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Entitled: Discriminating Tastes and the Expansion of the Arts

by Jennifer C. Lena, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2019, 256pp., £25.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780691158914

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Note

1. The VBK is an institution of the GDR that managed to maintain its structure but changed the remit of its scope, from major work contractor to lobbying body. The KSK is by contrast a West German institution that was then extended to the states of the former GDR.

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Entitled: Discriminating Tastes and the Expansion of the Arts, by Jennifer C. Lena, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2019, 256pp., £25.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9780691158914

'Nothing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works'. (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 40)

The structures of social inequality in the spheres of cultural production and consumption have been a long-standing concern for sociologists of culture. At the core of many of such debates is the question of how we come to recognise certain cultural works and producers as legitimate – as *art* and *artists* – while others are excluded from such processes of sacralisation. What makes it into the canon, who has the authority to make such decisions and how do these processes relate to patterns of social stratification and elite reproduction? Those questions guide Jennifer Lena's new book *Entitled* in which she traces how American art as a tradition emerged and expanded over a period of almost 200 years during which it progressively shifted away from European highbrow culture towards the inclusion of various popular, vernacular and folk forms. Yet, this is not merely a book about changes in the American artistic field or in the cultural tastes of Americans but, as Lena foregrounds, "[a]t the heart of this book is a question about American elites: How did they become sophisticated cosmopolitans while maintaining the myth of equal access to opportunity?" (Lena 2019; p. viii). As emphasised by Lena, and indeed documented by a wide range of contemporary scholarship (see e.g. Bennett et al., 2009; Chan, 2019; Coulangeon & Lemel, 2007; DiMaggio & Mukthar, 2004; Friedman et al., 2015), the cultural tastes of elites in the US and elsewhere have moved from an exclusive focus on overt highbrow snobbery to a wider appreciation of an increasingly eclectic set of artistic forms and genres.

However, while this trend towards cultural omnivorousness might be seen as a sign of cultural and social openness, Lena emphatically complicates this view and stresses that "elites are still *elite*—they still have and display sophisticated tastes" (p. ix; emphasis in the original). To some extent, the book seems to spring out of the author's tiredness of cultural sociological research that has merely focused on mapping the widening of cultural tastes of different social groups rather than linking these insights to a rigorous study of social reproduction: "These scholars", says Lena (p. 133), "neglected the original definition of omnivorousness, which indicated a mastery of prestigious culture combined with a taste for some forms of popular culture", masking persistent inequalities of cultural access in favour of elite privilege. Lena furthermore calls attention to the methodological limits of such studies as being based

on national surveys of cultural consumption behaviour that make use of unspecific and generic genre classifications. Consequently, they would fail to account for legitimacy struggles and differentiations of taste in the respective cultural fields themselves, being blind to the institutional and organisational parameters that inform such dynamics.

Lena sets out to bridge these scholarly concerns, re-staging the question of “what is art” as a site of social boundary-drawing and power struggles. To that end, she develops a “theory of artistic legitimation” (p. ix) based on a rich study of institutional and organisational changes in multiple artistic fields that have undergone a transformation from vernacular culture into art. While the tone of writing is generally rather agnostic, there is a clear political momentum to Lena’s work. Embedded in critical scholarship that deconstructs processes of aesthetic value-making as manifestations of classed, raced and gendered inequality, Lena records how disputes around artistic legitimation across cultural fields have been continuously shaped by two battling forces: cultural openness on the one hand and social closure on the other. Despite the rich detail with which she discusses her diverse case studies, Lena manages to never lose sight of this overarching narrative (which makes some repetitive moments in the book easily forgivable). The depth and breadth of Lena’s work are impressive: combining statistics, comparative historical research and cultural studies approaches, she not only rigorously works through a wide scope of cultural forms (from opera, ballet and jazz to tap dance, graphic novels and tattooing, among others) but also covers an impressively wide temporal ground (her case studies range from the 19th century to the 2000s).

