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## Review of Very Important People: Status and Beauty in the Global Party Circuit by Ashley Mears

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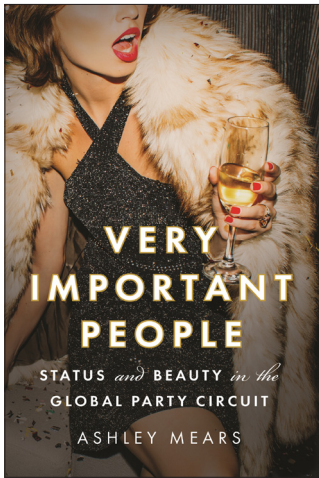
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Global Party Circuit

Conspicuous Consumption

Ethnography

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## REVIEW

**Ashley Mears.** *Very Important People: Status and Beauty in the Global Party Circuit.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. 328 pp. \$17.95/ €18.80 (paper) ISBN 978-06-9116-8654.

### **Alix Boirot**

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After analyzing the modeling industry in her previous book, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (2011), Ashley Mears now offers an ethnographic exploration of the VIP party scene across the globe, with New York as its center. She provides insights into the practices and customs of the global elite's leisure nights, into the ways they establish their social status and indulge in shared cultural experiences, and into the gendered dynamics around them. The book focuses on the stories of promoters, the young women who attend these parties with them (named "girls" by all the actors), and the wealthy men who seek to be surrounded by beautiful women.

It is important to note that Mears benefits from her particular position: she is one of the few sociologists in the world who can access this data thanks to her former model status. Indeed, as she points out, "Many VIP destinations are public spaces, ostensibly accessible to everyone. But by design, they are effectively closed off to all but the world's most privileged" (p. 36). Her immersion and involvement are intense since she takes on the role of a girl (to which she is sometimes brutally referred to, such as in the passage where a businessman who welcomes her into his Hamptons home makes it clear that she is not there because she is a writer but because she is a "hot girl" [p. 105]) on over one hundred different nights in seventeen different clubs in New York over eighteen months. The author succeeds in finding a good distance in her observing participation. She integrates, in a very appropriate way, the narrative and analysis of some moments that directly involve her, but far from the self-heroization that sometimes mars the exercise of the observing participant in difficult-to-access environments, she mostly remains in the background, letting the actors involved speak for themselves. In addition to her observations, she conducted forty-four interviews with thirty-nine promoters, twenty with "girls," and twenty with clients. Mears provides a convincing explanation of her position as a researcher and former model and the prominent role of promoters in her work. Promoters have socially fascinating and rare upward trajectories and are brokers at the junction between the different actors. Nevertheless, one can regret that the girls' point of view is not put forward more.

The book consists of a prologue, six chapters, a concluding chapter, and a research appendix detailing the methodology used. The organization of the chapters is mostly thematic but sometimes chronological as well. Because of the importance of time in Mears's research, the first chapter begins at 11:30 p.m., ending with Dre, one of the promoters, reflecting on the previous night. The following chapter, titled "Daytime," describes a typical day of several promoters. Placing the notes at the end of the book allows for ample commentary on sources and concepts that will satisfy specialists in the field without making it too cumbersome to read. Overall, this is an accessible sociology book that never sacrifices scientific rigor.

Mears spent a year and a half immersing herself in the elite global party circuit to write this ethnography. With remarkable empirical density, the text exposes the mechanisms that govern leisure consumption and production among the rich and provides a welcome analysis of the plurality of actors involved. She delves into the inner workings of VIP nightclubs, where promoters are paid to attract stunning young women, mostly models, to the clubs to lure men into spending exorbitant amounts on bottle service. Studying these VIP places, which attract mostly white and male elites, provides an excellent opportunity to examine the dynamics of masculine domination and white supremacy. Mears admirably shows how issues of race, gender, and class intertwine in her field. These “girls” are seen as a status symbol for men and a source of profit and standing for club owners. They provide promoters—usually men from working-class and/or ethnic backgrounds—with access to the club’s wealthy clientele, mostly white males, from which they believe they could establish valuable connections to obtain investments for their future projects, a largely illusory dream. Despite their centrality in this system, they receive relatively meager and fleeting benefits. They exchange their body capital for free drinks and dinner, the opportunity to party and have fun in a luxurious environment, and sometimes the hope that this VIP network will facilitate their career. As Mears writes, “The value of women’s labor, I would come to see, went disproportionately to men” (p. 103).

