Taking elite culture seriously

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ABSTRACT
In this article, Larsen argues that social scientists seeking to understand elite culture need to move beyond simply investigating the correlations between social status and cultural consumption. Instead, one must seek to understand why specific forms of expressive culture is perceived as particularly meaningful by high status groups, irrespective of the social benefits such knowledge may or may not provide in society. Only by taking elite culture seriously as a culture in itself, will social scientists be able to understand the meanings of elite culture.

Sociologists studying elite culture have for the most part been interested in the correlations between social status and patterns of cultural consumption and activities. The social stratification of cultural consumption has also been important for cultural policy scholars when evaluating the success of cultural policies as a vehicle for the democratization of culture (Mangset & Hylland, 2017). One important aspect that is missing from these kind of studies is a deep analysis of the reasons why high status groups find specific forms of expressive culture to be particularly meaningful. If we want to achieve a rich understanding of the meanings that elite culture have for participating actors, we need to take it seriously as a culture in itself, irrespective of the social benefits particular kinds of knowledge may or may not provide in society.

Specific forms of art music, the performing arts, and the visual arts are commonly perceived as quintessential symbols of elite culture, with opera being the most expensive of all art forms, in terms of the budget of opera houses vis-à-vis other arts organizations (Bereson, 2002). Even though sociologists of culture have documented that the elite’s taste is omnivore rather than snobbish (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Peterson, 1992; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992), and cultural theorists have for a long time been arguing that the high culture—popular culture divide is becoming less prevalent (i.e. Lash, 1990; Bauman, 1992; Featherstone, 2007), opera, dance, symphonic music, and the visual arts still functions in popular culture as a metonym for snobbish elite taste. Furthermore, most sociologist of culture (Khan, 2012), as well as lay persons (Schwarz, 2016), rely on a Bourdieusian (Bourdieu, 1984) framework when evaluating taste. This means that one has a
Premise that a social actor’s knowledge of and hermeneutical skills for understanding the high arts provides benefits in society, vis-à-vis persons with less knowledge and weaker hermeneutical skills. However, if we are to understand the meanings of art as elite culture in the 21st century, we must move beyond such limited approaches reducing elite culture to merely a cultural capital.1

Social scientists engaging in historical analysis of elite culture have also treated cultural consumption and high culture institutionalization as a distinction game and an elite power activity (Ahlquist, 1997; Bourdieu, 1984, 1993; DiMaggio, 1982, 1992; Johnson, 1995; Levine, 1988; McConachie, 1998; Santoro, 2010; Storey, 2006). These studies might be accurate in a historical sense, but if we are to take elite culture seriously when studying contemporary arts organizations, we need to have a more open approach and treat the high arts as a culture in itself, deserving of serious scholarly attention from social scientists. This entails studying the life at these organizations, and how elite culture is practiced by management and employees, as well as artists and audiences. This does not mean that we are losing our critical distance, in that we are all aware that most of these actors are part of the elite, thus the labeling of it as elite culture. Nevertheless, a fruitful analytical approach to studying contemporary opera houses, symphony halls, dance theatres, or art museums does not reduce these arenas to merely being a cite for power struggles in artistic (Bourdieu, 1996) or organizational (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) fields, or to be places where the elite engages in practices to uphold their own status in society, irrespective of this being a conscious strategy or not (DiMaggio, 1992; Bourdieu, 1984). Rather, we must take the culture of the high arts seriously as a meaningful activity in itself (Benzecry, 2011; Benzecry & Collins, 2014; Boise, 2016). Applying a nuanced and open approach when studying elites (Daloz, 2013) will help us move beyond reductionist approaches to elite culture. As pointed out by Shamus Kahn (2012) in his review of the sociology of elites, this sociological subfield is in need of more studies of the meaningful activities that goes on in actual elite arenas.

That critical sociologist have insisted on approaching the aforementioned art forms as exclusionist forms of elite culture, in line with the influential theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), has helped maintain a popular discourse on the high arts as elitist even in an egalitarian country such as Norway. This has resulted in contemporary managers of arts organizations battling this discourse in their public performances of legitimacy as inclusive arts organizations (Larsen, 2016). Even though the audience at these arenas are better educated and more wealthy than the average citizen (Bjørnsen et al, 2012; Mangset, 2012; Mangset & Hylland, 2017), it is not necessarily the case that knowledge of the high arts functions as a cultural capital that can be converted to other forms of social benefits, as Bourdieu and his followers has as a (sometimes implicit) theoreti-

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1. Even though there have been a significan t amount of writing seeking to expand the Bourdieusian framework to account for omnivorous consumption patterns (i.e. Prieur & Savage, 2013; Savage, 2015, chp. 3), they nevertheless think of culture as a form of capital.
cal premise. That the audiences at the Norwegian opera houses, symphony halls, art museums, or theatres do not reflect the demography of contemporary Norwegian society does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that we have come to the end of democratization in cultural policy.² Arts organizations are working towards being perceived as inclusive and civil arenas, seeking to change not only the popular discourse on these art forms representing elite culture, but also to recruit audience members from a broader segment of society (Larsen, 2016). Furthermore, the state expects contemporary state funded arts organizations to seek to be as inclusive as possible (of course given the premise that they should not have to make artistic compromises).³

The time is ripe for social scientist to take elite culture seriously. This entails moving beyond simply studying it as consumption stratified by social characteristics. Only by seeking to understand what motivates actors within and outside arts organizations to engage in activities to nurture, maintain, and develop these art forms can we move towards a richer understanding of elite culture.

REFERENCES

². See Mangset and Hylland (2017, chp. 6) for a discussion of consumption patterns and cultural policy.
³. At least this is an ideal given that there have been numeral cases of breaches on the arm’s length principle on the part of the Government. Whenever these breaches has occurred, they have resulted in media scandals, with ministers seeking legitimacy repair in the public sphere (Larsen, 2016; 2018-forthcoming).


