

"in search of respect: selling crack in el barrio" by philippe bourgois essay sam...

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“ In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio” by Philippe Bourgois Essay Sample

The book “ In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio” by Philippe Bourgois is an in-depth look of the working community and family lives of inner-city Puerto Rican crack dealers in East Harlem and gives important answers to many of the difficult questions facing policy-makers, social scientist, journalists and lay people concerned about the polarization of American society and the hopelessness, despair and deteriorating facing our inner cities. Bourgois lived with his wife and child in the neighborhood he was studying which was a crumbling tenement barrio. Throughout the five years of his participant-observation research, he created relationships with approximately two dozen crack house traffickers and their families. He brought to the study a political structural look into the plight of the underclass in the modern urban economy. He gave a look into the intimate everyday life answers about the way his friends and subjects saw this world and organized their lives within it. The author notes the street patterns of attitudes and behaviors and gives the reader individualistic explanations to the structural, cultural, economic and family trends emerging in contemporary urban America.

The book gives a look at the young men’s cultural role expectations of being sole breadwinners of traditional patriarchal families that were very close against a reconstructed economy. Inner city unionized factory jobs that supported their masculine identities have been replaced with service sector jobs that devastated their sense of power, position and respect. Their

dreams of attaining secure lives in a new country were a clash with the reality that they had to ultimately have to accept serving in economically and socially marginalized roles. This came through their disheartening experiences when seeking jobs in traditionally masculine work arenas such as construction, where they were racially discriminated against, to their failures in the newer, feminized occupational realm of the service sector where employment was dominated by women, submissiveness and the upper middle class white culture which they could never understand or master. They are caught in a semi-assimilated world where they no longer fit within the Puerto Rican culture they only to find little place in the legitimate New York economy.

These men and women wrestled with global changes in gender roles. The women moved into positions of greater economic responsibility and independence, gradually freeing themselves from the tyrannical dominance of violent men, only to find themselves trapped by their cultural gender role expectations of romantic love, status and fulfillment wedded to having a boyfriend, and intimacy attained through childbearing. Women wrestled uneasily with their movement out of confined domestic situations into roles in the underground economy, only to find themselves denied access to the more lucrative illicit employment opportunities, and torn between their and society's expectations that they sacrifice themselves to raise their children. Bourgois's analysis is painfully accurately made not only in the masculine economic realm, but in the more hidden feminine realm, where the answers he found led him. He looks into the first large scale entry of women into the

drug scene, an alarming development that has threatened to undermine the inner city childrearing. Without women creating extended pseudo-kinship networks, the children born to the disenfranchised men and their youthful, idealistic women become subject to even greater social disorganization and disarray.

This deterioration and the effect it has on inner city children, relating these not only to personal and social problems of individuals, but to the macro economic trends that have characterized the reproduction of poor populations. The children of this underclass are experiencing higher mortality rates during adolescence than at younger ages, as the barrio works better to support and nurture children than young teenagers. The harsh economic realities of life and the barrio cultural roles that frame behavioral expectations take a heavy toll on adolescents as soon as they separate from their mothers and move into the destructive social and economic roles open to them. Rejected in the legitimate economy, the boys become dealers. Abused by the boys, the girls become desperate single mothers.

These roles are filled with contradictions, as their traditional Puerto Rican family models concerning parenthood conflict with contemporary adaptations, undermining both maternal nurturance and paternal support. We witness, then the pain of young people, young families and young children, as they suffer and self destruct. This structural victimization is rooted to the issues of poverty, racial segregation, economic polarization and social inequality that have created the conditions fostering the rampant

substance abuse. These will be examined more deeply to understand Bourgois ethnography of the people of El Barrio (Bourgois 2003).

With poverty most social thinkers over the past century have been in general agreement concerning the long-term effects of urbanization and modernization on the family. They see a progressive nuclearization of the family in the face of modernization. This position is perhaps best presented by William Goode, who has stated that industrialization and urbanization have brought about "...fewer kinship ties with distance relatives and a greater emphasis on the nuclear family unit of couple and children" (1963: 1). Although in many parts of the world we can observe the association between modernization and fewer extended kinship ties.

There are a number of exceptions, most in developing countries. The Puerto Rican Americans in New York use extended kinship ties as a strategy for coping with poverty. The natural family is a nuclear family consisting of two monogamous heterosexual parents with children. In the past four decades this typical family has become harder to find. According to census data for 1990, fewer than 27 percent of all families in the United States are comprised of married couples with children less than eighteen years of age. The formation of families through the process of marriage serves several important social functions by reducing competition for spouses, regulating the sexual division of labor, and meeting the material, educational and emotional needs of children (Lavenda and Schultz 2003).

There are two explanations to poverty the first focuses on social structure and this feature of society will deny people access to education or learning job skills as with individuals in El Barrio. They emphasize racial, ethnic, age and gender discrimination as well as changes in the job market such as the closing of plants, drying up of unskilled jobs and an increase in marginal jobs that pay poverty wages. Another explanation focuses on characteristics of individuals that are assumed to contribute to poverty. Individualistic explanations that anthropologists reject outright as worthless stereotypes are laziness and lack of intelligence. Individualistic explanations that anthropologists will acknowledge include dropping out of school, bearing children at younger ages, and averaging more children than women in the other social classes, but it should be kept in mind this is not blame only observation. Poverty is unequally distributed in the United States. Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, children, women headed households, and rural Americans are more likely than others to be poor. The poverty rate of the elderly is less than that of the general population. Some believe that a characteristic of individuals, such as the desire for immediate gratification causes poverty, but in ethnography studies structural features are examined (Lavenda and Schultz 2003).

