Paradoxes of Privilege
Victoria Bonnell
Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews 2012 41: 288
DOI: 10.1177/0094306112443518

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://csx.sagepub.com/content/41/3/288

Additional services and information for Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://csx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://csx.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - May 2, 2012

What is This?
A great deal has been written about the micro-macro link and its role in sociology (Alexander et al., eds. 1991; Huber 1987). The discipline has produced admirable studies that focus either on micro-level phenomena or developments at the macro level. Even more challenging, however, is to establish convincing connections between what happens on the ground and the big picture. Shamus Rahman Khan, a young scholar who writes with a distinctive voice, has produced a study that skillfully brings together these two levels of analysis.

Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School opens with an account of Khan’s family background, a signal to the reader that this is no ordinary scholarly book. Born into a family with a father from rural Pakistan and a mother from rural Ireland, Khan spent four years at St. Paul’s School, an exclusive boarding school for high school students in Concord, New Hampshire. A decade later, when he was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, he returned to St. Paul’s as a teacher, sports coach, dorm advisor, and ethnographer. With the consent and cooperation of the school’s administration, he set out to understand the process of elite reproduction.

Khan tells an intriguing story. “One of the curiosities in recent years,” he writes, “is how our social institutions have opened to those they previously excluded, yet at the same time inequality has increased” (p. 5). The theme has both intellectual and personal resonance for Khan. In the first pages of the book, he informs us that he was placed in a minority student dorm when he arrived at St. Paul’s in September 1993 and remained there throughout high school. Racial differences at the school were compounded by significant disparities in family wealth, line-age, and lifestyle.

Much had changed by the time Khan went back to St. Paul’s. The school adopted and implemented a far more inclusive policy regarding race and gender. This transformation coincided with a growing inequality of wealth among students in elite educational institutions such as St. Paul’s, and in American society more generally. The first chapter gives the reader a broad historical overview of elite formation over the past two centuries, with particular attention to the impact of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s and the shift toward earned rather than inherited income among the top tier of the richest families.

On his return to St. Paul’s, Khan observed a modification in the cultural paradigm among elites from the “arrogance of entitlement” to “an ease of privilege.” Whereas formerly class-based elite groups created exclusionary boundaries to define themselves and their tastes, the “new elites develop privilege: a sense of self and a mode of interaction that advantage them” (p. 14). Following in the Weberian tradition, Khan treats privilege as a mark of distinction. Juxtaposing “entitlement” and “privilege,” he presents the former as an ascriptive trait and the latter as the internalization of acquired beliefs and behaviors.

Students at St. Paul’s learn the three fundamental “lessons” of privilege. First, that...
Hierarchies are part of the order of things, to be viewed as opportunities not obstacles. With hard work and luck, any individual can ascend the ladder of success and gain entry into the new elite. Second, since the attributes of elite status are not innate or inherited, only personal experiences can imbue a sense of privilege. And finally, that omnivorous cultural tastes and ease in all social situations are defining features of the privileged. Thus conceived, privilege has democratic, meritocratic, and individualistic origins and connotations.

If privilege is acquired through experience, then we must turn our attention to the facilitating circumstances. For Khan, school rather than the family plays a decisive role: “...in telling the story of how an institution trains elites, I am firmly telling a Durkheimian story of how elite culture works through the elevation of a small group not by their individual characters but by a social process of schooling” (p. 162). But it is Bourdieu, far more than Durkheim, whose ideas and theoretical apparatus equip Khan to interpret what goes on at St. Paul’s School, one of the most exclusive boarding schools in the United States.

Founded in 1856 to inculcate Christian values and to teach ancient Greek, Latin, and mathematics, St. Paul’s School initially displayed many of the features that Erving Goffman ascribed to a total institution (Asylums). By the time Khan returned to conduct research, the school had been several times transformed and expanded to encompass about five hundred male and female high school students, still residing in a bucolic rural setting (2,000 acres) where all students board on a relatively sequestered campus.

Admission to St. Paul’s is highly competitive and when Khan conducted his fieldwork, approximately two-thirds of the students paid the full $40,000 tuition per year. School endowment funds contributed an equivalent amount of support. The remaining third of the student body, many of them minorities, received substantial scholarships. The actual cost per student at St. Paul’s was, at the time, in the vicinity of $80,000 per student—about eight times the average for American public high school students. Virtually all St. Paul’s graduates attend college, either an Ivy League school (one third) or some other prestigious institution.

Khan takes us inside the chapel, dorms, dining halls, soccer fields, and classrooms of St. Paul’s where privilege is inculcated through a multiplicity of everyday activities and the interactions of students with each other, with those who mentor them, and with those who clean their rooms. Social and academic success at St. Paul’s requires a refashioning of the self (Goffman redux). This refashioning begins the moment students arrive at St. Paul’s and it is reinforced by participation in formal activities such as mandatory chapel attendance four days a week (St. Paul’s is affiliated with the Episcopal Church) and twice-weekly sit-down dinners with faculty. A parallel process occurs informally, in the dorms, the dining hall, and the library. Spatial arrangements, dress, demeanor, etiquette, symbols, and rituals facilitate the embodiment of the lessons of privilege, all of which Khan engagingly describes and analyzes.

Formal and informal routines at St. Paul’s teach the consecration of hierarchy, ensuring that within the framework of a putative meritocracy, every member of the community knows where he or she belongs. Through repetition, students acquire corporeal knowledge that marks them as part of elite—how to eat a meal, how to carry oneself, how to converse in particular situations, how to wear suitable clothing, and how to strike the right balance between “presumption and reverence.” When talking informally to a teacher, moving between classes, or socializing after a formal dinner, the nuances of comportment and tone make all the difference; mastering rules will not suffice. Practices must be internalized and naturalized, Khan tells us, because “it is these seemingly superfluous details that are at the heart of daily life and are essential to positioning oneself effortlessly as a ‘Paulie’” (p. 97).

Privilege leaves little doubt that the making of an adolescent elite at St. Paul’s school is fraught with contradictions. Not all students adapt equally well to the imperative that “ease only comes once you buy into the belief that the St. Paul’s way of acting is really the right (natural) way to act” (p. 105). Students attending the school are a heterogeneous group with considerable...
variation in family wealth and occupation, lineage, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and place of origin. Female students encounter more difficulties at St. Paul’s than their male counterparts. They outperform male students academically but receive fewer awards; depression and eating disorders are common among them. The ease and naturalness expected of a Paulie cannot easily be reconciled with the school’s expectations concerning female sexuality or the role played by female students as “gift givers” in sexual encounters. A nasty hazing scandal in a girls’ dorm soon after Khan arrived brought these tensions into sharp relief.

More than any other group at St. Paul’s, students of color have difficulty wholeheartedly embracing the meritocratic premise underlying the ease of privilege. For them, the dissonance between the ideology of the school and the reality outside creates a lingering ambivalence. Some, such as Carla, a bright and articulate African American student, view the approach purveyed by St. Paul’s as just another form of “bullshit,” that is, a set of beliefs and practices to be strategically appropriated but always relativized.

The reputation of St. Paul’s rests, in part, on the quality of its education. Khan’s final chapter raises troubling issues about the curriculum and the intellectual environment. The required three-year humanities sequence—described by Khan as “a product of St. Paul’s hubris” (p. 157)—applies a multidisciplinary approach to teach “habits of mind.” The courses cover broad historical periods and focus on overarching themes and decontextualized comparisons between, for example, *Beowulf* and *Jaws*. The cultural egalitarianism inherent in the humanities program reinforces the omnivorous tastes expected of the new elite. But the implications of the curriculum, Khan tells us, extend even further: “What St. Paul’s is teaching is a style of *learning* that quickly becomes a style of *living*—with an emphasis on ways of relating and making connections rather than with a deep engagement with ideas and texts” (p. 192).

Notwithstanding a strong meritocratic belief in hard work, few students apply themselves conscientiously to their academic courses; most of those who do are non-white and/or female. Of course, Paulies have a lot to contend with. Participation in athletics is mandatory five days a week for the first three years and students are encouraged to immerse themselves in extracurricular activities. To complete the picture, Khan examines the role of the dedicated cadres of resident teachers. In contrast to the “invisible” staff, teachers are a central part of the students’ experience and much admired by them. They, in turn, tend to exaggerate the potential and accomplishments of their pupils in what appears to be a mutual cycle of overestimation.

The administration at St. Paul’s opened its campus to Khan, gave him the opportunity to conduct research, and permission to identify the school in his publications. This, in turn, placed the author in a somewhat awkward position. To his credit, Khan explicitly addresses this conundrum and navigates adeptly between the roles of participant and observer, alumnus and scholar. He weaves together personal experiences and reactions on the one hand, ethnographic and interview data on the other. The addendum, “Methodological and Theoretical Reflections,” should be required reading for anyone doing fieldwork.

Khan’s rhetorical style deserves mention. He is refreshingly open about his opinions and he has a particular fondness for paradox. Paradoxical statements suggest an actual or seeming contradiction, often laced with irony. Thus we read in the introduction: “Twenty-first-century America is increasingly open yet relentlessly unequal. Our next great American project is to find a way out of this paradox” (p. 17). *Privilege* contains a great many arguments formulated as paradoxes, as well as references to contradictions that ensue when beliefs and practice are not well aligned. For Khan, things are not always what they seem. Besides the “great trick of privilege” (p. 40) that naturalizes durable inequalities, there are many other forms of trickery—deliberate or otherwise—in the micro world of St. Paul’s and in the world beyond.

