



The Unknown City: The Lives of Poor and Working-Class Young Adults. Michelle Fine and Lois Weis. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. 342 pp.

CATHERINE EMIHOVICH

State University of New York at Buffalo

The two authors, Michelle Fine and Lois Weis, have selected an apt title for this compelling urban ethnography, for in it they depict a shadowy world of grinding poverty, lost economic opportunities, and personal despair that most middle-class and upper-middle-class people simply have no idea exists. The economic boom times of the last ten years have masked a grim reality that is unfolding in the lives of the poor and the working class, one that is unflinchingly depicted in this book. Although their analysis is segmented by race, class, and gender to give readers different entry points into people's lives, it is absolutely clear that the authors' intent is to lodge a comprehensive cultural and structural critique of modern society as an indictment of the failure of public policy makers to resolve the issues this book presents.

The book opens with a comparative analysis highlighting the vivid contrasts between the views of African American and Caucasian men about the source of their current economic woes. Unfettered by a racist ideology that positions them as superior, the African American men can clearly articulate the most acute social critique: the loss of well-paying jobs that require little advanced education and allow a community to sustain economic viability. In contrast, the white males locate the source of their economic malaise with "welfare cheats" and "affirmative action," believing that if only these issues were to disappear, their lives would be more secure. As later chapters reveal, however, the broader concern for these men is the loss of white privilege, a privilege that is constantly eroded not just by the increasing numbers of people of color moving into their previously well defined territories (I use this word deliberately instead of the more conventional word community because there is an almost primitive element to their rage that seeps through all the interviews) but also by increasing rebellion on the domestic front. Ironically, it is their racist views that prevent them from creating natural alliances with men of color (African Americans and Latinos), whereas, for African American men, it is their inability to redefine their masculinity in terms that allow for more collective social responsibility and action (unlike African American women, who have defined their femininity in these terms) that prevents them from engaging in meaningful social change.

The chapters on the experiences of Latino men and women are especially important because too often sociological analyses can become fixated on black-white differences and overlook the subtleties that language and cultural differences introduce. The rich and detailed account of how Latino men and women struggle to maintain their language and



sense of connection to Puerto Rico (which itself holds an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the United States in terms of statehood) while negotiating the identity politics of race in a society torn by a legacy of slavery is fascinating and reminds readers that, as multiracial, multilingual identities proliferate in contemporary society, the easy categorizations of difference will no longer suffice in public policy discussions.

One of the most troubling and disturbing aspects of the book is the prevalence of domestic violence in the lives of all three groups of women, white, black, and Latino. The authors openly acknowledge that they did not anticipate hearing such painful stories of abuse perpetuated by men who could not find any other viable way to define their masculinity. Ironically, these women often could not risk leaving home to become prototypical “single mothers,” for seeking help from social service agencies could result in the loss of their children for “bad mothering.” Again, it is impossible for those of us comfortably settled in a safe, middle-class world to imagine the daily travails of these women’s lives, the indignity and struggle coupled with the constant fear of violent attacks on either themselves or their children. I could not agree more with the authors’ acidic comment that “federal, state, and local legislation is being written in ways that reflect prevalently the terrors, needs, and projections of white males while silencing the voices of men and women of color as well as white women in their cries for violence-free homes and communities” (p. 111).

The book does not end on a completely bleak note, for Fine and Weis take care to note that even within devastated communities there exist places and spaces of hope and promise to counter the voices of despair. Yet they cannot avoid presenting readers with the unmistakable conclusion that we need not only more economically sustainable jobs but also a re-creation of the national safety nets to provide better schooling, housing allotments for the poor, college loans, medical care, and multiple services for poor children. The real American tragedy being played out by our politicians is their unwillingness to acknowledge the disturbing economic chasm rapidly expanding between those with sustainable futures and those with none, while countless lives are being lost for future generations. The message for those of us in the academic world who want to connect our scholarship more closely to community concerns is to follow novelist Doris Lessing’s admonition: “Whatever you must do, do it now—the conditions are always impossible.” This moving and important book gives us a clear picture of where we might begin concentrating our work to make a difference in peoples’ lives.

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