

BOOK REVIEWS

Class warfare: Class, race and college admissions in top-tier secondary schools, by Lois Weis, Kristin Cipollone, and Heather Jenkins, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014, 292 pp., £21 (pbk), ISBN 0-978-0-226-13492-5

This excellent book is a study of elite American youth and their families; academically oriented young people, most of whom are also from affluent families, attending sought-after secondary schools, and aiming for a place at highly selective and mostly private universities. Its focus is preparation for the university admissions process as experienced by young people at three secondary schools, one state (referred to as Cannondale) and two private (Matthews and Bradford). The authors state:

Our goal in this volume is to analytically unpack the production of a new upper middle class as uncovered ethnographically in privileged secondary school sites, one that swirls around access to a broadened pallet of particularly located postsecondary destination (beyond the Ivies) (24).

The study is ethnographic in orientation and produces a wealth of fascinating detail, especially about family dispositions, priorities, and strategies for helping their children obtain a place at a prestigious university. For the students in the study from affluent backgrounds, 'resumés are jam-packed with activities' (53), and exotic work-experience placements abound in a search for distinction that becomes normalized within these school populations. Entry to an elite university is understood by students, parents, and teachers, as the most likely way to guarantee a well-remunerated job, and thereby to achieve economic security and reproduce or, in a few cases, establish upper-middle-class status.

The book's biggest strength is the authors' ability to move between micro-level practices (in the home, for example) and show how these contribute to the development of the social structure; what they refer to as 'critical bifocality'. Weis and her colleagues argue that, as selective higher education is now understood as a viable destination by an increasing number of people (a broad middle class), what we are seeing in the US is 'tensions *within* a social class [the middle classes]' (193) as a particularly privileged segment acts to accrue and preserve its own advantages in insecure economic times. Chapter 7 offers some information about changing economic conditions, and class structures and fractions in the US, in order to substantiate this argument a little more. The authors conclude that we are seeing 'class warfare', waged, not by men and managers in factories, but by staff in elite schools and by privileged families. Indeed, the two-year process of college admission is often directed by mothers, another form of mother labour.

The students in the study are all highly academically performing: the top 10 per cent of mainly white students from a state school; the top 20 per cent of minority-ethnic, mixed-heritage, and white students from a private school; and a cohort of low-income black students, studying at one of the two case-study private secondary schools.

The book goes into some detail concerning the three schools and the procedures they have in place to support university applications. There is relatively little explanation here for those not familiar with the processes and practices of American high schools and university admission arrangements. However it is, in my view, the discussion of parents and their interaction

with school that is most revealing of 'class work'. Parents at the state school have, the authors argued, laid the groundwork for successful prestigious university applications. They have worked to ensure that their children have access to sought-after secondary schools, that they have a range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills through enrichment activities, and also that they are placed on academically distinctive courses and tracks, thus ensuring that the children develop an identity as the suitable and appropriate applicant for elite higher education. This allows parents to leave the micro-management of the application process to their children and the school. The private-school parents at Matthews, however, are heavily involved in the college application process, despite apparent discouragement from the school. The reasons why these two groups of parents, similar in class background, should vary so much in their strategies around college was never, I felt, fully explained. However, I recognize that a complete explanation would require further research in other sites.

Existing studies have enquired into the ways in which practices and privileges of white upper-middle-class students (comparable in British terms, I think, to affluent sections of the professional and managerial middle classes) play out in practice. Another strength of this volume is its original emphasis on the lived experiences of low-income black students who have won a place at one of the two private schools. The authors' analysis suggests that these students gain a lot of information about colleges and college application processes from simply being in a school which has, as its *raison d'être*, the delivery of young people to selective post-secondary destinations. However, also highlighted is the range of ways in which the low-income black students – 'outsiders within', 'not full members of the community' (147) – struggle to some degree in the race for college. This is because this cohort is often placed in lower-level classes in the private secondary schools, the students do not appear to feel entitled to demand time and attention from college counsellors, and, in the main, do not come from families with existing knowledge about elite universities nor with the material resources to fly their children around the country investigating different options and pay to for preparation courses. The authors conclude against the easy optimism of the doctrine of equal opportunity, noting that 'being physically present in a given institution does not guarantee equal access to resources and information' (137). They sum up their data as the 'relative abandonment of low income minorities in privileged educational sites' (200). The book also details the psychological demands on the low-income black students in terms of their relationships with white peers in these exclusive schools and their relationships with friends from their previous majority-black schools. The authors discuss the different situations of middle-class black and other minority-ethnic groups who are 'class insiders' at the schools, although race still remains key to their experiences. Having conducted research in the UK with black middle-class parents, I would agree that race indeed interacts with class privilege, but remains central to the educational experiences of black students.

In summary, this book is an absorbing and detailed study of the reproduction of class privilege and the central role of access to highly selective universities as part of that process. It should be required reading for everyone interested in how social class and race work through educational processes and institutions.

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