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SOCIOLOGY

Art and Social Values: A Study of Three Utopian Communities

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Though it is agreed that artistic activity is conditioned by social circumstances, statements about the form of such conditioning are tentative and even contradictory. Perhaps one reason for this state of affairs is the assumption that artistic activity is essentially peripheral to the important issues of social life. Confusion about the social conditioning of artistic activity is also occasioned by the great variety of conceptual frameworks from which art is analyzed (Read: 1937; Gotshalk: 1947). In any case, the accumulated body of knowledge on the sociology of art is quite incomplete in comparison with materials available in other areas of sociological study.

At present, any agreement among sociologists of art seems to be limited to the notion that artistic activity comprises three elements—the artist, the art object, and the audience (Barnett: 1959; Tomars: 1940; Sewter: 1935).

Recent work in this field has been largely confined to the popular arts—the mass media of communication; radio, television, movies, and popular literature (Warner & Henry: 1948; Mayer: 1946; Barnett & Gruen: 1948; Leonard: 1958). A strong emphasis on the popular arts is unfortunate since these phenomena do not represent the range of artistic activity in contemporary society. Furthermore, the popular arts do not lend themselves readily to the study of style—one of the few aspects of artistic activity where similarities in time and space are manifest. The failure to distinguish between popular and fine arts seems to be possible only when the emphasis upon the investigation of the popular arts has reached such proportions that the possibility of artistic activity outside the sphere of popular art forms is ignored or forgotten. While the popular arts are quite as worthy of attention, they are more properly considered from Lalo's perspective, as "minor arts," different by nature from the fine arts and serving different audiences, having different

subject matter, and employing different techniques (1921).

The most successful attempts to describe the nature of the relation between artistic activity and social structure have been made by anthropologists (Boas: 1955; Adam: 1954; Kroeber: 1930). One important reason for the success of such studies is that the community chosen for anthropological investigation is usually a relatively simple society sustaining one, or at most, a couple of related art styles. The presence of a single art style or of relatively few art styles in a primitive society or in other communities may be attributed to the fact that the individuals in the community are presented with the limited alternatives of a single cultural milieu. In societies with a proliferation of art styles, each struggling for pre-eminence on grounds that become increasingly esoteric and represent greater departures from central social issues, the several styles stand in a tenuous relation to determinative social issues. This is not to say that the artistic activities of complex communities are devoid of social influence. But the contemporary artist is more likely to be a specialist engaged in the business of creating meanings for a coterie of other specialists and a small group of educated laymen. Any single artist in such a situation is not likely to represent more than one social milieu of the many available to the individual in the contemporary world. In the nature of the case, it is difficult for the sociologist to isolate the bearing of any single milieu upon artistic activity.

Artistic activity has become an appropriate concern of sociologists by virtue of the assumption that art is somehow conditioned by the social circumstances surrounding it. This assumption is basic to this study. However, the problem remains: just what is the nature of this conditioning and how does it work? At least two hypotheses

have been offered, but to make matters interesting they are, in part, contradictory.

Alternative Hypotheses: I. It is sometimes said that great art is great because it reflects and reinforces the dominant values of a society. This theme is as old as Aristotle who believed that the aim of art was the imitation of action (*De Poetica*). Artistic productions of this character have, in addition to other values, a high propaganda value, and the reinforcement of common values becomes one of the major criteria for artistic excellence. In contemporary American society much of the literature in women's magazines seems to express conventional values and to reinforce them by the manner in which they are represented by the various characters involved in the story. The reinforcement function seems, in general, to characterize all of the popular arts of contemporary society.

II. It is also maintained that the artist is fundamentally an innovator who works in opposition to conventional value systems. Plato, for example, regarded both the artist and his art as dangerous (*The Republic*). In this interpretation, the artist is often an outcast, often pilloried, and he sustains himself by the strength of his own convictions, sometimes with the help of a small coterie of admirers. This is not necessarily the context within which the creative person works, but it may be considered the dominant attitude toward the artist in contemporary society. In this case, the work of art is generally ignored, considered meaningless, or is banned and prohibited as dangerous. There are many historical examples. The fame of both Amadeo Modigliani (1884-1920) and Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) was posthumous. Their lives were marked by dire poverty and their works were often not saleable at any price (Schwartz: 1940; *Encyclopedia Britannica*, X, 1961).

