

# *Charting Cultural Priorities*

JAMES RUSSELL WIGGINS

**J**OHNS ADAMS wrote something two centuries ago that put the whole idea of discussing cultural priorities into my mind. You will remember that marvelous letter to Abigail, written at Paris May 12, 1780, in which he discussed the cultural priorities of successive generations of Americans. At the conclusion of a rather long letter about the sights of Paris, he wrote:

I could fill Volumes with Descriptions of Temples and Palaces, Paintings, Sculptures, Tapestry, Porcelaine, &c, &c—if I could have time. But I could not do this without neglecting my duty—The Science of Government it is my Duty to study, more than all other Sciences: the Art of Legislation and Administration and Negotiation, ought to take Place, indeed to exclude in a manner all other Arts.—I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have the liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, Natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Tapestry and Porcelaine.

Adams thus neatly summarized the cultural priorities of his own and subsequent generations in a young nation not yet possessed of the riches and luxury and peace that would permit it to devote its energies to finer things. Our own priorities are not as clearly disclosed or indicated by the state of our development. But the reflections of John Adams serve to instruct us that each generation, including ours and those to

Mr. Wiggins made these remarks on September 21, 1977, at the annual meeting of the Fellows and Friends of the Peabody Museum of Salem. The speech is printed here through the courtesy of Ernest S. Dodge, director of the museum.

follow, will have to chart cultural priorities. Circumstances of one kind or another will dictate a choice of emphasis.

Elsewhere Adams spoke of the influence of great accumulated wealth upon a society's enjoyment of the finer things, a phenomenon of which we are constantly made aware. Because of this wealth, Americans, we are told, spend annually more than twenty-five billion dollars on charity, including the arts, literature, education, and science. All the beneficiaries of this great fountain of private gifts cannot avoid being nervously aware that this whole outpouring of individual philanthropy is now being questioned more seriously than ever before.

A factor of enormous importance in American giving is the tax legislation of the country. As tax deductions, gifts cost the giver less than the face of his contribution. Gerry Knight, writing in the Business & Finance Section of *The Washington Post* a few weeks ago, estimated that a dollar donated to charity costs only eighty cents to a moderate income taxpayer in the twenty-percent bracket, and as little as thirty cents to taxpayers in the top or seventy-percent bracket. He quotes Dr. Martin Feldstein, Harvard tax specialist and chairman of the National Bureau of Economic Research, as saying that eliminating deductions would cut gifts by twenty-six percent. The 'no deduction' tax return would slash charitable contributions from seventeen billion dollars to twelve billion dollars a year. The effect would vary widely with contributors of differing income groups—low brackets giving some twenty-two percent less, top brackets as much as seventy-five percent less, the experts estimate. Treasury officials think lowering the maximum tax rate from seventy to fifty percent (a measure strongly urged by tax reformers) would cut big gifts to colleges, hospitals, museums, and the performing arts and shift the weight of total giving more to churches, health and welfare agencies, and such.

These conjectures suggest how any alterations in tax legis-

lation may work major changes in total giving and in the relative amounts to different objects of giving.

Another tax change recently suggested by Rep. Fred Richmond of New York would expressly authorize taxpayers each to contribute one dollar to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, or both, by means of a check-off on their returns. This raises new and different questions of further concentrating governmental authority over all our cultural and social institutions.

Last fall, following his association as a consultant with the Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs, Wade Greene wrote an article for the *New York Times Magazine*, in which he concluded, 'In this time of rising egalitarian expectations, of widespread disenchantment with our institutions of expanding government, we are, I believe, attending the disintegration of philanthropy in its traditional forms, as a major force in American Society.' He also wrote that 'private educational institutions have found themselves relying more and more on government funds. . . . The result is that in the foreseeable future we may see even so private an institution as Yale turn, in effect, into a state university.'

Robert F. Goheen, former president of Princeton University, and later chairman of the Council on Foundations, disagreed with this forecast in an interview printed in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*. He foresaw a continuing role for private philanthropy and pointed out that existing tax laws would permit corporate giving to rise from roughly one billion dollars a year to four or five billion. He noted that polls his organization had authorized showed continued support for private giving and for tax deductions, as well as support for foundations.

And yet, there is a phrase in Greene's sentences that jolts those whose institutions are dependent upon private giving, and that phrase is 'egalitarian expectations.' Precisely what Greene meant by the phrase, I am not sure, but it ticked in

my mind recollections of a conversation in 1947 with Ilya Ehrenburg, then one of the last surviving European cosmopolitans in Communist upper circles in the Soviet Union.

