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Book Review: Wealth, Whiteness, and the Matrix of Privilege: The View from the Country Club

Amanda Marie Gengler

Gender & Society 2012 26: 127

DOI: 10.1177/0891243211416810

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://gas.sagepub.com/content/26/1/127.citation>

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Wealth, Whiteness, and the Matrix of Privilege: The View from the Country Club. By Jessica Holden Sherwood. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010, 163 pp., \$60.00 (cloth).

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For Jessica Holden Sherwood, sociologists' call to "study up" was a call to turn her sociological eye on a social world not far removed from the one she grew up in: the world of profoundly privileged country club members in an affluent area of the Northeast. Sherwood interviewed 45 members of five different area clubs and insightfully analyzes the accounts they offer for their (potentially morally questionable) membership in these elite and exclusive organizations. Sherwood brings an intersectional approach to her analysis, working to show how member's raced, classed, and gendered positions—which she refers to as a "matrix of privilege" (p. 15)—shape their experiences and perceptions of the clubs, as well as their attempts to explain away the inequalities at the root of these organizations.

Sherwood begins by offering the reader a brief background on the clubs to which her interviewees belong. She explains how the intricate nomination and screening process unfolds, and how it functions both to preserve and obfuscate the clubs' exclusive nature, consolidating social networks and reinforcing racial and class divides. Sherwood then turns to members' accounts of their membership to show how they both deny and justify their club's exclusivity. Members denied overt exclusion, claiming that it was simply natural for people with similar tastes and backgrounds to come together and prefer one another's company, and that "anyone can join" who can afford to pay the price of membership. Members justified their own membership by extolling the benefits of belonging for their children, their marriage, or the strength of their community relationships.

In chapters 3 and 4, Sherwood tackles the more threatening topic of the clubs' past and present racial homogeneity and sexist policies. Since overt segregationist rhetoric has fallen out of favor, members eagerly claimed diversity for their own clubs and decried the lack of diversity at other clubs, even when this "diversity" amounted to only a handful of (very wealthy) nonwhite members. At the same time, cultural explanations that presume a natural desire to group around shared interests and hobbies that "happen" to fall along race and class lines were simultaneously used to justify the clubs' (still) overwhelming whiteness.

While members worked hard to hide any racial inequality in their clubs, gender inequality was a different story. Here, members' accounts invoked

traditional and essentialist gender ideologies as they accepted and at times even endorsed unequal policies for women, particularly around men's protected access to the golf course through reserved tee-times. Sherwood compares the differences in these policies across clubs and seeks to explain why some have overturned sexist policies while others have found creative ways to legalize them. Sherwood nicely discusses how and why some women took up these battles while others were happy to "trade power for patronage" by keeping silent and even discouraging or shunning those who advocated change.

Sherwood's book is an excellent first step toward partially pulling back the curtain on this private world where power, privilege, and social and cultural capital are enjoyed, consolidated, and passed on to the next generation. That this intriguing glimpse is only partial is both the primary limitation of the study and further evidence of the web of privilege and power in which these organizations are embedded. Sherwood was unable to gain access to the clubs themselves, leaving her without access to membership numbers, club events, or members' daily interactions at the pool, in the dining room, or on the golf course—forcing her to rely exclusively on interviews instead. Observational data would have helped the author significantly strengthen her case and deepened our understanding of how the clubs operate behind the scenes as incubators of power and privilege.

This limitation aside, Sherwood makes a compelling case that country clubs—and more specifically members' talk about the clubs' constituencies and practices—are key sites for the reproduction of inequality. These clubs, she writes, "teach that exclusion on subjective criteria, extreme economic inequality with whites on top, and the subordination of women to men are all right and natural" (p. 133). Certainly, her interviewees deftly spoke of their clubs in ways that obscured and legitimized these inequalities. Ultimately Sherwood's contribution is in demonstrating how the most privileged use a variety of accounts to feel okay about themselves, and avoid feelings of guilt or discomfort around their active participation in a system of inequality that allows them to reap rewards unavailable to most. This book will be of interest to those who study race, class, and gender inequality, elite groups, and social stratification, and would be a useful addition to courses interested in exploring how privileged groups understand their own positions in structures of inequality.

AMANDA MARIE GENGLER
Brandeis University