occupying the right half of the continuum, with the most democratic order being one with a unanimity rule, or the *liberum veto*. An order is “an institutionally-mediated order of human interaction” requiring consent and legitimacy due to electoral politics (Wagner 2007, 7).

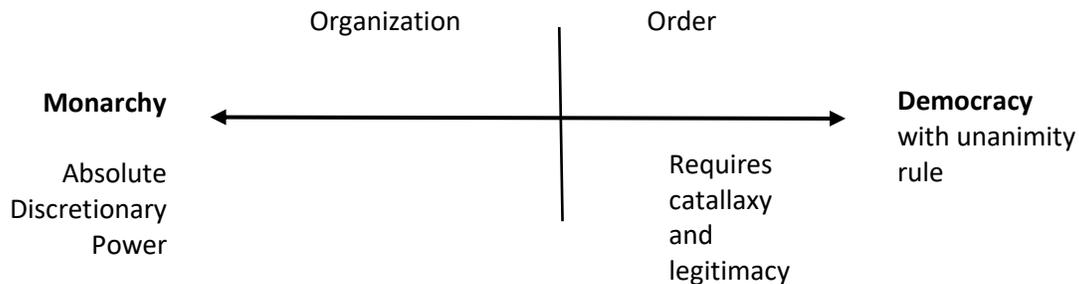


Exhibit 1: Dichotomy and Continuum between the “Organization” and “Order” Forms of Government. Diagram by author, adapted from ideas found in Wagner (2007).

A self-interested state can be seen as attempting to move leftward along the organization – order continuum, balancing the seeking of an increase in power with the necessity of maintaining legitimacy. Jasay finds that as the state transitions

from a process-oriented government representing the people in a *polis* (Wagner's "order"), it metamorphosizes into something else (Wagner's "organization"), which might be of alarm to some citizens (or at the least to Jasay). It is seen by Jasay that a state which has increased its power is not degenerative for the state itself, but this new situation is negative only over whom the state rules.

*Making itself less dependent on subject's consent, and making it harder for rivals to compete, would amount to improving the environment instead of adjusting to it.... I would not accept that, like Plato's Republic on its way from democracy to despotism, the state 'degenerates' in the process. If it has improved its ability to fulfill its ends, it has not degenerated, though it may well have become less apt to serve the ends of the observer, who would then have every reason to be alarmed by the change (Jasay 1998, 272-273, emphasis in original).*

### *Second Movement*

#### 3. Building a model for preference-creation

A self-interested state in a democracy must maintain its legitimacy while pursuing its increased discretionary power. State art-production can be instrumental in creating preferences in the median voter for this enlarged state role in society. Public art can use symbols of '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).

## A theory of art with instrumental value to the state

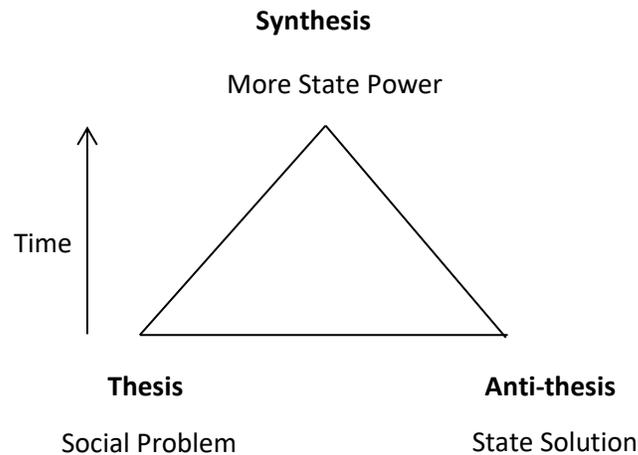


Exhibit 2: Fichte Triangle Illustrating Historical “Progress” and State Power. Author’s diagram.