Paradox can be rhetorically effective because it provokes the reader and sharpens the book’s critical edge. Sometimes it can also be elliptical, as in the concluding chapter where Khan sums up: “And this leads
to an odd, perhaps even ironic outcome: by becoming more democratic the elite have undercut the power of the weak within our nation” (p. 199). How did we get from “the making of an adolescent elite” to such a hegemonic role for the new elite on the national stage? Perhaps Khan’s future work will address these issues.

There are few ethnographic accounts of life in exclusive American boarding schools and Khan’s book is far and away the most sophisticated among them. But the contribution of Privilege goes beyond this narrow field. Those interested in the sociology of culture, stratification, everyday life, education, race, and gender will find much to appreciate. Khan’s work reminds me, above all, of Arlie Hochschild’s pathbreaking studies, The Managed Heart, The Second Shift, and The Time Bind. Like Hochschild, Khan is a versatile and earnest ethnographer with a sharp eye for gesture and a keen ear for dialogue. Both authors are attentive to the interpretive possibilities presented by the smallest details (Geertz’s wink comes to mind) and both are bold and original thinkers. Khan’s book is full of surprises, and when you read it, you will understand why snobbery is out and why “democratic inequality” has become the creed of the chosen.

References

The Peculiar Persistence of the U.S. Death Penalty

LYNN CHANCER

Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY
lchancer@hunter.cuny.edu

David Garland’s Peculiar Institution: America’s Death Penalty in an Age of Abolition received prominent attention when, on November 27, 2010, an article alluding to the book appeared on the front page of The New York Times. It was the sort of publicity about which most scholars dream, those who are concerned about having a “real world” influence on policy and law. The occasion for this notice was a then-forthcoming review of Peculiar Institution that former Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens had written for The New York Review of Books (Stevens 2010). Stevens, the Times noted, agreed with many of Garland’s arguments as his own views had changed between 1976, when he voted to reinstate capital punishment, and 2008, when he came to believe the U.S. death penalty unconstitutional.


After reading Peculiar Institution, its interest for Stevens is apparent, but even more so is the book an outstanding sociological study of a controversial issue for reasons including, but not limited to, its persuasiveness. Notwithstanding Garland’s other volumes Punishment and Modern Society (1993) and The Culture of Control (2002), both deservedly influential in the fields of law and criminology, this may be Garland’s finest work to date. Making Peculiar Institution especially
impressive is its simultaneous strength on multiple levels. First, academically, it makes an important contribution to extant criminological literature on the death penalty through careful historical and sociological scholarship. Second, it offers a model of sorts—especially for liberals and the left—of analyzing a politicized issue outside a framework of polarized “pros” and “cons.” Finally, *Peculiar Institution* manages to conclude on a novel and even daring note with theoretical speculation about American culture’s attitudes toward death; I write “daring” since mortality often remains underexplored in contemporary social theory. Let me elaborate briefly on each point in turn.

First, the clear and well-written *Peculiar Institution* is likely to surprise both general and specialized readers with its illuminating historical analyses. Each chapter reads like a well-defined essay nicely integrated with overall themes. Garland poses a key query: why is it that the United States remains an outlier when, by now, most advanced industrial nations have abolished the death penalty? Rather than reiterating oft-heard arguments about American exceptionalism and the conservative character of U.S. culture though, Garland investigates the effects of structural political differences to paint a more complex picture. To wit: he compares the federal system that devolves power to the 50 states with the “top down” organization of European nations that has allowed political elites to impose national positions from on high. In the United States this has meant that some states, including Michigan, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin in the mid-nineteenth century, have been historically “ahead” of Europe in repealing capital statutes; in Garland’s words, they “were in the vanguard of the abolitionist movement” (p. 119). Others, of course including most of the South, have held on to the death penalty when and however possible. Thus, as Garland suggests, the U.S. system of grassroots democracy can go “either way” vis-à-vis capital punishment (i.e., it can have “progressive” or “regressive” ramifications depending on local state cultures). Moreover, variability on this issue was enabled by *Gregg v. Georgia* 1976 wherein the Supreme Court returned decision-making about capital punishment to the states only four years after the Court came close, in *Furman v. Georgia* 1972, to finding the death penalty unconstitutional. Garland’s chapter, “New Political and Cultural Meanings,” on the post-*Furman* period when reactions to civil rights and new social movements erupted, and when “culture wars” and “law and order” campaigns were solidifying, powerfully reconstructs these years. As Garland notes (p. 233), a whopping 35 states enacted new capital statutes within only two years after *Furman*.

Garland also offers statistics about European public opinion that likewise challenge overly simplistic stereotypes about European liberalism as opposed to the supposedly homogeneous United States. Garland describes how in Germany, two-thirds of the public supported capital punishment at the time of that nation’s 1949 Constitutional prohibition of the death penalty; in France, when Mitterrand’s socialist government abolished it in 1981, 73 percent of the French public still supported capital punishment for “atrocious” crimes; in 1995, three decades after its abolition in the United Kingdom, polls showed 76 percent of the British advocated the death penalty’s re-introduction (p. 184). At various points, then, it has appeared that some Europeans might re-institute capital punishment if they could, buttressing Garland’s claim about the relevance of political structures for tracing the divergent paths of this issue on the Continent versus in the United States.

*Peculiar Institution* is equally strong when depicting the—indeed, in some ways, exceptionally—punitive attitudes that have made the United States a world “leader” in imposing death sentences for crimes. Clearly capital punishment has been applied in a racially discriminatory manner in America. Garland recalls the history and horrors of lynching—he quotes at length from an 1893 *New York Times* article on the execution of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas (pp. 27–29)—noting long-standing connections between capital punishment and “the peculiar institution” (as historian Kenneth Stampp termed it) of slavery, and later with Jim Crow and institutionalized racism.

While a “taste” for capital punishment thereby remains very much alive in some
states and regions, its actual “use” in the United States is increasingly rare. Garland notes that since the American death penalty resumed in 1977, an average of 60 executions have taken place each year in a nation where at least 14,000 murders occur annually (p. 47). Why the statistical infrequency? In chapters evoking themes from Foucault and Elias, Garland traces slow but steady developments over centuries that have led “civilized” nations to be increasingly embarrassed by a legitimation problem the death penalty incarnates: on the one hand, modern nations allegedly abhor the taking of life and, on the other, capital punishment showcases the state so doing. To deal with this contradictory dilemma, one that can paradoxically create sympathy for death penalty’s “victims,” states try to be as “humane” as possible with executions (abolition has rendered this problem non-existent in many modern nations). Multi-leveled court appeal processes are, and must be, in place to attempt to ensure that mistakes are not made given the death penalty’s radical finality.

Thus people across the country remain on death rows for years and decades as their cases go through long appeals. Other problems abound. For one, Garland provides remarkable data on capital punishment’s costs: for example, the State of Maryland expended $187 million on five capital cases since 1976, averaging $37.2 million for each execution; between 1995 and 2005, New York State spent $170 million on capital prosecutions, none of which resulted in an executed death sentence (p. 47). Then, too, as many as 66 percent of all capital sentences have been reversed prior to execution; since 1973, more than 130 people have been exonerated or freed from death row—in more than a dozen cases, people were found to have been convicted falsely on the basis of DNA evidence (p. 46). Given capital punishment’s racist history and biased application, lengthy and costly appeals processes, DNA and other evidence that have led to exonerations (so that, obviously, they can be used mistakenly) and the fact that, in any event, it is hardly ever actualized—the conclusion emerges from *Peculiar Institution* that the persistence of the death penalty in the United States is blatantly, absurdly irrational.

But a second strength of *Peculiar Institution* is that Garland eschews any such surmise, insisting instead on exploring the death penalty’s ongoing resonance on cultural and ideological dimensions; supremely well-done are the book’s analyses of both the institution’s operative (il)logic and its decidedly emotional appeals. And this is where the book may provide something of a model not only in terms of its substance but its form. For it does not preach to the converted nor offer an (arguably easier-to-make) “politically correct” case, familiarly clothed in an adversarial language of sides. Rather, precisely because investigating a range of death penalty positions intellectually and non-judgmentally, *Peculiar Institution* can (and should) be read by people in favor of capital punishment as well as by abolitionists; it could conceivably change people’s minds (not only general readers’ but students’ of myriad fields and levels) through its respectful, thoughtful approach. This is an important achievement especially at a time when well-argued treatises on a range of issues—not only in the realm of criminal justice policy but across a range of hotly debated social issues from gun control through abortion, health care and economic policies—are badly needed.

A third strength of *Peculiar Institution* is found in its theoretically creative next-to-last chapter entitled “Death and Its Uses”: here, Garland speculates on the discursive cultural functions of the death penalty above and beyond its rare usage. Garland comments on the ontologically unknown status of death, juxtaposing this existential fact with the relative certainty people experience when focusing on someone else’s projected demise. Garland’s writing is worth quoting at greater length as he speculates on how:

In the day-to-day life of most late-modern Western societies, people strive to keep death hidden, placing it behind the scenes of social life. They avoid talking about it in front of the children and do their best to put it out of mind. It has, for Americans today, the kind of status that sex had for the Victorians... Discourse about death is discourse burdened with devastating, often unbearable, implications for the
self—except when the death in question is the controlled, socially approved, legally authorized death of a demonized other. The existence of a death penalty for convicted murderers prompts people to talk of death and contemplate killing, permitting the guilty pleasures of taboo violation. This permission functions as a kind of liberation, a release from repression. (p. 304)

Thus the ability to facilitate death talk, death discourses, may be an overlooked “psychosocial” factor affecting capital punishment’s own stubborn survival. Moreover contemporary media narratives in highly-profiled cases concerning violent crimes now famously blur news and sensationalism, providing vehicles for “righteous enjoyment of prohibited wishes and fantasies” (ibid.) through the circulation of publicity about capital case convictions (e.g., the Timothy McVeigh case) as well as acquittals (“death talk” that surrounded the prosecution, and then the not guilty verdict in the Casey Anthony case; see Chancer 2005; Kudlac 2007). Garland’s discussion of these collectively unconscious dynamics is fascinating and unusual, completing the book on a thought-provoking note.

