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The Penthouse Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich

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Sociology has made a mark in elucidating how those on the bottom end of the class hierarchy understand their status, how they make decisions, and how they view others. We have learned about the working poor, domestic servants, factory workers, homeless individuals, and more. We draw attention to the plight and agency of those undermined by the capitalist order or those who fell through the cracks of our economic system and civic sphere. But if our goal is to understand not only the lives of groups normally stigmatized in popular discourse but also how class stratification is experienced, it is surprising that we give scant attention to those on the opposite end of the class hierarchy. Portraits of the poor give dignity to those normally disparaged and help us understand how poverty reproduces itself in daily ways. But portraits of the

Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence, by **Rachel Sherman**. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. 308 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780691165509.

rich can help us understand how wealth stays in the hands of a few and how economic inequality becomes rationalized as normal. It is the other side of the stratification coin, the one with fewer details filled in.

Enter Rachel Sherman's *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*. It not only provides insights into the lifestyles and mindsets of elites, but it explains how they form moral values that justify their privileges. Established wisdom has been, at least since the publication of *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* by

Thorstein Veblen in 1899, that elites engage in conspicuous consumption in order to demonstrate their wealth. Social theorists, including Marx and Bourdieu, contend that the rich dwell on their distinctions from the rest of society. Research in the United States often affirms this notion. G. William Domhoff's (1967) exposé on the social and domestic lifestyles of the wealthy in the 1960s (and since), *Who Rules America*, uncovers their lavish debutante balls, private schools, social clubs, and the like. Susan Ostrander, in *Women of the Upper Class* (1984), similarly finds that wealthy women engage in a performative upper-class lifestyle, including membership in social clubs, not working outside of the home, and engaging in charity. Michèle Lamont's *Money, Morals, and Manners* (1992) articulates the various cognitive distinctions that wealthy professionals draw from others as they define themselves as deserving.

But, as Sherman notes, another theme has emerged regarding how elites inhabit their status. Some of the world's richest men are known for dressing in casual attire. People do not want to simply give money to charities, they now want to visit the countries or people they are trying to help. In other words, the wealthy connect with the "common man" rather than disconnect. Similarly, it is common for elites to originate from various parts of the world and to have earned their money through technological innovations rather than only inheritance or established businesses. That is, the new wealthy *have* wealth, but they are not *of* wealth.

To understand how elites feel about their wealth, Sherman studied 50 parents in 42 households in New York City, using a snowball sampling method. Annual household incomes were \$250,000 or above, putting them in the top 5 percent of household incomes in the city. While there was a range of household incomes, reaching to over \$10 million per year, half had over \$1 million annual income "and/or had assets of over \$8 million" (p. 14). They came to their wealth through earnings or inheritance or both. Living in New York City, it is perhaps not surprising that most identified as Democrats, while still referring to themselves as economically conservative. They lived in the city or in the surrounding suburbs (having lived in

the city prior). In addition to these interviews, Sherman conducted 30 interviews with expert service providers to the wealthy, such as personal concierges.

As the book title suggests, the main informants themselves feel a conflict. They often draw distinctions not from those beneath them on the class ladder but from those above them. They aspire to the middle class rather than dwelling on their advantages. They feel "uneasy" having such wealth and income. The book explains how two categories of elites, earners and inheritors, alleviate their guilt. In part, they do so through a mental exercise of telling themselves that they are worthy because of their work ethic, which is the common rhetoric individuals use to feel good about themselves and look down on others. Yet these elites do not look down on the poor or those reliant on government assistance, as would be expected, but on those of great means. They consider people with greater wealth to be ostentatious and/or to lack a grounding in reality. The earners leaned on this refrain quite readily.

Both earners and inheritors also turn to practical actions to demonstrate their normality: they spend money in frugal ways, make everyday meals like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, send their kids to public school or justify their use of private school as not their first choice, spend money to help others rather than just on themselves, have few luxuries outside of their home(s) and private school, and the like. That is, they do not simply justify their wealth by referring to their work ethic, but they point to their consumption habits and generous giving. They are moral by downplaying or denying their elite status. In fact, they hardly ever talk about their own assets, often out of a sense of embarrassment. Those who don't feel guilty often went through a process before no longer feeling that way and often reference their paid or unpaid work and contributions to society. In other words, Sherman identifies the emotion work and emotion rules that let the wealthy feel moral despite, not because of, their wealth.

