

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Wolfgang Lehmann, *Choosing to Labour? School-Work Transitions and Social Class*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, 232 pp., \$27.95 paper (978-0-77353-306-6), \$75.00 hardcover (978-0-77353-280-9).

Wolfgang Lehmann's *Choosing to Labour? School-Work Transitions and Social Class* examines the extent to which formally structured programs designed to link schools and workplaces can overcome the reproductive effects of social class and gender in the early career experiences of German and Canadian youth. The author offers a comparative study of academic-track high school students in Bremen, Germany and students participating in an apprenticeship program (known as the Registered Apprenticeship Program, or RAP) in Alberta, Canada. Lehmann relies primarily on qualitative data drawn from interviews and focus groups with a total of 105 students, along with some generally simple quantitative analysis.

Lehmann builds his analysis around the concepts of structure and agency. He presents three competing theories of the relative role of youth choice in school-to-work transitions. Rational choice theory, which leans heavily toward the agency side, is based on the cost/benefit calculations that people make as they decide between various educational and employment options. Status attainment theories, in contrast, focus on the role of ascribed characteristics, such as race and SES, in circumscribing educational aspirations and attainment. Interpretive studies highlight the centrality of agency, without insisting that the choices one makes be rational or economically goal-driven. Lehmann wants to determine if individual life courses are more responsive to broader structural constraints or to the choices that young people make about their futures. As its title suggests, *Choosing to Labour?* is in part a response to the questions raised decades ago by Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour*, and taken up more recently in the school-to-work transition literature.

After a brief introductory chapter, the book proceeds straightforwardly. Chapter 1 sets out Lehmann's theoretical premises, revolving largely around the distinction between structure and agency. In Chapter 2, he provides a detailed and informative description of both the RAP and Germany's Dual System of apprenticeship and skill acquisition. This is a particularly clear statement of the social pressures currently impinging

on the ongoing viability of the Dual System. Lehmann characterizes both the Canadian and German systems in terms of the transparency and flexibility that they provide to their participants.

The next two chapters assess the effects of broader structural constraints on the school-to-work transition. Chapter 3 concerns gender. Lehmann concludes, not surprisingly, that career expectations are “gendered,” although the clustering of the females in his sample into a very few educational categories prohibits him from saying much more than that. Chapter 4 focuses on social class. Lehmann conceptualizes social class using such Bourdieuan concepts as cultural capital and habitus. He also works in some provocative ideas on risk, along with Willis’s notion of resistance. Lehmann turns to the policy implications of his research in Chapter 5, and to the theoretical implications in Chapter 6.

Choosing to Labour? is well-written and even-handed. Lehmann’s descriptive material of the Canadian and German systems is refreshingly clear and judicious. He offers a useful reminder that agency — the ability to make independent and autonomous choices — inevitably operates within what are often quite deterministic structures. He is persuasive that structure and agency are not mutually exclusive but are in fact interdependent. We appreciate Lehmann’s insistence that social reproduction is a problematic concept. That is, Lehmann believes that analysts err when they characterize the decision of youth to choose, for example, plumbing jobs as a failure or a blocked opportunity. Without resorting to a functionalist account that market mechanisms inexorably move people in the direction of the kind of work to which they are best suited, Lehmann rejects more extreme theories that deny working-class youth any legitimate preference for working-class jobs.

As his own data show, of course, working-class youth are more likely to end up in working-class jobs than are more privileged youths, just as females are more likely to end up in feminine occupations than are males. Thus, while Lehmann calls himself more optimistic than Willis in his judgment of the efficacy of school to work programs, we continue to be struck that the life chances of contemporary youth in postindustrial Germany and Canada, just as in Willis’s industrial-era England, continue to be shaped to a great degree by the material resources they have available to them. Many of Lehmann’s young respondents are smart, ambitious, and able to clearly express their preferences for career advancement and stability. Often too, though, they are cynical and perceptive about the barriers that stand in their way. On balance, we find ourselves more persuaded by Lehmann’s statistical data showing the persistence of inequality than we are by his interview data showing agency. These interviews, while informative and valuable, sometimes read as stories

teenagers tell themselves to feel that they have control over their lives, and about how they construct reality in a world of social inequality.

This criticism does not diminish our enthusiasm for *Choosing to Labour?* Wolfgang Lehmann has provided a readable and cogent appraisal of the interplay between social class and school to work transitions that successfully steers clear of the polemics that often plague the literature on youth policy. It deserves a wide readership.

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

DAVID B. BILLS AND NOGA ADMON

David B. Bills is Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Graduate Programs and Professor of the Sociology of Education in the University of Iowa College of Education. His research interests are in education and the workplace, labour markets, technological and organizational change, educational demography, and social inequality. He recently published *The Sociology of Education and Work*. He spent the Fall, 2003 semester at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB) to collaborate on a project examining trends in the hiring and training practices of German and American employers over the past twenty years. david-bills@uiowa.edu.

Noga Admon is a visiting Assistant Professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Iowa College of Education. Her areas of research are social and educational inequality, internal stratification within higher education, and minority students at K–12 schools and in higher education. She is currently involved in several research projects looking at the relationship between higher education and the labor market. noga-admon@uiowa.edu