ACCOUNTS

STOCK-BASED COMPENSATION & GENDER WEALTH INEQUALITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANGELINA GRIGORYEVA

Angelina Grigoryeva is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Toronto, where she is also affiliated with the Data Sciences Institute. Her research interests include economic sociology, organizational theory, social stratification and inequality, social demography, and quantitative and computational methodologies. Her research agenda examines the shift to stock-based compensation and its implications for workers' economic outcomes, firms' organizational performance, and social inequality at large. Another strand of her research explores racial residential segregation and its consequences for occupational attainment from a historical perspective. Her research has appeared in the *American Sociological Review* and *American Journal of Sociology* , has received research awards and funding from various organizations, and has been profiled in the media. Angelina received a Ph.D. in Sociology with a Certificate in Demography from Princeton University, followed by a David E. Bell Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in the Center for Population and Development Studies at Harvard University.

Zhen Wang, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto, spoke to Dr. Grigoryeva about the relationship between stock-based compensation and gender wealth inequality.

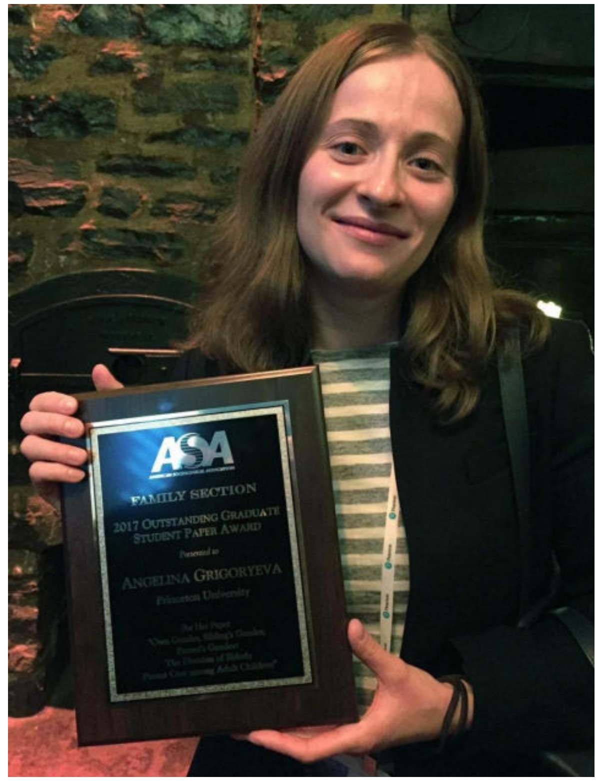
Zhen Wang: Your recent article "The Shift to Stock-Based Compensation and Gender Inequality in Wealth in the United States" in *Socio-Economic Review* provides a novel explanation for gender wealth inequality in the U.S.—stock-based compensation. You found that stock-based compensation generates more significant wealth accumulation than regular wages; however, the effects are higher among men, and men are also more likely to be compensated by stock options than women, which translates to disparity in wealth building among men and women, especially at the top of the wealth distribution. In what ways do you think your findings echo existing literature that studies gender wage inequalities, and in what way do these two mechanisms of gender wealth inequality differ?

Angelina Grigoryeva: Thanks for these questions! Let me start with the latter. Unlike regular cash wages, stock-based compensation gives employees an ownership stake, albeit without the authority to influence management decisions. In essence, stock-based compensation blurs the line between capital and labor, a distinction famously theorized by Karl Marx. However, my study shows that not all workers benefit equally. Rather, women face a double disadvantage: they are both less likely to receive stock-based compensation and, when they do, they accumulate less wealth from it than men. That is, even when men and women receive the same amount of stock-based compensation, women benefit less from it. So, I'd go so far as to suggest that perhaps Marx needs a revision: solutions to the capital-labor divide may not benefit all workers equally.

Turning to your first question, my study offers new empirical evidence on a persistent but underexplored pattern: that the gender pay gap is concentrated at the top of the economic distribution. My findings show that men at the top of the wealth distribution are the primary winners from the shift to stock-based compensation in the course of financialization of the U.S. economy. Similarly, recent scholarship on regular cash wages shows that top-earning men have reaped the largest gains from rising returns to education and wage growth in recent decades. Together, these patterns suggest that the forces driving economic inequality—whether through stock-based compensation or regular wages—are disproportionately rewarding men at the top.

Z. W.: What are the most surprising findings in your study on the relationships between stock-based compensation and gender wealth inequality?

A. G.: One of the most surprising findings is just how widespread stock-based compensation has become. Nationally representative survey data show that one in five of U.S. private-sector workers, or 29 million Americans, receive stock-based compensation. These employees range from executives in Fortune 500 corporations to engineers in high-tech companies to even baristas in Starbucks.



For reference, the share of workers with stock-based compensation is now three times higher than that of unionized workers. In other words, stock-based compensation—and other novel forms of pay that have emerged in recent years—is a major economic force, and it's far more prevalent than commonly assumed.

Another striking finding is the gender disparity in the returns to stock-based compensation, particularly at the top of the wealth distribution. It's not just that men are more likely to receive stock-based compensation; it's also that when they do, they tend to accumulate more wealth from it than women. This means that even in a hypothetical scenario where men and women received the same amount of stock-based compensation, wealth inequality would still increase because men benefit more from it, especially at the top. These findings suggest that the shift to stock-based compensation has contributed to a distinctive shape of U.S. wealth inequality characterized by both gender disparity and growing concentration at the top.

Z. W.: You mentioned that "cultural values and social constraints steer men toward and women away from the stock market outside of work. . . .Gendered norms and expectations view finance and the stock market as a stereotypically male-typed domain." This is very interesting, and your findings echo this argument. What do you think are some potential institutional and policy solutions that could help level the playing field?

