

Motti Regev

Jennifer C. Lena, "Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music". Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, viii+242 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/77058)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2014

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book Review

Jennifer C. Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, viii+242 pp.

doi: 10.2383/77058

Classification of musical idioms and music-related socio-cultural phenomena has been for long a major object of study in the sociology of popular music. The reason is quite obvious to anyone even with the slightest interest in the field. Since mid Twentieth century at the very least, popular music manifests itself in the cultural field as an ever evolving and expanding repertoire of styles, sub-styles and sub-sub-styles, interconnected between them in intricate ways. Closely related to these are the numerous socio-cultural phenomena of collective behavior, which repeatedly emerge in close association to the production and consumption of specific musical styles. Various referred to as subcultures, scenes and, recently, aesthetic cultures, such phenomena gained much attention from popular music scholarship.

The notion of “genre” has been quite central to all the above. While in areas such as film and literary studies the term refers primarily to formal characteristics of the art works themselves, in the case of popular music it acquired a broader meaning. Given the link between musical styles and socio-cultural phenomena, genres in popular music came to be regarded as socio-cultural units encompassing a strong link between musical styles, communities of musicians and consumers, and corresponding practices.

Jennifer Lena’s book, *Banding Together*, is an ambitious and impressive attempt to offer a sociological analysis of genres in popular music – how they are constituted in relation to musical communities and what is their life-cycle, their social career. Throughout, Lena demonstrates a remarkable scope of knowledge in American popular music. Integrating it with a wide research body in cultural sociology, she delivers a delightful reading for sociologists who are popular music fans. The clear analysis, rich examples and insightful observations should make this book a staple in music sociology and indeed in cultural sociology as a whole.

The empirical core of *Banding Together* consists of two analytical steps, based on Lena’s extensive work on hip-hop, to which she adds research on bluegrass and bepop as well as ample expertise in the history of popular music at large. In the first step, Lena develops a classification of genre types in popular music. She identifies four basic forms of genres: avant-garde, scene-based, industry-based and traditionalist. The genre forms differ from each other along several parameters that pertain to their organizational, economic, social and cultural aspects. In the second step, Lena examines the trajectories of genre – that is, the shift in their characteristics and their transformation from one form into another.

Lena’s major finding is that genres in American popular music during the Twentieth century have followed two basic trajectories. Many, if not most genres of popular music have followed the more expected trajectory, one that takes them from the initial form of avant-garde to the scene-based form, and then to the industry-based form. Some of them have further transformed into the traditionalist form. Genres as diverse as be-

bop jazz, folk rock, salsa, and urban blues – to name but a few – have followed this full trajectory. Others, like extreme metal or house, for example, didn't evolve beyond the scene-based form. Yet another group of genres, like reggae or tango, started their trajectory at the scene-based form and then remained at the industry-based form.

A second trajectory, less frequent but nevertheless exemplified by prominent genres like soul and funk, is the one that begins with the industry-based form, and then transforms to the scene-based form and further to the traditionalist form. As Lena notes, this second trajectory is a surprise of sorts, because it contradicts in a way the romantic notion about artistic innovation being always associated with avant-garde or scene based forms of free creativity, before being “co-opted” by the industry. In other words, Lena demonstrates that creativity sometimes emerges from within the music industry. This last point exemplifies one of this book's merits – a sober sociological tone that avoids the sort of quasi evaluative nuances that often infiltrate into studies of this type. At the same time, however, as already mentioned, Lena succeeds in transmitting her expertise and enthusiasm for popular music.

For all its merits, *Banding Together* could have benefited from tighter integration of existing concepts and theories in cultural sociology and deeper engagement with broader sociological issues. The notion of genre, as developed by Lena, resembles in many aspects the well explored concept of field in Bourdieusian cultural sociology [see Pierre Bourdieu 1992, *The Rules of Art*. Cambridge: Polity; 1993, *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity]. Once genres are understood as positions in the field of popular music, it becomes obvious that the dynamics of genres' trajectories, analyzed so intricately and expertly by Lena, comply with those outlined by Bourdieu in his works on fields of cultural production. The trajectories of genres are in fact movements from autonomy to heteronomy (and *vice versa*), and reflect struggles over dominant criteria of evaluation in the field of popular music. While not fully acknowledging it, *Banding Together* in fact extends and applies to the field of popular music Bourdieu's insights about the dynamics and histories of cultural fields.

Moreover, genres could also be analyzed as sub-fields in themselves. When doing so, it becomes obvious that genres can exist, concurrently, in more than one form. That is, while some practitioners of the genre might shift their mode of creativity from scene-based to industry-based (moving to heteronomy), other might still stick to the scene-based form (staying in the autonomous pole of the sub-field). The historical trajectory of genres may also include re-invigoration of the avant-garde based form.

Finally, there is the “big” question of the exponential growth and diversification of genres in popular music – the basic phenomenon whose very existence seems to be taken for granted in this study. Why do genres constantly emerge and recurrently split and multiply in popular music? As I have indicated elsewhere [see Motti Regev 2013, *Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity] – echoing Bourdieu's notion of homology between field-specific struggles and the recurrent emergence of new class fraction, as well as DiMaggio's analysis of the correlation between ritual classification of art forms and status fragmentation of modern societies [see Paul DiMaggio 1987, “Classification in Art”, *American Sociological Review*, 52, pp. 440-455] – the ritualized and relentless diversification, as well as constant innovation of styles and genres in popular music should be sociologically theorized and researched in light of

the decomposition of late modern social formations into small and ever changing social units of life style groupings, and the quest of each one of them for cultural materials around which they can perform boundary work. While *Banding Together* does not take upon itself to address this issue, it certainly proves to be a significant contribution to a sociological understanding of the mechanisms through which genre transformations in modern arts fulfill such functions.

Motti Regev
The Open University of Israel