The Public Institution
Understanding the Logic of Cultural Production in the Public Sector

Matt Patterson
University of Toronto
Presented at the American Sociological Association Annual Conference
August 2011
Las Vegas, NV

Abstract

Public institutions have played a central role in the development of many cultural fields within Western society and have been frequently studied by sociologists of culture. Yet we lack an explicit model that defines exactly what public institutions are, how they work, and what makes them distinct from other organizational forms. This paper attempts to lay the groundwork for such a model by arguing that it is their access to donated resources rather than dedication toward communitarian interests that make public institutions sociologically distinct. Access to these resources depends on the ability of public institutions to build “public legitimacy”, which is defined as the belief among outsiders that the institution serves the public good. This paper argues that the strategies involved with building and maintaining public legitimacy shape the organizational logic of public institutions. Understanding these strategies helps us to better explain why certain cultural forms tend to be produced within the public sector, and how this culture differs from that created by market-based producers. In outlining this argument, the paper draws on a case study of two public museums in Toronto and existing studies of public cultural institutions.

Keywords: sociology of culture, production of culture, organizations, public institutions, theory, legitimacy
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief sociological model for the public institution. I argue that what unites public institutions as a distinct organizational form is not that they serve more selfless or communitarian interests than private organizations. Instead public institutions possess a unique characteristic that I call public legitimacy; that is, the belief among outsiders that the institution serves the public good. The existence of public legitimacy results in a situation where outsiders voluntarily lend support (economic, political, social, etc) to the institution with no immediate trade-off expected. While parts of this analysis are applicable across societal sectors (e.g. social, environmental, scientific), for the purposes of this paper I will focus only on the cultural sector. I will first address the need for a general model of the public institution by reviewing some of the literature from the sociology of culture and organizations, and second, outline how the existence of public legitimacy helps us to better understand the practices of public institutions and the forms of culture that they produce.

The impetus for this paper comes out of ongoing research that I am doing on two iconic architectural expansion projects in Toronto, each carried out by a different public institution: the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). Both projects featured elaborate architecture involving unprecedented feats of engineering, budgets over $200 million CAD, and designs by world renowned architects Daniel Libeskind and Frank Gehry (respectively). In attempting to make sense of these projects, I was confronted with the question of why these two institutions – and other public institutions like them across the globe – would choose to undertake something so risky and expensive. Understanding the popularity of iconic architectural developments among public cultural institutions requires identifying some underlying logic that can help explain how public institutions make decisions and adopt
strategies. As I will attempt to demonstrate, this logic has not yet been sufficiently accounted for in the existing literature on cultural production.

The role of public institutions in the production of culture is extremely important within Western society. Major public museums, galleries, symphony and theatre companies, broadcasters, and other organizations have often played central roles in shaping their respective fields. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a tremendous amount of research has been conducted by sociologists of culture that examines this organizational form. We know, for instance, about the historical development of public institutions (DiMaggio 1982; Peterson 1986), about their sources of funding and its impact on their programming decisions (Alexander 1996a, 1996b; Useem and Kutner 1986), about the audiences who consume such programming (Gaav and Potapova 1996; DiMaggio 1996; Verdaasdonk et al. 1996; Kracman 1996; Smith and Wolf 1996; Kirchberg 1996; Glynn et al. 1996), and about the different management styles and internal structures within public institutions (Peterson 1986; DiMaggio 1986b; Glynn 2002; Oakes, Townley, and Cooper 1998). Sociologists of culture have, therefore, developed a strong understanding of specific aspects of public institutions and of many of the activities in which they are engaged. They have not, however, provided a general model that tells us exactly what public institutions are, and how they are sociologically distinct from other organizational forms.

Public institutions are extremely variable in their histories, mandates, resources, and internal structures, so it may be tempting to doubt the usefulness of a general model. Yet, in the study of private, for-profit cultural producers (which are at least as diverse as public institutions) we do have such a model. We acknowledge that they all share an underlying profit-motive. Whether we are studying art dealers (e.g. Becker 1982) or television executives (e.g. Bielby and Bielby 1994), we are able to draw a commonality in the fact that both are generally interested in
investing in pieces of art/culture (whether buying a painting or financing and broadcasting a television show) with the intention of extracting surplus value (through resale at an auction or selling advertising time). As non-profit organizations that are relatively insulated from the market, public institutions are a poor fit for this profit-oriented model. Instead, I would argue that a separate model can be identified that will help us find general commonality among public cultural producers. However before introducing my own model, it is worth briefly exploring some existing perspectives.