Let me conclude with the hope that others will pursue arguments emergent as *Peculiar Institution* leaves off; as former Justice Stevens wonders at the end of his review, Garland himself may wish to elaborate upon this topic even further. One line of additional inquiry relates to how Garland classifies the development of attitudes toward capital punishment. He suggests three historical modes—early-modern, modern, and late-modern—though *Peculiar Institution* does not clearly differentiate modernity from late modernity, tending to elide the two. Yet, at least in the United States, it may be that “late modernity” is a more ambivalent, confused, and confusing period going back to those post-*Furman* years of incipient conservatism. On the one hand, world trends (and even a few U.S. states) seem inclined toward abolition; on the other, in 2011, well over 30 states hold onto their death penalty statutes with varying degrees of vigor and intensity.

Indeed, one expression of the complex “in-between” late-modernity Garland could clarify involves contemporary facts about gender vis-à-vis capital punishment. Regarding attitudes, a 2010 Gallup “crime survey” poll finds a “gender gap”: 71 percent of men, as opposed to 58 percent of women, say they approve of capital punishment in cases of murder (and 24 percent of men, as opposed to 35 percent of women, say they disapprove in such cases); overall, whites, men, and Republicans are the strongest proponents of the death penalty for homicides (Newport 2010). But whereas patriarchal (not only racially biased) attitudes have historically influenced who received capital punishment, of late, it is hardly unheard of to find women—including white women—on death row facing execution for homicides. Thus even though capital punishment is rare, it may be ideologically significant that in 2010, Teresa Lewis became the first woman in nearly 100 years to receive the death penalty in the State of Virginia; in 1998 in Texas another white woman, Karla Faye Tucker, received a lethal injection in a highly-profiled case after pleas based on good and “Christian” behavior failed to halt her execution.

Thus, another potentially fruitful avenue of research post-*Peculiar Institution* follows: if Garland’s broadly delineated “death discourses” indeed help to illuminate capital punishment’s persistence in late-modern America, what mediating factors explain its unequal attractions? In other words, and as per the above instance, why might “a kind of liberation, a release from repression” through death talk be relatively more seductive for men and relatively less so for women? *Peculiar Institution* does not delve much into this question nor does it investigate whether a gender gap in attitudes toward the death penalty extends cross-culturally. To pursue this thread of argumentation in the future, though, would suggest a need to bring feminist theorizing about gender and its effects—on masculinities as well as femininities—closer to the heart of penology, criminology, and law, including but also extending beyond the specifics of Garland’s own provocative work.

As it stands, though, *Peculiar Institution*—perhaps understandably, given capital
punishment’s “peculiar” history in the United States—tends to focus relatively more attention on the death penalty’s connection with racialization than with gendered or, for that matter, class-related social facts. Further attention ought be paid to the complicated question of how people in varied class situations may (or may not) differently experience capital punishment’s discursive appeals. Garland does quote several studies about the greater likelihood that states with high degrees of racial heterogeneity, economic inequality, and below-average welfare provisions will have death penalty laws on their books (see, among others, his references to Jacobs and Carmichael, p. 199). By comparison, Garland devotes relatively little attention to the implications of his theoretically innovative last chapters for elucidating divergent reactions based on class and class inequalities.

Not only repression and sublimation—concepts explicitly mentioned by Garland when he discusses death and its uses—but also social defense mechanisms involving displacement can increase death discourses’ appeals under conditions of worsened inequalities when people feel anxious and insecure. At such times and for some people, talking about and calling for capital punishment in response to heinous crimes may offer possibilities for particularly intense emotional release. And if we are indeed in something of a “third” historical period, when class-related hardships are also especially acute, exploring connections between class and punitive reactions becomes especially a propos. This is where Garland’s work strikes me as most inspiring of all. For it generates optimism about the sociological enterprise itself, suggesting that even in difficult times, our ability to write clearly and well about complex issues—even, especially, in complex ways—can make a difference. For this and all the other reasons previously noted, Peculiar Institution deserves to be widely read and broadly debated now and for a long while to come.

References
There is one kind of homelessness, so deeply embedded in the slippages of work, family, and state aid as to have become a routine, unremarkable part of what it means to be poor in America today. This is the low-visibility, serial displacement that plagues uncertain lives and patchworked livelihoods, chronicled by journalists Adrien LeBlanc, David Shipler, Jason DeParle, and the occasional social scientist. There is another, more flagrant homelessness, lurid and alien, making its wretched way plain as life, here among right-thinking, god-fearing folks. Seemingly without shame or cover, its métier is what Mill called the “spectacle of pain.” This latter type is the subject of the two books under review here: Righteous Dopefiend, by Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg, and Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders, by Teresa Gowan. Both are set in the present-day San Francisco. Both are luminous and unsettling—and for strikingly different reasons.

The trolls under the bridge

Righteous Dopefiend is a disciplined photo-ethnography with just about everything stacked against it: unpleasant, untrustworthy, casually brutal people; lives indented to heroin and cutting wide swaths of collateral damage; misogyny, racism, mendacity, betrayal, and self-pity; child abuse and abandonment; squandered clinical resources; untold social costs. And to frame this sprawling documentary portrait, a theoretical argument crammed into a dense 21-page introduction, whose offshoots (like a cranky Greek chorus) intermittently hector the text that follows. The black-and-white photographs (all Schonberg’s, all approved for inclusion by those they depict but do not name) are unflinching: whether depicting the physical toll of addiction, pathetic gestures toward home and country, seeming parodies of love and friendship, mundane misery, candid homemaking or the anatomy of shooting up. The steady torrent of appalling history, sordid detail and pervasive violence threatens to overwhelm, if not numb, the reader. (You may find yourself having to set it down from time to time.) And yet, this warhorse of a book seizes our attention, provokes our thinking and earns our respect—not only for the labor (12 years in the making) required to bring it into existence, but for its craft. Against all odds, with world enough and time, what Bourgois and Schonberg have produced is something of an ethnographic prodigy. Beautifully (defiantly?) bound and printed, Righteous Dopefiend is a near documentary masterpiece, bearing witness to an otherwise invisible derivative order, both parasitic and accusatory. That it cannot quite close the circle of theory says as much about the state of that theory as it does about its own talent; that it would overreach and undersell in drawing pragmatic lessons was probably a foregone conclusion.

Righteous Dopefiend tells the story of the Edgewater Homeless, “a community of addicted bodies...held together by a moral economy of sharing” (p. 6), and occupying an unstable conclave of encampments set precariously under the freeways of downtown San Francisco. Addiction is watchword, iron rule, and “devotion” (p. 112) here: nothing rivals it, little that gets in its way lasts long. In nine closely packed...
chapters, interleaved by artisanal-quality fieldnotes, the authors rehearse the history of Edgewater’s inhabitants, their tangled interpersonal and familial relationships, the rhythms and hazards of everyday existence, and the (rare) grace notes that together create a kind of thralldom. In this “grey zone” of bare life (pp. 19–20), hounded by cops, dopesick when not nodding off or driven to score, an eerily depraved indifference to all else morphs into a local virtue. The product of sustained engagement, writing/reflection/rewriting, committed advocacy, and rock-steady photography, the portrait that slowly takes shape in these pages is extraordinarily intimate, easily justifying the authors’ claim of having “befriended” these people. More than contrived friendship is at stake, of course. Clerk of outlaw records, portraitist, interventer, advocate, and, crucially, confessor: the ethnographic role in this project is protean.

Bourgois and Schonberg are especially adept at dissecting the micro-machinery of gratuitous harm, the way institutions feed and compound the self-destructive tendencies of homeless addicts, agents and victims alike remaining oblivious to the shaping systemic forces at work. Rationing care through “a deliberately hostile bureaucratic triage system” and lengthy waiting times, local ERs effectively deter the disreputable poor from seeking care and thus ensure that chronic conditions go untreated until life-threatening (pp. 97ff). Clinic recapitulates cultural doxa: bedevil, deny, make disappear until, ruinously, they cannot be ignored. Similarly, well-meant “harm reduction” efforts cannot help but become the “gentle strand in the disciplinary web that seeks to rehabilitate the lumpen” (p. 106), exacting shame and dissembling as the price of engagement by misguided outreach workers. (Injunctions to use bleach kits and not to share needles are ludicrously at odds with the moral economy of sharing and practical realities of homelessness.) Preventive campaigns backfire, perversely ratifying the “willfully and oppositionally self-destructive” subjectivity that is preferable to seeing oneself as “a sick failure who lacks self-control” (p. 109). Ramp ed up law enforcement turns septic shooting sites (“filthy nooks and crannies…optimal for spreading infectious diseases”) into “their safest refuges” (p. 113). The medical problems of the dually diagnosed are criminalized (p. 218). What the left hand of the state offers in the way of service and respite, the right hand undercut s by razing camps, harrying displaced residents and wrecking their ties with mobile health vans (p. 222).

Attention to race and gender, no less than class and biopower, is pervasive throughout, theory fans will be pleased to discover. But so is an old-fashioned regard for evidence—sometimes corroborating, sometimes challenging an informant’s account. Birth, military, police, court, and coroner records; the testimony of siblings, parents, and employers; even the racked discussion of a medical school seminar: all are grist for the capacious mill grinding away here, in what the authors gamely describe as a quest for “truth” (p. 12).

