From Cultural Purity to Segregated Inclusion: Subscribers to the New York Philharmonic in the Gilded Age

von Shamus Khan

Lecture by Shamus Khan at Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies

This talk explores how cultural participation cemented the status of elites in late nineteenth-century America and how culture worked as an elite resource in that era. It is based on an analysis of a new database of subscribers to the New York Philharmonic including information on who subscribed to the Philharmonic between 1880 and 1910 - by many accounts a key period of upper class consolidation in the United States. The talk partly argues with the classic account of monopolization and exclusiveness of high culture, showing how over the long Gilded Age the social elite of New York attended the Philharmonic both increasingly and in more socially patterned ways. However, it also finds that the orchestra opened up to a new group
of subscribers who did not share the social practices, occupational background, or residential choices of more elite patrons. These new members were a group of cultured, non-elite subscribers. Their integration was facilitated by the fact that the two groups would not mingle within the hall, and lived in different parts of the city. The talk reflects on the implications of these findings for elite theory and cultural sociology.