Existing Perspectives of The Public Institution

While the sociology of culture has not clearly articulated a sociological model of the public institution, there are many existing ways of understanding what public institutions are, how they work, why they exist, and what makes them unique from other organizational forms. In particular we can identify four perspectives: legal, normative, economic, and class-based. I would argue that none of these perspectives are totally sufficient for sociological analysis, but they do provide a good starting point.

First, from a legal perspective, we can say that public institutions exist as separate legal entities that are distinct from other organizational forms (most notably the private business or for-profit corporation). While public institutions can be quite diverse on paper (even within the same polity), there are a few common legal characteristics that can be identified. First, they are incorporated without share capital. Thus, they are not privately owned by shareholders. Second, like a for-profit corporation, they are run by a board of governors. As there are no shareholders to vote for these governors, methods of selection are quite diverse. The ROM and the AGO were both established by acts of parliament that outline exactly how the boards of governors are
selected and by whom. Finally, in the absence of a clear for-profit motive, public institutions also typically have a legal mandate that provides some basic direction for their leadership. However, as DiMaggio (1982) has argued, these mandates are often ambiguous enough to “accommodate a range of conflicting purposes and changing ends” (p.39).

While understanding the laws that govern cultural production is important (Griswold 1981; Peterson and Anand 2004:315), the legal perspective leaves many unanswered questions. What public institutions look like on paper tells us nothing about why they exist or the overall logic by which they operate. Furthermore, we must avoid collapsing the distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* organizations. The legal status of an organization is just one of the factors contributing to the logic by which it operates. Some organizations that are legally public may nonetheless operate very similarly to private organizations, and *visa versa*. Thus, a sociological model of the public institution cannot limit itself to what is outlined in law.

Though the legal perspective may provide the clearest definition of the public institution, the vast majority of academic and popular literature adopts a *normative* approach. The normative approach is not so much interested in explaining what public institutions are or how they work, but rather how they *should* work. This approach takes for granted that public institutions exist to serve important social functions and, following from this assumption, addresses questions such as how well public institutions are fulfilling their function and how they can be strengthened. A significant amount of research looks at contemporary challenges that face public institutions such as the emergence of new technologies, scarcity of government funding, demographic shifts, and other disruptive social changes (Murdock 2004; Collins et al. 2001; Rowland and Tracey 1990; DiMaggio 1986b). Other research takes a critical approach by evaluating how well public institutions live up to certain democratic ideals such as transparency,
accountability, and inclusivity (Hetherington 2003; Sandell 2003; Pieterse 1997). The normative debates surrounding public institutions are important and sociologists have a lot to contribute. However there are risks involved with linking a research agenda to the assumption that public institutions exist to represent the public good. Most importantly, such an assumption may limit our ability to think critically about the origins and sociological role of public institutions and consider possible alternative explanations that have nothing to do with the ‘public good’. The next two perspectives demonstrate such alternative explanations.

Unlike the normative perspective, the *economic* perspective does not make any assumptions about the public good. Instead, public institutions are understood to represent the most economically efficient means to a desired end. Hansmann (1986) argues that public institutions amount to voluntary price discrimination where some consumers elect to pay more than others by providing donations in addition to the cost of admission. Given that certain forms of cultural production have high fixed costs and low marginal costs (e.g. museum exhibitions or theatrical performances), voluntary price discrimination is more efficient than distributing the cost of production equally across all consumers (See Hansmann 1986 for a more detailed explanation). Historical sociological accounts have offered some support to this line of argument, particularly as it applies to the early formation of classical symphony orchestras in the United States (Dowd et al. 2002:39-41).

While providing some economic justification for the feasibility of public institutions and their affinity with certain forms of cultural production, the economic perspective still leaves some unanswered questions and problematic assumptions when examined from a more sociological perspective. First, the economic rationality assumed in this perspective is a poor model for how the leaders of public institutions actually think. Second, we cannot use issues of
economic efficiency to explain why some consumers would be willing to pay more through donations to accommodate freeloaders who reap the benefits while contributing nothing. Nor could we use efficiency to explain why some forms of cultural production attract donations while others do not. To answer these questions, we require examining issues of meaning, status, and legitimacy.

