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Social Mobility for the 21st Century- Everyone a Winner?

Steph Lawler and Geoff Payne (eds)

2018

ISBN: 978-1-138-24489-4

£115, hb

184pp.

"Social mobility is one such optimistic fantasy that ensnares and works on both the individual psyche and collective consciousness." (Reay, Chapter 11, P.146)

This timely book offers a long-needed update to social mobility studies within the social sciences, drawing upon a much more critical approach which questions the assumption that social mobility is inherently 'good'. Its call in the introduction for a better understanding of the personal stories behind mobility utilising a methodological pluralism is essentially what the book presents, with a move beyond the often-simplistic measure of occupational ladder movement. This book succeeds in its aims to extend and advocate further mobility studies with more reflection on the consequences of mobility, and as such should appeal to not only mobility scholars, but to anybody who has an interest in the reproduction of structural social inequalities.

The book begins with an essential contextualisation chapter by Payne, who explores the (quantitative) history of approaches to measuring and researching mobility in the UK context. Chapters two (Mallman) and three (Gardner, Morrin and Payne) focus on family life and habitus formation and how this can impact upon mobility narratives of working-class families. Chapters four (Boliver and Sullivan) and five (Friedman and Savage) draw upon quantitative analyses of mobility, although Friedman and Savage extend this further by drawing upon Bourdieu's conceptual tools to address some weaknesses of quantitative mobility approaches. Chapter six (Bradley) questions how useful meritocracy can be for improving social inequalities whilst exploring the career destinations and struggles of middle-class and working-class graduates. Chapters seven (Sohl) and eight (Giazitzoglu) both explore the mobility experiences of under-researched social groups, migrant families in Sweden and self-employed childless men respectively (although chapter three also explores the mobility experiences of care-leavers). Chapters nine (Lawler) and ten (Chapman) look at mobility through a more policy-focused lens, with Lawler critiquing mobility 'talk' in reports from think tanks and its individualising nature whilst Chapman discusses young people's mobility and the pressures of aiming interventions at long-range mobility, suggesting a redefinition of 'success'. And finally, chapter eleven (Reay) provides an emotive and unsettling account of the cruelty of social mobility, questioning its desirability.

This brief description of the book does not do the individual chapters justice although provides an insight into the range of topics covered by the authors. There is considerable focus on the affective injuries invoked by social mobility, and the unsettling identity work which can cause upset, trauma and dislocation for those who have been 'successfully mobile'. Many chapters (Mallman; Gardner, Morrin, and Payne; Friedman and Savage; Lawler; Reay) draw upon the conceptual tools of Bourdieu in an attempt to provide the narratives behind the mobility process, and also to develop the conceptualisation of class. Inevitably, this means the chapters draw upon more qualitative approaches than quantitative, although the introduction makes clear that the book "is not trying to trigger a paradigmatic turf war within mobility studies" but instead "trying to expand mobility's collective territory" (P.5).

One of the key strengths of the book is its discussions of mobility experiences of typically under-researched groups and of mobility in differing contexts. Mallman's chapter documents habitus development of working-class families in Melbourne, Australia; Gardner, Morrin and Payne's chapter explores care-leavers' adaptable habitus in relation to their higher education experiences; Sohl focuses on the racialised and classed experiences of mobility in newly neoliberal Sweden; whilst Giazitzoglu provides insights into the mobility experiences of self-employed childless men. This widens the scope and appeal of the book to a variety of audiences both in and outside of the UK.

Despite developing the field of mobility studies considerably, the book left me hungry for a more radical reimagining of social mobility. Although moving beyond simplistic occupational measures, a lot of the chapters still discuss mobility in relation to education, employment and income. It seems it is difficult to discuss mobility and 'success' in terms other than the quality of our labour. Many chapters discuss the importance of family, kinship and community, and it appears this can be lost in normative understandings of social mobility. Both Bradley and Reay make fleeting references to radical notions of redistribution, but perhaps it is too revolutionary and idealistic to expect more from mobility literature. Maybe we need to accept, as Chapman suggests (p.145), 'worthy but dull' attempts at addressing the social mobility 'problem' given the grand scale of inequalities that prevail in society.

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