The discussion, so far, has dealt with art viewed as a means to some other value not intrinsic in itself and art viewed as it is concerned primarily with ultimate values. The distinction here is essentially between art that is incorporated into the society as a social institution and art that is allowed to manifest itself as a cultural institution. In the first case, artistic activity, treated as a social institution, is generally employed as an agent of social control to reinforce common values (*vide supra*). In the second instance, art serves intrinsic values and is not merely a means for achieving other desirable ends. In other words, art is not related to the social institutions in an instrumental fashion; the artist appears only when his society reaches a stage at which it can afford to support persons not making a direct contribution to the maintenance of the society. The popular arts in contemporary society are those susceptible to employment as social institutions, while our fine arts are customarily regarded as ends-in-themselves and, therefore, as cultural institutions.

Methodological Considerations: A major problem in the study of art and social life is the selection of a suitable unit of investigation. For the purposes of this investigation, an appropriate unit of study would appear to be the community. The relation between the arts and the

value system of a particular community type seems to provide an ideal testing ground for an hypothesis concerning the relation between the arts and common values. If there is a determinable relation between them, one should be able to find: (1) unique values, (2) a unique social structure, and (3) a unique development of art.

At the present stage of the sociology of art, we lack the precision required for experimental or statistical study, and these limitations indicated that only a comparative case study was appropriate at the time of this study. The communities chosen for study are communistic, voluntaristic and religiously oriented communities which appear particularly appropriate for study because of the clear relation between their value systems and artistic activity. They are the Israeli *kibbutz*, the Shaker community, and the Cluniac order of monks. These three communities possess the advantage for study of being, at least in a comparative sense, complex communities with relatively sophisticated artistic traditions. Yet these utopias are also communities that offer to the individual a unified social milieu. Hence, they do not embody the hindrances to sociological study previously outlined as characteristic of most complex communities.

The general hypothesis concerning the social significance of artistic activity within the specialized community is that the community supports those art forms which possess instrumental value for the society. Art is an aspect of the community's social institutions and is so employed to achieve ends that are unrelated to aesthetic values and standards. This means that the art is not regarded by the community as valuable for its own sake and does not possess any intrinsic value. It is possible, therefore, to hypothesize that art is regarded by the specialized community in one of three ways: (1) Artistic activity is supported because it makes concrete significant aspects of the ideology. (2) Artistic activity is discouraged or prohibited because it not only fails to exemplify ideological motifs but actually endangers the preservation of certain social values. (3) Artistic activity is neither supported nor prohibited because it is not regarded as being either instrumental or dangerous; in this case the community attitude toward art is neutral.

If the preceding hypothesis does, in fact, characterize the artistic activity of the specialized community, then certain material consequences will confirm the hypothesis. These are as follows: (1) If art is instrumental then the art will emphasize the content of the art object rather than its formal elements. (2) This type of art emphasizes social meanings and discourages individual meanings. (3) In an instrumental art experimentalism is discouraged and the style itself is fixed in terms of traditional formulas. (4) Since the most highly regarded art object is that which is instrumental the bulk of the community's art objects will tend to reify collective values rather than negate them or fail to impinge upon social values at all. (5) Just as the art object is regarded as an instrument, the artist is regarded as an instrument of the society and consequently remains more or less anonymous. (6) The creation of art objects possessing neutral value for the community is permitted as long as it does

not interfere with either the community's work program or other significant activities.

An attempt was made to follow a uniform and systematic approach in the analysis of these communities in terms of the hypothesis and the material consequences. To begin with, all available literature for each of the communities was examined to obtain a general view of their histories, social structure and organization, community values, and the indigenous art forms. Finally, an attempt was made to relate the values in their social context to the art forms.

Findings: In the Shaker community, it was found that social controls were so stringent that, nominally, at least, art did not exist. In addition to prohibiting all forms of ornamentation because they were thought to be evil, Shaker dogma held that any consideration of aesthetics or non-utilitarian items was a personal vanity. At the same time, the members of the community remained completely unaware that they had themselves formulated an aesthetic criteria which governed the manufacture of furniture. The Shakers were certainly among the earliest people to suggest that the form of an object should evolve from its function, beauty residing in utility. This principle is very well exemplified in Shaker architecture and furniture. In this case, the general principle of communal and aesthetic uniformity reflects an ascetic-puritan work ethic which controlled all social behavior in the community. It is of some significance that the Shakers viewed their art forms as an aspect of the economy and as pragmatic solutions to specific problems. For this reason, the creation of a distinctive style of furniture was akin to the inventive genius of the Shakers which was responsible for numerous labor-saving devices and techniques.

