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The Rockaway Years: Social Class, Sibling Relations and the Structure of Everyday Life

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Abstract

This article extends the definition of social class by examining interlocking systems of oppression and domination. The systems of oppression include gender and class, while the system of domination is white privilege. By telling the story of food in the everyday lives of three white working class Jewish sisters, their husbands, and their children during summers in Rockaway, Queens, between the war years of the 1940s and the suburbanization of the 1950s. Their relationships provided a day to day structure for the three sisters and their families, with sibling ties contributing to family survival strategies but, at the same time, reinforcing inequalities. Along with a broader view of social class, we add experiences such the lack of boundaries, the division of labor, reciprocity, the intra-family pecking order, and the reproduction of the next generation to the story. The story is not based on interviews with the three sisters, who are all deceased. Instead, it combines theory and context as well as memories of daily life during this period by the children of the three sisters.

Keywords: Life; Sibling Relation; Family; Social Class

Abbreviations: OPA: Office of Price Control; FSA: Federal Security Agency.

Introduction

This article broadens the definition of social class by telling the story of the everyday lives of three white working-class Jewish sisters (Pauline, Doris, and Ida) their husbands and their children in the "outer boroughs" of New York City between the war years of the 1940s and the suburbanization of the 1950s. The story takes place in Rockaway Beach, Queens in the summer between 1944 and the mid-1950s.

Kin relations provided a day to day structure for the three sisters and their families. Sibling ties among the sisters both furthered survival strategies but, at the same time, reinforced a pecking order [1]. We examine how these processes were enacted in daily life by the sisters and experienced by their children. World War II was a major part of this decade that began with scarcity and shortages and ended with growing affluence. Kin relations and sibling ties occurred in a world without social media and geographic mobility among working-class Jewish families, many of whom did not have cars. It occurred within the context of War-time government policy, followed by the growth of monopoly capital, and on the cusp of what Cohen [2] has called the "growth of a consumer republic."

In his recent book Love's Labor's Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America, Cherlin [3] defines the working class in terms of the blue-collar, industrial work of the father. Although women and children do populate

his book, it is the white male breadwinner who is the center of the story. He focuses on the post-World War II period to the early 1950s, a period which saw the growth of capitalism, lower rates of inequality, and higher wages, growing homeownership, and stay-at-home wives, according to Cherlin. The story of the three sisters and their families takes place during the same time period, but presents a broader view of social class by placing this extended family at the center of the story and emphasizing activities that reproduced the family on a daily basis, but also reproduced inequalities.

As white working class Jewish women, the sisters led their lives at the intersection of gender, whiteness, and social class. Along with a broader view of social class, beyond male blue collar work, we add experiences such as reproduction of the next generation, the lack of boundaries, sibling ties, reciprocity, and pecking order to the story. In short, the paper takes what Erik Olin-Wright [4] call a "kitchen sink" approach to the study of social class, because it does not privilege one stream of thought or one set of authors. It includes both objective and subjective measures of social class.

Unlike most ethnographies, especially those that employ feminist methodologies emphasizing equal relationships between interviewer and interviewee [5], this story is not based on interviews with the three sisters. They are all deceased now. Instead, the story combines theory and context as well as the memories of daily life during this period produced by the children of the three sisters (cousins Eleanor, Marty, Susan, Barbara, and Roberta). While we cannot speak for the sisters, we do not believe that we "drown their voices" or their perspectives [6]. The voices of Aunt Paulie, Aunt Ida, and Aunt Doris are still with us, and they are frequently part of the daily conversations among the cousins even as we approach old age. In fact, we still refer to them as Aunt Paulie, Aunt Ida, and Aunt Doris, as we always have.