We were discussing the broad question of how different societies direct their resources to human needs of all kinds. In the course of the conversation we came to the difference between the distribution of resources in a genuine socialist society and in a capitalist society. There probably is no real socialist society in the world and maybe no classic capitalist society, so we were not talking about the Soviet Union or any other dictatorship of the proletariat, or about the United States. We came down finally to the question of whether a genuine democratically governed socialist society would or would not support arts, literature, education, and other cultural pursuits, given the rising demands of the people in the world for creature comforts and satisfactions. It was interesting to find that the great Communist writer and philosopher had some doubts that they would allow as much diversion of national wealth into these channels as a capitalistic society.

If this is the prospect under socialism, it probably must be accepted as a tendency as well under governments becoming more directly influenced by popular vote. The dictatorships of the proletariat, like the Soviet Union, have an elite that can compel diversions of resources to purposes they respect and prize. The non-Communist countries, with reservoirs of private capital, can also make decisions on the diversion of wealth to cultural purposes that probably would not be supported by referendum, plebiscite, or pure democracy. Are such diversions of resource menaced by a trend toward more popular control of the dispersal of wealth?

Cultural and educational institutions in the private sector are confronted by a double crisis. On the one hand, private giving has not kept pace with the growth of the economy, and, in constant, uninflated dollars, has fallen off absolutely in the last few years. This was the conclusion of the Filer Commis-

sion report. On the other hand, the real needs of cultural and educational institutions have been expanding more rapidly than in previous periods.

Museums and research libraries once enjoyed (or suffered) greater isolation from the general economy and greater insulation against the general economic environment. This isolation and insulation rested upon distinctions between non-profit institutions and profit-making establishments that are rapidly diminishing. Nonprofit cultural and educational institutions are being greatly changed. They were once more broadly staffed by volunteers and amateurs than they are today. Professional staffs in the past did not receive and did not expect to receive monetary rewards and fringe benefits comparable to those available to persons of like skill in business and government. Inflation did not add to staff costs as rapidly as it added to endowment values. Inflation did not act upon the price levels of acquisitions of scholarly works as rapidly as it acted upon some other things. Tax pressures of municipalities had not yet inspired demands for tax-equivalent payments for public utilities. While inflation adds to the worth of the capital assets of profit-making enterprises and non-profit institutions alike, the rise in the real value of the collections of libraries and museums does not improve their balance sheets as it improves the balance sheets of profit-making enterprises.

Nonprofit cultural and educational institutions thus find themselves the objects of a double impact of rising needs and diminishing resources. This universal influence sharpens rather than diminishes the competition for funds. The competition between cultural or educational agencies and those dispensing creature comforts through our expanding welfare operations grows steadily. The competition among competing cultural institutions, moreover, grows sharper each year—competition between education and the arts, between the humanities and science, between literature and music. Those

concerned with the humanities tend to think academic science is in clover, but the *Technology Review* for August points out that federal support for basic research has dropped nine percent between 1968 and 1976. The financial crunch is on across a broad front of American life.

Friends of museums and libraries must occasionally feel as though there is nothing upon which they can depend but prayer. They are, however, practical people (as well as religious people) of the kind once described to me by Sir William Lawther, then secretary of the British Coal Miners' Union. He told me that he and his Methodist neighbors used to pray to God every Sunday to smite the coal owners. After giving prayer a reasonable time to effect their ends, he said, the miners would leave the church and throw stones at the coal owners' houses to help God answer their prayers.

Friends of cultural institutions will not be content to rest on prayer alone either. They will, in my opinion, work to broaden both the contributions that their institutions make to society and the popular understanding of those contributions, so that the services they now perform, and that they hereafter enlarge, may continue through whatever alterations of private philanthropy and public philosophy may come in the years ahead.

The Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs, in its 1975 report on *Giving in America*, gave support to this point, emphasizing that the future of the private sector would depend on what private institutions do or fail to do. One of the statements made in the concluding pages of the report must be constantly stressed. It said that 'an ultimate Commission charge to organizations and institutions of the non-profit sector is to be constantly aware that, though privately controlled, they exist to pursue public purposes and in various ways are answerable to the citizenry as a whole. No institution or set of institutions automatically deserves public support and all must be aware of the need to recurrently demon-

strate, by deed and by openness to public examination, their worthiness of this support.'

John Adams could clearly see the cultural priorities of his own and two succeeding generations. Those of the generations now coming on are not so clearly visible. What we do know of their cultural priorities, with any certainty, is that they will be shaped and fashioned less than in the past by the wishes of political and economic elites, and more by broadly based popular tastes and wishes. It is the task of those who operate and support these institutions to see to it that the cultural priorities of the future are fixed by the broadest understanding and appreciation of the importance of agencies of learning in the world that is coming into being.

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