

## Review Symposium

*Sidewalk*. By Mitchell Duneier. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999. Pp. 383. \$27.00 (cloth); \$15.00 (paper).

*Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. By Elijah Anderson. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999. Pp. 352. \$14.95 (paper).

*No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*. By Katherine Newman. New York: Russell Sage Foundation and Knopf, 1999. Pp. 401. \$15.00 (paper).

## Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography<sup>1</sup>

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After a long decade during which researchers, following journalists and policy pundits, focused on the alleged rise, (mis)conduct, and threat of an “underclass” characterized by its presumed social isolation and antisocial behaviors (Jencks and Peterson 1991), students of race and poverty in the U.S. metropolis have recently turned to issues of work, family, morality, and individual responsibility, in keeping with the newfound political concern for and media interest in those topics fostered by the “welfare reform” and the bipartisan rightward turn of social policy. The three ethnographically based books offer a composite portrait of the dark figure of “the

<sup>1</sup> Many colleagues were kind enough to provide precise and productive comments on this essay (without necessarily agreeing with all of its arguments), among them Pierre Bourdieu, Zygmunt Bauman, Philippe Bourgois, Michael Burawoy, Megan Comfort, Kim DaCosta, Rick Fantasia, Arlie Hochschild, Jack Katz, Gail Kligman, Eric Klinenberg, Josh Page, and Paul Willis. I also benefited from the reactions of participants to the Author Meets Critics session on Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street* at the meetings of the American Sociological Association, Anaheim, California, August 20, 2001, where a portion of this article was presented as “Decoding Ghetto Violence.” Direct correspondence to Loïc Wacquant, Department of Sociology, University of California, 410 Barrows Hall, Berkeley, California 94720. E-mail: loic@uclink4.berkeley.edu

street” seen from different yet converging angles in just this light: Mitchell Duneier’s *Sidewalk* tracks the trials and tribulations of black homeless book vendors and magazine scavengers who ply their trade in a touristy section of Lower Manhattan; Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street* chronicles the raging battle between “street” and “decent” families in the ghetto of Philadelphia; and Katherine Newman’s *No Shame in My Game* depicts the gallant struggles of the “working poor” of Harlem to uphold the hallowed values of thrift, family, and community in the bowels of the de-regulated service economy.

These books assemble a mass of rich and nuanced empirical data variously drawn from firsthand observation, in-depth interviews, life stories, and institutional reports gathered over years of fieldwork conducted individually or in team. They would have greatly advanced our knowledge and understanding of the ground-level social dynamics and lived experience of urban marginality and racial division in the United States at century’s end, were it not for their eager embrace of the clichés of public debate (albeit in inverted form), the pronounced discordance between interpretation and the evidence they offer, and the thick coat of moralism in which their analyses are wrapped, which together severely limit the questions they raise and the answers they give. Thus *Sidewalk* proffers a sprawling stockpile of data without any theory to organize it and strives, by default, to bring these data to bear on a crime-and-policing issue that they are ill-suited to address; *Code of the Street* is animated by a thesis, that proximate mentoring makes a difference in the fate of ghetto residents, that is glaringly disconnected from, even invalidated by, its own findings; and *No Shame in My Game* subordinates both observation and theorization to public policy considerations, such as the ideological dispute over “family values,” that are so constricting that it ends up slighting its own discoveries and reading like a business tract in praise of low-wage work.

Most significantly, all three authors put forth truncated and distorted accounts of their object due to their abiding wish to articulate and even celebrate the fundamental goodness—honesty, decency, frugality—of America’s urban poor. To do this, Duneier *sanitizes* the actions and neighborhood impact of sidewalk bookselling by systematically downplaying or suppressing information that would taint the saintly image of the vendors he wishes to project; Anderson *dichotomizes* ghetto residents into good and bad, “decent” and “street,” and makes himself the spokesman and advocate of the former; and Newman *glamorizes* the skills and deeds of her low-wage workers, extolling their submission to servile labor as evidence of their inner devotion to the country’s ordained “work ethic.” All three authors make the urban poor, and to be more exact the *black* subproletariat of the city, into *paragons of morality* because they remain locked within the *prefabricated problematic* of public stereotypes and pol-

icy punditry, for which it is the only guise under which this subproletariat is deemed “presentable.”<sup>2</sup>

The earnest labors, good intentions, and personal generosity of these scholars are beyond dispute. But moral munificence is no guarantee for rigorous social analysis, and even less so a substitute for it. And the task of social science, ethnography included, is not to exonerate the character of dishonored social figures and dispossessed groups by “documenting” their everyday world in an effort to attract sympathy for their plight. It is to dissect the social mechanisms and meanings that govern their practices, ground their morality (if such be the question), and explain their strategies and trajectories, as one would do for any social category, high or low, noble or ignoble. Appealing to popular pieties about the down-trodden would not be so serious a problem if the evidence presented in these books supported the appeal. But, taken singly or collectively, *Sidewalk*, *Code of the Street*, and *No Shame in My Game* do not bring about “the street” the message that their authors wish them to convey. Their blindness to issues of class power and their stubborn disregard for the deep and multisided involvement (or, to use their own language, “responsibility”) of the state in producing the social dereliction and human wretchedness they sensibly portray condemn Duneier, Anderson, and Newman to elaborating variants of the classical fallacy of *argumentum ad populum*, in which a thesis is asserted, even acclaimed, because it resonates with the moral schemata and expectations of its audience, but at the cost of a dangerous suspension of analytic and political judgment.

After presenting and evaluating their core arguments in turn, I will suggest that the proximate causes of the common limitations and liabilities of these three tomes—their uncontrolled skid from morality to moralism, their naïve acceptance of ordinary categories of perception as categories of analysis, their utter subservience to policy prescriptions and propaganda—can be found in the parochialism of the U.S. tradition of poverty research, the unwarranted empiricist disjunction of ethnography from theory, and the changing economics of social science publishing. Their collective failure to go beyond a homiletic vision of “the street” also points to a broader quandary faced by ethnographic researchers today, as the craft enjoys renewed popularity but also faces unprecedented threats to its autonomy and integrity. And it spotlights a watershed moment in the politics of urban sociology in the United States: just as the romantic

<sup>2</sup> In a 1946 talk, “Principle and Rationalization in Race Relations,” Everett C. Hughes (1971, p. 216) noted that a major obstacle to the rigorous study of ethnoracial inequality is the impulse to “counter the exaggerated statements of our opponents with exaggerations in another direction,” leading one to portray subordinate groups as “paragons of virtue, delightful in their manners—better, in fact, than is common for human creatures to be.” A half-century later, that remark applies in full to the black poor who stand at the epicenter of America’s “urban orientalism.” (Josh Page pointed out this passage to me after I had completed this essay. I read it as confirmation that the “opportunism of logic” that Hughes diagnosed as a “fault common enough in American social science” is a deep-seated and long-standing problem.)

ethnographies of the cool, the marginal, and the lowly produced during the progressive sixties in the style of the second Chicago school were organically tied to the liberal politics of America's semi-welfare state and its then-expanding "social-problems complex" (Gouldner 1973), the *neo-romantic* tales spun by Duneier, Anderson, and Newman at the close of the regressive nineties suggest that U.S. sociology is now tied and party to the ongoing construction of the *neoliberal* state and its "carceral-assistential complex" for the punitive management of the poor, on and off the street (Wacquant 1999, pp. 83–94).

#### THE SAINTS OF GREENWICH VILLAGE: DUNEIER ON HOMELESS SIDEWALK VENDORS

During his stint as a law school student at New York University, Mitchell Duneier became intrigued by, and acquainted with, street sellers of "black books" occupying a busy three-block area at the crossroads of Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue, at the heart of Greenwich Village, the gentrified bohemian quarter of New York City. Through his friendship with one of these vendors (who eventually cotaught a course with him at the University of California, Santa Barbara, on "The Life of the Street in Black America"), he gained access to the site and returned to work there as a "general assistant" and "magazine vendor and scavenger" for about one year (stretched over three summers and one fall season plus a spring from 1996 to 1999). *Sidewalk* (hereafter SW) draws a detailed portrait of the social organization of this informal street trade plied by homeless African-American men with checkered journeys at the margins of society, complete with pages upon pages of transcripts of running conversations and some 72 pictures by *Chicago Tribune* photographer Ovie Carter. It documents patterns of cooperation and competition among sellers, their contrasted interactions with black and white patrons, and their exchanges with neighbors, business organizations, and city authorities as represented by local business improvement districts and the police.

Duneier's aim is to "offer a framework for understanding the changes that have taken place on the sidewalk over the past four decades" (SW, p. 8), since Jane Jacobs's sentimental account of the role of "public characters" in the production of urban civility in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). Two questions anchor his inquiry: How do vendors of written matter and assorted secondhand goods in the Village "have the ingenuity" to "live in a moral order" in "the face of exclusion and stigmatization on the basis of race and class?" and "How do their acts intersect with a city's mechanisms to regulate its public spaces?" (SW, p. 9). Duneier finds that his subjects lead "moral lives" and even act as "mentors" for one another and their clients, notwithstanding their offensive appearance and behavior. He also contends that, far from being a criminogenic factor, they enhance the safety and welfare of the neighborhood, thus challenging the "zero-tolerance" policing campaign

launched by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in an effort to cleanse the city streets of its rabble. Duneier uses these findings to make a plea for amending the so-called broken windows theory of public (dis)order and spare from its application the moral strivers among the urban outcasts. As we shall see, Duneier's central claims are either unexceptional (that sidewalk vendors live in a moral world: who does not?) or unsupported (that they improve neighborhood safety and social cohesion: his own data are either inapposite or indicative of the contrary). And the corresponding plea for a kinder, gentler street policing is profoundly misguided as well as unconvincing: "zero tolerance" is not, contrary to what Duneier asserts, responsible for the drop in urban crime, and tweaking its implementation to allow for more sidewalk entrepreneurship would hardly affect the life chances of the urban poor.