In Chapter 1, the author discusses “the invention of ‘the arts’ in America” (p. x) between 1825 and 1945, zooming into the different phases of legitimation which turned previously popular forms of culture from symphonic music to modern dance into forms of artistic appreciation. A crucial part was played in this development by the profound changes in funding structures, away from the commercial sphere and towards the patronage of wealthy entrepreneurs. Citing Paul DiMaggio (1991, p. 44), Lena explains that “[e]ach of these was a form of commercial culture, so they all had to free themselves from the ‘grip of the market place’ to “make credible the professions of ‘disinterestedness’ on which claims to high cultural status ride” (p. 6). This important focus on the role of funding continues throughout the book: in Chapters 2 and 5, Lena elaborates how the increase of state subsidies provided by the New Deal and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) “accelerated the pace of artistic legitimation and widened its path” (p. 25). This was accompanied by an increasingly rationalised and professionalised arts administration which promoted the inclusion of many forms of vernacular, regional and non-Western culture into the ranks of art. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the role of reputational entrepreneurs, using the example of Nelson Rockefeller and the establishment of the Met’s primitive art collection as a case study. In Chapter 4, Lena convincingly situates the legitimation efforts in the respective artistic fields within a broader analysis of what she calls “opportunity structures” (p. 70); namely, overarching economic, political, legal and technological developments shaping US society and its arts sector.

In Chapter 6, Lena turns to the inevitable and essential issue of cultural appropriation. Framing the chapter through a debate between aestheticisation as a form of appreciation or “as a kind of symbolic violence” (p. 113), she looks into several case studies where elite entrepreneurs and art institutions have co-opted “other cultures” in the name of cosmopolitan openness. For Lena, the process of re-packaging the cultural work of poor people (see the example of “slumming”), immigrant communities (see the “Chinatown Plaid” example) or non-Western societies (see the “Monet’s Kimono” protests) in easily accessible and digestible consumption products that “balance ease and exoticism” (p. 130) only re-emphasises the privilege of cosmopolitan elites as taste-making authorities. As in the preceding chapters, Lena’s empirical breadth and critical nuance make for an excellent analysis. Although she again persuasively

embeds a study of cultural representation with a critical account of wider institutional and organisational arrangements, the chapter left me wanting a bit more theoretical development. I would have been especially interested in a more elaborated connection of the politics of representation and the politics of production which could have provided an important analytical expansion of the cultural appropriation debate. Lena does allude to this in her discussion of the Kimono controversy at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts but then moves onto her next case study rather than exploring the potential theoretical implications further.

Lena draws her key arguments and empirical insights together in Chapter 7, in which she also outlines promising trajectories for future research and policymaking. Despite the cultural multifacetedness of American art today, she concludes that “[t]he impact of a network of wealthy, white, and educated Americans on definitions of art is remarkably strong, particularly in a context where arts advocates are at pains to celebrate vernacular culture” (p. 149). She thus urges scholars to take the concept of omnivorousness seriously as a call for a closer interrogation of the specific organisational parameters that inform “the mechanisms of omnivorousness (however we define it)” (p. 137). With regards to arts participation in the US, she reaffirms the centrality of state funding to facilitate a more diverse cultural sector and argues that “artistic producers are better off under high public support systems than market-dominated ones” (p. 156). Young people from non-elite backgrounds may especially “depend upon these [public] delivery systems to develop a love of the arts and an understanding of other cultures” (p. 156).


In times of escalating socioeconomic inequality and the simultaneous re-emergence of private money as a key facet of contemporary arts sponsorship, Lena’s concluding remarks cannot be overstated. All in all, *Entitled* is a well-researched and politically urgent intervention into contemporary cultural sociology, not only in the US. As such, the book presents an insightful read for scholars and students concerned with the links between cultural practice and social inequality as well as for cultural practitioners and policymakers committed to a more equitable arts sector.

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