

Working-class adulthood in the U.S.

Patrick Ainley *reviews an important new study*

Jennifer M. Silva (2015) *Coming Up Short: Working-class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford University Press, £12.99 (paperback), £12.34 (Kindle), 192pp.

This book answers the \$64,000 question Phil Cohen posed in his 1997 *Rethinking the Youth Question*: 'How has the decline of the political cultures of the manual working class and the rise of structural youth unemployment affected the formation and outlook of non-student youth?' With 'all that is solid melting into air' and 'all that is holy profaned', the widely presumed answer was that there would be some form of collective response – hopefully of the left, since Marx had predicted in *The Communist Manifesto* that people will then be 'compelled to face with sober senses . . . the real conditions of their existence'.

The same hopeful scenario lies behind today's Green Party presumptions that the common threat of global climate catastrophe will at last bring people together to avert it. And yet many people are either ignorant of or do not believe in global warming despite the evidence they see all around them. Especially in the USA where – incredibly as it seems – oil-rich Republican crazies who deny climate change gain substantial support as many working people oppose also health care reform and other state action in their interest.

Jenny Silva explains why, at least as far as the majority of her sample of 100 working-class young

men and women in their 20s and 30s were concerned when she interviewed them between 2008-10 in Lowell, Massachusetts and Richmond, Virginia – two prototypical post-industrial localities. As she says, 'There is a great deal of ambiguity and disagreement surrounding the concept of social class within sociology' (p175, note 2). Indeed, this has been reflected in the pages of *PSE* where, despite earlier discussions of how to teach about social class, Stephen Lambert in the last issue, while explaining 'Why class still influences educational attainment', also asked, 'Is there a ruling class?'

Confusion is worse confounded when the US class system, towards which the UK is moving, is compared with the post-war English class pyramid with which new class divisions are currently muddled. For instance, Silva relies on 'father's attainment of a college degree as a marker of middle-class status'. In the USA, this relegates a minority of non-graduates to 'working-class' status. In the UK, where nearly half of 18+ year-olds go to university, a degree is now required for hope of at least semi-professional secure employment. However, this does not mean that lack of an undergraduate degree relegates the other *Half Our Future*, as the 1963 Newsom Report referred to secondary modern school pupils, to working-class status. Leave alone to a so-called 'underclass' of ghettoised or 'trailer trash' that in the States is more or less synonymous with 'working class'.

For Silva 'college degree' does not include associate degrees taken in the US Community Colleges (like Foundation degrees in FE here), even though in the USA the Colleges are part of the Higher Education system (see PSE 80 review of Clifford Harbour's book on the Community Colleges). However, with their high drop-out rate, the Colleges do not fulfil their potential of integrating mass participation on to university. Rather, they often function as 'holding pens', as Silva calls them, cooling kids out before they can make it through to HE. This happens to many of Jenny's interviewees, leaving them with more debt but little else. The few who stay the course need to graduate as under- if not post-grads to achieve the American dream of upward social mobility.

In both countries, the limited upward social mobility of the post-war years from the industrial manual working class to the then-expanding non-manual managerial and professional middle class, has given way to general downward social mobility. Where then is the no longer manually-working but now mainly service-sector-working class to go in both post-industrial countries as they shift from one shitty job to another? Far from any recognition of shared interest against the one per cent minority ruling class (Lambert!) whose money works for them, those who have to work for their money, whether ascribed working- or middle-class status, turn against each other in the individual competition of neoliberal subjects in the marketplace.

Only one of Jenny's interviewees sees the bigger picture. Wally describes himself as 'a revolutionary' who was stimulated by countercultural noise music into 'learning more and more about how everything actually went down', not through school or the one or two college courses he has taken. Being a political activist is taxing and frustrating though and who knows how long he can battle on as 'a tiny force of resistance against the rising tide of risk'. Yet, 'For him a sense of "we" actually does exist.' (pp152-5). Other glimmerings of common (*sic*) sense amongst the other interviewees are snuffed out by popular culture in ways that render them individual, perverting the political into the personal (p142) to reverse the feminist slogan.

The rest divide unevenly into two lots: the minority who cling to traditional 'blue-collar' work mainly in public services – the police, fire-service or other government employment, even as it is being intensified, outsourced and delayed by state spending cuts. In the case of the military this offers 'a rare opportunity to find direction, meaning and security' (p41) but cannot guarantee even survival. Predominantly male, these interviewees achieved (just about) the traditional working-class markers of

maturity by providing for their families, though most of their wives also work. The majority of interviewees fail to achieve this degree of security however, or the American dream of upward mobility to professional employment via education (as one or two others do) and remain 'trapped' in the private service sector of precarious employment, where they will strive to do a good job for the demanding customers unappreciated by managers ruthlessly implementing the corporate bottom line.

These young service workers do not blame the system however, but blame themselves for their own weakness in failing to beat it. This is the message of this book and it explains much, including why so many Americans admire and identify with Trumped up self-made politicians. Or why so many people graffiti themselves with tattoos displaying the significant events in their lives since there is no other way to make their mark. Intimacy is felt to be another trap since 'The gendered division of labour at the heart of industrial society has become unworkable' (p56). In its place 'a new cultural ideal of romance and love has developed . . . predicated on the autonomy, rather than the mutual dependence of partners' (p57). This makes the logic of adult independence completed by the dependence of children contradictory. When it comes to their children's future, 'Narratives of hope can take on a desperate quality' (p77).