Sidewalk commerce in this section of Greenwich Village involves three interlinked and loosely hierarchized roles: book vendors, scavengers of magazines and secondhand goods, and the panhandlers who assist them in various capacities. The vendors specialize by type of books (art volumes, dictionaries, best-sellers, "black books," out-of-print tomes, comics, etc.) and take in \$50–\$200 daily from a mix of passers-by and neighbors who patronize their half-dozen tables. By selling printed matter on the street, Duneier proposes, these homeless men not only exercise a worthy and complex occupation;<sup>3</sup> they also "serve an important function in the lives of their customers," offering them an attentive ear, the "expectation of continued discussion," and "a symbol of those values necessary to live in accordance to ideals of self-worth" (SW, pp. 19, 38, 34). Duneier speaks effusively of the relationships that Hakim Hasan, his main informant, develops "with many young black men" from the poor boroughs of New York City who stop by, likening Hasan's role to the function of the ghetto "old head" of yesteryear but one "located squarely in the new economy," whose "presence emphasizes that gang leaders and drug dealers are not the only alternatives" (SW, pp. 37, 33, 40).

Like the book vendors, magazine scavengers are African-American men in their mid-30s to mid-50s, all but one former or current drug addicts, half of whom have been to jail (or prison: one cannot tell as Duneier's account conflates these two very different institutions). Nearly all claim that they "made a choice to live on the streets" (SW, pp. 23, 49, 54), where they work a few days a week, combining their sales with welfare payments and veteran pensions to eke out a living. They would have succumbed to a retreatist "fuck it!" mentality," entailing the loss of one's sense of shame and embarrassment, were it not for what Duneier calls the "re-

<sup>3</sup> "There is substantive complexity to this work: finding the magazines, taking them in and out of storage, setting them up, knowing what kind of magazines to carry, how to price them, and what to charge" (SW, p. 68). By that definition, it is hard to think of a trade that is not complex. Indeed, we shall see that Newman finds also that fast-food employees hold highly skilled jobs. Anderson, by contrast, recognizes the lousy jobs that his informants have for what they are: lousy.

habilitative forces of the sidewalk”: street entrepreneurship has enabled them to “take control and earn respect within a limited domain,” and thereby escape the downward cycle of economic redundancy, social disaffiliation, and escalating entanglement with the criminal justice apparatus (SW, p. 79).<sup>4</sup>

The crack-addicted panhandlers who hold the door and beg for money at the vestibules of automated-teller machines partake of this sidewalk economy in that they supplement their income by working as assistants to the book vendors, holding their place at night, watching their tables when they need to take a break, “laying shit out,” and moving merchandise to and from the nearby parking garages and storage lockers where it is stowed after dark. Again, Duneier’s main argument is that the panhandlers are moral beings who “derive self-respect from the way they conduct themselves” and “have chosen to engage in a worthy enterprise” which, despite the mutual scorn that the two subgroups have for each other, offers panhandlers an opportunity to move up to the position of street vendor and eventually benefit from the morally uplifting and socially integrative pull of this informal street business (SW, pp. 84, 85, 83).<sup>5</sup> Echoing compassionate conservatism, compassionate sociology intimates that deep-seated problems of urban poverty and inequality can be effaced by an infusion of personal “responsibility” and one-on-one mentoring: no matter how economically desperate and socially marginal, a sidewalk tradesman can be a “sponsor” for other wayward souls “in a way that no government or social-service agency, religious institution, or charity can. The task of the sponsor is to encourage responsible behavior” out of his own goodwill. And Duneier to wax emotional: “I am thinking about the sidewalk. Thank goodness for the sidewalk” (SW, p. 80).

Now, Duneier concedes that the sidewalk system of “informal social control” anchored by inner morality and mutual respect is hardly perfect. It cannot entirely contain untoward behavior, such as sleeping out, urinating in public, and aggressively “coming on” to women passing by on the street. But, according to him, even these violations of common standards of propriety are motivated not so much by brute constraints (such as the “access problem to the bathroom resource itself,” discovered during a firsthand visit to the public latrines of Washington Park and verified

<sup>4</sup> “They have used the opportunity provided by the sidewalk to become innovators—earning a living, striving for self-respect, establishing good relations with fellow citizens, providing support for each other” (SW, p. 79).

<sup>5</sup> It is not clear why panhandlers would want to become written-matter sellers since, according to Duneier’s data, they earn much more than the lower end of book vendors (\$75 a day, nearly twice the minimum wage) and they do not have to scavenge, keep a spot, lay out and store away merchandise, or maintain a clientele.

by the testimony of a friend golfer)<sup>6</sup> as by a sense of decency and “respect for society.” Thus homeless vendors innovate the technique of urinating into a cup held under an untucked shirt while pretending to hail a cab out of concern “about the feelings of [their] fellow citizens” in restaurants and other commercial establishments who might be offended by their appearance, drunkenness, or body odor if they came in. Invoking ecological theory, Duneier claims that vendors sleep out on the block because of “the complementarity of the various habitat elements,” namely cheap food, readily available shelter, the opportunity to make money, and the presence of friends who help make them feel safe and comfortable. Students of homelessness—and, even more so, advocates for the rights of the homeless—will be surprised to learn that being “unhoused” (a curious neologism used throughout the book by Duneier) is a voluntary phenomenon: vendors and scavengers “choose” to sleep on the streets either because of the brute habituation of their body to “sleeping on hard surfaces” or as an expression of their abiding commitment to entrepreneurialism.<sup>7</sup>

“Talking to women” on the sidewalk can also “create a ‘quality of life’ problem in the minds of residents,” especially when the homeless black vendors attempt to draw upper-class white women who pass by their tables into sexually laden conversations. Deploying the analytic techniques of “a kind of policy-oriented applied conversation analysis” enables Duneier to “consistently discover” that “rudeness” is indeed what “makes some residents of the Village feel annoyance and even anguish” at the street peddlers and scavengers. And that “for the women, the men’s ‘eyes upon the street’ do not bring about a sense of security among strangers

<sup>6</sup> “I have also heard from Adam Winkler, a friend who plays golf at the Hillcrest Country Club, that it is not uncommon to see men urinate on the golf course, despite the restrooms scattered throughout the tract. In all socioeconomic classes, the male act of urinating in public seems to be common, though those who work on the streets seem to have fewer options as to where to go” (SW, p. 186).

<sup>7</sup> For the incredulous reader, the former explanation must be cited in full: “Mudrick’s [a magazine scavenger] ‘Once you’re homeless, you’re always homeless’ seems to be linked to his body’s response to the social and physical experience of sleeping on a hard surface. His body seems to have grown to prefer a particular experience. . . . For some of these men, sleeping in a bed no longer feels natural. Although most Americans take sleeping in a bed as basic to decency, the conventional bed is not a physical necessity but a cultural artefact; many people of the world regard a bed as less healthy for sleeping than a hard surface” (SW, p. 168). This learned preference of the body for “hard surfaces” fails to explain why Mudrick does not opt to snooze on the floor of an apartment or hotel room rather than risk his life sleeping out on the streets. Nor does the commitment to entrepreneurialism explain (somewhat redundantly) why Mudrick “chooses to sleep on the block”: millions of Americans define their personal identity by their job, yet they do not for that feel the need to bed down at their workplace.

but a feeling of deep distrust” (SW, pp. 199, 216).<sup>8</sup> Duneier concedes that a “few men who commit ‘interactional vandalism’ give a bad name to others,” but he reassures us that, while such breaches of “conversational ethics”—also commonly known as gender harassment—do “create tension,” they “rarely harm” and should not reflect badly on the vendors since “at other times . . . each of these men would be seen as acting in ‘positive’ and straightforward ways toward others, including the women in their lives” (SW, pp. 190, 210, 314). As for the accusation by local bookstore owners that the sidewalk vendors steal books and sell them at a cut rate, Duneier rebuts it with a long exegesis on the organization of publishing suggesting that the “sale of written matter is always a corrupt enterprise” (SW, p. 221) and that theft is rampant in the business of bookselling. Presumably, the fact that store owners and customers filch books provides a warrant for vendors to do so also.

Duneier is to be commended for his persistence, sensitivity, and assiduity in the field. Unlike his previous book, *Slim’s Table*, in which he conjectured rashly about social structure and culture in the ghetto of Chicago’s South Side without having set foot in it,<sup>9</sup> *Sidewalk* is firmly grounded in direct observation (supplemented with 20 interviews paid \$50 apiece) and extensive personal engagement with the street scene. But Duneier’s admirable patience and boundless empathy, verging on devotion, for his subjects blinds him to evidence and processes that do not fit his portrait. The irenic vision of a fragile community of dispossessed, street-living men triply burdened with racial stigma, criminal records, and drug addiction who nonetheless resolve conflicts peacefully and do not commit illegal acts in their gallant struggle for independent living “on the legit side,” who, better yet, enhance social cohesion and public order in the city, is a heartwarming tale—complete with the “Kodak moments” of happy times spent with a loving grandchild or visiting a sick elderly aunt (SW, pp. 76–78, 108–11)—but it is simply not believable on the face of it.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This would seem to be a textbook case of methodological overkill: Does one need to track “adjacency pairs,” spot “disaffiliative responses,” measure the delay between question and answer with a stopwatch in tenths of a second, and resort to the intricate transcription techniques of conversation analysis to “discover” that women use “distracted facial gestures,” hurried moves, and curt replies to ward off unwanted invites to face-to-face exchange by male strangers in public space?