A. G.: Sometimes the most effective solutions are surprisingly straightforward. Some types of stock-based compensation require employees to actively opt in, and my study shows that this opt-in structure contributes to gender gaps—women are significantly less likely to enroll. We see similar dynamics with defined-contribution pension plans, where employees tend to stick with default options, even when those options may not serve their best interests. In other words, part of the gender gap stems from the institutional design of stock-based compensation itself. A promising solution is to flip the default: make participation in stock-based compensation automatic, with the option to opt out. This small structural change can significantly boost participation among women by removing an initial barrier to entry and help narrow the gender gap. It's a seemingly minor shift that can meaningfully level the playing field.

Z. W.: Amid the trend of financialization among U.S. corporations, how can the findings of your article help economic sociologists and gender scholars think about gender wealth inequality in new ways going forward?

A. G.: That's an important question, and what I'd like to emphasize is how economic mobility in the United States has increasingly shifted from labor to financial markets. While scholars have traditionally situated the emergence and reproduction of inequality within the context of the labor market, such focus becomes too narrow with the rise of finance. Financialization has brought forward financial markets as a key site where socioeconomic attainment—particularly wealth accumulation—takes place. My study shows that employees who receive stock-based compensation accumulate more wealth because they gain a stake in the stock market. This form of compensation goes beyond traditional wages and reflects a broader transformation in the sources of economic mobility. Given the gendered nature of the stock market and finance more broadly, these large-scale structural shifts have far-reaching implications for gender inequality—not just in wealth, but in how economic opportunity is distributed and reproduced more broadly.

Z. W.: Thank you once again for your insightful questions and the opportunity to discuss my recent work with you and the readers! ■

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ELITE MULTIGENERATIONAL CLASS PERSISTENCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH SHAY O'BRIEN

Shay O'Brien studies the kinship networks that weave elites together. Her mixed-methods research tracks the capture and circulation of resources through upper-class populations over time, with a particular focus on women, whiteness, and wealth. She is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Stone Program in Wealth Distribution, Inequality, and Social Policy at Harvard, and later this year will begin a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the MIT Shaping the Future of Work Initiative.

Allison Wigen, a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at Boston University, interviewed Dr. O'Brien about elites, kinship networks, and class persistence.

Allison Wigen: Thank you for taking the time to share about your work for this issue of Accounts. Let's start with your broader intellectual trajectory. What initially drew you to studying elites, and how did you come to focus on kinship and family networks as a central lens for understanding elite persistence?

Shay O'Brien: Thank you so much for the invitation! I love Accounts.

My focus on elites is really about inequality, and how I've observed inequality in my own life. I'll explain that a bit. I'm from a white, middle-class family in Dallas, where I went to neighborhood public schools that were internally segregated by race and class. Growing up in that context, I understood myself as very privileged, and I was. But then I went to an elite university where I was suddenly surrounded by peers from elite families and schools. That was in 2008, when the mortgage crisis hit. It was easy to believe in meritocracy up until then, because that belief flattered me, structurally. But seeing that the so-called "best and brightest" were mostly rich made me realize how self-serving—how racist, classist, and ultimately nonsensical—my meritocratic thinking had been. I felt bamboozled! I've been trying to figure out how things actually work ever since.

After college, I spent four years at a social policy research firm evaluating programs meant to tackle inequality in the U.S. Those programs mostly focused on alleviating poverty, but I couldn't stop thinking about rich people—like, where's the RCT on wealth redistribution? And I wasn't alone, of course: talk about elites was everywhere. Occupy Wall Street started my senior year in college. Then Shamus Khan's *Privilege* came out, and Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century,* and I read them both on the subway to work. All my experiences coalesced into this vague but intense curiosity about: *how is it* that so few people hoard so much, with such devastating consequences for our societies and our planet, and it's apparently only getting worse? So I decided to go to graduate school to study elites, but I wasn't sure what I wanted to ask, and it took a lot of reading and conversation to figure that out. The kinship stuff mostly emerged from my data collection process, which I'll talk about in my next answer.

A. W.: Let's talk about your 2024 *Socio-Economic Review* article, "The Family Web: Multigenerational Class Persistence in Elite Populations." This is a significant empirical undertaking: you construct a full kinship network of Dallas's upper class between 1895 and 1945. Can you walk us through how you compiled and verified this data, and what challenges or surprises you encountered in the process of untangling this web?

S. O.: The dataset in "The Family Web" is an earlier version of a dataset I'm constantly deepening and expanding based on my research questions. Basically, I take lists of elites, look them up in multiple archival databases, and then compile information about them, their resources, and their intimate ties in a structured way. If you've ever known anyone who has done family history research using sources like *AncestryLibrary.com* and newspaper archives—that's essentially what I did for about 20,000 interconnected people. The lists of elites I used for "The Family Web" were the social registers, which are local directories of white upper-class families in the U.S. The most difficult part of the process, and the main reason I had to do it by hand, was figuring out who the women were, because they were often listed under their husband's names, e.g., Mrs. Tom Smith. But it was worth it because that's how I learned everything I've learned.

By far the biggest surprise of the data collection process was the family web itself. As I was going through the registers, adding the people inside, I started to notice that they seemed to marry each other quite often. It wasn't until I first mapped the kinship network that I realized those marriages cumulatively wove them into a big hairball. I thought it was a coding error at first! In retrospect, I don't think I would have been so surprised to find that hairball if I was studying, say, nineteenth-century European royals, because everyone knows that their "family tree" was more of a "family wreath" (to borrow a term I once heard on TikTok). But Dallas was a settler colonial city, which means it had quite recently begun as a collection of land-hungry strangers, and it filled with thousands of newcomers every year; it was also supposedly an especially mobile, "new money" kind of place. Finding a giant elite family tangle in Dallas shaped the whole trajectory of my research, because I realized that if *Dallas* looked like that, then probably elite populations everywhere look like that, to some extent.

