
Ashley MEARS, *Very important people: Status and beauty in the global party circuit*
(New York, Princeton University Press, 2020, xv + 303 p.)

Sociological research on elites has experienced a revival during the last two decades. Accelerating processes of globalization and an increase in economic inequality (now further aggravated by the pandemic) have caused the superrich to (re)emerge as insightful objects of observation. The study of the wealthiest 0.1% of the population does not only allow scholars to understand how people can gain huge quantities of money and exercise power over political, economic, and social institutions; it has become increasingly clear that the experiences of top wealth holders can also shed light on the processes of value production, global interconnect- edness, and cultural norm creation which extend to those beyond the boundaries of this restricted group of people. Elites define “dreamworlds”, as Davis and Monk put it, which “enflame desires for infinite consump- tion, total social exclusion and physical security, and architectural monumentality”.¹ To study elites, then, as Shamus Khan reminds us, is to study power and inequality from above.²

Despite the difficulties of gaining access to luxury sites, many import- ant ethnographic works have been carried out as part of this recent rise in interest in the sociology of elites. They carefully illustrate the everyday lives, places, identities, and discourses of the super-rich: from owners of superyachts on the Côte d’Azur³ to Wall Street investment bankers confronted with their own downsizing;⁴ from Pakistani business elites and their relations with families, friends, and politicians⁵ to luxury boutique managers and clients in the United States, France, China,

¹ Page 15, in Mike DAVIS and Daniel Bertrand MONK, eds, 2007. *Evil Para- dises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (New York, The New Press).

² Shamus Rahman KHAN, 2012. “The Sociology of Elites”, *Annual Review of Soci- ology*, (38): 361-377.

³ Emma SPENCE, 2014. “Unraveling the Politics of Super-rich Mobility: A Study of Crew and Guest on Board Luxury Yachts”, *Mobilities*, 9 (3): 401-413.

⁴ Karen HO, 2009. “Disciplining Invest- ment Bankers, Disciplining the Economy: Wall Street’s Institutional Culture of Crisis and the Downsizing of ‘Corporate America’”, *American Anthropologist*, 111 (2): 177-189.

⁵ Rosita ARMYTAGE, 2020. *Big Capital in an Unequal World: The Micropolitics of Wealth in Pakistan* (Oxford, New York, Berghahn Books).

and Japan;⁶ from professionals involved in wealth management⁷ to billionaires devoted to environmental philanthropy in rural areas;⁸ from Manhattan parents engaged in home renovation⁹ to students at the USA's most prestigious high schools.¹⁰ Ashley Mears's *Very Important People* deserves a special place in this field of research.

This book lets us into the global VIP party circuit, an exclusive world characterized by excess and the display of beauty and money. Mears was herself a model and she applied the critical lens of sociology to her experience in the fashion modeling industry both in her graduate research and then in the book *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*.¹¹ In this new work, she uses her bodily capital to pass for a model again and gain access to exclusive nightclubs, crowded with beautiful women, charismatic promoters, and wealthy clients. Her account of these locations is a vivid actualization of Shamus Khan's definition of elites, as "those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource".¹²

Mears began this project by reconnecting with the promoters she had met during her previous fieldwork in the fashion world. By following them as key informants over the course of three years, she immersed herself in the sparkling life of the nightclubs, in the daily routines of promoters in the city and on yacht trips, from Manhattan clubs to the sandy beaches in the Hamptons, from dinner parties in Miami to the French Riviera. She conducted interviews with models, clients, and promoters; the latter act as brokers in the field. Much of her ethnographic work was based on notes taken during nightclub parties, an activity she could perform without attracting too much attention "as everyone is constantly tapping on their phones inside clubs" [247].

The presence of beautiful girls was a required resource in the scene: simply by being there, attractive young women generated enormous value for the club industry. Mears took a methodological advantage from this: In exchange for her dressing up and wearing high heels at the

⁶ Jean-Baptiste WELTÉ, Julien CAYLA and Eileen FISCHER, 2022. "Navigating contradictory logics in the field of luxury retailing," *Journal of Retailing*, 98 (3): 510-526.