<sup>9</sup> *Slim’s Table* (Duneier 1992) is based on the sayings and conduct of a few elderly black patrons and one white customer inside a white-owned ethnic restaurant located on Fifty-third Street in the affluent neighborhood of Hyde Park, the stronghold of the University of Chicago and one of the safest neighborhoods in the city.

<sup>10</sup> In this, *Sidewalk* is an ironic vindication of Duneier’s warning that a major obstacle to adhering rigorously to the rules of the ethnographic method is the “strong attachments one develops with one’s subjects, which can lead to emotions that make the idea of social science less than realistic” (SW, p. 79).



1

Duneier presents no evidence that Hakim and his colleagues actually have any influence over young men from the ghetto who take advice and purchase books from them, unless one counts as evidence the incidental statement to that effect of *one* youth during a quick interview on the fly. Given that the streets of Lower Manhattan are also filled with black service workers, black clerks, black executives, and black professionals—all of whom provide plenty of conventional “role models”—it is hard to see why homeless vendors would acquire the symbolic visibility and sociomoral efficacy that *Sidewalk* attributes to them. Duneier also speculates that the vendor’s table is “a site for interaction that weakens the social barriers between persons otherwise separated by vast social and economic inequalities” (SW, p. 71) but he presents no data and suggests no mechanism whereby such fleeting and superficial contacts would produce this weakening. Customers of department stores interact daily with cashiers, and corporate executives frequently run into the black and Latino janitors who clean their offices nightly without *eo ipso* reducing class differences and bridging ethnoracial divides. Duneier asserts that the ethnic variety of buyers “gives a good sense of the wide-ranging impact a book vendor *can* have on the lives of many people on the street” (SW, p. 25; emphasis added) but, again, there is no evidence that they *do* have an impact on any of them. Thus the moral salience and cultural sponsorship thesis of the book is unsubstantiated and rests entirely on a continual confusion between sociability and solidarity, cordiality and cohesion (as when Duneier asserts that “sidewalk life still provides strangers with a source of solidarity”; SW, p. 293). As for the notion that “there is no substitute for the power of the informal social relations that constitute a wholesome sidewalk” (SW, p. 42), it is simply fanciful: cities and neighborhoods without sidewalk vendors have not for that reason plunged into moral strife and social chaos.

2

The saintliness of vendors in Duneier’s portrait is the cumulative effect of three strategies of selective data collection, interpretation, and presentation: disconnecting, censoring, and skewing. First, Duneier *disconnects the legal from the illegal economy* and excludes by fiat the latter from his purview, on grounds that the topic was “addressed in detail by other scholars” (SW, p. 159). This is surprising, first, because the Village is renowned as one of the region’s prime open-air markets for narcotics, a variety of which can be openly purchased on the streets, in Washington Park, and around the nearby basketball courts. It is also unwarranted since previous research of the subsistence strategies of the homeless in New York City by Waterston (1993) and Dordick (1997) as well as studies of the city’s informal economy (Bourgois 1995; Freidenberg 1995; Sharff 1998)—which Duneier studiously ignores—have consistently shown that

there is no separation between the licit and illicit sectors of street commerce: drug-addicted homeless and poor people routinely combine intermittent wage labor, odd jobs, pilfering, scavenging, drug peddling, and prostitution—whatever is at hand to stay afloat. When Duneier maintains that even panhandling “makes the sidewalk safer by providing an outlet for [derelict men] to earn money to support their drug habits by means *other than* stealing or themselves selling drugs” (SW, p. 85; emphasis added), he does not explain why panhandlers could not at the same time beg for money, work for book vendors, *and* engage in a variety of less commendable activities to satisfy their addiction and other needs as the occasions arise. His postulate that there exists a patent incompatibility between worthy street entrepreneurship and unlawful pursuits is untenable and begs the very question to be investigated.

It may well be that sidewalk vendors do take up the trade as an “alternative to stealing” but there is no way of knowing since Duneier also systematically *censors unflattering and deviant behavior* that would contradict his contention that they are engaged in a wholesome enterprise of moral uplift of self and other. He repeats time and again that street selling has a civilizing effect on all involved and that “on most occasions the vendors are self-regulating,” but then he had a policy of exiting from the scene whenever vendors became drunk and aggressive (SW, pp. 95, 47) and he supplies ample incidental evidence that directly belies this notion. Thus many scavengers are chronic cocaine and alcohol abusers who cannot be relied upon to man their own table because they will run off to appease their habit as soon as they get enough cash. One of their motivations for sleeping out, rather than in a cheap hotel, is to score crack and “keep bingeing all night long—smoking or drinking” until they pass out, hardly behavior that bolsters conventional social norms (SW, pp. 92, 160, 165).<sup>11</sup> Some vendors also frighten tourists into giving them money in exchange for directions, while fierce competition for valuable spots on the street is regulated by intimidation and likely by force. Yet there is scarcely any account of physical commotion and confrontation in the book and no trace of weapons (outside of one cursory mention; SW, p. 244), even for self-defense, which leaves unexplained how homeless men who carry hundreds of dollars in cash on them manage to fend off violent street predators after dark (but then Duneier did not follow them at night). Might the routine use of violence have something to do with the fact, also left unexamined, that sidewalk vending is an exclusively masculine endeavor (with the exception of one Filipina seller), when the activities that compose it seem tailor-made for poor women? That Duneier did *not* grant

<sup>11</sup> “If [vendors] were using drugs, . . .” writes Duneier, “we might reasonably conclude that they had given up on the struggle to live in accordance with society’s standards” (SW, p. 170). This is a curious proposition since (i) Duneier provides profuse indications that sidewalk vendors are using drugs and (ii) millions of Americans of all classes and ethnic groups use illegal drugs regularly without for that matter having forsaken “society’s standards.”

his informants cover of anonymity, contrary to the norm in ethnographic research, strongly reinforces the bent to exclude illegal and immoral activities from their accounts.<sup>12</sup>

A third technique for beautifying street commerce consists in *skewing the display and interpretation of data* so as to showcase the virtuousness of the booksellers. Thus the brunt of conversation transcripts deal with being good, doing good, mending one's ways and supporting others, and seeking and expressing respect;<sup>13</sup> there are precious few moments of anger, jealousy, dissension, and conflict, let alone villainy, among the vendors. The tritest and most inconsequential aspect of their trade, such as scavenging monthlies rather than weekly magazines, are transmuted into tokens of ingenuity and marks of achievement (SW, p. 153). Whenever a "cultural" explanation spotlighting the morality of the street peddlers and material considerations of expediency and power suggest themselves to account for a pattern of behavior, Duneier systematically latches onto the former without examining the latter. For example, he maintains that vendors do not display pornography during the day, not because they might run into trouble with adult buyers or attract the attention of the police, but "out of respect, they say, for passing children." The cut on his sales that a vendor gives to the watcher of his table is presented, not as payment for services, but as a token of "respect and trust" between them and as proof of "a certain creativity" on the watcher's part. Mudrick's reconversion from a thug who "robbed deliverymen and sold drugs to support his needs" to sidewalk seller is attributed to his newfound "commitment to society" without checking whether aging and increased violence and police repression on the street might help account for it. When magazine scavengers take pains to "leav[e] the trash they sort through neat and orderly," it is not because they want to avoid being caught and charged with a class E misdemeanor but out of occupational pride (SW, pp. 77, 108, 88, 87, 150).<sup>14</sup> The point here is not to deny that sidewalk vendors

<sup>12</sup> This sanitizing thrust is further solidified by Duneier's uncritical acceptance of his informants' self-portraits ("I have *never* doubted *any* of the things Hakim told me about his life"; SW, p. 360, emphasis added) and express desire to not make them look bad: "I believe I should never publish something about an identifiable person which I cannot look him or her in the eye and read" (SW, p. 352).

<sup>13</sup> Even the treatment of sidewalk sellers by the forces of order is interpreted not as the product of relations of power and authority but as "crises of personal respect between police and those who do not comply" during which the "officer's anguish over the prospect that the vendors see him as unprofessional" goads the vendor to act as "confidant and even therapist" for the officer (SW, pp. 256, 284). The fixation on respect applies to the sociologist's own endeavor and interactions with his informants: "Would I be safe on the streets? Would the toughest and most violent men on Sixth Avenue accept what I was doing as worthy of respect? . . . To this day, I cannot say how much 'acceptance,' or 'rapport,' or 'respect' I have on the sidewalk, or how much 'respect' I have shown these men in our personal relations" (SW, pp. 334, 357).

<sup>14</sup> Duneier is so intent on casting the trade in all-around positive light that he reports this bracing fact: "I discovered that magazines tend to be very clean. Storing stacks of them in my apartment never led to any problem with roaches" (SW, p. 69).

develop mutual social ties, pursue moral ideals, and achieve a sense of individual and collective worth. They do. It is that Duneier gives us a one-sided, truncated picture of their world that makes it seem like this is all that is going on, when in reality, as in any social universe, the pursuit of morality is neither the sole spring nor the exclusive design of their actions.