We use the dialectic, as shown in Exhibit 2, to explain how fear and hope might be used in public art to create preferences for a larger role for the state in society. In the first moment public art can encode a social problem (fear, the thesis), while at the same time encoding a state solution to this problem (hope, the antithesis). The viewer (median voter) experiencing this art now decodes the public art instrumentally with a precognitive preference for the state to solve the social problem, this preference is realized in voting behaviour. In the next moment we have the synthesis of the social problem and the hoped-for state solution, realized as more state power over society.

The aesthetic precognition for more state control in society, realized with encoded public art, emerges materially in society through the experiential cognition of political economy (see Exhibit 3). Wagner uses a binary structure of mind theory to discuss the relationship between the individual and society. Human nature<sup>7</sup> is a duality between self-interest and socialization (or between man and society). “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

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<sup>7</sup> Some may prefer the terminology human “instincts” as opposed to human “nature.”

ends people choose to pursue and the means they employ in doing so” (Wagner 2007, 21). Wagner’s fiscal sociology can account for taste activation towards preference creation, when public art is the instrument for preferences for an enlarged discretionary role for the state in society. We can term this field “art statism”.

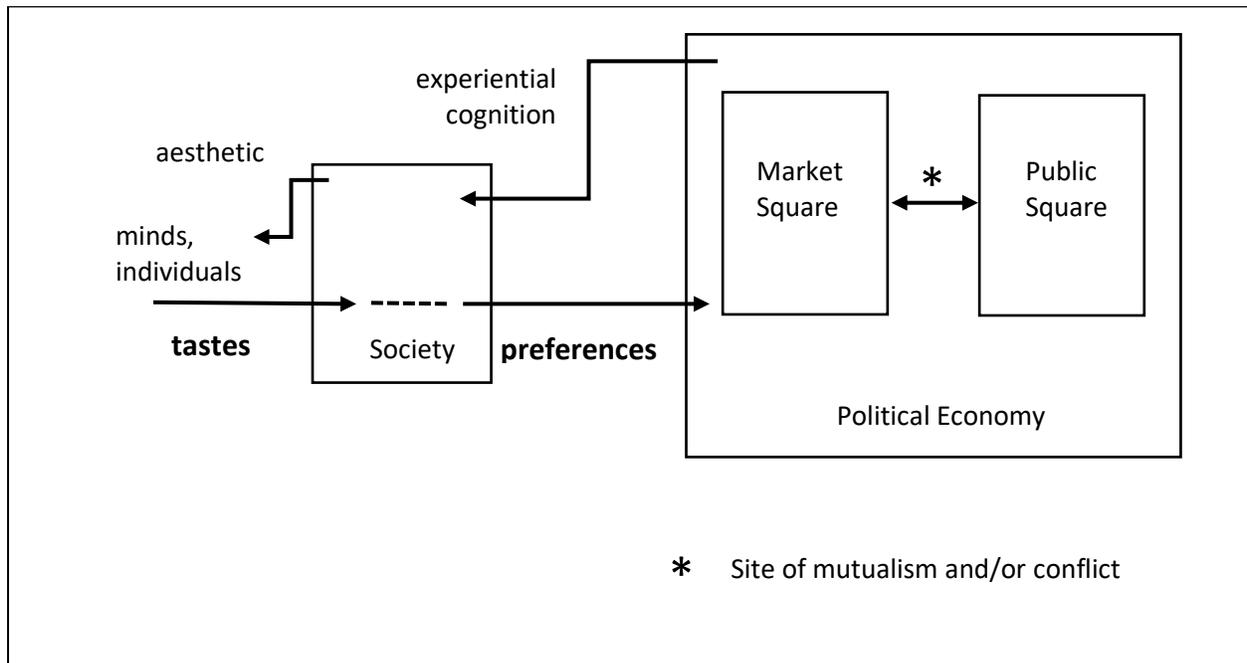


Exhibit 3: Precognitive Taste Activation and Preference Revelation in Exchange. Diagram by author based on ideas in Wagner (2007).