This article is written and illustrated by two of the cousins, who are part of the story. Not all of the cousins agree that a class analysis and even a broadened class analysis of the family makes sense, because the sisters never thought of themselves in those terms. It is true that the sisters and their husbands did not identify as working class, because neither the men nor the women worked in factories or carried lunch pails. Nonetheless, from a sociological perspective, their jobs as clerical, service, and semi-skilled workers did not have high prestige or income and did result in ownership of the means of production or authority over the work process, including their own work [4]. Further, they did not own their own homes, have college educations (Aunt Doris did not graduate from high school), and in Rockaway they occasionally took in borders [7-9]. Uncle Milton (Aunt Ida's husband) did talk about "the little man," and Uncle Ted did refer to himself as "a working man." According to a study of blue collar wives in Baltimore by Olson [3], her respondents, who if they did not take in boarders, do laundry, or work at paid jobs, often rejected the term working class and insisted they were middle class. The sisters would agree with Olsen's informants, if they thought about class at all. But, even in those days when we didn't have enough money to rent our own bungalows, as with Olson's working class wives, they still had a "colored woman," Lily White, who took turns working for all the aunts, Miss Paulie, Miss Doris, and Miss Ida, and even their sister-in-law Miss Charlotte. This was one of the markers of white privilege, although the sisters did not reflect on what Lily meant to their prestige or class status.

Lack of Boundaries

*Unlike most middle-class families, we experienced f*ew boundaries among extended-family members (especially among the sisters and their children). For example, bathrooms were not sacred spaces, anyone could walk in, you did not have your own towel or soap, and bedrooms were shared among children and adults. Clothes were passed from one to another. Barbara was shocked when she realized that she had one coat that was not either Roberta's or Susan's. The sisters never called each other on the phone before dropping in to each other's apartments, but felt free to do so. We always lived near each other even in the winters, and even when we moved to the suburbs.

Rockaway

During this period, the sisters and their families did not have cars to take trips to the Jewish hotels or bungalow colonies in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York. Instead, we went to Rockaway in Queens every summer during the 1940s and early 1950s. In these years, before air conditioning, our small apartments and railroad flats in Brooklyn and Queens became stifling after a day of baking in the sun. After school closed in June, a moving truck arrived at each family's apartment to drive their possessions to Rockaway, including clothing, bedding, and pots and pans.

Rockaway is a barrier beach on the south shore of Queens, between the Atlantic Ocean and Jamaica Bay, connected to Manhattan by the Long Island Railroad. During the years our family went to Rockaway, there was a small permanent population of 60,000 year-round residents. In the summer an influx of millions of renters and day-trippers who sought the beach and the ocean breezes. In July and early August, the ocean was calm with swells or waves that you could ride on to the beach. Later on the water could be rough and choppy with big waves, and some days there were jelly fish and slimy seaweed that wrapped around your legs. Yet the breezes,

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the ocean, and the clean air did not stop the outbreak and contagion of poliomyelitis or infantile paralysis in the pre-Salk vaccine days [10]. Mindful of our health, our aunts made us change out of wet bathing suits, thought to be a reason for the disease, as soon as we emerged from the ocean.

We rented bungalows from the permanent residents of Edgemere, primarily working class and lower- middle class Jews who supplied summer rentals in order to supplement their incomes [11]. They earned their livings owning small shops or commuting to jobs in other parts of the city. Except for the renting of apartments and bungalows, stores, and small businesses, Rockaway had no industry. The government rejected a wartime bid for a plant to manufacture war goods, but because labor was considered "too expensive" and so the plant was built in the non-unionized South [11]. In the summer of 1944, gas rationing and the ban on pleasure driving resulted in the best rental season Rockaway had since 1925, and *The Wave*, the local weekly newspaper, reported that 99 percent of the bungalows in Edgemere were taken.

Rockaway was made up of a variety of neighborhoods unofficially divided by race, ethnicity, and class. Breezy Point was Irish. Hammels was a black ghetto, while those wealthy Jews, who advertised for "white housekeepers," spent their summers in fashionable Neponsit and Belle Harbor. We lived in Edgemere, which went from Beach 32nd to Beach 52nd Street, a neighborhood composed of white working class and lower middle-class families.