The *kibbutz* represents a recent innovation on the specialized community form which draws its population from the diverse cultures of Europe and the United States. These immigrants, characteristically of urban background and possessing a comparatively high level of sophistication in the arts, have sought to maintain a Westernized intellectual and artistic tradition. At the same time, the *kibbutz* value system is firmly rooted in a communal work ethic which places a high value on manual labor, and more specifically, on agricultural labor. Although a variety of industrial enterprises have appeared in many of the *kibbutzim*, this development is regarded as an unfortunate although inevitable departure from original *kibbutz* goals. The requirement that *kibbutzniks* spend eight or nine hours each day working leaves comparatively little time for artistic pursuits. In actual practice the two values — intellectual and artistic achievement on the one hand and manual labor on the other — turn out to be incompatible. To be sure, a certain amount of time is available for intellectual and artistic endeavors, but leisure is sufficiently scarce to limit participation in non-productive activities to that which occurs on a dilettante or amateur level. That this is the case is testified to in part, by the fact that the children of the *kibbutz* tend to be comparatively anti-intellectual.

Cluny and its many dependencies constituted a medieval monastic community in the peculiar position of being both central to the developing civilizations of the medieval world while maintaining an existence in which it had relatively few contacts with the secular world. From the beginning, and in time to an increasing extent, the Cluniac communities began to compete with other monastic communities in selling religious services to the lay community. The sale of religious benefits of various types and the manipulation of sacerdotal privilege and power became the major monastic industry and the major source of revenue. Thus, the development of religious paraphernalia enhancing the position of the Cluniacs in the marketplace finally became the dominant concern. Before the decline of the order, the Cluniac monks were among the most successful religious strategists in this competition. This was due, at least in part, to the superior organization of the Cluniac community, which was distinguished by the subordination of every monastery within the order to the abbey at Cluny and by the freedom of Cluny and its dependencies from diocesan authorities.

The economic strategies of the Cluniacs resulted in the creation of numerous sacred art objects which were instrumental in increasing monastic revenues. Yet the Cluniac community was originally conceived as a Benedictine reform which did not have as one of its aims service to the lay community. Therefore, even when these services had become important, a good deal of the communities' energies were directed inward to the perfection of the monastic community and to the glorification of God. Hence, a great deal of Cluniac art was instrumental in these latter ways.

Cluny illustrates, in a small way, the shifting tendency of monasticism from its preoccupation with the monastic community itself to a concern with the lay community. The shift in emphasis is reflected in monastic architecture from the early Benedictine churches to the Jesuit churches of a later period. This shift was a gradual change from a preoccupation with the choir of the church and those parts of the church used by monastics to a concern with the church façade and with the enlargement of the nave and the general accommodation of monastic architecture to the needs of the lay community.

Another aspect of Cluniac art that deserves mention here is the fact that the Cluniacs who subscribed to the general monastic belief in economic self-sufficiency and consequently in the necessity for a fairly rigorous work program substituted manuscript copying and illumination for the customary agricultural labor. In contrast to the Benedictines, who came to spend more time on manual labor than was allotted to the performance of church services, the Cluniacs reduced conformity to the principle of self-sufficient agricultural labor to infrequent ritual observance. One of the most significant things about Cluniac manuscript illumination, however, resided in the use of illustrated texts as sculptural models. Cluniac sculpture was almost always executed by lay sculptors and continually reiterated textual themes and motifs

