

W. McNeil Lowry, the Arts and American Society

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The book that drew me to the study of cultural policy was a collection of essays edited by W. McNeil Lowry based on a 1977 Columbia University American Assembly conference on *The Future of the Performing Arts*. The volume was a slim paperback edition entitled *The Performing Arts and American Society*. In his introduction (p. 3), Lowry noted that ‘music, opera, theater, and dance are treated less in their separate aesthetic than through the instrument – institution, company, group – by which they reach the public, by which, in effect, they become “live”’ And the introduction goes on to explore the institutional context of the performing arts, including the role played at the time by the Ford Foundation. The author’s note on Lowry explained that he had ‘launched the first organized national program in the arts from the Ford Foundation in 1957 and prior to his leaving the Foundation in 1975 was responsible for its investment of some \$280,000,000 in the performing arts’.

My research colleague Barry Karl and I had begun to study the impact of American private philanthropic foundations just a few years before *The Performing Arts and American Society* was published. I was (and still am) a cultural ‘omnivore’, attending performances across a wide range of the arts, but I had given little thought to how the art I consumed was produced, much less to what alternative forms of cultural production there might be. Thus the Lowry volume caught my attention, and made me think that my growing expertise concerning philanthropy might have some useful bearing on the problem of cultural production and on the policies that might produce more and better cultural products.

But I might not have acted upon this impulse had I not met Lowry at about this time. Someone told him that I was interested in both philanthropic foundations and culture, and he invited me to lunch at the Century Association in New York in order to solicit a background essay for another American Assembly volume – this one on arts policy in the USA. I think I must have begged off on the grounds that I knew nothing about arts policy, but Lowry was a very persuasive man, and so I agreed to write for him. The result was ‘Influences on Public Policies in the United States,’ my first publication on cultural policy.

But I was probably attracted to the field of cultural policy less by a book than by a person. Lowry was a brilliant and charismatic cultural entrepreneur who had a profound

impact on the development of the performing arts in the USA. But his career was one that could not have occurred in any other country, for only in the USA has private sector funding been decisive in cultural policy formation. Lowry had figured this out, and since he worked for the largest philanthropic funder in the country he was able to mobilize an enormous amount of resources for his project. But, even so, he could not have had such a profound impact without a strong conception of how arts organizations might perform better. I suppose it now seems obvious that arts policies in the USA are predominantly in the private sector, but it was Lowry who revealed to me how they worked. And in retrospect I can see that I was well situated to analyze the problem. I had begun teaching public policy at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School only a few years before, and I was trying hard to think how my research on philanthropic foundations related to policy formulation. Cultural policy seemed an ideal test case for me, and Mac Lowry's cultural funding initiative at Ford was a wonderful example of how to formulate public policy in the private sector.

But what do we mean when we talk about "public policy" in the United States? According to Google, "public policy can be generally defined as a system of laws, regulatory measures, courses of action, and funding priorities concerning a given topic promulgated by a governmental entity or its representatives." Google is probably correct, if we are looking for an ordinary language definition of the term. But in fact this definition does not correspond to the reality of public policy in the United States, where much "public" policy is determined by people and institutions in the private sector rather than by what Google calls "governmental entities".

The government sets most, but not all, public policy in our country – if what we mean by policy is the norms that govern public behavior. We must also remember that "government", like "the state" is an ambiguous concept in the United States. Our current constitutional government is the (delayed) result of a revolution against what colonial Americans considered a tyrannical British government. After a decade of experimentation with a weak confederation form of government, the Framers established the partially centralized government of the 1787 Constitution. It was "partially" centralized because the Framers recognized that although for some purposes (economic, defense) they needed fairly strong central government, they also recognized the strength of the libertarian commitments of their post-revolutionary country. And so they created a federal republic with dual sovereignty – citizenship in both nation and state, with "state" now meaning the sub-polity in which groups of citizens lived. The idea and institution of federalism was intended to reassure Americans that the national state would not intrude unnecessarily into their private or community lives. The most important compromise in 1787 was the one that guaranteed that the government's police power – control of the public health, safety and welfare—was delegated to communities and withheld from the national state. Fear of government is as American as apple pie.

Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the first to recognize the political implications of federalism, which forced local Americans to do many of the things required for local governance through self-help – by social cooperation rather than governmental

compulsion; by associationalism rather than by state fiat. In other words, we used a vibrant civil society to achieve the social cohesion and political consensus necessary to govern a young democratic nation of nations. And the civil society tradition persisted, making it possible for Americans to accomplish through private associations what their European contemporaries looked to their national states to do. Associationalism as an organizing and governing principle was especially important in our religious and cultural life, in which most Americans felt that the state did not belong. Culture, in America, was the sphere of civil society and community. The state, especially the national state, was seen as a threat to the integrity of culture, which Americans generally conceived of as private and local. And insofar as government was involved with culture, it was state and local government (not national or federal government) that played a role.

Needless to say, the American tradition of cultural localism and privatism, which Americans tend to take for granted, is quite different from foreign, especially European approaches to culture. After all, in the much older European societies, “high” culture was the domain of kings and aristocrats, who served as the patrons of culture. The royal court was the epicenter of culture, and the tastes of royals and nobles set cultural norms – just as these groups also patronized art and other forms of cultural production. Indeed, it was the crown and the state church who supported the institutions of high culture and individual artists. The Frenchman Tocqueville understood this very well, and accordingly concluded that the fine arts and other manifestations of high culture were not likely to be valued and produced in the more democratic United States. Tocqueville reasoned that Americans were “born free” and thus unburdened with the obligations of monarchy and aristocracy, but he recognized that freedom and culture might well be at odds with one another.

One of the most interesting things about the United States is the fact that so many social and political assumptions of the Founding Era still preoccupy twenty-first century Americans. Nowhere is that more true than in our public attitudes toward culture, which a majority of Americans still consider primarily a private and local concern. We have a few prominent, national public cultural institutions, but they are few and they are mainly located near the Mall in Washington, DC. Many of these are directly under the supervision of the Smithsonian Institution (itself originally a privately endowed organization), and they are physically proximate to the Smithsonian. These organizations receive funding directly from the federal government, but in the larger scheme of things such support amounts to a tiny fraction of the federal budget. The American state spends more on military bands than all other national cultural institutions combined.

The reason for this is not federal parsimony. The reason is that few Americans have thought that it was either necessary or appropriate for the national state to support culture. We have to remember that there were really no dedicated federal institutions to support culture until 1965, when the Congress established both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. These federal agencies, established in the wake of the new-found cultural awareness of the John F. Kennedy years, were never intended to be significant funders of national cultural activity

and although they grew beyond their intended size, they reached their peak in the 1970s and have had at best flat funding since then. Moreover, they have from time to time evoked serious political opposition, mostly from those citizens who really do not believe it appropriate for the federal government to involve itself with culture. This is the reason why the United States is one of the few nations in the world that does not have a Ministry of Culture. If culture is a local and private matter, why should it need a Minister?

Among artists and aficionados of the arts, it is commonplace to remark that the United States has no cultural policy. However, as I have already remarked, Mac Lowry sought me out to request that I write an essay on cultural policy – after all, his job at the Ford Foundation was to fund cultural policy. What did Mac, a man deeply knowledgeable about European cultural policy, have in mind? That is the question I had to ask myself in 1984. The starting point was to ask what the role(s) of cultural policy were in a polity like that of the United States.

It will be my argument of that the United States does indeed have a set of public policies with relation to culture, but that it does not have a single policy. It will also be argued that many of the “public” policies are created in the so-called “private” sector, and that they display important regional variation. Finally in so far as we do have a general policy or attitude toward culture, it is in fact the result of the push and pull of a multitude of conflicting public and private policies, most of which were never specifically intended to impact upon the arts. All of this sets Americans apart from Europeans, for whom at least a plausible claim for the existence of national cultural policy might be made.