Aunt Paulie and Uncle Ted commuted into the city every morning and came home every night on the Long Island Railway. Uncle Harry just came on weekends, often with a whole tongue from the Fashion, the luncheonette in the garment district where he worked delivering lunches. Rockaway was not so much a vacation as a change of residence brought on by the heat of the city and the needs for childcare. The adults may have played more than in their winter lives, going to the boardwalk at nights, and going to the beach on weekends. Their children who had summers off from schools were provided with no "enrichment" activities, but developed activities of their own.

The sisters reproduced their families through cooking, cleaning, and child-care on a daily basis, producing what has been labelled as use value rather than exchange value [12]. Use value comprises products or activities that contribute to daily consumption and to daily consumption by the family, rather than exchanged on the market. For example, Aunt Doris' considered the family's best knitter, would not sell the baby sweaters and hats that she made. "I would only get paid about ten cents an hour, " she reflected. Instead she exchanged them for gratitude that may have resulted in favors by the recipients.

In addition to the cooking and cleaning, Aunt Paulie had to go to work when Eleanor and Marty were very young, because Uncle Harry was not a "good provider" and spent a portion of his wages betting on the horses. She was always a "working" mother who supported her family on her scant women's wages as a bookkeeper. Her family never owned their own home or car, even during the 1950s, years of relative affluence.

Extended Family Living

Summers in Rockaway meant the extended family lived in close quarters with fewer boundaries than in the winter. In Gerstel's [13] words, "extended kin networks are part of survival strategies." Gerstel emphasized that help with childcare meant that women in low-paying jobs could go to work because other family members could act as surrogate mothers.

Aunt Doris' and Aunt Paulie's families shared rental fees and lived in a single apartment or bungalow with each family having one bedroom, and everyone sharing a common kitchen and bathroom. In one rented apartment, Aunt Paulie, Uncle Harry, Marty, and Eleanor were allotted the largest bedroom. It overlooked the porch, and was a spot to listen to ball games after Aunt Paulie went to work in the morning. Eleanor shared a bed with her mother, but cannot remember where she slept when her father, Uncle Harry, arrived for the weekend. Uncle Ted, Aunt Doris, and Roberta had a side bedroom. By renting a single shared bungalow or apartment, summers at Rockaway also resulted in a summer division of labor between the sisters with common care of children, bulk shopping, and a rotation of meal preparation. Aunt Doris was the "summer mother" for Aunt Paulie's two children, Eleanor and Marty. She also was in charge of buying food. She would hitchhike, with Roberta and Marty, the two or three miles to Far Rockaway, stopping cars at the bus stop, asking if the drivers were "going to Far Rock," to shop at small-scale supermarkets. The meals were simple and not-kosher style. Eleanor and Marty remember eating tomato sandwiches on white bread. Eleanor often walked over to Aunt Ida's bungalow to get a better lunch. On Sundays we ate the tongue brought by Uncle Harry from the Fashion Luncheonette with Cambell's vegetarian baked beans. Roberta was always a "problem eater", and Aunt Doris begged and cajoled her to eat more.

The Division of Labor as a Survival Strategy

Joint food consumption occurred as part the family's survival strategies, including the common preparation of meals in order to benefit from bulk shopping, during a period of relative food scarcity and rationing, enforced by the Office of Price Control (OPA). During the war years, rationing and

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price control had a significant effect of the family's diet. *The Wave* exhorted people to buy war bonds, to plant victory gardens to enhance food supplies, to develop an entire meal around protein rich foods such as eggs and cheese, rather than meat, and "to wipe the smiles off the faces of the Japs." As occupiers of rented apartments and bungalows, the sisters did not plant victory gardens.

Government Regulation as Part of the Survival Strategy

During this period, there was substantial intervention between consumers, manufacturers, and retailers, in the form of the Office of Price Administration (OPA) established in 1941 in order to stabilize prices, prevent hoarding, and control consumer spending [2]. When rumors of food shortages occurred, there was stampeding of grocery stories and hoarding of food [14]. In addition, black markets for the selling of items such as meat became a part of the food distribution system. Voluntary efforts to control these activities failed and so, in 1942, the government instituted food rationing. Eleanor, the eldest cousin, remembers the ration coupons that limited the amount of basic foods, including meat, sugar, butter, and eggs that the sisters were allowed to buy.