We follow Kant and Hume who find that all people have innate aesthetic tastes. An individual enters social relations (society), in our case experiencing public art, say for example an art exhibit, a mural or a play, and tastes are then converted into preferences. These preferences are then exercised in the political economy, in our case voting and the democratic process, where the state enlarges its legitimate power, moving along the sociological continuum from an order to an organization.<sup>8</sup> The public art has realized instrumental value for a self-interested state. This process we term art-statism.

<sup>8</sup> The state has increased its “monopoly power” and instead of poly-centric governance we have governance oligopoly (Giuseppe and Wagner 2017).

*Intermezzo*

4. Not all state art-production is art-statism

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. The state may use public art to *revalidate* its legitimacy as national culture. We define all public art as “national culture” and claim that art-statism is but a subcategory of national culture, see Exhibit 4.

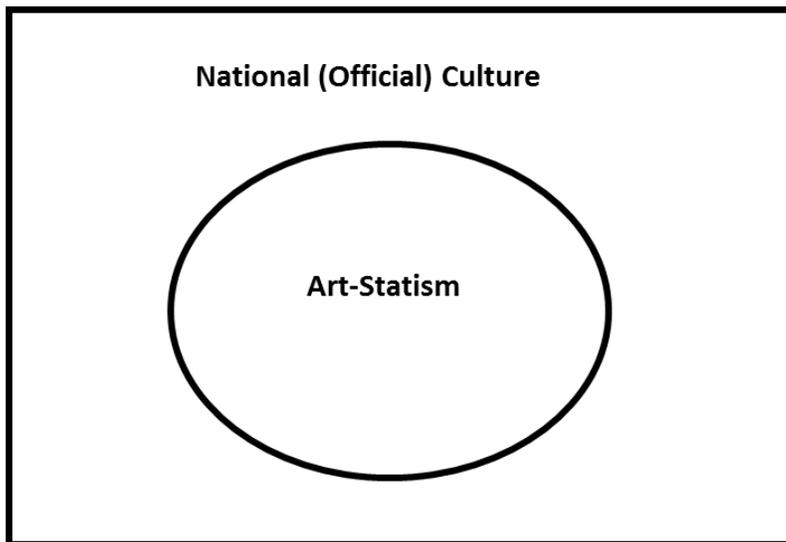


Exhibit 4: Venn Diagram on National Culture and Art Statism. Author’s diagram based on discussion in the text.

Welch (2013, 42) believes “building and sustaining a sense of national identity is an important goal for most states” and describes the birth and development of the state (in the West) as an enlightenment project beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century “The nation has been defined as an ‘imagined political community’ ...this sense of imagined community differs from an actual community, because it is not based on everyday, face-to-face interaction among its members” (Ibid.). We find again that the state needs to build towards its monopoly on coercion.

## A theory of art with instrumental value to the state

Creating the sense of nationhood, of belonging, is imperative for any state in order to justify political and economic policies to its citizens – especially when it comes to the collecting of taxes and other unpalatable activities (Welch 2013, 42).<sup>9</sup>

Whether public art is national culture generally or art-statism more specifically may only be in the eye of the beholder. For example, placing the U.S. Constitution in the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC (and making entrance free) is of course a form of national culture but could it also be a form of art-statism? For a libertarian it may be more specifically the latter, whereas for an American progressive only the former.<sup>10</sup> Art-statism is always nationalism<sup>11</sup>, where state power is salutary *prima facie*. Where we draw the line between national culture and art-statism is when we can find *intent* to use public art to enlarge the scale and scope of the state in society. The case-study archival method allows us to make this analysis during the New Deal period in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson writes that these relatively new nation-states “imagine themselves antique” (1991, xiv). “All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias” (Ibid., 204).

<sup>10</sup> During the debate over ratification of the US Constitution in the years leading to its signing in 1787, the Jeffersonian Anti-Federalists argue that the revolutionary war was won under the pre-constitution Articles of Confederation and believe that the constitution was a statist power grab by Hamiltonians, with a new Federal government and its constitutional monopoly on monetary and trade policy.

