

Keith Klovers
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Charitable Giving: Filtering or Freeing Cultural Organizations?

Cultural organizations such as museums, gardens, theaters, and zoos have become bigger and better – but at an ever-increasing financial cost. In the West, this has always been where businesses and tycoons step in – Citibank, Coca-cola, the Carnegies, the Rothschilds, and many, many more. Until very recently, however, this was unknown in Prague and the rest of the so-called “Eastern Bloc” – the state owned everything and was the sole patron of culture. Now, however, Prague institutions like the Prague Zoo, National Museum, Czech National Theater, and Prague Symphony Orchestra are receiving sponsorships from companies as diverse as Škoda, Nestle, Česká Spořitelna Bank, and Sazka Lotto. Such sponsorship is a mixed blessing – while outside money frees cultural institutions from state financial support (and the politically-driven distortions that resulted), it transfers this filter power to the organizations that provide the funds¹. Thus this development expands some cultural opportunities, restricts others, and in extreme cases adds new distortions to the presentation of historical and social topics.

In the West, critics charge that the individuals and corporations that cover the difference between organization’s revenue and costs exert disproportionate influence over what art or culture is exhibited. Sometimes, the demands implicit with corporate sponsorship become unreasonable – in 1996 Oldsmobile sponsored a Magritte exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, insisting that a new Oldsmobile Aurora be parked in the lobby because “...the visual elements, produced for the Aurora’s participation in

¹ Alexander, 798

the exhibition, were developed to highlight the natural fit between the car and Magritte's work."² The Central European context is somewhat different: until 1989 communist governments exercised monopoly power over culture and arts exhibitions which often distorted historical and cultural presentations for the sake of propaganda. Thus in the Czech Republic, and Central Europe at large, the debate over philanthropic influence is best considered within the context of former state control – while there may be some influence, certainly there is greater choice and freedom for cultural institutions than under the old system.

Under communism, cultural institutions were nationalized and used as mouthpieces of the communist propaganda apparatus. In the regime's attempts to popularize Marxist-Leninist ideology, it was not uncommon for historical presentations to be altered or removed entirely. In addition to the more overt mechanisms of control (such as arrests, intimidation, etc), the state also influenced cultural organizations by financial means, generally by heavily subsidizing ideologically "correct" programs.

The state's financial role was strengthened because private sources of funding did not exist, and even if they had they would have been ineffective counterweights given the state's outright ownership of the Czechoslovak cultural organizations. Furthermore, corporate charitable giving was unheard of, as all large and medium businesses were state-owned. While in the West (and increasingly now in Central Europe) businesses and private individuals were active in philanthropy, that simply wasn't an option under the previous regime.

² Cuno, 6. Quote attributed to Glenn Lemmerick, manager for advertising and promotion at Oldsmobile for GM Canada.

Communist state intervention was especially evident in cinema³ and museum collections⁴. One example, the State Jewish Museum, was targeted because its collections emphasized the Prague Jewish population as ethnically Jewish (rather than Czech), a “myth” “artificially constructed by the ideologues of Zionism.”⁵ The museum was closed in the conservative reaction of 1968 and reopened in 1989 conspicuously missing a famous memorial to the 77,297 Bohemian and Moravian Jews killed in the Holocaust.⁶

While the Magritte exhibit in Montreal testifies to limited distortions in the way culture and art are presented in the West, the perception and magnitude of former abuse differs greatly between the East European states and their colleagues in the West. Years of regular exploitation in the East (such as the State Jewish Museum) contributed to the growth a strong skepticism toward Communist-era information and historical presentation, one manifest in the many popular jokes regarding Communist propaganda and “history”⁷. Thus, while East Europeans recognize the need for government to support cultural institutions (as is done in the U.S. with the Smithsonian Institute and myriad local museums and art centers), they generally seek a limited governmental role. In particular, there is less trust when government is heavily involved in objective

³ The Normalization era film “Vrchní, Prchní” is one such example. The Normalization era, following the Prague Spring, focused artistic efforts on non-political topics and banned films and books that implicitly or explicitly criticized the Communist regime.

⁴ The National Ethnographic Museum (Musaion) in Prague was yet another tool of the Communist regime until it shut down in the early 1990s. There is a lengthy discussion of the Musaion in the following section.

⁵ Sayer, 173. The quote itself is attributed to a 1979 visitor’s brochure to the State Jewish Museum that describes the state’s struggle to present their view of history in the face of “the ideologues of Zionism”.

⁶ Sayer, 173. The memorial was reconstructed in 1996 and is currently open to the public.

⁷ Indeed, jokes about Communist news and information have survived to become an integral part of any conversation East Europeans have about the era. One popular joke parodies a Communist radio broadcast, starting with an update that Soviet fighter jets fought a battle in “self defense over Soviet territory” and ending, after several revisions, by concluding that “the bombers were successful in their raids against Afghan positions.”

presentations (e.g. historical displays) than when it is involved in subjective presentations (e.g. art, opera, etc).

