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The cultural hierarchy in funding: Government funding of the performing arts based on ethnic and geographic distinctions



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ABSTRACT

We construct a cultural hierarchy of arts organizations in Israel based on government funding, building on the premise that patterns of government funding of arts organizations over time represent priorities driven by cultural policy. We investigate how this hierarchy corresponds to the social hierarchy among ethnic and national groups and between the center and periphery, and whether changes in funding over time in the center and the periphery are differentially associated with the changing socio-demographic characteristics of Israeli society. Our data include public funding allotted to 32 arts organizations representing three performing arts domains: theaters, orchestras, and dance companies from 1960 to 2011. Our findings demonstrate that theaters are at the top of the funding hierarchy, orchestras in the middle, and dance companies receive the least funding. Significant differences in funding exist between organizations with different ethnic or national orientations such that the social hierarchy, in which Ashkenazim are more privileged than Mizrachim, and Mizrachim are more privileged than Israeli Arabs is reproduced in arts funding. Finally, the gap in funding favoring organizations in the center has been decreasing since the mid-1990s and funding trends have similar associations with economic and demographic changes in the societal makeup.

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1. Introduction

We contribute to the literature on public funding of the arts by depicting a hierarchy of arts organizations based on their governmental funding levels over time. More importantly, we ask whether this hierarchy corresponds to two major axes of stratification, namely ethnicity/nationality and geographic location. The link between the social hierarchy and the government funding hierarchy of arts organizations can take two forms. First, the funding hierarchy may correspond to the social hierarchy such that organizations associated with and producing legitimate, dominant culture and organizations in the geographic center of the country receive more funding (Bjørnsen, 2012; Donnat, 2003; Gilmore, 1993; Li, 1994). Alternatively, funding patterns could aim to modify the socio-cultural hierarchy by providing support to arts organizations that are associated with the underprivileged social strata. In this case, organizations from underprivileged and ethnic and national minority groups, and that are based in the periphery would receive more funding (Garfias, 1991; Kiwan, 2007; O'Hagan, 1998; Zuidervaart, 2011).

Israel is a particularly interesting setting for testing the correspondence between social divisions and cultural spending for several reasons. First, Israel is a young state where, for many years, governmental involvement in the arts was committed to nation building and held a formative role in promoting the hegemonic culture. Second, ethnic divisions between the dominant Ashkenazi community (Jews of European origin) and Mizrachi Jews who come from Arabic-speaking countries, as well as national divisions between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs are significant factors in Israeli society. Third, the geographic location of one's community in either the center of the country or the periphery plays a significant role in many areas of social life.

We investigate the implications of cultural policies using empirical data about the variations in public funding to 32 arts organizations in three performing arts domains over several decades. We focus on the performing arts as a special arts domain that is distinct from others such as the visual and media arts in its modes of creation, production, distribution and consumption (Chartrand, 2000). The performing arts have high production costs and a labor-intensive nature that makes them heavily dependent on external sources of funding, private and public (Baumol and Bowen, 1966; Towse, 2011). In Israel, as in many other countries, performing arts organizations are among the largest recipients of public funding.

We address three research questions. First, based on the allocation of government funding, what is the cultural hierarchy of arts organizations in Israel? Second, does this hierarchy correspond to the social hierarchy among ethnic groups and to the status of centrally located communities over those in the periphery? Third, is funding for organizations located in the center of the country and those located in the periphery similarly associated with various societal characteristics over time?

Our approach provides a unique way to both portray the cultural hierarchy that results from funding trends and examine the consequences of such a hierarchy for ethnic and geographic inequality. Our choice of the ethnic and geographic dimensions of social inequality is driven by the significant role of these two factors in structuring Israeli society. Other dimensions of inequality can be used in analyzing the cultural hierarchy in other countries and other contexts. We argue that our approach can be generalized beyond looking specifically at ethnicity and geographic location to studying the correspondence between the cultural hierarchy in funding and the social hierarchy along the axes dominant in specific contexts (e.g., nationality, language, religion).

2. Background

2.1. Ethnicity and arts funding

Promoting diversity in the cultural traditions of ethnic groups has become a stated goal of cultural policies in a number of Western countries, and the public funding of culture is one of the tools used to implement such policies (Bennett, 2001; Pankratz, 1993). Campaigns for public spending on ethnic art emphasize that such support is particularly instrumental in countering the traditional bias that favors European-derived forms of cultural expression (Kymlicka, 1995). Although there is scant research about public spending on the culture of ethnic minorities, some evidence suggests that fear of this bias

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