TABLE I.
The Instrumental Character of Art in Utopian Communities

	The Shakers	The Kibbutzim	The Cluniacs
Emphasis upon content rather than form.	Furniture designed to exemplify important group values by absence of superfluous and decorative detail. Shaker emphasis upon honesty reiterated in furniture manufacture by the high quality of materials and craftsmanship.	Continuously life in the kibbutz is the subject matter of art.	Almost all art is didactic in nature thus pointing up some scriptural lesson or instructive in some other way—the only exception is the small amount of purely decorative art.
Emphasis upon social meanings rather than individual meanings.	Uniform style of craftsmanship is intended to promote group solidarity.	<i>Tobacco Road</i> criticized for presenting the author's feelings alone rather than those of the group. A novel written by a kibbutznik criticized for same reasons. Marc Chagall criticized as unrealistic because of his involvement with his "private fantasies" and his evasion of important social issues.	Most art is either narrative or symbolic.
Experimentalism is discouraged. Style is fixed.	Identical pieces of furniture were manufactured in all communities. The style of craftsmanship once fixed, continued to prevail.	The kibbutz is too young for the development of a fixed art style to have occurred.	Figures depicted by paintings and sculptures tend to be those of importance to the monastic community as a whole rather than the popular saints of the lay visitors. A uniform art style prevailed in the various Cluniac monasteries—thus there was a distinct Cluniac style.
Art and artist are instrumental. Art supports social values.	Furniture, religious songs and dances, religious tracts. Artist is almost always anonymous.	Amateur activity in all arts is encouraged. Little prestige is accorded the artist because amateur activity is such that anyone can participate in the work program.	Cluniac iconography is based primarily on subjects drawn from literary sources. Cluniac architecture developed into a distinct style. The least successful Cluniac sculptures were frequently those appearing as innovations and not based on traditional motifs.
Art has neutral effect on social values.	No art with neutral value is present.	Professional activity is permitted so long as it does not interfere with work program and with other group goals.	Music, architecture, sculpture, illuminated manuscripts. Monastic artists are almost always anonymous. Some illumination and architecture—primarily early staff which was purely decorative—was regarded as neutral.
Art endangers social values. Art is prohibited or regarded as dangerous.	Secular art-painting, books, music, poetry—all strictly prohibited.	Art having individual rather than social meaning is felt to endanger social values.	Secular literature, music, secular subjects for paintings, sculpture are rarely or never present.

which were of didactic value for the monastic community.

The Relationship of Findings to the Hypothesis: It may be recalled that the general hypothesis of this study has been that artistic activity of the specialized community is instrumental in character. The test of this hypothesis has been pursued through the investigation of several related material consequences of this hypothesis. These material consequences, along with supporting evidence from the three utopian communities are summarized in Table I.

As may be noted in the table, the evidence, even though of varying quality, would appear to consistently support the general hypothesis of this study that the art of specialized communities is instrumental in nature.

Referring to the first of the material consequences,

(the emphasis in art is upon content rather than form), it can be seen that the hypothesis is supported in each of three communities. In fact, in none of these communities was there an extensive development of decorative or nonsymbolic art.

The second consequence (emphasis is upon social meanings rather than on individual meanings) proved somewhat more difficult to establish. Yet the uniformity of style of craftsmanship in the Shaker community supported by a number of formal and informal statements regarding the true nature of work points to the use of art as a means of sustaining group solidarity. Within the kibbutz not only is a single subject matter predominant but the basis for aesthetic criticism is seen to reside in the relevance of the art object to group needs and attitudes. In the Cluniac monasteries there tended to be a uniform

use of traditional religious symbols, thus the important saints of any major Cluniac abbey or priory would appear in the sculpture of a number of Cluniac dependencies. In the same way an art style developed which characterized the Cluniac art of various regions.

The third consequence (experimentalism is discouraged and style is consequently fixed) is most clearly supported in the Shaker community where the principal art form, furniture, was the same in all communities throughout most of Shaker history. The same uniformity characterized Shaker architecture although building materials differed according to what was available in any given locale. Similarly, Shaker songs and dances were readily identifiable as such regardless of the Shaker village they appeared in. By contrast, the kibbutz lacks a distinct art style. The indications are that the kibbutz has not been in existence long enough to have developed a distinct style. Thus, the finds regarding this aspect of kibbutz are inconclusive. In Table I it is noted that a distinct and uniform art style characterized the art produced in all Cluniac dependencies. Furthermore, the Cluniac control of artistic creation was so rigorous that even the art produced by hired laymen (in the absence of monastic artists) was in complete conformity with the monastic art of manuscript illumination. Thus, sculptural motifs were directly drawn from text illustration.

In view of the consistency with which the various methodological hypotheses have been supported it seems fair to conclude that the general hypothesis to the effect that artistic activity in the specialized community is instrumental in nature has been significantly supported, if not established conclusively. What has been found is that three divergent communities with differing social histories and cultural contents but having in common a religious, communistic value system and a distinctive work ethic tend to shape the development of the arts in similar ways.

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