The prescription to such ills is simple: private philanthropists must act to weaken the state's dominance over cultural institutions by funding competing or unorthodox events. This is not to say that the government shouldn't have any role (even in the United States governments at all levels are important cultural patrons), just that their influence should be mitigated by competing pressures from private individuals and corporations. Finally, it is necessary for both private individuals and corporations to be involved in the process, since corporations and individuals have different priorities (corporations seek marketing exposure, individuals act on personal preferences).

The National Ethnographic Museum (Musaion), a branch of the National Museum, is an excellent example of the positive force that balanced, non-political philanthropy can provide.⁸ Prior to 1989, the Musaion was a state-owned museum which focused on traditional peasant life in Czechoslovakia and emphasized a shared Czech-Slovak ethnic heritage (which was in line with the Communist goal of reducing ethnic distinctions and ethnic-based nationalism). Based on interviews with Czechs who visited the museum both in the 1980s and following its recent re-opening (in 2005), private philanthropy has radically changed the museum's presentation from one that presented this shared cultural unity to one that presents Bohemian, Moravian, and Slovakian peasant cultures as related but distinct traditions. This change is not unique to the Musaion either – many museums and cultural institutions have seen substantive changes.

⁸ The Musaion, as a branch of the National Museum, is primarily sponsored by Skanska (Swedish), Škoda (Czech, but a subsidiary of Germany's Volkswagen), and Czech Radio (publicly-supported radio)

Foreign-local sponsor mixes are an important tool in balancing influences and maintaining institutional independence in terms of programming choices. For example, foreign sponsors may open up foreign contacts for the institution, or may have exposure to concepts that aren't prevalent locally. In either case foreign sponsorship helps import new cultural choices that may not otherwise be available locally. Thus French Impressionism⁹, Russian ballet, the music of John Phillip Souza, and many other foreign developments have reached and influenced local culture.

Individuals represent another patron group which is highly sought after, due to their personal interest in and familiarity with specific cultural venues. These donors frequent the organization's events, from theater performances to concerts to exhibit openings. Additionally, since their interest usually stems from intimate familiarity with the art or institution, they often can sponsor events they consider important that corporation sponsors aren't familiar with. Furthermore, individuals deeply involved with one or another institution may seek to raise their standing among others in that social circle, such as theater or music-oriented social groups, and thus sponsor particularly prestigious or unique events. Thus what individual philanthropists lack in sheer financial resources they make up in passion, interest, involvement, and variety.

The problem with the Czech cultural scene is that it is conspicuously lacking such individual donors – of all of the institutions surveyed, from the National Museum to the Prague Zoo, not one had listed a private donor or an event sponsored by such a philanthropist. That is not to say that they don't exist – it is entirely possible that there

⁹ A Paul Gauguin exhibit featuring his *Les Alyscamps* (on loan from the Musée d'Orsay, Paris) is on display at the National Gallery from February 28th to June 18th. This was made possible by a temporary exchange for a Henri Rousseau work which the National Gallery has loaned for a display at the Grand Palais in Paris.

are such donors who choose to take a low profile – but they have such a low profile that philanthropy is virtually invisible in the public realm. The problem is that the less visible private philanthropy is, the less able it is to counterbalance corporate philanthropic interests. Without visible competition, corporations are left with relatively free reign – just remember the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts’ Magritte exhibit with the car in the lobby. There is, however, one interest large enough to provide some counterbalance – the government.

State interest in culture and the arts seems like the last thing that anyone would want after the Communist years of ideological purity. It is true the state can be heavy-handed at times, but at the same time the state can also be a healthy counterbalance in a competitive and free society. This seems to be the case throughout the Czech Republic and the world at large, especially when local *and* national government play some role.

The difference in size and scope make national and local governments suited for different philanthropic purposes – the national government for organizations with broad (eg national) focus, local government for smaller institutions with limited scope and resources. Thus, the national authorities sponsor the National Museum and the National Gallery, while the local Greater City of Prague authorities¹⁰ sponsors smaller local organizations such as the Talích Chamber Orchestra. In this sense local government is an important player in promoting horizontal artistic competition¹¹ – the Talích competes directly with the Czech Chamber Orchestra and indirectly competes with other musical ensembles like the Czech Philharmonic and the Prague Symphony Orchestra.

¹⁰ In Czech “Hlavní Město Praha”, the municipal authority for the capital area akin to the District of Columbia in the United States (although with weaker taxation authority)

¹¹ By horizontal competition I mean that local government often sponsors small rivals of larger organizations, such as orchestras or local art galleries. Vertical cultural competition, the primary focus of the paper, focuses more on competition between patrons with different skills and goals..

Thus, today the large variety of institutions and programs can only be seen as progress, as they balance state and local government involvement and thus provide a degree of credibility. Private (corporate) philanthropy provides hefty support for the Prague Zoo, the Czech National Theater, the National Museum, the Museum, and many smaller organizations, weakening the overt influence of the Czech state. The Prague Zoo highlights international corporate exposure, as Coca-cola, Nestle, and Toyota all are official “partners” recognized on their website. The National Theater and the National Museum, on the other hand, are supported mostly by local Czech companies – the Theater by KB Bank, Škoda, and Synot Lotto, the Museum by Skanska, Škoda, and Český Rozhlas¹².

