

The Arts and Humanities in Public Life

Patronage, Beyond Panegyric and Jeremiad

by John Brewer

Professor of English and History at the University of Chicago. His books include The Pleasures of Imagination: A History of British Culture in the Eighteenth Century (1997).

These remarks have a simple aim in view: to unpack some of the concepts that we routinely use in discussing issues of patronage - notably patronage itself, artistic freedom and intellectual integrity - in order to clear the ground for a better discussion of issues of policy in the arts and humanities. In particular I want to suggest a move beyond what I call the panegyric and the jeremiad versions of patronage which have dominated the publicly acrimonious debates about patronage policy.

In my view no proper understanding of the nature and dynamics of cultural patronage can be confined to an analysis of the relations between patron and client. Who the patron is, what she proposes or does offer, how much control she is able to exert over the activities and institutions patronised is affected by the place of the patron-client relationship within a larger social, cultural and ideological field or frame. The same can be said for the client: what he requests, expects or needs from a patron and what he provides the patron are also largely shaped by this larger context. This is not to deny individual agency - the importance of personal will and particular talent - but to argue that analytically it has to be understood within definable constraints.

In a society and polity such as the United States, all acts of patronage are framed within two contexts: the public and the market. This has not always been so in the past, nor is it necessarily the case in other sorts of political regime. It's also possible to imagine totally private acts of patronage (the commissioning of a work of art solely for the private gratification of its commissioner) but not only is this not our general concern, but in practice this is rarely how even private commissions are conceived of in this country. This is because intellectual and artistic work produces something we consider both a commodity and a good; it embodies both private and public value.. Potentially, at least, it has both exchange and aesthetic/moral value, both of which are the result of different sorts of opinion.

In such a context, the range of possible actions which we might call patronage is very considerable: the commissioning and financing of intellectual and artistic work, its purchase after completion, its use and adaptation to new

environments and so on. And the range of potential patrons - the central governments, local authorities, non-profit organisation of individuals - the sorts of bodies that Milton Cummings has analysed - is equally great. But they all have to operate in and are constrained by a certain sort of political and economic order.

We can see this through a example in which a patron and its clients moved from one political and economic regime into another. The work of *Index on Censorship* before 1989 was much concerned with the patronage of dissident writers in the Soviet/East European block. To that end they published in the West the manuscripts of works that were banned but smuggled out of the East, and they mobilised international opinion to support writers persecuted for their views. After 1989 these activities were largely redundant, and Index switched to providing stipends (grants and fellowships in the western manner) to help eastern writers seeking to make a precarious living in a tough (but uncensored) literary marketplace. Some of these writers, though glad of their freedom, found it very difficult to adapt to these new conditions, and found that what they had once had to say was deemed of less interest and commercial value than when produced under a regime of censorship and persecution.

If the meaning of every act of patronage is affected by the political and economic framework, both institutional and ethical, in which it occurs, it is also true that all acts of patronage leave their mark on the work they support - who patronises and how affects the significance and status of the work produced - its meaning and value. This may seem most obvious when a work is directly commissioned, whether it be a portrait or a study of the ethics of patronage, but it is also true when patronage does not seem to touch the form and content of an individual work, because, as the case of Index shows, it affects its presentation and reception. There are two issues here which are sometimes distinguished but are related: the first has to do with the "freedom" of the creator to decide on the nature of his/her work; the second with the question of meaning and value of the work which, once in the marketplace or the public sphere, is up for grabs or the object of opinion. One, particularly romantic view of this situation sees every act of patronage, no matter how ostensibly benign, as a threat or challenge for those who want to maintain the autonomy of art or the integrity of intellectual endeavour. Having a patron is to engage in a Faustian pact.

The assumption behind such a view is the existence of some pure realm of artistic and intellectual endeavour, a cloud-cuckoo land inhabited by artists and humanists unencumbered by personal prejudice, social intrigue, professional (de)formation, habit, money and moral inertia. This is a good way to point out the iniquities of the world but it is a lousy account of the avant-garde or the Academy. It is a view that confuses the liberal demand that artists and humanists should enjoy aesthetic and intellectual self-determination with the larger claim for the purity of the work produced, a notion which derives from the view that the value of such work is in the expression of the genius or skills of its

creator, and the belief (intrinsic to neo-Kantian aesthetics) that great art must be the product of creative play rather than of coerced or alienated labour. In effect the claim here is that creators give meaning to aesthetic and intellectual work (which of course they do), but the way in which it is couched sets artistic purity against other forms of intervention or interpretation which are viewed as intrusions upon the integrity of the work, as if those who created it had some right to prescribe how it should be understood by others.

