

[Review] Carla Freeman (2015) Entrepreneurial selves: neoliberal respectability and the making of a Caribbean middle class

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Freeman, Carla. 2014. *Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

The heroic figure of the entrepreneur is everywhere these days. She's the small-scale 'micro-entrepreneur' at the centre of microfinance initiatives aimed at lifting millions out of poverty; she's the grasping contestant on the worldwide television franchise, *The Apprentice*; she's the occupational embodiment of the neoliberal directive for economic subjects to be self-starting, opportunistic, and risk-taking. But despite the ubiquity of the entrepreneur in popular culture and scholarly discourse, there are precious few ethnographic accounts that take entrepreneurs seriously as people—subjects who are not only active, strategizing, and agentive, but also affective, relational, and socially embedded.

Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class (2014) is Carla Freeman's rich and theoretically sophisticated account of 'middle-class entrepreneurs' in Barbados, meaning individuals who create and manage their own businesses. In a service-oriented economy, these businesses include retail shops, life coaching, wellness and spa therapies, daycare centres, corporate consulting, and a large number of tourism-related enterprises. Based on interviews with 107 entrepreneurs and countless hours of participant observation over more than a decade, *Entrepreneurial Selves* tracks Barbadian middle-class entrepreneurs' personal narratives, exploring their motivations, values, day-to-day lives, family histories, and hopes and plans for the future. Drawing theories of 'affect' into conversation with economic anthropology, Freeman pays special attention to how new longings (for flexibility and autonomy in livelihoods, for equality in romantic partnerships, and for a sense of authentic selfhood) animate the entrepreneurial endeavour.

Freeman depicts entrepreneurialism in Barbados not simply as a means of making a living, but also as a new 'manner of life' (p.57). Becoming an entrepreneur requires particular qualities that an individual must cultivate within herself. Some of these qualities are directly relevant to business activities – such as being flexible, opportunistic, and self-motivated – but others are less obviously so, such as the imperative to develop self-knowledge and learn to think with one's 'heart.' Freeman describes how these valued qualities become woven not only into the entrepreneurs' business lives, but also into their spiritual outlook, parenting practices, and intimate relationships. As this new 'manner of life' infiltrates middle class identity and practice more broadly, what it means to be middle class becomes newly connected to aspirations and desires to live a life that is spirited and self-authored.

Freeman's analysis draws insight from, and has much to say about, the Caribbean value complex known as 'reputation and respectability.' In Peter Wilson's (1969) original formulation, attaining respectability in the Anglophone Caribbean required educational achievement, stable employment, church attendance, and patriarchal marriage – the preeminent symbols of membership in the middle class. But alongside the ideals of respectability have always existed their inverse in the values of 'reputation': a rejection of social hierarchies and the bureaucratic-colonial establishment in favour of a more egalitarian, rebellious, and authentic self to be found on the street corner, in the marketplace, and within the day-to-day communitas of all-male social groups. Entrepreneurs of the kind Freeman describes have achieved upward mobility and a firm footing in the middle class by following the path of 'reputation' rather than that of 'respectability.' This shift aligns with the transformation of Barbados' economy from a post-colonial agricultural economy with a strong public sector, to a neoliberal one that is oriented towards service and immaterial labour of many kinds. 'Reputation' has itself become 'upwardly mobile' (p.24) in a context where permanent jobs are harder to find, and middle-class individuals have to adapt themselves to fast economic change.

What is excellent about this book is its captivating characters: Colleen, for example, is a vivacious woman who left a secure but dull bank job to create an outdoor expedition company that takes locals and tourists on team-building exercises and wellness outings. In her 'climbing gear, shorts, and head wrap' (p.49), Colleen confounds traditional expectations of middle-class femininity and restraint. She has created a successful business by capitalising upon her passion for the outdoors and her desire to inspire the same in others. Freeman shows how for entrepreneurs like Colleen, the separation between 'work' and 'home' (a binary at the heart of Fordist employment relations) breaks down. New technologies allow 'work' to become mobile, and many women seek to combine entrepreneurial activities with the traditional expectation that they should be the primary carers of young children. For Freeman, these arrangements are neither simply technological or structural, but also affective. For example, the aspiration for patriarchal marriage now gives way to 'intimate partnership marriage' (p.97) of the kind Colleen has, where spouses share emotional closeness, equality, and mutual support.

Entrepreneurial activity gives rise to new ways of being in the world, and new ways of being 'middle class.' Freeman hints at – but could have discussed in more depth – the role the entrepreneurial ethic plays within wider political discourses in Barbados. A focus on individual achievement, self-authoring, and the passionate pursuit of one's personal 'destiny'

can blur into extreme individualism. Neoliberal political projects that seek to loosen the state from the grip of citizen entitlements can reveal a punishing side of the entrepreneurial ethic: self-blame for economic hardship, and a sense of personal failure for workers who do not feel 'passionate' about their jobs.

The central premise of anthropology is that the study of the particular provides insights into universal experience. What Freeman's ethnography shows to be universal about neoliberal capitalism is that it takes diverse (not homogenous) form in the local places where it thrives. The landscape of contemporary Barbados – with its shopping malls and brand-name goods – is similar to any capitalist country in the twenty-first century. For Freeman what is particular about this place is what neoliberal changes mean to people. Although this is a very Caribbean story, *Entrepreneurial Selves* will appeal to wide audiences because of the diverse applicability of its findings: that the successful reproduction of neoliberal capitalism requires it be made culturally 'local' in every context where it takes root, and that through ethnography we can examine these processes in the subtle detail they deserve.

References

Wilson, Peter J. 1969. 'Reputation and Respectability: A Suggestion for Caribbean Ethnology.' *Man* 4(1):70-84.

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