Although the situation has largely changed in the Czech Republic, governments still attempt to influence cultural institutions, and not just in former Communist countries. In 1996 the Smithsonian Institute in the United States planned to put on an exhibit about the Enola Gay and the US decision to use atomic weapons against Japan, hoping to spark a national debate on the necessity of such drastic action. Powerful opposition groups immediately mobilized; under heavy pressure from the Veterans of Foreign Wars and members of the US Senate and House of Representatives, the Smithsonian decided to change the exhibit, instead showing “...a simple display of portions of the restored plane with text labels honoring the mission uncritically¹³.”

¹² These corporations represent varied prominent interests in the Czech Republic – Škoda, a subsidiary of Volkswagen, produces heavy machinery and cars; Český Rozhlas (“Czech Radio”) is the primary Czech radio broadcaster; and Skanska, the lone international corporation of the group, is a Sweden-based infrastructure construction contractor generally associated with road and rail projects

¹³ Cuno, 7. He went on to add bitterly that “Museums, it would seem, are more suited for commemoration than for critical inquiry.” The example interesting in its own right in illustrating government influence over museums and other cultural institutions, but is even more poignant considering the American boasts of limited government and freedom of expression.

The Enola Gay controversy introduces a deeper, universal debate regarding the proper function of cultural organizations. Many see cultural organizations such as the Smithsonian Institute as repositories of collective social memory, with the expectation that institutions should provide displays and performances in their original context and leave interpretation to the audience. Another view, representing the Smithsonian's original plan for the Enola Gay exhibit, envisions cultural organizations as facilitators of critical inquiry and self-reflection. Yet a third view (supposedly discredited with the fall of European Communism) sees cultural organizations as repositories whose programs need guidance and supervision. Given that both the US Congress (in the Enola Gay controversy) and the Czechoslovak Communist Party supported a supervisory approach (admittedly with varying intensity), this debate is clearly one that extends beyond the curious historical and political circumstances of communist Central Europe to the present time¹⁴.

In general, Czech cultural and artistic organizations have succeeded in maintaining their new-found independence and avoided giving new donors the same level of influence once afforded to the Communist state. While certainly there are still distortionary dangers, not least when a focused corporate donor can become sole sponsor of a whole cultural segment, the promise of competition among corporate, governmental, and individual donors mitigates this risk. With the development of a strong, involved, passionate group of individual donors, Czech philanthropy will be able to strike the kind of balance required to provide quality programs to the general public without

¹⁴ This debate continues to rage in political, professional, and academic circles. Personal experience seems to indicate that professionals prefer something between the first and second approaches, while academics tend to prefer the second approach (certainly Cuno does) and politicians here and in the Czech Republic feel that public dollars come with a "public responsibility" to keep inquiry as uncontroversial as possible.

interference. That would be the kind of achievement still unmatched in “mature” societies like the United States and Canada – the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Smithsonian would surely agree.

Appendix A: Organizations and their Sponsors

The Prague Zoo

- <http://www.zoopraha.cz/english/>
- Media Partners
 - Česká televize, Egmont CR, Euro AWK, Frekvence 1, Palace Cinemas, Ringier
- Partners:
 - Coke, Nestle, Staropramen, Toyota

Czech Philharmonic

- http://www.ceskafilharmonie.cz/en/content_26.htm
- Partners:
 - Škoda
 - CEPS

Prague Symphony Orchestra

- http://www.fok.cz/HTML_EN/index_press.html
- Partners:
 - Czech Coal
 - Marriot Prague, Renaissance Hotel Prague, Czech Telecom, Marco Polo IV Hotel, Perrier, Metamorphosis

Czech Chamber Orchestra

- <http://www.cko.cz/english/index.html>
- Partner: Česká Spořitelna

Talich Chamber Orchestra

- <http://www.talich.com/>
- Partners:
 - Hlavni Mesto Praha
 - Subterra

The Czech National Theater

- www.nationaltheater.cz
- KB Bank General Partner
- Partners:
 - Škoda
 - Autocont
 - Synot Lotto
 - Lobal

National Museum

- www.nm.cz
- Partners:
 - Skanska, Škoda, Český Rozhlas

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The British Museum.

[http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass/ixbin/hixclient.exe?_IXDB_=_compass&_IXFIRST_=1&_IXMAXHITS_=1&_IXSPFX_=graphical/gt/lin/&\\$_with+all_unique_id_index+is+\\$_=ENC7214&_IXtour=ENC7214&submit-button=summary](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass/ixbin/hixclient.exe?_IXDB_=_compass&_IXFIRST_=1&_IXMAXHITS_=1&_IXSPFX_=graphical/gt/lin/&$_with+all_unique_id_index+is+$_=ENC7214&_IXtour=ENC7214&submit-button=summary). Online, 4 December 2005.

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