If working-class lads turn into working-class men, many elite children also turn into elite adults. With a nod to Paul Willis’s classic *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, Lauren Rivera reverses the usual question of why the disadvantaged remain disadvantaged. Instead, she asks: In an era when elite class positions cannot be handed down by title or property, how do elites maintain their advantage?

The answer Rivera provides is that they do so in a way that is systematic, thorough, and extremely expensive. By studying the hiring practices of firms that award 22-year-olds with salaries that double to triple the income of the median American household, Rivera traces the ways that privileged students are escorted from privileged schools to privileged jobs. Jobs that are out of reach to the majority of Americans are the same jobs that are obtained through the path of least resistance by the children of the elite.

Drawing on rich ethnographic detail and revealing interviews, *Pedigree* shows that the process of obtaining a job at an elite professional services firm (EPS)—in banking, consulting, or law—is biased in favor of the privileged. Rivera points out that half of Harvard students come from families in the top 4 percent of household income, while only 4 percent of Harvard students come from families in the bottom 20 percent. Elite professional service firms recruit students exclusively from universities whose student population, like Harvard’s, is dominated by the well-off. Firms saturate elite campuses, spending up to a million dollars per school to convince these graduates to work for them. Yet, not only do EPS firms not make an appearance at less elite schools, they do not even bother to read the résumés of students who attend them.

Firms do read the résumés of students who attend elite schools, but this badge of merit alone is not enough to grant students an interview. Firms consider the grades of students at the most elite schools to be irrelevant; students’ admission into a top school, not their performance there, is what counts. Instead, those in charge of hiring reward excellence in expensive and time-intensive activities. Applicants who participate in these activities are viewed as driven and passionate. Applicants who work to support themselves are given a nod, but often overlooked as they are not also Olympic athletes or concert violinists. Students who focus on job-related clubs—often working-class students—are dismissed as uninteresting suck-ups. As high achievement in expensive activities takes substantial resources to cultivate, it is usually those born into privilege who provide the signals of ambition and drive that firms reward.

The one in two applicants who pass the résumé screening are advanced to the interview round. Here, untrained interviewers assess candidates’ merit by considering their fit with the company. Fit is never neutral, and applicants are effectively assessed on their class-based activities and presentation styles. Interviewers ask applicants to talk about “their story,” then evaluate some stories as more valuable than others. Stories that suggest that applicants repeatedly made choices to prepare themselves for their selected career are admired. Such stories of individual choice, purpose, and triumph are stories the class-privileged can easily tell. Stories that include luck, constraint, and diversions—stories more common among the less privileged—are evaluated less favorably. Admitting to constraint by suggesting that one wants the job because

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one needs the money is a surefire way to be shown the door.

Interviewers do not only focus on cultural capital and fit; they assess human capital as well. Yet despite these exercises, smarts and skills are de-emphasized. Though the firms sell themselves as employing the “best and the brightest,” they also believe that the intellectually mediocre can do the job well. They then pass over students with 4.0 GPAs because they assume they will not fit into a culture that focuses more on fun. Consulting firms also use case study interviews. While these questions can test applicants’ math skills, interviewers do not care if applicants get the math right. They are more interested in how the applicant presents herself while tackling the problem and if she follows a particular script. Embodied knowledge of the right script is often obtained by repeated interactions with EPS insiders, a process that favors the advantaged. Applicants with the right connections are also hired even if the interviewers think that their math or social skills were weak.

In sum, Rivera shows that each stage of the hiring process ushers the elite into elite jobs while largely excluding the working class and the poor. From who is recruited, whose résumé is read, how résumés are evaluated, the definitions of merit used in interviews, and whose social capital can override their lack of other skills, the process of getting hired at an EPS firm helps elite college students become employees at elite firms. Rivera’s work then pushes against the current literature, asking us to rethink what counts as cultural capital. The criterion for exclusion in EPS firms is not a lack of familiarity with or participation in the high arts; in fact, the reverse is at times true, as men who show too much involvement with the high arts are dismissed as unmanly. The criteria also do not include familiarity with a large array of music, theater, arts, and foods. The more relevant markers, instead, include participation in country club sports, telling the right kind of personal stories, and embodying polish, presence, confidence, and normality. Rivera’s work then pushes against the current literature, asking us to rethink what counts as cultural capital. It also serves to highlight the diversity of ways that gatekeepers use culture to define merit. Some of the markers of merit business elites use likely would be markers of demerit when viewed by elite academic hiring committees.