3

*Sidewalk* connects neither with research on homelessness and addiction on the street, which demonstrates that legal and illegal activities are not separable, nor with the existing literature on street vendors, which would have enabled its author to locate his booksellers and magazine scavengers in the broader galaxy of informal city trades. The result is that, even as a “social world” study of an occupation in the mold of the second Chicago school, *Sidewalk* presents serious lacunae. How do vendors deal with uncertainty in supply, demand, and income flow (Morales 1997)? How do variations in their activity relate to changes and cycles in other economic circuits and sectors (Jones 1988; Gaber 1994)? Are there no differences between subproletarian sidewalk peddlers who engage in the trade as a “stop-gap” means of survival and college-educated bibliophiles and beatniks who take it up as an avocation, for the love of books and of the people they meet? What accounts for the rigid racial partitioning of the occupation, with black vendors monopolizing the spot near Sixth Avenue while white booksellers congregate only a few blocks away on West Fourth Street,<sup>15</sup> as Jason Rosette (2000) reveals in *The Book Wars*, his award-winning documentary film on the craft? How do African-Americans maintain a lock on the area despite the crunch on vending space and the wide diffusion of immigrant vendors from Africa in other neighborhoods of Manhattan (Stoller 1996)? And how do they survive periods of forced inactivity, such as rainy weeks and the long months of winter when the arctic cold empties the street of potential customers? Surely Hakim and

<sup>15</sup> It is surprising, given Duneier’s express interest in race, that he does not mention them and the conflictual relationship they apparently entertain with some of his vendors, for a comparison of the practices and relations of black and white vendors with their customers and with the Manhattan police would have shed considerable light on how race, class, and state effectively intersect on the sidewalk. Much more so than Duneier’s mysterious invocations of a “black collective consciousness” and bizarre speculations about a “hypothetical conventional black family from Vermont selling Christmas trees on Jane Street” which he (sort of) compares to the white Vermonters who come every winter season to sell Douglas firs and Canadian balsams to the locals (SW, pp. 239, 304–6). Surprisingly, Duneier also does not make anything of the fact that his main informant Hakim Hasan (and possibly other vendors) comes from the Virgin Islands, even though the social dispositions and pathways of West Indian blacks in New York City are quite different from those of native-born blacks (Vickerman 1999; Waters 1999).

his colleagues must have other income-generating activities then.<sup>16</sup> None of these issues are addressed in *Sidewalk*.

Duneier does not discuss the structural forces—the desocialization of labor, the erosion of the patriarchal household, the retrenchment of the welfare state, the criminalization of the urban poor, the conflation of blackness and dangerousness in public space—that directly shape and bound the material and symbolic space within which vendors operate. As a result, he never returns to the question, posed at the beginning of the book, of “the changes that have taken place on the sidewalk over the past four decades.” He offers a profusion of dispersed notations, vignettes, and slices but not the kind of systematic life histories needed to connect the local world of the vendors to the major institutions that coprocess them: the deregulated labor market, the criminal justice system, health and welfare bureaucracies, charitable organizations, and personal networks beyond the street scene. Such biographical-cum-institutional data would reveal the pathways in and out of that world and allow the reader to see whether and under what conditions sidewalk commerce exercises its alleged salvaging virtues on homeless vendors, rather than sustaining their addictions, entrenching their marginality, and perpetuating their misery.<sup>17</sup> Instead of linking the trajectories of vendors to the transformation of extant social structures, Duneier insists that it is “difficult to rigorously project individual cases onto the template of social processes” so that all we can do is “speculate with caution” (SW, p. 51). This speculation proceeds essentially by embracing the folk theories of their own lives that the vendors produce, as when Jamaane explains that he “believe[s] highly in role models and trying to set examples” (SW, p. 58).

4

The obsessive focus on respect and “ideals of self-worth” within an interactional microcosm severed from its institutional moorings and seemingly devoid of material determinism and power vectors expresses a deeper theoretical flaw of *Sidewalk*: throughout the book, Duneier takes the statements of his informants at face value and conflates “vocabularies of motives” with social mechanisms, the reasons invoked by vendors to make

<sup>16</sup> Duneier’s silence on this is likely a consequence of having conducted fieldwork essentially in the summer. This prevents him from examining how seasonal shifts in subsistence strategies affect the social morphology of book vendors and, through that mediation, the moral physiology of the community they form (as Mauss and Beuchat [(1904) 1978] did in their classic study, “Seasonal Variations among the Eskimos”).

<sup>17</sup> *Sidewalk* closes on an unresolved conundrum in this regard: given its manifold social benefits and redeeming moral virtues, why does Hakim Hasan abruptly announce in his afterword that he has chosen to leave the sidewalk (especially now that the book has made him something of a celebrity in the Village, which cannot but help his sales)?

sense of their actions with the causes that actually govern them.<sup>18</sup> Why does Duneier swallow whole the sing-song claim of his subjects that they “made a conscious decision to ‘respect’ society by scavenging trash or panhandling (instead of breaking into parked cars or selling drugs)” (SW, p. 159)? Because it resonates with the Victorian trope that informs public stereotypes of the urban (black) poor—even as it inverts its valence, turning a negative into a positive—as well as with his own conception of the social world as a stage for the affirmation of individual moral valor. The narrative of “men motivating one another to try to live ‘better’ lives” is one he could readily hear and record in the field, because he brought it there with him.

Instead of selecting a site to answer a sociological question, the 29-page methodological appendix that closes *Sidewalk* makes it clear that Duneier happened onto a site that, for whatever reasons, attracted him and in which he developed rich and rare contacts. So he went about “fishing” for questions to which these informants might have answers. But his problematic did not emerge inductively, as in the epistemological fairy tale of “grounded theory” or “diagnostic ethnography”:<sup>19</sup> it resulted from the projection, onto the sidewalk, of Duneier’s personal interest in morality and “respectability” (already evident in *Slim’s Table*). Duneier must be given credit for the candor with which he acknowledges it:

I hadn’t formulated a precise research question. I had no theories that I wanted to test or reconstruct, and I didn’t have a particular scholarly literature to which I knew I wanted to contribute. . . . I sought mainly to diagnose the processes at work in this setting and to explain the observed patterns of interactions of people. I also have a general theme that guides me in collecting data *in all of my work: whether and how the people I am with are or are not struggling to live in accordance with standards of “moral” worth.* (SW, pp. 340–41; emphasis added)

The inquiry then became a matter of pursuing and spotlighting those strands of everyday life on the sidewalk that fit and filled out that righteous

<sup>18</sup> “Checking Stuff” (SW, pp. 345–47) to establish the *factual veracity* of statements made by informants is commendable (as well as routinely expected of any fieldworker). But it is not the same as establishing their *sociological pertinence and analytic adequacy* for explaining the social practices of these same agents.

<sup>19</sup> “Diagnostic ethnography” is the label coined by Duneier’s Wisconsin colleague Erik Wright to characterize this inductivist, I-began-to-get-ideas-from-the-things-I-was-seeing-and-hearing-on-the-street approach to field-based inquiry (SW, p. 341). The name is catchy and the analogy attractive but it is invalid: a therapist who “gains an appreciation of the ‘symptoms’ that characterize a ‘patient’” (SW, p. 341) does not extract a medical theory out of clinical data; she anchors her observations in a nosography and a nosology backed up by an aetiology. And her primary task is to sift through information to select a *reci-pe* so to cure a condition, not discover the hidden *mechanisms* that produce it (indeed, the therapist typically knows that mechanism well, thanks to the science of medical biology).

interactionist vision, which Duneier did with impressive zeal,<sup>20</sup> but to the exclusion of all other issues, and especially material constraint and symbolic violence, that would risk muddying it. Still the sidewalk would acquire its full significance as a miniature of and template for urban civility (embedded in a Shilsian conception of society as a web of concentric circles of deference and charisma) only if street book vending could be linked to broader controversies about public order. This is where the thesis about crime and policing comes in.

5

Jumping from the sidewalk to the public policy arena, Duneier alleges that the presence of homeless vendors, scavengers, and panhandlers does not feed crime on the streets of Greenwich Village but on the contrary *reduces* it. What crime, committed when and where, we are not told exactly, but it must be the offenses vendors would commit were they not engaged in “innocent entrepreneurial activity” as well as those they deter by watching over the street. It follows, Duneier pleads, that “a new social-control strategy is needed” that would retain as its “core the unrelenting demands for responsible behavior” which subtends “quality-of-life” policing but imbue it with “greater tolerance and respect for people working the sidewalk” (SW, p. 313). This is the boldest claim advanced in *Sidewalk*; it is also the weakest.

It must be noted first that Greenwich Village is an odd place to assess the workings of any law-enforcement strategy, since it is a diverse yet wealthy area (the median household income is \$70,000 per year), with a mix of functions and an unusually large proportion of university affiliates, tourists, artists, gays and lesbians, and a public ethos of cultural tolerance—in short, a one-of-a-kind locale on the American urban landscape. The problems of public-order maintenance that arise in it are different from those faced by homogenous residential or commercial neighborhoods and even more so the ghettoized communities that bear the brunt of “quality-of-life” policing.<sup>21</sup> Be that as it may, Duneier supplies not a single piece of hard evidence that sidewalk commerce deflects the incidence of crime

<sup>20</sup> At one point, Duneier asks a vendor who was occupying a disputed spot on the sidewalk: “Did you feel while you were waiting that if you did set up here you were being *some kind of bad person*?” Then he notes: “My presence became an occasion for the men to discuss what constituted suitable behavior” (SW, p. 248; emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> Duneier acknowledges that Greenwich Village is “unique in a multitude of ways” but he refrains from discussing how its peculiarities impact the validity and generalizability of his claims: “I must leave it to the readers to test my observations against their own, and hope that the concepts I have developed to make sense of this neighborhood will prove useful in other venues” (SW, p. 11). It would have been more helpful to sketch even a summary comparison with the lively sidewalk vending scene on Fourteenth Street (studied by Gaber [1994]) or the open-air market on 125th Street in Harlem (described in detail by Stoller [1996]).

there. Instead of presenting data on police complaints or arrests (available in geocoded sets from the city's police department) or narrating specific incidents of crime prevention, he is content with affirming that he has personally "rarely seen any crime spring from this environment" (SW, p. 79)—which suggests that he does not know that the purchase and possession of crack, for instance, is a felony punishable by multiple years of prison in the state of New York. Yet we do not know that street vending was *not* accompanied by criminal activity on the side; and it is unclear how the "eyes upon the street" of a dozen sidewalk sellers would make a tangible difference at a busy crossroads that is dotted with tens of shops and that harbors regular pedestrian traffic from residents and tourists alike at all hours of the day.

