

> Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes and art between the wars

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Abstract

In 1931, John Maynard Keynes looked forward to quasi-utopian “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” speculating that, in a peaceful and prosperous future, artists would especially thrive. But by the late 1930s, Bloomsbury’s optimistic assumption that iterative, experimental change would foster art and the good life is put under increasing pressure by the threat of fascism. For both Keynes and Virginia Woolf, the idealism of Bloomsbury’s earlier decades becomes impossible to sustain in the shadow of the Second World War. As Woolf and Keynes affirm the value of art in the context of community, they develop increasingly different perspectives on public audiences, with lasting implications for modernism and arts policy.

Keywords: Bloomsbury. Art. Modernism. Keynes. Woolf.

Resumo

Em 1931, John Maynard Keynes ansiava pelas quase utópicas “Possibilidades econômicas para nossos netos”, especulando que, em um futuro pacífico e próspero, os artistas prosperariam especialmente. Mas, no final da década de 1930, a suposição otimista de Bloomsbury de que a mudança iterativa e experimental promoveria a arte e a vida boa é colocada sob crescente pressão pela ameaça do fascismo. Tanto para Keynes quanto para Virginia Woolf, o idealismo das primeiras décadas de Bloomsbury torna-se impossível de ser sustentado à sombra da Segunda Guerra Mundial. À medida que Woolf e Keynes afirmam o valor da arte no contexto da comunidade, eles desenvolvem perspectivas cada vez mais diferentes sobre o público, com implicações duradouras para o modernismo e a política de artes.

Palavras-chave: Bloomsbury. Arte. Modernismo. Keynes. Woolf.

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In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924), Virginia Woolf warns her readers that only a necessary “season of failures and fragments”¹ might enable the experimental development of modern fiction. In 1931, despite the Great Depression, John Maynard Keynes looks forward to quasi-utopian “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” speculating that most professions, including his own, might fade in a peaceful and prosperous future, but artists – “those who have to do with the singing”² – will especially thrive. Both texts rely upon an optimistic assumption that iterative, experimental change will foster both art and the “good life,” foundational values that Old Bloomsbury had adopted from Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore. However, by the late 1930s, Bloomsbury’s assumptions are put under increasing pressure in the context of fascism. Repeatedly addressing the role of art in the context of community and under the shadow of the Second World War, Woolf and Keynes develop increasingly different perspectives on audience, public performance, and arts policy.

In “My Early Beliefs” (1938), Keynes describes himself and his fellow Cambridge Apostles as “among the last of the Utopians (...) who believe in a continuing moral progress by virtue of which the human race already consists of reliable, rational, decent people”³. He warns Bloomsbury’s Memoir Club: “we carried the individualism of our individuals too far”⁴. Observing that Keynes’s assessment of Moore becomes more critical over time, Marina MacKay characterizes Keynes’s observation that the Apostles had believed in a “pseudo-rational view of human nature”⁵ as a “retraction”⁶. The consequences for Keynes went beyond his Memoir Club address, influencing his roles in patronage and policymaking in support of the arts. Keynes’s more pessimistic late epistemology and his conception of the role of public art diverge significantly from Woolf’s. For example, in Woolf’s posthumously published *Between the Acts* (1941), Miss La Trobe cannot single-handedly will her historical pageant narrative to cohere, as airplanes signaling a repetition of global war fly overhead. Still, Woolf scripts a moment of fortuitous, unpredictable intervention that saves a small English village’s communal but not propagandistic performance. Keynes, by contrast, turns away from the fortuitous, the unexpected, the experimental; he casts his

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, 1924, p. 22.

² John Maynard Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” 1972, p. 5.

³ John Maynard Keynes, “My Early Beliefs,” 1975, p. 95.

⁴ John Maynard Keynes, “My Early Beliefs,” 1975, p. 96 .

⁵ John Maynard Keynes, “My Early Beliefs,” 1975, p. 95.

⁶ Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, 2007, p. 67.

villagers as mass audience, spectators only, and not co-creators of a pageant's spectacle.

