
BOOK REVIEW

Under the long shadow of working-class origins

Friedman, S. & Laurison, D. (2020). *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*. Policy Press & Bristol University Press

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In an era when merit seems to be the mantra of accessing high quality post-compulsory education followed by prestigious jobs, which also means fat pay checks and social recognition, it is of utmost importance to critically re-examine this social ethos, and to look behind it in terms of the social mechanisms active in the backdrop, and perhaps to ask what kind of society it produces. We often (and perhaps proudly) believe that will be a more egalitarian society. Or will it?

Friedman and Laurison present a fascinating, thought-provoking ethnography set in three elite corporate firms in London, UK, based on interviews with individuals of working-class background who 'made it' (at least that is what it looks like at the first glimpse). The book is based on elaborate individual insights in the form of personal narratives about corporate careers, education and job-related choices, failures and barriers when searching for suitable employment and assignments, individual success stories with helpers and movers in the backdrop. Their case studies come from three very different sectors in terms of the type of 'merit' they require or recognize, from a *fashionable national television broadcaster, a successful architecture firm, and a large multinational accounting company*. Despite the different profiles and sectors, what connects these corporate entities as ethnographic sites is that they represent elite professions, where many young professionals from the UK and abroad aspire to reach and plan to make their fortunes. These are firms where those from privileged backgrounds enter at disproportionately higher rates, and in addition they tend to earn much more once 'in' than their less fortunate (and privileged) colleagues coming from a working-class family background. Analysis of the respective sectors in the UK (based on Britain's largest employment survey, the Labour Force Survey (LFS)) by the authors reveals that a significant pay gap exists between those from a privileged backgrounds and those coming from the working class. And this means not only that the former reach higher positions and in shorter time, but also that the latter get paid less for the same work.

The case studies present insights from both the employer and employee perspective, examining both the 'demand' and 'supply' side contributing to mechanisms of professional inclusion and exclusion, obstacles in career advancement, feelings of inadequacy, lost opportunities in parallel to multiple instances of arrogance or ignorance of those in lead positions.

The book manages to capture narratives of employers on choosing those considered ‘fit’ or ‘matching’ concrete positions and tasks (leading to employment, tasks assigned, promotion, or accepting among the firm’s Partners) due to certain behaviours, accent and language use, manners, ways of self-presenting instead of others considered ‘less fit’ or ‘matching’. Intriguingly, those belonging to the ‘fitting’ category are typically coming from the elite, privileged backgrounds, while the rejected ones are first-generation diploma holders with working-class origins. Hence, Friedman and Laurison argue that *class origin*, in contrast to meritocratic ideas that emphasize the central role of merit in career achievements (see corporate ethos), *casts a long shadow on people’s lives*.

The authors’ book captures the complex socio-cultural mechanisms through which class origins operate in individual careers with exemplary ethnographic precision: their answer focuses on elite occupations and career advancements. They draw on various and rich research traditions, providing important clues for their analysis. The first such tradition comes from studies on ethnic minorities and white women in the job market, introducing the concept of ‘glass ceiling’. Here the ceiling is used to suggest the invisible yet firm barriers which individuals belonging to these groups have to negotiate. These barriers include mechanisms linked to indirect as well as more direct forms of discrimination. This line of research has firmly proved that minority people and women tend to get systematically shut out of career opportunities and promotions. ‘Merit’ is a key point in these studies, underlining an important fact: *merit is not or not the lead factor in accessing elite jobs and progressing in one’s career*. When feminist academics spoke about ‘a glass ceiling’ in the careers of many women previously, they also noted a sense of *dislocation* experienced during their journeys, both in the past and in future places. Friedman and Laurison note similar dilemmas among their working-class origin interviewees, feelings of exclusion and limited access, hesitation as well as questions of self-worth when it comes to stepping into high prestige jobs in elite sectors. The authors’ intention is not to simply draw parallels with cases of inequality concerning ethnic minorities or women, instead, their work is inspired by the concept of *intersectionality*, emphasizing that these categories and axes of analysis (ethnicity, gender, race and class) build on and reinforce each other.

Previous research related to class and mobility often halted at the point of getting access to quality education, assuming that public education systems in the democratic world have an equalising effect regarding its capacity to directing individuals to channels of social mobility by bestowing them with (technical, meaning professional) knowledge required by their future employers. Friedman and Laurison however point to a serious inadequacy and pretension of the ‘meritocratic model’. Their results unquestionably suggest that technical knowledge is insufficient for getting hired or gaining promotion. The most exciting part of the book, covering an uncharted territory in terms of previous research of qualitative and ethnographic nature, sheds light on mechanisms of and challenges encountered while getting ‘on’ within the firm, moving in their careers, climbing firm hierarchies. It comes across as a striking, yet very powerful finding that working-class background is a key explanatory factor in difficulties related to promotion, career advancement, in getting on with external partners of the firm, in becoming part of the upper management, laced with identity crises, emotional struggles, reoccurring sense of inadequacy and feeling of ‘out of place’.

The analysis of Friedman and Laurison in the book, as a continuation of their earlier work, adapts the Bourdieusian lens which insists that class background is defined by one’s parents’ stock of three primary forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social). These not only structure one’s childhood, but we tend to inherit them. While the passing on of eco-

nomic (monetary assets) and social capital (networks) seems to be more straightforward, the inheritance of cultural capital is a bit more complex, as the authors argue. Bourdieu introduces the concept of *habitus* for this end, describing a set of *dispositions* which organize and define how we relate to and understand the world around us. Some of these dispositions are embodied, manifest themselves through bodily *comportment* such as accent, affections, posture, gestures, but also it includes a broader set of body-related behaviours such as etiquette, manners or dressing style. The most striking examples of these bodily manifestations emerge through practices through which privileged families imprint (teach) their children for 'symbolic mastery', as Bourdieu calls it, of those codes and behaviours related to correct language use, grammar, vocabulary, tone of speech etc. (for a quick comparison, Brecht's Pygmalion poignantly captures such comportments and the problems around their 'symbolic mastery').

