

business. These sorts of solutions, implemented once before in the wake of the Crash of 1929 as a result of increased regulatory supervision, have not yet penetrated the ongoing neoliberal regime.

*Trading the Floor* is an important contribution to the sociology of finance. Beunza's engagement with his informants is extraordinary. It is this kind of engagement that draws us to ethnography. We can be grateful that Beunza followed up on Quinn's offer.

---

*The Upper Limit: How Low-Wage Work Defines Punishment and Welfare*, by **François Bonnet**. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. 200 pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520305229.

RAHIM KURWA  
University of Illinois-Chicago  
Rak@uic.edu

---

In late March 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19-induced economic crisis, several Republican senators threatened to block a congressional relief bill known as the CARES Act because the bill's expansion of unemployment insurance benefits violated their economic principles. Tim Scott (R-SC) explained, "we cannot encourage people to make more money in unemployment than they do in employment." Lindsay Graham agreed, warning against evidence that nurse's aides who make \$15 an hour would walk off the job if they could "make \$24 an hour on unemployment." Graham threatened to stop the bill because it would "incentivize taking people out of the workforce" (C-SPAN 2020).

In their statements, the senators were echoing one half of the principle of less eligibility, the subject of François Bonnet's excellent new text, *The Upper Limit: How Low-Wage Work Defines Punishment and Welfare*. Bonnet defines less eligibility as the principle that "every society has to make welfare less attractive than minimum-wage work and arrange punishment so that crime is less attractive than welfare" (p. 1). As in the case above, Bonnet describes less eligibility as a structural fact, shaping policy-making regardless of policy-makers' belief in it.

The book can be thought of as containing two parts: first, the theoretical proposition of less eligibility and a review of its historical origins; and second, an ethnographic account of how less eligibility is managed in the East New York neighborhood of New York City.

The introduction and first chapter trace the long history of the idea that welfare must be less desirable than work and then build onto it the corollary that punishment should make crime less attractive than welfare. While some scholars focus on how welfare was eroded by political decisions based on the idea of deservingness (a metric shaped by race and gender animosity), less eligibility focuses on how the state organizes the incentives facing poor people. Yet Bonnet is clear that less eligibility is a neutral concept. While the United States presently fits the scenario of a low minimum wage, a meager welfare state, and a highly punitive society, he draws comparisons to systems in Scandinavian countries often identified as aspirations of the American left, where less eligibility still applies. In Denmark, for example, the living standards of the lowest wage earners are high enough to make room for a generous welfare state and allow for a remarkably mild (from a U.S. perspective) system of punishment.

In the book's second chapter, Bonnet traces the applicability of less eligibility to twentieth-century U.S. politics, arguing that it has remained a constant order despite massive social and political change. Between the New Deal and the Great Society, rising living standards accompanied a growing welfare state, as well as a carceral state far smaller than it is today. As living standards began to decline in the 1970s, the following years saw a reduction in the welfare state and the dramatic growth of policing and incarceration as modes of managing those increasingly outside the formal economy. This history could better engage with the thesis that Black integration and access to social programs hastened white opposition to welfare. But Bonnet's argument that this enormous transformation in social conditions never violated the logic of less eligibility is persuasive.

Such continuity in the order of work, welfare, and punishment, particularly in a nation where policy-making is highly fragmented,

is made possible by a continuity between conservative and liberal policy-making. For example, when looking at the Earned Income Tax Credit, one might wonder why Democratic policy-makers would fashion an aid program that excludes non-wage earners and phases in benefits before phasing them back out. But read through the lens of less eligibility, such “trapezoidal policy” makes sense—if the government extended the program’s benefits to non-wage earners, it could disincentivize labor market participation and thus threaten to violate less eligibility. Worse yet, by supplementing the wages of low-income earners, EITC may actually entrench a low minimum wage by alleviating pressure to raise wages.

Finally, Bonnet uses this first part of the book to address other explanations of national variation in living standards, welfare, and punishment. Some theories focus on the uniqueness of the United States—understandable given its settler-colonial origins, legacy of slavery, and contemporary imperial power. Other explanations situate the country as the harbinger of a global convergence toward neoliberal governance—again, compelling given its tremendous global influence in both economic policy-making and policing around the globe. But Bonnet argues that the relationships between living standards, welfare, and punishment remain consistent with less eligibility even in highly dissimilar countries like Brazil and Denmark and suggests that more extensive cross-national research might further validate the concept.

The book then turns to its second part—a focus on New York City and the predominantly Black neighborhood of East New York as a case study of less eligibility. Bonnet draws on several years of ethnographic fieldwork at a social service nonprofit known as Family Justice. Instead of presenting detailed descriptions of individuals’ experiences or how subjects describe their lives, Bonnet buttresses his observations with media analysis and policy reports. The result trades a more detailed picture of less eligibility for a broader description of how it works in the neighborhood and city at large.