The last perspective, which I term class-based, places the logic of the public institution squarely within the interests of the upper class. This perspective is perhaps best exemplified in DiMaggio’s (1982) classic study of the formation of public institutions in 19th century Boston. Like the economic perspective and unlike the normative perspective, DiMaggio does not assume that there is any larger public good that underlies public institutions (at least not during their founding). Instead DiMaggio argues that public institutions facilitated class reproduction by enshrining the cultural tastes of the upper class as naturally superior and more refined. The phenomenon is also identified by Bourdieu (1984; 1993) who refers to it as “misrecognition”. Though I will not outline them here, DiMaggio points out various characteristics of public institutions that made this organizational form particularly useful in fulfilling the function of class reproduction (see DiMaggio 1982:38-39).

The connection that DiMaggio and Bourdieu identify between public cultural institutions and class interest has been highly influential within the sociology of culture. However there are some significant problems that arise when we reduce the organizational logic of public institutions to class interest. DiMaggio (1986a) himself admits that public institutions have changed substantially since the 19th century. Two historical developments in particular have created some separation between the interests of the upper class and the activities of public institutions. First, a class of cultural and managerial professionals now exists that run the day to
day (and often long term) operations of public institutions (Glynn 2002; Peterson 1986; DiMaggio 1986a). This class must be seen as having their own interests and practices and they cannot be reduced to either members or puppets of economic or political elites. Second, the financial support for public institutions comes from a diversity of sources including governments, private foundations, admission prices, and membership fees. These two developments do not mean that class interest has become marginalized in the operation of public institutions, only that class interest can no longer stand in as a model for how public institutions work.

On their own, none of these existing perspectives provide a full sociological model that defines what public institutions are, how they work, and what makes them distinct from other organizational forms. Instead, each of them reduces public institutions to some external factor: a set of legal guidelines and a mandate, some abstract notion of the public good, economic efficiency, or class-interest. Without a doubt, each of these factors is important to the overall logic by which public institutions operate, but we should see them as environmental factors rather than actually constituting public institutions themselves. Thus, we need to re-examine what makes the public institution unique. I begin this examination with the question of interest provoked by the normative perspective: do public institutions have different interests than private organizations?

The Question of Interest

According to the normative perspective, and the way public institutions present themselves, public institutions are distinct because they serve more communitarian or selfless interests that are associated with the public good, whereas private organizations are motivated
primarily by self-interest (e.g. profit-making). This focus on interest presents some difficulties for sociologists, however. The most immediate problem is that it would be difficult to determine exactly what the public good is (both for the sociologists and for the public institution itself). Beyond this difficulty however, is the assertion made by neo-institutionalists that it is misleading to reduce the workings of complex organizations to a personalized “interest”. Rather, as DiMaggio and Powell (1991) assert, the way complex organizations work “represents collective outcomes that are not the simple sum of individual interests” (p.9). Public institutions, like all other organizational forms, are made up of a collection of actors with different job descriptions, facing different sets of constraints, resources, and goals. Interest, at least at a collective level, is therefore too vague and poorly defined to serve as the defining feature of the public institution.

Even when we move down to the level of individual actors within organizations, interest still presents a problem. Though we may be tempted to believe that members of public institutions are more selfless than those in private organizations, this is also too weak and unfounded an assertion to stand as the basis of a model. It is unreasonable to assume, for instance, that a museum curator is significantly less interested in advancing his own career than a computer programmer. Or that a computer programmer is less interested in the success of her organization or the public as a whole than a curator. Therefore I would agree with both the economic and class-based perspectives in rejecting any assumption that public institutions are necessarily more selfless and communitarian in their interests, or more willing to place their own survival in jeopardy than private organizations.
Donated Resources

So if public institutions cannot be distinguished based on the interests that direct them, then what makes them unique? I would argue that it is actually the resources available to public institutions that distinguish them, and it is these resources that should serve as a starting point for building a theoretical model. In particular, public institutions have the unique ability to motivate voluntary support from outsiders with no formal expectation that they will provide anything directly in return. In other words, public institutions are unique in receiving donated resources. The most important of these resources are economic. Public institutions only exist to the extent that they receive government funding or grants, or private donations. Almost as important, though perhaps underappreciated, is the role that volunteering plays as a form of economic support. Both the ROM and the AGO benefit enormously from voluntary labour, in many cases from highly educated people engaging in high-skill work such as administration and public education. Overall, volunteers make up roughly 50% of the labour force for both institutions. Without these economic resources – offered voluntarily and for no immediate or significant trade-off – public institutions could not be sustained.