To explain how “structurally imposed everyday suffering generates violent and destructive subjectivities” (p. 19), the authors put forth the concept of “lumpen abuse,” which combines a clinical appreciation for the long arm of trauma with a sociological sensibility for structure. In practice, this amounts to a stiff reagent of Bourdieu and Foucault titrated to expose the manifold and cumulative ways in which institutional realities seep into and shape character: “invisibly,” routinely misrecognized, all but irresistibly bundled into a “habitus formation” whose most terrible toll may be to convince its victims to “celebrate” the socially degraded stereotypes applied to them (p. 133). Showing how this occurs, the “micro-mechanisms through which externally-imposed forces operate on vulnerable individuals and communities” (p. 20), is one of the book’s great strengths. True, in brief catechistic bursts, the lesson can verge on the formulaic, even comically heavy-handed (“defusing the biopower insult of having been confronted…with the inescapable fact of her daily risk-taking practices” (p. 110). In large measure, though, they pull it off. Time and again, we see how it sculpts not only opportunities and assets, but also—over time, insidiously, collaboratively—the hearts and minds of those it disfavors. (Its casualties not only
misrecognize, they exonerate as well.) The rigged results of institutional sorting mechanisms of adolescence are turned into proud, even defiant choices (p. 133). Edgewater’s black homeless will tell you they reject panhandling not because pervasive racism makes it unproductive, but as a matter of style and dignity (p. 167). Sal’s disgraceful behavior toward his kids is not just dumb mimesis of his own grim childhood, but “mindful, targeted, effective, and ethical within the bounds of its own logic” (p. 197). The past for all that it has inflicted, no less than the present for all that it denies, is appropriated by the Edgewater Homeless and put to inventive face-saving use; it is not just a legacy endured. Structure’s stage-direction nowhere in evidence, these actors nonetheless act out “socially structured roles through their everyday practices, confirming to themselves and to those around them that they deserved their fate” (p. 172). Trolls under the bridge (p. 111) they may be, but in beds of their own making.

For all the evidence amassed, the argument still feels over-wrought. Structure’s tutelage is all-pervasive, miasmatic, surmised, and, in the end, over-determined. There are no exceptions. And yet this may well be the limits of contemporary theorizing. We lack the requisite tools for teasing apart the connective tissue of history and circumstance in order to reveal the subtler machinery of disposition and connivance, something distinct from determinism. For one thing, the past is retrieved chiefly through bent instruments of structure’s own (partial) making: recall, reflection, recounting. For another, we go without the potentially instructive contrasts of counterfactuals (sibs growing up in the same environment who turn out differently). We lack, to put it bluntly, an open window into the slow wheeling of constraining circumstance that makes for compound effects over time, the improvised complicity that deepens their impact, and the adaptive preferences that scuttle the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2004). Not that the evidence or the framing constructs are ready at hand: a casuistry adequate to even conventional epidemiology’s tangled skein of causality, unspooling over time such that inequalities interact with and compound one another, is only beginning to take shape (Powers and Faden 2006).

Because this is critically applied anthropology, Righteous Dopefiend must also make recommendations. Hoist on their own petard at this juncture, a diagnostic both systemic and radical gives way to remedies promising topical relief. They recycle the vexed dependencies of harm reduction (having already subjected its practice to stinging critique); advocate for the politically fanciful notion of heroin maintenance; and make the eminently sane but haplessly unlikely suggestion that addicts be given the standing offer of “a wide diversity of treatment and social support models” (p. 302). Admittedly, it is difficult to see how they could have avoided this trap. Short of rewinding history, upending the entire architecture of social assistance, or reversing the Rome Plow of neoliberalism, paltry proposals for reducing social suffering may be all we can hope for—except, perhaps, for sowing the seeds of skepticism more broadly. Which brings me to the photographs.

In the fifteenth century, if Shattuck’s (1997) account is to be credited, paintings of ghastly religious scenes like crucifixions often featured a minor figure whose function was to model the ambivalence—horror mixed with fascination—that the scene should provoke in the viewer. The painting’s incompleteness was “transitive,” requiring an informed observer for the suffering depicted to work properly. Like a sentry barring entry to baser prurient interests, that minor figure was there to instruct and admonish. It was a delicate, even dubious, balancing act, easily misread as advising the viewer that they had just stumbled upon something they were not supposed to see. To a scene already complicated enough, then, the element of the forbidden is added.

The photographer burdens attentive viewers with caption and text, seeking to constrain, even guide, their response. Even so, how a photograph works, the meaning and message it conveys, is impossible to control. Having once argued that the global “diffusion of vulgar and appalling images” had led to a moral flattening of response, sowing voyeurism instead of indignation, critic Susan Sontag later changed her mind. An image can only provoke not dictate
(let alone deaden) a response. At most, it dares the viewer to reflect on what has been presented and “examine the rationalizations... accepted up to now that ought to be challenged” (2002:117). Captioning text—like admonitory figures in Renaissance paintings—can advise and propose, but the power of even text-laden photographic records like Schonberg’s resides finally in the imaginary archive they set loose in the viewer’s mind (including, as he notes, those portrayed by them). To those who dismiss unsettling photographs of war-torn scenes as pornographic, Sontag’s answer (schooled by Sarajevo) is unyielding: the moral problem is not the images—stopping time, channeling our attention, insisting upon a response—but our own impotence in the face of the urgent, falsely distant business to which they bear witness. Reproaching the messenger advertises our own “frustration of not being able to do anything about what the images show” (2002:117).

None of this comes as news to Bourgois and Schonberg, who have thought long and hard about “representational practices,” but their resolution of such difficulties is instructively deficient. They cite Benjamin’s early ruminations on the importance of “inscription” when presenting photographs (p. 21), dutifully note the Rorschach indeterminacy of even well-contextualized images, recall the Victorian legacy of pollution and sanitation in slum-touring, and worry that accounts of “cultural pariahs” caught unselfconsciously in flagrante lend themselves to “ideological projections.” Foucault (1990) found it productive to deliberately misread seventeenth-century confessional guides as instruction manuals for turning sex into discourse, for saying what was previously unimaginable. Bourgois and Schonberg feel duty-bound not to sanitize or ennoble their account, but worry that the ugly honest truth that they present may misfire. If the prevailing doxa is such that readers/viewers will be unable to see past the surface misery to the underlying causes, structure will have the last laugh. Their considered refusal to edit may inadvertently fan the embers of hatred.

And so, content up to this point to document, to supply appropriate framing devices and occasional commentary, and to trust the reader to do the necessary interpretive work, they lose their nerve in the closing pages of this deeply unsettling book. They disappoint and condescend when they inform us that their aim has been to “motivate the reader to care” (p. 319), when all along we thought their project was to make us think. What happened? Sontag provides one clue: Without clear lines of engagement, without something to do, compassion quickly degrades into resentment at having been made “to care” in the first place. It is the price for being so much more than “good enough” photo-ethnography, but lacking a program sufficient to the cause.

Under the same sheltering sky, as it happens, and working no little magic of her own, Teresa Gowan examines dueling street imaginaries in Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders. This time, the surprise is less outlaw moral economy than salvaged moral affinities. “where [else] the ragged people go...” Strategically positioning discourse analysis as her translational apparatus between structure and agency, Gowan does a splendid job of delineating the distinctive ecologies of livelihood and talk in San Francisco’s unstable homeless terrain. In part, an exploration of the discursive harmonies that reveal themselves between place and work, talk and life stage; in part, searing send-up of “rabble management”—Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders is professional sociology with a bruised heart. Here, it is language that provides the shared currency of a moral community, especially the language of self-accounting. Like a latter-day Weber, Gowan believes that moral agents have no choice but to take on the work of self-justification, and identifies three versions in contention on the street. Their taglines are a fair guide to their respective folk-etiologies: system-talk, sin-talk, sick-talk, though their discursive polarities maybe reversed from those in ordinary use. (What Gowan terms a “flipped” version of the second runs throughout Righteous Dopefiend: the bloody-broken-bent-on-destruction-but-unbowed variant of early Augustine: “It was foul and I loved it; I loved my own undoing.” There are inklings...
in both books, too, of a fourth: self-justification as a changeling’s performance art.) Each of these speaks to homelessness as moment of *peripetia* (Bruner 2002)—a “rupture” or breach, something gone badly awry—“an exceptional state that required explanation,” a way of accounting for “the fall” (p. 25), and of mounting a bid for “authenticity” (p. 92). Each supplies a restorative narrative. But just when the reader balks at overly scholastic neatness, Gowan retracts the offer, returning to the street (in a bid for world enough and time that echoes *Righteous Dopefiend*)—to “unflatten” an artificially text-like analysis with ethnographic irregularity. She reclaims action as a “kind of speech” or “discursively charged practice.” This also reflects a shift in focus, undertaken relatively early in her own ethnographic research, from a concentration on ennobling labor to what it held at bay: “conflict, anger, shame and misery” (p. 9)—and on the different work (this time semantic) needed to order and own those emotions. It is a move away from labor and livelihood to discursive/practical logics of the street (p. 24).

Bourgois and Schonberg take us deep into the ruined history and defiant *chez nous* of a colony of trolls. Gowan’s canvas is broader, and if her portraits lack the sounding depths of theirs, they have a vitality, vividness and virtuosity all their own. (Candid and casual, her photos do not have the elegiac quality of Schonberg’s—production values are part of the problem—and so lack the tension, first caught by Agee and Evans in the 1930s, between meanness of circumstance and “cruel radiance” of self.) Her ethnographic chops are seasoned and exacting. And so, not content (because it isn’t true *enough*) with mapping the elective affinities between livelihood and narrative—between works and faith—she shows how the unaccommodating exigencies of street life can scramble scholastic parsing. Having just laid out a set of discursively distinct *lumpen* rehab projects, she proceeds to undermine them. The cultural narratives they offer are not scriptures to be forsworn, but pliable sources of moral reasoning to be plundered at will as circumstance requires. The ease with which the men shuttle between discourses—“combin[ing], blend[ing], subvert[ing] and rework[ing] popular narratives and schemas to make sense of homelessness, both as everyday life and as extraordinary stigma” (pp. 106 and 140, emphasis added)—can be breathtaking. (So, in this book too, is the investment of time needed to capture this.) Street philosophers unburdened by fidelity to school, they are adepts at keeping the beast inside at bay, piecing together “narratives, personal dispositions, and means of survival” (p. 119): whatever works to score a livelihood and salvage a measure of pride.

