Osborne, M. (2024). *Polished: College, Class, and the Burdens of Social Mobility*. University of Chicago Press.

Review by **Lauren J. Harvey**

What does it mean for colleges and universities to “level the playing field”? Does it involve institutions adapting to better support their diverse student bodies? Perhaps it means providing marginalized students with the resources to navigate and thrive in upper-middle-class academic environments? Or does it require that students themselves change their values, demeanor, and interests to assimilate into existing institutional structures? In *Polished: College, Class, and the Burdens of Social Mobility*, Melissa Osborne explores how low-income and first-generation students experience, adapt to, and respond to the unexpected challenges of social mobility at elite U.S. higher education institutions. Osborne meticulously examines how selective colleges “polish” these students by offering resources and programs designed to help them navigate the college experience. Like raw diamonds, students' perceived "blemishes" – their working-class backgrounds or lack of cultural capital – are smoothed away to help them acculturate to the upper-middle-class aesthetic of academia. While this polishing process yields positive outcomes for many marginalized students, it also creates a liminal space that students must navigate, balancing institutional expectations with the values and desires of their families and home communities. Osborne traverses this terrain and highlights ways colleges must do more to support students confronting the challenges of social mobility in the face of class marginalization.

The book comprises five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion, which build on one another to explore students' experiences throughout their college career. It opens with a brief overview of how U.S. colleges and universities have attempted to support low-income and first-generation students over recent decades. In general, institutions focus on providing students with economic and cultural tools to compensate for their perceived social and material “deficits.” This raises a critical question: despite these efforts, why are low-income and first-generation students still struggling disproportionately? To answer this question, Osborne conducted an ethnographic study between 2016 and 2021, involving focus groups, surveys, in-depth interviews, and participant observations with 150 first-generation and/or low-income students across 18 highly selective and selective private institutions in the U.S. These schools were grouped by region—East, South, Midwest, and West.

Chapter 1 explores the factors students consider when selecting colleges, such as financial aid and prestige, and the dissonance they experience between their decision-making strategies and the realities of attending elite institutions. Many students adopt new personas, or "suspended identities," to fit in with their peers. Suspended identities reflect the attitudes, behaviors, and values low-income and first-generation students adopt to navigate the college environment, with the expectation that they can forfeit these personas for their “true selves” when they return home.

Chapter 2 delves deeper into the experiences of first-generation and low-income students, illustrating the intersecting forms of exclusion they face within elite institutions. Osborne argues that students' ability to navigate these spaces is often shaped by their prior cultural capital, with students from elite high schools having a strategic advantage. The chapter introduces the concept of a "socially mobile habitus," a toolkit that enables students to maneuver through multiple social spheres, balancing the demands of academia with their awareness of being marginalized. One student describes this experience: "I learned how to play the game of this kind of place [elite universities] a long time ago in prep school… I can be the well-behaved scholarship student, but I can also try and make the space for people like me a little bit larger and more authentic." Students with a socially mobile habitus feel confident navigating elite spaces without fully sacrificing their authentic selves.

Chapters 3 and 4 shift focus to the college "polishing" process and the tensions that arise when students try to balance the expectations of their college and home communities. Many selective colleges offer programs designed to teach financial literacy, professional skills, and campus cultural norms to help first-generation students acculturate to the upper-middle-class values that dominate these environments. While these programs represent a positive step toward greater inclusion, they often convey the message that these students are deficient in the economic, social, and cultural capital necessary for success. Osborne critiques this process, arguing that it risks erasing students' authentic selves and reinforcing a narrow, class-based definition of success. Osborne demonstrates how mobility facilitated by colleges often results in conflict with family or friends who may not understand or accept students' new "elite" personas. For example, students who adopt suspended identities experience the most conflict when they return home, as their families may perceive them as abandoning their roots in favor of upper-middle-class ideals. Osborne frames this as a "double bind" – the pressure to conform to the values of both home and school, often leading to internal conflict and alienation.

Finally, Chapter 5 examines coping strategies students employ to manage these pressures. Some students leave school, cut ties with family, or maintain suspended identities as long-term survival strategies. Osborne critiques institutional programs for focusing primarily on skill-building while failing to address the psychological and identity-related challenges students face as they navigate their social mobility. The book concludes by urging colleges to better support students through these personal transformations, suggesting that institutions should not only provide resources for academic success but also help students navigate the complex and often painful process of social mobility.

Polished is a vital contribution to working-class scholarship, but it could have engaged more with the distinctions between class, income, and first-generation status. Class and working-class identities are mentioned several times throughout the book, but the author never fully defines what a working-class identity entails. Moreover, class is never explicitly differentiated from the terms first-generation and low-income, leading readers to assume these terms are synonymous with working-class backgrounds. The book would have benefited from a clearer discussion of class, especially given that there is no universally agreed-upon understanding of working-class status.

Additionally, Osborne sets up a distinction between first-generation and low-income students in the introduction and methodological appendix, but the book would have benefited from a more

detailed synthesis of how these students' experiences differ. For instance, Chapter 4 describes how low-income students experienced less family conflict as a result of the polishing process compared to their first-generation peers. A more comprehensive discussion of the differences between first-generation and low-income students would have helped illuminate the unique burdens first-generation students face. Race also emerges as a significant factor for many students, particularly in relation to their first-generation experiences, but the book lacks a cohesive analysis of how racial and cultural experiences may have differently shaped students' trajectories. Readers are left uncertain about whether and how these differences impacted students' academic paths.

Despite these critiques, *Polished* is an important contribution for educational practitioners and working-class scholarship, enhancing our understanding of first-generation and low-income students' experiences. The longitudinal and multi-regional scope of the study offers valuable insight into how students' experiences vary across time and geography. While much literature focuses on first-generation students at a single point in time, Osborne's work demonstrates that social mobility is a "longitudinal experiential process" that impacts students' identities, emotions, and behaviors well beyond their first year in college. Moreover, Osborne offers tangible suggestions for institutions and practitioners to better support first-generation students *throughout* their college careers, such as creating programs and resources to help students navigate the contextual changes they will encounter, implementing peer mentor programs and staff positions, creating parent cohorts, and improving utility of campus mental health services.

Perhaps most unique about this book is that it reveals how students not only framed their mobility but responded to the structural and cultural constraints of elite institutions. Multiple students emphasized the need to "buy in" to an elite education without "selling out" their working-class values. Students who did this best were those who developed a "socially mobile habitus," successfully balancing their identities with the overwhelming and intimidating cultural apparatus of higher education. This reframing is essential for those of us who study working-class culture and education as it shows how students lay claim to their identities while navigating the polishing process of higher education.

Reviewer bio:

Lauren J. Harvey is a Ph.D. student of Sociology at Rice University. Her research centers working-class people and higher education. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* and *Inside Higher Ed*. She is currently working on a project that examines school effects on first-generation, working-class students' academic and social-psychological outcomes.