

Life on the Margins

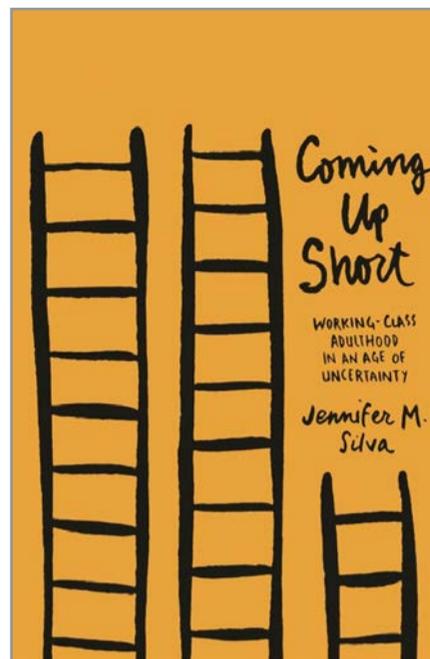
COMING UP SHORT:

WORKING-CLASS ADULTHOOD IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

REVIEWED BY SARAH L. COURTEAU

AMERICA'S WORKING CLASS IS AN ENDANGERED species. The factory work's gone overseas, the unions' backs are broken, and everything's been automated, anyway.

That is and isn't true, of course. With the exception of trades such as law enforcement and firefighting, which can't be outsourced or diced up into penny-ante shifts, many traditional blue-collar jobs have become rarer. But the working class itself is still around, its members surfing relatives' couches, living off credit cards, taking out staggering college loans for degrees they can't finish or can't use, and piecing together work at coffee shops, retailers, and security companies. Yes, as documented in *Coming Up Short* by Jennifer M. Silva, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, the working class is still very much with us.



By Jennifer M. Silva
Oxford Univ. Press
192 pp. \$29.95

What's changed is lower-wage workers' status in a postindustrial economy, and with it, their sense of identity. The hard-workin', hard-livin' man of country song who "wears denim, drinks American beer," actively participates in his local church, union, or neighborhood

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bar scene (perhaps all three), and swears by “hard work, family, God, and the promise of the American dream” is harder to find. Ditto the down-to-earth heir to Rosie the Riveter, a family anchor with her sleeves forever rolled up.

In their place is a new generation of anxious and unsettled young adults who literally can’t afford to buy a home, get married, or have a stable family (though many do end up with kids anyway). Only about a fifth of the people Silva interviewed for her book were married. A large number had bought the message that education is the key to a

better future. But they were struggling to figure out how to secure financial aid—even if they qualified—and didn’t know how to translate a degree into a career. (Without that knowledge, Silva writes, “community college simply acts as a holding pen for working-class youth slated to eventually enter the service economy—but with loan debt to pay off.”) Confused about what they should even aspire to, they expressed suspicion of the government and of institutions in general, but also believed they were the ones to blame for the detours and wrong turns they’d made. They were loners.



REDUX

Working class jobs have dwindled, but working class people are still around.

From October 2008 to February 2010, during the depths of the Great Recession and the beginning of the slow recovery, Silva spoke to about a hundred working-class men and women ages 24 to 34. Defining “working class” as people whose fathers hadn’t attended college, she sought to trace how “the children of the working class of a generation ago are recreating what it means . . . to be working class.” She focused on Lowell, Massachusetts, and Richmond, Virginia, because these two cities embody the new economy of dwindling industrial work, diminished government funding, and the proliferation of low-paying “May I help you?” jobs. (Barbara Ehrenreich memorably put the lie to the claim that service jobs can adequately support one person, much less a family, in her 2001 book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*.)

In intimate and sometimes wrenching conversations, Silva—herself a first-generation college student and the daughter of a firefighter—draws out her subjects on their histories, their aspirations, and the myriad obstacles they face in trying to achieve the traditional markers of adulthood—the house, the spouse, and a steady paycheck. *Coming Up Short* bears the earmarks of a dissertation cum book, with observations such as “Tradi-

tional conduits of adulthood are deeply gendered” and references to Marx and Engels, but through her interviewees’ voices, it breaks free of the academes and says something important and new about the changing American character.