It is an extraordinary tour. But not one without a few bumps. Gowan cites Wacquant’s blistering review of recent ethnographies of poverty (p. 23)—without mentioning the authors’ rejoinders that detail extensive errors in his review, or, more to the point, noting that the work she herself is about to present confirms that scavenging can “combat stigma and create a space for self-respect and solidarity” (p. 149). (In fairness, this may be rhetorical staging on her part.) She can casually lampoon the quality of hospitality meals in passing (p. 47) even though, a later description reveals (p. 67), she knows better. Numbers occasionally trip her up: she mocks early advocacy estimates of homelessness as hopelessly at odds with the 1990 Census Bureau’s empirical findings (p. 50), but fails to note that prevalence estimates published shortly thereafter (Link et al. 1995) essentially corroborated much larger estimates. (Oddly, she knows and cites that study in a different context some 200 pages later.) A conveniently high figure on anti-panhandling laws in American cities (p. 52) seems wildly inflated next to the sober findings of advocacy groups with a keen interest in getting them right (NCH/NLCHP 2006). To my (not-disinterested) mind, the grueling contradictions of homelessness advocacy get short shrift. And, in an uncharacteristic lapse in ethnographic counter-checking, the “homeless archipelago” in Chapter Six is described at one remove. (Still, her portrait of amateur therapeutics, mindless form-filling, pointless discipline and discursive anarchy rings true.) She notes how SSI rules changed in the late 1990s to exclude addiction as an eligible disability (p. 210), but not the Congressional debates that provided textbook examples...
of sin-talk trumping sick-talk (Hunt and Baumohl 2003).

But all this is small beer. These portraits are so lovingly assembled, so subtly rendered, and so exactly cut that they convey the persuasive power of craft. Consider Gowan’s extended account of “pro” recyclers in Chapter Five, people wholly committed (in a nicely turned phrase) to “collecting recyclables for redemption” (p. 148). In the course of interviewing a number of hardened canners, she encountered repeated reference to favored “suppliers” on whom such adepts rely in their regular circuit for recyclables. It makes sense that the pros would develop reliable sources of bottles, cans, paper and cardboard—but is that how it actually plays out in practice? As in Righteous Dopefiend, the check of sustained fieldwork makes its mark: No, it turns out, it does not work that way. The value of such regulars is not the reliable supply they represent, but the opportunity provided to cultivate “common ground and recognition” in the small change of conversation that eases such transactions (p. 173). No matter material gain, in these exchanges men seek “moral capital” to offset the otherwise degraded currency of homelessness (p. 175).

Gowan closes out her account by tracking the inertial force of public policy over the last decade, a detailed and demoralizing recitation of ascendant neoliberalism, “class cleansing,” and the intensified coupling of vagrancy control/dispersal measures with shelters as “corrals.” The net effect is mass displacement. Encampments are destroyed, vehicles impounded, networks disrupted; even the most stalwart of rough sleepers begin to see voluntary evacuation as the better part of lumpen valor. After this, there is really no place for Gowan to go: having argued that shelter policies are merely one part of a revanchist campaign to reclaim the city for commerce and class privilege, and having exposed the destructive of sin- and sick-talk, she is left holding out hope for a revival of system-talk—and a (faintly nostalgic) “cross-class model of community” (p. 290)—in the wake of the recent financial meltdown.

I said at the outset that these two fine books were differentially unsettling. I think the difference is this: the one shows us homelessness as lethal embrace; the other, as indeterminate sentence. But from the outside, 30-years-and-counting into this nation’s longest round of widespread homelessness, it is difficult to tell them apart.

References


This book is the belated translation—more than ninety years after its publication in German immediately following his untimely death at the age of 60—of Georg Simmel’s last “testament”: a wide-ranging intellectual meditation on “life” in its most general aspects. The publication of an English-language edition of a major work authored by one of the central figures in social theory today constitutes an event, and this translation effort (by John A. Y. Andrews and Donald N. Levine) certainly qualifies as such. The book is composed of three major thematic chapters headlined by an introductory statement of the fundamental problematic that serves as the ordering framework for each of the more detailed investigations. Levine’s exemplary introduction to the book does a fantastic job of dealing with the intellectual and more immediate “production” history of the book, so I will not devote any space to repeating that here. The volume closes with the first translation into English of a set of “aphorisms” written towards the end of his life, headlined with an introduction by Andrews.

Recent scholarship has exploded the received view of Simmel’s work as primarily concerned with providing the methodological and intellectual foundations of sociology as a scientific discipline (narrowly conceived) or as an unfocused essayist mainly concerned with providing impressionistic portraits of different aspects of modern culture and experience. Instead, the “new” Simmel is revealed as a specifically philosophical thinker, whose various interventions—up to and including The Philosophy of Money—can best be thought of as iterative attempts to grapple with a fundamental problematic of modern life: the “dialectic” of the objectification of dynamic vital impulses into static forms that seem to stand against the very impulses responsible for their production (as pithily stated in “The Tragedy of Culture” essay). This problematic, most clearly recognizable among other classical theorists in Marx’s thoughts on alienation and “estrangement” and in Weber’s influential portrait of the “spirit” of modern capitalism transforming itself into a “steel-hard casing,” is recast by Simmel in The View of Life as the fundamental problem across a wide range of fields, from Metaphysics, to Ethics, to the Philosophy of Biology, Epistemology, Aesthetics, and yes, even Social Theory.

This sort of ambition makes The View of Life a book like no other written by a classical social theorist. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber all rejected or transcended philosophy stricto sensu in their unique ways. Here, Simmel returns to philosophical reflection proper in an attempt to develop a post-Nietzschean metaphilosophy that is simultaneously foundational (in its attempt to lay down some non-negotiable precepts) and anti-foundational (in its open-ended, radically unfinished character).

As the title indicates, the basic category for Simmel is life, a notion that is used in a multivocal sense. It is clear however, that the sense in which Simmel uses this term throughout is inseparable from a consideration of what life is not: in its most naïve formulation, life is not death (however insofar as death is simply a limit-boundary then—as Simmel argues in detail in Chapter Three—death is not the opposite of life but is instead a presupposition of its continuity). Most importantly, life is not form. The core argument can thus be distilled as follows:


Contemporary Sociology 41, 3
life is dynamic, continuous and bound to a temporal-evolutionary process. Form, on the other hand, while emerging out of life is static, “eternal” (out of time), and in some cases can serve as a harness preventing the continuing transformation of life. If life is experience in its most immediate form, not-life is experience as filtered by a Kantian categorical grid; if life is the a-nomalous intermingling of contents and motivations in everyday existence then not-life is the lawful autonomization of those contents into self-legislating forms in delimited “worlds”; if life is the concrete understanding of what is the right thing to do for me in this situation, not-life is the abstract subjection to a categorical moral law that stands above me as an impersonal mandate across all possible settings.

The essence of life is thus—as Simmel argues in a groundbreaking attempt to marry Darwinism to vitalism—to persevere in its continuity (life is always more-life). The continuity of life is however, a paradoxical sort, insofar as it is realized via its inscription in a field defined by limits and boundaries (here Simmel can be seen as a precursor of the “autopoetic” thesis in the Philosophy of Biology). Given its constitution via boundaries, the continuity of life can only be realized by a constant process of self-transcendence of the very limitations that define it, which results in the creation of objective forms that are “not-life.” Life is defined by limits and also by its constant tendency to overflow those limits. Thus, life is bound to canalize this vital effort in self-preservation into the regularities of forms (of which cognitive abstraction and the aesthetic objectification of sensibility are prototypical) which then stand to life as more-than-life.

This argument as laid out in the first chapter is intuitive and innovative. However, this is not to say that the rest of the book is easy going. The translators have done an excellent job of rendering Simmel’s prose in clear, readable English. However, Simmel’s rejection of sub-sectioning and the sometimes meandering nature of his argumentation lend to some sections of the book an amorphous feel, and getting through the more abstract portions of the work became a rather arduous task. This applies in particular to the last two chapters, a problem that is compounded by the fact that the subject matter at hand is far away from social theory as traditionally defined: Chapter Three is really a contribution to ontology and theologically broadly conceived and Chapter Four is really a contribution to Kantian meta-ethics. Even Chapter Two, which is the chapter most directly connected to classical themes in social theory, contains important contributions to debates in aesthetic theory (where Simmel argues for a formalist transcendence of the realist/conventionalist debate) and epistemology (where Simmel brazenly attempts to recast the pragmatist/realist debate in truth theory into his own vitalist-dialectic conception). This makes the book difficult to appraise as a whole; it will undoubtedly take a long time (and contributions from scholars across a wide range of disciplines and sub-specialties) to settle on the total extent of Simmel’s achievement here and to lay out its promise and limitations.

