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Judith R. Blau

Excerpt

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1 Culture as structure and meaning

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
Into a village,
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
Into twenty villages,
Or one man
Crossing a single bridge into a village.
Wallace Stevens, "Metaphors of a Magnifico" (1918)

Wallace Stevens makes an observation here that is simultaneously perplexing and profound. What is in certain terms considered to be complexly structured with intricate patterns and multiple meanings is, in other terms, considered to have a simple shape and singular meaning.

The relevance of this apparent paradox for the queries I raise here about culture is that it is shaped by many different objective conditions: spatial, social, economic, and organizational. Moreover, my conclusion draws attention to the contradiction that is intended: the very social conditions that shape institutionalized culture also erode distinctive cultural meanings as these meanings have become universal and are widely shared in modern society.

These considerations also raise questions about the conventional assumptions made in the social sciences about the nature of social and cultural patterns and the processes that govern them. Social scientists have emphasized one world view at the expense of others. We stress differences over uniformity, the multiple over the singular, structure over disorder, progression over retrogression. Whether understanding is sought through empirical study, theoretical explanation, or meaningful interpretation, the intricacies of the social fabric and the complexity of the processes that underlie change are relentlessly emphasized.

Wallace Stevens urges us to consider instead the possibility that complexity and singularity are two sides of the same coin, or that they are in a dialectical relation that is governed by contradictory conditions. In other words, we need

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to entertain questions about structure and indeterminacy, stasis and transformation.

Cultural meanings in modern societies seem to be messy and disordered, since preferences for culture – liking the Beatles and disliking Bach – are highly personal and idiosyncratic.¹ Cultural interests are shaped by early family experiences, schooling, neighbors and acquaintances, how close one lives to a concert hall, and very many trivial events and experiences. Culture has no shape to it, one supposes, because it is such a personal affair. As a friend and colleague once told me, he could not imagine going to a public concert: listening to a Brahms violin concerto is much too intimate an experience to share with other people.

But if we assume the meanings of culture have little shape, what about those structures in which they are embedded? Among those “structures” are cultural products (paintings, dance performances, films, musical recordings) and cultural institutions (museums, concert halls, cinemas, night clubs). It is generally believed that cultural products and institutions exhibit order and pattern. On the one hand, cultural products are much like other consumer goods; regardless of the meanings people attach to them, they are distributed more or less systematically in the population according to individuals’ accessibility, leisure time, disposable income, life style, age, and so forth. Cultural institutions also exhibit meaningful patterns, and like all institutions, are subject to political, economic, and social forces. The number of theaters in a city is, one might expect, a function of population size and other urban characteristics, such as the city’s location, and what other kinds of entertainment are available.

Contrary to such expectations, this investigation of cultural institutions and products in U.S. cities concludes that in a variety of ways they exhibit little structure and order. That is, there are few fundamental differences in the ways that high and commercial cultural products and institutions relate to their urban environments. Much social and economic inequality impairs the development of both, despite our commonsense view that cultural consumption and display are generated by differences in social rank, education, and the economic resources of individuals. This study suggests that large-scale social forces promote a decline in the differences in the conditions that account for the distribution of both high and popular arts, and also a decline in the differences in the opportunities that individuals have to enjoy them.

High entropy refers to a process that produces messy configurations and random distributions, whereas low entropy is one that leads to highly structured configurations and nonrandom distributions. Entropy can be employed analogously to describe an historical process – which is inferred

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from the conclusions of this study of contemporary patterns in culture – and also, metaphorically, to capture such contrasts as those between the potential for divisiveness created by differences in class and other structural aspects and the integrative possibilities inherent in common cultural understandings.

Background

This investigation is based on the relationships between social conditions and culture in large contemporary American cities, specifically the largest 125 Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs). About two-thirds of the American population lives in these urban locales, and undoubtedly, a much higher proportion of most cultural institutions is located within them. This study considers the significance of various urban conditions for the supply of culture, as indicated by the numbers of cultural institutions and of cultural workers, and it looks at the contrasting features of art institutions and how these features can be understood in terms of their cultural products and urban environments. Attention is also paid to the linkages among arts organizations and to the qualitative characteristics of the arts they produce. Such analyses lead to inferences about developmental processes and historical changes in American culture and about sources of aggregate demand.