Particularly striking is the sense of betrayal many of Silva’s subjects feel toward education. Take the young black man she calls Brandon. (All names were changed.) He graduated in the top tier of his high school class and attended a private university in the Southeast, excited about becoming an engineer. But he couldn’t pass calculus or physics, so he switched his major to criminal justice. Graduating with \$80,000 in debt, he applied to three police departments, but was dinged at one by a lottery system, at another for failing a spelling test, and at a third for participating in a college prank that wasn’t even on record at his school but that he’d confessed to in the interest of being honest. Eleven years later, he works as a manager at a clothing store chain and can barely keep one step ahead of his student loan payments. “You have to give Uncle Sam your first-born to get a degree and it doesn’t pan out!” he says.

Because they haven’t been able to walk the same path to adulthood followed by past generations, these young people have

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had to develop their own measuring stick for growth. So they’ve taken the American ethos of self-reliance, mixed it with the “neoliberal” bent of America’s free-market economy (Silva deploys the term like a dirty word), and embraced a self-help approach to life that seeks to make meaning from what they’ve overcome—addiction, alcoholism, mental health issues, and troubled family histories. As Silva points out, this is a stark change from the “stoic, taciturn” working stiff of the public imagination. Today’s young working-class Americans were raised on Oprah, and they’re not afraid to use her.

Reading these accounts can be painful. Often, internal transformation is all these young people have to cling to, and they wield therapeutically tinged language to describe their attempts to overcome the challenges in their lives. “You just got to figure out that it’s all in your head and you almost got to talk yourself out of it,” says a man who lost

his managerial position at his company because of anxiety attacks. Eileen, who was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder after she discovered that her boyfriend was molesting their four-year-old daughter, wants to pass on to her kids the lesson that “we aren’t perfect, that we make mistakes and we try to learn from it.” “I’ve . . . learned you’re not going to get better if you don’t want to,” says a woman who was neglected by her mother and flunked out of college because of her drinking.

Another young woman bedeviled by alcohol, Monica, 31, is a photography student at an art college where she is, she says, “just hanging on by a thread all the time financially.” An alcoholic from the time she was a teenager, she worked a string of jobs through her twenties as she struggled with addiction. Now committed to sobriety, she reflects that “there’s tons of stuff that I don’t feel proud about that I’ve done, like tons of stuff. But I can’t change that, and I wouldn’t be who I am today if I didn’t go through everything that I did. And I feel like I’ve had a very, like, live-out-loud, colorful growing up and maturing, and you know a lot of life’s lessons that I had to learn and I had to go through *myself*.”

Silva’s focus on the Isolated American

may ring familiar to those who read Harvard social scientist Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). That seminal book, which expanded from the statistical insight that Americans today tend not to bowl in leagues, argued that the country's sense of community and civic engagement have both badly eroded. Silva is one of Putnam's research assistants, and his observations about the decline of a sense of community resonate throughout the book.

Silva hopes that young working-class Americans will be able to reconnect, and she's particularly rueful that the power of unions and the movements to empower minorities and women have dwindled in the last few decades. Her working-class subjects may feel that the government, the education system, and in some cases the military (several are or have been enlisted) have let them down.

But they're suspicious of one another as well.

She credits the Credit Card Accountability Responsibility and Disclosure Act, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and the Affordable Care Act—all major legislative initiatives of the Obama administration—with attempting to offer some of the social protections that would help ensure that young working-class adults aren't hung out to dry. But it's hard to come away from her book without hearing, in the stories she tells, a deeper loss and yearning than a strengthened social safety net would remedy, and wondering what the ultimate cost will be to a country that has come to depend on the service of strangers. ■

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