Keynes was, of course, always an active patron of the arts. He was a private collector; he frequently promoted plays, ballets and art exhibitions in *The Nation and Athanaeum* and *The New Statesman*, sometimes writing anonymously; he founded and built the Arts Theatre of Cambridge, and beginning in the 1930s he took on an increasing number of institutional roles connected with the arts. For example, he was treasurer of the Camargo Ballet Society from 1931-35, a Trustee of the National Gallery beginning in 1941, and, most influentially, from early in 1942 he became Chairman of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), which in 1945 became the Arts Council of Great Britain. As Patricia Laurence has observed,

Generally, critics will demonstrate Keynes's commitment to the national arts by citing his projects at the end of his life, but the notion of the 'enlargement of knowledge' was in the air in Bloomsbury and among Cambridge friends from the beginning of his career.⁷

In May 1936, J.R. Ackerley of the BBC asked Keynes to write an introductory article for a series to be published in the BBC's periodical, *The Listener*, under the title of "Art and the State." As Ackerley described it, the purpose of this collection was to "form a kind of inquiry into the condition of modern art at home and abroad in relation to the social crisis"⁸ – by which he meant the rise of fascism. As he explained, he was attempting to get writers from Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union "to give an account of what art is doing under their various political regimes; what its object is under Fascism, Nazism and Communism, and what are its achievements – what, in short, is, or should be, in their view, the relationship between art and the state"⁹. Keynes agreed that this was a fascinating subject and in his reply to Ackerley, dated May 28, 1936, he confirmed his scope would include the performing arts. Keynes proposed a focus for his introduction, writing, in somewhat startling language for Bloomsbury: "The failure of the nineteenth-century democracies to maintain the grandeur and dignity of the state is, in my judgment, one at least of the seeds of their decay; and what I should offer would be a development of that theme"¹⁰.

⁷ Patricia Laurence, "The Intimate Spaces of Community: John Maynard Keynes and the Arts," 2007, p. 301.

⁸ John Maynard Keynes, "Art and the State," p. 335.

⁹ John Maynard Keynes, "Art and the State," p. 335.

¹⁰ John Maynard Keynes, "Art and the State," p. 336.

Ackerley replied that this would be “exceedingly welcome”¹¹, noting that he had also received acceptances from chief Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels’s new Director of Culture, Hans Hinkel, as well as contributors from France and the Soviet Union. Keynes’s piece was published in August 1936 under the title, “Art and the State.” With the political context of fascism clearly in mind, Keynes opens his contribution to *The Listener* with his observation that the public needs “circuses as well as bread”¹². He goes on to emphasize:

Even more important than the permanent monuments of dignity and beauty in which each generation should express its spirit to stand for it in the procession of time are the ephemeral ceremonies, shows and entertainments in which the common man can take his delight and recreation after his work is done, and which can make him feel, as nothing else can, that he is one with, and part of, a community, finer, more gifted, more splendid, more care-free than he can be by himself.¹³

Reflecting on how the state might support such public spectacles, Keynes asks rhetorically: “Are there any of us who are free from strong emotion when an occasion arises for all the people dwelling in one place to join together in a celebration, an expression of common feeling, even the mere sharing in common of a simple pleasure?”¹⁴. He posits that providing “proper opportunities” for this kind of communal experience of spectatorship “should rank high in the arts of government”¹⁵. And, with an eye to the Continent, he remarks,

The revival of attention to these things is, I believe, a source of strength to the authoritarian states of Russia, Germany, and Italy, and a genuine gain to them, just as the lack of it is a source of weakness to the democratic societies of France, the United States, and Great Britain.¹⁶

Keynes’s language in “Art and the State” clearly has the potential to be disturbing. He does acknowledge the risk of this kind of public performance or spectacle: “In so far as it is an aspect – and it partly is – of an aggressive racial or national spirit, it is dangerous”¹⁷. But, he concludes, “it may prove in some measure an alternative means of satisfying the human need for solidarity”¹⁸.

