tions, and she convincingly makes the argument that “emotional capitalism realigned emotional cultures, making the economic self emotional and emotions more closely harnessed to instrumental action” (p. 23).

One quibble with this book is that because it is a series of lectures, there are many instances in which fascinating insights are introduced but not systematically developed. For example, although she underscores the need to see how new forms of knowledge are mobilized by people in everyday life (p. 18), her own analysis of the early uses of psychology remains largely dependent on management guidebooks and magazine columns, raising questions about how the therapeutic emotional style shaped actual interactions between managers and workers or between lovers. Also, in several places, she claims that the therapeutic emotional style serves to “blur gender differences” both at work and at home (pp. 23 and 29), but this claim needs more nuance given the extensive body of research on gendered inequalities. However, as she herself notes, these lectures are designed to provide a “broad and cursory framework” (p. 36) for thinking about emotions and capitalism, and those interested in the history of psychology, commodification of the self, emotions in the workplace, or interaction in romantic relationships will encounter a variety of intriguing ideas in this book.

Among those who don’t study the topic, many sociologists probably believe that their grasp of the role of inheritance in the distribution of wealth is relatively solid. Off the top of our heads, we might be able to reference various works that have established the unique role that wealth plays in inequality in the United States, or demonstrated that wealth-based disparities represent a particularly insidious and difficult-to-tackle form of disparity.

Jans Beckert’s Inherited Wealth instructs these sociologists in particular (among whom I count myself), and the discipline in general, that the nuances of inheritance have deeper roots than might appear at first glance. Rather than a quantitative exploration of wealth inequality, Inherited Wealth presents a discourse analysis of more than 200 years of parliamentary debates in France, Germany, and the U.S. By comparing the ideological origins as well as the practical applications of inheritance law across three countries, Beckert does an astonishingly good job of illustrating just how firmly embedded our notions of inheritance rights are.

His thesis—that these ideologically-based justifications lend cultural legitimacy to the structure of inheritance law—is supported by country-specific patterns of discourse that persist across different legal areas. France’s ongoing struggle over the relationship between state and civil society (most clearly illustrated by the French Revolution), in tandem with their general resistance to embrace notions of social justice, provide the basis for much of their inheritance policy. Alternatively, similar debates in Germany were rooted in the moral foundation of the family, while the U.S. relied on individual freedoms as the primary point of reference. This cross-national contrast provides a strong and clear understanding of each nation’s systems of justification, as well as the four major areas of inheritance policy: testamentary disposition, the regulation of familial claims to inheritance, the abolition of entail, and the taxation of inherited wealth.

The first substantive chapter traces the history of testamentary freedom, or the question of to whom one may bequeath their wealth. While America’s individualism-based ideology allowed legislators to argue that people ought to be able to bequeath property (and, importantly, to not bequeath property) to heirs of their choosing, Germany’s notion of family as the moral foundation of society led to policies that established a minimum share to which all family members were entitled. Meanwhile, the French Revolution led to a reform of inheri-
tance law directly aimed at preventing dynastic dominance, such that compromises between equality and liberty emerged, with a greater focus on equal treatment.

Next, Beckert explores the discourse around statutory inheritance law (for those who die without a will), tracing three elements of regulation: the principle of equality in intestacy law; the role of the spouse; and the integration of illegitimate children into inheritances. Beckert argues that a long-term decline in the importance of dynastic inheritance, the growing assertion of the principle of equality, and the increasingly diverse model of a conjugal family each played a role in shifts of inheritance rights across the three nations, although this does not suggest that the trajectories of the three countries’ statutory inheritance policies progressed in the same manner. For example, while spousal rights have traditionally been privileged in the U.S. (especially during the nineteenth century, as homesteaders moved away from their extended families), wives did not legally acquire control over wealth in Germany until 1958 or in France until 2001.

The third important area of inheritance policy, entails, is addressed in Chapter Four (a note to overly-confident scholars like myself: to entail a property is to restrict its inheritance to a particular class of lineal descendants). As the original de facto law in all three nations, the timing of—and justifications for—the abolition of entails is particularly indicative of the discourses of equality in the three countries. The two clear criticisms of entails—that they violate the notion of property ownership as individual endeavor, and also contradict the notion of civic equality—emerged, in fits and starts, as the consequence of revolutions and changes in monarchies. A young U.S. abolished entails in 1780, while successful and failed revolutions respectively influenced the timing of France’s abolition in 1848 and Germany’s in 1919.

The fourth hotly debated area of inheritance law is the taxation of inheritance. Largely the consequence of similar war- and depression-driven financial crises and political need to establish an efficient and equitable system of taxation, the three nations institutionalized a modern system of inheritance taxes within fifteen years of one another (1901–1916). Consistent with the book’s argument, Beckert shows that the rise and fall of estate taxes in the U.S. mirror the ongoing debate between the equality of opportunity and the prominence of private property. Meanwhile, German policymakers struggled between providing for surviving family members and promoting social justice. In France, however, other factors such as the predominately agricultural nature of property and the ongoing struggle between the state and society translated into inheritance taxes taking a back seat to other social policies.

Beckert’s thesis on political discourse and its translation into policy is strong, well-developed, and thoroughly detailed. Data from secondary sources, in combination with a careful and systematic understanding of the topic, create an extremely well-researched piece of scholarship. Substantively, Inherited Wealth makes an important contribution to the existing understanding of wealth distribution by convincingly demonstrating the salient role of national ideology in creating testament-related policies. Methodologically, sociologists have much to learn from a cross-national discourse analysis.

A note about the writing style: the immense amount of detail alongside the broad scope of the project translates into an extremely dense book. While interesting and important, the book is not for undergraduate students (although the data provided could contribute much to a lecture).

Although not recommended for a general audience, Inherited Wealth presents a theoretically and methodologically strong piece of scholarship on an important sociological topic, and serves as a strong model for other researchers, regardless of the area of study.


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In this book Wendy Leo Moore, a sociologist with a law degree, argues that despite the end of formal racial exclusion, American elite