

The politics of the value of culture

Hans Blokland Every citizen has to pay for a good which is only valued by a small elite. Hans Blokland refreshes our memory and describes Klamer's line of reasoning about this problem. He then starts to test Klamer's solution. Arguments concerning external effects and merit goods might be stronger than Klamer suggests, if only he took people seriously and did not take their present preferences for granted.

The problem

Those who go to the theatre, observes Klamer, only pay a very small portion of the costs. According to the CBS each visitor to a subsidized play pays on average 11 guilders. The contribution of the state and the local governments to this visit amounts to 175 guilders. This poses a problem: how can this exorbitant endowment of the arts be justified? The economist Klamer states that 'conventional economics does not produce a convincing economic rationale for the public support of the arts.' So when the right-wing republican Newt Gingrich argues that the subsidies are unfair because they force everybody to pay for the enjoyment of a small elite, he, writes Klamer, 'has a point'. And, Klamer adds, 'there is no good defense against it, at least not from the conventional economic perspective' (p. 301).

Arguments in favour of subsidies which are based on the view that art is a public good or

that art has positive external benefits are in the opinion of Klamer hard to sustain. Undefensible is also the argument that low prices for cultural events and products lower the threshold for low income groups: 'In reality low prices for cultural products mainly benefit those who already enjoy them and seduce only a few of the target group' (p. 301). Forthright 'tricky' is the argument that art is a merit good. This argument 'implies that some people have better tastes than others (...) and violates the modern principles of individual sovereignty and equality' (p. 302). It is an 'aristocratic', 'undemocratic' view which cannot be defended in a modern society.

In general, Klamer notices that in the economists' perspective cultural products are reduced to commodities and their values to prices. The result is that 'reasons for public support dissolve for your eyes' (p. 303). Nevertheless, Klamer is not satisfied with this

conclusion, he has the feeling something is missing in the picture. The insights gained with the economists' perspective are limited or even pernicious and do not seem to do justice to the phenomena studied. So he wants 'to alter the economic glasses to get a more interesting but also more truthful picture of reality' (p. 303).

Klamer's solution

What is exactly missing? Or, in other words, what could be a tenable argument for state-subsidies for the arts? First Klamer asks himself in what way art differs from other goods. He believes the distinguishing feature of art is its 'open' meaning: it is never possible to define what an artist tries to say with his work in an accurate way. The moment you can, we are no longer talking about art. Art, writes Klamer, 'happens in the sensation of a problem, that is, a problem of meaning. (...) art exists (...) in the moment of wonderment, of the question mark that the physical form evokes in our mind.' Solving the problem of meaning 'would destroy the art' (p. 304).

At this point in my account of Klamer's argumentation, I have to prelude on my opinion, about his definition of art. It seems to me a rather narrow definition because it is western, modern and middle class. The upshot of this definition is that all art produced in our civilization before about the twentieth century and most of the art produced in other cultures is no art at all. After all, most of the artists concerned (and some of their contemporary western colleagues too) 'only' tried and try to express in an esthetic, but still understandable, way the common truths of their culture. Should we in this case speak of 'decoration' or 'arts and crafts'? I am afraid the artists in question, as well as their public, would not agree. Neither do I.

Back to Klamer. Money, he says in the next step of his argumentation, is antithetical

to art. This needs some explanation. Thanks to money we can measure and compare the value of different goods. Measuring - in time, length, or value units - might be called characteristic of modern times. Distinctive too is the increasing precision of our measuring and the expanding spheres of life in which we measure and calculate.¹ By doing so, something is lost. Klamer stresses that any measurement intervenes in the nature of the object measured. Karl Marx made the well-known distinction between the *use* and the *exchange* value of an object. The imposition of an exchange value transforms the object in a commodity which can be compared and exchanged with other commodities. A preoccupation with this exchange value, Marx wrote, can turn people blind to the distinctive characteristics of the object concerned as well as to the social relations underlying its production. Knowing for instance that a particular painting of Van Gogh has an exchange value of 75 million dollar usually devalues the experience of its art.

Measuring human relationships in money or time normally devalues them too. You do not pay a friend for a good conversation and if you would offer or ask a payment this would normally imply the end of the friendship. Neither will parents send their child a bill at its eighteenth birthday for its upbringing. The difference between commercial transactions and exchanges with friends, relatives, colleagues, et cetera is, Klamer writes, that these last exchanges are measured nor well defined. They are based on *reciprocity*: there is always the expectation that *something* will come in return but it remains open *when* this will happen and of *what* this return will consist.

