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GOODBYE TO THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS?

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In the shadow of the truly egregious policies rolled out by the Trump administration in their first year in office (anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant policies, de-staffing the State Department into paralysis, shrinking national monuments, strangling the ACA), and a general tone of chaos surrounding the office of the presidency, a standing threat remains. That is: among other cuts, freezes and gag orders, the administration has vowed to defund the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). Here, I demonstrate how current political arguments around defunding the NEA are derived from a larger political model of dismantling the state apparatus, and purposely conflate fiscal and symbolic rationales in an attempt to influence cultural policy.

When the plan for cutting federal funding for culture was first announced, defenders of the NEA, NEH and CPB moved quickly, asking concerned Americans to sign this petition, call that office, and so forth. Those who are actively fighting the cuts note how the arts and humanities programs that are supported by these agencies enrich the lives of everyday Americans in rural and urban areas of all fifty states. Furthermore, defenders explain, myriad cultural stalwarts—from public libraries to local orchestras to public radio—are attached to these workhorse agencies, which themselves operate on shoestring budgets. Lately, the smallness of the NEA budget is taken as a unit of currency, as in: *this [bomber, bureaucratic measure, security detail] is three times the NEA's whole annual budget.*

Fairly often, the appeal—*stop cuts to arts and culture!*—includes a graph or pie chart, demonstrating that the NEA receives an infinitesimal percentage of the Federal Budget. The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) reports:

The \$146 million budget of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) represents just 0.012% (about one one-hundredth of one percent) of federal discretionary spending. The NEA has sustained signif-

ificant budget reductions. NEA appropriations have declined by \$21.5 million (–13%) in the last three federal budgets.

The NASAA goes on to explain that even these meager funds create jobs, stimulate local economies and improve education. Put in these terms, the general argument is that if Americans only knew how valuable these organizations are—and how far-reaching—especially compared to the much bigger wastrels (i.e. Department of Defense or, in recent days, the president’s vacation spending), we would all be up in arms and we would have the good sense to join together to preserve them.

Others insist that the cuts are just a political proxy, such as in the case of CultureGRRRL (Lee Rosenbaum) at ArtsJournal, who writes:

Unfortunately, whenever there’s a call to prune the budget, the NEA and NEH are low-hanging fruit. They’re worth more for their symbolic value—an expendable expense when politicians want to appear fiscally frugal—than they worth are [sic] for their negligible impact on the government’s gargantuan outlays.

And while I do not disagree with this sentiment, “symbolic value”—that is, symbolizing fiscal prudence—is not, in fact, the only logic under which these cuts are being made.

Indeed, in launching a defense of the NEA (and like organizations) that extols its efficacy as an economic engine, albeit one with deep cultural value, its defenders may be missing an opportunity to directly contest the arguments that the right is making about the NEA. The NEA’s opponents are not simply arguing that the dollars we spend are a bad spending choice; rather, they are revitalizing old culture war tropes, and then hiding behind absolutist claims about limited government. Thus, as artists, academics and community-level cultural workers rush to save these small organizational and funding homes—and, by proxy, their merit on the national stage—we should also consider how we arrived at the current assault.

When the NEA was founded in 1965 under the Johnson administration,¹ with a budget of 2.4 million, the legislation that brought it (and the accompanying National Endowment for the Humanities) into existence stated:

... the practice of art and the study of humanities requires constant dedication and devotion and that, while no government can call a great artist or scholar into existence, it is necessary and appropriate for the federal government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.

¹ This process was initiated by President Kennedy, whose Executive Order 11112 established the President’s Advisory Council on the Arts in 1963 (Koostra/NEA 2000).

As an additional part of the charter, the NEA was set up with peer review panels of respected artists to choose grants, “buffering grants from political oversight and emphasizing artistic freedom over democratic accountability” (Lewis and Brooks 2005:9). Monies appropriated by congress to funding the NEA increased throughout the 1960s and 1970s—largely under the leadership of Nancy Hanks—with its projects gaining in scope and prestige.