It may help to take another historical detour in order to understand why the history of public policy in the United States is so curious, or at least hard for present day Americans to understand. The growing use of the term “public policy” to describe programs planned, supported, and administered by the federal government may conceal one of the most profound social revolutions in American history. The power of the federal government to command compliance with the aims of social reform, which vast majorities of Americans may agree are noble rests on a legal authority that those same majorities, even a few years, ago, would not have believed existed. Federal administrators, backed by federal courts, are able now not only to withhold money appropriated by Congress for support of local schools, transportation, and police and fire protection, but also to take private business firms to court to enforce social changes which may have played little or no part in the legislation which authorized the original programs. Even those who supported the need for social reform can be puzzled by the size and shape of the federal authority which has emerged to bring it about.

In some respects, the peculiarly American aspects of the problem of regionalism versus nationalism offer us the best historical point of departure. The major political debates of the first century of American government centered on the issue of the power of the federal government to control national public policy. The hard fought battles which ultimately produced a measure of agreement on such issues as banking, currency, and the tariff also produced a Civil War which abolished slavery. Underneath what we now acknowledge as the limited success of such national crusades, however, was the

commitment to government which began at home – in state legislatures, in traditional county and town systems, and in the growing urban governments. The compromises which followed the Civil War affirmed the original constitutional limitations of the federal government where the making of policy was concerned, but most of all in the formulation of policy on social issues. This was an important affirmation for the South in particular where social issues meant not only the treatment of Negroes but the whole problem of poverty in what was, in effect, an under industrialized and recently defeated colony with relatively little industry. State and local governments were perceived as independent entities pursuing locally determined “public” aims pursued by other “publics” in other communities and regions. The term “public” itself was loosely applied, stretched to include the interests of business and professional groups whose concern with the health and well-being of the community, as well as its moral and charitable needs, could be defined by many different organizations and associations which no one would have called governmental.

Awareness of the good for some kind of national institutions and procedures for influencing the quality of the lives of all citizens came basically from two sources, one quite traditional and the other quite new. The older of the two, the charitable and religious beliefs and institutions which had served as the organizational base for national, educational, and social reform since the Jacksonian era, no longer appeared to be effective, even though for many the benevolent motive remained unchanged. The Civil War had brought a lot of lessons, among them the divisiveness of denominational interests and transience of religious enthusiasm. At the same time however, the growing consciousness of the needs of the technological revolution under way had led some entrepreneurs and managers engaged in the building of national industry in the nineteenth century to see a new range of national needs in education, scientific research, and in the relation of the two to human welfare more generally.

What made the combination of charity and technology unique in American society was the tradition of federalism – the unwillingness of Americans to give their national government the authority to set national standards of social well-being, let alone to enforce them. Part of the problem lay in the diversity of ethnic, racial, and cultural groups which had been affected dramatically by the successive waves of late nineteenth century immigration and the unprecedentedly rapid expansion and settlement of the western lands. The traditional American idea of welfare did not reflect a national standard according to which communities could measure the quality of education, medical care, treatment of the aged or the unemployed, even from neighborhood to neighborhood in the growing cities, let alone from state to state. For better or worse, federalism in the nineteenth century had become a way of making pluralism palatable by confining unresolvable differences and accepting them.

From the vantage point of historical distance, one can see the problem more clearly than it was perceived at the time. Among a national elite of modern industrial reformers, a growing consciousness of the desirability of national programs of social welfare collided with a general political culture which would not accept a national government bent on such reform. It was a culture which would have been threatened down to its

partisan and regional roots by any attempt to create a nationally unified conception of social policy. Not until the New Deal would the federal government move into areas dominated by civil society and local government, and then only in a very limited form engendered by the Great Depression and accomplished by emergency measures that many believed would not become permanent. Even Americans who looked upon the social programs of the New Deal as the origins of the American welfare state still accepted the fact that solutions to such national problems as a compensation for unemployed, the children of the poor or the indigent and disabled elderly (not to mention emergency employment of artists) would vary widely according to the resources provided by state and local governments as much as by regional traditions. Schemes developed by the central government were suspect, even if for a brief period during the Depression they could be accepted as an economic and political necessity.