The real significance of such aesthetic dispositions and various aspects of symbolic mastery associated to the privileged classes is their direct relevance to social mobility. Such dispositions tend to be (mis)recognized, especially in highly elit(ist) environments such as leading corporate firms, they are assigned with high value, and are read as signs of cultural competence and distinctions. This is in short how class privilege gets reproduced. What is especially problematic about this practice from the point of social justice and equality of chances is that while the passing on of economic assets and social contacts is (relatively) easy to spot, cultural capital is transferred in less obvious ways, and such capacities tend to be (mis)read as signs of talent, 'natural sophistication', innate intelligence, as Friedman and Laurison so compellingly point out. While these are strong theoretical statements, the book manages to convey this message through a uniquely rich ethnography. A short quote from the book:

... it is really important to be able to chat and yes, have a bit of humour and for it to be jolly. There's a certain lightness of touch and it's really tiring because you are performing. You are on. It sort of looks open but it's actually quite careful and not like... it's actually a skill. (p. 135)

A major strength of this book is not simply its insights into certain elite occupations, as there have been studies about specific professional fields, but these were always isolated studies, without establishing any links with the complex mobility structures of the entire society, and typically focused on the single issue of making it 'into' those professions (from lower strata of society), whereas the next steps remained unexplored until now. In my understanding, this is the major strength and novelty of the book, since Friedman and Laurison discuss individual mobilities (from the working class to the upper-middle class and the elite) not only by following and explaining how people 'get into' elite occupations, but most importantly, by meticulously exploring and via individual narratives reconstructing individual career trajectories laced into life-histories.

The second major strength of the book is the way the authors synthesize a standard approach of class mobility, which looks at occupational class as the single most important indicator of social mobility, with two further research traditions which conventionally do not fall under the scope of classic mobility studies. One of these traditions is the sociology of the elite recruitment tradition, a tradition which gained special popularity in the last century, especially in the 1950s and 1960s Anglo-Saxon sociological tradition (around the concept of social closure). Bringing back the class- structure approach, the analysis draws on a current mobility analysis utilizing LFS data on class origin. The second tradition is that of feminist critics introducing the 'glass ceiling' concept into the general scholarship, standing for a broad circle of mechanisms identified as characteristics of the class ceiling such as homo-

phily, sponsorship, micro-aggression, which have been identified in studies about racial ethnic groups and in studies about white women too. Friedman and Laurison promptly explore these features and mechanisms among their corporate protagonists too. Since many of their interviewees also belong to racialized minorities while being of working-class background, their ‘double or multiple disadvantage’ is without a question, intersectionality is at play without any doubt.

The book’s major innovative aspect lies in its ability to capture the conceptual depths of social mobility. As the authors note, income and occupation still stand in most studies to analyse social mobility (a two-point approach: departure and arrival), which means that even recent innovations fail to dislodge this theoretical consensus on social mobility. This means that class is still approached through a single variable (income or occupation) and mobility destination is captured through a one-time single snapshot (they call it single time-point). What is missing from this approach is the trajectory aspect, leaving bumps and turns of the journey unexplored, and the entire time aspect unnoticed – whereas in a professional career, it is quite important both in terms of prestige as well as financially, whether one reaches the (potential) ‘peak’ of one’s career two years after entry into a firm, or after twenty years, or if it never takes place at all.

This is where the Bourdieusian approach turns out to be extremely fruitful as it captures exactly these two aspects: time and trajectory. Friedman and Laurison are deeply interested in exploring intra-generational mobility that is mobility within one’s own career, its intricacies and nuances, its main influencing factors, hindering and supporting circumstances. For the latter they bring examples from interviews about the role of ‘the Bank of Mum and Dad’ (parental financial support), housing arrangement typical of privileged background (rent paid by the parents at the beginning of one’s career, access to housing in an affordable way via social contacts). Other than its immediate consequences on one’s financial situation, such support coming from one’s (privileged) family background has far-reaching career related consequences: those without such privileges are to make undesirable career choices, becoming forced to detour from their intended trajectory (e.g. an actor aspiring for a TV channel gets stuck in unimportant C category ads, accepts casts in clichéd roles instead of making his/her break of his/her life, while a colleague of similar artistic talent with a significant family support can make more informed and planned choices quickly advancing his/her career).

Friedman’s and Laurison’s book is brilliant for multiple reasons: it advances an important line of research to better grasp the complexities of social mobility via the Bourdieusian lens in a theoretical sense. It also adds significantly to better understand the mobilities to and within certain elite professions (with direct relevance to the entire structure of social mobility), while it most importantly informs social science thinking about the role of class in social mobilities, its role not restricted to only studying access to certain occupational categories but also regarding individual movements within these categories. The book’s real highlights are the chapters unpacking the ‘trickiness of merit’, individual perceptions of situations characterized by ‘studied informality’, or the one on selection and promotion mechanisms applying ‘glass slippers’, that is; the (mis)recognition of ‘symbolic masteries’ of candidates on the road of the reproduction of the elite.

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