Here the issue is in large part one of the value and significance of the work produced. The productivist view of value and meaning - that who make art make its meaning and value - with its roots in romanticism, modernism and in Marxist aesthetics, privileges the moment of creation over and against reception and consumption, the former being natural - as in Marx's remark, that Milton "produced *Paradise Lost* as a silkworm produces silk, as the activation of his own nature" - the latter being alien. There are many difficulties with this view, but the most serious has to do with the issues of temporality and opinion. Why privilege the moment of conception over other moments in the life of the products of cultural and intellectual work? It is obvious that the meaning and value of such works will change in time and space, especially in regimes where 'opinion' though it may be manipulated cannot be legislated.

I recognise that the fear provoked by such a position is that it plunges us into a sort of relativism, that somehow it makes all opinion equally valid as opinion; that it seems to abnegate judgement. But to say that meaning and value are relational - a consequence of the position of works within a cultural or social frame - is not the same as relativism, and does not preclude critical judgement. On the contrary it maintains that critical judgement should be made from a position of the consciousness of the cultural and social relations within which a work is embedded. (Incidentally this does not mean, again, that the aesthetic is collapsed into the social; merely that aesthetic judgement takes place within a certain context.)

Much of the uneasiness expressed by artists and intellectuals about patronage stems from the way it repeatedly reveals the socially (and spatially) grounded nature of artistic and intellectual activity. The same work patronised in one context does not have the same import as when patronised in another. A Puccini aria from Turandot sung in a state-subsidised opera house is the same work (or part of a work) as the song adopted by FIFA for Italia 90, but Nessun Dorma with its stirring climax of "vincero" has quite a different meaning when performed in the same city on the stage at La Scala or on the pitch of San Siro. Conversely, the patronage of wealthy east coast women, like Amelia Elizabeth White, helped transform native American artefacts of the South West into a truly American art in the 1920s and 1930s. Pots once in the adobe were given a different sort of value when exhibited in the 1931 Exposition of Indian Tribal Arts in Manhattan.

The situatedness or relational character of meaning has, of course, become a

cliché of scholarly analysis in recent years, but it does not seem, on the whole, to have led to a deliberate consideration (especially by patrons themselves) of the performative and transformative character of different sorts of patronage. A recent analysis such as Balfe's *Paying the Piper*, though full of interesting case studies, revealingly characterises the effects of patronage in terms of unintended consequences. The clichéd disclaimer of the patron - "I'm not going to interfere" - is a nonsense, though clearly a gesture to the notion of independent creative work. Why be a patron if not to interfere? Such a view inhibits a proper discussion of what forms the interference might take and what its implications are. Nor is it useful (as the rubric to this session implies, with its productivist assumptions) to confine such a discussion to the effects of patronage on the artistic process without considering questions of presentation and reception which are bound to be central in the U.S political/cultural context.

I want then to emphasise three larger points. First, the quality and value of work does not exclusively depend on the circumstances in which it was produced; valuable work can and often has been produced by alienated labour, for instance. It is not the circumstances that create the value, but the circumstances which create the conditions in which to make critical judgements. Secondly, it is unhelpful to think of patronage as a force that acts upon a fixed object or enterprise, rather than to recognise it as one of the ways in which artistic and intellectual endeavour is given meaning. Thirdly, we need to disentangle the complex issues of possession and proprietorship that patronage poses. When patronage has a public function (is conceived of as a public good) then what rights of possession or proprietorship has the patron and, conversely, what obligations does he incur? Posing this question clearly is difficult because issues of interpretation about value and meaning become inevitably bound up with issues of control, access and entitlement. Too often we seek to separate these two areas of conflict rather than exploring their connections.

Historically patronage has been the object of two symbiotically related discourses: the panegyric and the jeremiad. Since classical antiquity critics, artists and patrons themselves have shaped two exemplary patrons: one with good taste, discernment and discretion, who has nurtured genius and protected skill, a person worthy to join a pantheon of patrons that runs from Pericles and Maecenas to who knows who; the other a tasteless, ignorant, interfering and controlling figure (usually contrasted with the figures in the pantheon) whose intervention produces mediocre, compromised or bad work from an alienated client. The good and bad patron can either be an individual or an institution. Both versions have their exemplary anecdotes which follow a pattern either of patronal prescience or of risible ignorance. Ironically the panegyric usually paints a rather distanced picture of the patron - she isn't "patronising" - who remains in the background, somewhat removed from the creative work itself, while the jeremiad usually offers a much more detailed depiction which foregrounds an active, hands-on intervention.

