



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 41
Issue 1 *March*

Article 11

2014

Review of *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Jennifer M. Silva. Reviewed by Marguerite G. Rosenthal.

Marguerite Rosenthal
Salem State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Rosenthal, Marguerite (2014) "Review of *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Jennifer M. Silva. Reviewed by Marguerite G. Rosenthal.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 41: Iss. 1, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3841>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol41/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

advocated the reformulation of traditional Eurocentric welfare state models to incorporate social investment features.

Nevertheless, this is an important book that will stimulate critical debate on a number of issues. The author's use of data is extensive and impressive, and his thorough knowledge and documentation of European social policy, will be a major resource for international social policy scholars who wish to understand the complexities of recent trends in the region; the author is to be commended for putting welfare change at the center of his account. It is hoped that his book will foster a more dynamic approach in the field that needs to address the volatile and chaotic nature of change in the light of recent events. If combined with the now extensive scholarship on social investment in the developing world, it may also contribute to the formulation of a One World perspective, combining the analytical insights as well as normative commitments of scholars from different nations. This has the potential to inform global social policy and benefit the world's people as a whole.

*James Midgley, School of Social Welfare,
University of California, Berkeley*

Jennifer M. Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*. Oxford University Press (2013). \$29.95 (hardcover).

Coming Up Short is a brief, but powerful, update of the status, difficulties, behaviors and distresses that characterize the lives of young working class adults. Based on in-depth interviews with 100 subjects, both White and African American, the book is—among other things—a reminder of the power of qualitative research, where the subjects' statements and the vignettes about them poignantly document a number of themes in a way that statistical tables could not.

Silva is consciously updating the classic sociological studies of Sennet and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972) and Rubin's *Worlds of Pain* (1976). Her findings document lives as circumscribed as the subjects of those earlier studies but are totally different: where working class men and women formerly led gendered and role-ascribed lives characterized by narrow choices and feelings of defeat and duty, today's young

adults face uncertainty in every aspect of theirs.

The major changes—deindustrialization, primarily—in the U.S. economy since the 1980s account for the disruption of traditional work and family patterns that were previously determinative of the American working class' behaviors. Now, young under-educated adults cannot get a foothold in the labor market. They go from one poorly paid and often temporary job to another. Some have tried to pursue higher education but often drop out, leaving them frustrated, bitter, and in debt. Without regular sources of income, young adults do not marry or form stable relationships. As a consequence, single parenthood is common. These many problems leave the subjects distrustful and in precarious situations.

Many of these problems have been previously documented (see Edin and her colleagues). What Silva adds to our understanding is that the way neoliberalism has infected this population's understanding, so that rather than looking to structural causes, they blame themselves for their insecurity and struggles. Another major characteristic that defines this group is what the author labels the "mood economy," where failure is understood as stemming from psychological problems experienced in their growing up, and success is understood as overcoming their inter- and intrapersonal difficulties. In this important discussion, Silva makes frequent reference to the work of Eva Illouz. Respondents are likely to have been in treatment or have participated in AA and NA meetings. They have absorbed the language of psychotherapy, if not from direct experience, then from popular media figures like Oprah Winfrey. Young adults seem unfamiliar with any aspect of group solidarity, and they interpret their problems almost completely in personal terms.

Silva is sensitive to the growth of inequality in America and the role that neoliberal economic policies have played thereto. Indeed, almost the last statement in her book is:

In order to tell a different kind of coming of age story—one that promises hope, dignity, and connection—they (young working class adults) must begin their journey to adulthood with a living wage, a basic floor of social protection, and the skills and knowledge to confront the future. (p. 156)

Yet the book is slim on policy recommendations that are implied: better schools, greatly increased educational and vocational counseling (in high school and at the community college level), low interest government-sponsored loans, and a return to easier means to declare bankruptcy, among others.

Included in the Appendix is the author's Interview Guide. It reveals that Silva's questions were designed to elicit responses about personal and familial histories, struggles and, sometimes, redemptive successes. Silva apparently did not seek responses about experiences with unions or other forms of worker cooperation, although she states that her interviews were semi-structured. The interviews were conducted in Lowell, MA and Richmond, VA from October 2008 to February 2010, before the Occupy Movement (which Silva primarily critiques as having spurred right wing backlash) and before recent worker protest activities, such as fast food and Wal-Mart workers' demanding higher wages. One wonders what Silva's respondents would have to say about these events and whether they have affected their current understanding of their predicaments.

Coming Up Short is highly recommended for sociologists and social welfare students and academics alike. It informs in telling detail the difficult circumstances and self-perceptions of a significant portion of the American population. It is also a window into how the "helping professions" have influenced the thinking of young adults and suggests that those professions need help their clients see their troubles in broader terms than they apparently currently do.

*Marguerite G. Rosenthal, Emerita, School of Social Work,
Salem State University*

Cris Beam, *To the End of June: The Intimate Life of American Foster Care*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2013). \$27.00 (hardcover).

David Tobis, *From Pariahs to Partners: How Parents and Their Allies Changed New York City's Child Welfare System*. Oxford University Press (2013). \$29.95 (hardcover).

David Liederman, the late Chair of the Child Welfare League of America, once said, "Child welfare work isn't rocket science. It's harder." *To the End of June* and *From Pariahs to*