Since Chapter Two contains themes that most clearly address fundamental problems in social theory, I will close this review with a brief consideration of its argument. Simmel proposes an astonishing rethinking of the influential Weberian theme of the inevitable constitution of different spheres of value endowed with their own lawfulness (eigengesetzlichkeit) but devoid of an overarching meaning, as laid out with characteristic Weberian pathos in the so-called “Intermediate Reflections” (zwischenbetrachtungen). What is significant is that Simmel is able to theorize the dialectic of autonomization and differentiation while avoiding the non-committal nominalism and moral relativism of the Weberian position.

Simmel assimilates the problematic of differentiation into his conceptualization of the emergence transformation of more-life into more-than-life across various self-disclosing “worlds” (what today would be called “fields”): the cognitive (science), the aesthetic (art) and the religious (in addition to the realms of eroticism, law, and the economy). The core argument here is that autonomy emerges from the emancipation of life from the inherent “purposiveness” of everyday (biological, psychological, and social) existence. Simmel turns traditional action theory on its head by convincingly showing that
purpose and goal oriented-action is not the feature of human behavior that guarantees “freedom,” as presumed for instance in Parsonsian action theory (in fact purposive action is precisely what persons share with animals). Instead, it is the capacity to turn what is usually a purpose into a “purposeless” goal in itself (a process distinct from the transformation of means into ends in themselves as analyzed in “The Psychology of Money” essay). A key part of Simmel’s argument is that autonomization entails a “rotation” or shift so that what was previously experienced as tied to life (e.g., knowing [in order to] live) becomes the primary purpose of life (e.g., living to know). Simmel sees this drive toward autonomization as both an irreversible process and—here is the difference with Weber or Adorno for that matter—as a precondition for the further development of life (although his description of the autonomization of the “economic” logic into an objective apparatus still shares a lot with Weber). Thus, the acknowledgment of differentiation and even incommensurability across worlds is not incompatible with a view that sees them as sharing a common vital foundation that makes up for their inherent limitations as partial ways to transcend the objectively given.

America’s New Underclass and (the Absence of) Class Mobilization

ANDREW W. MARTIN
Ohio State University
martin.1026@sociology.osu.edu

With previous books like Journey to Nowhere, and kudos from celebrities like Bruce Springsteen, Dale Maharidge has become one of the most widely recognized journalists to investigate the lived experiences of the downtrodden in America. In his latest effort, Someplace Like America, Maharidge’s excellent new account of America’s rapidly growing underclass, at times reads like a Solzhenitsynian account of American poverty. Page after page, the despair felt by Americans who have lost virtually everything as a result of economic downturns, globalization, and neoliberal trimming of social welfare, is starkly felt by the reader.

Maharidge is a journalist by trade, and makes no pretentions of being anything more than that. His job is to get out of the way and give voice to those hit hardest by the changing U.S. economy. He offers little in the way of analysis beyond the plea for politicians to begin acting in the interests of American workers, rather than corporate elites. So the question becomes, what lessons can sociologists take from this? Or, is there anything new here?

As sociologists, it is easy for us to sit back and say smugly, “yes, we know all this already. We have countless empirical studies proving that inequalities exist, that the racial, gender, and class position of individuals plays a critical role in determining their ability to survive today. And we even have ethnographic accounts of the working poor

Contemporary Sociology 41, 3
and the underclass that add flesh and blood to our statistics.’’

So is this book merely a human-interest version of what sociologists usually study, or do Maharidge and Williamson pose an actual challenge for academics to take up? I think they do, but perhaps not a challenge that is immediately apparent from a cursory reading of the book. The strength of Someplace Like America is Maharidge’s ability to tell the story of the down and out, a story made all the more real by the photographs of Michael Williamson. Yes, perhaps sociologists could learn to humanize our subjects, especially in quantitative accounts of inequality, but I think many ethnographers do a fine job in this regard. Instead, the real challenge is to understand why we have not witnessed a broad-based class mobilization to challenge the massive growth in inequality in America that Maharidge and Williamson so deftly document in this book.

Throughout the book Maharidge remains optimistic that Americans are resilient, that they can find dignity despite being stripped of everything: their jobs, homes, and often, their families. And while he does offer examples of ordinary Americans who have hit rock bottom and managed to made a new life for themselves, the people he documents tend to gravitate toward individual-level solutions to a structural problem; living within one’s means and avoiding the trap of possessions. As movement scholars have so ably documented in case after case (Civil Rights, the women’s movement), it is often only through collective action that the forces of inequality are successfully challenged.

The stark honesty that Maharidge is able to draw out from his interviewees offers insights into the cultural, structural, and political forces that have moved Americans in this direction. The lived experiences of these individuals once they become part of the underclass also provides some clues to the lack of mobilization by working Americans. Such realities, I believe, are often overlooked by those of us interested in explaining when and where mobilization occurs. In this essay I suggest some possible directions for new lines of empirical inquiry to address this puzzle.

Maharidge spends a portion of the book interviewing the very bottom rung of the economic ladder: long-time homeless individuals, who many of us would label hobos. Yet, not surprisingly, it is with the newly minted underclass that he is able to garner the greatest insights. For example, he recounts Sally’s situation, a one-time successful small business owner who lost everything, and who shares the same general reaction as all of the individuals interviewed here: how did this happen? For many of the middle class, economic insecurity is closer than imagined: the loss of a job, an illness in the family, and they quickly find themselves over their heads. These individuals, many of whom felt at least some contempt for the chronically unemployed prior to joining the same ranks, not surprisingly quickly change their view once they join the underclass.

Scholars of the labor movement have focused their attention on efforts by unions to mobilize the working class; particularly low-wage, often immigrant, service workers. Yet these studies tend to be rather optimistic, examining successful outcomes and offering advice to unions on sure-fire paths to victory. Indeed, in his recent essay, Michael Burawoy (2010) critiques labor scholars for their overestimate of labor’s revitalization. Even the theoretically-rich field of social movement scholarship tends to privilege the presence, rather than the absence, of collective action. Of course explaining the lack of a phenomenon is more difficult than the presence of one, yet I believe Maharidge’s book can begin to help us think about this more systematically.

The stark honesty that Maharidge is able to draw out from his interviewees offers insights into the cultural, structural, and political forces that have moved Americans in this direction. The lived experiences of these individuals once they become part of the underclass also provides some clues to the lack of mobilization by working Americans. Such realities, I believe, are often overlooked by those of us interested in explaining when and where mobilization occurs. In this essay I suggest some possible directions for new lines of empirical inquiry to address this puzzle.

Maharidge spends a portion of the book interviewing the very bottom rung of the economic ladder: long-time homeless individuals, who many of us would label hobos. Yet, not surprisingly, it is with the newly minted underclass that he is able to garner the greatest insights. For example, he recounts Sally’s situation, a one-time successful small business owner who lost everything, and who shares the same general reaction as all of the individuals interviewed here: how did this happen? For many of the middle class, economic insecurity is closer than imagined: the loss of a job, an illness in the family, and they quickly find themselves over their heads. These individuals, many of whom felt at least some contempt for the chronically unemployed prior to joining the same ranks, not surprisingly quickly change their view once they join the underclass.

Contemporary Sociology 41, 3
How then do these experiences challenge their views of the broader economic and political system that allows such inequality? Social movement scholars generally regard grievances as perhaps necessary, but not a sufficient cause for driving activism. Doug McAdam writes of cognitive liberation, the belief that acting collectively can bring about fundamental social change, and indeed many of the interviewees here not only have experienced hardships, but identify the causes as lying outside of themselves. The economic and political system, they believe, is skewed against the middle and working classes to favor the richest of Americans.

Yet here is the critical disconnect that as sociologists we need to take seriously: many of those same individuals believe the solution to such problems remains in the realm of the individual. They speak of cutting back, of living a frugal life within one’s means. There is talk of how political and economic reform is needed, but it is generally in the abstract. For example, James Alexander, an out-of-work miner, says, “Material possessions are meaning less and less to me.” Sally has adopted a new motto, saying “less is more” (p. 60 and p. 18).

This long-standing American emphasis on the individual has significant implications for collective action. If the downtrodden feel that the answer lies with the personal, then political action is ruled out. Certainly movement and labor scholars have at least half of the equation figured out: mobilization does not happen on its own, it must be fomented by organizations and networks of activists to channel discontentment into action. While social movement scholars have developed strong theoretical frameworks for analyzing mobilization, it is labor scholars who have taken seriously the notion of class mobilization. In recent years scholarship on the tactics used by unions to expand their membership base has grown significantly. Yet even if we were to explore the broader efforts by unions and other social movement groups to mobilize the underclass, such an analysis would only tell half the story. The larger question is why is the working class not more receptive to large scale mobilization, especially when there is fairly extensive evidence that the promise of neoliberalism has not worked out in their favor, and as Maharidge documents, they harbor significant anger against the monied elite? Again, why is the locus of redress internal, rather than external?

There are, of course, some popular answers to this question. Thomas Frank’s What’s the Matter with Kansas? posits that as the Democratic Party became less interested in representing the working class, cultural conservatives saw an opportunity to expand their electoral base by exploiting cultural concerns (abortion, gay marriage) at the expense of their economic issues. While that may certainly hold a kernel of truth, it is perhaps too simplistic. Certainly we have witnessed the growth of “grassroots” right-wing populism in the form of the Tea Party (funded in large part by conservative business interests like the Koch brothers), yet much of the noise made by these groups does indeed focus on economic issues, like tax cuts and deficit reduction.

