

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Annette Lareau and Dalton Conley, eds.,** *Social Class: How Does it Work?* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008. 329 pp. \$US 42.50 hardcover (978-0-87154-506-0)

*Social Class: How Does it Work?* makes significant theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions to the study of inequality and social class. Annette Lareau and Dalton Conley have assembled a collection of qualitative and quantitative papers (originally presented at a 2006 conference at New York University) from distinguished scholars such as Erik Olin Wright, Michael Hout, and John Goldthorpe, along with more junior sociologists, and three New York journalists.

The book's first section considers conceptions of social class. In the introduction Lareau defines the problems the book addresses, and champions the concept of class. According to her, the tendency of sociologists to specialize in subfields prevents them looking "horizontally" to see broader patterns. Lareau also points to confusion around how best to define and measure social class, which creates "considerable murkiness" for empirical study. To remedy these problems, the book looks for evidence on the viability of the concept of class by looking across multiple spheres of social life, assesses the array of definitions of class, and examines the difficulties inherent in empirical research on social class.

Michael Hout persuasively argues that social class remains salient. Using data from the General Social Survey, he argues that "people's answers to simple questions" correlate with "what they do for a living and what they have." In contrast, David Grusky and Kim Weeden argue that the class model is in decline, as economists and sociological subdisciplines embrace other measures of inequality. They urge scholars to opt for measures that adequately capture the structure of inequality, rather than those based on tradition or theoretical affiliation.

The second section of the book offers eight strong chapters analyzing life chances, and how social class works in daily life. John Goldthorpe and Michelle Jackson use quantitative data since 1974 to conclude that class background continues to play a significant role in determining educational outcomes for British youth, over and above academic performance. In a follow-up study to Lareau's 2003 *Unequal Childhoods*, Lareau and Elliot Weininger demonstrate the advantages accruing to middle-class students, whose parents actively assist them in the labyrinthine

college admission process. The updated qualitative data provide a rich, detailed glimpse at the lives of these young adults, revealing the stark continuation of differences between how working class and poor parents raise children, and how middle class parents do. Working class and poor parents continue to see their children's schooling as the school's responsibility, and while they badly want their children to attend college, lack of informal knowledge about the higher education system means that they are unable to translate this desire into concrete gains for their children.

Karyn Lacy and Angel Harris, and Mary Pattillo explore the intersection of social class and race in their chapters on African American adolescents' racial-identity development, and the exclusion of marginalized groups in Chicago neighbourhoods, respectively. Leslie McCall takes on the connections between social class and gender in her chapter on inequality among women. Expanding opportunities for women in recent decades have been unequally distributed across class lines, but gender has not given way to class, as "inequalities among men and women are qualitatively different if quantitatively similar." She concludes that gender and class inequalities should be examined simultaneously. Dalton Conley shows the transmission of advantage by studying socioeconomic outcomes among siblings, while Richard Carpiano, Bruce Link, and Jo Phelan identify clear links between higher levels of social class and good health. Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks examine how class matters in politics.

Three short chapters in the final section of the book are written by journalists; squarely rooted in the New York City context, they may be less useful to Canadian scholars. The other two chapters are essential reading, however. Erik Olin Wright contributes an inventory of six "important general questions for which the concept of class often figures centrally in the answers." While the most prominent question tackled by sociologists is "What explains inequalities in life chances?" Wright argues that more weight should be given to exploring causal mechanisms of class-based opportunity hoarding, and domination and exploitation. His chapter should be required reading for sociologists studying social class.

In the concluding chapter, Conley urges readers to read between the lines of the book, in order to see the role played by aspects of social class that evade measurement: expectations, possibilities, aspirations. Conley reminds us that despite the efforts of scholars to measure social class, it is elusive. Just when we think we are measuring some aspect of class adequately, "we have taken our finger off what class really is"; its essence is virtually impossible to measure. Conley encourages readers to keep

the tension between what can be measured and what resists measurement in mind as they read the volume.

*Social Class: How Does it Work?* is an excellent addition to the literature on social class. It is an ambitious and sophisticated book, not for the faint of heart. Lareau and Conley are dedicated to opening a dialogue among scholars about the value and utility of the concept of social class, and have crafted this book to be accessed as a whole. More than most edited collections, many threads weave the book together, and the authors appear to be having a genuine, engaging conversation about social class. It is not designed for readers to quickly parachute in and move on: skipping to the chapter whose substantive research topic interests you most may leave you feeling as if you have walked in on a conversation already in full swing.

This book is a particularly good reference for sociologists studying inequality, stratification, methods, or theory, as Lareau and Conley expertly bring salient concepts and questions to the fore. It is a vital resource for working through the nebulous concept of social class to observe and measure it in the real world. It should be required reading for graduate students and their supervisors alike.

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