

INTERVIEWS

Interview with Ashley Mears, author of *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model: “Things May Look Great and Glamorous on the Outside, but There is Much More Work behind This”*



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Abstract

Ashley Mears is an associate professor in the Sociology Department and the Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies Program at Boston University. In her studies, Dr. Mears focuses on the nexus of culture and markets. In her teaching and research, she generally explores how people assign value to things and focuses on how gender, race, and class in equities inform the production and evolution of culture.

Dr. Mears' first book, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (2011) was widely recognized not only in academic circles, but also with popular readers. The book is devoted to sociological inquiry into the fashion-model business. Modeling is a specific kind of market in which careers depend on judgments about individual appearance. Based on ethnographic work and interviews, the book uncovers how the modeling industry produces value from female bodies and beauty. The review of *Pricing Beauty* was published in the *Journal of Economic Sociology* in 2014 (15 (5): 113–122).

Her current research is focused on how the VIP leisure and party scene operates as a global market. Based on ethnographic observations and a series of interviews, Dr. Mears examines how elites use different repertoires of symbols, values, and practices to signal status among each other.

In the following interview, Dr. Mears speaks about current changes in the fashion industry, the new politics of diversity, and feminist research practices and methodology. She also reveals details from her upcoming new book.

Dr. Mears was interviewed by Tamara Kusimova, a research assistant and a sociology master's student at the Laboratory for Studies in Economic Sociology in Higher School of Economics, Moscow.

Keywords: fashion industry; aesthetic commodities; fashion model; cultural perspective; elite; cultural reproduction.

— I am really pleased to have this conversation with you. First, could you tell us about yourself—your background and how you decided to complete these undoubtedly complicated research projects?

— Well, I was a fashion model in college. I was only modeling part-time, and I was not really sure what I would be studying. I took a course in the sociology of

work and occupations, and we were reading ethnographies, including Erving Goffman's, works by people who had been studying the micro dynamics of occupations in everyday life. I was thinking that in the sociology of work, somebody really should do a study on fashion modeling. I was working as a model, and it is fascinating as a second job. The early idea that I could continue studying sociology came in a conversation with my professor in college. Basically, I became a sociologist through fashion modeling.

— Your first book was published in 2011. Since then, many things in the modeling industry have changed. For example, there has been a major shift toward diversity in the industry, and I'm talking here not only about the diversity of skin color, but also the diversity of clothing and body size as well. Have you noticed any of these changes yourself?

— Actually, no. Not with regard to racial inclusion and diversity. Pretty much every Fashion Week, reporters call me with the same set of questions: "Why are there so many white models on the runway? Why are they so thin? Why are they so young?" And this really has not changed in high editorial fashion modeling, with the exception of one aspect of diversity: gender. There was a move toward inclusion of trans-models, trans-women, and trans-men. Very few people make it in the high ends of the fashion modeling industry, but it creates some great opportunities for inclusion across other fashion markets. There are now modeling agencies specifically for trans-models in New York, which is really interesting. The racial diversity is not changing very much, at least not at the editorial part of the market. It is still like a token inclusion of a couple of non-white models. There may be a greater increase in Asian models, however— particularly Chinese models. I don't have the data, but my colleague is making a database on the fashion models by their ethnicity and name, and there is definitely a rise in Chinese names. You know, it is like one suggestion on the way it may change.

— Despite the movement toward diversity, all these girls are still tall and skinny. In your first book, there was an idea that those changes are something superficial and that the industry itself remains conservative and rigid at its core. Is this idea still relevant for the industry?

— Yes, sure.

— In the beginning of *Pricing Beauty*, you mention that the process of searching for new faces, either for commercial or editorial fashion, became quite difficult with the development of new technologies. Every girl or boy can send his or her snapshots to agencies through email, eliciting millions of new faces. Did it become even more complicated with the invention of Instagram? Several agencies in Russia now require their models to manage their Instagram accounts regularly.

