

Pascale, C.-M. (2021). *Living on the Edge. When Hard Times Become a Way of Life*. USA: Polity. 280 pages. ISBN: 9781509548231

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Abstract

Book review of Celine-Marie Pascale (2021). *Living on the Edge. When Hard Times became a Way of Life*, Polity, pp. 256, price approx. USD. Book reviewed ahead of print.

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This is a Book Review: Pascale, C. M. (2021). *Living on the Edge: When Hard Times Become a Way of Life*. Pp. 280 Forthcoming from Polity. Release date September 24 in the UK; October 22 in North America. E-book September 24th.

“*Living on the Edge: When Hard Times Become a Way of Life* is a book written by Celine-Marie Pascale, Professor of Sociology at American University, leading scholar in the field of language, society, inequality and the author of two award-winning books *Making Sense of Race, Gender and Class: Commonsense, Power and Privilege in the United States* (Routledge, 2007) and *Cartographies of Knowledge: Exploring Qualitative Epistemologies* (Sage, 2011). Pascale’s third book *Social Inequalities & The Politics of Representation: A Global Landscape* (Sage, 2013) has been found as a field defining international collection of original scholarship. Celine-Marie Pascale specializes in qualitative methods, especially in forms of textual analysis and interview techniques which is also reflected in her latest book - the subject of this review.

Is the American Dream achievable for everyone? How is it possible that people who are working two or even more jobs are not able to pay their rent, basic bills, obtain decent housing and sometimes they are not able to provide (adequate) food for the family? Is it a consequence of their individual features like for example laziness, ineptitude, lower intelligence, or maybe is it connected to making bad life choices by them? If so, why this situation affects not only individuals, but entire communities in many parts of the country, and has lasted for many years? Pascale claims that it is the result of decades of collusion between business and government to maximize corporate profits at the expense of workers. To support this thesis, author conducted research using institutional ethnography, so the method that, unlike classical ethnography, does not only focus on explaining the behavior and attitudes of a group of people, but examines how people's daily lives are organized by institutional forces (Smith, 1990). The choice of this method in view of the posed thesis seems to be the most justified.

In order to obtain research material, the author traveled to places in America that were characterized by deep and long-lasting levels of economic poverty in various parts of the country: economically distressed counties in Appalachia, the Standing Rock and Wind River Reservations in the Midwest, and poor neighborhoods in Oakland, California. She has talked with over a hundred people in total and conducted 27 in-depth interviews with people of different race, age, gender, ability, and sexual orientation. What these people had in common was some sort of economic distress. The diversity among the interviewees can be perceived as a strength of the book. What also deserves recognition is the conduct of interviews in such distant places, which strengthens the author's thesis about the lack of randomness of the difficulties experienced by the interlocutors.

The result of mentioned activities is an extensive, reliable analysis of the problem contained in 11 chapters of the book, which are ordered thematically. At the very beginning, the author acquaints the reader with the concepts and facts needed to better understand the discussed content, e.g., “struggling class” (which is the synonym of the “working class”, used in further analyses in the book), “underemployment”, “unemployment rate”, “EPI self-sufficiency budget” etc.

Surprisingly, in the first chapter, it can be found that the author of the book herself belonged to the struggling-class, and her family faced many difficulties resulting from it, which were shown. This personal experience shaped the research for the book, from the questions that were asked to the ability to be a reliable partner in the conducted interviews.

However, the book mainly concerns the stories of the respondents who are currently experiencing (the study was conducted during the year in 2017-2018, and then partially repeated after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic) difficulties in make ends meet. In the following chapters, we get acquainted with the stories of people depending on the topic that is taken up in each chapter. These stories are intertwined with reliable statistical data that confirm and supplement the statements of the respondents (who use pseudonyms to remain anonymity), as it can be seen on the following example:

In Athens, Ohio, Rose Taylor tells me “Being a collage town, sexual assault is prevalent here. I think a lot of it is tied with the drinking culture.” Ohio University records show there were ninety-three rapes in 2018. Local news covered police reports of sixteen sexual assaults in the first month of the fall semester in 2019 (...) (Pascale, 2021, p. 141).

The stories we get to know start with details about the places in which they happen. As the author rightly notices these places affect us: “Where we live shapes our opportunities, our troubles, our aspirations, and our fears. The places we call home can give us a tremendous sense of identity and belonging and sometimes a depth of sorrow that escapes words.” (Pascale, 2021, p. 17). In this regard it is also shown how predatory practices have polluted these environments (air, land and even water), which are homes for interviewees from this book. Some of the stories included in the book are shocking, terrifying, heart-breaking, and at the same time are the ordinary, everyday reality for people from struggling class. The author points out that the presented problems in a particular way affect women and people of color, devoting one chapter to issues of class and race, and then another one to gender issues. This broad study also includes drawing attention to political issues, explaining for example Trump's relationship with people from struggling communities and deals with myths about being served to all of us in order to maintain the prevailing order.

The undoubted advantage of the book is reaction to the current situation and repeating the research at the time of a pandemic, the results of which are presented in the penultimate chapter of the book. The book also includes the author's proposal for solving the discussed problems, supported by the respondents' statements. This vision highlights an ambitious plan of change that every interested person should get familiar with it on their own. At the very end of the book, in appendix, a short, several-page methodological description can be found.

It should be noticed that the book doesn't include some very important aspects of how poverty is lived, for instance it doesn't describe a situation when, if a person cannot afford bail and is kept in custody until the end of the trial (which may take months) may quickly lose their job, home, family, etc. As none of the respondents had this experience, no description was provided concerning the justice system. It should be noted, however, that it is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of poverty. As the author says “It is an illustration of lived experience and a strategic consideration of how the conditions of economic struggle are created and maintained by broader social structures.” (Pascale, 2021, p. 236). With that all being said, if there are any potential shortcomings in this book, they have been overshadowed by a number of the book's strengths, mentioned previously.

The book might be and should be recommended to all groups of recipients, not only to scholars, but to anyone who wants to know mechanisms responsible for inclusion/exclusion of diverse social groups. The research is set in American reality, but the socio-structural mechanisms presented in the book can be also observed in other socio-cultural contexts.

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