

search of the kind Mastny has undertaken, and, less directly, from what Soviet scholars like Sivachev and Yakovlev choose to emphasize or ignore. What both approaches reveal, above all else, is the perpetual state of insecurity Soviet leaders seem to live under—a chronic inability to be

at ease with the world as it is that both unsettles the balance of power and simultaneously generates the countervailing forces necessary to reconstitute it. The Soviet Union, like Richard Nixon, is its own worst enemy; we could do worse ourselves, in choosing our own. □

FAMILIAR TERRITORY:  
OBSERVATIONS ON AMERICAN LIFE  
Joseph Epstein / Oxford University Press / \$11.95

Stephen Miller

How pleasant to meet (again) Mr. Epstein, whose familiar essays, gathered together in this volume, first appeared in the *American Scholar* under the pseudonym of Aristides.

Meet is an appropriate word, since the familiar essayist should write as if he were conversing with the reader—discussing extemporaneously upon a subject that has for the moment seized his attention. The genre, if we can call it that, allows for—perhaps requires—digressions, which add to its appearance of informality. The familiar essayist should not fasten upon a subject but, rather, wander around one.

The familiar essayist, moreover, should avoid a number of things: embarrassing the reader by disclos-

*Stephen Miller is a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.*

ing too much of himself (familiar essays should not be confessional); boring the reader by, say, explicating a text; and discomfiting the reader by giving him advice. Good familiar essayists—and they include, as Epstein says in the introduction to his collection, Addison and Steele, Montaigne, Hazlitt, and Lamb—are like good conversationalists; they don't try to make us become better neighbors, citizens, friends, or lovers. They try to entertain us with an unusual turn of phrase, a sudden sally of wit, an unexpected view of the commonplace. Good familiar essayists are argumentative, but they rarely are shrill. They usually want to unsettle the reader, disturbing his moral or intellectual complacency, but at the same time they want to amuse him.

Although it looks easy enough to write, requiring neither strong schol-

arship nor a particularly rigorous argument, the familiar essay is difficult to bring off. Nevertheless, it holds many attractions for writers because it allows them to discuss innumerable subjects that, as Joseph Krutch has said, "are neither obviously momentous nor merely silly." The familiar essay is a mansion with many rooms in it, housing such varied contemporary writers as Joan Didion, Edward Hoagland, and Lewis Thomas—to name some of the best.

Epstein's room is one with a view on American manners, especially the manners of America's upper-middle class. In several essays he gently ridicules its major and minor snobberies. Jogging, self-help books, gourmet food, boutiques, and casual clothes all get their comeuppance. But Epstein's opinions are, in a sense, beside the point. We don't appreciate familiar essayists because they take a particular stand on a question; their conclusions are less important than the distinctive ways in which they meander towards them. We appreciate them, that is, less for their substance than for their style. Epstein's style is moderately antic—unleaded, not high octane. He does not wear the reader out by trying to provide a laugh-a-minute, but he does move the argument along with a telling anecdote or a carefully-phrased exaggeration. In "Marlboro Country," which deflates the publishing business, Epstein tells us about his performances on the talk-show circuit while trying to peddle his first book. Certain that he was a terrible bore as a TV "personality," he laments: "All through the South I imagined men and women watching

me over their breakfast, their heads nestling gently, asleep, in plates of scrambled eggs and cereal bowls." In an essay on jogging, we learn of Taxicab Rabinowitz, who "inevitably appeared to be either emerging from or entering into yet another cab." Rabinowitz, Epstein tells us, was "the very antithesis of all that is implied by the phrase 'in shape.'"

Some may think that praising a writer for his style is a backhanded compliment—a way of insinuating that the writer is all style, no substance. Is the familiar essayist an irresponsible fellow who wastes our time by gossiping about trivial matters? A reviewer in the *New Republic* complained almost wistfully that "Epstein does not seem to urge any social action...." Well, no, he doesn't. He doesn't do a lot of things, but only a rigidly high-minded soul would argue that we should limit our reading to writers who wrestle with momentous subjects. In any case, we suffer from an excess of writers who tell us what they think about Social Problems.

It is wrong, though, to assume that because Epstein is both an elegant and an unfailingly good-humored writer, he is lightweight. His essays are rich in precise observations about the oddities of American life, and he is especially perceptive when he takes a look at what we usually take for granted: the clothes we wear, the greetings we give to people.