A. W.: A key intervention in your piece is the critique of patrilineal models of class transmission. Why do you think these models have been so dominant, and what gets missed when we rely on them?

S. O.: Well, I think patrilineages are vastly easier to measure. And they're easier to measure because

of sexism. In the English-speaking world, people usually inherit surnames patrilineally, women traditionally change their surnames after marriage, and key archival sources like the U.S. Census don't usually record "maiden names." Plus, we tend to measure class at scale in ways tailored to men and the assumption of a male-headed nuclear household. So everything from how we often name ourselves to how we collect data about one another lends itself to patrilineal models of class transmission. I am hugely sympathetic to using a patrilineal model when it's the only methodologically tenable option, but as more and more family data becomes available, searchable, and linkable, that choice is becoming less defensible in many contexts.

The most persuasive *theoretical* argument I've heard for patrilineal models is that when men and patrilineages are more highly valued culturally and economically, then men and patrilineages are what really matters for class transmission. I've gotten more skeptical of this argument over time because I worry it conflates the cultural value placed on women's work with the structural consequences of women's work. For example, the British aristocracy before WWI was extremely patriarchal: for nearly a thousand years, estates and titles flowed almost exclusively from fathers to eldest sons. But that doesn't mean women were irrelevant to the transmission of wealth, status, and power. For example, one causally-identified study (Goñi 2022) found that nineteenth-century British aristocratic women's endogamous marriages made the men in their families of origin more politically powerful. Women affect their families, even when they're rendered invisible by their societies and the way we structure information.

So, what gets missed when we rely on patrilineal models is, first of all, over half the population, and second of all, most of the kin ties that bind us together and variously structure our classed, racialized, gendered social worlds. There are a lot of consequences to this, and one of them, which my "Family Web" article talks about, is that patrilineal models of elite persistence make it look like there is a lot more turnover at the top than there really is. The surnames change more quickly than the actual families.

A. W.: You introduce the concept of the "family web" to capture the dense and durable kinship ties among elites. What does this concept help us see that traditional notions like "dynasty" or "lineage" obscure?

S. O.: The family web is an alternative conceptual metaphor for families. Notions like dynasties and lineages posit that elite families are bounded groups that live or die with the success of sons. But that's a massive simplification for elite families for three main reasons: elites tend to marry each other, they tend to produce elite children, and their children are not always sons. The Dallas case demonstrates that these massive family tangles can locally cohere in decades given moderate levels of elite endogamy and reproduction.

The thing is, though—if you zoom out far enough, we are all related. Kinship on earth is a singular fabric. In retrospect, I wish I'd called "the family web" something more like "a kinship clot" to emphasize that what's different about elite kinship networks is not that they're connected in a big web (because we all are), but that the kin ties between elites are remarkably dense and durably resourced. They're like a clot, trapping riches and power in certain sectors of our global-historical kinship network. That's my hypothesis, anyway. I hope that in the coming years, given more kinship data, we'll learn more.

A. W.: One of your findings is that nearly 70 percent of Dallas's elite population was linked through this web, and that women played a central role in maintaining these connections. How does this reshape our understanding of women's economic agency in elite families, even in the absence of formal employment?

S. O.: At this point, it's more than 75 percent, and it's denser, too. I'm always finding new ties. Just this morning I found that a Dallas district attorney (Henry Wade, of *Roe v. Wade*) was the brother-in-law of a fancy Dallas socialite named Madeleine Hopkins. Henry and Madeleine were in my dataset already, but the brother (John) wasn't, so I added him and tied them together. In network terms, then, two elites I thought were 19 kin ties apart were actually two kin ties apart. I also saw that Henry and John's mom was a cousin of a couple other Dallas social elites, and their dad was a small-town judge. John eventually became a state senator, and they had many other politically elite brothers and brothers-in-law scattered all over Texas. So this very powerful district attorney was much more kin-entangled with other elites than I realized. I found and ordered an out-of-print biography of him on Ebay that I hope will teach me more about his family and the process of his rise to power. All these bits of information really add up. Even though women are less likely to directly control fortunes and governments, it has become very clear to me that I can't understand elites and inequality without them.

My empirical point—that elite women did key economic work in their families, even when they weren't formally employed (which they still disproportionately aren't, by the way)—is not new. Historians, anthropologists, and qualitative sociologists, among others, have been saying this for a long time in many ways and contexts. To give one important example: Stephanie Jones-Rogers's book *They Were Her Property* tackles the persistent myth that white women were only passive beneficiaries of slavery in the US South. It turns out that white women in enslaver families were much more likely to inherit human beings than land, and they accurately saw the buying, selling, and exploitation of people as their path to financial independence from their husbands. Nearly half the bills of sale of people in pre-Emancipation South Carolina included a woman buyer and/or seller. Jones-Rogers's work provides a horrifying and perfect example of the way that elite women's economic agency doesn't just produce elite children: it helps produce our highly unequal economy itself.

A. W.: You make a compelling case for including what you call "co-lineal" ties—such as aunts, uncles, and cousins—in analyses of class transmission. How might this expanded kinship perspective apply to other social groups beyond elites?