In the *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899), sociologist Thorstein Veblen showed that to demonstrate their superiority and display their wealth, members of the leisure class ostentatiously consume goods and recreational activities. Mears argues that by focusing on the question of “cultural capital” (a notion developed by Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [1979]) and its transmission, researchers have overlooked the issue of economic power that Veblen had emphasized. She situates herself in the continuity of Veblen’s work while updating it. Thus, while the nouveaux riches of Veblen’s leisure class went to great lengths to show that they did not have to work to earn money, in contrast, the wealthy bankers and businessmen Mears met during her investigation have little leisure time and are proud to accumulate numerous working hours. During these moments of relaxation in nightclubs, they engage in conspicuous waste. Mears shows, and this is one of the most exciting elements of her analysis, that contrary to what Veblen presented and what is commonly perceived, ostentation is not an inherent trait of wealthy people. Indeed, many actors and infrastructures are necessary to construct the conditions of this ostentation, which is, therefore, only spontaneous in appearance.

Mears assimilates this practice to a potlach (this is indeed the title of the chapter that examines it). The potlach consists of extravagant gifts and rituals and festive destruction of goods. Gifts and waste mark the domination of those who dispense them and materialize social hierarchy. The parallel is therefore quite relevant, but perhaps it should not have been pushed to the point of assimilation. First studied by anthropologist Franz Boas in various Amerindian communities at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the potlach designates a situated and standardized ritual institution. In his famous book, *The Gift* (1925), sociologist Marcel Mauss (Émile Durkheim’s nephew) compared the potlach to the kula observed by Bronislaw Malinowski in the Pacific Islands (*Argonauts of the Western Pacific* [1922]) and considered these systems of giving as total social facts, in other words, activities involving the whole group and having implication throughout society—in the religious, economic, legal, and political spheres. The use of this term

1. See, for example, Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (London: Picador, 1998).

undoubtedly serves Mears to lead the reader to take seriously the practices she describes. The parallel remains superficial, however, since not every wasteful ritual is a potlach. I think Mears could have been more specific in her use of this concept.

In the prologue, we wake up with Mears after several days of parties in a villa rented by wealthy men excited to lend the place to the group of model women to which Mears belongs, led by promoter Santos. This could be a book by Bret Easton Ellis, yet from the third page, the author introduces such notions as the gendered economy, ritual performance, the hierarchical system of prestige, and so on. <sup>1</sup>The tone is set, and Mears never stops brilliantly intertwining ethnographic narrative and sharp sociological analyses.

The first chapter, titled “We Are the Cool People,” is an introductory essay that presents the space and actors involved in this ethnography and introduces the key hierarchies of the VIP scene. By following promoter Dre on his night’s work, we meet the different protagonists of the VIP nightlife scene as well as the relevant locations. Mears takes advantage of this to summarize the book’s claims, which she then details in the following chapters. She begins with a brief but important reminder of the economic changes that have turned New York into a “destination for international millionaires, affluent tourists, and rich businessmen” and discusses how this change has affected nightclubs by putting VIP bottle service at the heart of their profits (p. 9). The VIP table and bottle service system was an additional service that the wealthiest paid for to avoid queuing, but it has become a means of ostentatious consumption. She then introduces the central actresses of this world: the girls. To be recognized as a VIP club, establishments must display as many young, tall, and thin women as possible, ideally fashion models, within the crowd of partygoers.

Promoters are paid up to one thousand dollars per evening to bring in girls. In exchange for their body capital, they are taken to dinners at fancy restaurants and are granted free admission and drinks at VIP nightclubs. Mears details the hierarchy of people in this world of VIP nightlife. This hierarchy is highly gendered. For women: authentic models (height and slenderness) are at the top; good-looking civilians (women who look like they could be a model) follow; and civilians or pedestrians (all other women are excluded from the category of “girls”) are at the bottom. There is also a hierarchy of men. At the very top are the “whales.” The term “whale” is derived from the casino industry, which refers to a wealthy gambler who places huge bets. In the world of nightclubs, it refers to people who spend tremendous amounts of money in one night, sometimes over one hundred thousand dollars. Then there are the celebrities. These two categories are also the ones who enjoy free entry, free drinks, etc. Next, there are affluent tourists and businessmen (this third category is the one that clubs profit from), followed by the “fillers” (those who are not rich or influential enough to have a table but look good enough to enter and add to the crowd). Finally, those who do not make it in are the “bridges and tunnels,” who may have enough money to buy a table but do not have the right look, as well as the “goons” and “ghettos” (lower-class and non-white people). VIP clubs have very few people of color, including girls, though Mears notes that a black model will always be preferred to a white woman who does not have the required physique. The subject of race is quickly broached here but becomes more central in Mears’s analysis of the clients (mostly wealthy white men) and promoters (mostly working class and many of whom are not white).

