Book Review/ Compte rendu

Armstrong, Elizabeth and Laura T. Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality.* 344 pp. $35.00 (9780674049574)

Paying for the Party is the latest in a string of qualitative studies within the sociology of higher education that includes Ann Mullen's (2010) *Degrees of Inequality,* Mitchell Stevens' *Creating a Class* (2009), Jenny Stuber's (2011) *Inside the College Gates* and Amy Binder & Kate Wood's (2013) *Becoming Right*. Like their recent predecessors, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton have produced what constitutes a must-read. This well-written and empirically rich text touches upon a diverse range of topics including peer-subcultures, organizational hierarchies, parenting practises and social stratification. Given its coverage of such diverse topics, *Paying for the Party* is likely to be worth a read for social scientists with interests in any of those specified areas.

Armstrong and Hamilton's book draws on qualitative evidence, including interviews and ethnographic observation, gathered over a period of five years from a cohort of female undergraduates at the pseudonymed Midwest University. Armstrong and Hamilton use this empirical evidence in order to construct a clear understanding of the available "pathways" for students at Midwest University. They define pathways as "simultaneously social and academic", as logics that "coordinate all aspects of the university experience" for undergraduate students (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013: 15). This includes how seriously students take their studies, as well as how intensively and with whom they socialize. Using such a conceptual lens, the authors develop a typology consisting of what they call the "party", "mobility" and "professional" pathways, exploring the implications of each.

The party pathway, which serves as the default pathway within Midwest University, is described as being based on something akin to the "disengagement compact" that has been documented by James Cote and Anton Allahar (2007) in *Ivory Tower Blues*. Yet, within the context of Midwest University, this includes not only an implicit arrangement between the institution and undergraduates to expect little of each other, as suggested by Cote and Allahar (2007), but also, substantial adjustments by each side. Midwest University provides easy majors and allows the system of Greek sororities and fraternities, along with their long list

of social events, to operate largely unobstructed. Meanwhile, students on such pathway sacrifice time, academics, mental health, as well as their parents' financial resources in order to sustain the alcohol-infused rhythm of such lifestyle.

Now, although this party pathway draws in the lion's share of undergraduates at Midwest University, Armstrong and Hamilton note that most students do not possess the financial and social resources to participate in it. As a general rule, they find that only the most affluent and savvy students are capable of participating in such a pathway without hampering their chances of academic and economic success. Armstrong and Hamilton note that success stories from students who participated in the party pathway came mainly as a result of parental interventions. Armstrong and Hamilton document numerous instances in which parental networks and financial resources allowed largely average students on the party pathway to land dream jobs in, for example, the entertainment industry. In the absence of such parental resources, students who partied throughout the course of their undergraduate years faced significant roadblocks on the road to graduating, let alone landing gainful employment.

Beyond the party pathway, the authors note the presence of the mobility pathway, which consists mainly of less prestigious vocational training for working-class students, and the professional pathway, which consists mainly of training for higher status occupations. These alternative pathways are closer to what one would traditionally expect to occur within a university. Students travelling within such pathways will eventually rely on what they learn and achieve while in school, rather than on who their parents know, in order to acquire employment. That being said, these more traditional pathways are also marred by potential disasters when student resources and organizational structures do not align well. Armstrong and Hamilton note several cases where, for example, parents lacked the knowledge and experience to guide their children through the professional pathway and its rigorous course requirements. Similarly, they describe cases where working-class students on the mobility pathway unwittingly self-selected into what they described as "worthless" classes (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013: 156). These, of course, were challenges they faced in addition to the significant distractions posed by their peers on the party pathway, including the late night partying, drinking and other antics.

After reading this book, Canadian sociologists of education as well as their counterparts outside of the United States will be left wondering about its implications for the future study of their national higher education systems. From a Canadian standpoint, much of the discussion within *Paying for the Party* about Greek sororities and excessive partying might

appear distinctly American and largely disconnected from the realities of our system. Beyond a select number of institutions north of the border with a party school reputation, the mobility and professional pathways appear to be rather dominant in our context. Yet, although such basic differences exist between our systems, Armstrong and Hamilton's book should nonetheless encourage us to explore the potential mismatches which might exist between student resources and available pathways within the Canadian context. Following Armstrong and Hamilton's lead, we could learn much about the dynamics of social stratification within our borders.

McMaster University Roger Pizarro Milian

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Roger Pizarro Milian is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Sociology at McMaster University. His research interests include the sociology of higher education, organizational theory and social stratification.

pizarrr@mcmaster.ca