S. O.: That's a fabulous question. I think extended family ties matter for everyone. We are all fundamentally shaped by the webs of intimate exchange we are born into and variously participate in throughout our lives. As more and more kinship data becomes available, I suspect stratification studies are going to shift toward flexible, network-based models of kinship, as opposed to traditional models of families as nuclear groups and dyads. This is going to bring up a host of new methodological puzzles and opportunities. So, for example, if you've linked a person to two parents, a stepparent, four grandparents, siblings, cousins, godparents, aunts, and uncles, who are themselves are linked to still more kin: how do you measure that one person's class background? A weighted average of occupational scores across their kin network to a certain distance? The density of college degrees among their grandparents' lineal descendants? Or is the class background of one person even the right question? Should we be thinking instead about the flow of resources across the network over time? There are no obvious answers.

My two writing group partners study elites, too, and our research topics have independently led each of us to wrestle with the structural complexity of class transmission, broadly speaking. Estela B. Diaz studies elite preschool admissions in NYC, and she is working on this paper, "Children as Status Projects," making the essential point that status doesn't just flow downward from parents to children, it also flows upward from children to parents, and in multiple directions across multiple types of kin. And Doron Shiffer-Sebba has a wonderful paper out right now, "Keeping the Family Fortune," on how rich families entrench their wealth by spreading it across a labyrinth of legal entities and kin. I hope that all our work on the complexities of elite kinship can contribute to a larger goal of thinking through how to study class, mobility, family, wealth, etc. when we're able to collect multidimensional resource data for full kinship networks of entire populations, rather than just one itty bitty entangled elite.

A. W.: You mobilize insights from relational economic sociology, particularly the work of Viviana Zelizer. How did Zelizer's notion of "relational work" inform your analysis, and what do you see as the broader potential of this framework for economic sociology?

S. O.: I love this question, because Viviana Zelizer's relational approach to the economy is at the heart of my work. "Relational work" as a concept helps me tease out the processual relations between elites and inequality. Take the example of inheritance. Inherited wealth fuels inequality, and increasingly so. But standard economic theory isn't very good at explaining inheritance. I listened to an interview with Melinda Cooper where she talks about an interview she listened to with Milton Friedman (haha), who said that the "bequest motive of the family" is the "foundation of free market capitalism"—but *why* people give their wealth to their kin when they're supposedly these rational self-interested actors is a total mystery. In Zelizer's framework, of course, it's no mystery: that's textbook relational work. When people write wills, and when governments make laws about where bequests should go, they are doing relational work by matching properties and portions to types of relations, and their work clearly shapes inequality.

Anyway, lots of economic sociologists have been working to connect the subfield to inequality. I'm thinking of fantastic research by Céline Bessière, Luis Flores, Sibylle Gollac, Kathleen Griesbach, Greta Krippner, Ashley Mears, Davon Norris, and Don Tomaskovic-Devey, to name a few. I want to contribute to that. So my work uses the case of elite kinship networks to help connect economic sociology and inequality, using the following series of ideas: (a) elites, by definition, have disproportionate resources; (b) as Zelizer's work makes clear, all people tend to share their resources primarily across their most intimate ties, which means that (c) we can conceptualize elite kinship networks as an architecture of resource hoarding and a driving structure in the production of inequality. To do this well, I need to think about the whole gender/sexuality system, rather than just "women" per se, because gender/sexuality systems are constitutive of kinship systems. So increasingly, I've been thinking about the absences and presences of queerness in my data, and generally wondering: *why* do upper classes seem to feature especially rigid, binary gender and sexuality systems? Are compulsory heterosexuality and the oppression of women and trans people some kind of *precondition* for durable inequality, or something? I genuinely don't know, but relational economic sociology is helping me work through it.

A. W.: The article makes an implicit methodological argument: that large-scale historical prosopography and kinship mapping can yield powerful insights. What advice would you offer to graduate students or researchers interested in taking on similarly ambitious historical projects?

S. O.: Building the dataset took years, and I'm still adding to it. I was only logistically able to do a project like this because I got seven years of funding with very minimal teaching requirements, and because I didn't have caretaking responsibilities at home. Another essential element was that my committee was very supportive, even at the beginning, when I didn't know how long this would take or what it would ultimately look like. Any research success I've ever had is a testament to the payoffs of generously funding and supporting graduate students.

My general advice for a person wanting to take on this kind of time-consuming historical data project is, first, to make sure you've got a fairly obsessive interest in the topic, which I think goes for all major research projects, and second, to start small and build out, such that you can write about smaller sets of data early on, rather than having to wait years until your data are "done" (you can always add more; I always am). For my specific methodological approach, I have many detailed ideas about how to structure relational databases, what population size to start with, what kinds of sources to use, which parts of the process you could automate, etc., so please feel free to email me because I'd love to chat. ■

THE HISTORY OF THE RACIAL WEALTH GAP: AN INTERVIEW WITH CALVIN SCHERMERHORN

Calvin Schermerhorn grew up in Southern Maryland. After graduate degrees at Harvard Divinity School and the University of Virginia, he became an historian of slavery, capitalism, and African American inequality. He teaches courses in nineteenth-century American history and advises Honors, Masters, and Ph.D. students. He was a Fulbright Scholar to the University of Nottingham in 2022. He has contributed to The *Atlantic*, *The Daily Beast*, *Time* and *The Washington Post,* among other popular venues, and his work has been featured in national discussions of racial inequality. He is author of four books on American slavery and inequality including *The Plunder of Black America: How the Racial Wealth Gap Was Made*, which was published by Yale University Press in early 2025.

Erika Brown, a Ph.D. candidate at Texas Woman's University, spoke to Dr. Schermerhorn about the historical roots of the racial wealth gap in the United States.

