

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Sociology Faculty Research and Scholarship

Sociology

2021

Review of Amplified Advantage: Going to a "Good" College in an Era of Inequality By Allison L. Hurst.

David Karen

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/soc_pubs



Part of the Sociology Commons

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/soc_pubs/24

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Latino and black are not mutually exclusive and “black” includes more than African-Americans. This distinction matters analytically.

According to Gosin, 75% of Hispanic-owned businesses were owned by Cuban Americans at a time when the Cuban immigrant population was predominantly white (Gosin uses “Latino” elsewhere in the text; presumably the cited statistics used the category “Hispanic”). Moreover, “Miami has one of the most diverse black populations in the United States owing to post-1960 immigration to the area from the Caribbean” (p. 6). In that case, the racial inequality is more than a “perception of inequality” among African Americans (p. 96): it is a major economic split. Still, these data ultimately support Gosin’s overall conclusion that Afro-Cuban immigrant experiences disrupt popular racial logics, including those that we use to construct and measure demographic categories.

Gosin documents the strategic exclusion of black Cubans from early waves of Cuba-to-Miami immigration as well as media depictions of Marielito immigrants as black and criminal. The treatment of Marielitos complicates our understanding of race as a rhetorical technology. Gosin’s data and analysis demonstrate that racialized groups must continually adapt the racial narratives they employ to preserve their precarious citizenship in a white supremacist social hierarchy. The cultural power of the black/white racial dichotomy raises the stakes of successfully appealing to citizenship belonging. Consequently, the racialization of Cuban immigrants helped shape the political power of blackness and whiteness in Miami.

Gosin demonstrates compellingly that whiteness and blackness are mutually constructed through incompatible, even competing, logics of racialization. These incompatible discourses reflect the idiosyncratic operationalization of white supremacist ideals rather than fixed African-American/Cuban American relations.

The Racial Politics of Division successfully argues that the black/white boundary and immigration are mutually constitutive racial-formation technologies. Race scholars will benefit from considering how Afro-Cuban racialization experiences challenge cultural ideals about the meaning and function of race. A broad audience will also find the author’s use of news artifacts and interviews engaging and authoritative, making this ideal for classroom use.

Amplified Advantage: Going to a “Good” College in an Era of Inequality. By Allison L. Hurst. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2020. Pp. xiv+288. \$95.00.

David Karen
Bryn Mawr College

Over the past few decades, U.S. higher education institutions have increased the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of their student populations. At the same time, both wealth and income inequality have increased nationally

to the point that we are about as unequal as we have been since the Great Depression. It's in the context of this era of exceptional inequality that Allison Hurst attempts to understand how social class affects the experience and outcomes of attending a liberal arts college—the “good” college of the title. Her focus on this rather small sector of higher education is motivated by her sense that these institutions are elite and distinctive with social-justice oriented, “leveling up” missions, which lead them to aspire to having diverse student populations.

Using a clear writing style and a mixed-methods approach (including her own survey), Hurst attempts to understand how social class affects both college choice and the college experience of students at small liberal arts colleges (SLACs). Most sharply stated, she wants to understand why, given the supreme efforts made by the SLACs to create an environment in which each student is treated equally—Hurst would say that they're all in the same “bubble”—student outcomes vary so greatly by social class. Although they didn't motivate the study, Hurst attends as well to race and gender intersections throughout.

Extensively relying on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field, Hurst attempts to show how students from different social origins—with different resources/capitals and different perceptions of possible futures (habitus)—navigate through these institutions that are perceived and misperceived in different ways by students who are attempting to take advantage of their potential rewards. One of the main reasons that Hurst did her own survey was so she could create a better operationalization of Bourdieu's concept of class to distinguish economically from culturally elite students and both from working-class students. But she also wanted to have a five-class schema that ranged from working to lower-middle to middle to upper-middle to upper class. Hurst relies on both categorizations, but the logic that motivated the use of one or the other for any given purpose was not clear. Additionally, Hurst was frustrated by the degree to which she had to make less than certain occupational coding decisions.

Hurst's main findings both reinforce findings from other studies and highlight some patterns that should be further explored. Hurst finds that students who enter SLACs do indeed enter a “bubble” that appears to equalize experiences for all. And *all* students do benefit from their time in college in terms of accumulating additional social and cultural capital. But the working-class students, as opposed to better-resourced students, struggle to convert the college-accumulated capitals into favorable postcollege outcomes. This is due, in part, to a habitus that doesn't signal the strategic challenges they face in the SLACs and the lack of sufficient economic capital to provide a bridge to self-sufficiency. In a section that examines differential class accumulation of “hip” and “traditional” cultural capital, Hurst shows that there is a very slight diminution of the differences between working- and upper-class students. However, using postcollege data, she finds that the cultural capital accumulation trajectory of the upper-class students continues after graduation, while that of the working-class students stalls: “For working-class students . . . what happens/ed in college stays in college” (p. 174).

Overall, then, Hurst does find that initial class advantages are maintained through students' experiences at SLACs. In some ways, the initial advantages of elite students are increased, especially since they are unburdened by the debt that working-class students have accumulated. They also increase their initial advantages by the social capital that they strategically accumulate in the extracurriculum. But the most interesting argument that Hurst makes is that those with economic and cultural capital—with their associated habitus—encounter the institution in ways that allow them to strategically deploy their resources within the institution's field(s) (Hurst suggests that different majors can be seen as different fields), while those without those advantages—working-class students and students of color—act more passively and allow the institution to mold them. Ultimately, she suggests, without the agency that those with apposite habitus and capital bring to the SLAC, the SLAC is quite ineffective in producing social mobility. Indeed, Hurst is explicit that “social mobility and successful social reproduction is a *family project*” (p. 215; emphasis in original).

As noted above, Hurst collected a lot of original data: 2,200 surveys of students; ethnographic and archival data; and, using a variety of sampling techniques, more than 250 “stories” from interviews, focus groups, and other qualitative data. With low response rates to an initial survey, a problem that got worse in follow-up surveys, Hurst's respondents do not necessarily represent the population of liberal arts college students (she did attempt to assess the degree of difference). She also encountered problems recruiting interviewees. Further, the interview data, which Hurst intended to use to understand the connections between social class and the choices that students made, are not deployed very systematically. Instead, Hurst speculates a lot about why students from given backgrounds decided on specific paths, relying on “fictionalized composites” of 10 students and two institutions. So, ironically, to help the reader understand what she found, Hurst tells us about students (and institutions) that do not exist. A better choice would have been to rely on actual cases and use them to illustrate the patterns in the data that they represent.

Hurst ends the book in a very provocative place. After relying on and benefiting from a Bourdieusian approach, Hurst suggests that Bourdieu's insight about the importance of cultural capital might have to be sidelined as the current state of inequality brings a reassertion of the importance of economic capital. The flattening of inequality that occurred after the Great Depression and World War II, as Piketty and others observed, allowed cultural capital to play its distinctive role in allocating privilege. Although cultural capital is hardly irrelevant (Hurst argues that it is necessary but not sufficient), she sees economic capital as now playing a larger role in allocative and conversion processes. Ultimately, Hurst finds that the bubble may be the same for all, but those who emerge best are those who entered best.