The second chapter focuses on the promoters. It shows the daily work that is necessary to attract girls to nightclubs (hence the title "Daytime"). Through scenes of active searches for girls, Mears portrays different promoters while explaining their strategies for finding girls and their different approaches to the profession. Spending afternoons in a black SUV parked in downtown Manhattan looking for new models, going directly to casting locations or having lunch at fashionable places and engaging with passersby, working their network and cultivating relationships with girls they already know: this part of the work, which Mears makes visible, takes a lot of time and energy. The description of a scene in which Malcolm mentors Trevor on how to recruit the correct type of girls for their promotions serves to explain the selection criteria as well as the work that promoters have to do to adjust their vision of beauty to conform to the key indicators of the VIP field: height, slenderness, youth.

In the third chapter, Mears explores the clients, their extravagant spending in nightclubs, and the infrastructure that enables and encourages it. Despite the disgust that repeated mention of the exorbitant sums paid on champagne by some clients in a single night (\$10,000, \$100,000) may provoke, Mears strives to bring the reader to consider the phenomenon in all its complexity and never passes moral judgment. She conducts a precise and convincing anthropological analysis of the super-rich's rituals of conspicuous consumption and demonstrates, for instance, how the size and quantity of bottles and girls around them allow them to display their status. In fact, not all the bottles are consumed, and the clients do not interact with the girls, who are sometimes too numerous and in too noisy an environment for that to be possible. The important thing is to be surrounded by an excess of girls as well as an excess of bottles. Waste is the hallmark of status for these mostly white rich men.

Mears notes that women who do not have a model-like physique are excluded from these spaces where contacts are made and information exchanged, meaning that these women are not only excluded from festive moments but also from business circles. The book largely focuses on the symbolic violence suffered by girls, who are objectified and lack the necessary information to benefit from the exchange of their own physical capital fully. A chilling scene in this chapter serves as a reminder that physical violence, the brute force of a man toward a woman, can happen at any time and anywhere. A wealthy man wants the girls around him to drink champagne straight from the bottle. One of them refuses; he violently grabs her chin and forces the \$1,700 bottle of champagne into her mouth. She swallows, chokes, and spits out some champagne. He turns away, ignores her, and starts to dance to the beat with his hands while looking at the DJ. Placed at the beginning of the chapter, amid mentions of the staggering amounts of money spent that night, this scene subtly reflects on gender-based violence within the analyzed ritual's description, though one may have wished for a longer development on the systemic violence of the VIP party scene.

Mears also examines the mechanisms that put clients in the right conditions to push them toward consumption and ostentation. VIP nightclubs leave nothing to chance and strive to pit clients against each other regarding the amounts spent, valorizing their clients' spending. The bottles are often served with sparkler fireworks, and sometimes the amount spent by a customer (several thousand dollars) is emphasized by the DJ on the mic. All the players judge this behavior as ridiculous, yet they participate in it (either by spending or enjoying the spectacle). In part, this is

because “clubs are spaces designed to sublimate people’s criticism of clients’ wasteful displays and refashion them as play” (p. 88). In this chapter, Mears also reminds us of the importance of senses and pleasures. These are not disembodied rituals that we witness; they involve dance, music, and the pleasure of feeling powerful, a pleasure that one client compared to drugs. The rituals of waste bring status and intense sensations of pleasure to the participants. However, it is rarely sexual pleasure since what is at play in the presence of girls is not the possibility of sexual activity but “the visible display of high-status femininity” (p. 97).