Certain political resources are also provided to public institutions that are unavailable to private organizations. The ROM and the AGO received important political support, for instance, from Toronto City Hall. While they did not offer any significant economic support, City Hall did contribute to the expansion projects by providing a series of bureaucratic shortcuts and exemptions. By-laws that apply to usual development projects were quickly overturned for the ROM and the AGO, and others were not enforced. In one of the more contested moves, a municipal committee forced street vendors off the sidewalk in front of the ROM by modifying their vending licenses, thereby allowing for an unobstructed view of the new architecture.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Organization</th>
<th>Method of Resource Acquisition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For-profit business</td>
<td>Resources acquired in exchange for goods or services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private social clubs</td>
<td>Resources acquired in exchange for access/social inclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public institutions</td>
<td>Resources donated under the assumption that they will be used for a public good.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Different organizational forms and their resources.

Other than a few cases of economic self-sufficiency, almost all organizations need to acquire external resources in order to sustain themselves. However, where and how these resources are acquired differs across organizational forms. Table 1 contrasts public institutions with other organizational forms. For-profit businesses attain resources through commercial activity: extracting surplus value through the exchange of goods and services. Private social clubs on the other hand sell access to prestigious social networks. Without a doubt, actual public institutions employ these two strategies regularly. Public institutions rely increasingly on commercial activity to sustain themselves by charging admission prices, running gift shops, or investing endowment funds. Likewise, public institutions often maintain stratified levels of accessibility and will open up the most exclusive levels only to their highest donors. Therefore, public institutions do act like for-profit business and private social clubs under certain circumstances. Nonetheless, I would argue that what is distinctive about the public institution in general, and what defines it as an organizational form, is the third method of resource acquisition: the voluntary donation that is made with no immediate or substantial trade-off. Neither of the other organizational forms can claim to have the ability to inspire support without offering something immediately in return.
Public Legitimacy

If public institutions are distinct in being able to attain these donated resources the question then becomes: what is the unique characteristic of these organizations that provides this access and that is missing from private organizations? I would argue that this characteristic is not necessarily observable within the public institutions themselves, but rather in their relationship to the outside population – a belief shared by a sufficient segment of that population that motivates them to support the institution. I term this characteristic public legitimacy. Public legitimacy can be defined simply as a belief among outsiders that an organization represents the public good. However, it is worth examining both the term “legitimacy” and “public” in some more detail.

A common term in sociology, legitimacy refers to either a status of acceptability or a process by which something becomes acceptable (Baumann 2007b; Johnson et al. 2006; Zelditch 2001), and it is probably best known from Max Weber’s (1968) discussion of “legitimate domination”. Yet, my use of the term legitimacy varies from the Weberian definition in one important respect. Whereas Weber argued that legitimacy allowed leaders to impose domination over a population, public legitimacy as I use it refers to the ability of an organization to inspire voluntary support among outside groups. Public institutions, particularly those in the cultural sector, rarely have the ability to demand support from outsiders – be they politicians, wealthy donors, or their clientele. Instead, they must adopt a variety of techniques aimed at inspiring voluntary support among enough people in order to sustain themselves.

As Weber (1968) has argued, authority cannot sustain itself by entering into a series of private exchanges with each individual actor. Instead it needs to foster an overall sense of acceptance that is widespread among a population. Thus, legitimacy (of the State or of
individual public institutions) typically appeals not to individual private interests, but rather a general sense of collective interest associated with a public (Habermas 1972; 1991). This public interest is collectively produced social interaction within a public sphere (Habermas 1991), rather than remaining unspoken, habitual, and tied to isolated individuals. Public interest may also motivate short term personal sacrifices such as making donations, paying taxes, or following laws, in order to realize longer term collective goals. Public institutions can achieve public legitimacy to the extent that they convince sufficient members of a public that they can help to achieve these goals. For cultural institutions, this typically relates to the production and dissemination of some form of culture that is valued as a public good rather than as a form of private consumption. As will be discussed, the requirement that they align themselves with public interest creates important restrictions on the forms of culture that public institutions can produce.