According to Gallup polls 80 to 90 percent of the public supported OPA [2]. Working class women became involved in checking on prices and helping to distribute ration cards, although to our knowledge, the sisters were free riders on this movement. Researchers suggested that during World War II, with food shortages and rationing, food inequality among the class decreased, as wages rose and working class diets improved while upper middle class diets became more restricted [15].

During the war years, the government began also to engage in nutrition campaigns. Government nutritionists thought that war-time shortages could have a positive effect on diets and could "Keep American Strong" [15]. As a result of sugar rationing, they hoped that sugar would become a less essential part of the American diet. The Nutrition Division of the Federal Security Agency (FSA) issued lists of recommended daily allowances of food, but large-scale food producers lobbying efforts prevented the government from grading food [2]. The FSA nutritionists ran campaigns that encouraged the increased use of items such as Wheatena, a whole-grain cereal, especially for children. In the winters we ate a combination of Wheatena and Farina (cream of wheat), which we hated. During the summers we ate Wheaties, "the breakfast of champions," with baseball stars pictured on the cereal boxes.

Much to the chagrin of many working class families, the OPA was abolished in 1947 and food prices were allowed to rise. Musicians Pete Seeger, Butch Hawes, and Tom Glazier recorded: "We Gotta Save the OPA." This effort was not successful, and as a result the government had fewer direct relations with working class wives about food. The sisters were not political (although they always voted a straight Democratic ticket), and they did not participate in these activities.

The Family Pecking Order

In spite of sharing resources and labor as part of their survival strategies, there was a pecking order, with status differences within the family. In The Pecking Order, Dalton Conley [1] examines status hierarchies within families and the factors that make some siblings succeed while others do not. He looks at conditions such as birth order, family resources at the time of each siblings childhood, gender, and race. Our family's pecking order was not based on birth order, but on gender and husband's position in the labor force. The two brothers in the family, Willie and Dave, were allowed to go to college at night, while the girls were expected to turn over their paychecks to support the family. As a result the brothers had professional-level jobs, although they did not manage or supervise anyone. Dave worked as a bank examiner for the State of New York and Willie was a lawyer with his own practice. Willie, especially, was less connected to the family, and moved into an upper-middle class lifestyle. Of all the family members, Willie received the most respect and deference, but was not part of the daily life of the extended family.

It was the sisters who reinforced the pecking order on a day-to day basis. Aunt Paulie, who worked full-time, was dependent on this summer child care and Doris's ability to provide it, creating a status hierarchy or a pecking order within the household [1]. Aunt Doris felt she was giving a gift for which she expected reciprocity, because the work was not remunerated. There was an exchange of household labor with Aunt Paulie cooking supper and washing the dishes so that Aunt Doris would not complain about being "a maid" or "the slave around here." The men were not expected to cook, and, in fact, Uncle Ted went swimming after they returned from work.

Aunt Doris and Aunt Paulie were deeply connected by bonds of jealousy and anger. These bonds were fueled by status discrepancies. Aunt Paulie, as the oldest living member of the family, felt responsible for taking her nieces and nephews shopping to buy them presents. Although loved by the children of the family, to whom she gave presents and taught card games, Aunt Pauline did not get the respect typically accorded to the oldest sibling, especially from Aunt Doris. As a working mother all-year-round and had lower

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status than Aunt Ida or Aunt Doris –who could rely on their husband's income. Being a working mother was definitely lower status especially after World War II and into the 1950s, when families' status' was higher if there was a stay-at-home wife. In Aunt Paulie's words Aunt Doris, "only liked rich people," and looked down on Aunt Paulie and Uncle Harry. In her turn, Aunt Doris felt she never got the respect and love from her sisters that she deserved. For example, she did not think that Aunt Paulie thanked her enough for caring for her children during the summer. "I'm too good," Aunt Doris would say sorrowfully. Neither sister felt they received gratitude for what each did for the other, and each felt she was taken for granted. Despite their deep-seated beliefs about the unfair distribution of love and gratitude, Aunt Pauline and Aunt Doris spoke on the phone nearly every day when they returned from Rockaway to their Brooklyn apartments, if only to argue or to criticize. They remained deeply connected for their entire lives, although Aunt Doris was known to tell Aunt Paulie that she would not attend her funeral (of course she did).

