

Sherry B. Ortner. *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. xvi + 340 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-3598-6.



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The 1950s have acquired a certain mythic aspect in American popular culture, as baby boomers age and doo-wop concerts fill time slots during PBS fundraisers. There is a longing for a purportedly simpler time that permeates reminiscences of low-slung Fords replete with steering knobs and spinners; after-school forays to the soda shop for French fries and cokes; and muffled sobs as James Dean and Natalie Wood mourn Sal Mineo's tragic death in the closing moments of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). That life was more complicated during the era of the Bomb, Joe McCarthy, and air-raid drills sometimes gets lost in the gloss of "Happy Days" and *American Graffiti* (1973). Sherry B. Ortner's ethnography brings a welcome dose of reality to an era obscured by fifty years of nostalgia.

Ortner is an anthropologist best known for her work in the Himalayas, as well as her work in feminist and cultural theory. Her research with the Sherpas of Nepal is prodigious. Her final work on Sherpa culture, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest*, was awarded the J. I. Staley prize as the best anthropology book of 2004. In *New Jersey Dreaming*,

Ortner has changed her focus, citing her sense that "class in the United States is under-recognized as a factor in American social and cultural life" (p. 10). As a result, she utilized her ethnographic expertise to elucidate and analyze the culture, class, and capital (education and occupation) of her classmates, the Class of '58, Weequahic High School, Newark, New Jersey. With the help of a former classmate, Ortner located 292 of the 304 members of her graduating class and garnered data on 244 of them via questionnaires. Over the course of her research (1991-94), she interviewed one hundred of the respondents in person, and the balance by telephone (p. 14). Ortner considered "the cultures of striving and mobility, and of snobbery and discrimination" in "earlier moments of global 'flows'" that marked the immigration of ethnic groups to the United States in the late nineteenth century, and the earlier "forced immigration" of African Americans as the "base" of her book (p. 2). The ethnic composition of her high-school class, however, was markedly unbalanced. Fully 83 percent of the students in the Class of '58 were Jewish; African Americans accounted for 6 percent; and "all other ethnic

groups" accounted for 11 percent of the population (p. 9). Ortner argues that even with such a skewed demographic it is possible to reach some valid, and surprising, conclusions.

Ortner's book is divided into two parts. The first section deals with the composition of the Class of '58, while the second deals with the post-graduation life experiences of the class. Ortner begins with some assumptions about class and ethnicity. While she does not eschew the Marxian nexus of class and politics, Ortner is more concerned with "understanding the workings of class in ordinary lives and ordinary times" (p. 12). Ortner places her discussion of class in the "context of a historically specific national project: the (re-)normalization of the American family in the 1950s" (p. 33). The Class of '58 represents a model of what Ortner terms the postwar "middle-classing of America," with its attendant "reestablishment of 'normal' hierarchies of gender and generation" (p. 33). In American discourse, Ortner argues, "class" is not visible, nor is it discussed as such. Instead, class is "a matter of economic gradations of goods and privilege, and is almost entirely embedded in narratives of snobbery and humiliation" (p. 41). These narratives are found in the memories of those who were part of the compressed and hyperactive atmosphere of Weequahic high school in the mid-fifties.

In the social microcosm of the mid-century Weequahic neighborhood, "one of the major, if not the major, markers of class difference ... was geographic location" (p. 43). Early on in her research, Ortner realized that her classmates ranked status by attendance at specific grammar schools within Weequahic. Ortner calls this phenomenon "reading class" (p. 44). Although predominantly Jewish, Weequahic was a heterogeneous neighborhood on its fringes. Residents living on the boundaries of the Weequahic tended to be more racially and ethnically mixed. These were less-affluent working-class families. The area around the high school, considered the "bet-

ter section," was predominantly white, Jewish, and more affluent (pp. 43-44). Of the class, 35 percent attended two schools located near the high school in the "better section" of the neighborhood. The balance of the class was split almost evenly between middle and lower status schools. All of these components, each approximately one-third in size, formed the Class of '58.