While I suspect that the American working and middle class does not accept these right-wing ideas carte blanche, we must take seriously the idea that they are appealing. But it is a mistake simply to discount the American working class as mindlessly conservative and an easy mark for such messages. Instead, it is imperative to investigate the broader cultural mechanisms by which conservative ideologies that limit class mobilization are promulgated in America. Such messages do not necessarily have to mobilize new members for the Tea Party, they merely have to dissuade involvement in collective action that challenges the interests of the very wealthy. In particular, I see two
streams of investigation that are of critical importance. The first is the message. Conserva-
tive interests in America have been more successful at crafting a message that reson-
ates with the public. Ideas like tax cuts and reigning in government spending are perhaps intrinsically appealing because they can be seen as immediately reward-
ing—larger paychecks, for example. More-
over ideas are often at least implicitly tied to racialized notions of (undeserving) minor-
ities as the primary beneficiary of social pro-
grams. Additionally, conservative groups
successfully have used specific language to
broaden the appeal of their message; think
“death tax” as opposed to “estate tax.”
This should not be surprising; business
groups devote significant resources to public
relations, so they have the resources at their
disposal to construct appealing messages,
even political ones.
Yet we live at a time when tax rates are at
historically low levels, where government
spending on specific programs (education,
Medicare) is actually quite popular, and the
regulation of business is limited. Thus, for
conservative claims to resonate, they must
dominate mass media outlets, and they
have been successful in this regard: Fox
News no longer claims to let you decide
the story, and the liberal counterparts, such
as MSNBC, are centrist in many of their pro-
grams. Even more worrisome is the growing
influence of corporate money in political
campaigns intended to promote business-
friendly candidates.
Unfortunately, as sociologists I believe we
continue to lack a strong theoretical frame-
work for understanding these processes,
one that moves beyond a simple “false con-
sciousness” explanation and takes seriously
the notion that the manipulation of cultural
symbols and messages is critical to limit
mobilization by the working class. Whether
it is called propaganda or political commu-
nication, until we investigate this in greater
detail (both assessing how messages are con-
structed and their reception by targeted
audiences), we are unlikely to understand
fully these processes. Historically, scholars
like Gramsci, Mills, Bourdieu, and Foucault
have taken seriously the idea that the cultur-
al manipulation of ideology is critical to
maintain various forms of subjugation.
More recently movement scholars speak of
framing, the way in which movement actors
assign meaning to contentious situations,
including who is to blame and the potential
solutions. The current manifestation of fram-
ing is rather narrow, however, focusing on
traditional movement actors (as opposed to
Astroturf groups that are fronts for corporate
interests). This literature also lacks in its
recognition of framing as a strategic act
intended to mobilize support, though recent
work that uses focus groups to evaluate mes-
sages is an important and potentially fruitful
exception. Of course, understanding the cul-
tural mechanisms by which people’s politi-
cal views are shaped can be daunting, yet
there are some empirical innovations that
could be used to such an end. For example,
some framing scholars have used focus
groups to assess the appeal of specific
frames. There have also been recent advances
in text analysis tools that could be used
fruitfully to analyze systematically the grow-
ing mass of content available online, from
news stories to blogs to press releases by
political actors. It is only by examining all
forms of political communication that we
will understand why “X” thinks the answer
to his economic woes is to live in a smaller
house, rather than limit corporate execu-
tives’ pay.

References
Burawoy, Michael. 2010. “From Polanyi to Polly-
anna: The False Optimism of Global Labor
The dominant U.S. labor federation over the last century, the American Federation of Labor, has experienced multiple internal and external challengers to its favored format of “business unionism.” These include the American Labor Union (ALU, 1902–1904), the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, 1905–1924, date of effective operation), the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL, 1920–1929), the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL, 1929–1934), the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO, 1937–1955), and, most recently, Change to Win (2005–present). These challengers provide fodder for interesting examinations that probe the possibilities for a different (namely, more progressive) type of labor movement in the United States. Yet in the end, it has been the AFL (which merged with the CIO in 1955 to form the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO)) that persisted. Many studies of the two largest challengers—the IWW and CIO—have sought to uncover the factors involved in their success. Fewer studies chronicle the ALU, TUEL and TUUL. Fewer still call attention to the rebellions of the 1970s.


by insurgents who took control in opposition to union leaders’ persistent attempts to forfeit workers’ interests in favor of smooth capital-labor relations (thereby securing their own privileged union leadership positions). Below, I address each of these arguments in turn.

Is the “long 1970s” in fact a period of unusual labor militancy? Aaron Brenner states that “Between the early 1960s and 1981, American workers engaged in an extraordinarily high level of workplace militancy, exhibiting a sustained rebelliousness not seen since the 1930s” (p. xi). Twice during this “strike wave,” workers set records for the most strikes in a single year. Cal Winslow dates the “strike-prone” years of rebellion a little differently, as 1965–81.

The authors’ argument regarding a peak in strike activity is correct in one sense: the absolute number of strikes in an average year was about 22 percent larger during 1965–1981 (the mean number of yearly strikes was 4,864) than in the prior 19 years (mean = 3,974) and that 1974 witnessed an extremely large number (6,074) of workplace stoppages (calculated from Carter et al. 2010). Yet this pattern is not evident when considering the number of workers involved in stoppages, as is clearly shown on the table on page 47. The average number of workers involved was actually higher in the previous 19 postwar years than it was in 1965–1981 (an average of 2,167,000 during 1965–1981 compared to 2,261,000 during 1946–1964). If we omit the strike-prone years of the immediate postwar period (1946–1948), the years 1949 through 1964 averaged 2,140,000
workers out on strike per year—not much different from the so-called strike-prone years of the long 1970s. More importantly, the number of strikes should be examined in tandem with the relevant workforce that is “at risk” of going on strike. Some scholars standardize by the total workforce, others by the unionized workforce. When considering workers involved as a percentage of the total workforce, we find that the 1965–1981 period is considerably less strike-prone than the earlier 19 years (a mean of 2.88 percent of all workers struck as opposed to 4.2 percent). Likewise, for person-days idle: 184,700,000 in an average year 1946–1949; 30,369,000 during 1949-64; and 37,312,000 during 1965–1981. As an estimated percent of total work time: .54 percent in 1946-48, .23 in 1949–1964, and .19 in 1965–1981, we find the long 1970s was less disruptive. (Because union density declined after the mid-1950s, standardizing by union membership would reveal fewer extreme differences than standardizing by the total workforce.) While the increase in total employment during this period increased the total number of strikes that occurred and the person-days idle during the period under consideration, workers were not more “strike prone” than they were in the period immediately preceding it. This point is acknowledged by Robert Brenner (p. 72), yet for some reason, it goes unheeded by many of the other authors.

The second prong of the volume’s main thesis is clearly substantiated. Though Kim Moody’s overview chapter is less convincing, the excellent individual chapters chronicling rank-and-file upsurges among farm workers (Frank Bardacke), miners (Philip Nyden), teamsters (Dan La Botz), teachers (Marjorie Murphy), phone workers (Aaron Brenner), auto workers (A.C. Jones, Kieran Taylor), and female service workers (Dorothy Cobble) during this general period are very effective.

Kim Moody, ignoring relevant sociological literature on the subject, uncritically accepts Michels’ Iron Law of Oligarchy (p. 107) as does Robert Brenner (pp. 41–42), and dates the roots of the rank-and-file rebellion to the early 1950s. He bases his argument on the rise in three key indicators: contract rejections, election challenges, and wildcat strikes. He cites what appears to be convincing evidence of rising rank-and-file rejection of collective bargaining agreements. This is an article by Simkin (1967) which concludes that these rates were negligible prior to 1962, but grew steadily during the 1960s. Not mentioned is a subsequent publication in the same journal (Burke and Rubin 1973) which analyzes 1969 data and demonstrates that Simkin overestimates contract rejections. Burke and Rubin find regional differences (indicating different definitions of rejections in different regions; their findings led the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service to correct these definitional discrepancies), that Simkin includes in his definition of contract rejections situations that do not involve disagreements between rank-and-file workers and union officials, and that over half of the rejections were concentrated in eleven unions and one-fourth in just two unions. This indicates that the rank-and-file rebellion was isolated to a relatively smaller sector of the organized labor movement than Moody claims.

Conversely, Moody’s own calculations of the growth in the percent of wildcat strikes are underestimated. He concludes that in four years during the 1970s, a one-fourth of all strikes were wildcats. Published sociological literature (McCammon 1990:220) concludes that wildcat strikes constituted about one-third of all strikes between 1961 and 1976.

Moody also points to successful challenges to incumbent officials in the Steel Workers Union, International Union of Electrical Workers, Oil, Gas and Atomic Workers, United Rubber Workers, and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. Robert Brenner likewise notes that “In the single year 1963, more than one-third of the top officials in UAW production locals were voted out of office” (p. 61). In addition, rank-and-file groups were formed in the American Federation of Teachers, Communications Workers of America, International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union, National Maritime Union, Painters, United Rubber Workers, United Steel Workers of America, United Mine Workers, Teamsters, and United Automobile Workers (p. 136–8). Of these, only the Miners for Democracy were able to take
control of their national union. Moody attributes this larger failure to their inability to transcend business unionism (p. 141) and labor leaderships’ repressive response (p. 143). He laments leaders’ suppression of their militant base, yet he does not seriously consider the alternative. If union leaders had supported wildcat strikes, there would have been serious negative ramifications including fines that may have quickly drained union resources.

Cal Winslow emphasizes the innovations of the rebellions from below: the reinvention of direct action, the assault on racism and sexism, the demand for human dignity and the right to dissent, along with their ultimate failure to make connections across unions or industries. Aaron Brenner’s (pp. xi–xii) characterization of workers’ “militant mood” emphasizes rank-and-file workers’ broader agenda, their rejections of union contracts and their collective insubordination through wild cat strikes and other actions independent of their leaders. Workers’ accomplishments were many, including the usual wage and working condition advances, expansion of unionization (in the public sector), real workplace equality (Memphis sanitation workers), and important legislation (regarding Black Lung disease) as well as a disruption of the “stable one-party rule that had governed most U.S. unions for the previous twenty years and ended the long reign of many entrenched union leaders.”