Gender and parenting influence how individuals conceptualize their status. Husbands and wives have strategies for how to handle their wealth and recognize the contributions

of one another, especially when one (typically the husband) engages in paid work and the other (typically the wife) engages in unpaid, domestic work. One key space in which parents navigate spending is through purchases for their children. We know from Allison Pugh's *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture* (2009) and from Christina Williams's *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality* (2006) that parents' purchases for their kids often aim to create aspirational identities and are laden with symbolic value. As seen here, parents validate toys because they are educational or spark creativity. And parents insist to their children that they have plenty and should not be spoiled. Kids can have lots of goods but should not *feel* entitled.

Here we see a key point of the book: how one feels about one's wealth matters more than how much wealth one has, in the eyes of Sherman's interviewees. As long as one does not feel spoiled or act spoiled, one's wealth has no negative social or personal consequences. As parents consider their lives as standard and filled with moral intent, they do not come to terms with their material advantages. In other words, if I feel like everyone else, then what advantages do I really have? What differences are there, really, between me and those truly in the middle class or even in the working class? We are all struggling with our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and we all raise children grounded in reality. We are all different than "those people," that is, people who spend their money without regard to conventional norms.

While the reader is drawn into caring about how these individuals draw moral distinctions and caring about Sherman's analysis of those distinctions, she ends the book with an unexpected turn. What does it matter how elites feel about their wealth? Why do they (and many others) feel the need to downplay their assets as they speak to others? People's feeling rules are a distraction from the real point: that they live at the extreme end of a class hierarchy. A preoccupation with their feeling rules not only distracts from this fact but facilitates the reproduction of that hierarchy, for we focus on the sense of wealth rather than on its material consequences.

While this is an insightful, engaging book, a few questions arise that deserve clarification and elaboration. Clearly, not all elites worry that their wealth signals a spoiled character. Why do many people here carry shame? Sherman finds some informants who compare themselves to people richer than themselves and, in turn, feel that they are in the middle class of sorts, and others who look downward and feel quite privileged rather than like the "common" man or woman. This difference correlates somewhat, but not exactly, with individuals' class background, political attitudes, occupations, and the like. But there are no clear causal mechanisms that lead people into one category versus the other, based on individual biographies or attributes such as gender or upbringing.

This leads me to wonder if the subjects' sense of their wealth depends not on attributes internal to them but on their social interactions. If people are treated as having made their wealth through their own ingenuity, does that allow them greater freedom for how to present it and how to raise their children? Does that change the narrative around their wealth and self-identity? If so, is the unease of the informants here not about their degree of wealth but about the public narrative around their wealth? I am curious how informants were treated based on their wealth and how that shaped their self-conceptions. What comments have parents at their children's schools made to them about their vacations or homes? How do old high school friends consider them? The wealthy are not all viewed the same way: some are ridiculed as extravagant and others are emulated for their extravagance. We learn in the book about what informants anticipate about others' judgments, but more on the actual interactions would be informative. On a related note, it would be helpful to know if those families who believe they perform a middle-class lifestyle are the same kinds of families that others point to as extravagant. In other words, are they actually living their values, or is it just rhetoric?

Another question concerns the sampling. Included in the study are multi-millionaires with two homes as well as those with household incomes just over \$250,000. While I'm not in the habit of feeling sorry for those

who earn just under half a million dollars, I do imagine that with New York real estate prices, such informants actually are not wealthy in the same way the others are. But the (literal) image of the book is one of great wealth. The book works on the premise that it attends to how millionaires think and feel, even as that is not its claim. I understand that households making \$250,000 enjoy an economically privileged position (they are in the top 5 percent within New York City), but such variation in the informants' wealth makes one question whether the differences across wealth are so much as to create different experiences with money. Should people making "just" \$250,000 or even \$500,000 be included in this study? If so, should those on the extremes of income level be treated in separate categories from the others?

A final issue concerns a central theme of the book, elites' self-conceptions as moral people. As is true for other people across the class spectrum, informants refer to their work ethic as a moral attribute. They aspire to the middle class. Sherman contends that there is a cultural legitimacy to the middle class. But what is behind this valuation of the middle class? Why not value the working poor, or the self-made entrepreneurs, or some other social category? What is it about the middle class that makes them better than other people?