When looking at economic polarization anthropologist understands the most fundamental requirements of all societies are to see that the basic physiological needs of its people are met. People cannot live unless they receive a minimum amount of food, water, and protection from the elements. Society will not last without living people, every society needs to

work out systematic ways of producing or procuring from the environment the essential commodities and then distributing what it regards as necessary to its members. In the United States, goods and services are distributed according to a capitalistic principle. In socialist countries as Cuba and China, distribution takes place to the principal of each according to their need. Every society has worked out a patterned way of ensuring that people get what they need for survival, drugs were the residents of El Barrio's means and became their economic system, but drugs is becoming the slow destruction of their society. Other needs besides the necessity to produce and distribute vital commodities to their members are systems of marriage and family and the educational system. Social order and the inequalities are another important component that needs to be examined (Lassalle and O'Dougherty 1997: 243).

All societies have patterns of inequality that directly influence their member's opportunities, life styles, goals and self conception. Although the types of inequality may vary from hunting and gathering to agricultural inequality is a marked feature of society regardless of its level of economic and technological development. Social stratification is composed of layers of groups, some of whose members have greater life chances and some of whose members have less. Ethnic group distinctions are distinctions of cultural background in terms of such cultural items as music, dress and food preferences and political, religious and other loyalties.

Many people can accept that ethnic differences are culturally learned more individuals find it difficult to understand that the racial distinctions they

make are based to a degree on cultural learning. Regardless of the biological criteria which one might use to define race, a great deal of its definition is based in culture. People vary from one another on the basis of many different biologically inherited traits such as hair color, hair texture, eye color, stature, nose shape or skin color and so on. In every population of every society one finds some degree of mixture of such biological traits. One person may have brown wavy hair, another brown straight hair, and another black wavy hair. Race is culturally learned and shared categorization of people on the basis of such traits. It involves pointing to some traits as important for classifying people and to others as unimportant (Lopez 2007: 60-85).

Skin color is the major trait used in our culture to separate races, while hair texture is not. Most Americans distinguish between the white, black and yellow races. But these three major distinctions used in our country have not been used everywhere. In Latin America many who are viewed as black in North America would be viewed as mulattoes. Class stratification is based upon the unequal distribution and ownership of income producing property and the unequal possession of wealth producing jobs skills in a society. The more income producing property one owns, the higher one's stratum, along with the more productive property one owns the greater one's life chances. The United States is probably the society in which stratification has come closest to a system of unequal strata based on the criteria of wealth arising from property ownership and job skills. From the beginning and throughout history, the wealth of the nation has been highly unequally distributed.

Wealth is usually the primary determinant of life chances in our society. From entrance into Harvard to politics wealth makes the difference. It is not to say that it is set in stone only that the chances are greater for admittance. Types of occupations, vacation spots, housing quality and locale, clothing, and other desirable things in life can be attained with wealth and more difficult to attain without it (Lopez 2007: 60-85).

Inequality in gaining employment and promotion arises from three interrelated causes: discrimination, sexual harassment and traditional gender role socialization. Discrimination refers to denying opportunities to persons on the basis of arbitrary and irrelevant criteria. Sexual harassment refers to the imposition of implied or explicit unwanted sexual comments or advances in the context of a formal organizational relationship. Gender role socialization refers to attitudes goals and self conceptions in terms of what is considered culturally appropriate for male's verses females which are learned through the socialization process.

This can be seen very well in the study of New York's El Barrio's culture. Less obvious than overt discrimination and sexual harassment and produces inequality in the work place is the influence of gender role socialization. This was a huge problem for the Puerto Rico population in New York. Girls have been traditionally taught values, beliefs, attitudes and self conception that later in life put them at a competitive disadvantage in gaining equal employment opportunities. In the ethnography examined this was almost reverse. Where as, the young men felt the stinging realities of unequal

employment opportunities, but still held gender role expectations (Lassalle and O'Dougherty 1997: 243).

Bourgois views the problems associated with the illegal economy as a result of the intertwining of structural oppression and individual action. Long term structural changes and remnants of rural Puerto Rican culture combine to create a street culture that traps many youth in the illegal economy. The continued physical and cultural exclusion of Puerto Ricans from the dominant culture, added with changing definitions of gender roles, only adds to the problems of the persistently poor and helps perpetuate these problems across generations. Lacking the cultural capital to succeed in the legal economy, many of El Barrio's poorest members are forced into the underground economy. Puerto Ricans who first moved to El Barrio were largely trapped in the vulnerable factor based economy of New York's textile industry. This industry crumbled and was replaced by a service oriented economy and because of this it caused unemployment, income reduction, loss of benefits and weaker unions. The primary route of legal upward mobility requires working in professional fields, which the residents of El Barrio do not qualify for.

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