Here, we can usefully contrast Woolf’s village pageant, and her characterization of Miss La Trobe in *Between the Acts*. Reading these two Bloomsbury texts together foregrounds their differences. Miss La Trobe begins

¹¹ John Maynard Keynes, “Art and the State,” p. 336.

¹² John Maynard Keynes, “Art and the State,” p. 341.

¹³ John Maynard Keynes, “Art and the State,” p. 344.

¹⁴ John Maynard Keynes, “Art and the State,” p. 346.

¹⁵ John Maynard Keynes, “Art and the State,” p. 346.

¹⁶ John Maynard Keynes, “Art and the State,” p. 347.

¹⁷ John Maynard Keynes, “Art and the State,” p. 347.

¹⁸ John Maynard Keynes, “Art and the State,” p. 347.

with a Keynesian kind of project as playwright and director of her pageant, seeking to represent “great” moments of English history while the audience watches passively. But it doesn’t work. She can’t impose on her audience a uniform experience of what Keynes in his letter to the BBC’s Ackerley had characterized as “the grandeur and dignity of the state.” The performance does not cohere, and her audience resists La Trobe’s efforts. As Michele Pridmore-Brown characterizes it, La Trobe initially tries to turn the villagers into a uniform “crowd” or “herd”¹⁹ that thinks, feels and acts in unison. She uses a gramophone, attempting to invoke the kind of quasi-fascistic “strong emotion” and “common feeling” that Keynes had found “a source of strength” in “Art and the State.” The audience’s reaction, as Woolf shows, isn’t positive: “We aren’t free, each one of them felt separately, to feel or think separately, nor yet to fall asleep. We’re too close, but not close enough. So they fidgeted”.²⁰

Woolf scholar Steven D. Putzel notes that “all studies of *Between the Acts* acknowledge Woolf’s interest in theater”.²¹ In contrast to how Keynes envisions the spectator’s ideal experience in *The Listener*, Woolf usually maintained a degree of critical distance from the spectacles she viewed on a London or Cambridge stage, including those that Keynes sponsored: “Even when she attended a performance (...) she saw herself as a double audience; she remained an audience of one reading between the acts, even as the performance unfolded before her”.²² As early as 1918, Woolf reflects in her diaries: “What a queer fate it is – always to be the spectator of the public, never part of it”²³ (D 1 222 – 30 Nov 1918).

As Putzel observes, Woolf recognized that “theatrical space is to a large extent defined by the reception and response of the audience”.²⁴ Theater director and scholar of performance Herbert Blau cites *Between the Acts* in his study of reception theory, noting that “If the audience is not altogether an absence, it is by no means a reliable presence”.²⁵ Performance theorist Richard Schechner has also analyzed and sometimes conflated the lines between theater and ritual performance, emphasizing the audience’s affect. He labels ritual performance as “efficacy” and theatrical performance as “entertainment,” but recognizes that an

¹⁹ Michele Pridmore-Brown. “1939-40: Of Virginia Woolf, Gramophones, and Fascism.”, 1998, p. 411.

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1941, p. 60.

²¹ Steven D. Putzel, *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*, 2012, p. xiii.

²² Steven D. Putzel, *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*, 2012, p. 109.

²³ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1977-1984.

²⁴ Steven D. Putzel, *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*, 2012, p. 110.

²⁵ Herbert Blau, *The Audience*, 1990, p. 1.

audience's experience of theatrical spectacles may fall on a continuum between the two.²⁶ As Schechner theorizes: "The more entertaining the performance—the better the music, the louder the laughter, the more energetic the dancing—the more it possesses the audience and involves them in a dangerous, ritual-like collective creativity".²⁷

While asserting that "Woolf's influence overall may well have been significant in forming Keynes's worldview"²⁸, economic historian Craufurd Goodwin also acknowledges their disagreement – in particular, around pageantry – concerning Woolf's 1938 feminist economic polemic, *Three Guineas*. As Goodwin speculates:

"She enraged her critics, including Maynard, by illustrating *Three Guineas* with photographs showing the absurd regalia worn by a general, heralds, a university procession, a judge, and an archbishop (...) Maynard might have sensed that this touch was aimed directly at him".²⁹

Here, Goodwin draws a contrast between Woolf's spoofing of pomp and circumstance in the photographs for *Three Guineas* and Keynes's call in "Art and the State" for "more public shows and ceremonies' like the late King's Jubilee for which he believed there was a public craving. 'Are we convinced that this emotion is barbaric, childish, or bad?'"³⁰

Both Virginia and Leonard Woolf – who published three books in the 1930s that argued for the essential role of rationality in political and economic systems: *After the Deluge* (1931), *Quack, Quack* (1935) and *Barbarians at the Gate* (1938) – were early and increasingly inclined to such skepticism. Leonard Woolf, in particular, recognized a dangerous potential in political pageantry that played on a mass audience's emotions, making his critique of such unreason central to his satire of contemporaneous "public shows and ceremonies" in *Quack, Quack* (1935). The Woolfs recognized the rising threat from fascism in the 1930s with more alacrity than most of Bloomsbury, including Keynes. Indeed, as Putzel has noted, Virginia Woolf's polemic *Three Guineas* "calls for a kind of anti-pageant, an undermining of the pageant of the patriarchal empire".³¹

²⁶ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 1988, p. 130.

²⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 1988, p. 131.

²⁸ Craufurd Goodwin. "Maynard and Virginia: A Personal and Professional Friendship," 2007, p. 271.

²⁹ Craufurd Goodwin. "Maynard and Virginia: A Personal and Professional Friendship," 2007, p. 277-78.

³⁰ John Maynard Keynes, "Art and the State," p. 346 in Craufurd Goodwin, "Maynard and Virginia: A Personal and Professional Friendship," 2007, p. 278.

³¹ Steven D. Putzel, *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*, 2012, p. 144.

Similarly, Keynes's mass audience subsumed by a "common feeling" in "Art and the State" contrasts with the villagers of *Between the Acts*, for whom "[e]ach of course saw something different"³².

Miss La Trobe saves her pageant in *Between the Acts* only when she opens the spectacle to chance and non-didactic, genuinely democratic, audience participation. She turns mirrors on the crowd, and they recover their individual agency in at least a fleeting epiphany of authentic community. There is no place for propaganda in the collective moment of artistic creation that follows. From a director's willed effort that tried and failed to center great figures from British history, it becomes an artistic and social experience where the audience recognizes their own participatory roles, seeing themselves reflected in multiple mirrors held by the actors, connecting them in multiple ways, as both actors and audience, as both individuals and community. As Megan Fairbairn has recently observed, Miss La Trobe's arc in *Between the Acts* reflects "the artist's desire to impart the vision onto the audience, while also showing the impossibility of forming one homogenous understanding"³³. The regional village pageant succeeds, finally, when it moves away from Keynes's vision of state-supported art. Roles are equalized, even reversed; the ordinary and everyday are foregrounded as the audience focuses on a confused villager, on a little girl as big England. Melba Cuddy-Keane emphasizes that here Woolf's pageant "undermines all definitions of a group as a centered, unified identity and rewrites the concept of community as a fragmented, questioning, contradictory, but fully collective voice"³⁴. The audience is not propagandized, but is free to co-create and then disperse as individuals, while retaining their sense of community. As the gramophone sings, "Dispersed are we; who have come together (...) But (...) let us retain whatever made that harmony," the audience replies: "O let us (...) keep together. For there is joy, sweet joy, in company"³⁵.

Only months after *Between the Acts* was posthumously published by Leonard Woolf, Keynes became Chairman of CEMA, the forerunner of the Arts Council. Now involved deeply in the arts on a national scale, he published an article in 1943, titled "The Arts in War-Time." Here, Keynes acknowledges that CEMA, funded by the British Treasury, was structured with "an undefined

³² Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1941, p. 213.

