

The State should not support the Arts

by Petr Mach

"Arts don't deserve to be haggled about on the market," think many, especially those artists dependent on the government's grants or anybody who works in a government-funded, art-aimed organization. They also say: "Delivering art to the mercy of market would extinguish many precious works of art. Sure, there are some artistic products, which can work their way to the market, but then it is questionable whether they should be called art at all. They are rather products of commerce made only for the sake of money, and not from the artist's own inner impulse. Real artists must therefore be supported – this is what enlightened sovereigns had been doing since times passed. We all know that products of art are not good just for artists themselves or their passionate admirers – the ultimate beneficiary of arts is society as a whole. Modern society should therefore support independent production of art. Since we now have a democratic government, it is unthinkable to make artists beg for support from wealthy maecenases. Art must be supported through grants for artists and the possibility of writing-off of taxes for those who provide the support."

Their arguments seem persuasive. In their vagueness, however, they may obscure the heart of the matter. Let me now summarize these arguments in a single sentence. The principle of financing arts from governmental resources may be resumed in the following thesis: Give us money for the activity that is not interesting enough for a sufficient number of people who would be willing to pay a sufficient amount of money for seeing or hearing it. The government then forces taxpayers to give up a portion of their income (which they would otherwise invest into goods and services of greater interest for them) to support people whom the public would not award for their artistic activity according to their wishes.

It is obvious that the resources of the government support for arts have to be collected by force. The government can penalize me for such an innocent crime as my reluctance to support the arts I don't want to support, by confiscating my property or putting me into prison.

I am for the freedom of arts. Note that I prefer using the word "freedom" rather than "independence", since the meaning of the latter, like plenty of others, has been distorted by some left-wing intellectuals who say, "Independent art must be supported by the government". Freedom of art doesn't mean that only what somebody is willing to pay for will be produced. It also means that an artist can even make a work, which he doesn't expect to be sold. He is ready to give it time and formerly gained money – just because he wants to make it. But how can we speak of any independence of art, if the decisions on projects are made by governmental committees and not by the artist himself or his audience? Aware or unaware, artists then submit themselves to the tastes of distributors of the money seized by the government. On the other hand, the distributors, not wishing to be replaced with other distributors, try to please all sorts of artists' lobbies.

The interpreters of taste won't be, however, satisfied with merely taking away money from people as a support for the right arts. In addition, they decided to strangle commercial art by a special tax from expenditures on arts. Commercial art is according to some people synonymous with bad-taste art. The word "commercial" is a dirty word in their view. The decisions are thus made according to the interests of members of the art committees and the lobbies they represent, instead of being completely in the hands of citizens, their taste as well as their votes "by money". For instance, even if the government-supported film production is not funded from a general tax but just an excise on cinema tickets or TV fees, I have no other means to avoid supporting a silly Czech movie but not watching movies at all.

The efforts of some people dealing with arts to get taxpayers' money by force are often disguised in all sorts of masks. One of the most commonly used is the protection of national cultural identity against foreign cultures (what they mean is of course American culture – other cultures seem to express rather a valuable ethnical versatility). People are not capable of making free decisions to watch products of foreign culture; some money must therefore be taken away from them for the support of a domestic artist, whose works will be enforced upon them. No wonder that such voices are loudest when they come from people who benefit from an income that could have been somebody else's income, were it not usurped by the state budget.

Although our tastes may differ, I am sure everybody remembers many excellent artistic performances produced without the government's funding. On the other hand, it should not be a problem for anybody to think of some government-funded junk. See? Another evidence of the fact that the quality of art cannot avoid being rated by the taste of millions of people. The government's support therefore cannot guarantee flourishing of the good art. And this is why I think that arts don't deserve to be controlled by the government.

Petr Mach is publisher and editor of Laissez-Faire, Prague, Czech Republic.