Erika Brown: Over the past ten years, the popular and academic discourse has included more conversations about the racial wealth gap. To start, please explain the racial wealth gap which is at the center of your new book, *The Plunder of Black America: How the Racial Wealth Gap Was Made*.

Calvin Schermerhorn: The Black-white racial wealth gap is the difference in what an average or typical household owns (assets minus debts) between those who identify as African American or Black and those who identify as white. This is important because it's a measure of relative opportunity and a history of familial wealth building. Since wealth is a generational project, a household's wealth reflects previous generations' strivings, successes, and opportunities as well as the current generation's achievements. In 1860, Princeton economist Ellora Derenoncourt argues, the average Black American household had just two cents on the dollar compared to the average white one (and those who were enslaved had zero wealth). That was America under slavery. By 1870, the gap had narrowed to 1:23 or four cents on the dollar. Nearly 150 years later, the gap is still a chasm. In 2022, the typical Black household had between 15 and 16 cents on the dollar compared to a white one, and the distance between those two figures is the best measure of inequity in America today. *The Plunder of Black America* explores why that gap was so persistent for so long and why it is so stubborn.

E. B.: In the book, you use stories of Black Americans to paint a picture of Black dispossession, disinheritance, and decapitalization. Please define the terms and share how they help to create an environment for the racial wealth gap to flourish in spite of gains during points in time such as reconstruction and the Civil Rights era.

C. S.: Every dollar has a history, and the theft of wealth has a history too. The Plunder of Black America argues that during each economic shift, architects of the new economy invented new ways to strip wealth and income from Black Americans. The first iteration of that process was dispossession. Slave ships were machines of dispossession. Colonial economies, whether in the Chesapeake or New England, dispossessed Black people of the fruits of their labors. By the time of the American Revolution, most Black families were generations deep. Dispossession became disinheritance when those who enslaved Black families stole their children's birthright—their parents and all that they had earned over lifetimes of toil. In the early U.S., most Black people's inheritance was another generation of theft and an unpayable debt to the enslaver. After Emancipation, that process did not cease. It transformed and became decapitalization.

Whether in rural South Carolina or the urban West, American institutions and practices continued to steal Black Americans' labor products, deny opportunities, and create new barriers to Black advancement. Instead of an armed overseer on a plantation, decapitalization took the form of restrictive deeds and predatory lending, denials of financial aid, artificially low credit scores, overtaxing and underassessing Black-owned homes, and a system of vengeance that called itself justice by targeting young Black and Latino men. By viewing plunder historically, we can see that it assumed different forms over time and did not cease at Emancipation or during the Civil Rights Revolution. In fact, over the last 45 years, we've seen it resurge more robustly than at any time since the rise of Jim Crow.

E. B.: There are some who will claim that slavery happened so long ago that it is folly to make connections between what happened historically and the economic positionality of Black Americans today. What words do you have for those who suggest Americans in general, but Black Americans specifically, should be over our nation's history of chattel slavery and its economic toll?

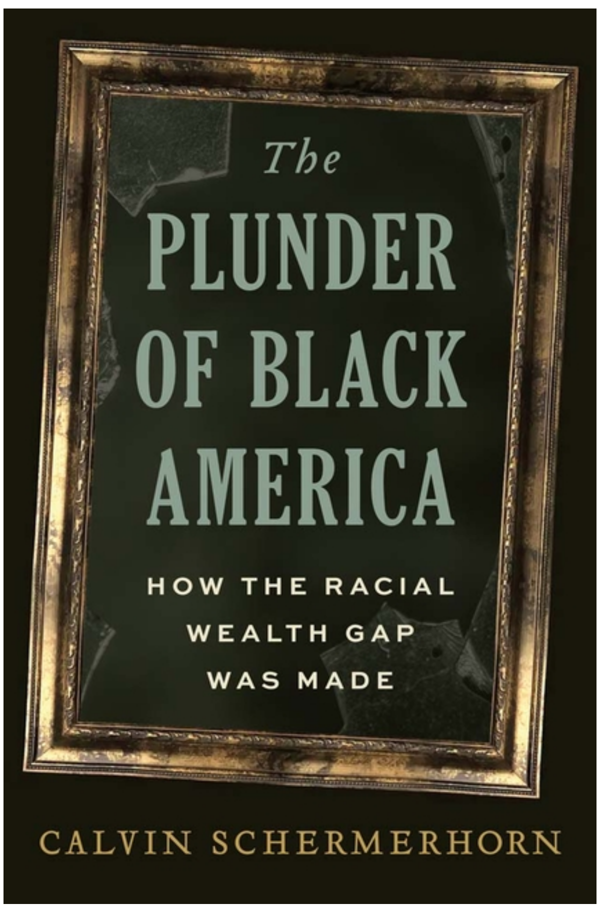
C. S.: Ta-Nehisi Coates contends that "plunder in the past made plunder in the present efficient." The historic theft of Black income and wealth is not reducible to slavery, and to see Emancipation as a complete break with a past of plunder is to misunderstand American history. We cannot get over the massive theft of Black income and wealth by enslavers because the momentum of that process remained active. It changed forms. Slavery was the root, but ways of decapitalizing Black Americans are its branches. We cannot reckon honestly with present racial gaps in wealth and income without coming to terms with that process. By the same token, we can't alibi current inequities as merely a consequence of a distant past. Enslavement is important, but it's just the start of the story.

E. B.: Definitions of class often include income, education, and occupation but not wealth. What affect does wealth, or the lack of it, play in assessments of economic success within and across generations?