³³ Megan Fairbairn, "Toward Multiplicity and (Comm)unity: Conditions of Art, Artist, and Audience in Woolf's *Between the Acts*," 2021, p. 42.

³⁴ Melba Cuddy-Keane. "The Politics of Comic Modes in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*," 1990, p. 280.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 1941, p. 176-177.

independence, an anomalous constitution and no fixed rules”³⁶. In other words, Keynes had a great deal of room for experimentation and autonomy in the projects he might choose to support, since the council’s “arm’s length” structure was designed to distance its artistic beneficiaries from the politicians and bureaucrats who funded their work. In practice, however, and with real contrast from his earlier experiments with Roger Fry and the London Artists Association – a cooperative that supported emerging artists from 1925 to 1933 by guaranteeing them a modest annual income if their paintings did not sell – Keynes emphasizes an educational aim for the British public in language that echoes rather closely Matthew Arnold. As he described CEMA’s purpose, his council intended to

seek, and increasingly, to aid all those who pursue the highest standards of original composition and executive performance in all branches of the arts and to carry their work throughout the country, and to accustom the great new audiences which are springing up to expect and approve the best³⁷.

Anna Rosser Upchurch has identified Keynes’s “underlying assumptions” about who would administer CEMA’s policies and which artists and audiences would benefit from governmental funding:

This policy preference very intentionally favours 'the exceptional and the aspiring' and reflects his belief that an intellectual elite should demonstrate ways of living and organizing social conditions that accomplished human progress without diminishing individual liberty”³⁸.

Here, Keynes’s approach resonates rather strikingly with the longstanding didactic aims of art critic and fellow Bloomsbury member Clive Bell, although Keynes and Bell held significantly different views about the value of governmental support for the arts. Bell had asserted in his much-criticized book, *Civilization* (1928): “in civilized ages there will be a sensitive and cultivated public, in sympathy with the artist, and disposed to allow him to know best what is best for himself”³⁹. Bell’s language is reminiscent of Keynes’s writings on the value of the public arts, and has a common origin; as Craufurd Goodwin has noted, both Keynes and Bell were strongly influenced by Roger Fry’s aesthetic theories, including Fry’s views about the importance of making the “imaginative life” available to the public at large⁴⁰.

³⁶ John Maynard Keynes, “The Arts in War-Time,” 1982, p. 360.

³⁷ John Maynard Keynes, “The Arts in War-Time,” 1982, p. 360-361.

³⁸ Anna Rosser Upchurch. “Keynes’s legacy: an intellectual’s influence reflected in arts policy,” 2011, p. 74.

³⁹ Clive Bell, *Civilization*, 1947, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Craufurd Goodwin, “The art of an ethical life: Keynes and Bloomsbury,” 2006, p. 217-236.

However, Bell took issue with Keynes's vision in "Art and the State," titling his counterargument "The Failure of State Art," and claiming that the public support for the arts that Keynes envisioned in the late 1930s was likely to prove destructive. Mark Hussey has recently analyzed the contradictions and complexities in Bell's evolving thinking about arts policy, including Bell's involvement in Keynes's development of institutional support for the public arts from the late 1930s through the Second World War. As Hussey characterizes Bell's longstanding view: "To put art at the service of patriotism was as meaningless as calling for a patriotic mathematics"⁴¹. Nonetheless, Bell participated extensively in Keynes's official efforts to foster art and artists with CEMA and the Arts Council. Bell advocated for a "Ministry of Arts" after conversation with Keynes.⁴² Bell also joined the government's fine arts advisory committee, where he "used his British Council position to continue to disseminate his version of England's art history"⁴³, even as he continued "to rail...about the encouragement of mediocrity engendered by government subsidies for the arts"⁴⁴.