The fourth chapter is focused on the “girls.” At least, that is what it purports to be. However, the reader, who may already be impatient to finally hear the perspectives of the main protagonists in this system, may end up a bit frustrated. Indeed, while Mears, faithful to her desire to show all the players’ agency and perspectives, gives the girls a voice, this is too quickly dealt with and took far too long to be exposed. The first twenty-one pages of the chapter are devoted to men’s (clients’ and promoters’) visions of the girls and what they allow them to acquire. This vision and strategy have already been extensively explored in the previous chapters. In these pages, Mears sketches new interesting ethnographic scenes that could have found a place elsewhere or been pruned entirely.

The second half finally gives voice to the girls, and as elsewhere in the book, does so rather finely and by trying to expose the diversity and complexity of the situations. Mears first reveals the internalization of the male gaze by the girls. She is particularly interested in the stigma of prostitution that weighs on the girls, which drives some girls to call other women “sluts” to distance themselves from the stigma. They display their lack of sexual interest during nightclub outings as proof of their morality. Aside from the figure of the prostitute, another category of negative thought governs the world of girls: that of women. Women are too old to go out. Partying after thirty is considered pathetic; it is desperate women who have not found men and will soon be too ugly to seduce one who continue to go out. Mears notes that some girls find the double-age standard—which does not exclude men over fifty but excludes women over thirty—to be unfair. Mears shows that, unlike other actors, most girls do not cultivate their social capital. They do not seek to do so because they know they are not in a position to do so: they are not taken seriously. Mears explains that access to the VIP scene can allow some to learn the tastes and manners of the global elite and can help them penetrate this world later, but she still insists on the homogeneity at work in this milieu. What she calls “girl capital” does not benefit girls but men. As she points out, “The unequal ability of one person to capitalize on another is a classic measure of exploitation in [Karl] Marx’s terms” (p. 141). Mears notes that, like other forms of women’s labor (domestic work in particular), this exploitation is hidden under the guise of “non-work” and, in this case, masked by fun. Yet many accounts from her fieldwork reveal the limits of fun for girls: they must stay at the promoter’s table and show that they are having fun, even if they are tired or not in the mood. Promoters deploy many tactics to encourage them and even publicly reprimand them if the girl wants to leave anyway. They cannot go to the club of their choice or with a competing promoter.

It is only on page 144 that Mears finally asks the terrible question, “Why do women consent to being exploited?” Unfortunately, she settles the matter in just four pages: “getting high, having sex with good-looking men,” and having “a sensual break from the rest of their lives”; overcoming a breakup; getting access to refined wine and food, exclusive destinations, and high-profile

2. Nicole-Claude Mathieu, "Quand céder n'est pas consentir: Des déterminants matériels et psychiques de la conscience dominée des femmes, et de quelques-unes de leurs interprétations en ethnologie," in *L'Arraînement des femmes, essais en anthropologie des sexes* (Paris: EHESS ed., 1985), 169–245; Nicole-Claude Mathieu, "When Yielding Is Not Consenting: Material and Psychic Determinants of Women's Dominated Consciousness and Some of Their Interpretations in Ethnology," pt. 1, *Feminist Issues* 9, no. 2 (1989): 3–49; and Nicole-Claude Mathieu, "When Yielding Is Not Consenting: Material and Psychic Determinants of Women's Dominated Consciousness and Some of Their Interpretations in Ethnology," pt. 2, *Feminist Issues* 10, no. 1 (1990): 51–90

events; and being chosen for that (p. 144). These are all very plausible reasons, but they deserved to be expanded on. Such elaboration would have been welcome not only from a scholarly perspective but also from a symbolical one in that it would have allowed to finally give voice to these objectified girls and fully restore their subjectivity. Unfortunately, the book partly fails in that regard. Moreover, even though she emphasizes it in the next chapter, Mears could have stressed more the question of the unequal sharing of information, knowingly orchestrated by men to keep women out of their profitable system. From this point of view, the admirable essay by French anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu, "When Yielding Is Not Consenting," for which an English translation is available, would have allowed Mears to extend and enrich her analysis.<sup>2</sup>

