
SUGGESTIONS TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF ART

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Sociologists have made interesting studies of the hobo, the prostitute, the drug addict, and the criminal. They have made valuable contributions to the subjects of population, social change, the family, and other topics of sociological interest. They have done less than justice, however, with the subject of art from a sociological standpoint. Art is a significant social phenomenon, and deserves the careful attention of students of sociology. It is a product of the social thoughts and activities of men, and as such it is a vital reflection of the culture of a time and place. Art holds up a mirror, not to nature, but to human society. In contrast to the philosophical view of art which constructs metaphysical or epistemological theories around the subject, and to the psychological view which aims at a description of art in terms of sensation and perception, the sociology of art tries to discover the social and cultural roots of art. It perceives the beauty in art, not as a metaphysical essence as philosophers do, nor as an experience that can be adequately measured in the laboratory as some psychologists would like to have us believe, but as a social process, a changing artifact conditioned by the prevailing institutions, mores, economic and technological developments, social attitudes, and the like. The central task of the sociology of art, therefore, is to discover the social and cultural conditions that are anterior to artistic achievement

and responsible for the body of ideas from which artistic culture springs. From this point of view an artistic production must always be appraised in terms of the standards of the period in which it occurs, rather than by contemporary criteria.

Among the many problems in the sociology of art only a few will be briefly outlined.

1. *Institutional aspects of art.*—Institutional factors are all those formal and informal agencies in society which exert control over artistic productions, such as customs, tastes, public recognition, publications, art schools, museums, laws, etc.

An interesting problem is the role of professional criticism in art publications, the press, and the radio. Reviewers wield an influence, if not on the artist, then certainly upon the consumers of art. Music critics, acting as commentators at symphony broadcasts, can shape the musical tastes of their audiences. Symphony conductors in their capacity of selecting compositions, can elevate into famous artists composers of no great merit and discourage others of great promise.

The competitive nature of contemporary life has not left the artist untouched. To protect himself from predatory dealers and publishers the artist has been obliged to organize into associations and to secure copyrights for his creations. This in turn has given rise to legal experts who

defend their clients against their dealers. The freedom of the artist is thus effectively curtailed.

We do not yet know accurately the role of art schools, academies, and art galleries in artistic productions. The evidence suggests that they force potential artists into predetermined molds. Art galleries are in a position to select the works of those artists which are in conformity with their directors' ideas of what is good in art. It is well known that the productions of dissident artists are frequently rejected.

A problem of great concern, and one which is in need of careful research, is the role of foundations in art. To what extent is the will of a donor detrimental to the free growth of art? We do not know precisely; but it is sufficient to note that donors frequently limit the use of their gifts to conditions and circumstances which do not operate after their death.

2. *Art and the economic system.*—Art is conditioned by the economic circumstances under which it originated. Art and material culture are closely associated. The incentive for artistic creation is greatest among people whose time is not entirely consumed in securing a mere subsistence. In frontier America artistic creation was feeble in part because of the pioneer's preoccupation with material survival. American, like all art, is associated with the achievement of a relatively stable material economy.

Closely related to this problem is the relation between art and the class structure. If the general character of cultural life is affected, as it seems to be, by the material relations of production, then art is no less untouched by them. Accordingly, the dominant class that controls

and manipulates these relations will also influence artistic productions. Art is, in short, influenced by class relations, especially by rich and powerful patrons.

3. *Art, sectarianism, and the political process.*—Philosophers, critics, and moralists have for centuries inveighed against the "immorality" of art and artists. Censorship of art has been an important influence upon art. Ecclesiastical control over art comes readily to mind. The agencies of suppression are also at work today. Mrs. Grundy has a sorry record for strangling the aspirations of the artistic spirit. Literary art, especially, is often "made" or broken by the "guardians" of the moral order.

The relation between art and political institutions has long been recognized. It is only recent history, however, that has made us fully aware of the oppressive nature of political forces in relation to art. Communism and Naziism, each in its own way, has crushed all dissidence in art. The doctrinaire intolerance of the Soviet dictatorship and the ruthless suppression of all "non-Aryan" art in Germany cannot be here described; their effect on art in totalitarian countries is, however, well known.

4. *Art and fame.*—While it is probably true that, in the long run, an artistic production of exceptional merit tends to achieve public recognition, this recognition is dependent considerably on social circumstances. Artistic fame is social. The influence of the home, the school, and the special agencies of artistic training in the life of the artist must be taken into consideration. Frequently artistic fame depends upon influential intermediaries who can win favor or acclaim for a work of art through their prestige and au-

thority. Patrons, rich men, critics, and publishers are important factors in artistic recognition. A genius is, therefore, in great part a product of favorable social and cultural circumstances.

5. *The personality of the artist.*—Artists, like other people, differ among themselves. Despite this fact, however, they have characteristics which are more common to them than to non-artists. If we conceive of the artist as an "ideal type" or construct, then the real artist is a person who, while never merging with it, approximates it in various degrees. Again, while the personality of the artist, like that of anyone else, is laid down early in life, his role and status are significantly bound up with his "occupation." His life organization is conditioned by his being an artist "professionally."

The person who eventually becomes an artist was early confronted by deeply personal problems which were pressing for solution, such as unrequited longings, powerful unrealized ambitions, unusual desire to excel, problems of inner tensions and conflicts, and the like. The "temperament" of the artist is a composition of hyper-activity, verbal outbursts, violence to or withdrawal from the environment resulting from frustration of his powerful wishes. These traits are hardly conducive to individual repose and are more likely than not to produce an unhappy artist. This is particularly true of the modern, in contrast to the ancient and the mediaeval artist;

for the modern artist must above all things be original. In a world of rapid change there is no settled or prescribed meaning of life. Each artist has to discover it through his own spiritual agony. The modern artist, in other words, has not only to delineate, but to invent his own meaning, of existence; it does not come to him ready made, like Christianity to the mediaeval artist. The need to inject order into the chaos of life taxes the imagination, intelligence, and creative powers of the artist to the limit. In this situation the artist cannot remain conventional or normal.

Among other topics in the sociology of art mention should be made of the following: the role of art-ideologies in art, the effect of scientific ideas on art, art as a means of social adjustment, the psychology of the creative experience, abnormality and the artist, psychoanalysis and art, the social nature of aesthetic appreciation, and art as social communication.

This brief statement of the nature of the sociology of art shows that it is an effort to look upon artistic productions objectively; to make art amenable to rational analysis by discovering its social and cultural origins. If art has meaning, as philosophers tell us it does, then that meaning can be in large measure ascertained by a knowledge of the culture that gave it birth. A work of art means, from this point of view, what the artist intends; and the artist intends largely what the cultural values direct. Art and culture are thus inseparable.