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Paying for the Party. How College Maintains Inequality.

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Reviews (II)

Armstrong, E. A. & Hamilton, L. T. (2013) *Paying for the Party. How college maintains inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

In times when university are increasingly questioned about their capacity to properly attend the academic and social needs of their students, and especially of female students, the present book provides an excellent insight into the daily struggle of college women to find their place in society. Through an unconventional and longitudinal study Armstrong and Hamilton gain a very broad and detailed overview of the diverse variables that play into the different pathways that women this Midwestern University follow in their 4 years or more at college. Members of the research team share the living space of one cohort of freshmen women who are allocated in the “Party dorm” to explore the not only the pathways and the social determinants for these pathways, but also to evidence the social relations that emerge among the women living in these college residences.

The authors highlight that the university under research is known for its Party Pathway, which is mainly set forth by the fraternities and sororities. These particularly serve upper class students who have the means to afford their membership fees, engage in the extraordinarily time consuming social activities and stand up to the social standards of appearance. While requirements to enter these sororities are very high and specific enough to make a homogeneous selection of their members, their social network is extensive and promising future upward social mobility – which as it turns

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out is only true for the most privileged as the study shows. Competition to be part of this social life and its networks creates an extremely hostile environment among college women who attempt to climb the ladder of upward social mobility, based on traditional female assets such as beauty and cuteness, defined by their peers, and social class. Failure to meet these criteria or lacking interest in participating in the party culture and sorority activities leads to social exclusion and marginalization affecting the situation of college women with detrimental effects on mental health and academic outcomes. Thus, their capacity for upward social mobility is undermined in this context.

Armstrong and Hamilton distinguish between different pathways that college women in this “Party dorm” follow, which are embedded in structural landscape of social class. According to the study, more affluent women tend to be more likely to enter sororities and engage in the Party pathway. Whether this choice turns out to lead to upward or downward social mobility depends greatly on their financial resources and social skills to integrate in and navigate these networks. Academic performance is less important and only comes into play in the future if social ties to entering the labor market are lacking, thus for those not belonging to the upper social classes. On the other end of the class spectrum, lower class women tend to experience impediments for upward mobility as their routine in college involves long working hours, less to no help in navigating higher education, thus making wrong academic choices leading them to no success in terms of revenue for their investment in higher education to climb the ladder of social mobility. The only way to thrive in this pathway is inside knowledge on the academic environment to successfully achieve scholarships and funding for the college experience linked to academic effort. A third pathway includes those for whom academic attainment is more defining than the other pathways. A distinction is thus made between achievers and underachievers including women from upper and upper middle class for the first group and all social classes for the latter.

To conclude their book, the authors analyze the importance of structural elements in creating these pathways, which lead to maintaining inequalities. They highlight that reduced funding lowers the universities capacity to limit the strength of sororities and fraternities to influence campus life and the

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women's pathways. One of the more common trends is to implement online classes reducing financial issues as well as exposure to social marginalization. Yet, it further limits access to establishing social networks which appear to be crucial in the future. Thus the authors appeal to universities, policy makers, and governors to provide quality education and living conditions to students. Although not the main focus of the book it perfectly informs about the interactions that greatly influence a student's life on campus and their future to either thrive as a person or being devastated.

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