— It is the same in New York. When an agency represents a model on a website, it will have her portfolio pictures and also the link to her Instagram account. It is a complete transformation. On one hand, it opens up access for many people who before had no opportunity, maybe because of living in not-so-preferable locations or something else. They now can be noticed. And yet, now people can create their own following and attract notice. There are a couple of famous cases of models who did this. Kate Upton is a good example. She was probably the first model who took this path from YouTube to commercial modeling. She became a celebrity first, then signed with an agency. But still, her success also was coming down to whether Anna Wintour would put her on the cover of *Vogue*. While it seems like a radical transformation, it is certainly more work on behalf of models to manage and curate their Instagrams. In terms of the labor, there is much more work. Every moment of your life is now "being a model" and show casing that you are a model. It is an intensification of the labor of models. The radical potential that Instagram had to influence casting directors, intermediaries, photographers, and models did not happen. The power of the industry was just confirmed because there are so many people in the spotlight who are gatekeepers, and they're now more important than ever.

— **Those girls who first become celebrities are largely criticized because they're not “true models”—because they are a little more diverse than regular girls in the modeling business. They're viewed as “girls from Instagram,” but not “models.”**

— What is a true model? Someone discovered by industry insiders. People there have that power, and they don't want to give it up to Instagram followers.

— **You've mentioned that you have conducted interviews and observations with Russian modeling scouts. Could you tell me more about this experience?**

— This was a project that came up after I finished my fieldwork. I was friends with several Russian models, and they told me many interesting stories about how they were recruited by a couple of scouts who found them in peripheral places. I interviewed one of these scouts, who is quite well-known; his name is Alexey Vasiliev. He discovered Natalia Vodianova. I started to conduct interviews with people like Alexey and others who work for agencies as scouts, and some people who are bookers and scouts in their free time. I became very interested with the question of how the scouts recognize talents and new faces and how the whole process is organized. I went with Alexey to Ekaterinburg for a modeling contest, and we went to all the small agencies. He was taking pictures of the girls, watching them walk. He was incredibly thorough with the work, and I realized that his thoroughness is something more than just checking whether these girls have potential. He actually knows it right away. He can look at a girl and say “yes” or “no” instantly. It only takes him a few moments to assess a model's potential, but he spends a lot of time with every single model because he wants to build the relationship with the modeling agency, as it is important to have these contacts and relationships. If he gets a good girl, he can send her to major modeling agency and make a commission. The process is more about relationships between the agents, and also between the scouts and models' parents. In Russia, there is a strong association with prostitution and escorting. Many parents are unwilling to send their daughters off to become models because in popular opinion, it is sometimes associated with prostitution. Many model scouts try to build ties and gain these parents' trust. I just finally got this work published as a research paper. It is very informative, but maybe not so good in terms of enough samples, maybe because of the language barrier.

— **Thank you. Speaking about the models in Russia, have you found any significant differences between aspiring models in Russia and the U.S.?**

— I don't think it could be a necessary cultural difference regarding their work. Coming down to nationality, I think that the biggest determining factor in a model's orientation toward her work is her socio-economic background. Because so many models are recruited from lower economic communities, like Natalia Vodianova, they don't have that many economic opportunities. If you don't have many economic opportunities, modeling can be an incredible pathway toward upward mobility. You know, the models who are recruited from lower economic classes, they get the opportunity to travel, learn English and other languages, and earn money. For them, it is an incredible opportunity, so you may expect those models to be more hard-working because they may not have any other options. It is not that Russian models are more hard-working than the American ones, but models who come from lower economic rungs are more hungry, more willing to seize their opportunities than middle-class models. Middle-class Russian models will be more like middle-class American models than like models from lower classes. But there are also differences in age. Models are usually scouted very young across the world, not only in Russia, but also in Latin America. In the U.S., there are also very young girls, and it is a different kind of scenario than those who are a little bit older, you know.

— **Many models are still very young. Is there no diversity in age?**

— New York finally passed some state legislation that models under 18 years old must comply with federal child labor laws. New York had been exempt from that law. It means that models under 18 must not work past

midnight on school nights, and so on. That law has made it more difficult to hire women under 18, but that still is quite young to be a model for women's wear. Generally, I don't see much of a shift.

— Your current research is focused on the VIP leisure and party scene. Will you please tell us something about your new upcoming book, its main ideas, and theories that have inspired you?

— I was reading Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, written in 1899. I first read it in college, then I read it once again more recently before I started the project, and it fascinated me, especially the idea of how women are used by men to convey a man's status. For example, women had to wear very impractical dresses in the 19th century as an indicator that they were of high socio-economic status, with wealthy husbands to ensure they don't have to work. I became very interested in the idea of how women can transmit a man's status. This idea is very strong in my new project. Another classic book that I rediscovered is Marcel Mauss' *The Gift* because so much of the nightlife economy works as a circulation of gifts. I was interested in the phenomenon that some people get free stuff, with certain people getting more free stuff than others. For example, celebrities are always getting gifts, but it is also true about corporate elites, as they get "frequent flyer" cards, loyalty points, and so on. This Mauss' book was very influential in this project.