Closely connected to these two versions of patronage are two versions of

patronage's connection to the market. On the one hand, the market was often seen as a source of (abstract) freedom from the (personal) forms of dependence associated with private patronage. (This, for instance was Haydn's view of the commercialised concert world of London in the 1790s whose freedom - "How sweet is some degree of liberty!" - (and great profitability) he contrasted with the impositions of the Esterhazy court.) On the other, patronage - construed as a publicly-minded philanthropic or 'disinterested' act - was explicitly distinguished from the marketplace, and its representatives - dealers, impresarios, publishers - which, though they were recognised as important intermediaries between writers, artists etc. and an audience or public, were/are also seen to inhibit, restrain or compromise creative work because of their commodification of culture and attention to the bottom line.

From this second point of view, the value of patronage is that it provides a free space (free, at least, from market pressures or 'the culture industry') so that the artist's work is 'uncompromised'. The case is construed as all the more compelling when the patron purports to be a public body whose ostensible purpose is the pursuit of the public good rather than private profit or gain (the state or the non-profit sector). The powerful effect of occupying this high moral ground can be seen in the way that men of commerce - like Joseph Conrad's literary agent and protector, J.B. Pinker, or the Impressionist dealer, Durand-Ruel to cite two nineteenth-century examples - were concerned to emphasise their role as patrons of art who sacrificed profit to bring what they considered great works of art before the public.

But, as I have been arguing, the pursuit of a free space opened up through patronage is a utopian enterprise, a romantic wish which inhibits an engaged analysis of what is at stake in considering the effect of patronage. The two versions of patronage - panegyric and jeremiad - are better understood as complementary accounts of the contradictory relationship between patronage and its intellectual and cultural objects: at once enabling and controlling, liberating and inhibiting, facilitating and restricting. Yet this contradiction is premised on two caricatures - one of artistic freedom, the other of total patronal or institutional control. Its not that artistic creativity and intellectual freedom or over-determined or ill-informed patronage are not real issues; its that we need to handle them in ways that move beyond the discourses of patronage. We need some other mode of analysis to look at issues of control, interpretation, ownership and value.

One way to move beyond the discourses of patronage has been to analyse the use-value of the patron-client relationship. Thus patronage is interpreted as a means of manifesting or instantiating economic, political and social power (as in the Renaissance notion of princely magnificence), elaborating or creating social distinction through the distribution of 'cultural capital' (thus Bourdieu), as a form of memorialisation and commemoration (of individual or group), or, as in the "contingent value" analysis of economists like Kahneman and Knetsch,

as "the purchase of moral satisfaction", what they touchingly call "the warm glow hypothesis".

It's noticeable how much more attention is paid in such accounts to the use-value of the patron-client relation to the patron rather than to the client, whose needs are either passed over in silence or assumed to be obvious. This asymmetry is probably explained by the frequent desire of such analyses to demystify patronage, to explain "what is really going on", usually by casting such conduct in rational actor terms and, quite often, thereby condemning it or revealing it to be a sham. (It also tacitly endorses the romantic view of the artist or intellectual and is slightly embarrassed to discuss his material and daily needs.) But the poverty of such accounts lies in their failure to capture the special qualities and nature of cultural work (its aesthetic form or moral content), and in their rather one dimensional account of the motives and meaning of the patron-client relation. At their worst they seek to dissolve the aesthetic and moral in the social, a trend that has understandably worried many artists, intellectuals and critics.

Such analyses also point to the difficulty we have in dealing instrumentally with activities (and the things they produce - images, texts, objects) whose value is seen to derive from their non-instrumentality, Kant's famous "purposiveness without purpose". Much social and cultural theory of the last twenty years has been spectacularly (I would say fetistically) obsessed with the aesthetic - with attempts to abolish, demystify or explain its contaminated nature. But, as John Guillory has so clearly argued, what such a move often entails is a "logical misstep" in which the "impurity" of the aesthetic (its inevitable implication in social relations) is taken as a denial of the reality of the aesthetic, rather than as grounds for seeking to determine what place we want to accord it in political and social life.

What is needed, then, is the explicit recognition (and consequent analysis) on the part of patronising bodies of how their activities change the meaning and import of the intellectual and cultural endeavour they support. Too often the ostensible purposes of patronage are treated, almost self-evidently, as tantamount to their effects. This, in turn, entails the abandonment of some of the great clichés that surround the discussion of patronage and the recognition that it is the fluidity not fixity of cultural and intellectual endeavour which is the source of its value. We need, as it were, another genre or form for the discussion of patronage, apart from the panegyric or the jeremiad. On the other hand, it is unhelpful, once we recognise the limitations of ideas of intellectual objectivity and aesthetic purity, to take this as an end to discrimination. Rather there should be a more direct engagement between producers and patrons over the meaning and significance of the work patronised, a recognition that patrons are inevitably involved in this process.

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