

# Book review on anthropology

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## **Book review: In search of respect by Philippe Bourgois**

About the author

Philippe Bourgois is an experienced writer and researcher. He is also a professor and the chairman in the anthropology, history and social medicine department at the University of California. He mainly focuses his research on political mobilization of the ethnic communities in central and north America, political violence, labour relations in this region and the general life of the marginalized communities within America and especially the street families in the inner city dwellings of North America. He has also done research about the violence and the HIV prevalence in such dwellings, bringing out the suffering that is inherent in the modern day America that is in most cases ignored by the relevant authorities. Dr. Bourgois is currently writing a book about the addicts of heroin in San Francisco who are also homeless (Bourgois, 2003).

His work therefore can be termed as mainly being humanitarian as he brings to the lime light the plight of the poor in central and North America. Dr. Bourgois has also done research in drug abuse prevalence and its effects and how this vice affects the American social structures. He has in his many books brought out the level of social injustices that are prevalent in the lowest social structures of the American communities. These communities mainly include the blacks and the immigrants from Central America. The much debated issue of unwarranted deaths of illegal immigrants has also been addressed in his books (Bourgois, 2003).

He surely is a force to reckon with on social issues and the general American life. He puts things as they are for the relevant authorities to take the necessary action. He is currently interviewing former Salvadoran guerrilla fighters who are now day laborers in San Francisco.

So what is the book “ In search of respect” all about? This is a book that focuses on social marginalization of modern day America. It is an ethnographic research of the inner city social life in America’s most drug afflicted communities who live in the most dangerous ghettos of America. The book was first published in 1995 after an intensive research and was later awarded the Margaret Mead Award in 1997. This was because of its vivid and straightforward presentation of social plight inherent in the inner city life of modern day America. It is the only book that social identifies with the hard core drug dealers of Harlem. The book is written with a personal appeal identifying directly with the real life of the inner city dwellings and the drug dealers trade. Bourgois seem to have gone to the next level to get a real personal touch with his respondents thus the book’s emotional appeal. He has crafted his stories with wit as he presents personal real life experiences of the people in the society he is writing about. This has won him many friends among the hardcore drug dealers in Harlem despite him being an ethnographer. It is not usual for a person like him to make friends in such a community (Bourgois, 2003). This book is thus mainly about the lives of Puerto Rican drug dealers, their families, friends and enemies as well as their cultural lifestyle.

Among the major central themes of this well crafted book is the irony of the mainstream media popularization of the pop culture. Bourgois criticizes this

as being absurd. While fellow Americans are living in abject poverty and suffering, the mainstream media is busy describing this as the popular hip hop culture. The manner in which the media presents this society is questionable of the role of the media. Instead of bringing out the real and hard facts afflicting this society, mainstream media focuses on the fantasy pop culture of the inner cities in the America “ ironically, mainstream society through fashion, music, film, and television eventually recuperates and commercializes many of these oppositional street styles, recycling them as pop culture. (Bourgois, 2003).” Bourgois in his book criticizes this. According to him, mainstream media should be giving the ideal facts on the ground in order to make any meaningful change. This though does not happen as the mainstream media sends messages contradictory to what is really happening in real life. Bourgois therefore strives to ensure that this ideal life of the people living in the inner city ghettos of America is addressed and brought to the limelight.

Bourgeois also brings out the theme of racial negativity as is presented in the mainstream society. He says that despite the absolute suffering of the minorities living in the inner city ghettos, the media redirects this to a manner in which the ideal situation is not brought to light. In a bid to make more money from the life inherent in this society, the mainstream media colors crime and the ill social life in this society to appear glamorous and appealing. This further makes worse the already volatile situation in this society. Bourgois strongly criticizes this and suggests that reparative measures should be taken (Bourgois, 2003).

The book also addresses the theme of illiteracy among the Puerto Rican society. It especially gives a vivid background of the Puerto Rico people and how they are afflicted with poverty and a lack of education. In a bid to get a better life, the Puerto Ricans prefer to migrate to America in search of wage jobs which the government is busy suppressing. He points out the role of the wealth American multinational companies which took advantage of tax concessions rendering the Puerto Rican farmers jobless thus being forced to seek for a livelihood in the urban centers thus their migration to America (Bourgois, 2003).

