

Reseñas de publicaciones

Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels

Rachel Sherman, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, USA: 2007.

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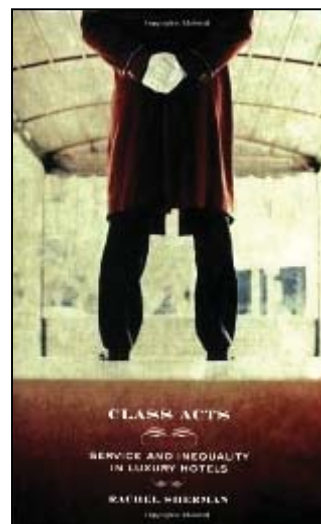
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“...Take the advertisement of a present day ‘millionaire’s hotel’, with the assurance it gives ‘the very last word in sumptuousness’. Is this not one of the features of our time upon which we all trust that a wiser age will look back, not only with condemnation, but with a sense of nausea?” Herbert L. Stewart (1918, as cited by Sherman, 2007, p.257)

It is true that the last crisis of the current capitalist economic system, which has been going on since 2008, raised more public outcry globally (99% marches) compared to the time *Class Acts* has been published. Still, the high-end consumption that is analyzed by Sherman (2007) seems nowhere near disappearing and human race seems nowhere closer that “*wiser age*” that Stewart mentioned. Thus, the book *Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels* deserves a renewed attention nowadays.

Sherman’s (2007) book, which is an extended ethnographic work that uses participant observation and in-depth interviews, represents one of the best examples of sociology of labor, occupations and organizations that focuses on the luxury hotel industry.

Sherman uses two urban luxury hotels as her sites to analyze the nature of luxury service. It is well established in the service work literature that unlike manufacturing jobs, all service jobs are defined by their requirement of face-to-face contact



and interactive production and consumption. Sherman makes an addition to those characteristics by showing that in a luxury service workers are also expected to engage in intense emotional labor by continuously recognizing “*the customers’ limitless entitlement to their attention and effort*” (p.6). Therefore, Sherman suggests that the globally omnipresent luxury consumption of the new service economy creates “*new forms of inequality*” (p.259) between the worker and the client. Thus, a new paradigm or at least more flexible concepts are necessary to understand these new dynamics. In her own words:

“These issues matter for two reasons. First, they are important for our understanding

of interactive work and its links to relationships to selfhood. Second, they are significant for our conception of how work is connected to class” (p.3)

Sherman uses two concepts in her book that are central to her discussion. One of them is the notion of “*consent*”, which she borrows from Buroway’s (1979) study. Briefly, she describes consent as “*workers’ use of their agency to participate in work*” (p. 16). The notion of consent also allows the worker to withdraw their consent in various ways such as quitting or not engaging in required emotional labor. The other concept is “*normalization*” that refers to “*the taken-for-granted nature of both interactive and structural inequality. Unequal entitlements and responsibilities ... they simply became a feature of the everyday landscape of the hotel.*” (p.17).

Throughout the book Sherman builds on how these two concepts function in workers’ strategies to shape their identity and behavior on the face of managers, coworkers and guests. The first four chapters of the book mainly focus on the strategies that workers use to construct themselves, not as subservient but as in control of their work.

The strategies that workers use with guests, which are explained in great detail, include: personalization and recognition; anticipation and legitimation of needs; pampering as display of labor; deference and sincerity; playing games of speed, service, control (i.e. maximizing sales, room blocking, etc.); games of money (i.e. tipping game); condescension and criticism of guests (i.e. guests as needy); limiting the entitlement of guests to stay in the hotel and consume luxury services.

In the second chapter, the author also includes a discussion of how organizational factors, such as different managerial regimes, rhetoric, division of labor, worker demographics, internal labor markets and practical cultures of managerial authority and worker relations, also shape the strategies developed by workers and how different managerial regimes help workers to see themselves as powerful, professional, skilled and independent.

In the third and fourth chapters, Sherman describes how workers constitute themselves as superior to their peers by using: comparisons related to competence; emphasizing perks associated with their jobs; and using association with the status of the hotel and its guests.

In chapter five, Sherman focuses on how reciprocity in luxury hotels is not only defined by antagonism, instrumentality and un-authenticity as it is usually discussed in the service work literature.

She shows how meaningful and reciprocal relations are formed between workers and clients that helped workers become invested in their job. While reciprocal relations act as the major mechanism to generate consent, the normalization of inequality is achieved as guests also use reciprocity to constitute workers as inherently equal. Sherman explains three ways through which this equality is established. The first is the acceptance of a mutual obligation and exchange of both workers and clients to each other. The second is the acceptance of worker labor as voluntary and offered willingly. Finally, the third is through the development of meaningful relationships. The chapter also discusses what happens in situations when this contract breaks down.

While the majority of the book is dedicated to describe how employees construct themselves as powerful agents, the last chapter of the book goes into some details as to how the guests produce their entitlement to luxury services. Through their contact with hotel staff, guests learn how to behave in the luxury environment and come to see themselves as deserving of luxury consumption. For their part, they work to create selves that are needy, deserving and generous in order to overcome their fears of not belonging to luxury sites or exploiting workers.

Overall, the author provides three important conclusions: The first one is that the entitlement in the production-consumption of luxury service emerges from class positions of hotel workers and guests outside the hotel. Thus, the luxury service in the hotels *depends on* unequal entitlement to material resources outside the hotel. In addition, greater entitlement to material resources also *guarantees* unequal entitlements to recognition. The second one is that the class is not only an important factor that structures luxury service sites, but it is also created interactively within these sites through workers’ and guests’ performances. The third one is that luxury service sites *normalize* the unequal entitlements in production-consumption relations through the workers’ and guests’ various strategies of self.

In conclusion, the book *Class Acts* is a good case of thick description of the relation between class and service work. It is a highly readable book with interesting anecdotes and solid sociological concepts, offering the reader a complicated and nuanced picture of the social dynamics in the luxury hotels. Sherman gives a detailed analysis of luxury service, its organization and the negotiation of inequality between workers and guests through various practices, which eventually make class inequality seem

normal.

The book offers a detailed description and a sound critical sociological analysis of the professionalized luxury service in hotels that normalize existing unequal social relations and reproduces ideas about class, race and gender. In addition, Sherman asks a very important question in the conclusion:

“But another critical question emerges here: What are the possibilities for challenging unequal worker-client entitlements and dominant ideas about income and class inequality generally? (p. 268)...it is hard to see how consumption entitlements could be contested practically, especially in the service theatre. In luxury hotels, workers cannot demand guests to be less rich or less entitled to recognition, because the hotel’s existence is predicated on these features. And, of course, the issue goes beyond the service theatre itself, for class entitlements are embedded in cultures outside the hotel. (p.269)”

It is not realistic to expect answers to such complicated questions from one book and from one discipline. Therefore, *Class Acts* definitely is a must-read for scholars and students of tourism as it offers a critical perspective to the growing economic inequality that also underlies luxury consumption in certain forms of tourism.

References

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