

Elsewhere ■ man

Sociologist Dalton Conley takes a wide-angle view of the newly hatched middle class

BY ADAM HYL
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Once, it seems like years ago, the American work force's rising productivity was supposed to buy us some free time. No less an eminence than Jon Kenneth Galbraith worried about what Americans would do as technological advances brought leisure to the masses. Today, we understand that the digital age means the collapse of old boundaries between work and play as we enter a life in which we're intimately reachable 'round the clock. We used to brag about being plugged in; these days, we can't get unplugged.

Sociologist Dalton Conley describes the social and psychological consequences of this and other aspects of the "weightless" economy in his new book "Elsewhere, U.S.A.: How We Got from the Company Man, Family Dinners, and the Affluent Society to the Home Office, BlackBerry Moms, and Economic Anxiety" (Pantheon) as high

created a whole new demand for more personal services at low cost — in other words, low-wage work that only worsens inequality.

Conley is chair of New York University's sociology department, Adjunct Professor of Community Medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, and research fellow with the National Bureau of Economic Research. With his books; "Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America" and "The Pecking Order: Which Siblings Succeed and Why" and he has explored the interaction of social class with racial and other physical characteristics. These are subjects that Conley, in his youth, explored empirically: his memoir describes growing up in the mostly black and Latino housing projects of New York's Upper East Side.

Adam Hyla: You left your cell phone at home today. How appropriate. How does it feel?

Dalton Conley: Like I left my kid in the stroller outside a restaurant, or in the car with the windows up. It's definitely a feeling like something key is missing.

A.H.: Your book is about anxiety and alienation, and that's sort of what it's like right now.

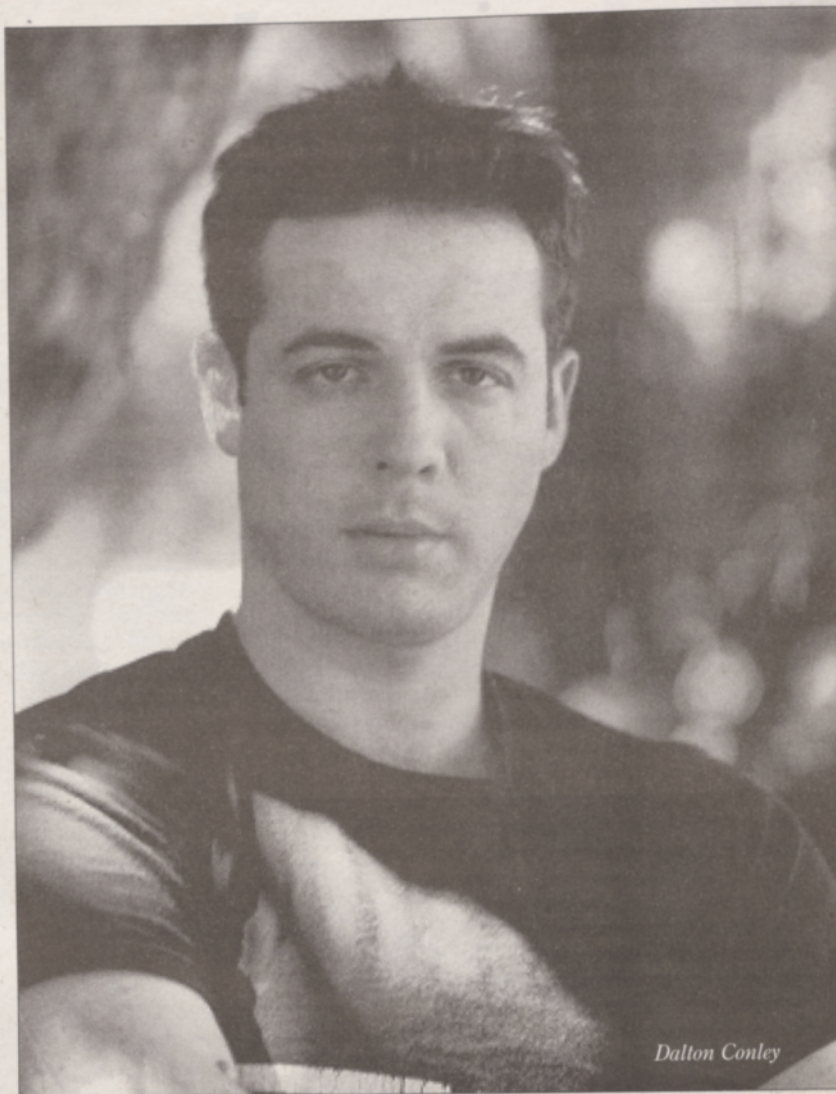
D.C.: Exactly.

A.H.: You describe the social anxiety of the middle classes, who may not know their true worth. Some of that isn't too new. What is?

D.C.: Well, I think that certainly for people who are upwardly mobile, they've experienced that fear that the rug's going to be pulled out from under them. That the clock's going to strike midnight and the ball's over. But what I argue is that never before have there been so many people in the professional classes that work so far removed from the actual physical production of any product and/or anything that's really related to material survival. Therefore, there's always this specter that we're disposable, that we're really not necessary and in fact are overvalued in the marketplace. Because what we have to offer isn't really anything we can point to literally.

A.H.: It seems like a lot of these jobs are never boring. Is that a blessing or a curse?

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Dalton Conley

PHOTO COURTESY OF DALTON CONLEY

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technology, changing gender roles, and hardening class lines have altered life in the workplace and at home.

The dollar value of one's labor, Dalton argues, has abstracted as the middle class moves from the industrial into the symbolic sector, spurring anxiety about one's earning power and social standing. There's an old word for this, Conley writes: alienation. Our sense of detachment from the real economy has us working scared and putting in more hours, while the rise of the two-income family has

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