The American fascination with the middle class should not be taken for granted. The moral boundaries of elites are formed not simply by the cultural ideology around hard work but also by how race has defined who is deserving and undeserving. The middle class has supposedly attained its economic status through legitimate occupations and cost-saving techniques. They are differentiated from not simply the poor, who might be poor due to no fault of their own, but most strikingly from "the undeserving poor," who are read as African American. Race marks such persons more readily as not deserving respect or benefits. The middle class, in contrast, is read as implicitly white. Unless the link between race and class is recognized, the ways in which race helps define who is moral become naturalized.

This matters here all the more as elites situate themselves as worthy people, unlike

"the undeserving rich" (McCall 2013). There is overlap between critiques of the underserving poor and the undeserving rich. In the view of these critiques, both groups benefit unfairly from a broken system that gives them more than they deserve at the expense of hardworking others. Race helps define who is "deserving" and "undeserving" in the United States, and its possible relevance for how elites decide whom to aspire to and whom to deride needs more attention. We need to move beyond a Puritan ethos as the single bedrock of the American ideology of legitimacy. Bruno Cousin, Shamus Khan, and Ashley Mears (2018) ask that research on elites take into consideration race and gender more thoroughly. This means not simply considering the experiences of minorities and women, which Sherman does, but considering how race and gender inform what elites take for granted.

In sum, *Uneasy Street* deserves to be widely read and reread, and it will be integral to the growing subfield of elite studies in particular and social stratification in general. This is not merely my judgment. I had the privilege of serving as a critic on an Author Meets Critics panel for *Uneasy Street* at the 2018 Eastern Sociological Society annual conference, with fellow critics Allison Pugh and Jessi Streib. With their permission, some of their points have been incorporated above.

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Frustrated Fantasies

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A Fraught Embrace: The Romance and Reality of AIDS Altruism in Africa interprets the African AIDS pandemic in Malawi through the lens of romance. But this is not a love story. The book does not weave a tale of desirous longings fulfilled, or matrimonial bliss. Instead, Ann Swidler and Susan Cotts Watkins's extraordinary account of the uneasy relationship between donors and brokers is better understood as a tale of jilted lovers, partners talking past each other, and marriages in turmoil.

Codependent in a sociological sense, donors and brokers truly need each other. Swidler and Watkins argue this need is driven by romantic imaginings. Moved by the tragic effects of AIDS, altruistic wealthy donors, western nations, and international NGOs believe they can (and must) *do something*. They show compassion by designing interventions that teach people how to protect themselves from HIV or that care for AIDS orphans. To effectively do this work, they need support from local Malawians. Donors hire Malawian brokers to refine and implement their programs in villages, coordinate with organizations on the ground, and report progress back to central administration. Local brokers also need donors. Brokers fantasize about social mobility via jobs in the formal economy and much-needed resources for their communities. Such mobility, they believe, will flow from the experience, skills, and ties they gain from working on projects funded by foreign donors and agencies.

Donors and brokers are also codependent in a psychological sense, with great imbalances of power between donors and brokers. Swidler and Watkins rightly draw attention to how altruistic donors misunderstand how African societies organize around

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patron-client ties of "reciprocal dependence." Brokers bend over backward to write grants that align with development industry buzzwords like sustainability and stigma, when what they really need is clean water. Once awarded resources, brokers serve as patrons to family and community members, whom they feel obliged to help. This, in turn, frustrates donors, who do not understand these demands and who interpret brokers' actions as irresponsible at best and corrupt at worst. This embrace between donors and brokers is truly fraught.

The story of a broker named Teresa is emblematic of these tensions. Two Americans who founded an NGO called Good Futures described how essential Teresa was to their endeavors. She offered great ideas in meetings, served as a role model in the community, and gave advice about how youth leadership development could be done in Balaka. The Americans gave the youth center they established to Teresa to run, and board members who visited reported her great success with the programming. Over time, things fell apart. On a later visit the American donors found the center's library a mess, and they learned Teresa had used the center to house her relatives. Given Teresa's good fortune of a job with the NGO, she was expected to serve as a patron to her extended family. Soon the Americans stopped raising funds for the NGO, the