

Fabrizio Bernardi

Dalton Conley, Elsewhere, U.S.A. How We Got From the Company Man, Family Dinners, and the Affluent Society to the Home Office, BlackBerry Moms, and Economic Anxiety. New York: Vintage Books, 2009, 240 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/35875)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2011

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

Dalton Conley, *Elsewhere, U.S.A. How We Got From the Company Man, Family Dinners, and the Affluent Society to the Home Office, BlackBerry Moms, and Economic Anxiety*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009, 240 pp.

doi: 10.2383/35875

Some years ago, this journal contributed to a debate on the four ideal types of Sociology, originally identified by Raymond Boudon and, later, discussed by John Goldthorpe. One of the conclusions was that, in the field of social stratification, the boundaries between analytic, cameral, and Marxist sociology are not very clear-cut. Accordingly a critique was made of the “expressive sociology” of social stratification, as epitomized by the work of Ulrich Beck. It was actually argued that that instead of talking about expressive sociology it may, perhaps, be more appropriate to talk about shoddy sociology¹. Now, a book by Dalton Conley, *Elsewhere, U.S.A.*, challenges those previous conclusions. If expressive sociology is ultimately about conveying, in the words of Boudon, “in an original and effective fashion feelings which many people experience in their daily lives”, then *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* clearly fits this definition. But far from being useless and shoddy, this book is important and intriguing. Either it represents an exception to the arguments put forward in the debate that took place in *Sociologica*, or such arguments were wrong.

I will return later to this – probably trivial – dilemma. Let me instead summarize the main content and thesis of the book. Its starting point is that, nowadays in the U.S.A. (and probably in other post-industrial societies) the boundaries that once were the hallmarks of industrial capitalism, such as work versus leisure; public versus private sphere; office versus home; and investment versus consumption, have blurred. The social group that is most intensively affected by these changes constitutes what Conley names the “elsewhere class.” The identikit of an individual in this emerging creative class of American professionals is someone in the top half of the income distribution who works as a professional in the service sector in some type of creative job; who is constantly connected to the internet; and who has children and some direct domestic responsibilities. Conley estimates that about 5 to 10 per cent of the American adult population meets these criteria, although this figure might be growing, and their influence on the cultural and political debate is much larger than their size. Three major transformations – in the economy, in the family and in technology – have contributed to the emergence of this new class.

In the economy, the salient change is the growth in inequality, especially at the top of the income distribution, with increasing pressure not to slip down the income ladder and to work longer hours. An inversion in work motivation has, thus, occurred. Previously, one worked longer hours to earn more and then to enjoy spending it. Now, since there is an opportunity to earn more income, one works longer hours. Leisure time has become a prerogative of the poor. In the realm of the family, the rise in female paid

¹ See F. Bernardi [2007], Le quattro sociologie e la stratificazione sociale, in “*Sociologica*” 1/2007, doi: 10.2383/24195. For an English version: http://www.uned.es/dpto_so2/bernardi/documentos/BernardiSociologicaE.pdf

employment and the demographic changes associated with it, have paved the way for multiple family equilibria, which have not yet been fully institutionalized. In highly educated homogamous couples there is, then, a demand, more or less satisfied, for greater involvement of the father in domestic responsibilities. Lastly, developments in telecommunication technology and computing have allowed for the reorganization of economic activities and the delocalization of work, which can now be done at any hour from any location. In sum, there is increased pressure to work 24/7 and to earn more, coupled with both the demand and the desire to be a responsible parent. The good, or bad, part of the story is that your WiFi connection, iPad, and BlackBerry enable you to do this. There is no excuse: should you fail to manage your multitasking identities, then you are to blame.

Conley then analyzes in some depth the different facets of these structural changes. He analyzes the organization of work at Google, which approximates a decentralized total institution; he discusses the rise of a “nowhere class,” the dialectic component of the “elsewhere creative” class, made up of unemployable, poorly-educated men, expelled from the labour market into criminality and then sentenced to prison. Starting from a provocative idea of shooting advertisements on the moon, he reports on the expansion of the market and the commodification of all realms of reality, a process which exerts further pressure on the imperative to work longer hours. He expatiates on consumption and investment, so increasingly undistinguishable that the author coins the term “convestment.” He links Simmel, Granovetter, and the hyperlinks of Amazon in order to explore the birth of the “intraindividual” with multiple fragmented selves that are in constant competition. Finally, he focuses on the “dynamic polygamy” induced by divorce and remarriage and, somehow cynically, inspects the new parenting styles of the “elsewhere class,” who face the dilemma of how to foster their children’s talent through organized leisure activities, while at the same time ensuring that over-scheduling does not damage their creativity.

Neo-logisms are abundant. However, far from being just a smart and creative narrative, Conley’s analyses are extremely insightful. They are based on solid evidence that often contradicts media myths (which are, unfortunately, often publicized by other expressive sociologists). These include the idea that employment insecurity and unemployment now equally affect the working class and white collar workers, and that highly educated women are less likely to find a stable partner (with both cases being untrue).

Let me, then, venture as to why this book might be the exception to the general judgment on expressive sociology. Conley’s expressive writing is exceptional for two reasons. First, as I have already mentioned, Conley builds his arguments on a vast base of solid empirical evidence that ranges across disciplines, from sociology to genetics, medicine and economics. In this sense, the accompanying notes at the end of the text are an example of academic erudition and demonstrate a capacity to summarize the best insights from different fields. Second, I am not a native speaker and, as such, not the best person to evaluate the author’s literary skills. But if one takes Italo Calvino’s *Six Memos for a New Millennium* as a reference, Conley’s writing is quick, light, and exact. It is also multiple, insofar as the text constantly changes from serious argumentation to some hilarious comments, via a subjective excursus, and then back to the main argument. Not bad for a book on structural changes.

To conclude, the social science that Dalton Conley usually does is made of falsifiable hypotheses that are tested with sophisticated statistical methods and innovative data. In *Elsewhere, U.S.A.* however there is no straight hypothesis to be addressed, nor are there instrumental variables, genetic data or siblings data. As Conley writes in the final author's note, this book is social criticism, and its test and value lie in whether the reader identifies with the reality and feelings that he describes. Conley actually ends the book with the direct question: "Do I make sense?". Well, I am finishing this expressive review while supervising my small daughter and ensuring she is not painting on the living room wall. Meanwhile, I am also intermittently checking and answering emails and discussing on my cell phone the agenda for a board meeting of a local civic association to which I devote much more time than I probably should, with the secret hope that those who argue that social capital and civic involvement improve health and happiness have not really engaged in an ecological fallacy. My obvious answer to Conley's final question is: "Yes, you make a lot of sense."

Fabrizio Bernardi

European University Institute, Florence