Yet in the end, they failed to arrest the employers’ offensive or their ability to force union density downward and to transform union bureaucracy.

Robert Brenner’s analysis of the economic context and the role of foreign competition and Judith Stein’s analysis of how U.S. economic policy came into play in labor’s fortunes make excellent contributions to our understanding of the context of this long decade. Brenner suggests three phases in the post-war period: the first from the end of the 1940s to the end of the 1950s (labor’s honeymoon), the second from the last few years of the 1950s through the middle 1960s (the period when employers toughened their stance against labor), and the third from 1965 through 1973 (characterized by an intensified employer offensive with little response from labor leaders). Between 1953 and 1959, manufacturing productivity growth declined, but the growth in compensation did not adjust due to employers’ acceptance of long-term contracts, given in return for the promise of uninterrupted production. As manufacturing profit share declined, manufacturers both squeezed American workers and moved production abroad. When foreign competition capped U.S. manufacturers’ prices, their only remaining strategy was to increase labor productivity by further squeezing workers. Through all of this, Brenner argues, U.S. labor leaders did not respond; but rank-and-file workers did, with their feet.

But the precise dates of this long decade remain contested. As mentioned above, the beginning of the period is not clearly specified, and the authors of the volume do not agree on the date of the period’s termination. While Winslow dates the “defeat of the labor movement” at 1981, when President Reagan fired striking air traffic controllers, Robert Brenner argues that it was the deep recession of 1974–1975 that “delivered the knock-out punch” to labor (p. 38).

Steve Early’s excellent concluding chapter ties the book together by outlining a compelling list of the lessons learned and their relation to labor’s current paradox. First, he notes that the grassroots insurgency of the long 1970s was powered by courageous workers not initially motivated by ideology or personal idealism. These activists, not unlike TUUL activists in the CIO period (Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin 2003), provided experienced and dedicated activists and leaders for the most recent round of labor upsurge: AFL-CIO’s New Voice. Likewise, several of the isolated internal union movements produced important groundwork for subsequent positive developments in the AFL-CIO. For instance, he credits the Teamsters’ rank-and-file movement with laying the groundwork for the “Teamsters and Turtles” alliance against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, and with impacting the balance of power in the AFL-CIO. This change in the power balance eventually led to John Sweeney’s election and a leftward turn in the federation’s political stances on the Iraq war and immigration, for example.

I credit this volume with calling attention to the spate of rank-and-file rebellions
This is one hell of a book. Sweeping, energetic, lucid, rich in story and detail, but sociologically informed and informing. Jennifer Hunt, a professor at Montclair State College, put in years of deep and dogged fieldwork to craft a superb and highly inventive organizational ethnography of the New York Police Department. Ostensibly, the story is a tightly focused one, concentrating on a pre-dawn raid on an apartment in Brooklyn in July 1997 by an ESU team (Emergency Service Unit). In the flat are two Palestinian suicide bombers in possession of highly potent explosives they plan to set off in a few hours in the New York subway. A courageous roommate of the two alerts the police who move into action with considerable skill, some dissension, and blessed good luck to prevent a major disaster. The informant, a recent Pakistani immigrant who spoke little English, is severely tested by the police who try to judge the credibility of his story and counter the risks faced by both the police and the local residents. The raid itself is recreated and described in excruciating emotional and hair-raising fashion. Two officers fire their weapons, the seven shots, on entering the bedroom, critically wounding both suspects just as one moves to detonate the explosives hidden in two black bags on the floor. Minutes later, as the wounded are being carted away, two detectives X-ray the bags and, after a robot failure, disarm the live bomb by hand. An officer on the scene later says, “if the bomb had gone off, it would have been

a bag-and-broom job.” Parsed as a single story, the book is about how in less than seven hours, one persistent Muslim informant, six dedicated NYPD cops and two cool and capable bomb squad detectives along with supporting units, back-up teams, various technologies, and wise (and not so wise) commanders narrowly aborted this country’s first suicide bombing.

The book is of course far more than a single story or simply a dramatic and carefully written police procedural. This is a die-hard empirical and scholarly work deeply concerned with the troubling moral complexities embedded in the police world where the use of coercive force is a defining feature of the trade and, as the raid makes so vivid, an ever-present possibility. The personal, situational and structural shaping of these complexities provides the grand arc of Jennifer Hunt’s account. The heart of the book is located in the aftermath of the raid when the officers involved let their bosses (including Police Commissioner Howard Safir and Mayor Rudy Giuliani) know they do not want to attend a highly orchestrated press conference a few days after the raid for fear of retaliation by terrorists aimed at their families. Angered by their stance, the police command orders them to appear which they do, yet their initial reluctance has a devastating and lasting effect on their personal lives, their work careers, and, in some unexpected ways, on the organization itself.

Hunt’s detailed and episodic account of the aftermath—taking us up to, through, and beyond the events of 9/11—offers one of the most riveting and penetrating representations of the police life and culture(s) yet written. In brief, the ESU officers and bomb squad detectives involved in the raid find themselves surrounded by jealous colleagues, devious press reports, rumors and innuendos designed to dishonor them, credit-seeking (and hoarding) supervisors, anxious family members, sympathetic friends and work partners, and a gaggle of self-serving managerial elites at headquarters, One Police Plaza, known to street cops for good reason as the “Puzzle Palace.” Life goes on of course, but for the inadvertent heroes who serve as the protagonists of this police opera, it is marked by increasing disillusionment as they come to feel—and are—victimized by forces within the department. Promised rewards are withdrawn or forgotten, bosses prove unreliable and vindictive (“kiss up, kick down”), unsavory politics of a remarkably petty sort are exposed, powerful vertical and horizontal cliques ensure that trust among officers is limited, divided and highly problematic. What these career-breaking accounts reveal is that the police culture is a many splintered thing; anything but cohesive or unified, neither supportive nor protective of its members.

The lines of discord drawn within the NYPD are many, including rank, race, and gender as well as skill, interest, and ambition. They are brought to the surface for the most part without explicit analytic markers or frame breaking asides, but are impossible to miss. This fast-paced, multisited, chronological narrative lays out its theory in the telling of tales—by the stories selected, the actors and roles displayed, the contemplation and action described, what comes to pass as a result, and more tentatively pursued perhaps but making the work recognizably ethnographic, why the stories told take the shape they do. As the evidence accumulates, the reader begins to recognize and understand why many experienced and hard working officers in the lower ranks (including more than a few who are bruised and more or less alienated from the organization if not the job) take it as axiomatic that whatever those in charge decide to do, things will swiftly become infinitely worse.

Seven of the nine chapters are put forth in what the author tags “literary nonfiction.” This is an experimental or impressionist ethnography that echoes the literary journalism of Jonathan Rubinstein (1973) writing on street cops in Philadelphia in his much cited City Police, or David Simon’s (1993) edgy squad-centered portrait of detective work, a forerunner to the HBO show The Wire, in Homicide, or, more recently, Peter Moskos’ (2008) recounting of his experience as a rookie beat patrolman in a crack-infested neighborhood in Cop in the Hood. Not all ethnographic conventions are breached in Seven Shots however, for Hunt includes a crisp assessment of the social science (largely sociological) literature concerning
American big city police in the synthetic- and theory-focused introductory and concluding chapters. There are also numerous (and welcome) footnotes and a thorough methodological appendix describing her activities in the field as well as clarifying the analytic and narrative choices she made when writing the book.

As readers discover early on, there is a good deal of reconstructed dialogue and action in Seven Shots and Hunt herself is present throughout the work as a first-person guide struggling to understand the multiple perspectives and the many realities, the conflicting tales, the agonizing uncertainties, and the voiced but always incomplete and foggy remembrances she encounters. The degree that many (but not all) of the police officers she worked with open up and speak to her candidly, often painfully, is astonishing given the light cover provided (pseudonyms are rarely used). Such apparent and unusual honesty certainly serves to mark the level of trust Hunt was able to build over time with those among whom she worked. The result is a positioned if diverse truth-telling among those studied and an impressive display of contrasting meanings that underlie significant symbolic and all too real tensions in the police world between those who are inside or outside, high rank or low, local or central, open or closed, responsive or elusive, adaptable or sclerotic. What remains curious, indeed paradoxical—to both the author and reader—is just why the NYPD appears so inept and inadequate in the aftermath of a highly visible and laudable success.

Without question, Jennifer Hunt has produced an engaging and spirited work, fully accessible to a broad audience and yet loaded with lessons and leads for a number of research communities beyond the criminal justice or police studies domains. Organizational sociologists, for example, might read Hunt’s precise and insightful descriptions of the indulgence patterns present in the NYPD as generic examples for how supervision operates in public bureaucracies where there are seldom enough rewards—both formal and informal—to go around. Risk theorists can learn from Hunt’s depiction of danger as seen personally from those inside, often on-the-ground, and impersonally from those outside, typically on-high in the organization. Those concerned with management in the public or private sectors would gain from Hunt’s persuasive conclusion that too many bosses in the NYPD abandon their charges or leave them unprotected and damaged in order to proffer some gain or save themselves from censure. Prolonged exposure to these bosses drives good people away while greatly increasing the levels of dissension, duplicity, and distrust in the organization.

All this is to say that I think Seven Shots should be on many bookshelves. It is as suitable for undergraduate students as graduates, for police at all levels as well as those of us who are policed. It speaks evocatively of organizational uncertainties and ambiguities, of the spectacular and the mundane, of the good and bad associated with a job many police officers say “they love but does not love them back.” This is at-home ethnography, up front and personal, and models a fresh and inventive way to do sociology that matters. We need more.

References