In July 1945, in an article published in *The Listener*, titled "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes," Keynes reflected on CEMA's expanding mission: "At the start our aim was to replace what war had taken away; but we soon found that we were providing what had never existed even in peace time"⁴⁵. He acknowledges, on the one hand, a role for regional artistic experimentation: "How satisfactory it would be if different parts of this country would again walk their several ways as they once did and learn to develop something different from their neighbors and characteristic of themselves"⁴⁶. But Keynes also highlights his goals "to make London a great artistic metropolis, a place to visit and to wonder at"⁴⁷ and

to create an environment, to breed a spirit, to cultivate an opinion, to offer a stimulus to such purpose that the artist and the public can each sustain and live on the other in that union which has occasionally existed in the past at the great ages of a communal civilised life⁴⁸.

Keynes's foundational assumptions about arts policy – influenced by Roger Fry, and perhaps increasingly by Bell after Fry's death in 1934 -- had

⁴¹ Mark Hussey, *Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism*, 2021, p. 165.

⁴² Mark Hussey, *Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism*, 2021, p. 410, 430.

⁴³ Mark Hussey, *Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism*, 2021, p.430.

⁴⁴ Mark Hussey, *Clive Bell and the Making of Modernism*, 2021, p. 450.

⁴⁵ John Maynard Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes," 1982, p. 367.

⁴⁶ John Maynard Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes," 1982, p. 371.

⁴⁷ John Maynard Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes," 1982, p. 371.

⁴⁸ John Maynard Keynes, "The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes," 1982, p. 372.

several implications. Keynes did indeed seek to open up artistic experiences to all who were interested, not limiting his focus to traditional London and Cambridge audiences. CEMA and the Arts Council did break new ground by significantly extending opportunities for spectatorship to all regions in Britain. But in practice Keynes's arm's length organizational structures tended to support artistic projects that were more canonically didactic, less experimental, and more London-centric than otherwise. As Upchurch describes, the "arm's length" model was "never completely independent" and thus "led logically to funding preferences for institutions and arts forms associated with the established standards of high culture located in the metropolitan centre, London"⁴⁹. As economic historian Donald E. Moggridge acknowledges, "Despite the apparent emphasis on decentralization in much of what Keynes wrote, there was also a natural London-centeredness"⁵⁰ (551). An arm's length model was intended to facilitate "lightness of touch"⁵¹, but Keynes "was more process-oriented than some critics would have liked" and "to some extent imposed his preferences"⁵².

Aiming to extend public access to the arts in Britain's regions, Keynes "planned for Scottish theaters in Glasgow, Welsh performing arts centers, and local open houses throughout the country, featuring local playwrights, actors, dancers, and musicians wherever possible"⁵³. But there were recurring tensions. Susan Galloway and Huw David Jones note that most analyses of the Arts Council's early years have viewed the tensions between core and periphery in terms of the relationship between the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) and the English regions.⁵⁴ Focusing on the somewhat more autonomous history of the Scottish Arts Council – which began in 1942 as the Scottish Committee of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, and was succeeded in 1947 by the Scottish Committee of the Arts Council of Great Britain – they find that the Scottish Arts Council's "autonomy was tested in conflicts involving both ACGB and government over Scottish arts policy from the 1940s onward"⁵⁵, although its "double arm's length" structure, which existed from 1947 until Scottish devolution in 1999, was beneficial, allowing "Scotland the freedom to develop the

⁴⁹ Anna Rosser Upchurch. "Keynes's legacy: an intellectual's influence reflected in arts policy," 2011, p. 78.

⁵⁰ Donald E. Moggridge, "Keynes, the Arts, and the State," 2005, p. 551.

⁵¹ Donald E. Moggridge, "Keynes, the Arts, and the State," 2005, p. 551.

⁵² Donald E. Moggridge, "Keynes, the Arts, and the State," 2005, p. 551, 552.

⁵³ Zachary D Carter, *The Price of Peace: Money, Democracy, and the Life of John Maynard Keynes*, 2020, p. 366.