Duneier's discussion of the "broken windows" theory is especially feeble, as it eschews the relevant criminological and legal literature and misdiagnoses its nature, means, and uses. It confounds sixties-style "community policing" (as studied famously by Egon Bittner) with nineties-style "zero tolerance" (SW, p. 375), which purports to reclaim public space by systematically arresting and jailing those accused of minor offenses such as littering, panhandling, prostitution, drinking, urinating in public, and vandalism. The centerpiece of "zero tolerance" is not the strict enforcement of municipal codes, which Duneier describes and complains about in the case of his vendors and scavengers, but "stop-and-frisk" patrols targeted at tens of thousands of young men in ghetto and barrio neighborhoods and resulting in their mass dispatch to Rikers Island. The city, goaded by the Village Alliance (a local business association) and vigorously assisted by New York University, tried to remove the vendors from their spot and failed precisely because the latter operate in full legality, owing to the peculiar manner in which the municipal council chose to implement the constitutional right to free speech (SW, pp. 132–36). The fact that Duneier never had a single occasion to bail a member of his sidewalk group out of jail or go fetch him at night court over the length of four years would seem to indicate that street sellers of printed matter are largely spared the harshest side of the campaign for "quality of life." The loathsome "squeegee men," and not sidewalk vendors, are its iconic target. Even if they were, the New York City police made 376,316 arrests in 1998 (over 227,500 of them for misdemeanors), a figure superior by about 50,000 to the total number of crimes recorded by the authorities that year and resulting in 130,000 admissions to Rikers Island jail. It is difficult to discern what exempting a dozen or even a few hundred street peddlers of printed matter would change to that picture.

Duneier presents as fact the propaganda of the mayor's office and neoconservative ideologues of the "war on crime," according to which "zero tolerance" has lowered crime in New York City (SW, pp. 287, 313) in spite of solid research findings to the contrary.<sup>22</sup> It is well established

<sup>22</sup> "We grant that the 'broken windows' has viability and that it has been used to lower



that violent crime started dropping years before Giuliani launched that policy; that other large cities that have applied police tactics divergent with “zero tolerance” sport equally large drops in criminal offenses; and that “quality-of-life” enforcement was *not* based on the so-called broken windows theory of George Kelling and James Q. Wilson but on the common lore of beat cops, who encapsulated it by the less elegant name of “breaking balls” theory (Fagan, Zimring, and Kim 1998; Green 1999; Joanes 1999; Bowling 1999; Maple and Mitchell 1999). Duneier’s minor emendation of that theory, consisting in “defining disorder with greater accuracy” while endorsing its “viability” (SW, p. 298), reads timid if not silly in light of Bernard Harcourt’s (1998, esp. pp. 343–77) thorough dismantling of its basic postulates and categories, including its muddled conception of disorder. Finally, the notion that challenging the conceptual logic of order-maintenance policing will lead to altering its implementation (SW, pp. 287–88) is whimsical at best: like other law-enforcement strategies, it was never adopted on “intellectual grounds” but for political, bureaucratic, and symbolic reasons.

Finally, one must ask: Why should homeless sidewalk vendors have to *reduce* crime rather than simply *abstain* from it in order to be allowed to exercise their trade? Why should one require of them a *higher contribution to civility* than is demanded of regular commercial operators and other users of public space? To show that they are not a blight to the neighborhood, Duneier feels that he must find them to be a boon, and in seeking to meet this uneven burden of proof he enshrines the double standard by which the urban poor are judged in American society. And one cannot but wonder, too: What if Duneier, having cast his ethnographic net a bit wider, had found that book vendors do *not* enhance neighborhood safety, would he then be calling for their removal?

6

The upshot of Duneier’s arguments is that there exists two categories of street people: those who, being moral and entrepreneurial, enhance social

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crime rates” (SW, p. 313). I mention here only works available while Duneier was still in the field. Among the other problems in Duneier’s discussion of policing, he cites as support for the “broken windows” theory an “excellent study” by Wesley Skogan (1990), *Disorder and Decline*, whose results in fact indicate that poverty and segregation, not disorder, are the best predictors of crime, and whose statistical findings on the disorder-crime nexus have been invalidated by Harcourt’s (1998, esp. pp. 309–29) painstaking reanalysis of the same data; he refers to a 1988 piece by Robert Sampson and Jacqueline Cohen that concludes that empirical support for that theory is lacking (SW, p. 370), and he overlooks more recent publications by the same author (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999) explicitly refuting it. Duneier also claims to introduce a distinction between physical and social order that is epicentral to Skogan’s earlier work (SW, p. 288). Finally, he presents George Kelling and Catherine Coles’s *Fixing Broken Windows* as a scholarly tome (SW, p. 374), when it is an ideological tract, bankrolled by the Manhattan Institute as part of its campaign to legitimize the rolling out of the police state to manage poverty.

order and should be supported as well as “honored” (SW, p. 317), and those who do not and must presumably be cleaned out and away. Under the appearance of a critique of “zero-tolerance” policing,<sup>23</sup> *Sidewalk* supplies a blueprint for a refocused, more efficient, class cleansing of the street that would stringently enforce the norm of “personal responsibility” but accord the worthy poor the room necessary to administer for themselves a sort of workfare program or “moral bootcamp” composed of begging, scrounging, and recycling secondhand merchandise:

We can observe the following process. A man comes out of prison and goes to Sixth Avenue to panhandle. He watches another man’s vending table and in time learns how to scavenge and find magazines that citizens will buy. Through his positive relations with customers and the self-direction that comes from being his own boss, he begins to feel the self-respect that also comes from knowing that he is earning an “honest living.” After a time. . . he makes his way off the streets to an apartment. . . . If residents come to see his behavior as a positive contribution, they treat him with a respect that he isn’t used to. At the same time, other men who come out of jail or who know no other way of self-support than robbery will see models of positive behavior and begin to imitate them. “Fixed windows” and “broken windows” can work together. (SW, p. 311)

This pollyannaish tale, premised on an artificial disjunction between sidewalk entrepreneurship and illegal activities, might in the best-case scenario apply to a handful of duly (self-)selected men, but it is evidently not replicable by the 60,000 ex-convicts who flood out of state prisons *every year* in New York state, three-fourths of whom come from and return to the seven poorest neighborhoods in New York City (Wacquant 2001, pp. 114–15). How many of them can realistically hope to find a place to peddle used magazines when vending spots are already overloaded, and how many can expect to earn enough that way to pay rent and move off the street when even full-time workers at low-wage jobs cannot? Yet, in Duneier’s view, what urban subproletarians need is a few “positive and inspiring models” to clue them in on how to make “an honest living” and a hearty serving of mutual and self-respect, and they will be just fine. Left to fend for themselves and each other on the sidewalk, they will learn self-direction, discover morality and, as a bonus, increase civility and “social solidarity” in the city. One could hardly formulate a better brief for continuing the state policies of urban abandonment, social dis-

<sup>23</sup> “The ‘broken windows’ theory as applied to street life seems to have worked so well because it has been used so broadly that it can hardly fail. In effect, with an unsystematic definition of disorder, it has been applied unscientifically, with a large margin of error that is usually unobserved. . . . A better approach would be to define disorder with greater accuracy. In particular, I would like to see ‘broken windows’-style regulation work without disrespecting people who are engaging in innocent entrepreneurial activity” (SW, p. 289). Just as respect rules the life of sidewalk vendors, it must guide the punitive action of the authorities.

investment, workfare, and “prisonfare” that have spawned the mounting social refuse strewn on the streets of the U.S. metropolis. Indeed, Duneier endorses the *institutionalization of economic dispossession and social marginality as queer antipoverty policy* when he proposes that “we will improve our well-being by making provisions for more persons, not fewer, to engage in informal entrepreneurial activity,” and that city government stay out of the way and accept such activity not only as “inevitable” but as downright “admirable” (SW, p. 315). Admirable indeed, is the ingenuity with which American society—and social science—keeps devising novel ways of making its poor shoulder the weight of their own predicament.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY IN BLACK PHILLY:  
ANDERSON ON THE “MORAL LIFE OF THE INNER CITY”

Whereas Duneier cleanses the street vendors of Manhattan’s bohemian district by censoring and deflating those aspects of their activities that would render them less appealing to conventional society, Elijah Anderson does not shy away from unpalatable characters and facts. In *Code of the Street* (hereafter COS), he gives the reader a close-up view of the good, the bad, and the ugly on the rough streets of black Philadelphia with a frankness that places his study squarely in the genre exemplified by William Julius Wilson’s 1987 book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, with its unvarnished account of “social pathologies” in the urban core.<sup>24</sup> Anderson’s book is striking for the candor and aplomb with which its author confronts realities that most observers either *cannot* see, because they remain safely remote from the scene, or *do not want* to see because it would ruffle their cherished preconceptions of the poor.