<sup>11</sup> Klamer (2016) finds nationalism and patriotism in his “societal domain of value,” but does not explore the use of culture by the state to increase its discretionary power, something he might denote as “functional value” to the state.

<sup>12</sup> “Government spending in the United States has steadily increased from seven percent of GDP in 1902 to almost 40% today’ (Chantrill 2015). For more on the New Deal (1933-1941) as catalyst in changing the nature of American federalism through today see Higgs (2012). See Beito (2000) for evidence of the welfare- state in the US as crowding-out pre-New Deal mutual aid.

*Third Movement*

5. Case-studies from the New Deal

In what follows we use the archives to create case-studies of three specific examples of art-statism during the New Deal. The first example is Ben Shahn's mural for the then new Social Security Building in Washington, DC<sup>13,14</sup>. See Exhibits 5 and 6 below.



Exhibit 5: Ben Shahn's *The Meaning of Social Security* (1940-1941). We can see the fear created by this social realism art.<sup>15</sup> Photo by author.

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<sup>13</sup> Now the headquarters for the Voice of America.

<sup>14</sup> This case-study is from documents with the Stephen Lee Taller Ben Shahn Archive, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. They were sent to the present author by Robert Sennett, Harvard University Library Liaison for the archive, email dtd. May 2, 2013. Used with permission.

<sup>15</sup> Social Realism art speaks in a clear voice directly to the popular ear. "By contrast working class people, who expect every image to fulfill a function, if only that of a sign, refer, often explicitly, to norms of morality or agreeableness in all their judgments." (Bourdieu 1984, 41).

(COPY) Please return to the Section of Fine Arts. Only copy

Jersey Homesteads  
Hightstown, New Jersey  
November 7, 1940

Mr. Edward B. Rowan  
Section of Fine Arts  
Federal Works Agency  
Washington, D. C.

Dear Ed:

Following is a detailed description of the content of the Social Security Building sketches, with titles for the separate panels.

Your choice of the quotation from President Roosevelt's message to Congress has stood me in good stead. Since I have an embarrassment of riches in social security material - both in feeling and in data - I have taken the President's words around which to build the mural. They afford a much-needed limitation as well as a motif:-

"Among our objectives, I place the security of the men, women and children of the Nation first.

"This security for the individual and for the family concerns itself primarily with three factors. People want decent homes to live in; they want to locate them where they can engage in productive work; and they want some safeguard against misfortunes which cannot be wholly eliminated from this man-made world of ours."

(West Wall)

Thus, I have used the long unobstructed wall on the west side of the building to interpret the meaning of social security, and to show something of its accomplishments. On this wall I have developed the following themes:

"Work"      "The Family"      "Social Security"

As a plastic means of emphasizing these themes I have placed each group over a doorway in large scale, projecting them somewhat forward from the rest of the mural.

The Family

Using the Family as a central theme, over the middle door, I have placed over the left door, the theme of Work, over the right that of Security. Immediately surrounding the

