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Patron Information

Name: Mark Cyzyk

Username: mcyzyk1

Status: Senior Staff

Department: Other

Email: mcyzyk@jhu.edu

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Book Review: Zolberg's Constructing A Sociology of the Arts

Mark Cyzyk

It is not quite clear what precisely Vera L. Zolberg is attempting to accomplish in Constructing A Sociology of the Arts (1990). On the one hand, her stated intention is: "...to suggest ways by which the approaches of sociologists and those of art professionals or humanists may be brought into congruity" (Ibid:27). On the other hand, the book reads as a topology of the sociology of the arts as it has emerged in the last century with little mention of actual "humanist" research produced during the same period. What results is an interesting topical history of the sociology of the arts—its methods and problems—that does not quite achieve the stated goal of the establishment of a congruency between sociologists and humanist scholars with respect to art and social scientific/humanist theories accounting for art.

Despite this fatal flaw (one that could have largely been avoided by trimming down her unwieldy thesis—a thesis that could not possibly be fully supported by a slender two hundred and fifteen page volume), Zolberg would have done better to calm her ambitions and simply offer, what is in fact offered, an introduction to the sociology of the arts. Despite her ultimately failed ambition, however, there is much in Zolberg's book of genuine worth and interest.

Setting aside discussion of Chapter One for the moment, Chapter Two: "Why sociologists have neglected the arts and why this is changing" provides an interesting historical survey of the discipline with special attention paid to American sociology. In this brief meta–sociology, Zolberg points out the traditional hinderance to sociological study of the arts, namely, the positivistic conception of sociology that held sway for the first half of the twentieth century. She states:

By accepting a rather limited and, in fact, increasingly old-fashioned version of the meaning of "scientific", sociologists excluded conceptualizations that might require evaluative stands, not only with respect to the arts, but often other aspects of culture as well. They focused on subjects suitable for their techniques and paid relatively little attention to religion, symbols, language, and other aspects of culture content, except insofar as these topics could be retranslated into units amenable to manipulation in the positivist tradition (p.45).

Essentially, sociology in the earlier part of this century seemed to be a case where the methodological dog was wagging the disciplinary tail. The
collapse of the positivistic dogma underlying sociological research was begun, as Zolberg points out, in the 1960's when the discipline itself was subjected to close internal scrutiny and reconceptualization. It was during this time that there awakened an increasingly invigorated, though still somewhat groggy, sociological interest in the arts; as sociology's self-conception has evolved, so too has grown the permissiveness with which the interest in such traditionally "fuzzy" topics as art have been received.

In Chapter Three, "Studying the art object sociologically," Zolberg defines what it is that sociologists of art do:

Sociologists study group processes of decision making, and institutional constraints in the selection of works for cultural production; institutional change and its effect on style, as in the emergence of impressionism; structural constraints and opportunities in the [artworld] (p. 54).

For sociologists, more important than art creation is the social processes of status creation, to whose end certain art works are selected for inclusion in the canon of elite art. The sociologist is more interested in the social symbolic use of art, rather than the work itself (pp. 55–56, italics in the original).

Having thus defined the sociology of art, Zolberg then offers interesting summaries of the work of Diana Crane, Alan Lomax, and Theodore Adorno as examples of sociological considerations of art.

The next four chapters, "The art object as social process"; "Are artists born or made?"; "Structural support, audiences, and social uses of art"; and "How the arts change and why" all provide interesting introductions to selected problems and tentative solutions in the sociology of the arts. I shall limit my discussion, for the sake of space, to Chapter Five, "Are artists born or made?"

In this chapter Zolberg addresses the issue of the social emergence/construction of the artist. In what ways can the artist's actions be seen to be socially conditioned? What is the relation between the artist and the rest of society? Do artists themselves fall into identifiable social categories? Zolberg offers a summary and critique of the work of both Howard Becker and Pierre Bourdieu in these respects. Her discussion of Howard Becker centers around his book Art Worlds in which he concludes, from personal participation in the microcosmic artworld, that artists can be categorized into four principle types: integrated professionals, mavericks, folk artists, and naif artists. Corresponding to these four general categories are what Becker refers to as art worlds--

social cohesions that are largely incommensurable. It is these separate worlds, through a dialectical relationship with the totality of individual artists, that socially condition the possibilities under which the individual artist functions. In sharp contrast to this "atomic" theory of the artworld and the artist's situation in that world, Pierre Bourdieu offers a more holistic account claiming that a proper sociology of the arts must include consideration of the macrostructure of society and the mutual relationship holding between the larger society, the individual artist, and the respective values created by each, subsequently altering the way that relationship is made manifest in the world.¹ And while Zolberg admits that both Becker and Bourdieu shed light on the production of art in society, "neither elaborates adequately the processes whereby individuals are drawn to be artists or to choose art as a career as opposed to other employment" (p. 129). In an attempt to determine this, she further notes that:

Scholarship on patronage, politics, and cultural policy indicates that the ideology, cultural policy and politics of different support structures have varying impacts on the kinds and styles of art created by artists, as well as on the artists themselves. Although these structures do not determine the creative process, they clarify how and why people are drawn to be artists, by what means they are selected, through what agents or agencies, the nature and trajectory of their career, what they create, and how they---sometimes---survive (p. 135).

Having said this, Zolberg then moves to a discussion of audiences and the social uses of art. The reader, however, approaches the discussion with a view to a conclusive determination of what it is that makes artists choose to be artists (a determination that the above-cited passage somehow seemed to promise). Such conclusions are, however, not forthcoming with regard to a coherent sociology of the artist and indeed, as the book as a whole will attest, with regard to the sociology of the arts in its entirety. Zolberg's constant shifting from one tentative solution to the other in the course of the book becomes quite frustrating. Her unexpressed desire for a synthesis of sociological theories of art is never appeased, and all she ever offers is a summary (with brief discussion and suggestions for

¹. Though Zolberg refers throughout the book to Bourdieu's notion of habitus, she never explicitly defines the term. This is especially required since Bourdieu's closest approximation to an explicit definition is not even very helpful: "The habitus, an objective relationship between two objectivities, enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation, the meaning of which is produced by the habitus through categories of perception and appreciation that are themselves produced by an observable social condition" (Bourdieu, 1984:101).
a future programme of sociological inquiry) of each position. And not only are the sociological theories she discusses never synthesized into a coherent social vision, but her primary objective—that of synthesizing sociological theories of art with "humanist" theories of art—is never even broached.

The reason why Zolberg cannot synthesize sociological theory and what she calls humanist theory (aside from the fact that she is never able to reconcile the various sociological theories of the arts themselves) is that her characterization of humanist theories of art is based on an ignorance of the literature. In the first chapter she characterizes the humanist (the art historian, literary critic, aesthetician) as one who glories in the mystery of art; regards the artist as a unique genius, unaffected by social surroundings; and generally disallows "externalist" factors such as politics, economics, or society to figure in to an account of artistic creation, dissemination, and especially evaluation. However, her characterization of the humanist, after a cursory glance at the literature of aesthetics, proves to be made of straw. (1) Though Zolberg does include the latest book by Arthur Danto in her bibliography, she does not include his seminal article, "The Artworld" (1978). A brief look at that article would suggest that aesthetician have been concerned with the social nature of art for at least twenty-five years. (2) George Dickie's institutional theory of art (1974) is never mentioned by Zolberg, nor is his work listed in her bibliography. The research programme Zolberg suggests seems to have been at least partially worked-out by Dickie in the mid-1970's (though his concluding theory is by no means incontestable). She would be wise to consult his work before beginning her own programme and perhaps reinventing the wheel. (3) A brief look at the evolution of the anthology by Margolis, Philosophy Looks at the Arts (1978), throughout its three editions since the mid-1960's would show quite clearly that many of the issues Zolberg mentions have been treated in-depth by philosophical aestheticians. (4) We may conclude that, since Zolberg cites only a single article from the Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism and does not cite any of the literature of the British Journal of Aesthetics, New Literary History, Empirical Studies In the Arts or the Journal of Art Education she is largely ignorant of what it is that art critics and aestheticians do. It is hard to see how she could ever attain a synthesis between sociological accounts of art and those of the humanists given such a neglect of the literature.

What is of lasting importance in Constructing A Sociology of the Arts is its concise and illuminating explanation of the various sociological problems regarding the arts and the theories proposed to account for the arts. Zolberg's topology serves to spur the beginning student of sociology to a deeper, more archaeological approach to the sociological study of the arts. One wants, upon completing the book, to go to the source, to read the original works from whence Zolberg illustrates sociological problems and their tentative solutions. But the grand synthesis of sociological theory, and of sociological theory with humanist theory, is lacking in the work and will have to wait for another day.

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