Federal financial support was always deemed to be supplementary, encouraging rather than controlling state and local policies. Civil society (in the form of private organizations supported by associations of well-to-do citizens and religious groups) worked jointly with agencies managed by local communities and bore the major responsibility for dealing with the condition of those unable to care for themselves. Such institutions as the numerous Charity Organization societies, the Associated Charities of Boston, the United Hebrew Charities of Philadelphia and New York are obvious late nineteenth century examples of the phenomenon, forerunners of the modern United Way approach to local, private provision for welfare needs. Schools run by various local committees and boards would continue to hold a widely differing range of powers to tax citizens within their jurisdictions and to distribute educational services the quality of which depended largely on the willingness and financial ability of citizens to supply the necessary funds. Needless to say, control of culture from music to museums (and especially including higher education) was quintessentially a local affair in the nineteenth century.

The point is that the emergence of the federal government as the controlling presence in the management of national public policy is a remarkably recent phenomenon. While in many aspects of social policy, most particularly those relating to poverty relief, we can date the origins of a national, governmentally created public policy as a product of the New Deal, the enormous range of federal public responsibility for policy is really a phenomenon of the Great Society created during the Johnson years of the 1960's. The Reagan reaction against "big government" was, from this point of view, really an attempt to set the clock back twenty years rather than a century. It played upon and corresponded to the localist elite sentiments which characterized the formulation of public policy in the United States prior to 1964.

While localist sentiment made federal intrusion into the major areas of social policy unpalatable to most Americans, the twin pressures of reform politics and economic necessity achieved grudging acceptance of the need for, if not the desirability of, federal and governmental solutions to certain social problems. But this was almost never the case with culture, and it is not hard to understand why. The cynical might say that society requires bread to feed hungry mouths, but that it does not *require* sculpture,

symphony, and ballet. There is some truth in this position but it ignores the less obvious fact that Americans have defined themselves locally and regionally until fairly recently, and that they have been fundamentally committed to the notion that culture in a republic is the product of voluntary patrons and societies, animated by civic pride and civic duty.

The clearest case here is education policy. Even when national government provided support for education at the local level by setting aside lands in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, or in the dramatic gesture of the Morrill Act of 1862 which created the land-grant universities – there was never any suggestion that federal government should set operational education policy for the nation. That was a task for the local electorate. For better or worse, this sentiment prevailed for most of our history, until a nonpartisan effort to insert the federal government into K-12 policy began during the presidency of George Herbert Walker Bush. Frustration over what were allegedly poorly performing schools led to attempts to formulate national educational standards, the “Common Core,” enforced through high stakes testing – a strategy continued, in various ways, by Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. But the tension between our historic tradition of localism and the recent attempts at the nationalization of K-12 policy became apparent after the initial acceptance of national standards began to be undermined by localist reaction and the retraction of agreement to participate in several states. Perhaps more important, the nationalist movement has been most effectively funded and championed by large new philanthropic foundations, in an example of private, civil society support for national objectives. How American!

But the nationalization of cultural policy has proved much more difficult to sell. Setting aside the short-lived Work Projects Administration (WPA) program in the arts in the 1930s, local control of arts policy originated with the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965. Then, for the first time, significant sums of federal tax-based funds for the arts were provided for expenditure at the state and local level. The situation any intelligent observer might have anticipated then came about: on the one hand, local artists and artistic groups eagerly competed for the newly available money, and, on the other hand, artists and philanthropists complained that national policy concerns ought not to guide the distribution of the newly available funds. The message was clear: “Give us the funds and we will determine what to do with them”; or, at best, permit the National Council of the Arts to determine the use of the funds without control by politicians and bureaucrats. The question was seldom asked however, why the federal government should behave in such a way. Should federal tax monies be returned to individuals for local expenditure without undergoing distribution through ordinary political and bureaucratic channels? Is NEA a properly democratic method of allocating federal funds? Can culture really remain above politics once the federal government intervenes?