Work

REPRODUCED AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

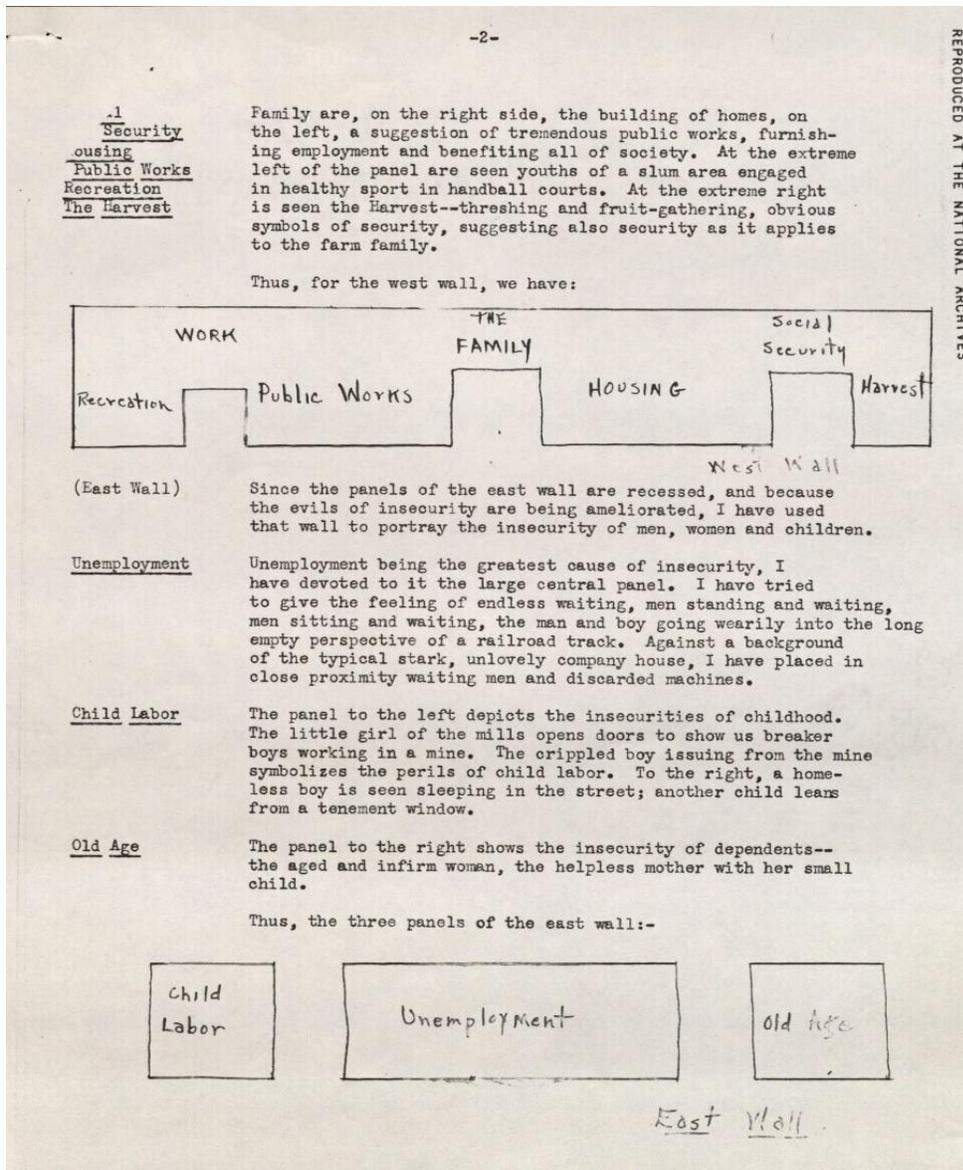


Exhibit 6: Letter from Shahn outlining plan for the mural.<sup>16</sup> We can see the artist's intent to create fear through depicting the social problems of "child labor", "unemployment" and "old age". We also find the state solution to these social problems which include "the family", "public works", "social security" and "housing". Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Housing Administration and Social Security (old-age pensions) are significant contemporary New Deal initiatives.

<sup>16</sup> Letter dated November 7, 1940 from Shahn to Mr. Edward B. Rowan at the Federal Works Agency, Washington, DC.

## A theory of art with instrumental value to the state

Public art must be disseminated to realize its instrumentality. The second case study shows how the presentation of public art is changed to encourage experiential self-selection as opposed to a more “command and control” form of public relations, exhibits 7 and 8.<sup>17</sup> The perception of self-selection and choice allows more state legitimacy than command-and-control.