⁵⁴ Susan Galloway and Huw David Jones. "The Scottish dimension of British arts government: a historical perspective," 2010, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Susan Galloway and Huw David Jones. "The Scottish dimension of British arts government: a historical perspective," 2010, p. 28.

arts in different ways to the rest of Britain”⁵⁶. However, this relative autonomy was achieved only by protest and after Keynes died in 1946, and it did not last after devolution; meanwhile, the regions of England never enjoyed the same degree of autonomy.⁵⁷

On the one hand, Keynes’s model for an arm’s length organization in support of the public arts proved “exemplary”⁵⁸; Keynes’s Arts Council became a model in the mid-twentieth century for several other semi-autonomous governmental bodies charged with public support of the arts. Keynes’s dedication and achievement in support of the arts, during a time of grave wartime crisis and despite his own seriously worsening health in the 1940s, were extraordinary. But the legacy of his arts policy and patronage in the 1940s is also open to critical analysis, all the more so for the Arts Council’s role as a mid-century model for several other national arts organizations of major and continuing cultural influence. Following the establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1945, these included the Canada Council for the Encouragement of the Arts, established in 1957; the New Zealand Arts Council, established in 1963; the Australia Council for the Arts, established in 1975; and the National Endowment for the Arts, established in 1965 as an executive agency in the United States.

All of these arts councils were designed as arm’s length agencies, although with some structural differences and varying degrees of actual political independence (for example, the NEA’s budget is set through the federal Office of Management and Budget, so the NEA has incurred more frequent legislative scrutiny than arts councils in Commonwealth countries). As Upchurch notes, beginning in the 1970s: “Many analysts and commentators over the past 50 years have pointed out the limitations of this system on access and equity and pushed for reform”⁵⁹. Eleonora Belfiore has found a persisting legacy in twenty-first century arts policy debates that is traceable to the history of CEMA and the Arts Council, including their hierarchies of cultural value.⁶⁰ Upchurch, examining contemporary arts policy and funding debates in a global context, has concluded

⁵⁶ Susan Galloway and Huw David Jones. “The Scottish dimension of British arts government: a historical perspective,” 2010, p. 28.

⁵⁷ Susan Galloway and Huw David Jones. “The Scottish dimension of British arts government: a historical perspective,” 2010, p. 29.

⁵⁸ Patricia Laurence, “The Intimate Spaces of Community: John Maynard Keynes and the Arts,” 2007, p. 311.

⁵⁹ Anna Rosser Upchurch. “Keynes’s legacy: an intellectual’s influence reflected in arts policy,” 2011, p. 78.

⁶⁰ Eleonora Belfiore, “From CEMA to the Arts Council: Cultural Authority, Participation and the Question of ‘Value’ in Early Post-war Britain,” 2019, p. 67.

that current inequities are traceable to the earliest “arm’s length” models.⁶¹ With respect to these larger stakes, we might contrast this political and cultural legacy of CEMA and Keynes’s Arts Council with Woolf’s championing of continuing experimentation by anti-hierarchical “outsiders” in *Three Guineas* and her anti-propagandistic pageant in *Between the Acts*. Implicitly in conversation with Keynes and Bell, Woolf prioritizes continuing artistic experimentation over official fine arts committees in *Three Guineas*: “Do not have museums and libraries with chained books and first editions under glass. Let the pictures and the books be new and always changing”⁶².

Indeed, considering Keynes’s writings on performance and arts policy, we can locate a late 1930s epistemological dividing point between Keynes and Woolf. This happens not when Keynes first foretells the likelihood of a repetition of war but leaves open the possibility that it might be averted, in his 1919 polemic, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, but in the mid-to-late 1930s, as the optimism that uncertainty had allowed Bloomsbury gives way to a recognition of grim inevitability with the rise of fascism. For both Woolf and Keynes in post World War One Bloomsbury, history becomes an act of narration that acknowledges uncertainty and subjectivity, in an effort to avert the repetition of war. But, by the mid-to-late 1930s, Woolf, confronting the inevitability of England’s involvement in a repetition of global war in the context of fascism, responds differently from Keynes. History is an essential element in Woolf’s novels, including *The Years* and *Between the Acts*, and in her nonfiction polemics, *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*. In a 1933 diary entry about the drafting of *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, she puts history first, recording that her goal for the combined earlier version, *The Pargiters*, was to “give the whole of the present society”, encompassing “history, politics, feminism, art, literature – in short a summing up of all I know, feel, laugh at, despise, like admire hate & so on”⁶³. But also, throughout her later writings, Woolf continues to repeatedly foreground contradiction, complexity and linguistic vagueness.

