

Conference on ‘Culture and Social Change: The Role of Aesthetics’

LSE, London, 16-17 December 2013

Call for Papers

Bourdieu’s seminal work has influenced the agenda of sociology of culture like no other. As a result, art—as symbolic representations of culture—is still mainly perceived as a means of distinction. Attention has been given to dynamics of art production and art consumption actively contributing to the reproduction of existing power relations. This focus has been at the expenses of other relevant cross-class dynamics: mainly the role of aesthetics in meaning development, and its impact on social relations. Aesthetic sensibility—which involves attributing meanings to form—does not pertain to any specific social class. Creativity often relies on contamination and mixing of genres and cultures. Labels such as ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’, which imply a hierarchy among art genres, seem therefore at odd with the convictions and practices of most art practitioners.

However, recently there have been exciting calls for an aesthetic or lyrical sociology from eminent theorists such as John Levi Martin and Andrew Abbott, aiming to develop a cultural sociology sensitive to the different ways in which people interact with the qualitative nature of social phenomena. Other disciplines have shed light on the potential of culture in developing alternative meanings and communication processes relevant for social inclusion and political engagement. The problem with these promising contributions is that they have tended to be either programmatic, or normative, excluding power relations and conflict from the examined art contexts, and have not established appropriate social research methods able to capture the relevance and impact of these cultural practices in society at large.

Building on these calls and contributions, this conference aims to put aesthetics at the centre of the sociology of culture’s emerging research agenda. Bourdieu’s focus on power dynamics remains central, notably through an interest in relationality and field analysis. However, by urging the focus on the role of aesthetics on meaning development and art forms/genres (beyond music) that seem to foster empowerment of marginal groups and/or communication among different social groups, we aim to lay the basis for an understanding of culture and the arts beyond entertainment and the consolidation of existing social boundaries.

The conference will address four subsections:

1. Aesthetics & meaning. Taking seriously the aesthetics at work in practices of cultural production and consumption as embodied meanings has implications for alternative understandings of power relations and routes to personal and group empowerment.

The sociological 'make over' of concepts from other disciplines to capture non-instrumental social practices is a fruitful beginning (e.g. poetry and lyric sensibility; existentialism and existential capital; rhetoric and quality of engagements).

2. Aesthetics & arts. Different forms of communication vary with regard to the degree and type of involvement of audience's personal experiences and emotions. The arts seem to maximise the space granted to the audience. Yet different (institutional) contexts allow different aesthetics to become visible and intelligible, and some art resonates only with a specific audience. What is the role played by aesthetics on the receptive power of the audience?
3. Aesthetics & field analysis. So far art has been understood as a dividing force. Even apparently tolerant 'omnivores' distinguish themselves from working class people for being able to appreciate more genres. However, field analysis can provide a more fluid approach to aesthetics, in which the passions and intensities of the field allow a better rendering of the shared stakes and 'organised striving' of social and cultural life.
4. Aesthetics & methods. Methodological challenges: how to capture the role of aesthetics in meaning development and its relevance and impact on social relations?

Confirmed speakers include: Mike Savage, LSE; Vikki Bell, Goldsmith; Georgina Born, Oxford; Peter Bearman, Columbia; John Levi Martin, Chicago; Roberto Franzosi, Emory; Marco Santoro, Bologna; James Brassett, Warwick; Laurie Hanquinet, York; Sarah Nettleton, York; Jennifer Lena, Columbia.

Please submit your abstract (200 words maximum) to Cristiana Olcese at c.olcese@lse.ac.uk by the 15 October. Accepted papers, along with registration details, will be communicated to delegates by the 31 October. The conference fee is £50.