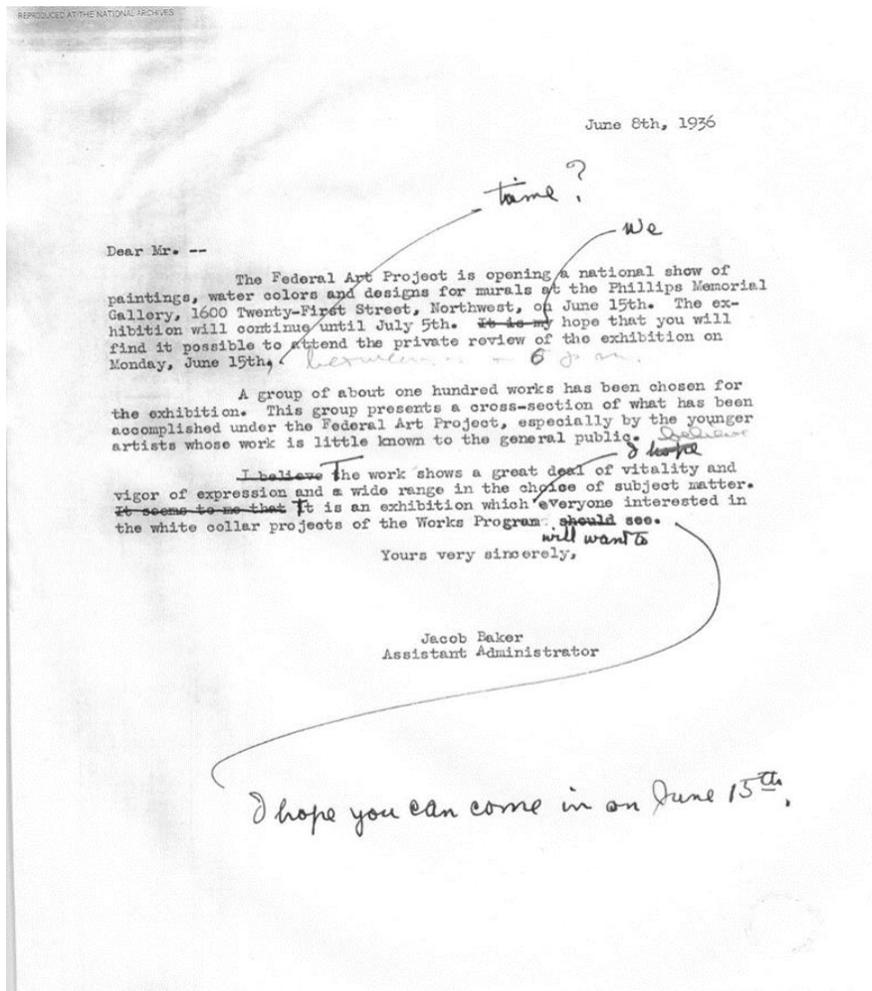


Exhibit 7: We see that the invitation to view public art is being changed to a more objective, less demanding rhetoric.

<sup>17</sup> This case is from the US National Archives, Works Progress Administration/ Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP) records. Exhibit 7 is a draft form-letter from Jacob Baker, the Assistant Administrator of the FAP, dated June 8, 1936 inviting the recipient to a “national show of paintings, water colors and designs for murals at the Philips Memorial Gallery” in Washington, DC. Exhibit 8 is an updated version one day later, this time from the Director of the FAP, Holger Cahill.