— Could you provide a brief snapshot of the lives of girls who are travelling around the party scene? As they position themselves on Instagram, they all appear to have beautiful, glamorous lives. What is behind the curtain, i. e., the front scene (as Erving Goffman says)?

— Actually, it is similar to my experience as a fashion model. People usually assume that models earn tons of money and have a very glamorous life. Indeed, some models can make a lot of money and have a lot of fun, but if you look at the distribution of income, it is a "winner-take-all" industry. The same thing with party girls. Instagram, naturally, by its design, captures the best-looking moments. Nevertheless, this kind of job is a very precarious one, especially if they are going out the way I went out, which was with promoters. Promoters are brokers who work on a contract basis for a nightclub or for clients around the world to organize parties. There are big parties all over the world, and promoters organize the flights and housing, then ensure that the girls show up. I mean, it is precarious because models who are not paying for their transportation, they have to rely on somebody else. They cannot live on their own. They tend not to eat at the places they're choosing. If they're sick, they still have to go out. Here's an example from my fieldwork: I worked at Cannes, a very glamorous place. In the peak summer season, it is a jet-setter destination, and people are spending thousands of dollars on champagne they don't even drink in these luxurious nightclubs. The girls are working in these places, but they come home at the end of the night with the promoter and sleep on air mattresses—four unemployed fashion models in one room and so on. It may sound great, like you are going to a villa in Cannes, but the reality is some very little air mattress with a bunch of 20-year-olds. So, it looks great on the outside, but like most things that look glamorous, there is much more work behind this.

— Can the party scene be seen as a kind of market?

— Well, people often talk negatively about nightlife as being like a "meat market" because of hook-ups and heterosexual interest, in which men spend money, and women are available. Nevertheless, there are certain exchanges that happen. From one perspective, women exchange their beauty for access to a world that can be incredibly funny, and they also enrich their social contacts. Party girls usually meet each other and tend to make very close contacts and friendships with one another, and that is important. They develop friendships with promoters, which also is crucial. They develop relationships with wealthy men, and there is a potential for these women to meet wealthy men, but that is more the exception than the norm. What was more common, because I've interviewed the men who were in the industry, is that most people understand that girls who attend these parties are like a pool of hook-ups more than a pool of wives. These are women to have fun with,

but not serious women—certainly not women to do business with, but the same men who go to these parties sometimes visit them with business associates, and the women are cut out of that. I think that as a market, sure, women may get something out of this, but the nightlife economy basically works to generate a huge amount of profit that is largely controlled by men, often the club owners. Or they open a pathway for promoters' upward mobility, who are also almost entirely men. It fosters many connections among wealthy men, the clients of these clubs. So, in terms of exchange, it is always less favorable economically for women.

— Is the party scene more diverse than the modeling scene?

— It depends on which party scene you are talking about. For example, New York is quite a diverse place, but Moscow is not. In places like New York, there is a huge ecology of different niches. There are, like, hip-hop clubs, which are more open to black elites, then you've got clubs that are more for college kids. There is a very big gay scene, some Asian clubs, Korean karaoke clubs, and so on. There is something for everybody in New York. But at one scene in another country I was investigating, one of the most exclusive VIP scenes, which operates with real fashion models, it is mostly white—mostly white clients and white women. But the promoters in the clubs there, you see more racial diversity, especially more black men. You see black men disproportionately doing the job of the promoters, and that looks very interesting.

— Can we consider working in such precarious circumstances as a kind of exploitation?

