

Deborah Royster, *Race and the Invisible Hand* (2003. UC Press), memo by David Eagle

In this book, Royster develops her central thesis that black and white labor disparities are due in large part to the fact that blacks have been cut off from a major source of employment opportunities – informal network connections to employers and other employment “gate-keepers.”

Methodologically, her argument relies on her ability to detect statistically real differences between blacks and whites (c.f. tables on 67, 80, 81, 93, 96, 99, 96), which is dubious given her snowball sampling technique (47-48). While she mourns the “loss of randomization” this creates, she still makes comparisons between blacks and whites, naively assuming that she has something like a VSRS. Snowball sampling has numerous drawbacks, the most serious being that the “seed” is not randomly selected and is likely to name socially-similar contacts because of the presence of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Thus, the variance in the sample will be artificially decreased and the statistical power of tests inflated, especially in small N samples (Salganik 2006; Salganik and Heckathorn 2004).

Theoretically, she calls attention to a gap in Wilson's theory – he fails to account for the black working class who are not ghettoized but still underrepresented in the labor force. She posits the Embeddedness theory, which argues that blacks lack network connections linking them to older whites who own small businesses, control hiring practices at other firms and restrict access to craft unions. The Embeddedness theory seems more a modification of Wilson's thesis rather than an alternative, that is, isolation is still the problem, but in the working class case the isolation is mostly network related. She goes farther than Wilson, however, in claiming that racism has become effectively bureaucratized so that older whites transmit the racist structuring of blue-collar job access to their heirs (15).

The Embeddedness theory has been tested by a number of researchers and has produced mixed results (Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo 2006). In particular, research has revealed that minorities are actually *more* likely to find their jobs through networks and that those who do so are paid less than those who find jobs through conventional means. Rather than focusing on lack of connections, much of the literature identifies the over-reliance on minority networks as the major problem.

These findings may help to explain how Latino men have managed to break into the construction

professions with much greater success than blacks (nationally in 2001, 30% of the craft workforce was Latino, compared to 7.5% black and 11.6% white) and are more likely to be in a union than whites and blacks in all but the service sector (Thomas-Briefeld 2003). This fact calls into question Royster's claim that older whites function as gate-keepers and successfully transmit their racism to their heirs. Here it is worth asking if restricting the study to Baltimore creates generalizability issues. If Latinos have successfully broken into traditionally white-restricted occupations, then perhaps Baltimore is unique. This is exactly what Swanstrom (2008) found. Baltimore has the second highest gap (14% vs. 6% nationally) between black representation in general employment and black representation in the construction industry; Latinos are over represented in the construction industry in Baltimore, but not to the same degree as in many other cities (-10% gap, vs. -25% nationally).

Another major question regarding the generalizability of her studies concerns the specific characteristics of the school she studied, in particular, the role of the school's placement coordinator (112-118). She notes that the coordinator's services were never used by the white students, that she lacked relational connections to employers, and that she had developed few, if any, new networks of employer contacts. If a school has a more effective coordinator would black students would have fared better? Royster claims that for blacks a lack of contacts with white employers is due to *persistent* racism. Certainly, the lack of black network embeddedness stems from *historical* racism, however, the present situation could simply be due to the the *legacy* of racism. Perhaps all that is needed is a strong bridging connection between blacks and job opportunities, which Glendale's administration did not provide.

In terms of policy solutions, contra Wilson who looks for neutral, market-based solutions, she argues for federal affirmative action policies to help break white control (189-191). The problem with this solution, at least in regards to many blue-collar sectors, is that many minorities are all ready well-represented in blue-collar trades. The major problem is low wages, lack of job security, and benefits. Some research indicates that increasing minority participation in the construction sector has driven down wages, suggesting that affirmative action could have negative unintended consequences (Korenman and Turner).

References

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