Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class by Carla Freeman.


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In Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class, Carla Freeman examines affective economies, or economies of emotion that have become a part of the labor process, and the ways in which middle class subjects of neoliberal capitalism are constructed (and re-constructed) through them. As she states, “this is a story about what it means to be respectable and middle class,” but her ethnography not only invites readers inside the lives of those who are newly defined as such (2014:1). Freeman also tells a broader story. Her research project is both a complex study of the changing global political economy and a nuanced examination of the lives of Barbadian entrepreneurs. A richly detailed analysis of the interconnections between political economy, labor, and affect, Freeman’s book is set in a time of neoliberal expansion on the island of Barbados, and she reveals how the new entrepreneurial self under study has been fashioned in relation to this specific time and place. While arguing for the wide-reaching effects of neoliberal transformation on new understandings of selfhood, she never overlooks the cultural particularities under which her research subjects have been constructed, and her thoughtful consideration of the competing influences of gender, race, and class in the post-colonial Caribbean context runs throughout her analysis. Freeman’s unique approach succeeds in illustrating neoliberalism as a fluid and unresolved process, while engaging with her argument for the agency of individual actors in middle class formation and the need for researchers to re-examine understandings of self and society in light of emergent economic opportunities and social structures in the Caribbean.

Freeman argues that entrepreneurialism, more than simply a path to self-employment, is becoming a form of self-making. She introduces her research site – Barbados – as relatively small in size, but complex in terms of the ordering of social life along lines of race, class, and geographic difference. She contends that like all Caribbean nations, Barbados
is a “combination of other nations and peoples” forced together by its formation roughly 300 years ago and molded by its histories of colonialism and transnational migration, highlighting how this origin story complicates distinctions between “the local” and “the global” (2014:10). While Freeman’s own history of work in the region (see Freeman 2000) strengthened her attention to local stages of social life, she presents Barbados as a nation that remains deeply intertwined with the global economy, allowing for a study of neoliberal affect writ large. Over ten years of ethnographic research, she assembled a broad and diverse research population, including those who stepped outside of gendered expectations through their labor, like women in the construction industry and men in fashion, and her methods combined historical accounts and archival research on representations of business with participant observation in new spaces of leisure and an extensive interview phase with over 100 new entrepreneurs. As was evidenced in her first book, *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink Collar Identities in the Caribbean* (2000), Freeman’s sensitive ethnographic engagement is facilitated by her investment in the region and her intimate awareness of the daily rhythms that structure the lives of her informants there. Drawing on articulations of entrepreneurialism within the distinctly Caribbean framework of “reputation/respectability” popularized by Wilson (1973), she situates the complicated history of neoliberalism within the region’s historic involvement in global capitalism through (forced and voluntary) flows of labor and goods. By detailing the transformation of labor and affect, or “the embodied expressions of emotions and feelings” in contemporary Caribbean nations, she leaves readers with a sense of what it means – and how it feels – to be a member of the middle class in neoliberal Barbados (2014: 3).

Applying an anthropological lens, Freeman analyzes neoliberalism in the post-colonial context by re-imagining the “reputation/respectability” framework. This re-imagination interrogates how the same social practices that were once associated with resistance to capitalism (or “reputation”) can now be linked to the neoliberal turn. Social practices of “reputation” are therefore being applied in new ways and re-shaping the construction of differentiation related to class, race, and gender through an emergent emotional economy. As the island of Barbados undergoes dramatic shifts in its own socioeconomic sphere, it is leading to a rise in service sector work and entrepreneurship. While it is not difficult to identify similar shifts underway in other parts of the world, *Entrepreneurial
Selves raises the question of how we can recognize these shifts on an individual, and therefore more intimate, level. Freeman asks if entrepreneurialism shapes how subjects structure their daily lives, choose the types of work they want to engage in, and even how they choose their marriage partners. Can we examine new forms of selfhood through the goods and experiences that are sought, from new modes of dress and personal training sessions, to new patterns of speech and trending electronic devices? Freeman pushes readers to grapple with the effects of global shifts towards contemporary capitalism and the decision to re-make oneself according to the demands of the entrepreneur. By bridging political economy and affect studies, she moves the research focus from the macro to the micro and places the figure of the new Barbadian entrepreneur – or as she suggests, the very embodiment of neoliberalism – in center-stage. As readers, we do not simply observe this figure from afar. We come to know this figure on multiple levels as Freeman moves between offices, churches, schools, homes, and places of leisure. According to Freeman, these are various realms in which middle class entrepreneurial subjects are being constructed. She argues that the rising global interest in service sector work and entrepreneurialism is shaping more than the global economy, as it also molds the emotional landscapes of the individual subjects involved. The effects of this shift are therefore not relegated to offices and cubicles, but can be seen and felt in the private and public spaces that structure daily life. Marriage, child-rearing, religion, education, and leisure all become key points of observation and analysis, serving to illustrate the entrepreneurial in the everyday.

Through the project of “self-making” (and re-making) the subjects of Freeman’s research re-draw lines of distinction between traditionally public and private, male and female spheres of life (2014:48). The narratives of women like Ashanti and Lilliana illustrate how domestic spaces and privatized offices have both long been linked to the private and the feminine, making them the appropriate spaces for middle class women in postcolonial settings. However, Freeman has followed in the tradition of feminist scholars who have theorized and critiqued the distinctions between private (female) and public (male) spaces (see Freeman 2001, see also Pateman). In this book, she illustrates how affective labor flow between home and work situate the entrepreneurial self between both spheres, thereby dissolving or at least muddling, the distinction between public and private, male and female spaces of employment and leisure. Following the work of other scholars
(Bourdieu 1998, Rouse 1992, Illouz 2007, and Walkerdine 2003), she explores how the entrepreneurial self remains continually in the making, and how this is indicative of society’s shift towards neoliberalism. Like the “flexible self,” neoliberalism demands a fluid and flexible globalized marketplace (Freeman 2014). The work of making an entrepreneurial self therefore becomes one other “grid of power” on which identity is constructed, re-shaping the ways in which individuals experience daily life and with time, re-shaping the very structures of social life within their communities (Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

By linking global political economy to her study of social and cultural impact, Freeman has created a book of wide-reaching interest to scholars and students alike. An important contribution to the studies of neoliberalism and affect, Entrepreneurial Selves also makes a substantial contribution to Caribbean scholarship by exploring a socioeconomic shift with great sensitivity to the historical landscape and cultural particularities of contemporary Caribbean society. Her book complicates the study of neoliberalism and enlists future researchers to consider the construction of the entrepreneurial subject in studies of neoliberal expansion. As a subjective and emotional state influenced by gender, class, and race, entrepreneurial self-making is presented as a work that will remain forever under construction. Freeman succeeds in weaving together critical analysis with compelling case studies, creating an ethnographically rich and theoretically sophisticated text.

**References Cited**