In the Weequahic section of Newark, no group was "socially higher" than the Jews. Ortner observes that as Jews moved up into the middle class, they moved into more middle-class suburbs and neighborhoods in the postwar years. She likens the Jewish experience to that of African Americans some decades later: "When Jews moved in the Gentiles moved out, leaving heavily or even all-Jewish neighborhoods--like Weequahic" (p. 58). Any similarity to the African-American experience in Newark or elsewhere ends here. As Ortner observes, "African-Americans seemed to embody everything that the Jewish parents were trying to no longer be: poor, stigmatized, victimized" (p. 61). However, Ortner posits that racism within the white working class, Jewish and non-Jewish, was bound up with job competition (p. 61). Although the Class of '58 was ethnically mixed, for the Jewish kids "dating non-Jewish persons ... was almost as strongly forbidden as dating Black persons" (p. 63). Ortner argues that the "others" represented--to the Jewish community--a "threat to ethnic purity" and "a lower-classness that the Jews were trying to leave behind" (p. 65). In the world of Weequahic, heterogeneity had its limits.

The non-Jewish population of Weequahic and the Class of '58 were the children and grandchildren of immigrants who came to the United States at about the same time as the Jewish immigrants. While immigrant Jews tended to find employment as shopkeepers and small business owners, most non-Jewish fathers took jobs as industrial laborers or on the docks. Ortner makes a strong case that it was this first generation's employment that

set the stage for the later "middle-classing" of both groups. She argues that Jews were either barred from industrial and port jobs because of anti-Semitism, or were more comfortable functioning in private enterprise (pp. 69-70). Ortner hypothesizes that this is "the difference that made a difference" in the upward mobility of Jews and non-Jewish white ethnics. She argues that because the working class "did very well" in the postwar economy, there was less pressure on working-class families than on Jewish families to attain greater economic and social status (p. 70).

As children of recent immigrants from other Northeast urban centers or from the Jim Crow South, the African-American students of the Class of '58 ranked lower than working-class whites (p. 70). Ortner attributes blacks' class status as a combination of overt racism--although she argues that ideologically the North and, presumably, Newark, was "strongly integrationist"--and disadvantages inherent in the black educational experience in the segregated South (p. 71). Ortner argues that during the years 1954-58 Weequahic did not have "'bad' race relations," and that within the Class of '58 her research demonstrates "a kind of generalized good will and a sense that there was not a conflictual divide between black and white in that era, at least one that could not be overcome" (p. 74). She is careful to circumscribe her conclusion, and utilizes Amiri Baraka's memories of the violent racism he experienced at another Newark high school (Barringer) during that same period. Ortner attributes the difference to the white, working-class student body at Baraka's alma mater as well as the general fear among working-class whites that blacks would compete for available blue-collar jobs (pp. 72, 73). In discussing the state of racial relations at Weequahic, Ortner concludes that "it is hard to overstate the importance of personal friendships for overcoming/ignoring social boundaries, avoiding a sense of injury and insult, and managing to enjoy life as a high school student" (p. 84). Racism is never far from the surface, however, and, although some African-Ameri-

can families in Weequahic were able to find "stable work at decent wages," most blacks were not moving to the ranks of the lower middle class along with their working-class white neighbors. In addition, for all of the outward amity of race relations within Weequahic, Ortner recognizes Northern racism was just as virulent as that in the South (p. 87). She astutely observes that "the seeds of the Newark riots were already in place, even in the seemingly peaceful Weequahic area" (p. 87).

In addition to the class, ethnicity, and race of the members of the Class of '58, Ortner proffers a "classic" fourfold table to demonstrate how the various combinations of class, culture, and capital create a "grammar" of the "native social categories of the ... generic American high school" (p. 97). In subsequent chapters, Ortner utilizes this table to discuss class and capital *vis-à-vis* peer group status (p. 97); and class and capital in relation to "tracking" the students within the educational system (p. 152).

