



Laboring Below the Line: The New Ethnography of Poverty, Low-Wage Work, and Survival in the Global Economy

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As the distribution of wealth between rich and poor in the United States grew more and more unequal over the past twenty years, this economic gap assumed a life of its own in the popular culture. The news and entertainment media increasingly portrayed the lives of the poor with such stereotypes as the lazy welfare mother and the thuggish teen, offering Americans few ways to learn how the "other half" really lives.

Laboring Below the Line works to bridge this gap by synthesizing a wide range of qualitative scholarship on the working poor. The result is a coherent, nuanced portrait of how life is lived below the poverty line, and a compelling analysis of the systemic forces in which poverty is embedded, and through which it is perpetuated.

Laboring Below the Line explores the role of interpretive research in understanding the causes and effects of poverty. Drawing on perspectives of the working poor, welfare recipients, and marginally employed men and women, the contributors—an interdisciplinary roster of ethnographers, oral historians, qualitative sociologists, and narrative analysts—dissect the life circumstances that affect the personal outlook, ability to work, and expectations for the future of these people. For example, Carol Stack views the work aspirations of an Oakland teenager for whom a job is important, even though it strains her academic performance. And Ruth Buchanan looks at low-wage telemarketing workers who are attempting to move up the economic ladder while balancing family, education, and other important commitments. What emerges is a compelling picture of low-wage workers—one that illustrates the precarious circumstances of individuals struggling with the economic conditions and institutions that surround them. Each chapter also explores the capacity for economic survival from a different angle, with ancillary commentary complementing the ethnographies with perspectives from other fields of study, such as economics.

At this moment of governmental retrenchment, ethnography's complex, nonstereotypical portraits of individual people fighting against poverty are especially important. *Laboring Below the Line* reveals the ambiguities of real lives, the potential for individuals to change in unexpected ways, and the even greater intricacy of the collective life of a community.

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