**Pedigree**, however, does not match its new empirical framework with a new theoretical one. In fact, the book’s theoretical framework can be summed up simply: Bourdieu was right. As Bourdieu wrote, gatekeepers have class-based preferences and tastes and use these to define merit. The people who have these “meritorious” qualities will be people who share their social class, while people from the lower classes will be rejected for reasons that are ostensibly related to their skills but in actuality are related to their class. The violation of meritocracy is hidden, as gatekeepers do not actively talk about class or even think of it but hire based on it anyway. In **Pedigree**, we see that each of these aspects of Bourdieu’s theory of class reproduction is enacted by hiring managers. Yet, by reminding us of Bourdieu’s theoretical contributions, Rivera makes her own empirical contribution. Too often social scientists assume that employers hire based on job-relevant skills that will maximize their profits. Conjuring up Bourdieu, Rivera instead reminds us that hiring agents, like other gatekeepers, reward not only job-relevant skills but class-based ones. They maximize not only profits but also the feeling of affection that occurs when two similar habitués meet. Elite reproduction is not a result of superior skills but of a well-developed infrastructure that routes elites toward high-paying jobs and then defines merit in their image.

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Pedigree also serves to highlight a large gap in sociological research: the lack of attention to class discrimination. Too often the class literature describes “barriers,” “resources,” “access,” “opportunities,” and “mismatches” without also suggesting that discrimination occurs. Even Rivera, who expertly shows how systematically employers favor the class-privileged over the underprivileged, does not use the word “discrimination” to describe what she sees. But Pedigree uncovers elements of several types of discrimination: taste-based, statistical, and the perpetuation of inequality that occurs through classism without classists. She also highlights that even though we live in a time when social closure is particularly stark when considering individuals’ class position as adults, discrimination is also leveled against individuals with low class origins. This is a powerful statement, given that the working-class-origin students who are considered by EPS firms have the ultimate badge of achievement—a degree from an elite university. Others should build on Rivera’s work, not only by creating carefully crafted, well-written, deeply important ethnographies, but also in uncovering the ways that class discrimination occurs. In doing so, we can better understand how class reproduction and mobility occur in an era when class animosity, segregation, and inequality are particularly entrenched.

Fighting Words

FRANCESCA POLLETTA
University of California-Irvine
polletta@uci.edu

Sociologists know that the enduring impacts of social movements are often cultural ones. Movements change the way we live and work; they make some behaviors socially inappropriate and others newly appealing. They create new collective actors and altered lines of social cleavage. And yet scholars have been remarkably bad at capturing and explaining movements’ cultural consequences. Or perhaps it is not so remarkable, since movements’ cultural influence is often slow and indirect, and hard to disentangle from the effects of cultural shifts that would have occurred even in the absence of protest.

Sidney Tarrow wades into this tangle with scholarly panache. Rather than choosing a set of cultural impacts and tracing them to their sources or choosing a movement and trying to identify its cultural influence, Tarrow examines changes in the language of contention. That is, he traces the spread of a number of terms across place, time, and issue. Some terms, like “working class,” “patriot,” and “male chauvinist pig,” are identities. Others, like “occupations,” “conventions,” “demonstrations,” and “sexual harassment,” are practices. And still others refer to feelings, such as the language of hate and love that Tarrow studies in genocide and in campaigns for same-sex marriage. In chapters on contention around work, gender, sexuality, race, and nation, Tarrow traces the emergence and diffusion of key terms, along with their utility: that is, what each term won and did not win for those using it.

The wealth of cases covered in The Language of Contention is stunning: from Parisian sans-culottes to post-World War II Israeli Zionists to the Tea Party (both eighteenth and twenty-first century versions); from the nineteenth-century Irish Land Wars to the Harlem Renaissance; from battles over land to battles over suffrage, work, birth control, and what a group or nation should call itself. Tarrow draws on the work of many scholars, but his unique talent is to integrate diverse perspectives into a nuanced and thick