
BOOK REVIEW

***Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality*, by Mark Banks**

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Our contemporary society is increasingly aware of the structural inequalities based on race, class, and gender that reinforce systemic exclusion across all fields and institutions. The cultural industries are no exception, leading many artists and arts workers to organize around calls for justice in labor practices and access to presenting opportunities among other concerns. This is shaping how longstanding cultural leaders approach their work and how entrepreneurs develop new arts enterprises, making developing a framework for justice in the cultural industries critical.

In *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality* Mark Banks seeks to meet this need with a critical discourse of justice within the cultural industries that calls attention to pervasive injustices that need to be addressed. Throughout this tightly framed and argued book, Banks unpacks the depth of how systemic inequalities impact and are entangled in the cultural industries. His aim is to do justice to culture itself, by looking not only at its economic value but also at its social and aesthetic value, influenced by various political sensibilities. To Banks, the primary goal is “the need to raise consciousness of *injustice* and to help connect the creative economy – and the cultural work it contains – to some normative principles that might make work more progressive and equalitarian, as well as fairer and more just” (p. 9). To accomplish this, a foundational canon of sociologists of culture (chiefly Pierre Bourdieu) are discussed, mixed with the concepts of critical theorists (including Angela McRobbie, Andrew Ross, Janet Wolff) and augmented by references to empirical studies, as Banks builds three core concepts of creative justice.

First, Banks addresses justice for cultural objects themselves, toward an “objective respect” that sees cultural value as being both subjective and socially shaped as well as objective, an aesthetic commodity. As cultural objects have become increasingly commodified and their value legitimized in cultural economy arguments, Banks demands space for recognizing their aesthetic qualities and how they matter for people who produce them and consume them towards recognizing their comprehensive value. He proposes a “more nuanced, qualified and holistic approach that considers historical context, subjective appreciation *and* objective quality” in order to “better know what the culture *is* and what it can *do* politically – and so do it justice” (p. 33). Recognizing that aesthetics is a crucial part of this process, he states that to ignore the full range of meaning is to “inflict an injustice” on cultural objects that hold value for people (p. 36). While art objects themselves disappear in Bourdieu’s theories, Banks does them justice by foregrounding aesthetics to view cultural objects both as social facts and commodities.

Cultural work is also included in this call for “objective respect”, a “socially complex moral endeavor” that demands to be analyzed in its process and content, as well as its impact on people and society (p. 43). Banks focuses on artists, using jazz musicians as a case study to analyze the “moral economy” of these artists by identifying the love of self-education, practice, and respect for tradition these cultural workers experience. People participate not just for financial gain through fame or sales but also to contribute to the social good, therefore studies must analyze the social embeddedness and foundational ethical character of cultural work. Thus, the process of creation needs to be evaluated on its own terms to understand how it fits into the world as a socially embedded practice.

The second framing concept is a call for “distributive justice”, i.e., an examination of who has access to education, participation, and recognition in the cultural industries. This political call is more relevant than ever, with cultural activist groups worldwide calling for equity and inclusion

in everything from exhibition and performance opportunities to curation and administration responsibilities. Banks proposes that exclusionary practices structure who participates in and is rewarded by the cultural industries and who is marginalized, making social favors more beneficial for entry over natural talent. This timely argument works to challenge the longstanding perception of the creative industries as meritocracies that reward individuals who strive in their craft and deserve to be rewarded based on some degree of natural talent. Banks also identifies the problematic practices in cultural work that are reliant on state funding and exploit interested participants through unpaid labor. Women and ethnic minorities are not only paid less but these groups work in more precarious positions and are less likely to achieve high status within a cultural organization or as practicing artists. To Banks, the cultural industries are “a fixed and unfair game; one marked by serial inequalities and minority disadvantage, and where the socially privileged are always better equipped to force the hand of chance” (p. 115).

These structurally exclusionary practices exist in every aspect of the cultural industries, particularly in access to elite institutions of higher education whose initial certification consequently leads to future opportunities for their graduates. Reinforcing recent calls for more equitable practices in higher education more broadly, Banks demonstrates that it is the inequalities structuring society at large that are to blame for the disproportionate number of elite students in elite institutions and not the lack of diverse, qualified candidates. This system reinforces the narrow, limited selection of successful artists and cultural workers in high level positions. Banks is not surprised by these exclusionary practices but he is surprised by the general lack of action:

What *does* remain shocking is the blind faith placed by governments, industry and employers in the cultural sector as a solution to problems of social and economic disadvantage amongst social minorities, since it’s becoming abundantly clear, at least for the most part, that the arts and cultural industries don’t just fail to alleviate inequalities, they actively exacerbate them. (pp. 115-116)

Lastly, Banks calls for a “reduction of harms” to be enacted to shift the deeply rooted systems of exclusion he has outlined. In recognizing the problematic role that cultural industries play, Banks proposes that we can move toward what Nancy Fraser has termed a “parity of participation” (2008; 2013) to redistribute opportunities and financial gain. The first step is to recognize that “the success of the creative economy – at least for its principal beneficiaries – has been very much founded on denying the existence of any kind of economic injustice, rather than drawing our attention to it” (p. 121). Despite increased attention to these issues, the precarity of wages and the extent of inequalities are getting worse.

As Banks, Ross (1998), and others have noted, it is difficult to have one definitive understanding of injustice because it is continually evolving. Yet, with this book Banks proposes an initial framework of a theory of creative justice upon which he anticipates others will build. There are multiple entry points within the framework he outlines and many subtopics that have already been taken on by others, hopefully cumulatively working toward future cultural industries that do acknowledge their structural exclusion and begin to challenge their practices in order to be more equitable and inclusive. Working toward justice in the creative industries is crucial as the field continues to expand and change, thus making this book a useful tool for students, educators, practitioners, and policymakers alike. Those with an established foundation of the sociological

theorists he cites may find the framework more readily accessible, but he does provide sufficient context for all readers to understand and enact upon his ideas.

In defining three core concepts of creative justice, Banks provides a platform for addressing the inequalities he observes. The book provides multiple entry points to foundational concepts in justice for cultural work that can be connected to specific subfields as practitioners in those fields strive to enact change. This book is particularly vital for arts entrepreneurs who are working to shift and expand cultural industries. In building new institutions and cultural platforms, arts entrepreneurs are well positioned to be the leaders in challenging structural exclusion in entry into and operations of cultural work.

References

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