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Shirley A. Hill, "Families. A Social Class Perspective". Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2011, 184 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/72712)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2012

Ente di afferenza:

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Book reviews

Shirley A. Hill, *Families. A Social Class Perspective*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2011, 184 pp.

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This book is part of a series on “Contemporary Family Perspectives,” in which each volume aims to give a brief overview of the scholarship on a particular aspect of family scholarship. The specific focus of this book is to examine family change through the lens of social class. The author argues that social class is somewhat ignored in the understanding of American family life. It is claimed that this is in part because of the power of ideologies such as the American dream – the belief that anyone can achieve success and mobility through hard work and determination; and the equally erroneous belief that the United States is a middle class society. In contrast, this book focuses on the impact of economic systems and social class on the organisation of family life. It is acknowledged that families are also political entities in the sense that they are the result of laws that govern particular aspects of marriage and family life. The author, following a Marxist perspective, suggests that such laws often stem from economic forces, embodying the values and interests of the economically powerful, while exploiting racial minorities and discriminating against women.

The book is organised in six chapters. The first chapter shows how family systems and ideologies are intertwined with and shaped by economic forces. It is claimed that as capitalist markets expanded, family ideologies were also used to dominate and marginalise people across the globe. Through international exploration and trade, white Europeans were able to establish their economic, political and family systems as superior while characterizing others as primitive, deficient and even non-human. Chapter 2 contains a broad overview of relevant classical and contemporary social theories, including structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. These first two chapters are relevant to family sociology internationally. However the following three chapters (on elites, middle class and economically marginal families) focus on social class and families in ways that are specific to the United States. While it is informative to have a broad spectrum of the way economic life affects families in the United States, the lack of a comparative perspective makes this somewhat less interesting from a European perspective.

In many ways, the three US focused chapters on family life among the very wealthy or upper class families, the middle income families and the low income or poor families are potentially the most interesting. This is because they draw on studies and theories that are less well known. Each chapter starts with a definition of the class under study and provides a succinct history of its origins. It then discusses how the particular social class position influences family patterns including marriage, gender relations, childbearing and the socialisation of children.

In the chapter on the upper class of the United States, Hill focuses on the top twenty percent of the population that account for most of the wealth and exert control over the economic and political systems. Members of the “old money” upper class are included along with the more recent self-made highly educated professionals and

successful entrepreneurs. Hill claims that despite the substantial increase of millionaire households in the latter part of the Twentieth century, there is a paucity of research on family life of the upper class. She suggests that this is because of their seclusion from most other Americans. This leads her to base the empirical content of the chapter on studies that are ill-suited to making any generalisations about family patterns of the very wealthy. For example, she draws heavily on the 1984 study by Susan Ostrander of upper class women, in one region of the US. Without discussing the nature of this small unrepresentative study, Hill implies that the study shows that fertility among these women was relatively high and traditional gender roles were common. Moreover, she seems to concur with Ostrander's interpretation that "for women in the upper class the gains of gender equality would not be enough to balance the losses of class equality." Another study Hill draws on is the impromptu ethnographic study by the journalist Robert Frank [2007] on "Richistan," the American new rich. While such studies are rich on insights into individual family orientations, they do not provide an adequate basis for inferring family patterns e.g. the presumed relative fertility of the wealthy elite. Given that Hill is concerned with the top twenty percent, it is a pity that the book does not review the work of historical demographers, who have used representative data, to examine interlinks between household income and fertility over time.

Hill provides a richer array of scholarly research in the two chapters that discuss family life among the middle class and the poorer class. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the book is at its best when it draws on the ways African American families socialise their children. This is the area of Hill's own research expertise and she draws on her earlier books on African American children: *Socialization and Development in Families* [Hill 1999] and *Black Intimacies, A Gender Perspective on Families and Relationships* [Hill 2005]. These two chapters have considerable overlap as middle class families are often compared with the families of the more economically marginal. For example, the work of Annette Lareau [2003] contrasting the "concerted cultivation" of the middle class with the "accomplishment by natural growth" of poor and working class parents is discussed in both chapters. Indeed the chapter focus breaks down completely when discussing the merits of the argument of Nancy Fraser [1984] about how best to achieve gender equity. Fraser's notions of the universal breadwinner model or the caregiver parity model are of relevance in different ways to the upper, middle and poorer classes, in terms of breaking the persistent links between class, gender, employment and unpaid family care.

The final chapter is about families in a global economic context. This is a very broad brush review of global trends. For example one global trend has been the demise of the male role as sole wage earner and the entry of women into the labour market. We are told that the growing presence of women in economically productive work has not led to gender equality, but has exposed the myth of male superiority and upended patriarchal traditions – sometimes to the endangerment of women. There is a brief nod to transnational families with a sweeping claim that the shift to female immigration has even greater ramifications for families, than did the prior male immigration. This is because "it separates mothers from children and shifts the wage-earning function to wives, thus undermining the basic foundations of family life." This is the sort of ideological claim that for the most part the book seems to critique; it is thus somewhat hard to know how to react, when the author reiterates such ideologies uncritically.

This book packs in a lot of information, but most of it would be very familiar to anyone with a more than basic acquaintance with family sociology. However, it would be a useful introductory text for those who want an overview of the field that puts social stratification at the heart of family analysis. However, it is questionable whether the book fulfils its brief to “provide the most advanced scholarship and up-to-date findings on the family.” In particular, while this book does seek to unravel social change since the mid-Twentieth century at the macro level, it has a peculiarly static view of the way family lives evolve at the micro-level, ignoring recent research from America and elsewhere on income dynamics and changes across the life course. The book repeatedly and correctly emphasises the importance of family diversity, but it pays scant attention to the way family life changes at different stages of the family life course. This is a pity because family dynamics are highly relevant to the stratification story that is at the heart of the book, particularly in terms of gender and race inequalities.

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