Aunt Ida was "the center person" who mediated between Aunt Paulie and Aunt Doris. She was the youngest sister and probably had some advantages, like her own room that the other two didn't have because she was the last to leave our grandparents' household. She was jollier and less filled with rage than her sisters, although she frequently spoke to them in what the cousins later recalled as "the tone," a voice full of sharpness. Although she didn't particularly like Doris, the other "stay at home mother" during the Rockaway years we all went to the beach together almost every day.

Kids Activities

The cousins took these survival strategies and status hierarchies for granted and were not particularly conscious of them, but instead went about their daily activities. As kids, we did not have scheduled activities as middle-class kids do today [16]. In Rockaway Marty rode his bicycle (a girl's bike to his shame) beyond Edgemere's boundaries along Beach Channel Drive to escape the routine of daily life. Until he was given his own portable radio, he sat near people on the beach so he could listen to his team, the New York Yankees. Sometimes he played stickball in the street with his summer friend. After breakfast, we always had to make the big decision-was it going to be a beach day or was it cloudy or overcast? On sunny days we went to the beach after lunch. So when we finished lunch, we gathered the things we always took along—an old blanket, some towels, and pails and shovels for the younger children. Marty remembers that Aunt Doris spent the afternoons leaning against her backrest and knitting. We did not bring food or drinks to the beach, but sometimes had snacks from the boardwalk concessions or from the ice cream peddlers who walked the beaches with their ice chests and their pith helmets. The sisters insisted that we wait at least half an hour after eating before going in the water so that we would not get cramps. We did obey, if we knew one of the sisters was watching. We built our sand castles at the water's edge and when the tide came in and demolished them we moved a little further back and began again. Some days the tides left a lot of shells and we would pick up the nicest ones and carry them home in our pails. By the end of the summer we had so many that we were only allowed to take the most prized ones back to the city with us.

On rainy days we played cards and listed to the radio. At night, we went to the boardwalk to play ski ball or pokerino, went to the outdoor movie theatre to see Abbott and Costello in "Who Done It?" and dreamed of eating the Tastee Cups, knishes, or waffle ice cream sandwiches that could be purchased from Boardwalk stands. An annual summer event was cousin Susan's (Aunt Ida's eldest daughter) birthday held in the backyard of the fixed-up garage that Aunt Idea and Uncle Milton rented from the Feldmans (who owned a coat factory).

Summer Guests

Living in a house near the beach meant summer visitors or even summer boarders, despite our cramped quarters. Guests were usually distant family members. They brought their own food when they came to visit. It's not clear whether they toted jars of chicken soup with fat congealed on the top out of consideration for our family's budget or because they were kosher and we weren't. More permanent quests were "the Uncle" and his second wife Clara, who lived with us one summer, as boarders. The Uncle was Ted's uncle; they were both from a Jewish colony in Harbin China and migrated to the United States in the 1930s.

The End of the Rockaway Years

The summer of 1952 was our last summer in Rockaway. The positive effects of World War II and the early post-war years never occurred in Edgemere, and the housing stock, never great, began to deteriorate and Rockaway became one of the city's worst slums [11]. The year was not a good one for summer rentals, in part because of the deteriorating housing stock, in part because of inclement weather, but also because the end of gasoline rationing meant that day trips replaced summer occupancy. By then, all the sisters and their families, except Aunt Paulie, had cars and began to move to the suburbs. The end of our summers in Rockaway meant the end of extended family living, communal kitchens, common shopping, shared meals, and daily battles over status.