A theory of art with instrumental value to the state

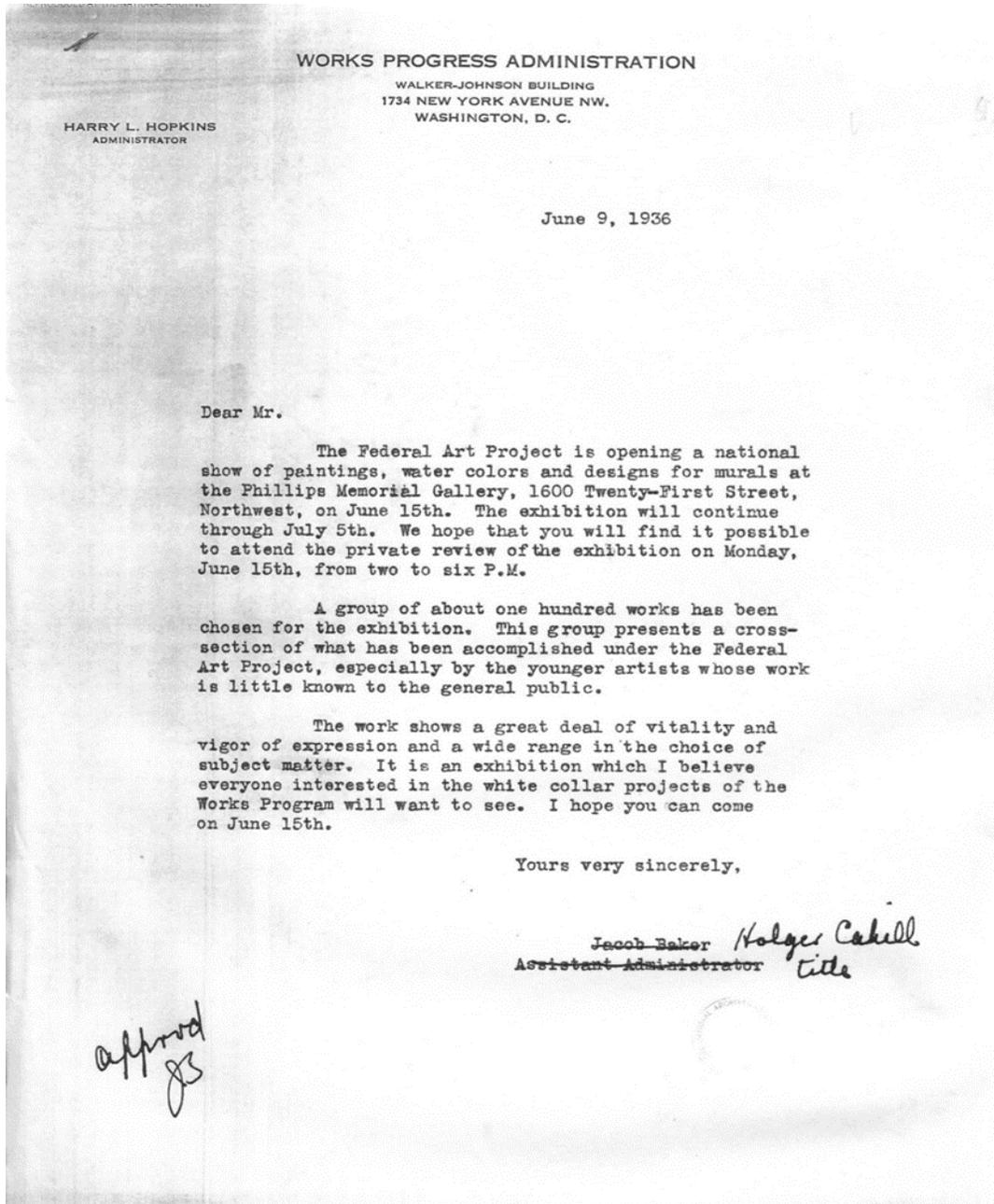


Exhibit 8. The final letter is now from the Director, instead of the Deputy Director, of the Federal Art Project, with an emphasis on choice. This is an example of art-statism in that we find the rhetoric changed to encode more legitimacy for the public art.

The third and last example here of art-statism is under the category of ‘war finance’, Exhibit 9.<sup>18</sup> We find that Ben Shahn is being asked to design a fearsome poster to encourage school-age children living at home to place 90% of their income towards war bonds, with the hope that then the war will end sooner and the younger siblings will not have to be drafted like their older brothers, and so that their family members and neighbors will come home from the war sooner than later, and alive.<sup>19</sup> Again whether or not this is an example of art-statism or national culture is open to debate. It could be argued that the administration’s agitation for the United States entry into World War Two itself is the ultimate form of statism.