C. S.: Wealth is not a measure of happiness, but wealth tends to make its pursuits possible. Wealthier people tend to live in safe places, have healthcare, vocational, and educational opportunities. They tend to have the seed money for business ventures and the cushion to sustain an emergency and build back. Wealthier people, ironically, pay less in interest and taxes proportional to those at the bottom. They have more leisure time and a greater say in government. They can navigate the legal system and pass forward wealth to the next generation, which unlocks opportunity. So, economic success in one generation seeds it in the next. To use a metaphor, if you're born on the top rungs of the wealth ladder, it's like being tethered to that rung. You may fall, but the tether limits your fall. If you're born on the bottom, then you're also tethered to that rung, which makes it hard to climb. It's been particularly difficult for Black Americans to climb that ladder, and therefore a history of dispossession, disinheritance, and decapitalization tends to limit the pursuits of happiness for the next generation. We like to think that it's all about pulling yourself up by the bootstraps, but it's a cooperative effort over the generations.

E. B.: As an historian of United States slavery, what can you share with us about how that period in history reflects what we see in the current political environment related to efforts to remove affirmative action and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)?

C. S.: It's a truism that those who control the present control the past as well. What we're seeing in the removal of diversity, equity, and inclusion, efforts to erase records of past injustices, the achievements of Black Americans, or shout patriotic slogans over frank discussions of the American past is a whitewashing of history. It's an attempt to re-impose a narrative of American greatness-as-goodness and to limit democratic debate. Enslavers were pioneers at this sort of thing. Between about 1830 and 1850, most southern states forbade the teaching of literacy to Black people. They forbade meeting in groups and worshiping without white supervision. They forbade literature that liberated—even readings of the Bible that emphasized liberation theology. Instead of a contest of ideas, those who oppose inclusive history and inclusive practices combat ideas with force.



E. B.: Your work in general, but *The Plunder of Black America* specifically, makes plain the interconnected nature of the society and the economy. How did you engage the research of scholars across subjects like sociology, economics, and Black studies to engage in transdisciplinary scholarship?

C. S.: This research began by taking seriously the findings of stratification economics and sociologies of racially specific obstacles to upward mobility. I think that historians should read economics and sociology to understand the processes at work in history at a high level of abstraction. My task in *The Plunder of Black America* was to build in context and nuance by following individual families over time. Instead of isolating a variable and quantifying it, this book attempts to tell the stories of particular people working for change over time. The big story the book tells through several families is how, once they overcame one obstacle or set of obstacles, new ones snapped into place. Historical context helps bring into view the mutually reinforcing nature of plunder, which is not ultimately reducible to housing, education, employment, finance, or health, yet incorporates all of these. A ground-level view, I hope, helps bring into focus the heroic work of sociologists, economists, legal scholars, and others on whose shoulders this project stands.■

On the Job Market?
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SPOTLIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEXANDER KOWALSKI

Alexander Kowalski is an Assistant Professor in the Human Resource Studies department at Cornell University's ILR School. His research examines how to support good quality jobs in challenging business environments, with a particular focus on the e-commerce and logistics industry. His earlier work offers a broader perspective on the changing nature of work and organizations, and has been published in *ILR Review*, *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, and *Negotiation Journal*. He received his Ph.D. in management from the Institute for Work and Employment Research at the MIT Sloan School of Management.

Jessica Urzúa, a Ph.D. student in Sociology and Social Policy at Harvard University, interviewed Dr. Kowalski about his career path and current research agenda.

Jessica Urzúa: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your career and research. You started out as an economics reporter for Bloomberg News before moving into academia. What inspired that transition, and in what ways has your background in journalism shaped how you approach research today?

Alexander Kowalski: I went into journalism because I enjoyed the craft of following an issue and gathering the evidence needed to make a case about it. At some point, though, I got tired of relying on experts to get a point across—I had to get a Ph.D. economist or policy analyst on the phone to verify my hunches whenever I had an inkling about what was going on. I wanted to be the one who had done the research that supported the point, who could say "This is happening. And this is happening because of X, Y, and Z." So I decided to become a researcher myself.

What have I kept with me from my first career endeavor? For one thing, I'm obsessive about citations. At Bloomberg, just about every line has to have a source attached to it. For better or worse, this practice has crept into my academic work, such that I'm searching for a citation for nearly everything I put down on the page, which can be pretty time-consuming. Right now, for example, I'm trying to work in a line in one of my papers contrasting the volume of customer traffic at brick-and-mortar stores versus e-commerce websites, and it has taken me much too long to find a reliable count of the number of people who shop at a Walmart supercenter on any given day. Let me know if you have a good source. Of course, because I spent so much time writing, I put a high value on style and eloquently articulated arguments. It can be hard to pull this off when following journal conventions, but I really appreciate an article that makes a convincing point while also sounding good. I've recently been lucky to collaborate with Steve Vallas, and he's someone who has a real knack for writing papers that hook you not just because they are so insightful, but also because they are enjoyable to read. If I could produce something like that, I would consider myself accomplished. Lastly, I'll mention an affliction that also stems from my time at Bloomberg. They don't like it when stories have single words that fall onto a new line on the page—they call them orphans—and so I now painstakingly edit and rewrite my stuff to avoid having words spill over onto the next line, which doesn't even matter because the format of the printed version will inevitably differ from what I see on my word processor.

J. U.: Were there any scholars or books that had a particularly strong influence on your intellectual trajectory? How did they shape the way you think about work and employment?