Major theories in sociology that deal with individual preferences for culture, as well as historical interpretations of the development of art, attach great importance to class distinctions in explaining cultural development. A version of the current perspective in sociology is clearly summarized by Pierre Bourdieu: elite or esteemed cultural products are appropriated by dominant classes, which augments and reinforces the prestige of members of these classes and at the same time provides an extra measure of authoritative legitimacy to these cultural products.² This view is not inconsistent with historical scholarship that places great emphasis on the role of patronage for the elite arts and on the symbolic significance of culture for maintaining distinctions between classes or estates.³ In short, it is generally considered that class differences are exceptionally important for the traditional or “legitimate” arts.

Similarly, it is generally assumed that standardized and inexpensive commercial arts are especially popular with “the masses.” Some argue that the working and lower classes readily take to “kitsch” because low education hinders their appreciation of classical forms of culture and low incomes preclude their access to them in any case. Others claim that the class-based observation is correct but the reason why the producers of commercial culture are successful with the working and lower middle classes is that escape in

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mindless entertainment provides relief from boring and exploitative work.⁴ Thus, the general assumption is that class differences maintain the distinction between traditional and commercial culture. These conclusions about social class and cultural preferences seem to be substantiated in surveys of individuals. Yet, survey data or other individual-level observations can only be used to speculate judiciously about the relation between class structure and cultural development at the societal level.

At the same time, however, there is irrefutable historical evidence that the origins of commercial, popular, and elite arts are very different. In traditional European societies and in the early stages of the industrialization of America, urban traditions were conspicuously different from one another as were the traditions of different groups, largely defined by class. For example, only cities like New York and Philadelphia supported the theater, while puritanical traditions retarded development of the performing arts in places like Boston. The south was precocious in its acceptance of early forms of live entertainment, but with few exceptions did not support the development of museums and galleries. Places with considerable concentrations of immigrants became the centers of cultural entertainment that did not require much education, while wealthy elites engaged early in ambitious and highly exclusive cultural undertakings – societies for the presentation of artists' works, concert series, and museum construction.⁵

In the early stages of industrialization, not only cultural institutions, but cultural products and group preferences as well, were much more conspicuously different from one another than they are now. Thus, by most accounts, well into the twentieth century, class, regional, and ethnic differences were greatly magnified when they found expression in cultural practices.⁶

My empirical results suggest that owing to rising levels of education and urbanization, a universal culture has been spawned, and the process of modernization has eradicated the consequences of class differences since the various institutionalized arts are now rooted in more or less the same social-economic matrix. To be sure, there are differences between elite and commercial culture in their base of production, modes of dissemination, and cost. And there is variation in the ways in which individuals prefer to use their free time. But at the societal level the differences one expects to find in the social conditions of elite and popular art are not very great – at least insofar as I am able to discern with data on the supply of cultural institutions and the characteristics of cities.

Culture stands in fundamental juxtaposition to the social context, which is to say that societal or institutional complexity is found to engender diffuse

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cultural patterns. For example, most forms of high culture are transmitted by a single cohort (namely those between the ages of 35 and 44 in 1980) and generally fail to be in great demand by other groups not in this cohort. In contrast, most forms of popular culture are in demand by a single age group but for only brief periods of time. These patterns are different since they suggest that items of high culture are in evident jeopardy while those of popular culture exhibit a regular turn-over.

Regardless of the mutual benefits that art establishments allegedly derive from each other's presence, I find that suppliers of cultural products adhere relatively weakly in cities. For one reason the demand for culture of all kinds is so spatially ubiquitous that there is very little concentration of cultural suppliers in any part of the country. (Surprisingly, the little concentration that can be detected is for commercial cultural suppliers, not for the suppliers of elite culture.) For another, there is little evidence that similar types of cultural institutions exhibit ties of interdependence within cities. One could call organizational suppliers footloose, except that at very high population thresholds they begin to occur together and to establish bridges in ways that are not intuitively obvious.

Organizations of all kinds face problems of co-ordination, deadlines, balancing efficiency with quality, and of raising revenues. Nevertheless, performing arts organizations differ in important ways from other types of organization. While they are inordinately dependent on their environment – on funding agencies, on fickle consumers, and the good will of local government – they respond in paradoxical ways to environmental conditions. Specifically, they become less bureaucratic – not more – in munificent and complex urban environments, as they apparently become assimilated into larger structures (or are co-opted by them). Organizational success, we also learn, accompanies the appreciation, or the relative decline, of artists. This, too, can be described, metaphorically, as an entropic response to complex circumstances.