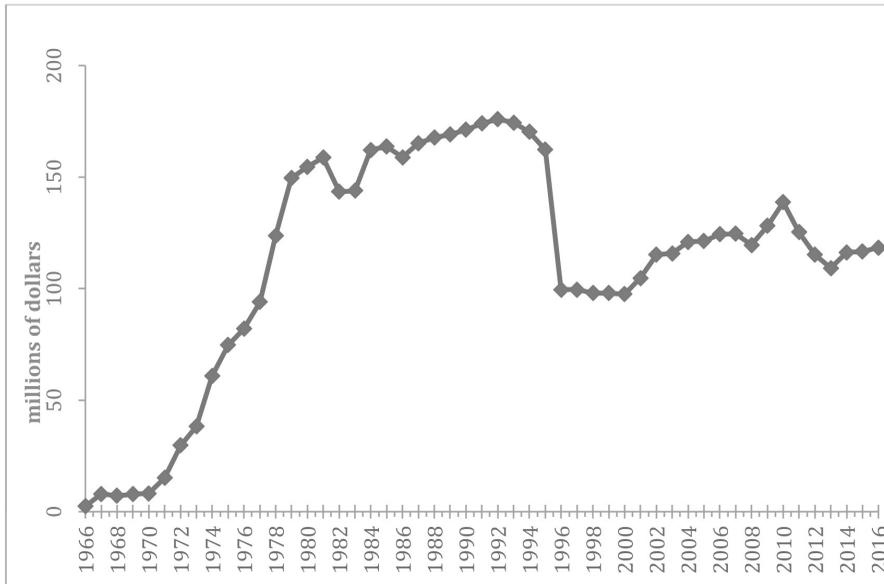


Figure 1: NEA funding 1966–2016. Source: NEA Annual Reports

<https://www.arts.gov/about/annual-reports>

NEA funding climbed for two decades until falling off steeply twice: the first time in 1982 during the Reagan administration, and the second in 1996, under the Clinton administration in the context of what would come to be known as the “Culture Wars” (Bolton 1992). At these junctures, the conservative legislative project of *making* NEA funding political took off by declaring arts having to do with gender and sexuality “obscene,” or by rehearsing class-based arguments about the snobbery of cultural organizations. Since that time, agency funding has more or less flatlined (with a small bump in 2010 under Obama’s economic stimulus bill), with its annual budget hovering around \$120 million for the last decade or so.

Examining the 2017 CATO Handbook for Policymakers (which has its earliest edition on the website from 1995) under the subheading “Cutting Federal Departments and Programs,” one finds Chapter #53: Cultural Agencies. At the top of the page is the language we plainly see in the Trump agenda:

Congress should

- eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts,
- eliminate the National Endowment for the Humanities, and
- defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting

Finding a document that so nakedly lays out this policy serves as a reminder that many of the seemingly abrupt plans of the current administration (and its allies in Congress) execute a project that has been developed over decades of accusing the progressive wing of American politics—particularly in the realm of arts and culture—of elitism and the exclusion of “everyday” people. A great deal of energy has gone into building up popular support for this message, until such time as policies could be rolled out by the most conservative elements of the Republican party.² The result is cultural policy—or elimination thereof—based in political ideology.

The mechanism for this process requires a powerful sleight of hand between material and symbolic claims about government spending. As CultureGRRRL points out regarding “symbolic value,” cutting the NEA or NEH is a *performance* of fiscal responsibility, as opposed to the actual thing. Yet, the symbolic and the material are not entirely discernable, especially when the budgets are in the hundreds of millions of dollars (a large-sounding sum to regular Americans), and have real effects—a fact of which both sides are acutely aware.

Important to note is that the CATO document is not unique in its approach, but is a good example of the rationale for dismantling state cultural agencies. In order to do so, the authors take a few different tacks in the space of a relatively short document. These fall broadly into the categories of (1) government overreach, (2) protecting the purity of arts and culture, and (3) class-based arguments.

In the first category, the authors invoke the legal powers afforded to government through their interpretation of the Constitution:

In a society that constitutionally limits the powers of government and maximizes individual liberty, there is no justification for the forcible transfer of money from taxpayers to artists, scholars, and broadcasters.
(535)

Of course, the government transfers wealth from taxpayers to many kinds of actors all the time through appropriations, tax cuts, subsidies, etc., but this is a way for the authors to link up this particular policy prescription with a whole host of other market-based notions about how to distribute resources (for health care, education, etc.), which they do throughout the rest of the handbook.

² In the nine-page document that follows, the terms for cutting these institutions are laid out, and connected to the political philosophy of the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank that has operated since 1977, providing federal and other lawmakers with their policy prescriptions in areas ranging from health care to foreign policy.

