

Social Class: How Does It Work?, edited by Annette Lareau and Dalton Conley, New York, New York, Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2008, 388 pp., \$42.50 (hardcover), ISBN-978-0-87154-506-0

Rarely are edited volumes comprised of such consistently strong and interesting chapters as are those included in this collection. Grappling with the complexity of the conceptualization and operationalization of social class, as well the underlying mechanisms of how social class functions, the sociological contributors offer a wide range of perspectives.

Michael Hout examines the role that subjective and objective conceptualizations of class play in how social class works. John Goldthorpe and Michelle Jackson problematize the ideology of the U.S. as an education-based meritocracy. Dalton Conley tackles the issue of different social class outcomes for siblings, explicating how families transmit advantages to some members over others. David Grusky and Kim Weeden offer a comprehensive framework for scholarship on social class.

One feature of the collection often absent in scholarly work on cultural differences is the inclusion of authors that tackle the topic of intersectionality. Mary Pattillo's chapter on race and social class is a fascinating examination of Chicago neighborhood politics and the strategies used by different groups to exclude marginalized others. Karyn Lacy and Angel Harris examine social class differences in the racial identity development of African American adolescents. Leslie McCall takes a look at the gendered nature of class equality, arguing for the importance of understanding the qualitative differences in the structure of class inequality for men and women.

A second important, but often neglected, topic that is woven throughout many of the chapters is the notion of social class privilege, although the language of privilege is rarely invoked. Annette Lareau and Elliot Weininger talk about cultural differences in child-rearing practices and assumptions how they privilege wealthy children in college admissions and their transition to adulthood. Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks peel back the layers of advantages built into the political system that initiate and maintain privilege for elites and the wealthy. Richard Carpiano, Bruce Link, and Jo Phelan tackle health disparities, demonstrating the role that hierarchy stress (among other factors) plays to the advantage of those privileged by social class. Perhaps most directly, Erik Olin Wright, in his discussion of the mechanisms of social class, discusses opportunity hoarding and its role in maintaining social class inequality.

While all of the chapters offer a complex and textured perspective on social class, Wright's chapter is the highpoint of the book. His detailed reflection on the chapters of the text, his thorough explanations of the mechanisms through which social class functions, and his challenge to scholars of social class to avoid reductionistic models of analyses that focus solely on either micro or macro processes offer a much needed direction for future work. He calls on sociologists to counter the neoclassical economic analysis of inequality which decontextualize social relations between social classes and to maintain a focus on the issue of power and how it is deployed to maintain inequalities.

He says it most succinctly when he argues that, “[p]overty and inequality are anchored in macro relations of opportunity hoarding, domination, and exploitation, and thus a serious challenge to poverty requires a serious challenge to privilege and power.” (p. 348).

While the writing in this volume can be difficult given the complexity and intricacies of some of the statistical and theoretical analyses, it should have wide appeal to seasoned scholars of social class, graduate students making their initial forays into the literature, and community practitioners who wish to have a better grasp of the complexity of social class and its impact on their work. Regardless of their role, readers will put down the volume, knowing that social class still matters and in very important ways.

N. Eugene Walls
Graduate School of Social Work
University of Denver