There is evidence throughout this study that public funding policies have benefited the arts. Public subsidies, for example, promote innovation and contribute to the democratization of American culture by stimulating arts activities in places that earlier had relatively few. Some results suggest that the private efforts of wealthy art devotees have a limited impact on the arts, and what impact they do have is counter to the overall trend towards increasing equity of cultural opportunities.

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It must be stressed that my conclusions are generally at odds with the original hypotheses. I initially expected that variegated social systems would be implicated in complex cultural systems. The assumptions on which this was based are altogether plausible: producers compete for markets, there are local traditions of cultural specialization, great inequalities in income and in education would appear to generate demands for cultural and art products of different kinds, the social and moral worth of high culture and popular culture varies from one social group to another; and, cultural organizations operate on ad hoc lines and not on the models of organizations that are geared to production and efficiency, which would suggest great variability in organizational structures. The design of the study fully permitted – even biased – the outcome in that direction. That is to say, the broadest and most diverse indicators of culture available were employed to study their relationships with organizational and population diversity. The findings are consistently contrary to the initial assumption that cultural complexity and structural complexity go hand in hand.

It is impossible in this study to have elicited people's reactions and evaluations of culture, but to some extent it is possible to juxtapose the results of this study with those of analyses of individuals to make inferences about the meaning of culture. It is also possible to infer meaning from the types of groups that are likely to appropriate cultural products. To be sure, it was impossible to obtain detailed information on arts organizations when the questions being asked required some information on many thousands of them. However, crude information on organizational structure, the nature of the arts they support, and the numbers of staff make it possible to derive tentative conclusions about the relations these organizations have with the public and with other organizations, and about the variation in the roles that artists have in different types of settings.

I do attempt to examine various qualitative dimensions of culture – traditionalism, innovation, and distinctive styles of popular music – in an effort to decipher plausible connections between identifiable aggregates of people and the symbolic codes of cultural products. There is evidence, for example, that museums with traditional collections are on the decline with the increasing population diversity of cities, and that avant-garde conventions in theater are not explained by the unique values of particular locales (notably, New York City), but rather by the relative affluence of cities (and New York City happens to have quite rich people). But other places do as well, and their

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theaters compete with those in Manhattan by launching innovative productions.

Methodology

The basic unit of study is the metropolitan place. Specifically, the largest 125 Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs) are under consideration and they are described in terms of the social conditions that influence their cultural supply, cultural organizations, and cultural workers. The SMSA was selected as the unit of analysis because it is defined as an integrated economic and social unit, unlike cities whose boundaries are defined partly in response to political, administrative, and fiscal pressures and sometimes change slowly in response to population and economic expansion. In general terms, an SMSA consists of a county or group of counties containing at least one city with a population of 50,000 or more, plus adjacent counties that are metropolitan in character and economically and socially bound to the central city.⁷ The 125 SMSAs are listed in Appendix A.

Two time periods are examined. Virtually all social and economic characteristics of SMSAs are from the 1970 Public Use Sample and the 1980 census of population, and most of the data on culture are for the early 1970s and when possible for the early 1980s. Detailed discussions of methodology and statistical techniques are confined largely to the notes and also the methodological appendix of chapter 8, which provides the information that is necessary for the reader who wants to understand the details of the change analysis. Descriptions of the cultural indicators (including sources, means, and standard deviations) are summarized in Appendix B.

A brief outline

In a conventional and linear fashion, I will now summarize the organization of the materials. Chapters 2 and 3 deal, respectively, with the spatial and temporal dimensions of cultural supply. In chapter 4, I examine the extent to which culture depends on a large population base and the extent to which cultural suppliers are themselves linked in an urban place. Cultural organizations – their internal configurations and their relations with their metropolitan environments – are the topics of chapters 5 and 6. Qualitative dimensions of culture – the extent to which an art genre has traditional or wide public appeal, the degree of innovation, and differences in style – are issues considered in chapter 7. Chapter 8 presents the analyses of secular, ten-year

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changes in artists' job opportunities and labor markets and the prevalence of cultural institutions. The main arguments are broadened in chapter 9 to examine historical processes that help to explain the patterns observed for the twentieth century in terms of earlier developments.