⁷ Brooke HARRINGTON, 2016. *Capital Without Borders: Wealth Managers and the One Percent* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press).

⁸ Justin FARRELL, 2020. *Billionaire Wilderness: The Ultra-Wealthy and the Remaking of the American West* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).

⁹ Rachel SHERMAN, 2017. *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).

¹⁰ Shamus Rahman KHAN, 2011. *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).

¹¹ Ashley MEARS, 2011. *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

¹² KHAN 2012, cf. *infra*: 362.

parties, promoters let her stay with them in the nightclubs, but also as they followed their daytime routines, as they took models to beaches, lunches, and castings, or hung around on city streets trying to pick up new girls. The result is an ethnography of promoters and the girls who support them, rich men who pay to be surrounded by beautiful women, and elite rituals of signaling status, cultures of fun, and gendered expectations of relationships. The main idea of the book is to show how the VIP party functions as a stage for the display of luxury consumption in which status, connections, and economic value accrue to the new global elite. Mears understands consumption as a means of producing value: The experience of consuming goods is as meaningful as their possession.

Who are the actors on the stage described by Mears? First of all, we have women. Only those who are in possession of valuable bodily capital are allowed in. Unattractive women are screened out by club doormen, who quickly assess a woman's status by sizing up her physique, looks, race, accent, clothes, and handbag. In these clearly racist velvet-rope practices, nonwhites are often told "tonight is a private party" because it is thought they could drain symbolic value from the club: Discrimination articulates race in terms of beauty, status, and quality. After stepping into the club, we find "girls". They are treated to free nights out regardless of their financial means, education, or personal qualities. At the top of a clear hierarchy of girls are fashion models. They have symbolic capital, connoting the fashion industry's high status. Their presence elevates the status of the space and that of all the people around them. They are comped with freebies of food and drink and with the compliment of being included in an exclusive world. Then there are girls who *look like they could be models*, as they have beauty and a tall and slender frame. Promoters, clients and patrons can see the difference between "just a hot girl" and a model, even where the lights are low and it is hard to discern details of their appearance: "In this rarefied world there is an unspoken but widely understood logic: girls are valuable, women are not" [20]. Then there are cocktail waitresses ("bottle girls"), who are tall and voluptuous and wear tight dresses and high heels. They represent sex and are seemingly available. Mears is very clear in describing the difference between these two groups of women: Fashion models represent beauty and status, while bottle girls represent sex. The former are meant to stand out because they determine the hierarchies of clubs, while the latter should remain invisible.

But we also have men on the stage of the VIP party. They are also hierarchically distributed. At the top we have "whales", oligarchs and tycoons who can spend huge sums of money, sometimes over a hundred

thousand dollars in a single night. Second, we find celebrities, who sometimes buy expensive bottles and add value to the club with their mere presence. Third, we have very rich men, who can spend huge sums on bottles they don't even drink but are sometimes invited to party free of charge by the club's owners. Being entitled to free drinks is a clear status signal for clients, who are expected to invest in the owner's next bar or hold their next large-scale, lucrative birthday party at that establishment. Fourth, we find affluent tourists and businessmen (bankers, tech developers, upper-class professionals) who want to be close to power and beauty. Clubs make most of their profits from them. Fifth, there are fillers: men who cannot afford even modest table rents and whose role in the scene is keeping the place from looking empty. They look cool enough and have enough cultural capital to be allowed in, but they cannot afford a table: They have to stand at the bar and jostle for their drinks. Then, we find the club personnel (from bouncers to boys who carry trays of empty bottles), who in this space are nonpersons, as Goffman would describe them. Last but not least, we find promoters: They come from lower-middle-class backgrounds, and they are rich in social capital. Their role is to bring stunning girls (or better, fashion models) to the club and ensure that these beautiful bodies stay at clients' tables until late at night. Promoters receive a cut from the club owners of up to 20% of what their clients spend on drink (and this can add up to thousands of dollars in a single night). They dream of upward mobility, but they will likely remain in their service role just adjacent to superrich men. They are conspicuous consumers in a world they cannot afford to be a part of, but they all have career aspirations, from music and acting to restaurant and club ownership, and aspire to convert their connections into profit.

