



UNIVERSITY OF  
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document and is licensed under Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 license:

**Folkes, Louise ORCID: 0000-0002-7857-6953 (2023) Book Review: Highly Discriminating: Why the City Isn't Fair and Diversity Doesn't Work, by Louise Ashley. ILR Review. doi:10.1177/00197939231165437**

Official URL: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00197939231165437>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/00197939231165437>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/12597>

#### **Disclaimer**

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.

## **Book Review: *Highly Discriminating: Why the City Isn't Fair and Diversity Doesn't Work*, by Louise Ashley**

*Highly Discriminating* tells the uncomfortable yet crucial story of how inequality in recruitment to some of the City of London's elite occupations is maintained and legitimized, despite recent pressures to hire from a more diverse pool of talent. Louise Ashley draws upon an extensive catalog of data from more than 10 years of research to demonstrate how and why this effort does not work. The City as defined in the book includes "elite investment banks, financial services firms such as asset and investment managers, hedge funds and private equity firms, and corporate lawyers and accountants who provide them with support" (p. 8). In Ashley's view, social mobility programs and associated diversity attempts will always be limited in their success, as they attempt to stick a cultural bandage over what is fundamentally a structurally ingrained problem. Presenting selected narratives from a pool of more than four hundred interviews with those trying to enter the City, those who work there, and those who have retired, Ashley provides strong evidence to support the claims made throughout the book regarding the City's failure to address its homogeneous and exclusive recruitment processes. The book ends with a short chapter outlining some suggested actions to help remedy these inequalities, while calling for a more radical response at the individual, organizational, and state level.

Structurally, the book is formed of two parts: Part I explores "Why the City Isn't Fair" and Part II details "Why Diversity Doesn't Work." Part I comprises Chapters 2 to 5 and provides the reader with the background and historical context of City recruitment practices. Part II comprises Chapters 6 to 10 and delves into the rich data to present narratives of participants who have engaged in social mobility programs. What is impressive about the book is Ashley's ability to integrate relevant theoretical and empirical literature from a broad range of disciplines, such as industrial relations, sociology, and organization studies. No theoretical dogma is presented—Ashley is critical and reflexive in the use of theory, taking a pragmatic approach to its application. The volume therefore appeals to a wide audience, including a non-academic audience, as it engages with a variety of theoretical approaches in an accessible manner. Anyone with a broad interest in inequality, elite professions, graduate outcomes, and organizational culture will gain important insights from reading this book.

The author dispels common assumptions about recruitment processes in the City, including the three meritocratic myths: 1) selecting on qualifications allows impartial identification of talent; 2) similarly qualified applicants have an equal chance to get in; and 3) scientific selection techniques eliminate bias. In practice, to maintain legitimacy elite City employers utilize social closure strategically to enhance their prestige and reputation, further replicating structural inequalities present in higher education. This institutionalized behavior is something Ashley carefully dissects throughout the book, arguing that it is counterproductive to any meaningful social mobility interventions. Appearing to act on social mobility works only to further enhance firms' reputations as diverse employers, even if only on a surface level. For example, Ashley provides data from employers and graduate-level

entrants to highlight the purposeful and careful management of (the few) diverse entrants, as they are placed in what are termed “back-office” roles, meaning roles that are not client facing. These roles are less revered in City firms while “exclusion is often seen by hiring managers as a rather sensible response to reduce perceptions of risk and allay their fears” (p. 77) that more diverse recruits may damage the firm’s reputation.

Some of the more powerful insights come from the narratives of those who have participated in such social mobility schemes or have applied for some of the City’s esteemed graduate roles (either successfully or unsuccessfully). Ashley draws on Pierre Bourdieu, French sociologist and public intellectual, to emphasize the significance of embodied cultural capital as elements of identity, such as style of dress, speech, accent, and hobbies, that are often used to determine who is best suited to the “front of office” positions. As one participant commented, “So he looked at me and said, ‘See that tie you’re wearing? It’s too loud, like you can’t wear that tie with the suit that you’re wearing’” (p. 240). These opaque social codes work to entrench social exclusion from top jobs as well as to have a significant psychological impact on diverse and underrepresented candidates as they struggle to fit in and feel that they are good enough. As someone from a working-class background myself, I think these findings are hardly surprising, but given the author’s own identity and careful framing, as explored below, this book provides a presentation of the systemic issues in the City in a more palatable manner.

A refreshing sense of humility appears throughout the book as the author is not afraid of outlining limitations and reflecting on positionality. Ashley is acutely aware of her own class identity as a middle-class woman and reflexively explores the implications of this on relationships with participants. Similarly, a conscious effort has been made to carefully position both City firms and aspirant entrants. For instance, the author reiterates that the book is not aiming to demonize the City or the people who work in it, and that often these discriminatory actions are not the conscious actions of individuals but ingrained organizational cultures. In addition to this, Ashley anonymizes the firms that participated in the research. One could argue this works to construct the City as a faceless entity, a backdrop for ubiquitous discrimination in which clear lines of responsibility and accountability are relinquished. Given that Ashley claims “my ultimate goal is to show how we can generate more meaningful change” (p. 25), it is therefore surprising that the majority of the book emphasizes how and why inequality in elite City occupations exists, with very limited attention given to what needs to come next. Perhaps this omission is attributable to the large-scale structural issues the author outlines throughout the book, but I cannot deny that after what was a thrilling read, the final chapter left this reader wanting to hear more about calls to action.

Louise Folkes  
Senior Lecturer in Sociology  
University of Gloucestershire  
lfolkes@glos.ac.uk