It may help to take a brief glance at another cultural policy problem in order to make the point concrete. Consider for instance such a major cultural institution as the Metropolitan Opera. What would it mean to ask whether or not there is a public policy toward opera in New York City? On the surface, the question may seem absurd, since I take it no one would argue that opera in New York is the result of principled

governmental policy directed specifically at the question: how is grand opera to be brought to the residents of the city?

The history of the Met demonstrates that its current status is the result of a series of policies formulated and intersecting over nearly a century's time. The Metropolitan Opera was founded in 1883, the era in which most of the urban cultural organizations in the United States began, by a group of wealthy businessmen who wanted a theater dedicated to opera – probably largely for social reasons. The original Met was at Broadway and 39th St. (and it was the house in which I first learned to love the opera). The Met was organized as a private non-profit organization, and it was sustained by a combination of ticket sales and charitable contributions from its founders and their friends, who controlled the Met through their domination of its board of trustees. From the late nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century, this was how most of the major American cultural organizations were managed – locally and charitably.

But interest in the high quality of Met performances increased audience demand to the point that the 39th St. house was no longer large (or good) enough to satisfy opera lovers. And in fact New York City was experiencing comparable audience demand for symphonic music, dance and theater. But the private market was not producing new venues for these forms of high culture, and neither the city nor the state would build suitable new theaters. In the end, a combination of political and cultural leadership produced a public-private solution to the problem, with the conception and creation in 1959 of what is now called Lincoln Center. The Center is a free-standing non-profit organization that combines eleven New York City performing arts organizations on one large site. The largest of the separate theaters is the new home of the Metropolitan Opera, now with world-class facilities.

But how and why did Lincoln Center and the new venue for the Metropolitan Opera come about? What public policies produced this most important of all American performing arts centers? It is very hard to identify the root causes, since an almost infinite variety of policies need to be taken into account in running an organization as complicated as the Met, and not all of them are policies which were intended to have an immediate or primary impact on an opera company. The policies of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations toward urban renewal, and those of Mayor John Lindsay, for instance, obviously had almost as much to do with the decision to build Lincoln Center as did the inclinations of John D. Rockefeller III and other philanthropic donors, and institutions such as the Ford Foundation. The laws on copyright had an immediate impact on the cost and choice of artistic works. Federal income tax policy with respect to deductibility of charitable contributions had an obvious effect. Direct subsidies from federal institutions such as the National Endowment for the Arts were of some help. More indirectly, in terms of the participation of foreign artists in the training of American artists, national policies with respect to immigration, foreign labor, and educational-cultural exchange were very important to the artistic production of the Met. These are classically “public” policies, but the Met also responded to “private” policies, ranging from trends in aesthetic taste through the network of interrelationships among the several national opera companies, and extending to the incentives offered by corporate

donors and sponsors. It was all very complicated, and it is very hard to see how it could have been otherwise.

The decision to build a mammoth performing arts center and the process through which it was implemented could have been very different. Compare the process that led to the creation of the Centre Pompidou in Paris with the process that led to the building of Lincoln Center, for instance. What the United States did not have then, and do not have now, is what exists in some of our European counterpart societies – a governmental ministry of culture which sets explicit policies for opera, ranging from the determination of subsidies for particular companies to the financing of artistic education for singers and musicians, and in some cases extending even to the determination of the actual works of art to be performed. We have all heard about the number of local opera companies in Germany or the centralization of artistic policy making in France, but whatever one thinks of German opera or French theatre, the centralized solutions are not possible in American political culture. We prefer to do these things locally and privately. American pluralism and regionalism create a constant pressure for the decentralization of cultural public policy

This means that our cultural institutions are largely on their own financially and in terms of cultural management. The state, in any of its manifestations, does not provide much support for the operating budget of the Met. Correspondingly, it does not tell the Met whom to hire or what to perform, since we consider culture to be in the private, charitable, sector. This is a sort of devil's bargain – there is little cultural policy pressure from the state, and there is less financial support. So the Met continues to rely upon the traditional combination of ticket sales and charitable contributions, but it has also developed new sources of revenue. The most important of those in recent years has been the Live in HD series, which streams live Met performances to hundreds of movie theaters and other venues around the country and more than one hundred more around the world, permitting global outreach and generating local ticket sales. The important point here is that the Met's decision to go global was generated internally, and did not come about because of any governmental decision to extend our cultural reach abroad.