These contradictory ideas do not come from nowhere; young working-class Americans 'learn powerlessness' as they grow up through school and college. 'Despite their belief in education as the path to upward mobility, pupils from working-class backgrounds who lack familiarity with the rules of the system enter at a structural disadvantage' (p47). For example, in higher education: '*Working-class young people overwhelmingly believe that picking the "right" major is vital to future success. Rather than understand the college degree as a credential, they see their choice of major as determining their future trajectories . . . [missing] the logic of higher education that what you learn in college is often not explicitly connected to the requirements of middle-class, professional jobs . . . [when] knowing how to use their education in the labor market is just as important as the degree itself.*'

Instead, their dealings with the state and the predominant media messages of a lone hero against the world, or the misery memoirs of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, reinforce the message of maturity through self-mastery to overcome the abuse victims may have suffered. This 'therapeutic' narrative to which so many subscribe is a watered-down Freudian / Nietzscheanism of the 'what does not crush us makes us stronger' variety. Also leavened

with the Protestant ethic that permeates organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous and all the other alliances against addictions that flesh can fight free from – or fail to do so, in which case those who cannot achieve the ‘self-realisation’ that substitutes for maturity are condemned as weak or sinners. Religion can provide ‘witness’ to these lonely achievements but conspiracy theories, fatalism and other craziness abound to explain the widespread feeling of having been sold ‘fake goods’ (p4), a feeling which is real enough.

For those few who succeed against the odds, churches of the right sort can provide support and example, as can other ‘often accidental transmission of middle-class social and cultural capital rather than inherent talent or even hard work’ (p50) – through a step-parent, encouraging teacher or other mentor, for example, but these are not universal panaceas. So too the ability ‘through intense counselling . . . to communicate in the therapeutic language of individual needs’ has enabled some interviewees to play the game but without ‘the resources and privileges of the middle and upper class – a college education, a secure foothold in the labor market, a safety net to fall back on – where anxiety is rooted only in the need to create the best possible life out of a vast array of options’ (pp7-8).

Into this toxic mix of misapprehended and conflicting interest are thrown the divisions of race, ability, culture and sexuality with all the complications of affirmative actions, playing the race card, prejudice, scapegoating and stereotyping that made Paul Haggis’s film *Crash* so striking when it first came out in 2004. In the UK by comparison, where class is not racialised as it is in the USA, the new class alignment is more fluid. For example, in the protests against loss of EMAs and fees in 2011, two constituencies of working and middle class youth at college and sixth form / university were briefly united. The riots later the same year saw another group of young people take to the streets. Meanwhile government rhetoric constantly seeks to divide ‘workers’ against ‘shirkers’ breaking any potential alliance of shared interest.

But I wonder how generalisable Jenny’s findings are as English students can feel they too are running up a down-escalator of perpetually devaluing qualifications, studying harder to learn less and end overqualified and underemployed. Misunderstanding their situation, they too sometimes blame it all on some vast government conspiracy to keep them in their place. How new also is blaming yourself / the victim for failure? ‘I coulda bin a somebody’, mumbled the beaten Marlon Brando at the end of *On the Water Front* (1954).

Further, how particular to parts of the USA is the Protestant ethic informing Alcoholics Anonymous and the therapy industry that Frank Furedi and his friends have made a little industry of denouncing as ‘infantilising’ English undergraduates, but only with the hidden agenda of freeing them into the market? They have a point though that a new administrative orthodoxy coddles the mass of students through their ‘student journeys’.

These reservations indicate some of the questions and comparisons that could be stimulated if this book takes off to set the terms of sociological and wider debate about generational crisis facing many societies today. It is certainly an exemplary ethnography in the tradition of American literature, sociology and journalism from Dos Passos through Studs Terkel to George Packer’s 2013 *inner history of the new America, The Unwinding*, which was the book Jenny’s most reminded me of as the hundred interviews lead seamlessly into one another to illustrate the author’s central point, made over and over again.

Despite this repetition, each ‘case’ stands out as an individual who is memorable in their own right and which you do not skip as you are reading. Silva’s interviewing is sensitive and, as a young, white, 30-something woman who has set off to find out what is happening to her contemporaries in her vast country, brave. It is supported by statistical evidence of the rising age for birth of first child, numbers living with their parents into their 30s etc. Also with sound scholarship remarkably free from the jargon of ‘societal imaginaries’ and half-digested Bourdieusianism that mars many academic texts – a possible reason they may not like it!

Silva draws on the sociology of risk to reflect in conclusion on ‘the “hidden injuries” of risk’ because: ‘*As it stands, the economic, political, and cultural systems that frame these men’s and women’s coming of age stories are coming up short, leaving them powerless, distrustful, and hostile towards human interdependence. Only by understanding the sources, consequences, and meanings of twenty-first century adulthood can we hope to rewrite the futures of working-class youth.*’ (p25).

Reference

Cohen, P. (1997) *Rethinking the Youth Question, Education, Labour and Cultural Studies*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, p232.