Keynes charts a different course from the late 1930s. Economic historians Nahid Aslanbeigui and Guy Oakes have observed that Keynes initially regarded his groundbreaking treatise, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), “as a work in progress subject to further clarification and

⁶¹ Anna Rosser Upchurch, *The Origins of the Arts Council Movement: Philanthropy and Policy (New Directions in Cultural Policy Research)*, 2016.

⁶² Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 1938, 49-50.

⁶³ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1977-1984, p. 151.

revision”⁶⁴, and he considered his macroeconomic “revolution...as a process of continuous reconsideration, revision, and renovation”, one that mandated “theoretical flexibility”⁶⁵. Almost immediately, however, Keynes’s junior colleagues at Cambridge began to formalize and mathematicize the General Theory, and they necessarily altered it to some degree in the process, in order to make it more palatable as a policy tool. As Keynes’s biographer Robert Skidelsky puts it:

Just as there was a theory embedded in the vision, so there was a model embedded in the theory. Keynes often said he preferred to be vaguely right than precisely wrong; but like all economists he was prone to the fallacy of misplaced precision. Above all, he wanted to influence policy.⁶⁶

As Cambridge economist Joan Robinson characterized the progression toward formalization, while herself contributing to its development, this was “bastard Keynesianism”⁶⁷. It was probably also the only available pragmatic alternative if Keynesianism was to become securely institutionalized as a framework for governmental policy initiatives. We can see the effectiveness but also the cost of Keynes’s pragmatism in this shift, even as we can see parallels in his decisions as patron and administrator of the arts in his work with CEMA and the Arts Council of Great Britain – dedicated to achieving great art and culture for everyone, but in a more institutionalized and fixed manner, with less of a role for experimentation, debate, or community involvement in any role other than spectatorship, than earlier Bloomsbury had welcomed.

Reading Keynes’s “Art and the State” and Woolf’s *Between the Acts* in conversation is especially useful for illuminating this late 1930s divergence between two key Bloomsbury writers and thinkers. Keynes, like Woolf, writes about pageants in the shadow of fascism, but in “Art and the State,” we see significant contrasts with Woolf’s vision of that communal art. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf had critiqued the professions, with their great men, their processions and parades, as structures that valorize hierarchy and foster the repetition of war. Keynes resists Woolf’s critique, yet, despite his recantation of Moore’s idealism, he defends “an art derived from the order and pattern of life among

⁶⁴ Nahid Aslanbeigui and Guy Oakes, *The Provocative Joan Robinson: The Making of a Cambridge Economist*, 2009, p. 223.

⁶⁵ Nahid Aslanbeigui and Guy Oakes, *The Provocative Joan Robinson: The Making of a Cambridge Economist*, 2009, p. 224.

⁶⁶ Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes. Vol. II: The Economist as Savior, 1920-1937*, 1992, Voll II, p. 546.

⁶⁷ Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes. Vol. II: The Economist as Savior, 1920-1937*, 1992, Voll II, p. 621.

communities”⁶⁸. For Woolf, the community’s role – that is, the everyday, anonymous individual’s role not only as observer but as participant and co-creator of the village pageant – remains crucial. Miss La Trobe’s too-didactic “failures and fragments” succeed when, and only when, they become a means to this end. For Keynes, however, the audience’s autonomy is increasingly subordinated to pragmatic ends under the extreme pressures of the late 1930s and the Second World War.

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⁶⁸ Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*, 2007, p. 68.

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