Wearing conventional economics glasses one would not notice that measurement can devalue goods and relationships. Economic theory, Klamer writes, 'does not account for relationships and does not recognize a value

that is beyond measure' (p. 307). He recommends these to become incorporated in economic theory, an incorporation which will require a shift in focus and in method of the discipline. By way of a first contribution to this shift Klamer presents two theses: '1. A commercial transaction devalues a good whose value is beyond measure; 2. When direct payments devalue the good traded, the parties have an incentive to establish roundabout ways of financing the costs of producing the good' (p. 307). Klamer interprets the ubiquity of indirect payments, that is subsidies, in the world of the arts as an indication of the correctness of his second thesis. But what exactly explains the existing mixture of direct and indirect payments? Klamer stipulates that art as a product differs from art as activity and as experience. In the last two cases art has a value that is not measurable and, therefore, a value that cannot be expressed with money. It even conflicts with money.

If I understand Klamer correctly, his central thesis is that we are willing to pay directly for the art as a product and only indirectly (via taxes and subsidies) for the art as an activity and as an experience. When you go to the theatre you know for sure that as long as you consider the performance as a product the evening will be a success (you are amused or improving your image in the Bourdieuan sense). So, according to Klamer, you are prepared to pay directly for this product. This is not the case with the experience-values the performance eventually generates.²

What does all this imply for our original question: how can the subsidizing of the arts by the state be defended? Klamer then takes a big leap: 'For the very same reason that we avoid commercial deals with friends and children, we avoid the intrusion of the commercial lifeworld in the world of the arts. The values that are communicated in that world are tender and

defenceless against calculation, and can be sustained only in the relationships that people form with each other and in the ongoing conversations among them' (p. 308).

Is Klamer's solution tenable?

I feel quite sympathetic to Klamer's line of reasoning and I agree with the thesis that there is a flaw in economic theory because its practitioners usually do not understand that measuring and calculating can devalue goods and human activities and relationships. Still, there is one problem left: I am not convinced. I do not think that Klamer has managed to formulate a satisfying justification for subsidizing the participation of a social-economic elite in cultural activities. He still is not able to counter Newt Gingrich.

Let us first simplify the problem and take a look at the utopian situation when all the inhabitants of a political community participate in comparable measures in cultural activities. There are no big differences between the activities of people with different income, education, gender, social background or whatever. Say, the people in question do not want to talk about or do not want to know the costs of art as an activity and as an experience: this would devalue their experience. They are only prepared to pay directly for the art as a product. The other costs are paid indirectly, via taxes. This is in fact the picture Klamer gives of the present situation and of the political problem underlying this situation. This picture is not correct, but let us, for the sake of argument, assume it is. Subsidizing the arts is, then, a strange kind of burying one's head in the sand. Because people do not want to pay all the costs directly they pay the largest part indirectly. But they still pay the full amount. It is like collecting Air-Miles. Nevertheless, subsidizing can of course be justified by this ostrich policy.

Still, why not turn the argument upside down: if the people who go to the theatre and the concert hall really cared about the art which is performed in these temples, why bother about the price of the tickets? Why even mention it? By talking about the price of the ticket they themselves devalue the art. They give the impression they only know the price, not the value. Besides this, why not expand the argument to, for instance, the visiting of restaurants? The food in a restaurant also possesses different values: a value as a product (to appease one's hunger) and a value as an experience (to tickle one's palate). Why not subsidize this last value? Perhaps something is wrong with the argument.

But, as I already mentioned, this is not the real problem. It is not the case that all kinds of people participate in comparable measures in cultural activities. The problem is that only a very small social-economic elite, which is even decreasing in size, goes to theatres, art museums and concert halls and that *every* citizen has to pay for these visits. The lower social-economic strata are in fact subsidizing the higher strata. When the non-visitors ask why they should continue their efforts (and they are asking this more and more), you cannot silence them by saying they are devaluing the art by asking this kind of questions. These people want to hear *reasons*. They want to know about the values of art in general (it is not necessary to understand the value of every piece of art which is subsidized, to acknowledge the overall importance of the endowment of the arts). It is not enough to tell them that 'people from all times' have tried 'to sustain the values that are communicated by means of art products' by circumventing 'the *quid pro quo* of commercial transactions for the very good reasons that their requirement of measurement devalues the art experience' (p. 308). It is not enough, because it is simply not

true: 'the people' or 'we' have *not* decided together to pay only indirectly for the value of art as an experience. The non-visitors were in fact never asked their opinion.³