The culmination of years of difficult fieldwork and deep scholarly as well as personal engagement with the topic, COS seeks to explain “why it is that so many inner-city young people are inclined to commit aggression and violence toward one another” (COS, p. 9). The answer resides in the rise and spread of a “code of the street,” that is, an oppositional culture of masculine defiance and interpersonal brutality fueled, on the inside, by the declining availability and authority of wholesome “role models” and, on the outside, by economic dispossession (caused by deindustrialization) and by racial exclusion, variously manifested in white prejudice, discrimination, and segregation. To arrive at this answer, the Pennsylvania sociologist patiently exposes the overlapping cultural di-

<sup>24</sup> *Code of the Street* can be read as a cultural elaboration and microlevel specification of the thesis put forth by Wilson (who enthusiastically endorses the book on the flap jacket) that attributes the ills of the contemporary ghetto to the combination of joblessness caused by deindustrialization and social isolation fed by family dissolution and the exodus of middle-class “role models” in the context of continued segregation. The jacket text states that Anderson’s tome “brings new understanding to the lives of the truly disadvantaged.”

visions, social tensions, and internecine struggles that rend the fin-de-siècle ghetto asunder and contribute to its collective quandary from within. But his analysis of these struggles is marred by the reification of cultural orientations into groups, conceptual equivocation about the notion of “code,” and a persistent disconnect between data and theory that make it an unfinished work that ultimately raises more questions than it settles. In particular, Anderson’s argument about the centrality of moral mentors is wedded to a theory of action, “role modeling,” that is conceptually defective and continually contradicted by the evidence in the book. As for the narrative of deindustrialization and racial exclusion, it is artificially overlaid onto field descriptions that nowhere display how such external macrostructural forces come to impact life inside the ghetto.<sup>25</sup>

*Code of the Street* reads like two separate books. The first, composed of the first four chapters, on the contest between conventional and street values, on the quest for manly respect in public encounters, on drugs and violence, and on the sexual mores of ghetto youth, revisits, revises, and generally repeats the themes and theses propounded in Anderson’s (1990) previous book, *Streetwise* (the COS chapter “The Mating Game” is even an identical reprinted of the chapter “Sex Codes and Family Life among Northton’s Youth” from the earlier book. The second, also comprising four chapters, brings fresh materials on the two social types that Anderson considers the “moral pillars” of the ghetto, the “decent daddy” and the “inner-city grandmother,” and on the travails of two young men who battle to tear themselves from the clutches of the street, the first unsuccessfully, the second with more sanguine results. Both parts turn on the central opposition between “decency” and “the street,” which Anderson introduces by taking the reader on a ride down Germantown Avenue, a major artery of Philadelphia that runs from the white, affluent district of Chestnut Hill through Mount Airy, a mixed, middle-class area, to Germantown, a dilapidated black neighborhood where the “code of street” overwhelms the “code of civility.” There, amidst a desolate urban landscape, young men “profile” and “represent” in and around “staging areas” that are so many proving grounds for a virulent and aggressive form of masculinity; public decency is openly flouted, crime and drug dealing are endemic, and fracas commonplace; streets, schools, stores, and homes are suffused with sociability but also with danger, dread, and destitution due to the dearth of jobs, the deficiencies of public services, racial stigma, and the profound sense of alienation and despair they feed (COS, pp. 20–30). Yet, far from being homogenous, like the city itself, this segment of the ghetto is differentiated along “two poles of value orientation, two contrasting con-

<sup>25</sup> *Code of the Street* also suffers from poor editing. The writing is very redundant, with each chapter summarizing the others and rehearsing again and again the central thesis of the book (nearly identical passages are repeated on the same page or only pages apart; see, e.g., pp. 73 and 78, 126 and 129, 209–10, 212–13, 218, 308, 313, 318, and 320), and the bibliographic references, though short, contain glaring errors (one note lists Darnell Hawkin’s 1986 study *Homicide* as a 1966 book entitled *Homocide*).

ceptual categories” of “street and decent” which “organize the community socially” and determine the tenor of life in the neighborhood by “the way they coexist and interact” (COS, pp. 35, 33).

1

Anderson insists at the outset that these paired terms are “evaluative judgments that confer status on local residents,” “labels” that people use “to characterize themselves and one another.” He wisely warns against reifying them by stressing that “individuals of either orientation may coexist in the same extended family” and that “there is also a great deal of ‘code-switching,’” such that the same person “may at different times exhibit both decent and street orientation, depending on the circumstances” (COS, pp. 35–36). But he immediately casts aside his own warning and proceeds to treat these flexible cultural orientations as fixed repertoires—codes, cultures, or value systems—and even as sets of households arrayed against one another. This classic case of *Zustandreduktion*, the “reduction of process to static conditions,” to use Norbert Elias’s (1978, p. 112) idiom, has three unfortunate consequences.<sup>26</sup> First, transmuted folk notions that residents use to make sense of their everyday world into mutually exclusive populations prevents Anderson from analyzing the dynamic contest of categorization out of which the distinction between “street” and “decent” arises and how this contest affects individual conduct and group formation. For it leaves unexamined the social mechanisms and paths whereby different persons drift toward this or that end of the spectrum, and what facilitates or hinders their sliding alongside it.<sup>27</sup>

Next, by taking his cue from the folk concepts of the residents without

<sup>26</sup> This is not a mere terminological problem. Despite his early insistence that “street” and “decent” are labels and not individuals or populations, Anderson handles them as such throughout the book. Thus chap. 1 is entitled “Decent and Street Families” and its main sections—“Decent Families,” “The Single Decent Mother,” and “The Street Family”—present individuals who are embodiments of two tangible social types. In the last chapter alone, Anderson insists that “most of the residents are decent,” yet that “decent people seldom form anything like a critical mass.” He estimates, based on visits in “numerous inner-city high schools,” that “about a fifth of the students [are] invested in the code of the street” and that, by the fourth grade, three-quarters have “bought into the code.” He reports that “employers sometimes discriminate against entire census tracts or zip codes because they cannot or will not distinguish the decent people from these neighborhoods.” And he refers to a decrease in “the ratio of decent to street-oriented people” as one moves deeper toward the heart of the ghetto or what he somewhat cryptically calls “ground zero” (COS, pp. 309, 311, 317, 319, 324).

<sup>27</sup> There are places where Anderson hints at this question, as when he notes that “the kind of home a child comes from influences but does not always determine” whether a child goes “decent” or “street,” or when he writes that the inability of street-oriented kids to code switch is “largely a function of persistent poverty and local neighborhood effects, but is also strongly related to family background, available peers, and role models” (COS, p. 93). But this listing of factors stops the inquiry right where it should begin.

anchoring their points of view firmly in the social order, Anderson presumes precisely that which needs to be demonstrated: that these two sets of families are properly differentiated by their moral values rather than by the distinct *structural locations* they occupy in local social space and the objective life chances and liabilities associated with these. Anderson is fully aware that “the inner-city community is actually quite diverse economically,” and he points in passing to variations in assets, occupation, income, and education (COS, p. 53). But he does not construct the system of places that these variations compose, so that practices that may be effects of social-structural position are *by default* automatically attributed to “culture” under the guise of “the code.” Instead, he draws a dichotomous portrait of “decent families” and “street families” that leaves no middle ground, little overlap, and faint symbolic interplay between them. Decent families display all the hallowed virtues of the stereotypical American family of dominant ideology: they are “working hard, saving money for material things, and raising children to try to make something out of themselves” in accordance with “mainstream values” (COS, p. 38). They hold on to their jobs even when these are insecure and underpaid, ally themselves with “outside” institutions such as churches and schools, and keep faith in the future. Their deep religious commitment allows them to maintain “intact nuclear families” in which “the role of the ‘man in the house’” predominates and instills in all a sense of personal responsibility. Street families are their mirror opposite: they “often show a lack of consideration for other people and have a rather superficial sense of family and community”; being deprived of good-paying jobs, their resources are limited and frequently misused, their lives “marked by disorganization” and filled with frustration. They are derelict in their parental duties, inconsiderate toward neighbors and have periodic run-ins with the police; by example, they teach their children “to be loud, boisterous, proudly crude, and uncouth—in short, street” (COS, pp. 45–47). The question looms, *unanswered*: Are these families destitute because they are morally dissolute or the other way around? Is their cultural orientation the spring or the spin-off of their lower position in social space and of the different relation to the future that comes with it?

Note that Anderson’s characterization of the “street family” is wholly negative, defined by deficiency, deficit, and lack; the street family’s orientation and actions are grasped from the standpoint of “decent” families who strive to distance themselves from “uncouth” neighbors. By thus adopting the folk concepts of the residents as his analytic tools, Anderson runs into a third problem: like the “decent folks,” he attributes all the ills of the “community” to the street people, in effect *taking sides* in the battle that these two factions (or class fractions) of the ghetto population wage against one another, instead of analyzing how their opposition operates practically to frame, curtail, or amplify objective differences in social position and strategies in the neighborhood. Anderson’s candor about the unsavory aspects of ghetto life is thus accommodated by comparten-

talizing behaviors and assigning flattering and offensive patterns to two distinct populations defined precisely by their contrasted moralities. Throughout the book, he is openly committed to documenting (and lamenting) the predicament and vindicating the point of view of the “decent” people.<sup>28</sup> This personal commitment to “decency”—spotlighted by the term’s presence in the subtitle of the book—limits Anderson’s observations, colors his analyses and truncates his ability to make sense of street values other than as the desecration of decent ones even as they are fostered, as we shall see below, by “adaptation” to material hardship and blocked opportunities.

