



The Burdens of Aspiration: Schools, Youth, and Success in the Divided Social Worlds of Silicon Valley

Elsa Davidson

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During the tech boom, Silicon Valley became one of the most concentrated zones of wealth polarization and social inequality in the United States—a place with a fast-disappearing middle class, persistent pockets of poverty, and striking gaps in educational and occupational achievement along class and racial lines. Low-wage workers and their families experienced a profound sense of exclusion from the techno-entrepreneurial culture, while middle class residents, witnessing up close the seemingly overnight success of a “new entrepreneurial” class, negotiated both new and seemingly unattainable standards of personal success and the erosion of their own economic security.

The Burdens of Aspiration explores the imprint of the region’s success-driven public culture, the realities of increasing social and economic insecurity, and models of success emphasized in contemporary public schools for the region’s working and middle class youth. Focused on two disparate groups of students—low-income, “at-risk” Latino youth attending a specialized program exposing youth to high tech industry within an “under-performing” public high school, and middle-income white and Asian students attending a “high-performing” public school with informal connections to the tech elite—Elsa Davidson offers an in-depth look at the process of forming aspirations across lines of race and class. By analyzing the successes and sometimes unanticipated effects of the schools’ attempts to shape the aspirations and values of their students, she provides keen insights into the role schooling plays in social reproduction, and how dynamics of race and class inform ideas about responsible citizenship that are instilled in America’s youth.

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