A. K.: The list of names is long, probably owing to the circuitous path I took to get here, but I can highlight a few. Before pursuing a Ph.D., I went to Berkeley to study urban planning, a story for another interview. There I sought courses that would expose me to different paradigms. Two were formative to my development. The first was the sociology of work, taught by Annette Bernhardt, who runs the labor center's Technology and Work Program. I went into class as an economist, really curious about automation and employment outcomes. When I was a reporter, the big story was the hollowing out of the middle class—or at least the fear this was going to happen—in the wake of the Great Recession, so I had a decent understanding of how economists narrated these developments. But Annette introduced me to a new way of explaining what was going on, using sociology. I remember thinking, "Wait, you can study the labor market like this? Why hasn't anybody told me this before?" An entire worldview had just been revealed, and I wanted more. I started reading on my own, and when footnotes led me to *The Social Construction of Reality*, I was hooked. In fact, Berger and Luckmann's way of deciphering—and writing about—the social world was so stimulating I found myself recommending their book, probably a little too eagerly, to friends who had no stated interest in the subject matter. I looked for more classes after that, enrolling in a second one that was hugely influential: Neil Fligstein's economic sociology seminar, which he graciously let me join as an outsider. His course brought me up to speed on the state of the field and convinced me that sociology was what I wanted to do.

Besides introducing me to the discipline, Annette's course also introduced me to an article that guided my next steps. That was Roberto Fernandez's study of skill-biased technological change. Back then much of the prominent research on this topic used census data with no actual measure of technology or skills. Instead, it inferred technology was driving income inequality based on differential patterns in wage growth and educational attainment. Technology was just a residual, an explanation for what researchers could not observe. Roberto, on the other hand, went into a factory, analyzing what happened before and after several new digital devices were brought online. Unlike other studies, he was evaluating a concrete technology, and—this was especially important—he could track how skill requirements changed after implementation. He could tell, for example, whether the new tools demanded a greater level of reading proficiency, and he could tell how individual pay was affected. This, I thought, was the right approach to take if we wanted to confidently say something about how technology shaped economic outcomes. It also occurred to me that inside organizations was where the economic action was, a point formulated quite clearly in Baron and Bielby's work, which I also often find myself citing.

That same article also led me to MIT's Sloan School, where Roberto was a professor. While I had some reservations about taking an interdisciplinary route, it turns out Sloan is home to an incredibly productive community of sociologists and fellow travelers. I'll name a few who shaped my thinking. Erin Kelly ended up as my main advisor, and she has been instrumental in showing me how sociological insights can be used to change the way organizations function, to workers' benefit. A huge amount of scholarly activity concerned with improving work focuses on changing individual behavior, but Erin stresses the need to redesign work itself if we want to see lasting results. Another important person is Ezra Zuckerman. I was remarking the other day that one hallmark of a Sloan education is the cultivation of a certain taste for what makes for a contribution, a taste that is in large part imprinted in all of us by Ezra. And there is one other figure who taught me a lot and whose insights could enliven any sociologist's work. That is Wanda Orlikowski. There are a slew of people studying technology at work, many of them in business schools, who are maybe on the periphery of mainstream sociology, and yet they have developed some really compelling theories and pieces of research. I think sociologists could benefit from reviewing this body of work, of which Wanda is a major contributor.

Because I mentioned a whole bunch of people, let me leave you with a book that really shaped my thinking: Bob Thomas's *What Machines Can't Do*. It's less well known than it should be, I think because Thomas left academia. Complementing Roberto's work, Thomas sketches a model of how political conflict inside organizations shapes the ultimate consequences of technology at work. He also stresses the role of designers and engineers, whose impact often gets overlooked.

J. U.: Your current research explores how shifting business risk and market uncertainty onto workers affects job quality, and whether greater employee participation can lead to better outcomes for both workers and organizations. What drew you to these questions, and what do you find most compelling about this line of inquiry?

A. K.: My interest came from observation. Spending time in e-commerce fulfillment centers, I saw just how tightly many workers' schedules were tethered to the ups and downs of the market. When orders went up, they stayed late. When orders went down, they got sent home early. These workers were grappling with many of the psychological and economic harms identified in Danny Schneider and Kristen Harknett's work on precarious scheduling.

What I also noticed, though, was that not every group of workers had it so bad. What really mattered was whether their supervisor engaged them in the process of scheduling. In other words, workers in certain warehouses had more control, or voice, over their work hours. This was compelling to me because scheduling outcomes hinged most closely on the manager-worker relationship, not something like industry or occupation. I was studying workers all employed by the same firm. They were all subject to the same standard operating procedures. They all did the same jobs using the same technologies. All the forces we'd expect to determine work hours were held constant, and, yet, some managers figured out how to coordinate their employees to craft better schedules, while—I should add—remaining highly productive.

What's the takeaway? There isn't one best way to handle market volatility, as far as firms should be concerned: they don't have to unload it all on their workforce to achieve high performance. In a paper I'm about to wrap up, I outline the alternative set of strategies managers can use to buffer employees from market uncertainty. Here I'll be brief and say that what's key is that managers not only give workers more control over their hours but also more discretion—and training—to move to wherever the work is each day, thereby alleviating bottlenecks. Now, this does not mean the market has been tamed. Even though some managers I studied had figured this out, most still burdened workers with arduous schedules, and we know from other research that tough hours are a problem common across many industries. But these observations give us hope that managers have agency in responding to market pressures. The challenge is getting them to appreciate that.

J. U.: You've conducted extensive research on work inside e-commerce fulfillment centers. What drew you to this particular setting, and what unique insights has it provided into contemporary labor practices?

A. K.: I wish I could claim it was by design, but I stumbled into the industry. In grad school, a company allowed me to assess pay practices inside its fulfillment centers, and without much thinking I jumped at the chance to access a real organization. At that time, I was also taking an ethnography course with Cat Turco, looking to try out the tools she had given me, so I asked if I could interview employees. Even though the study was supposed to use production data I could analyze remotely, I got the greenlight to visit several facilities to talk to workers and managers.