Racism and segregation is also a major theme in this book. Bourgois calls this American ‘ apartheid’. The Harlem community is a society of mixed races (Bourgois, 2003). There is Latin Americans or the Puerto Ricans, the African Americans and a minority white community. There is suspicion among these communities with each racial group tending to cooperate within itself. This division has heightened suspicion and tension between these racial communities which has in turn heightened insecurity in the whole society as a whole.

Bourgeois also talks a lot about drugs in the inner city of Harlem. He tries to kill the myth that all drug dealers and addicts are bad people. He says that the most people have a misconception of how the street culture which is associated with drugs and crime really operates. Street culture according to him should be referred to as “ risk environment” in order to understand the real concept behind poverty and drug and substance abuse in the society. There is nothing like “ people do what they do because of their culture”

(Bourgois, 2003). This proposition is set to justify that the Puerto Ricans in Harlem are drug dealers because it is in their culture. This is not the case according to Bourgois as people in the same culture are trying their best to stay away from drugs. Society thus should be studied based on the precincts of that particular society rather than through a generalization of a society's culture. A point to note here is that Bourgois confirmed that most of the residents of East Harlem or El Barrio have absolutely nothing to do with drugs.

The issue of marginalization of the Puerto Ricans and other minorities has also been addressed. Bourgois points out how Puerto Rican mothers are ridiculed in front of their small children in school. The public school system thus creates a culture of hostility and alienation among the members of this community. These marginalizations discourage most Puerto Ricans residents from pursuing any meaningful education and are thus caught into the drug and substance abuse web. This is in a bid to achieve a respected social status through the multimillion drug business which they couldn't get through education. This segregation therefore as Bourgois says pushes most of the Puerto Ricans to the drug business. They are thus not into the business by choice but by circumstance. Bourgois accidentally exposes the illiteracy of Ray when he asks him to read an article in front of his friends. This occurrence reveals the situation facing many Puerto Ricans. If Ray cannot read or write, yet he is a millionaire, then what would you expect of the children who have been subjected to the same system and who are looking up to him as a role model? They thus should not be victimized for this but instead should be given opportunities to help them get to better and

socially acceptable businesses. The government systems are thus the major cause of this underground economy (Bourgois, 2003).

Bourgois and his wife moved to East Harlem or El Barrio in the 1980's. This was to integrate himself directly with the culture of the residents of this area. In this way, Bourgois could personally correct primary data without relying on any distorted secondary sources. He made himself part and parcel of the society by befriending the members of this community and whole integrating with their way of life. He conducts personal interviews in families in this community interviewing people like primo his main character in this book. He also uses participant observation by actively participating in the events held by the Puerto Ricans. He managed to record a lot of raw data through direct participation and had first hand information from the Puerto Ricans. By immersing himself into these neighborhood, Bourgois was able to learn the thinking and behavioral aspects of the Puerto Ricans. This enabled him to get to know the real facts behind what is normally portrayed by government sociologists and stasticians who just take a general research of this community. He got to visit numerous of the Puerto Ricans and also got visited many times thus the actual primary information. He however managed to stay away from the hard drugs. Surprisingly, they never at any one time compelled him to take drugs (Bourgois, 2003).

The mode of presentation of his data is quite compelling. Bourgois utilizes all of the elements of persuasion. These are pathos, logos and ethos. He uses personal stories of people like primo to present the issues inherent in this

community. This way, he manages to create a personal appeal to the audience thus managing to persuade his audience.

The issues that stand out are the issues to do with drug business and the underground economy that run in this society. This issue is brought about by the unstable American education system. If this system is corrected, then it follows that a lot of drug crime would be eliminated since most of the people in this business get into it as a result of being segregated by the system.

It was really interesting to learn about the rich Puerto Rican culture. I disliked though the manner in which they lead a life of poverty trying to get a better life while at the same time being suppressed by the wealth multinational companies (Bourgois, 2003). I also disliked the manner in which Puerto Ricans are perceived by the mainstream society as a community infested with crime and drug dealers. This though has been proved otherwise as Bourgois has clearly shown that drug dealing is not a precinct of the Puerto Ricans but many are pushed into this business by circumstance. The whole society in collaboration with the federal government has a big role to play to avert this situation and create a health society free from drugs and crime.

## **References**

Bourgois, P. (2003). *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*. New York: Cambridge