

American Idle: Late-Career Job Loss in a Neoliberal Era, by Annette Nierobisz and Dana Sawchuk. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2025. Pp. 206. \$29,95 (Paperback and eBook).

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American Idle is a timely book about the harm and instability the Great Recession of 2007-2008 caused to now middle-aged American workers. In their seven clearly written chapters, Annette Nierobisz and Dana Sawchuk create an archive of personal stories about job loss, underemployment, marginality, and insecurity based on their surveys and interviews with sixty-two participants in Minnesota. The social picture they depict is one of ageist and reckless employment practices that threaten participants' housing, equity, retirement, pension savings, medical and insurance coverage, and chances of long-term employment. The heartfelt vignettes of decline in status and loss of dignity are particularly poignant for a generation raised to expect stable jobs and prosperous lives. Now, as 'boomers' on the verge of retirement, they face an uncertain and unprotected future.

Throughout the study, the authors discover that many of their participants accept the very neoliberal values that risk their survival, appearing in the "interpretive frameworks these individuals drew upon to make sense of their experiences" (6). Indeed, the most pernicious aspect of neoliberalism here is the power of its ideology to transform the social determinants of insecurity into personal dilemmas. Nowhere is this clearer than in Chapter 4, "In God We Trust", on faith-based job clubs in Minnesota, where the prospects and problems of employment are attributed to individual choice and responsibility. While the authors respect those who find solace in spiritual belonging and comfort in divine care, their 'religious coping' can also derail critical understanding of the injustices of the neoliberal state and workplace. Self-help programs and evangelical Christianity have long been allied in the United States, but current anti-labor politics and attacks on union activism have shifted job culture to voluntary organizations, many of which are the ground of personal faith training.

The book will appeal to scholars in age studies with its life-course approach to finely detailed qualitative research. The participants' life courses are shown to reflect the American political economy itself, whose foundations in democratic social welfare have been eroded by neo-conservative governments since the 1980s. Thus, the book's individual stories and interviews point to a new order of uprooted later life, where families, places of residence, intergenerational commitments, and biographical transitions are dislocated as people struggle against ageist employment biases and intersecting inequalities of race, gender, and class. The research on intergenerational relations, in Chapter 5 "Here's Where I Am, Here's Where I'll Stay," is important as 'boomer' participants express both judgmental and sympathetic sentiments towards younger people. There are stories of older workers losing their jobs to younger ones, where differences in values and commitments become sharply exposed. There are also cases where younger people can better adapt their lives to their jobs, including moving to new locations or taking on multiple short-term contracts.

Here, job flexibility for job competition is a key life-course issue and devastating for older workers. Expectations for flexible schedules and multiple short-term jobs negatively impact social networks, family responsibilities, parental and childcare, and health risks, for which few companies offer support or compensation. The mythical ageless figure of the flexible worker, unburdened by responsibility to others, is today marketed as the ideal job seeker, contributing to what the authors call a "neoliberal generationalism" that "inhibits the kind of coalition building that might bring much-needed structural changes for all workers" (44). At the same time, and evident throughout the chapters, the participants cite how employer stereotypes of mature workers as slower, weaker, and less productive persist even if they attempt to appear as younger, fit, job-flexible, and mobile.

The main critique of *American Idle* is that the framing of 'boomer' work insecurity in a language of religious or positive self-discovery, filled with metaphors of 'silver linings' and 'blessings in disguise,' obscures the webs of power through which it operates. The structures of neoliberal capitalism and its

fraying of social life during and after the 2007-2008 financial recession heightened the deep contrast between how American workers see themselves and understand their rights to age with security, health, and protection. However, in the end, one also wonders about resistance, whether from those with the privileged economic or educational resources to pursue alternative pathways or those for whom bright-sided narratives fail to fill the cracks of marginal existence.

The final Chapter 7, “Where Are They Now? And What Can We Do?,” reconnects with original participants in 2023, around ten years after the initial research project. The authors raise the question of resistance, citing examples of unionization attempts at big companies like Amazon and Walmart, networking and sharing through job clubs and other local communities, and positive outcomes for worker movements in Europe. Citing other critical studies, the authors stress that “the lessons of the past show us that the future is not necessarily preordained” and “that we should not let neoliberal ideology divide us and make us think we are all alone” (113).

However, less featured in the book’s participant stories are their thoughts about or attempts at legal responses, appeals to labor boards, engagement in alternative economic relationships or housing, or group action against ageist or sexist discrimination and wrongful dismissals. Readers may expect to learn more about contesting the power of neoliberalism and what forms the collective responses, espoused by the authors to widespread American insecurity and inequality, might take now and into the future. In part, a more thorough theoretical analysis of neoliberalism might also help to glimpse where aging radicalism threatens its hegemony. But overall, the accessible style of *American Idle* will appeal to students, scholars, professionals, and older community groups and is a welcome addition to the Rutgers University Press series on ‘Inequality at Work: Perspectives on Race, Gender, Class, and Labor.’