

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ALASTAIR GREIG, FRANK LEWINS and KEVIN WHITE, *Inequality in Australia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, xi + 306 p., index.

Inequality in Australia offers a new critical perspective that incorporates class, gender and ethnicity into a holistic sociology of the body, self, and politics. The authors' triad becomes three operational theoretical tools for analyzing and explaining inequality in Australian society. Organizationally, these three concepts become the three main sections of their book. The tripod reflects three interlocking myths of the natural body, the autonomous self, and egalitarianism in the history of Australia. The authors argue that "the politics of inequality affects the way we perceive our bodies and construct our identities" (1).

Building on Mills' classic "sociological imagination" whereby "private troubles" are transformed into "public issues," the authors argue that individual life experiences of inequality are a neglected facet in most studies and that their holistic approach captures this dimension. In fact, they assert that it is the missing piece in the puzzle of explaining how inequality is maintained within society. However, their holistic proposition, unlike poststructuralism, does not claim that "self-experience and individual meanings are an alternative to social structural explanations." Therefore, they do not lose sight of individual self-consciousness as many other theorists do.

Furthermore, due to transformations in society with regards to the organization of industrial, familial, ethnic and political relations, especially since the 1970s, individual lived experiences cannot be adequately explained by outdated theories. In this instance, the authors empirically challenge postmodern assumptions which suggest that individuals have unlimited capacities to choose their own identities and priorities in life. Their holistic model does not overlook the macro-structural determinants of self-identity.

The predominant theme of the medicalisation of the human body concerning gender, ageism, and disability is discussed throughout the text, especially as it relates to inequality. The authors invite readers to take a sociological perspective on the body in contrast to individualized, independent, normative, medical, biological conceptualizations. Here they draw upon classical sociologists like Weber, Marx and Durkheim to show

how they eschewed biological conceptualizations in their time to demonstrate that sociological explanations were much more fruitful in examining the situations of industrial workers as producers of goods. With industrialization, bodies were treated like machines. The authors argue that industrial inequalities are transformed into new postindustrial inequalities where bodies are producers of services and information.

The second theoretical tool which the authors use to capture individual lived experience is the concept of the self. They debunk the myth of the self as “free, autonomous and independent of social constraints.” How individuals think of themselves is one way that inequality is perpetuated. For the authors, self-experience plays a pivotal role in the maintenance of social inequality. The authors continually rely on their holistic model to demonstrate the vital interconnection between body, self, and the body politic. They even chart the opinions of six earlier authors (93) in relation to their own model, using their operational indicators of the three salient dimensions of social inequality in the literature: sociological theory, self-experience, and empirical reality. They conclude by showing how their theoretical model has more explanatory power.

By continually linking their theory with self-experience and empirical reality, they add theoretical rigour as well to the concept of culture. In treating issues such as ethnicity, race and multiculturalism, they use McKay and Lewins’ typology to distinguish ethnic identification (awareness and consciousness) and ethnic structuration (ethnic category versus ethnic group). This approach enables them to look at similarities between the experiences of migrants and Australian aborigines in the maintenance of patterns of inequality. In a similar fashion this approach leads them to challenge prevailing assumptions regarding gender. They argue that their holistic model is “an effective blueprint for the study of inequality in an even greater range of social domains than we have considered in this book” (154).

Their third section, on the myth of inequality in Australia, illustrates the historical strength found throughout this book. Their study is grounded in empirical reality. They present a very convincing and comprehensive case study of the transformation of the myth of inequality throughout the duration of the official White Australia Policy. While the authors do try to make some comparisons with other societies, these are only in the form of occasional references to the United Kingdom, United States, Sweden or even Canada. The references, however, are rather superficial. For example, the book does not acknowledge the extensive borrowing from and adaptation of the Canadian policy of multiculturalism. Instead of drawing on explicit similarities and contrasts, they make a rather fleeting reference to the FLQ as fitting into their four-cell typological box as an example of an “ethnically-conscious ethnic group.” Their comparison of second-generation migrant children to Canada’s bilingual and bicultural phenomena does not really do justice to the unique historical complexities of the French fact in Canada and its relationship to the multiculturalism ethos of the immigrant groups which have come more recently.

Nevertheless, their comprehensive treatment is an exceptional primer for anyone who wants to start making cross-cultural comparisons with Australia.

This very readable book is suitable for undergraduate students in minority groups, ethnic and race relations, multiculturalism, social problems, gender studies, political economy, poverty or inequality courses. Each chapter contains an effective outline, boxed studies, key terms and concepts, study questions, and a helpful annotated bibliography for further reading. The text concludes with an extensive 30-page bibliography and 15-page index. While the examples and case studies are Australian, the theoretical contribution of this book is much broader in scope. Inequality in Australia provides a holistic, systematic, historical and comprehensive critique of inequality in Australian society, which can be applied to other western societies.

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