Defensible positions

What could be tenable arguments for continuing the state subsidy for the arts? Klamer dismisses the arguments normally given for subsidizing the arts. For instance, he does not believe in positive external effects: 'It's not clear, for example, how my enjoyment of subsidized theatre is shared by other Dutchmen. There may be some spillover effects on my environment - although I would not know which ones - and, who knows, on future generations but they remain undetermined' (p. 301). I believe Klamer got out of this too easily. The arts can, among others, play a role in the renewing of a culture, they can liberate people (individually or collectively) from old, obsolete or confining values, habits and ideas, they can enlarge the understanding between people.⁴ These possible effects of art could be reasons for the non-visitors to subsidize the visitors. There is a chance that they will be convinced by the relevant argument.

Another argument for supporting the arts refers to their merit.⁵ The arts have a value even though not everybody recognizes it at this moment. The government has to continue its policy on subsidy even though the majority of the people does not support this policy. As we saw earlier, this argument is also dismissed by Klamer as an 'old aristocratic idea that violates the modern principles of individual sovereignty and equality. According to good anti-aristocratic and democratic values no one, not even a government, can tell an individual what to like' (p. 302). I consider this complete nonsense. I know nowadays everybody swallows this kind of reasoning (democracy! freedom! equality! just do it!), and you do not make

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yourself popular by criticizing it, but still: it is nonsense.

Why? This brings me to a second flaw in economic thinking, a flaw which is not noticed by Klamer: he is a willing victim of it himself. The shortcoming in question is that most economists take the present preferences for granted.⁶ They do not ask themselves how, in what social context, under the influence of which circumstances and powers, these preferences developed and whether they could have been different in another context. Before they start to build their impressive mathematical framework economists usually assume that present preferences are chosen in a well-considered, rational way on basis of a full knowledge of the available alternatives. In a next step respect for people, that is: freedom, equality and democracy, is put on a par with respect for these preferences.⁷ If you dare to question the preferences, if you ask what has been the influence of the upbringing, of the school system, of the massmedia and of the daily bombardment of advertising in developing them, you 'violate the modern principles of individual sovereignty and equality.' Still, it is my belief that you have to ask these questions if you want to take people seriously. Only then you can develop the social conditions which give people the opportunity to question their present preferences and to choose themselves which values, opinions or inclinations fit them best. That is why some people know better. And that is why merit-goods exist.

Notes

1. See for a brilliant analyses of the economic way of thinking, of measuring and calculating, and the social consequences of the invasion of this thinking in more and more spheres of life: André Gorz. *Critique of economic reason*. Londen/New York: Verso, 1989.
2. Since there is no guarantee that you will be inspired and stimulated, why should you pay a lot for a ticket, Klamer asks. I do not think that this spreading-of-risks argument is on the right place, in this line of reasoning: why should other taxpayers pay for my artistic risks anyway?
3. Maybe part of the problem is that more and more non-visitors deny that contemporary art has got a value as experience. This absence of experience-value might be linked to the prevailing definition of art, also Klamer's definition: art as 'wonderment' or bewilderment or art as a 'problem of meaning' without solution.
4. I write 'can', I do not claim that contemporary artist in fact do this. Doubts about this might be, again, part of the problem.
5. For an overview of possible justifications for support for the arts and the spreading of culture, see my *Wegen naar vrijheid: autonomie, emancipatie en cultuur in the westerse wereld*. Amsterdam: Boom, 1995 (in 1996 also available in English), Ch. 6.
6. I developed this point further in: 'Een politieke theorie over kunst en economie in de verzorgingsstaat'. In: *Schoonheid, smaak en welbehagen: opstellen over kunst en culturele politiek*; Diels, D. (red.). Antwerpen: Dedalus, 1992; as well as in: *Wegen naar Vrijheid* (see note 2). Extremely insightful in this context are the later publications of the economist and political scientist Charles E. Lindblom, e.g. *Politics and markets: the world's political-economic systems*. New York: Basic Books, 1977 and *Inquiry and change: the troubled attempt to understand and shape society*. New Haven and Londen: Yale University Press, 1990.
7. In still another next step a lot of economists contend that the market system gives people more freedom, equality and democracy than any other conceivable system. I do not believe Klamer belongs to this anarcho-liberal party.

Bibliografische gegevens

Blokland, H. (1995) 'The politics of the value of culture'. In: *Boekmancahier*, jrg. 7, nr. 26, 444-447.