It should be obvious that there are relatively few areas of direct state or federal cultural policy making in the United States. The National Endowment for the Arts is the single federal agency with direct responsibilities for arts and culture, but its annual appropriations are modest and its capacity for setting policy agendas for individual disciplines in the arts is limited at best. There are other governmental policies that make an impact on cultural decision making, but they are indirect and unintended. Probably the most significant of these is tax policy, since taxation has an obvious effect on the financing and therefore the policy making of largely nonprofit cultural organizations. What would the situation be, for instance, without state and federal deductions for charitable contributions and, indeed, without the whole structure of our legal system of inheritance? So much of our cultural activity is predicated upon philanthropic principles that it is hard for us to imagine a system which does not run on some combination of the market and philanthropy.

But of course we need not have charitable deductions, and in fact current proposals for the reform envisage the possibility of doing without them. State and federal policy with respect to education, to name another obvious area, clearly has something to do with the training of young artists, but state and localities have nevertheless always been more centrally important in the schools, and, alas, arts education is one of the least successful areas of K-12 schooling. Certain other federal policies designed for more general purposes have occasionally had a dramatic impact on culture – the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a labor program during the Great Depression, is only the most obvious example, but others could be cited. But the point is that the American tradition of localism and privatism in cultural policy has meant that the national government has had few justifications or incentives for influencing our cultural life.

The private sector itself provides a similar picture of a complex, interlocking and sometimes conflicting set of policies with respect to culture. Consider first the commercial side of the private sector. The market is a very powerful force in culture. The market sets prices for the sale of art, creating incentives and disincentives for the creation of art. The market for, say, music and dance, has a considerable impact on the forms of art that are performed successfully. Orchestras are inclined to program compositions that will fill their concert halls. What the publishers can sell drives their choice of authors and forms of literary production. Likewise, from the other side of the bargaining table, unionization and the demands of artistic workers have also transformed the arts. The news is replete with strikes and closings of local orchestras and opera companies. I suppose this is only to say that we must recognize that there is a vibrant and complex market for cultural goods.

Even more obvious, though less understood is the impact of the private not-for-profit sector. I have already mentioned that in America we have never had an aristocratic patronage system like that in Europe, but that is not to say that there is not an American patronage system. In our country we have replaced the patronage of the crown and church and national stage with an extensive nonprofit patronage system. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we have developed a mixed system in which cultural institutions and production are supported both by charitable gifts and by market activities – through gifts and tickets. The gifts have always come from the well-heeled individual donors who have traditionally supported the arts, but now the donor class, thanks to our inclusive charitable exemption policies, includes the general public. It also includes corporations who make charitable contributions to cultural production as part of their marketing strategies.

And, most importantly, it includes grants made by the charitable philanthropic foundations, like Mac Lowry's Ford Foundation. Financial support for arts and culture thus comes largely from our private charitable/philanthropic sector, which has developed significantly over the past half century. Levels of giving have risen over that period of time, with both the wealthy donors and mass givers continuing to invest in cultural production. There are now vastly more philanthropic foundations, although fewer of the largest foundations now have dedicated arts programs, since the emphasis of the dominant "strategic" form of philanthropy is on the production of near term social

change – and that is not the comparative advantage of arts organizations. This means that cultural organizations are under pressure to diversify their funding sources and, especially, to engage in riskier, more market-driven, activities. Think Met Live in HD.