2

The centerpiece of Anderson’s book is its grounded description of the workings of the “code of the street,” this “set of prescriptions and proscriptptions, or informal rules, of behavior organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public relations” in the ghetto (COS, p. 10). For the young men who embrace it, life is a perpetual “campaign for respect” waged by conveying, through appearance, deportment, and demeanor, speech and act, that they are prepared to defy and dish out violence without fear of consequence so as to get their share of “juice,” as manly regard is called on the streets. The diffusion of this bellicose mindset from the street into homes, schools, parks, and commercial establishments such as taverns and movie theaters, infects all face-to-face relations. It feeds predatory crime and the drug trade, exacerbates interpersonal violence, and even warps practices of courtship, mating, and intimacy between the sexes.<sup>29</sup> Here Anderson extends and enriches the previous, abbreviated, analysis by Richard Majors and Janet Billson of “the cool pose,” that “ritualized form of masculinity” through which marginalized African-Americans affirm “pride, strength and control” in the public theater of everyday life (Majors and Billson 1992, p. 23). Majors

<sup>28</sup> The only negative property that Anderson reports about “decent families” is that their efforts at upward social mobility can be perceived as an expression of “disrespect” for their neighbors and is liable to trigger a “policing effort” designed to keep them from “‘selling out’ or ‘acting white,’” which means adopting middle-class manners and moving out of the neighborhood. This is in sharp contrast to Anderson’s (1978) earlier work, particularly *A Place on the Corner*, a masterful study of the interactional construction of the ghetto social order, in which the points of view of the “regulars,” the “winos,” and the “hoodlums” are treated on a plane of full epistemic equality.

<sup>29</sup> On these topics, COS does not add much to the existing literature because it presents mostly stylized facts based on what Anderson himself calls “impressionistic materials . . . from various social settings around the city” (COS, p. 10) that leave key processes underspecified. One finds thicker descriptions and deeper dissections of the crack trade in Bourgois (1995), of the dynamics and dilemmas of stickup work in Wright and Decker (1997), of the sensual and moral construction of masculine honor through violent confrontation in Katz (1989), and of the plight and hopes of teenage girls in Kaplan (1997).

and Billson saw the “cool pose” as a symptom of oppression manifested in disastrous education, rampant unemployment, high poverty, uncontrolled fertility, and hypermorbidity; they portrayed it as a product of “underlying structural violence that jeopardizes the equal opportunity of blacks” and “breeds violence in its enraged victim.” Anderson likewise presents the “code of the street” as “a complex cultural response to the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, to the stigma of race, to rampant drug use, to alienation and lack of hope” (flapcover text).

But what exactly is a code, where does the “code of the street” come from and how does it actually generate particular behaviors? One would expect that Anderson’s book would elucidate these issues, but the more one reads the more muddled they seem to become. First, the code is variously described as a set of “informal rules,” an “etiquette,” a “value orientation,” an “oppositional culture” and the objective regularities of conduct they prescribe, but also as a “script,” a set of roles and their patterned expectations, a personal identity, a “milieu,” and even as the “fabric of everyday life” in toto.<sup>30</sup> This loose and overexpansive definition creates problems, for if the code is both a cultural template that molds behavior and that behavior itself, the argument becomes circular. Next, there is considerable confusion as to the origins and vectors of the “code of the street.” The notion is first introduced as a contemporary, group-specific, normative constellation spawned in the ghetto by the unique confluence of racial domination, economic devastation, and distrust of the criminal justice system. But a few pages later we learn that it is only the latest avatar of an ancient conception of masculine honor that reaches back to the dawn of civilization and is shared by a multiplicity of older and newer immigrant groups in American society.<sup>31</sup>

For clarification, Anderson refers the reader to the “plausible description tracing the tradition and evolution of this code” supplied in two books by journalists: Fox Butterfield’s *All God’s Children* and Nicolas Lemann’s *The Promised Land* (COS, p. 328). This does not clarify much, not only because neither book meets the usual standards of historical scholarship, but also because they flat out gainsay Anderson’s thesis of an aggressive conception of honor spawned by a combination of deep poverty and racial exclusion leading to virulent alienation in the U.S. metropolis after the 1970s. Lemann’s (1986) book claims that the culture of the postindustrial

<sup>30</sup> “The code of the street is not the goal or product of any individual’s actions but is the fabric of everyday life, a vivid and pressing milieu within which all local residents must shape their personal routines, income strategies, and orientations to schooling, as well as their mating, parenting, and neighbor relations” (COS, p. 366).

<sup>31</sup> On the one side, Anderson writes that “the code is a complex cultural response to the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, to the stigma of race, to rampant drug use, to alienation and lack of hope.” On the other, he maintains that “this code is not new. It is as old as the world, going back to Roman times or the world of the shogun warriors or the early American Old South. And it can be observed in working-class Scotch-Irish or Italian or Hispanic communities” (COS, flapcover text, p. 84).



ghetto is an import from the agrarian South brought there by the Great Migration of the interwar decades: for him, the “code of the street” is a Southern complex rooted in sharecropping and thus operative also in rural regions. As for Butterfield (1995, pp. xviii, 11), rampant violence in the inner city “has little to do with race or class, with poverty or education, with television or the fractured family”; it is neither recent nor peculiarly urban since it “grew out of a proud culture” of honor among whites in the antebellum South, which itself had its “roots in the blood feud between clans and families dating to the Middle Ages.” Contradictory recountings of its origins and carrying group means that the “code of the street” can be variously interpreted as a conception of *masculinity* (shared by all classes), as a *lower-class* cultural model (shared by all ethnic groups), as an *ethnic* or regional cultural form (but specific to one gender), or yet as a sociomental construct spawned by a particular *place* of extreme destitution and alienation (the street, the jobless inner city, or the hyperghetto), perhaps with influences from the criminal or convict culture. Some clarification is in order here to better locate the “code of the street” somewhere between a timeless masculine propensity to aggression and the peculiar expression of ethnoracial, regional, or class atavism.

3

Tracing the genesis of the “code of the street” as historically sedimented and class-ethnically inflected masculine ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in urban public space would not only help specify its tenets and chart its transformation, showing how the “cool pose” of the seventies mutated into the “hard case” of the nineties for black men trapped in the nether regions of U.S. social space. It would also clear up another ambiguity in Anderson’s account: the street code is said, at times, to organize and curtail violence by supplying “a kind of policing mechanism, encouraging people to trust others with a certain respect,” while, at other times, it is found responsible for sowing distrust, destabilizing relations and diffusing aggression so that even “decent and law-abiding people become victims of random violence” (COS, pp. 105, 108). This suggests that the “code” cannot explain a particular pattern of conduct *except in conjunction with other social forces* and factors that act as “switchboards,” turning its (dis)organizing power on or off. Among these factors that beg for a more sustained discussion than Anderson offers are the wide availability of handguns and the growing symbiosis between the street and the prison culture due to the astronomical rates of incarceration of young African-Americans from urban centers.<sup>32</sup> This, in turn, implies that rising

<sup>32</sup> For Fagan and Wilkinson (1998), it is not the informal rules of masculine honor but the implements and purposes of violence that have changed in the ghetto over the past two decades. In the early nineties, the mass circulation of guns and their rampant use by street gangs to conquer and regulate expanding street-level drug markets caused a sudden upsurge and epidemic-like spread of violence (and account also in part for

internecine violence in the ghetto is the unanticipated *product of public policies* of tolerance of private weapons (ownership and commerce) and of penal management of poverty in the metropolis via the “prisonization” of the street habitus, which points less to the local culture of masculinity than to the state (Wacquant 2001).

Specifying how the code of the street produces more or less violent behavior on the ground would likely disclose its dubious conceptual status. As a *depictive* device designed to capture the everyday perspective of ghetto residents, it is useful and illuminating; as an *analytical* tool aimed at explaining social conduct, it suffers from severe shortcomings. Code is a concept that comes from cybernetics and information theory via structural linguistics and anthropology. But, as numerous critiques of structuralism have shown—the most thorough being Bourdieu’s (1977) well-known dissection of Lévi-Strauss in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*—such an approach reduces individuals or groups to the status of passive supports of a “code” that works out its independent semiotic logic “behind their backs”; it cannot grasp practice other than as the mere *execution* of a timeless cultural model that negates the inventive capacities of agents and the open-endedness of situations, thereby freezing dynamic relations into eternal replicas of a single blueprint. In many passages of Anderson’s book, the code does appear as a *deus ex machina* that moves people about in the manner of puppets and dictates behavior irrespective of material and other factors. The “code of the street” is even invoked in instances where it is clearly superfluous: for example, one hardly needs to “acquire the street knowledge of the etiquette” of the stickup to figure that it is better to cooperate with an assailant who sticks a gun to your head and defer to his demands—which Anderson overinterprets as acknowledging “the authority, the worth, the status, even the respectability of the assailant” (COS, p. 128). It is a simple matter of trying to avoid injury or death, which any properly socialized urban denizen understands no matter her “code.”

4

What a wayward youth caught by the street “needs is a serious helping hand: a caring old head can make a real difference” (COS, p. 136). With this pronouncement, Anderson sets the stage for the second part of *Code of the Street*, in which he seeks to demonstrate that wholesome “role models” such as the “decent daddy” and the “inner-city grandmother” have an impact on social life in the ghetto. The trouble here is that, as with Duneier’s depiction of sidewalk vendors, upon close reading his own data continually rebut this thesis. “The decent daddy is a certain kind of

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its recent decline). Then “guns became symbols of respect, power, identity and manhood to a generation of youth, in addition to having strategic value for survival” in an environment of dispossession and an “ecology of danger” (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998, p. 105).

man," a "highly principled and moral" man with "certain responsibilities and privileges: to work, to support his family, to rule his household, to protect his daughters, and to raise his son to be like him," as well as "to carry the weight of the race on his shoulder" (COS, p. 180). His authority rests on his embrace of the work ethic, his abiding commitment to propriety and property, support from the church and access to economic resources, chief among them jobs. But "today the decent daddy's role of sponsorship is being challenged by deindustrialization" and his "moral aura" is waning. Having lost his economic footing, his ranks are dwindling, he is becoming less visible, and many young men "play the role poorly" because they know only "the outlines of the model" for lack of having been exposed to it firsthand in its full splendor (COS, p. 185). They are thus liable to become defensive, hypersensitive, and short-tempered, and they sometimes take out their frustration on their women when the latter dare "challenge their image as the man in control" (COS, p. 187).

