
BOOK REVIEW

Irina Kretser*St. Petersburg State University****Domestic Economies:******Women, Work, and the American Dream in Los Angeles***

Susanna Rosenbaum (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017)

Migration and migrants are lately a core concern of anthropology and related social sciences. While many scholars examine the causes and consequences of migration and deep-seated fears about migrants, Susanna Rosenbaum takes a different approach. She brings the notion of the American Dream to the fore and analyses how it is rooted in concepts and distinctions that relate to productive and reproductive labor, identity, invisibility, inequality, domestic service, and the middle class. The empirical data presented in the book were collected during fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Los Angeles. Through the voices of two groups of women—Mexican and Central American immigrant domestic workers and their native-born, middle-class employers—Rosenbaum investigates different but coexisting ways of pursuing the American Dream. In this process, she tracks collisions between the principle of equality and practices of inequality, desirable lifestyles and moral values, and visible productive labor and invisible reproductive labor.

At the heart of the American Dream is the idea of equal opportunity: everyone can improve their social and economic status through hard work, self-discipline, and upwardly mobile aspiration. But the central paradox of the American Dream is that equality goes hand-in-hand with inequality because “the labor of those not entitled to the Dream continues to subsidize the lifestyle of those who are” (p. 3). Drawing on these insights, the author sheds light on the production of invisibility and inequality in the physical space of Los Angeles. There are at least two “Los Angeleses” in Los Angeles: immigrant neighborhoods and employer neighborhoods. Crossing between these two cities raises discomfort caused by potential interactions with others with a distinct lifestyle. To avoid this, people try to be invisible. A good example of how invisibility works is the case of communication between Rosenbaum and a transit guard. She got on the bus, showed her ticket to the transit guard, and “without thinking, said something to him then turned and said something to the other two [immigrant women] in Spanish.” But these women didn't respond, “stared blankly into space” and “sat quietly until the

following stop” (p. 28). Later, she understood that “when [she] had spoken to the transit guard, and then had said something to Josefina in Spanish, [she] unwittingly had made her visible, calling attention to her ... and to the fact that [we] were not speaking English” (p. 35). Rosenbaum “had transformed a faceless immigrant into an individual” (p. 36). The same facelessness is practiced in employers’ houses: domestic workers and employers prefer to remain invisible to each other, occupying different spaces or—and this is another mode of invisibility—occupying the same place but using it differently. All these cases of invisibility illustrate that a crucial part of the American Dream is a deletion of any evidence of the inequality that can break the Dream.

It is remarkable that the meanings and practices of the American middle class implicitly support inequality and invisibility. The middle class is a blurry notion that refers to a specific lifestyle and values more than to an income level. American middle-class lifestyles include both the ideology of successful motherhood and the necessity of paid work. The former implies laboring to create opportunities that will provide one’s children with a successful future; kindergartens, private schools, colleges, sport, music, and art lessons are a required part of any successful motherhood project. Paid work, meanwhile, determines a family’s middle-class standard of living and sustains it. Children’s activities also require regular income because “even two incomes seemed insufficient to sustaining the ever-expanding requirements for raising successful children” (p. 60). Middle-class women are faced with the constant conflict between job and home.

Another dimension of this conflict is the different significance of productive and reproductive labor. The American Dream is composed of such values as hard work, economic advancement, and economic independence, and the notion of success for the American middle class is linked with achievement in the workplace. Further, women who grew up inspired by second-wave feminism consider a job as a vital part of their life and “construct their own subjectivities through their careers” (p. 86). Paid work not only provides income; it also forms identity. While work is linked with success, positive membership and identity, motherhood doesn’t refer to the same concepts: “Mothering was neither valued nor recognized as work” (p.98). As a result, if women prefer motherhood to work they lose not only work, income, and economic independence, but also a sense of self. They risk becoming socially invisible persons. In sum, motherhood remains an essential part of the American Dream, but it is insufficient for the achievement of the Dream. Interestingly, unlike the middle-class American Dream, in the immigrant version of the Dream motherhood is in the foreground and paid work is just a tool to support it. Rosenbaum writes that “immigrant women ... [do] not feel that motherhood erases them as valued and valuable persons; rather, they define themselves through ... their work as mothers” (p. 119). But if we return to the middle class, a question which arises is how to combine work and successful mothering?

Domestic workers solve this problem, but hiring them causes conflicts between the desirable lifestyle associated with the American Dream and egalitarianism as value of the middle class. “For employers, the possibility of inequality, the idea that their success is somehow less than fully earned, is disruptive—so much so that many struggle even with the decision to take on a domestic employee” (p.70). Although inequality causes discomfort, members of the middle class cannot refuse to hire someone because they aren't able to cope with work, children, and house by themselves.

In the second edition of *American Kinship* David Schneider noted that he had made a mistake in the title of his book: it had been less about American kinship than about fundamental principles of American culture. I remembered this when reading Rosenbaum's book, because throughout it Rosenbaum provides an essential insight into the system of values of modern American society, even though the emphasis in the title is given to “domestic economies.” This book will have value for those interested in issues surrounding the American middle class, migration, reproductive labor, and, perhaps most of all, the tensions and contradictions inherent in the American Dream.