Mears is convincing when she describes how all these people try to buy the illusion of spontaneity and manage their emotions in order to define the situation as fun and exciting. Promoters do not want their friendship with either clients or girls to be perceived as too economically motivated. At the same time, they must ensure that tables maintain a high quantity of girls, so they manage girls' time, bodies, and movements and discourage them from leaving too early. This implicates the exercise of a delicate discipline, suggesting that girls cannot be treated as workers because they are there not to work but to have fun. This reminded me of the book *Paid to Party* by Jamie Mullaney and Janet Hinson Shope,¹³ which focused on the mixture of friendship and market exchange in direct home sales

¹³ Jamie L. MULLANEY and Janet Hinson Shope, *Paid to Party: Working Time and Emotion in Direct Home Sales* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press).

(DHS). Authors described a DHS party as a combination of delicate nudging for purchases and friendship confirmation, where women manage their own feelings (emotion work) while paying attention to the feelings of other guests (emotional labor). Here, women strive “to display the right emotional demeanor by being enthusiastic, positive, trustworthy and genuine, all while making the sales encounter feel fun and comfortable for guests”.¹⁴ Just like DHS consultants, promoters in Mears’ ethnography try to shape girls’ and clients’ feelings through relational work. They enact strategies to redefine their economic transactions as a part of their personal connections. In so doing, promoters have two jobs: “to capitalize on the economic value of girls and to make it look and *feel* like they are just hanging out with friends” [153]. Emotion management has a prominent role here. Indeed, many jobs require it in our service economy. But both in DHS and in VIP clubs, despite the enormous differences between these two worlds, the setting brings real friends together at parties: the feeling rules that govern friendship, norms of reciprocity, and obligation are transferred into economic value. Mears took the literature on emotional labor into consideration in her earlier work (partly distancing from it, due to her major emphasis on embodiment). I think that this new book would have benefited from reserving more room for those reflections than it does. Likewise, it would have profited from the inclusion of a reflexive account of the author’s own feelings and emotions while the fieldwork was being undertaken, a practice that Mears has followed in the past.

The failures of expected and ritualized social conduct are always insightful moments in the ethnographic research. In the VIP party scene, this is what occurs when the illusion of friendship between promoters, girls, and clients falls apart. As an example, Mears reports of an episode of a girl wanting to leave early and the promoter obliging her to stay at the client’s table, reminding her of all the favors she has obtained from him. In such cases, promoters and girls alike describe those moments as abuse. This leads the author to point out:

We can think of these webs of friendship, favors and gifts, intimacies, obligations, and reciprocities as a relational infrastructure that supports ties between promoters and their gifts. If the infrastructure is sound, the exchange goes smoothly, and girls provide valuable labor for promoters that doesn’t look like labor at all; it looks like fun with friends. But this infrastructure can break down [...], when the promoter is perceived as being too strategic and the calculation behind their friendship feels too cold. We could then say there is a relational mismatch [...]. [205]

¹⁴ MULLANEY and SHOPE 2012: 14.

In this case, Mears explains, the illusion of spontaneity and fun fades away, and social processes are revealed to be what they actually are: the club is about men's enjoyment and women's objectification; attending the party is work and not leisure; relations are structurally asymmetrical; girls serve as valuable currency and their beauty is worth more in men's hands than in their own.