While we can distinguish between the private interests of individual actors and collectively produced public interests, we must also acknowledge that the public is fragmented and stratified. Publics are made up of various constituencies, each with their own unique understanding of the public good, and with different levels of power available to realize their version of the public good. This is particularly true within the cultural sector, since cultural preferences differ greatly across various lines of social cleavage (Bourdieu 1984). Zolberg (1986), for instance, has pointed out the “tensions of mission” that confront American art museums struggling to balance their commitment to connoisseurship of high culture on one hand, and to the democratic principles of inclusion on the other. As the support for museums has shifted from the upper class to the government, museums have felt pressure to shift from the former commitment to the latter. Thus, public institutions are as much defined by who accepts
their legitimacy (and offers support) as they are by why their legitimacy is accepted in the first place.

One possible objection to the notion of public legitimacy may be the observation that many of the donations made to public institutions are done in order to derive personal prestige rather than to contribute to any perceived greater good. In other words, donations are motivated by private interests rather than public. I agree with this statement, but would argue that the ability to derive personal prestige by associating with a public institution relies on the acceptance among a larger population that the donor is contributing to the public good. The necessity of public legitimacy to the functioning of public institutions is clear even if we adopt class-based approach. As mentioned above, a class-based approach argues that public institutions exist to recreate class divisions by fostering a sense of misrecognition that leads all classes to accept bourgeois tastes as superior (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1982). However, misrecognition is dependent on the fact that the activities of the public institution have achieved some widespread legitimacy. Without legitimacy, public institutions are revealed as bourgeois organizations serving their own interests. At this point they cease to be public institutions and, sociologically speaking, become little more than private social clubs. The existence of legitimacy allows social inequalities to become acceptable, naturalized, and therefore reinforced (Johnson et al. 2006:69-70).

Though far more could be said to flush out the concepts of “public” and “legitimacy”, it serves the purposes of this paper to assert that the organizational logic of the public institution revolves around strategies dedicated toward building public legitimacy. Public legitimacy is to public cultural organizations what profit is to private cultural producers: it sustains the organization’s ability to continue to act as a cultural producer. Without legitimacy, public
institutions must either transition to another organization form (i.e. privatize), or cease operation. Fully understanding why public cultural institutions produce the types of culture they do, therefore, needs to be understood as part of their broader task of building and renewing public legitimacy.

Building Public Legitimation

Studies of social institutions typically depict legitimacy as being taken-for granted or habitualized (Boin and Christensen 2008; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Berger and Luckmann 1966). Processes of legitimation are also seen as generally moving from explicit beliefs held by a few to implicit beliefs held by many (Johnson et al. 2006). This assertion, however, masks the constant negotiation that public institutions must engage in to maintain and build their public legitimacy. There are a few reasons for why organizations within the cultural sector in particular should not be seen as riding a silent wave of established public acceptance.

First, the legitimation of most public institutions is tied to their claim that they address important societal problems (Boin and Christensen 2008:275). Many public institutions make claims that are unambiguous and subject to large consensus. It is clear, for instance, why we need a medical system, social security, or correctional facilities. However, the justifications for public cultural institutions are often unclear and continually shifting. These institutions are often required to jump from one justification to another depending on their current projects, or even balance multiple justifications at once. The ROM and AGO expansions were supported by both a Liberal federal government and Conservative provincial government, but their support was justified for two different reasons. While the federal government was concerned with building national identity, the provincial government saw the projects as an economic development tool.
that contributed to tourism (Jenkins 2005). Thus, public cultural institutions cannot take their legitimacy for granted, and must often be nimble in adjusting their public profile as they shift from one group of potential supporters to the next.

Second, most public institutions, once established, gain a monopoly over the particular societal problem that they were designed to address. There is, for instance, only one police service or subway system. These public institutions can rely on the fact that they provide the only tangible or “lived” option for fulfilling their societal function, and possible alternatives are always speculative and risky. Cultural institutions, however, cannot claim such a monopoly. Not only do public cultural institutions compete against market-based and informal/amateur producers, they also compete against each other. Although public cultural institutions tend to fit into separate niches, their activities do overlap and they compete for visitors, exhibitions, and donations or grants.

