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Review of Pannor Silver, Michelle. Retirement and its Discontents: Why We Won't Stop Working, Even if We Can. New York: Columbia University Press. 2018. pp 296. Price: \$30,00 (Hardcover), \$29,99 (e-book).

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In *Retirement and its Discontents*, author Michelle Pannor Silver makes sure to clarify at the outset what the book's objective is *not*: it is not meant to capture a comprehensive view of how Americans experience retirement in the twenty-first century. Therefore, it does not, for example, discuss how people struggle to prepare financially for retirement, nor does it investigate the hardships some retirees may experience as a result of health issues or lack of access to adequate care. Instead, *Retirement and its Discontents* tackles a single, albeit complex question: "what becomes of those whose departure from their life's work means losing a core and fundamental component of their personal identity?" (3).

Silver engages with this question through detailed interviews and clear, grounded analysis that interweaves the interviewees' life histories with their contemporaneous thoughts on what it feels like to be retired and what it means to be a retiree. The introduction and conclusion provide the background and analysis of this theme respectively. The unique contribution of this book is best reflected in chapters two through six, which are devoted to interviews, and are organized according to the professions that interviewees occupied before they began to identify as retirees.

Chapter two concerns the experiences of five retired physicians. From Allan, the ER doctor who explicitly wonders what his value is now that he is retired, to Wendy, the family doctor who regrets not having cultivated closer friendships, these interviewees all devoted their lives so thoroughly to their jobs that they profess to feeling like "renegades" for leaving the workforce (23). Chapter three gives voice to the experiences of former CEOs, mostly from the medicine and health industries, to talk about their transitions from the corner office to slower-paced lives after retirement. Like the physicians, these interviewees had made their careers the epicenter of their lives, and now all report feeling listless after retirement. Chapter four focuses on elite athletes, who differ from the rest of the interview subjects in that they by and large 'retired' in their 20s and 30s. Reflecting on the concept of retirement while most of their same-age peers are just beginning their careers, these interviewees report struggling with a loss of direction and a need to adapt to a new reality after leaving their respective careers. Chapter five details the struggles of retired professors, who, in their reluctance to leave the campuses and roles that had become intertwined with their identities, continue to do the same work they had always done *after* their retirement – a phenomenon Silver describes as "working in place" (125). Chapter six takes an unconventional turn by examining the attitudes of homemakers toward retirement. By highlighting how these former housewives identify as retirees despite never being salaried workers, Silver addresses both the "universality and ambiguity of the term 'retiree' as a marker of personal identity" (191).

The fine-grained texture of the interviews calls attention to the remarkable ways in which people's idiosyncratic life experiences and family histories reverberate into their outlooks on the future in general, and on aging in particular. As a trained social scientist, Silver addresses both differences and similarities as they echo across the groups. For example, she notes in chapter six that, though Betty, the homemaker, never had a paid job, she nevertheless felt the same profound sense of de-stabilization and loss when her youngest son left home as the CEOs felt when they left the corner office (168). By presenting a wide range of experiences, Silver convincingly argues that a one-size-fits-all model of retirement ought to be replaced by more flexible and tailor-made approaches, on both policy and cultural levels. In this sense, this book adds to a conversation that began decades ago, when Robert Butler promoted the concept of 'productive aging' to counter cultural forces that isolated and de-valued retirees and elders (Butler 1985).

With a greying population rapidly becoming a global phenomenon, many countries around the world are forced to revisit retirement policies that were crafted when life expectancies did not so much exceed the age of retirement from work. Silver's book powerfully reminds of the necessity of "delinking chronological age from work-related norms about productivity" (204). However, scholars advocating for decoupling notions of human value from measures of productivity may find some of Silver's conclusions unsatisfying. She makes the case that tearing people away from their jobs when they reach a pre-ordained age makes for bad policy, since people look to their jobs for fulfillment and direction. It seems at least possible, however, that alternative sources of personal meaning can be cultivated and act as viable solutions to the problem of post-retirement anomie. Reading the chapters on the retired physicians and CEOs, for example, I often found myself wondering whether the clearly expressed dissatisfaction can be more aptly attributed to their own overzealous devotion to their jobs at the expense of other aspects of their lives, rather than to ageist assumptions that pushed them out of the workforce. This book paves the way for such critical discussions on how people internalize social narratives that equate personal worth with job performance, what freedom is left in a neoliberal climate to articulate a meaningful life in retirement without economic productivity and – by extension – where socio-economic, political, and individual responsibilities lie in the quest for meaning in later life.

It speaks to the strength of Silver's interview methods and the richness of her data that scholars with different disciplinary perspectives can find food for thought when reading this book. *Retirement and its Discontents* is written in clear prose and without jargon. It is a scholarly work, accessible to anyone interested in aging, retirement, and narrative gerontology, but may be especially useful for policy-makers: the book provides *human* stories to complement quantitative data on the challenges of growing old in the US today. Retirees may also find in it a helpful starting point to reflect on their transitions out of the workforce and into a new life stage. I look forward to discussing this book with my undergraduate students, who will undoubtedly have much to say on the link between work and personal identity. I also look forward to sharing these stories with my retired interlocutors in China, whose ambivalence about aging and frustrations with finding meaningful pastimes I saw echoed in the words of many of Silver's interviewees. Perhaps hearing similar voices from elders halfway around the world will help them realize that they are far from alone.

References

Butler, Robert. 1985. *Productive Aging: Enhancing Vitality in Later Life*. New York: Springer Publishing.