This sets us up for the second category—arts as ideologically pure—in which the rhetorical game is two-pronged. In both cases, we are pushed to understand the small number of dollars spent as material *and* symbolic. First:

Note that the amount of arts funding in the federal budget is quite small. That might be taken as a defense of the funding, were it not for the important reasons to avoid any government funding of something as intimate yet powerful as artistic expression. (536)

The number is admittedly small, but—the authors say—we make this claim because art *is* important, not because it *isn't*.

The second prong of the ideological purity argument speaks more to conservative *values*. In order to do this, the authors remind us of controversial NEA-funded works, harkening back to the culture wars of the mid-1990s when the conservative “Contract with America” congress most effectively slashed the NEA budget:

Among its more famous and controversial grant recipients were artist Andres Serrano, whose exhibit featured a photograph of a plastic crucifix in a jar of his own urine, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which sponsored a traveling exhibition of the late Robert Mapplethorpe’s homoerotic photographs. (535)³

That tap on the shoulder about controversial art is not because we cannot take it, assert the authors; on the contrary, this is important stuff and therefore the government should keep its grubby paws away. (Worth noting here is that this section has not been updated very much in this edition, so trotting out these now-25-year-old examples is either still wildly relevant to their readership, or the best example they can come up with.)

In the third group—class-based arguments—the authors assert that federal arts and culture funds provide a subsidy for elite entertainment:

Since art museums, symphony orchestras, humanities scholarship, and public television and radio are enjoyed predominantly by people of greater-than-average income and education, the federal cultural agencies oversee a fundamentally unfair transfer of wealth from the lower classes up (537)

In this rhetoric, government support of culture benefits an elite class that robs from the poor to entertain the rich. Another version of this, which one can find throughout the

³ This sentiment is repeated again in the conclusion to this section:

Because art is so powerful, because it deals with such basic human truths, we dare not entangle it with coercive government power. That means no censorship or regulation of art. It also means no tax-funded subsidies for arts and artists, for when government gets into the arts funding business, we get political conflicts. (541)

literature on de-funding federal cultural agencies goes, *the arts should be subject to market forces! Why do some people get to choose the symphony/ballet/museum for the rest of us?* Once again, the material and the symbolic are conflated to the point where they become difficult to disentangle. It is true that some kinds of entertainment (classical music, sculpture) receive federal dollars, while others (action movies, NASCAR) do not.

It is here that the NASAA argument (above)—which demonstrates that federal arts funding is distributed widely across American communities—makes the most sense. Local agencies of arts and culture require ongoing local maintenance, and ongoing reliable funding to make sure that someone is able to mind the store. The NEA makes art happen for all kinds of people in all kinds of places, even those without wealthy local foundations or edgy art scenes.

No matter. In the last moment, the CATO authors circle back around, claiming that their previous points were actually *not* their previous points even though they brought them up in the first place.

No, the issue is neither the content of the work subsidized nor the expense. Taxpayer subsidy of the arts, scholarship, and broadcasting is inappropriate because it is outside the range of the proper functions of government, and as such it needlessly politicizes, and therefore corrupts, an area of life that should be left untainted by politics. (539)

It is a clever rationale, but not in fact the argument that the authors have been making throughout the rest of the document. Rather, they have busily set about attacking the actual workings of cultural agencies, only to repudiate those claims as a supposed matter of principle.

Alongside the material question of how our tax dollars should be spent, two kinds of symbolism operate. One is budget reduction as a symbol of fiscal responsibility; the other is art as a symbol of social permissiveness. Opponents of the NEA conflate these on purpose, and to great effect.

What ought the response be? The NEA (and other cultural agencies) are not *good* because they run on next-to-nothing; indeed, their budgets should be increased so they can run effectively and so more kinds of people can make—and be exposed to—more kinds of art. Progressive supporters of art need to step away from culture war tropes, and not get hauled into a media spin cycle of arguments with people howling about photographs Robert Mapplethorpe made in the early 1990s. The NEA, though not without its flaws, is dedicated to making art flourish in American communities of all kinds, and this is most consequential at this moment when creative expression has a mark on its back.

Like so much of the authoritarian policy agenda of the Trump administration, a detailed, long-standing plan and a pointed architecture lurk behind the policies, a set of tactics based in an overarching strategy to consolidate power and wealth in the hands of a very

few as they tell very many that the terms of debate are, in fact, about a clash of values. Defunding our cultural agencies has diminished—and will continue to diminish—the nation’s entryways to everyday democratic practice in ways both symbolic and material.

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