As part of the war effort, manufacturers and distributers of retail goods learned production and management

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techniques that resulted in the mass production of food and lower cost [15]. After the war, these manufacturers and the growing number of supermarkets used techniques to rationalize production and distribution that undercut smaller corner groceries, in spite of efforts by the federal government under Roosevelt and Truman to prosecute supermarkets (under the Sherman anti-Trust Act) for using monopolistic techniques to sell goods more cheaply. Along with others, the sisters began to desert the small Jewish-style neighborhood grocery stores, and shop at supermarkets where food was cheaper and more plentiful. Women, as they moved into part-time jobs, were told by women's magazines that that they could eat better with less work, and have more time for leisure [15].

The growth of supermarkets, such as the A&P (the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company) had the effect of changing and homogenizing diets [17]. The A & P grew from modest beginnings as a tea shop in New York, to become the largest retailer in the world, before its ultimate filing for bankruptcy as a result of competition of even larger supermarket chains [18]. Products such as frozen fruits and vegetables that required bigger freezers than we had until we moved to the suburbs (in Rockaway we had ice chests, supplied by Benny the iceman). We joined the growth in consumption and bought larger refrigerators with freezers. Frozen fish fingers and chicken pot pies replaced boiled chicken in Aunt Doris three-room apartment., frozen fruit juice, packaged meat), and the ubiquitous Jello became part of our daily diets. We ate red Jello or canned fruit salad for desert (sometimes the fruit salad was emptied into the Jello as it cooked). According to Eleanor only Gentiles ate green Jello. Food became simpler and more was outsourced in the days after the national highway system, supermarkets, frozen food, and chain restaurants [19,20]. Roberta remembers the day that Uncle Ted stopped squeezing oranges and we stopped having fresh orange juice and converted to cans of frozen juice. The sisters began to think of themselves as middle class and began to consume more Americanized, commercially processed foods.

Post-Script: The Next Generation

According to Nelson [21] today's upper middle-class "helicopter" parents regard their children as never completed products that require intensive mothering. In Lareau's [16] analysis, middle class children are constantly cultivated and taught to negotiate institutions, unlike working class children. She sees strong class differences in child rearing patterns. Those patterns affect life stories, future resources, and future class positions. In contrast to this current generation of upper middle-class parents, the sisters regarded marriage for girls as the finished product of their child- rearing efforts. They did agree that going to college at the free city colleges to become a teacher who would stay home with their own children after school, on holidays, and in the summer. To the sisters, intensive mothering meant worrying day and night, but It did not mean constant cultivation or providing social or cultural capital that would result in upward mobility. The advice that they gave to us was seldom appropriate for upward mobility. For example, Eleanor was warned not to walk on Pitkin Avenue because "the gypsies will kidnap you."

The children of the three sisters did end up in the middle class, they were employed at professional occupations, and married university faculty members. The reasons for this upward mobility did not appear to be how we were socialized, nor the social or cultural capital provided by our parents, but rather the free college system in New York City and the increase in wages in the post war years that allowed college attendance. Our parents would not have known what courses to take nor is how to intervene in our college experiences, as today upper-middle class parents do. Nor did we look to them for advice as we grew older [22-24].

Conclusion

During the war years into the early 1950s the sisters and their families shared characteristics of the working class, for example, the lack of managerial jobs, the lack of home ownership, the lack of college educations, and limited income, although they did not think of themselves in this way. By putting the sisters and their families at the center of the story, rather than focusing on blue collar male workers, we exhausted our memories recalling the day- to- day survival strategies, such as the sharing of housing, food, childcare and daily (unpaid) labor, albeit within the context of war-time shortages, government regulation, and the growth of monopoly capitalism. Yet, we also reminisced about how these strategies lead to a pecking order or inequalities within the extended family, as a result of the differential status and activities of "stay-at-home" and wage-working mothers. We recalled some of the privileges of whiteness, and the ability to ignore blacks as a result of segregation and racism. We saw that the socialization of children did not include cultivation for the middle class, although it did require constant worrying-fear of polio, fear of gypsies, fear of not eating enough, fear of drowning, and fear of failure to marry. In spite of their worries, their children did marry and did make it into the middle class.

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