At this point one might ask how Mac Lowry thought about culture as public policy? I cannot claim to know, and I do not think that I ever put this question directly to him. But I think we can infer from what he did as the official who presided over the creation of the first (and most important) Ford Foundation cultural policy program. I think he must have known that the federal arts and humanities endowments were unlikely, by themselves, to make a decisive impact on the production of culture in the United States. But he surely thought that the country's largest philanthropic foundation could make a significant impact on cultural life. His strategy was to strengthen existing cultural organizations, and to stimulate the creation of new organizations, that could and would support the efforts of artists and performers to receive adequate training, find employment in their own fields, create new performing entities, and raise both capital and the necessary operating funds. I think he must have felt that his job, and that of his foundation colleagues, was to become sufficiently knowledgeable to recognize (and fund) the most promising individual artists and arts organizations. He was particularly attentive to those with cultural entrepreneurial skills and organizations dedicated to improving the quality of artistic performance. Through Ford funding Mac was able to identify and support large numbers of individuals and organizations, but since they were bound to be a minority of the whole field, his challenge and his job was to leverage his funds by investing them selectively and wisely. What Mac was doing was to apply what had become the characteristic philanthropic investment strategies of large philanthropic foundations to the cultural field. He, and Ford, were the first to do so.

Mac's challenge, as I am sure he saw it, was to make a significant impact on cultural policy in a country that had rejected the notion of national policy in the cultural realm. But that was the challenge of the Ford Foundation generally. Ford was very large, but during the Lowry years it was never large enough to compete with the state for policy influence and impact. The question for Ford was how its limited funds could be invested to support progressive public policies in its chosen areas of interest. The answers were in crafting grant programs that could, in themselves, make a real world difference and, more importantly, influence the state to move in desired directions. The challenge was to “nudge” the state and other social actors, since the philanthropic sector had neither the wealth nor the power to purchase or compel social action. The problem was to create the sort of organizational infrastructure that would move the cultural sector in the right directions. This challenge was particularly difficult, since it was so hard to discern the variety of issues that were the preconditions for change.

As must be painfully obvious from what I've already said, I am not a professional student of the arts. My field is rather the history of public policy in the United States and, in particular, the history of philanthropy. Nevertheless, it does seem clear to me as an avid consumer of art that the dynamics of public policy formulation in the United States apply to artistic policy as well as to those areas of social policy with which I am more familiar. The lessons, I would say, are really four.

The *first* lesson is that to have no policy is to have a policy. That we do not have a national cultural policy, in other words, means that we have made an implicit decision (this going far back in our history) to leave to private and local institutions the determination of the decisions most overtly affecting the creation and conduct of cultural institutions.

Second, no public policy can be understood in isolation. We do not have an explicit and unitary national cultural policy, but we have tax policies, urban renewal policies, immigration policies, and a number of other public policies that limit the ways in which cultural institutions can operate.

Third, if by policy we mean the creation of norms according to which action is determined, the public-private line is not very helpful in determining “public” policy. The norms which have operational significance for artists and cultural institutions derive equally from private and public sources, and it is a mistake to think of them as acts of the state, primarily governmentally derived. Indeed, in this country, private policy making has been predominant.

Finally, the increasing involvement of American cultural life with the overt process of public policy formulation has costs as well as benefits. While we may be appreciative of the governmental funds which have been made available to American artists, we must recognize that the price tag for this “public” support is a swelling demand for public accountability. There is an inevitable tension between high culture and democracy, and as cultural policy moves from the domain of the private, the elite, and the artist to that of public and popular taste, there will almost certainly be impact upon the artistic process itself. The one sure thing is that this tension will produce a wide variety of responses in our localistic culture, despite the best (worst?) efforts of federal government to achieve a more unified national policy. It was this tension that produced the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s, which resulted, among other things, in the reduction of funding and function for the Arts and Humanities Endowments.

I have no idea what Mac Lowry would have said if he had been reincarnated in the contemporary United States. He would have been enormously pleased by the proliferation of the sorts of arts and cultural organizations that he supported years ago. And he probably would have recognized that cultural overproduction was a problem he should have anticipated. He certainly would be surprised that he had no successor at the current Ford Foundation – unless, of course, he recognized a lot of himself in Ford’s President, Darren Walker. But he surely would have known that it is no easier now for philanthropy to influence cultural policy than it was in his day.