The basic theme that underlies the various topics is that there are trivial differences between the social forces that govern elite and popular culture since they are both explained by virtually the same social conditions. While one could argue that this means that culture has lost its historical roots, its social relevance, and therefore its distinctive meanings, I prefer to consider this an indication that a relatively universal culture modulates social complexities and provides a common framework of meaning and experience.

Notes

- 1 Methodologically, culture is treated throughout most of these analyses as a "structural" factor, in that it is measured as an aggregate or global indicator of cities, regions, time periods, or as derived from pooled data on aggregates of organizations, and cultural suppliers. In this sense, from the analysis of cultural patterns, inferences can be made about cultural markets and demand exerted by large identifiable groups, but this is reasonable when there is sufficient theoretical reason to do so since group preferences are not known. The main purpose, thus, is to explain cultural patterns in terms of larger social and urban factors and the emphasis is on a macro analysis of culture. (Additional methodological issues concerning ecological relationships are discussed in chapter 7.)
- 2 *Distinction*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 3 See for example: Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); Meyer Schapiro, "Style," pp. 137–171 in Morris Philipson and Paul J. Gudel, eds., *Aesthetics Today* (New American Library, 1980); Frederick Antal, *Classicism and Romanticism* (New York: Basic Books, 1966).
- 4 A recent summary of these positions is provided by Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).
- 5 See for example: Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878–1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).
- 6 See for example: Russel Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse* (New York, Dial Press, 1970); Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1940).
- 7 Recognizing the greater cultural attraction of particular places, an alternative to using SMSAs would have been to use Standard Consolidated Areas (SCAs) as the units of analysis. Two metropolitan complexes – one that includes New York, Newark, Jersey City, Paterson–Clifton–Passaic, and Middlesex and Somerset counties in New Jersey and the other that includes Chicago and the Gary–Hammond–East Chicago SMSA – were designated in the 1970 census as SCAs. By 1980 there were 23 such metropolitan complexes defined by the Bureau

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of the Census. Using the broader geographical definitions would have offered the advantage that the full potential market for cultural facilities that are primarily located within particularly important core cities could be taken into account. While it is true that the cultural facilities of New York and Chicago, as well as those of other very large metropolitan centers, attract many visitors, there is evidence that these visitors are not more likely to be suburbanites. In spite of generally high levels of education, somewhat low rates of cultural attendance (such as attending live classical music performances, opera, and nonmusical plays) are observed for people on the fringes of central cities (see Judith R. Blau and Gail Quets, *The Geography of Arts Participation. Report Prepared for the National Endowment for the Arts*, Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 1987). The conclusion is that while interest in the cultural facilities of New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Washington, and Boston is not purely local, it can be better understood as national or international rather than as narrowly regional.

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2 The American cultural landscape

I visited all of the exhibits in New York. The Medici of the Republic must exert themselves a little more before these can become even respectable . . . Often where a liberal spirit exists and a wish to patronize the fine arts is expressed, it is joined to a profundity of ignorance on the subjects almost inconceivable.

Mrs. Frances Trollope (1832)

Probably a century after Mrs. Trollope's visit to the United States, and certainly by the middle of the twentieth century, American arts and culture had earned an unqualified recognition in international circles. Yet it is still taken as a matter of course in our times, as in those of Frances Trollope, that most forms of institutionalized high culture in the United States, such as opera, museums, orchestras, and art galleries, are highly concentrated in a very few large cities located in the east, such as New York City, Washington, Boston, and Philadelphia. It is true that midwestern cities, notably Chicago, and some older cities in the west, such as San Francisco, have fostered important high culture institutions, and more recently southern cities, such as Dallas and Houston, have intensified their efforts to establish their cultural worth. Still, the undisputed centers for the visual and performing arts are considered to be on the eastern seaboard.

The historical record supports these assumptions. Simply put, east coast cities had an early start. The concentration of wealth in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City in the nineteenth century facilitated patronage of the arts. The farflung commercial interests of these eastern cities promoted intellectual and artistic ties as well, which encouraged public figures and families of means to express their social worth and good taste.¹

While early academies established by artists in Philadelphia and New York initially floundered for lack of support, by the mid-1850s, the monied elites of Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and also Chicago, recognized the social, moral, and symbolic importance of the arts. Class interests were undeniably implicated in cultural entrepreneurship. Patronage served to justify the claim