Finally, the funding structure of public cultural institutions have changed substantially over the past few decades as annual government funding has been replaced with one-time grants and donations from a variety of sources. In the United States, the strong government backing of cultural institutions under the New Deal of the 1930’s was largely scaled back in the 1980’s (DiMaggio 1986b). As a result, public cultural institutions turned to public foundations and for-profit corporations for assistance (Alexander 1996b; Useem and Kutner 1986). In Canada as well, annual government funding for operational costs has seen a decline relative to one-time grants for special projects (Jenkins 2009). The implication of these funding changes is that public institutions often have to move from one funding source to the next, making explicit cases

---

1 Public cultural institutions in Toronto and elsewhere have increasingly pointed to the public good that cultural production can bring by stimulating tourism and economic development. This justification has been a response on the part of the institutions to the popularity of Richard Florida’s (2006) “creative class” thesis, which argues that cities with cutting edge cultural opportunities attract high-skilled migrants (i.e. the creative class).
for why they deserve support. Funding is tied to applications, which means that it is also tied to evaluation. This arrangement contrasts with other public institutions that receiving funding mainly in the form of annual operating budgets. Institutions such as these need only protect their existing budget and do not have to actively request funding from different sources.

For these reasons, the public legitimacy of cultural institutions cannot be seen as only implicit, habitual, and self-reinforcing. The need to constantly build and renew public legitimacy must be seen as part of the regular work that public cultural institutions do. It is also work that must be integrated into the general activities required to maintain a complex organization. This presents what Boin and Christensen (2008) call a “double challenge: [institutions] must build an effective way of working while maintaining (or gaining) the support of [their] stakeholders” (p.275). Public institutions are faced with many of the same practical challenges that face private cultural producers: meeting budgetary constraints, competing with other organizations over finite resources, and avoiding or overcoming political opposition. In many cases the solutions to these challenges can be construed as anti-public (e.g. raising admission prices or maintaining secrecy). Therefore, public institutions must maintain a careful balancing act between convincing outsiders that they are serving the public good, while adopting strategies to serve their own organizational interests. Identifying this dilemma suggests that research into public institutions would benefit from a Goffmanesque dramaturgical approach (Goffman 1959). The organizational logic of public institutions involves balancing their front stage work designed to continually build public legitimacy and attract public resources (the work that makes them unique from private organizations), with the back stage activities of sustaining a complex organization (which they share in common with private organizations).
Public Institutions as Cultural Producers

The organizational logic outlined above puts us in a better position to understand why the public sector tends to produce different cultural forms than the private sector. As I have already mentioned, the sociology of culture has demonstrated how the organizational logic of for-profit producers impacts their cultural products (e.g. Bielby and Bielby 1994; Griswold 1981). In the public sector, however, cultural production is not tied directly to profit. Instead it is tied to public legitimacy. What are the forms of culture that allow public institutions to build and maintain legitimacy? There are many ways to approach this question. In the reminder of this paper, I will examine a much smaller, but related question: why is there an affinity between public cultural institutions and high culture?

According to the class-based perspective on public institutions, high culture is essentially a product of the upper-class designed to reinforce inequality. Public institutions are the mechanisms that formalize and reinforce high culture (DiMaggio 1982). However, any given public institution does not create high culture from scratch. Instead, it must inherit cultural forms that lend themselves toward public legitimacy. Even the first American public institutions drew on the existing court culture of European aristocrats (Dowd et al 2002:38). Furthermore, even after the democratization and professionalization of public institutions in the 20th century (DiMaggio 1986a; Peterson 1986; Zolberg 1986), high culture continues to be a central form of cultural output. But why does high culture lend itself toward public legitimation? To answer this question, we must look briefly at the unique characteristics of high culture.