Scholars who study elite distinctions argue that nowadays wealth is something to be hidden. Elites downplay ostentatious forms of wealth in favor of inconspicuous consumption. In super-gentrification mobilities, they move around the world in bubbles separate from most other people, out of their reach and out of their sight. Mears describes the other side of the coin: Ostentation is the *nouveau riches'* status-seeking activity. At VIP club parties, clients participate in rituals of play and display in the consumption of bottles of champagne. It is a collective production of status carefully orchestrated by club owners. On these circuits, ostentation is accepted to the extent it is collectively refashioned as fun and spontaneous, something which is deserved as an occasional indulgence after days of hard work. In documenting competitive spending rituals that are hugely dependent upon the backstage work of vulnerable women and marginalized men, Mears clearly refers to Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*.¹⁵ Like the classical work by the Norwegian-American economist, her account describes consumption as a competition for status, and displays of leisure as attempts to outdo others in a never-ending show of wealth.

The show reaches its apotheosis with "the potlatch". Here, Mears refers to the famous description by Franz Boas of competitive gifting and feasting rituals among the tribes of the Pacific Northwest coast to draw a parallel with the rituals around displaying and squandering wealth that take place in clubs. A potlatch is typically enacted by a group leader seeking to gain prestige and status by making a gift so large that it cannot be reciprocated. This provokes rivals' humiliation and establishes the gift-giver's dominance. According to Mears, something quite similar still occurs today at the parties of the superrich. Bottle expenditure and champagne waste by super spenders in the VIP club function as means of gaining recognition among their peers at nearby tables and creating rivalry through the public comparison of their purchases, in a combination of aggression and generosity. For Mears, "by studying the

¹⁵ Thorstein VEBLÉN, 1899. *The Theory of Institutions* (New York, The Macmillan Company).
the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of

organization of the show – the gendered entourage, the staging, the props, and the cues provided by the club – we can learn how rich men get transformed into “big men” over the course of a night” (72). Often this escalates into a “champagne war”, a potlatch where expensive bottles are shaken and their contents sprayed around by clients who are able to spend tens of thousands of dollars in a single night. This show contributes to creating a feeling of transcendence within an extraordinary world of privilege shared by city residents, tourists, and businessmen: something not far from what Durkheim defined as “collective effervescence”, according to Mears.

But the most convincing insight in Mears’s book pertains to her account of how female beauty generates symbolic and economic resources. Again, Mears revisits Veblen’s understanding of the role of women in communicating men’s status. Girls serve as a form of capital, as long as they take on what Laura Mulvey famously described as “to-be-looked-at-ness”, Mears suggests. Heterosexual, mostly white, wealthy clients want a large number of beautiful girls sitting at their tables. This enables them to show off this excess of beauty and is a parallel to their displays of empty champagne bottles. As Mears points out, “sex between girls and clients is not the main point of having so many models in attendance” (we learn from the book that sex between clients and girls is quite rare in the VIP club scene: rather it occurs between girls and promoters); “it is the visibility of sexiness in excess that produces status” [77]. Throughout the book, Mears convincingly explains to us that girls’ bodily capital can generate enormous returns for promoters, clients, and club owners, as it serves as an asset in their search for status. Beauty enables women to access the scene but secures them no recognition as serious players once inside it. They are spoken of as brainless and sexually promiscuous by men, while their bodily capital is short-term and can be easily replaced by a new supply. In other words, it is largely men who profit from the beauty of these girls, rather than the girls themselves.

According to a recent literature review,¹⁶ most work on elites has been gender-blind or at least gender-neutral. This is certainly not the case for this book; quite the reverse. One of Mears’s merits is that she pinpoints how patterns of gender performance sustain power relations on the superrich circuits. She treats the VIP club scene as a site in which to

¹⁶ Lisa A. KEISTER, Sarah THÉBAUD and Jill E. YAVORSKY, 2022. “Gender in the Elite,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, (48): 149-169.

study masculine domination and white supremacy. As such, in her work on inequality, she takes the topic of the “gender in the elite” mentioned by Keister, Thébaud and Yavorsky¹⁷ very seriously.

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*