During these visits, I came to realize warehouses were a microcosm for studying big changes to work and the economy. One thing I like to say is that the industrial sociologists of yore studied the automakers because they were the biggest employers of the time. Today, retailers have taken that position, and the biggest of them all—Amazon and Walmart—are successful in large part because of their vast network of warehouses. That by itself makes warehouses worthy of study. But it is also true that with so much economic activity flowing through warehouses, retailers are constantly trying to deploy labor as cheaply and, in their minds, productively as possible, which means there are so many highly scrutinized labor practices in use within their walls: algorithmic management, intensive surveillance, non-standard work, precarious scheduling, union busting.

E-commerce makes this all worse. Fulfillment centers are warehouses oriented to filling online customer orders. Steve Vallas, Beth Gutelius, Sanjay Pinto, and I recently fielded the largest industry survey we know of, and we find that the practices mentioned above get dialed up in these facilities. We think this is due in large part to e-commerce shoppers' close proximity to workers. All these frictions present in brick-and-mortar retail—the need to drive to a store while it's open, the ability to buy only what's present on the shelves—are removed. And because customers can shop anywhere, anytime, retailers have become devoted to convenience, low prices, and quick delivery times. To satisfy the newly elevated customer, they end up squeezing workers with tight productivity standards and syncing their work hours with customer demand.

These findings have concerning implications for industries outside of retail. As other types of businesses come to rely on digital platforms to connect customers with service providers, the latter are bound to become more exposed to the whims of the market. With less intermediation, I would expect growing, downward pressures on job quality for all sorts of workers.

J. U.: You explore whether involving employees in decision-making can lead to better job quality and organizational performance. What have you discovered about the effectiveness of employee participation in achieving these outcomes?

A. K.: Employee participation works. But it is hard to facilitate and maintain.

With Erin Kelly and several others collaborators, we ran a field experiment inside—you guessed it—fulfillment centers, getting select sites to implement what we called Health and Well-being Committees, or HaWCs. This new voice channel brought workers and managers together each month to identify and resolve worker concerns. What was special about the HaWCs was that workers, rather than managers, selected the issues, which could touch on anything from physical safety to career advancement to supervisor support. And they weren't just listening sessions; the HaWCs devised plans for addressing worker concerns and went out and addressed them.

The results were promising. In the year after the HaWCs launched turnover fell and worker well-being improved. Just as important, we found evidence of real change. The workers implemented a range of clever ideas, from gaining control of the music that played overhead and fixing broken fans to creating a buddy system for new hires and securing additional training for managers.

But despite the positive results, few of these committees are still up and running today. A main reason is that managers had a hard time maintaining support. Although the HaWCs are pretty low effort—just a few hours a month—managers are bombarded with new requests from above, new initiatives that eat up their time, and anything that isn't deemed crucial falls by the wayside. Hence, while I would encourage all organizations to support employee participation, leadership needs to free up resources for managers and emphasize that voice initiatives are a priority.

J. U.: You use both interviews and field experiments in your research. What advice would you give to students who are interested in using multiple methods in their own work?

A. K.: You didn't ask this, but, because I'm addressing students, let me first give a word of caution about field experiments. They are high risk, potentially high reward. As a scholar, especially a student, you are not usually an organization's first concern, and there were many times I worried my research was in jeopardy. For that reason, I'd be cautious about putting all my bets on a field experiment as a grad student.

Which is a good case for using mixed methods. One of the things this approach allows you to do is gather different sorts of data with the aim of narrowing in on an answer to what's really going on. I like to use multiple methods to triangulate. By going on the ground of an organization, I can find out what's interesting. I can then use bigger datasets to verify whether what I observed is true for a larger population. After that, I can return to the field to formulate plausible explanations for what I've found in my quantitative work.

The hard part, for me at least, is juggling the different demands the methods place on you. I find it very difficult to jump between quantitative and qualitative research. They seem to use different parts of my brain. Probably for that reason I've yet to write a paper that blends the two. So you need to have a lot of time on your hands and enthusiasm for stretching your brain.

J. U.: Looking ahead, what questions or areas are you most excited to explore next in your research?

A. K.: Work, technology, organizations, and economic processes are my interests in the broadest sense. Because the warehouse sector is such a great crucible for studying these topics, I need to decide if I want to investigate it further or turn my attention elsewhere. You'll notice that my early preoccupations centered on technology, but my recent work looks at market uncertainty, scheduling, and employee participation. Technology is still on my mind, and I've actually just written a paper about the way collaborative robotics degrade work conditions inside warehouses. This same setting is also ripe for studying surveillance, so that's one thing I'm considering. But I'm also really interested in the notion of the re-industrialization of America, what that means, whether it is possible, so I want to do some reading about that. Whatever I do, I hope what I produce answers important questions, helps support better quality jobs, and isn't a slog to read. ■

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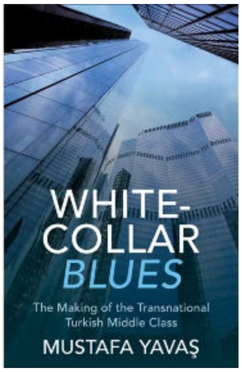
Yavaş, Mustafa. 2025. *White-Collar Blues: The Making of the Transnational Turkish Middle Class.* Columbia University Press.



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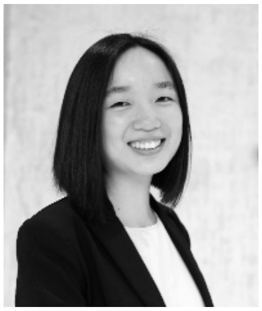

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