Of particular importance is the fact that high culture is often classified as “art” rather than as “entertainment” or “craft”. According to conventional Western ideology, entertainment and crafts are defined by the function they provide to private consumers. Art, on the other hand, is
conventionally believed to transcend function (Bourdieu 1984:32-33; Becker 1982:272-299; Peterson 2003). Art’s value is in its form. And though a clear definition of what makes art special has proven elusive (Bourdieu 1984; Baumann 2007a:4-7), its value is conventionally thought to have three qualities: (1) it is self-evident, (2) it is universal, and (3) it is able to bestow prestige on those with access to it. The self-evidence of art means that it cannot be said to derive value from any particular people or groups. The universal quality means that art can be appreciated by anyone across social cleavages and throughout history – provided they have the proper disposition. Finally, the ability to recognize, appreciate, and even create works of art is a source of social prestige. Thus, in contrast to the social constructionist perspective (Baumann 2007a:12-14), conventional understandings of art suggest that art lends status to people and not the other way around (Bourdieu 1984).

These qualities, which are absent for entertainment and crafts, allow art to be considered a public good. The production, collection, preservation, and experience of art are conventionally thought to benefit society as a whole. By establishing themselves as producers, collectors, and curators of art, public institutions are able to draw on the Western ideology of art to justify their own public legitimacy. This unique quality of art, I would argue, is why high culture has been and continues to be a dominant form of cultural production in the public sector and not the private sector. The relationship I have identified here (art providing legitimacy to institutions) is the reverse of DiMaggio (1982), who demonstrates how institutionalization produces the legitimation of art. This reversal reflects a difference of focus rather than a contradiction, since the legitimacy of art and cultural institutions is self-reinforcing. As Bourdieu (1993) would argue, the field of cultural production is a collective product of all cultural institutions. Any particular cultural institution, no matter how powerful, must work within the established rules of
the field – in this case, conventional Western ideologies of art. By reinforcing these rules, they reinforce their own base of power.

**Conclusion**

To briefly summarize, this paper has provided a theoretical model of the public institution based on a phenomenon that I call “public legitimacy”. I first argued that the sociology of culture lacks a sufficient model that defines what public institutions are, how they work, and what distinguishes them from other organizational forms. Examining the existing literature, I conclude that the organizational logic of public institutions is often reduced to some external factor: law, abstract notions of the public good, economic efficiency, or class interest. Departing from these approaches, as well as conventional beliefs that define public institutions according to communitarian or publicly-oriented interests, I have instead based my perspective on the resources available to public institutions. What distinguishes public institutions from private organizations is their ability to attract donated resources. These resources are provided by outsiders under the belief that they will be used by the institution to serve the public good. Organizations that have managed to foster this belief among a sufficient segment of the population are said to have gained “public legitimacy”.

Public legitimacy is to public institutions much like what profit is to for-profit corporations: it sustains their organizational existence. Public institutions, particularly within the cultural sector, cannot take public legitimacy for granted. Like profit-making, building public legitimacy requires constant work and negotiation. This work drives many of the organizational practices of public institutions. However, the “front stage” work involved in building public legitimacy must also be balanced with “back stage” work needed to maintain a complex
organization. This dynamic suggests that organizational studies of public institutions would benefit from adopted a Goffmanesque approach by focusing on how public institutions promote their publicly-oriented activities while hiding more self-interested strategies that may appear anti-public.

The paper concludes by looking at how public legitimacy helps us to better understand the role of public institutions as cultural producers. In particular I attempted to use public legitimacy to explain why there seems to be an affinity between public institutions and the production of high culture. I argued that high culture (or art) contains its own legitimacy that gives it a self-evident, universal value that can be recognized as a public good. By aligning themselves with art, public institutions are able to claim that they represent the public good. The affinity between public institutions and high culture is only one possible direction of inquiry, however. Identifying an organizational logic of the public institution not only allows us to fill some missing pieces into our current understanding of cultural production, it also opens up several empirical questions that are worth exploring. These questions include: (1) why do public institutions produce some cultural forms and not others, (2) under what conditions do certain cultural producers transition from public to private or the other way around, and (3) what impact does commercial activity have public legitimacy of a cultural producer?

As I mentioned in the introduction, the model I have presented in this paper is not necessarily limited to the cultural sector. It seems reasonable to assume that the same basic organizational logic underlies the practices of public institutions in sectors such as social services, science, education and environmental management. Though this assertion requires further verification, it is clear that even in neo-liberal times public institutions continue to play an
important role across all areas of social life and therefore deserve close sociological study. The model I have presented in this paper will hopefully advance this line of research.

Bibliography