For all the humor that runs through Epstein's work, there is also a melancholy strain as well, perhaps because Epstein is very much aware of the manifold ways in which many Americans strive to look down upon others—or even look down upon themselves. In an essay that attacks what Philip Rieff has called "The Triumph of the Therapeutic," Epstein speaks of "the strange cluster of the desperately hopeful gathered under the banner of the human potential movement...." Lionel Trilling once said that "the life of competition for spiritual status is not without its own peculiar sordidness and absurdity." Epstein is not a chronicler of sordidness and absurdity, but at his best he succeeds in transforming the familiar territory of American manners into a puzzling country populated by souls driven to attain—what? Health, sophistication, naturalness, honesty, fulfillment? What, Epstein seems to wonder, should one make of the comic and pathetic aspects of the way we live now? At his best Epstein makes the familiar strange. □

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## WHO GETS AHEAD?: THE DETERMINATES OF ECONOMIC SUCCESS IN AMERICA

Christopher Jencks, et al. / Basic Books / \$17.50

Mark T. Lilla

Social scientists as a whole are neither biased, ignorant, nor dishonest, but they always produce a view of social reality that is limited by the types of questions which they find important at a particular time. In 1972, the year of George McGovern, the "problem" of social inequality was the primary concern of social researchers, and the book by a social scientist which emerged to capture the most public attention was Christopher Jencks' *Inequality*. Indeed, how could a book making the claims it did fail to gain attention? Jencks and his collaborators argued that significant inequality existed in America and that virtually none of that inequality could be explained by individual differences in family background, intelligence, or, most important, education. All that was left, announced Jencks in a "Today" show interview, was "luck." From this Jencks concluded that all marginal social reforms (e.g., increased aid to the schools of the poor) were doomed to failure, failure being an unequal distribution of income. His last chapter, "What Is To Be Done?", ended thus:

If we want to move beyond this tradition [of marginal reform], we will have to establish political control over the economic institutions that shape our society. This is what other countries call socialism.

But times change, and so does social research. As the spirit of '72 wore off, it became clear to other researchers, and to Jencks, that the conclusions in *Inequality* were overstated, the quality of the data was poor, and some of the statistical methods were clearly wrong. So a year later Jencks put together a new research team, better data sets, and large federal grants to try it all again. The product of that effort is *Who Gets Ahead?*

*Who Gets Ahead?* differs from *Inequality* in both method and results. While *Inequality* was essentially a political tract interspersed with sta-

Mark T. Lilla is a graduate student in public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard.

istics, *Who Gets Ahead?* is so thoroughly technical that it will tax even the patience of those with intermediate training in statistics. Much of the debate about the new book will undoubtedly center on methodological points (especially the way in which Jencks "synthesizes" the results of the 11 surveys he examined), but those quibbles are best taken up elsewhere.

Jencks has limited the new book to two of the many questions previously addressed in *Inequality*. The first is the total amount of variance in men's occupational status and income that can be explained by demographic characteristics such as family background, education, race, academic ability, and noncognitive traits. *Inequality* found that only 50 percent of the variance in occupational status and 22 percent of the variance in income could be explained by these attributes; new and better data and methods now move Jencks to estimate that those numbers could be as high as 60 percent and 40 percent, respectively. While these differences may not seem important to the untrained reader, they have led to very different conclusions. Whereas Jencks concluded previously that luck determined the rest of the inequality that was measured, he and his new collaborators attribute much of the remaining inequality to labor-market imperfections, unmeasured attributes, and measurement error. This, of course, does not disabuse him of his egalitarianism (since egalitarians seem to be born, not made), but he does provide a more reasonable explanation of the distribution of income.

More interesting is what the new book has to say about the importance of each of the individual personal attributes. Jencks' new surveys allow him and his collaborators to reach stronger conclusions about the importance of background in general, and about the process by which some achieve success and others do not. By examining his samples of twins and brothers and comparing them to

samples of strangers, Jencks finds that family background affects achievement in ways beyond family income or the education and occupation of the parents. These "unmeasured" characteristics are important and, Jencks admits, probably include parents' genes and such intangibles as "home environment" and "values." Academic test scores also appear to be more important than suggested in *Inequality*; when compared to other types of tests (e.g., personality tests), they are robust predictors of later success. And if it weren't enough that Jencks deals with the current bugaboo of achievement tests and ability, he also examines individual "leadership," as measured by students' high school counselors. When these subjective estimates of leadership were compared to men's later occupational and economic success, it was clear that the "leaders" had done better than others. Finally, Jencks confirms that education is the most powerful predictor of success, though every year of education is not equally important. Each year in college is much more important than each year in high school, and the last year in each institution is as important as the other three combined.

No quick summary can do justice to the elegant analysis Jencks conducted or the social processes at work. All of these demographic characteristics are "important," but not equally so, and most of the results could have several interpreta-

tions (e.g., employers could be looking for high test scores rather than just ability). Moreover, all of these characteristics not only work independently to affect success, they also work through each other. For this and other reasons, no one "model" will represent what determines economic success in all cases. But if any one process is more representative than the others, Jencks concludes, it is the one whereby families (through measurable and unmeasurable ways) pass on "abilities" (high test scores) to their children which are then translated into educational achievement. Education then opens the doors to better occupations and higher earnings. Is anyone surprised?

For those who take the question of income inequality seriously, Jencks' results are probably distressing because they are so obvious. What made *Inequality* attractive to its supporters (and bothersome to its detractors) was that its results were counterintuitive. This is what led skeptics to re-examine the data and the methods, but it is also what attracted the New Left (with which most of the co-authors sympathize strongly). In *Inequality* they found a means of telling the public that everything it saw, experienced, and believed about how people get ahead in this country was illusion or anecdote, and that chance was the real distributor of rewards.

But Jencks is an honest researcher,

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