

**Culture as a vocation: sociology of career choices in cultural management**, by Vincent Dubois (translated by Jean-Yves Bart), Abingdon/New York, Routledge, 2013/2016, 146 pp., £95 (hardback), ISBN: 9781138819986

*International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 2017 Vol. 23, no. 4, 525–526  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2017.1293665>

Cultural management is a booming business, particularly for higher education courses training this sector of the workforce. It is a much more problematic sector of economy and society for those seeking remunerated labour. This is notwithstanding celebratory, global, discourses of the cultural and creative industries. In this context the need for research is clear. We are already well served with work focused on media industries (e.g. Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011) or specific cultural occupations (Conor 2014; Friedman, O'Brien, and Laurison 2016). However, the broader cultural workforce, particularly the new 'arts manager', has not yet seen the same level of sustained academic interest.

This is the context for *Culture as a Vocation*. The book grapples with the question of how a vocation develops and solidifies as part of an emerging profession. Cultural management is both a subject in its own right in the text, as well as a case study for a broader sociological project seeking to understand the agency of those entering this area of work, the structures represented by a vocation, and the social inequalities that vocation is part of replicating. In this way the book is really concerned with occupations and the life course, rather than cultural policy per se. This is the undoubted strength of the book, as its focus on the vocation allows the inequalities associated with the French cultural settlement, notably via education, to come to the fore. It shows the possibilities for cultural policy research that draws on a strong disciplinary grounding. This is not to argue for the subsumption of cultural policy studies within sociology, or for that matter geography, politics or cultural studies. Rather it is to illustrate that the possibility of making a significant contribution to our understanding of the operation of cultural policy, via research into the cadre tasked with its delivery, is at its most robust when it relates to, in this case, the broader canon of expertise developed around the sociology of class and occupations.

In order to address cultural management alongside the concept of a vocation, the book presents findings from a research project involving applicants to cultural management Master's degrees, along with policy and course material, observations of admissions interviews, and a small set of interviews with successful and unsuccessful applicants. The data is analysed against the backdrop of the French school and Higher Education systems, and the cultural policy settlement and cultural consumption patterns specific, but not exclusive, to the French state. Moreover, the influence of the particularly Bourdieusian mode of analysis and narration structures the text.

The example of cultural managers is used to reformulate the meaning of vocation. Here it is understood as the pursuit of moral values or common goods, with high cultural capital, along with the expectation of non-monetary rewards. The book grounds the development of culture as a vocation in two intersecting trends. On the one hand a whole range of new positions have

developed within cultural employment, whilst on the other universities have been producing more graduates from programmes focused on the skills deemed necessary for these positions. These two trends have reinforced one another, as the demand for training made courses more difficult to enter, thus bestowing both legitimacy and increasing demand as the need for credentials filters through to employment. Having sketched out these factors, the text grapples with the composition of prospective cultural managers to understand the process behind the emergence of cultural management as a vocation. This development is not an inevitable outcome of the broader social trends, but depends on the individual commitments of those pursuing a path into this area of economy and society.

This process is attached to the specific characteristics of the applicants in Dubois' surveys, who are generally well educated, higher social status, women. Here the use of MCA is a particular strength, disaggregating the ideal type of the prospective cultural manager, emphasising the role of cultural and social capital in sorting who will, and who will not, be likely to access the most prestigious courses and thus the best cultural management roles.

Whilst the disciplinary perspective of the book, alongside the direct relevance to questions as to the connection between cultural management and inequality, are important contributions, the text does have challenges that will, unfortunately, limit its impact. Put bluntly, the book is not an easy read and will trouble many academics interested in arts management, let alone those cultural managers seeking to reflect on their own practice. In part this criticism is harsh because translation is a technical and difficult task. However, the nature of the text raises the perpetual academic question as to the balance between the particular language necessary to account for methods or intervene in specifically scholarly debates, and the broader need for accessible texts to allow society to reflect on research findings.

In connection with this, the book does not quite balance the rich survey detail and use of Bourdieusian frameworks with the lived experience of the prospective cultural managers themselves. In particular, chapter 3's engagement with the rationality of choosing a career in cultural management would have significantly benefitted from more interview data to populate the narratives of commitment to the vocation. Partially this reflects the needs of the sociological framework, concentrating more on a structural narrative of cultural management, with the attendant suspicion of individual passion or psychological desire explanations. Here the four rationales for the choice of a cultural management career (social mobility, professional reproduction, reinvestments of capital, and self-assertion) lacked the sense of real individuals making decisions within the social structure. Catherine, Sofiane, Aurelie and Clara, to use some of the examples given in the chapter, felt strangely lonely as the bearers of social structures, rather than, as Dubois's introduction aims at, telling the sociological story of vocational commitments.

This issue carries over into the fourth chapter, where the interaction between work, the orientation towards cultural openness or eclecticism, and the social structures shaping vocational identities could well have been further developed with more detailed interviews and a more agent centred approach. Indeed, there are gestures towards this in the appendix, where Dubois reveals his own path not travelled into cultural management, a possibility located in his worries that his academic training and career may have been unsuccessful. Perhaps more of this aspect of the personal narrative, more reflexivity and ownership, rather than the objectivity granted by the

tools of sociology, may well have added further force to the insights generated by the research.

This broad critical point addressed towards the text is, of course, the great disciplinary problem confronting sociology, as to how to balance structure and agency, in writing as much as in sociological explanation. Here it is a price worth paying for Dubois' intervention, a intervention which does much to set research questions for, as well as offering challenges to, the current narratives of cultural management as a deliverer of social mobility, social justice and social transformation.

### ***References***

Conor, B. 2014. *Screenwriting: Creative Labor and Professional Practice*. London: Routledge.

Friedman, S., D. O'Brien, and D. Laurison. 2016. "Like Skydiving Without a Parachute': How Class Origin Shapes Occupational Trajectories in British Acting." *Sociology*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0038038516629917.

Hesmondhalgh, D., and S. Baker. 2011. *Creative Labour*. New York: Routledge.

Dave O'Brien *Chancellor's Fellow, Cultural and Creative Industries, University of Edinburgh - History of Art, Edinburgh, UK* d.obrien@ed.ac.uk