—There are two different ways to think about exploitation here, and I think that with fashion modeling, it is also good to think about it as well. In kind of a classic Marxist sense, exploitation is the condition in which somebody has a greater opportunity to capitalize on somebody else's labor power, and somebody extracts the surplus from that because that person's in a weaker position and just can't seize the opportunity, and their structural position doesn't allow them to capitalize on themselves. And in those terms, absolutely, the party scene is where men appropriate the surplus from women's beauty and bodies, and the profit disproportionately goes into men's hands because they control the system. This also works for fashion. If you look at most owners and at stakeholders who hold the power in major fashion conglomerates, or owners of model agencies, the power disproportionately goes to men. That is definitely exploitation. On the other hand, there are some other meanings. If we assume that exploitation is something that feels really bad, that makes you feel like you're being used, then the scene is not so evidently oppressive. The girls in my research on the party scene, as well as many girls in interviews on fashion modeling, would say, "This is not an exploitation; this is really fun!" It may be totally empowering to be in St. Tropez, to be on the catwalk, you know, the emotional thrill or the subjective feeling may be totally empowering and personal. But if you think about an exploitation as a structural outcome, then, for sure, this is exploitation.

— This is a very controversial question, whether those industries can be regarded as a sector of exploitation, because some regard them as a sector of empowerment, especially if we are speaking about power in non-binary, conceptual systems, like the Foucauldian one.

— I haven't used Foucault because he is a bit out of fashion now. Anyway, yes, you are right, the productive potential of power is a really good frame.

— You once mentioned that women can join the party scene in search of opportunities. Could you please tell us a little bit more? Which opportunities can they obtain?

—Yes. Well, they can seize some opportunities, although it would not work out very well if they don't work as promoters...Some of the women whom I've interviewed, they had this knowledge or sense that in the party scene, there are very valuable connections to be forged. There are very wealthy men whom they can partner

with, people with job opportunities. They knew that these kinds of powerful people are in the room. For most, though, they did not have a clear strategy on how to act or any knowledge to make those ties -- especially compared with promoters, who had a very clear plan, e. g., “In five years, I am going to get an investment and open my own club,” etc. This is like a standard strategy for a promoter. The girls did not have this clear strategy. They knew they could meet high-powered people, but they didn’t have the sense of what they would be useful for. They didn’t really have a sense that these kinds of people would help them. They didn’t have confidence to create empowering ties. I interviewed 20 women, and only two claimed they actually have leveraged contacts to find some kind of an opportunity, and it is nothing in comparison with the promoters. Every single promoter was talking about all the opportunities they would gain from their social ties. If we remember that most of the promoters are men, we can see that there is a gender difference in the utility of the party scene.

— **Thank you very much for the information about your upcoming book. There was kind of a major shift toward feminism and women’s rights in public discourse. Has it affected your research agenda?**

— In the U.S., it can be very different from working in Russia. Certainly, in my department and in my circles, there is plenty of attention paid to gender as a social structure or how things play out differently for men and for women.

— **How do you view your research: is it a feminist research?**

— Yes, sure. Without feminist approaches, my topic would be completely marginal. Also, I use a certain kind of methodology that is deeply informed by personal experience, and I shape my questions based on personal experience. That is a very feminist approach to knowledge. I try to reflect on and ground my analysis in who I am, what kind of experiences I have had, and what kind of position in the social structure allowed me to see the world. That comes with self-critiquing and recognizing that your own grounded experience is actually a very feminist strategy.

— **Could you name some sociological works that inspired you most in your career?**

— It is funny because you’ve mentioned Foucault, and maybe one of the reasons I got into sociology was because of *History of Sexuality*. This book transformed how I thought about knowledge and its production. That work also has been very useful for feminist theorizing on the body, which is very close to the things I do in my work. Thinking about how the body itself and regulations on the body come into being itself as a political and contested process. That was a huge book for me. In grad school, works by Viviana Zelizer interested me in economic sociology. I took a course with Zelizer at Princeton. I was at NYU, and she let me into her seminar. Prior to taking that course, I was very much into queer theory by Judith Butler, and I tried to think about fashion modeling as a process of embodiment. It was Zelizer who got me to thinking that the modeling business actually is a kind of market, and that we can see parallels with other markets, like sports, arts, cultural industries, etc. Through her mentorship, I came to see my projects more as valuing the body and beauty, as economic and cultural questions of worth. Zelizer helped ground me in sociology because prior to her influence, I was more into cultural studies. Her book *The Purchase of Intimacy* would be the one that really influenced me. And, of course, Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction* helped me think about the big difference between editorial and commercial modeling, and to think in terms of social fields. This is a great book that gives you empirical material to see how fields operate, and field theory is one I use too.

— **When will your new book come out?**

— I am going to finish it in December, so it will probably come out by the end of next summer.

— **Thank you very much for the interview.**

Interviewed by Tamara Kusimova

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