The third chapter traces East New York’s trajectory from the post-war period through

the crime drop of the 1990s and foreclosure crisis of 2007. The fourth situates policing in a structural context by explaining how the NYPD gained legitimacy as crime fell and property values rose, but lost legitimacy as its brutality increased. The fifth chapter presents a much-needed history of the growing influence of and entanglements between the criminal legal system and the administration of public housing. Chapters Six and Seven delve into the role of nonprofits—Bonnet situates them as the symptom of an inferior welfare state—and how they manage less eligibility rather than challenge it. In a final example, Bonnet documents how, when unhoused New Yorkers gained a legal right to shelter in the 1980s, the system responded by ensuring that that shelter was so miserable that it remained below the living standards of New York’s poorest workers.

Bonnet’s careful examination of public housing’s relationship to the criminal legal system is a strong complement to Kaaryn Gustafson’s (2011) work on the criminalization of welfare, and it should be of interest to housing scholars studying the intersection of policing and the nation’s rental assistance programs. Banning individuals with histories of incarceration from public housing is demonstrably counterproductive to their well-being and that of society, but it serves the purpose of maintaining less eligibility. Bonnet contends that reentry is undermined because “it is impossible to give to former criminals what is routinely denied to everyday citizens” (p. 5).

*The Upper Limit* enriches a broad range of literatures, including poverty and inequality, social welfare, punishment studies, reentry, federal housing assistance, and political sociology. Although Bonnet describes his theory as focused on “acknowledging the world as it is,” the work raises important questions about the world that could be. Bonnet suggests large-scale redistribution toward the poor through taxation of the rich as the pathway to higher living standards, a more generous welfare state, and a diminished carceral one. But looking further, his ideas suggest another way of seeing how the fight for prison abolition and for improved living standards are intertwined. We might also ask how less eligibility

squares with Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007) work on the political and economic forces that drove California's prison boom. And while the book's focus is primarily on men, further work could explore how less eligibility operates for women. In this manner, its contributions can be enriched by reading it alongside work on social movements (for unions, welfare, and the fight for a \$15 minimum wage), privacy, geography, homelessness, and administrative burdens, and the ways that less eligibility is experienced across race, gender, sexuality, disability, and immigration status.

Perhaps acknowledging that his opposition to parts of the CARES Act was doomed, Senator Rick Scott (R-FL) instead issued a warning that its meager relief would not be permanent: "We've gotta help them, but the moment we go back to work, we cannot create an incentive for people to say, 'I don't need to come to work because I can do better someplace else.' These employers are going to need these workers to rebuild this economy, so we cannot be paying people more money on unemployment than they would get paid in their job." The fight over living standards for low-wage workers is ongoing even as the pandemic rages, but it will surely grow once it passes. Bonnet's work illuminates the social stakes and imperatives of that fight—the chance to create a more generous and less punitive society.

## References

- C-SPAN. 2020. "Senate Republicans on Coronavirus Legislation." Accessed March 25, 2020. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?470700-1/senate-republicans-coronavirus-legislation&live=>.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gustafson, Kaaryn S. 2011. *Cheating Welfare: Public Assistance and the Criminalization of Poverty*. New York: New York University Press.
- You Can't Stop the Revolution: Community Disorder and Social Ties in Post-Ferguson America*, by **Andrea S. Boyles**. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019. 240 pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520298330.
- SHARON D. JONES-EVERSOLEY  
Towson University  
[sjoneseversley@towson.edu](mailto:sjoneseversley@towson.edu)

Particularly for ethnographers researching civil unrest in Black communities, place-based sociohistorical context and boots-on-the-ground depictions of community organizers, protesters' mobilizations, social organization, resilience, social ties, communal challenges, and their demands for social justice are far too often absent in twenty-first-century social movement research literature. However, in *You Can't Stop the Revolution: Community Disorder and Social Ties in Post-Ferguson America*, Andrea Boyles provides us a front row seat and real-time account of demands for justice in the City of Ferguson, Missouri, in the aftermath of the horrific and untimely death of Michael Brown Jr.

Mike Brown, as he is referred to throughout the book, was an unarmed 18-year-old Black male who was shot six times on August 9, 2014, by a White police officer, Darren Wilson. The book commences with vivid descriptions, outraged responses, and the somber grief of Mike Brown's mother, father, family members, neighbors, mourners, and bystanders as they gathered that hot summer afternoon to witness Mike Brown's bloody body laid prostrate for four hours on Canfield Drive. And while behaviors and accounts of the St. Louis law enforcement and local, national, and international media are noted by the author, the book focuses primarily on capturing the racial discrimination and systemic injustice that sparked the emergence of the post-Ferguson revolution led mainly by the Black citizens of St. Louis, Missouri.

Boyles's methodological accounts of St. Louisans' civil unrest are outlined in her copious field notes, focus group sessions, and in-depth interviews with a large number of eyewitnesses, community organizers, and citizens. Boyles's three-year ethnographic study not only takes us into real-time