The second part of Ortner's work focuses on the lives of the class members over time, "the lives they made for themselves and their families, and the ways in which those lives ... reproduced or transformed the larger culture" (p. 169). Ortner found that a "significant number" of her white, Jewish classmates are presently active in "anti-racism causes," and that such activity constitutes the largest area of social advocacy/activism within the class (p. 171). Interviewees cited the Kennedy era, the rise of the Civil Rights movement, the Peace Corps, the antiwar movement, as well as the counterculture of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll as forces impacting their after-school lives (p. 180).

In terms of educational success, the Jewish students were clearly more successful than their non-Jewish counterparts. 81 percent of Jewish men obtained at least a college degree as compared to 62 percent of "all other men." The data for Jewish women compared to "all other women" was similar, 74 percent and 33 percent (p. 194).

Ortner argues that while it would be "disingenuous" to deny that Jewish culture plays "some role" in these data, she posits two qualifications to that conclusion. She contends that there is no even distribution of Jewish culture and or values among all Jews, and that not all Jews are in a position to "fully enact its supposedly success-producing characteristics" (pp. 195-196). Secondly, she argues that Jewish culture has been formed within a historical process, and needs to be understood "as having been produced through real practices in real time and history." She posits that both a dialectical and an historical account of Jewish hard work and success in economic terms led to a desire for acceptance within the larger population that was eventually realized through education (p. 196). Ortner views agency as essential to a discussion of class, and argues that without agency "we are left with a kind of class determinism that is ... simply wrong with respect to the data" (p. 205). In addition to culture and agency, Ortner argues that the success of a particular ethnic group is also a function of its political history and its relationship to the social movements associated with its advancement (p. 213).

Ortner also takes a close look at gender as a function of class and capital. All of the data demonstrate that women were relegated to a lower class and possessed less capital. This is true whether they came from professional-, middle-, or working-class families, whether they were Jewish or non-Jewish, or whether they were white or black. Ortner posits a "girl track"--a "cultural regime" that applied to Class of '58 women of all races, classes, and ethnicities. This regime "dictated that they were excluded from direct participation in the game of 'success,' the game of rising up the class ladder through their own efforts" (p. 258). With regard to this cultural regime, women, Ortner argues, were "like African-American men" (p. 258). Gender may have been less visible among working-class women, whose families could not afford to send them away to college in any event. Yet Ortner asserts that for high-capital girls "there

was no explanation other than gender itself--especially if they were good students--for not being sent to top schools" (p. 244). That some Class of '58 women chafed under the restrictions imposed by gender and culture is evident from Ortner's interviews. However, some women "made it" up the class ladder, as Ortner herself demonstrates.

Near the end of chapter 12, "Late Capitalism," Ortner returns to the issue of race. She writes that the "race situation" of the Class of '58 has shown "modest improvement." In some cases, Ortner's respondents indicated a "moving beyond" familial prejudices (pp. 274-275). The "old racism" is "completely alien" to the children of some Class of '58 members--an indication of the changed racial attitudes of the class members. On the other hand, Weequahic High School is not the same socially, ethnically, racially, or educationally. With the Newark riots and the ensuing white flight, Weequahic suffered the same as other neighborhoods. The state takeover of Newark's schools is indicative of the serious problems Newark's residents confront today. Successful members of the "old" white, Jewish Weequahic have banded together with their counterparts in the "new" African-American Weequahic to bridge the racial divide and provide, among other goals, scholarships to top-ranked seniors graduating from the "new" Weequahic High School. Ortner proffers this initiative as a "continuation ... of the kind of antiracist, antipoverty, and pro-civil rights work that many members of the Class of '58 have done for years" (pp. 276-277).

At the end of each of the twelve chapters, Ortner has incorporated excerpts from her field notes. These excerpts are not only informative, but also provide a glimpse into the practice and pitfalls of conducting an ethnographic study.

Ortner is an accomplished and polished writer. The prose is clear and lucid yet vibrant. This is not a dry account of data collected and analyzed. It is a rendition of a time and place in New Jersey without the nostalgia, but with respect and a cer-

tain sense of affection. I would recommend this text not only for the professional, but as a teaching volume. This is how good ethnography is done.

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