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<sup>18</sup> This case is also from the Shahn archives at Harvard University. Exhibit 9 is a January 27, 1944 letter to Shahn from Daniel Melcher, Acting Director of the Education Section, in the War Finance Division of the U.S. Treasury Department. Melcher is requesting Shahn’s help in creating a poster which typifies, and extends, the art-statism as illustrated so far.

<sup>19</sup> The Roosevelt Administration was successful in gaining legislation for the conscription of 900,000 people into the US military *prior* to the USA entering World War Two (Olson 2013), the USA’s only peacetime draft.

(mac disc)



TREASURY DEPARTMENT

WASHINGTON

January 27, 1944

War Finance Division

*I hope the young in the  
are getting  
the word  
spread*

Mr. Ben Shahn  
Jersey Homesteads  
New Jersey

Dear Ben:

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 \$30 to cover a rough sketch. If you then go ahead and make for us on the basis of an approved sketch the finished artwork, I will arrange for another purchase order in the sum of \$270.

This seems to be the way to handle things from the red tape viewpoint and as 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 \$15 to \$30 per week — sometimes more. This summer they'll probably go on a full time basis.

Too often these students are touched for 10% at 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 attitude is the feeling among the boys "Well with what I'm doing and planning to go into the Air Corps at the end of the year, I guess I'm doing all anybody would ask".

We would like to get across to these young earners these points: (1) once you're in the service you'll 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 90% instead of 10%; and (3) you owe it to your older friends now in service to back them to the limit.



D148-155

I have been thinking in terms of a poster depicting a young looking boy in uniform under extremely uncomfortable looking combat conditions -- perhaps a soaked, shivering youngster diving into a mud-filled slit fence to escape a strafing's bullets and muttering fervently "I hope the gang in school are putting 90% into War Bonds."

I am quite clear on the objectives of this poster and not necessarily prejudiced ~~in~~ any one means of achieving these 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,

*Dan Melcher*  
Daniel Melcher  
Acting Director  
Education Section  
War Finance Division

letter of Mar. 9 asked S. for sketch because 2 or 3 mag.'s are interested in reprinting poster

DM:ml

148.156

Exhibit 9: Fear-inducing art-statism in time of war.

*Finale*

6. Conclusion

In this paper we build a model of *art statism*, where a state can use publicly-funded art to create preferences in the those experiencing this art for a larger, more discretionary, role for the state in society. In other words, art can realize *instrumental value* for the state.<sup>20</sup> We use the case-study method and find several cases where public art produced when the Roosevelt Administration is advocating the creation of programs laying the foundation of the modern welfare-state, a scope and magnitude of federal government intervention into people's lives unprecedented until this time.

We have also seen that some of the public art was altered during production, perhaps in order for the message propagated to remain legitimate in the eyes of the public in a democratic society. Relatedly we also find that art-statism during wartime may push the bounds of a legitimacy required under peacetime in a democracy.<sup>21</sup>

To say that *some* public art is art-statism is not to 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.

However methodologically as related to the case-study empirical methods used here, we will heed the words of Carl Menger in *Investigations into the Method of the Social Sciences*.

But in this line of argument there are a number of fundamental errors. We admit quite unreservedly that *real* human phenomena are not strictly typical. We admit that just for this reason, and also as a result of the freedom of the human will – and we, of course, have no intention of denying this as a practical category – *empirical laws of absolute strictness* are out of the question in the realm of the phenomena of human activity (1985, 200, *emphasis in the original*).

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<sup>20</sup> Coffey (2012) describes how the Mexican state used the mural movement to realize instrumental value. She does not categorize this art production as “art-statism,” but rather “hegemonic construction” (188).

<sup>21</sup> For more New Deal case studies see: <http://cameroneconomics.com/cmwphd.pdf>

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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