



Make the best case you can for public funding of the arts.

There are two main worries about public funding of the arts. One is that there seem nowadays to be so many more urgent calls on public money. Isn't public funding for the arts an unaffordable luxury? The second worry is that there seem to be so many other things that are similar to the arts, but that do not attract similar public funding. Are the arts being picked out for special privileges, perhaps thanks to snobbery? I will try to show why, in spite of these worries, the arts remain a deserving case for some public funding.

Let's begin with the claim that the arts are attracting special treatment. A comparison can be made with sports. Like the arts, sports call for skill and discipline from their participants. Like the arts, sports can be enjoyed by spectators as well as participants. Like the arts, sports vary a lot among themselves. Like the arts, sports are publicly funded to some extent. The main difference seems to be, however, that while public funding of sports is usually restricted to support for participants (e.g training of sportspeople), public funding of the arts often extends to spectators as well as participants. One can go to an art gallery or museum for free, but one pays to go to Anfield or Brands Hatch. Is this fair?

The answer is that the contrast is exaggerated. On the one hand, spectatorship of sports is sometimes publicly funded. One can watch Wimbledon on the BBC for free, just as one can go to an art gallery for free. On the other hand, not all spectatorship of the arts is publicly funded. It costs money to go to a premier league football match, but it costs no less to see a stadium rock concert. One must be careful to compare like with like. One should compare the treatment of niche arts with that of niche sports, arts infrastructure with sports infrastructure, etc. One should also be careful not to assume a purist's definition of the arts, according to which a stadium rock concert doesn't count as an arts event. That would be like claiming that football is not a sport, but only a game (sports being limited to pursuits that involve horses and hounds!)

In general we should expect public arts and sports funding to go to pursuits that are worth preserving but will otherwise not be viable, because there are otherwise not enough people who will pay enough money for them, while keeping them open to others. The government should step in where the market fails. But this brings us straight to our other worry. Surely, with so many more urgent calls on government expenditure, support for such things as sports and arts, however admirable, must be a low priority? They may be worth preserving, but is their preservation more urgent than the preservation of human lives in public hospitals?

The thought here is that priority should reflect urgency. But this seems a bad principle for government. It leads to the government thinking only about the short-term. Shouldn't the government provide for the future, as well as coping with the present? If so, the arts, like sports, seem suitable for inclusion in the government's longer-term plans. The government needs to ask itself whether great achievements and great excellences can be allowed to go to waste, bearing in mind that once they have gone to waste it will be much more expensive to recreate them (or to create replacements for them).

This argument seems to assume that a time will come when we will miss the arts or sports we have lost. That may not be true. Few people miss Morris dancing (a nearly dead art) or jousting (a nearly dead sport). But suppose we lost all dance-related arts, or all performance arts? Suppose we lost all combat sports, or all dangerous sports? Then we will live in a world with fewer choices and fewer opportunities for human beings to excel and develop their abilities, as well as for other human beings to spectate and admire this development. One important job for governments, even if it is never urgent, is to keep a wide variety of arts (and sports) alive for the future so that the future is at least as full of interesting options as the present. [719 words]