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Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty by Jennifer M. Silva

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Silva, Jennifer M. *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xii + 192 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

In *Coming up Short*, sociologist Jennifer M. Silva offers a thoughtful and insightful glimpse into the personal lives of working-class adults. Through a series of in-depth interviews with individuals living in two cities (Richmond, Virginia and Lowell, Massachusetts), she provides a detailed picture of a segment of the life course for working-class Americans—late youth and early adulthood. In doing so, she effectively challenges many of the misconceptions associated with this group.

Unlike previous cohorts, today's working class enjoys no guarantee of financial stability or of employment. They must grapple with an unstable economy and increasing social pressures to achieve material fulfillment. Young adults in the working class miss many of the traditional markers of adulthood or they find themselves achieving the steps "out of order." Perhaps the most egregious deviation from conventional adulthood is the lack of forward movement. A combination of factors conspire to stunt most of their efforts at progress, with the most formidable being a restrictive economy that prioritizes advanced technical skills. Working-class couples also face a number of constraints in their personal lives, including pervasive traditional gender stereotypes and, for persons of color, modern racism in the workplace.

What makes Silva's work unique is her reliance on the so-called mood economy as a basic framework. In a mood economy, the individual self is a process subject to transformation and tends not to be validated through singular events occurring in a linear fashion. This is particularly true of the working class, who cannot rely on conventional markers to validate and give legitimacy to their lives. Instead, they learn to adapt, taking on a degree of flexibility that mirrors the dynamics found in today's economy and normative structure. Silva's subjects spoke of family breakdown, addiction, mental illness, and other hardships. But the hardships offered a chance to circumvent popular rhetoric regarding personal attainment and goal fulfillment. The limitations of one's past became part of one's "success story."

Success in a post-industrial economy requires a combination of the right kinds of training, skills, cultural capital, and an appreciation for the ethos of individualism, most of which is elusive to the working class. Opportunities are often blocked by a sea of paperwork and bureaucratic ritualism unfamiliar to those growing up in blue-collar families. Obtaining student loans and utilizing the G.I. Bill, for example, are perplexing processes that present seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Participants in Silva's study reflected on the difficulties of establishing a stable and fulfilling personal life. These depictions will resonate with those who familiar with the work of such sociologists and activists as Lillian Rubin, Arlie Hochschild, and Barbara Ehrenreich. Many of them expressed sentiments of betrayal, noting the great divide between the marriages of their parents and the relationships they are now experiencing. Dating, marriage, and parenthood are all experiences shaped by economic realities; thus, they are seldom felt as secure or comforting. Gendered expectations were brought into question, with men wanting more caretaking from their wives and women needing more providing from their husbands. Children, while adding an essential element to the formula for complete adulthood, exacerbate tensions over money, intimacy, and the division of labor. Getting married and having children are important rites of passage. For many working class adults, however, these rituals play out differently in reality. Relationships buckle under the constant pressure of job uncertainty, mismatched schedules, and

the demands of childrearing. Attempts to mark adulthood through conventional rituals become, in effect, “spoiled performances,” and serve to cast further doubt into the minds of these players.

Limited educational and economic prospects foster both institutional distrust as well as racial prejudice among many of Silva’s subjects. Curiously, many of them reject social welfare programs while expressing approval of neoliberal policies. This rejection of governmental protection may stem from a lifetime of broken promises, dating back to elementary school programs that tracked students not by ability level but by socio-economic status. Institutions are seen as untrustworthy and are not often sought as vehicles for progress or mobility. Ironically, the working class develops a heavy reliance on the self, further restricting their chances for real change.

Coming up Short is a well-written and moving book, documenting in a very personal way the micro-level consequences of a changing economy, and ambiguous social norms, ethnic tensions, and continued pressures to achieve the American Dream *as an individual*. The book is ideal for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students in family sociology and social psychology, and has ties to broader fields such as economics, race, and gender studies.

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