In the fifth chapter, Mears explains the hidden work behind the appearance of leisure. She also shows how promoters weave their influence, even their grip, on the girls, which is suggested by the title "Who Runs the Girls?" Mears reveals in detail the daily work done by promoters to maintain relationships with the girls and cultivate what she calls "strategic intimacies." They accompany them to castings, invite them to lunch or bowling games, and flirt with them. Promoters deploy a lot of energy and time not only to build these relationships but also to make them appear social and intimate rather than purely economic. As Mears writes with particular bite, "Exploitation works best when it feels good" (p. 154). Promoters present themselves as friends. Still, the girls are not fooled by the ongoing economic exchange (even though they tend to vastly underestimate the money involved). In addition to this work of connection, promoters must motivate a certain number of girls daily to accompany them to their dinner and nightclub events. They send messages to all their contacts and even call them. They also obtain the numbers of agency-run apartments. Many models who have just arrived in New York have little money and do not know anyone, which puts them in a vulnerable position. Beginner models are not always paid to walk in shows (or are paid in clothes), and some are already happy with the prospect of a free meal. The dinner and attention are exchanged for the "support" of the girls, meaning their commitment to accompany them to a nightclub. However, the girls never receive cash, which would destroy the appearance of non-work and associate them with prostitutes. Mears, always concerned with balance, nevertheless wants to show that some connections seem sincere. She takes the opportunity to present a stimulating development on the question of friendship, the fiction of its purity, and the reciprocity that builds relationships. Paola Tabet's work on economic-sexual exchange and Sebastien Roux's study of the effects of prostitutes in sex tourism could have further nourished this analysis from the perspective of the relationships woven around a financial relationship.<sup>3</sup> She concludes this chapter with two small thematic sections: one on the question of control (of the table space, of the girls' bodies—especially through the imposition of wearing high heels—and of their departure times), which is not uninteresting but a bit redundant. The other is more informative and details the costs incurred by promoters and girls to access nightlife.

The book's sixth and final chapter discusses the promoters' ambition to access flourishing businesses and to become extremely rich, to access the same positions as their clients. Most come from low-income families, and many are of foreign origin. Their social ascension is already a statistical anomaly. However, their dreams are met with a glass ceiling. They are identified as outsiders based on their race and social class. Indeed, they put businessmen in contact with each other (and do not receive a commission for it), but they are not involved in

3. Paola Tabet, "Through the Looking-Glass: Sexual-Economic Exchange," in *Chic, chèque, choc: Transactions autour des corps et stratégies amoureuses contemporaines*, ed. Fenneke Reysoo and Françoise Grange Omokaro (Geneva: Graduate Institute Publications, 2012), 39–51; and Sébastien Roux, *No Money, No Honey: Économies intimes du tourisme sexuel en Thaïlande* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011).

their clients' affairs. Like with the girls, they enjoy presenting the transactional relationship with the wealthy men they associate with (bringing girls and earning commissions on bottle orders) as friendships. The clients do not see this relationship as friendly. As Mears explains, "It set up asymmetrical expectations between the two parties: clients expected fun and short-term contact, while promoters expected long-term ties with economic-mobility opportunities" (p. 225). The final scene is striking. Santos, a black promoter with dreadlocks, accompanies Mears to the train station. On the train, her neighbor, a local businessman living in Cannes, a regular at nightclubs where he often runs into Santos, asks her, "Is he a pimp, you know, trafficking women?" (p. 234). It perfectly illustrates the limits of the social capital acquired by promoters, which they cannot transform into social status.

As is often the case when dealing with leisure (sports or tourism, for example), the subject may seem superficial at first glance. However, through this book, Mears raises essential questions beyond trendy discotheques' walls. Issues of class, race, and gender are intertwined in this description of the spaces and relationships formed within VIP nightclubs. The book does not always avoid redundancy in its demonstration. However, Mears delivers a very rich ethnography of a world that is extremely difficult to penetrate and endeavors to restore the points of view of a maximum of actors in all their complexity by presenting a nuanced analysis of the dynamics of power that bind them. In sum, this book makes an invaluable contribution to research on festivities; the work behind them; and the issues of gender, class, and race that they raise.



## AUTHOR BIO

**Alix Boirot** is a postdoctoral researcher with the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (Inserm) at Aix-Marseille University. She received her PhD in social anthropology from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), in Paris. Her dissertation, based on deep ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Spanish seaside resort of Lloret de Mar, focused on the construction of masculinity/ies through party tourism. She now studies bartenders and their relationship to alcohol and is increasingly involved in public health research (health literacy, addictions, etc.).

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