For proof that the "decent daddy" remains "important for the moral integrity of the community," Anderson adduces a string of loosely assembled observations, anecdotes, and interview excerpts, including 11 pages of a rambling and highly repetitive account, by one such decent daddy, of an incident 25 years ago, in which his beloved, model son was killed in a banal if horrific confrontation with gang members (COS, pp. 194–204). This father is understandably distressed and bitter that life should be so unfair to someone who has steadfastly honored precepts of "decency." But voicing such pain and tracing out the ripples of emotional damage through the family does little to specify the social conditions and mechanisms whereby the morality he aspires to and embodies can or cannot become socially effective. Indeed, this decent daddy and his compatriots emerge as anachronistically yearning for a bygone world of stable factory employment and retrograde gender arrangements in which the man is the provider and the woman keeps to "her place, which is taking care of the house and preparing food to his satisfaction" while being watchful "not to speak out of turn or talk too much and make him look small" (COS, p. 183). Anderson's own nostalgia for this age of Fordist patriarchy blinds him to the fact that, far from being content with domestic subservience, African-American women have long assumed a major role in the affairs of their community and that the waning of the influence of the "decent daddy" is due not simply to the declining economic position of black men and their inability to deliver tangible rewards ("Their moral authority is weakened when being nice doesn't lead to material benefits: a good job for a young man, a good household for a young woman"; COS, pp. 204–5). It results from a sea change in the shape and dynamics of family, gender, and age relations sweeping over a profound and long-standing rift between black men and women that is especially pronounced at the bottom of the class structure but affects all

classes.<sup>33</sup> No amount of bemoaning the rise of the “‘bad heads’ (like certain rap artists),” who now allegedly supplant the decent daddy as beacon of achievement—will restore the conditions that made the latter a salient social type and bring back “the old days [when] the black man was strong” so that “even the white man would take note,” as one of Anderson’s informants puts it (COS, pp. 205, 194).

Much as the role of the decent daddy is fast eroding, “the network of grandmothers continues to form a communal safety net” of sorts but “that net is weakened and imperiled” (COS, p. 207). Because of economic re-trenchment, the spread of drugs, and the attendant crystallization of the oppositional culture of the street, the “black grandmother is once again being called upon to assume her traditional role” as “selfless savior of the community,” valiantly taking care of unwanted children, compensating for “the inability—or unwillingness in many cases—of young men to fulfill their parental obligations and responsibilities,” and wielding moral authority at large (COS, pp. 208, 211). Though there exists, not surprisingly, two types of grandmothers, the respectable and the street-oriented, the traditional grandmother is basically the older female counterpart to the decent daddy: financially secure, God-fearing, ethically conservative, dependable, and insistent on authority and accountability. But if it is true that she has become “a conceptual touchstone [*sic*] of the value system into which many young girls are initiated and actively grow” (COS, p. 214), then why do so many of these same girls behave so recklessly?

Instead of subjecting his informants’ romanticized vision of the past to a methodical critique informed by the social and oral history of the ghetto, Anderson lionizes it, leaving unresolved two contradictions at the heart of his account. First, the two major roles of the decent daddy and the heroic grandmother cannot have blossomed together since their functional importance is inversely related: Who needs the valiant grandmother to take care of the babies of a wayward daughter if the decent father has successfully “modeled” proper morality and raised his children, and especially his sons, the right way? Indeed, neither social type plays a major part in historical depictions of the midcentury ghetto and in contemporary life-story accounts (e.g., Drake and Cayton 1945; Greenberg 1991; Trotter 1995; Gwaltney 1980; Monroe and Goldman 1988; Kotlowitz 1991). Second, the “traditional grandmother” succeeds as *grandmother* only because, *in Anderson’s own terms*, she has failed as *mother*: despite her “enormous moral authority and spiritual strength,” she was unable to rein in her adolescent daughters and prevent their untimely pregnancy. And now she has to pick up the pieces as best as she can in the context of public

<sup>33</sup> For a view contrary to the masculinist folk vision of the “decent daddies,” documenting the less visible but not less decisive role of women as “makers of the race,” see Higginbotham (1992), White (1998) and Clark and Thompson (1998); for a thorough treatment of the deep-seated “crisis in nearly all aspects of gender relations among all classes of Afro-Americans,” see Patterson’s (1998) provocative and disturbing essay, “Broken Bloodlines.”

indifference such that she can rely on no one but herself and her close female kin.

As evidence for the ethical prowess of the inner-city grandmother, Anderson supplies the 15-page-long, underedited transcript from “a tape-recorded conversation” with Betty (COS, pp. 219–33), one such grandmother. To the degree that one can trust an account that is uncorroborated by observational data, this transcript suggests, not that Betty embraced a glorious moral calling on behalf of the “community,” but that she was forced to take over the care of her teenage daughter’s babies owing to the criminal ineptitude of the city’s child, health, and social services. The latter did next to nothing to protect a 12-year-old girl who reportedly was pulling knives on her own mother, ran away repeatedly, was raped on the streets, infected with syphilis and herpes as well as addicted to crack (which the hospital staff where she delivered a two-pound baby failed to detect; COS, pp. 222–23). Brute necessity and the tragic bankruptcy of public institutions rule the day in the ghetto. Betty is understandably exhausted and exasperated: she wishes that her daughter and her babies would “just go and stay away” and that doctors would forcibly sterilize her.

Anderson titles the closing section of the transcript “The Final Reality: Betty Accepts Her Heroic Role,” but there is little heroism in such *kinship servitude* thrust upon (sub)proletarian women by the faltering of the social-welfare wing of the state. The state’s contribution to this calamity is even greater yet, as Betty had to give up her job as a nurse’s aide to be allowed to receive welfare for her daughter’s babies. Anderson unwittingly concedes that material push, and not normative pull, is what trapped her in this predicament: “The lack of affordable day care in conjunction with the rules of welfare eligibility left Betty with only one responsible course of action: to leave her job in the private sector in order, in effect, to become employed by the state to raise her grandchildren” (COS, p. 233). In no other Western society would a grandmother have to pay such a high price for the combined errant conduct of her daughter and the gross dereliction of the state. Indeed, Anderson admits in the closing lines of the chapter that, “although generally loved and respected even when disobeyed,” the grandmothers “are losing clout” and “may come to seem irrelevant” (COS, p. 236), an admission that contradicts the thrust of his analysis hitherto.<sup>34</sup> All in all, Anderson presents a moving portrait of the decent daddy and the inner-city grandmother as the backbone of

<sup>34</sup> Anderson does not consider the possibility that, just as she can serve as a moral anchor, a grandmother may act as a malevolent force, drawing her children and grandchildren into a web of drug addiction and trafficking, theft, prostitution, and other criminal activities, in response to abject poverty and rampant violence affecting the lineage she heads. Yet that is precisely the case of America’s most famous “inner-city grandmother,” whose “harrowing true story” is recounted by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Leon Dash (1996) in *Rosa Lee* and chronicled in a widely watched PBS documentary.

the urban black community; however, this portrait suggests not that they operate as viable moral anchors and social mentors, but that they are overloaded and out of touch with current gender, family, and state relations.

5

The final two chapters of *Code of the Street* recount the travails of two young men struggling to gain a footing in the legal economy and achieve a measure of material stability and social standing. Here, Anderson offers a rare window onto the perilous obstacle course that African-American men face as they seek to trump their preordained fate at the bottom of the class and caste order. The book finally comes alive with stirring and eventful materials that richly repay a close reading and allow Anderson to display his deft touch for ethnographic probing. We get a close-up view of how John and Robert attempt to juggle the conflicting demands of employers and kin, sort out loyalty to the proximate peer group and commitment to established society, and conciliate the defiant masculine ethos of the street with resignation to the dull life of the low-wage laborer. The problem is, not only is the ratio of analysis to narrative and interview transcripts quite low (some eight pages out of 52 in the first case examined), but the latter hardly support the theory of mentoring and deindustrialization-cum-racism that Anderson intends them to illustrate. “John Turner’s Story” (chap. 7) is emblematic of this stubborn disconnect between data and interpretation.

John Turner is a 21-year-old high school graduate and father of six children by four different women, with extensive ties to gangs and repeated collisions with the law, whom Anderson first encounters in a carryout restaurant where John toils as a busboy for \$400 a month. The “college professor” helps him gain a respite from the court, then finds him a solid job working as a janitor at a hospital where, despite a rough start and the declared reticence of the union steward, John promptly posts a stellar record. But, a few weeks later, he is thrown back in jail for failing to pay his monthly court fine of \$100, even though his hourly wages have jumped from \$3.50 to \$8.50—John maintains he has other, more pressing, needs to meet, such as saving for his children’s future college education. After he returns to work, the young man confronts the open disdain and ostracism of the older janitors, who feel threatened by his presence and devalued by his demeanor. As a result, John abruptly quits his job and resumes dealing drugs, burning his way through mounds of “easy money” in a spree of personal dissipation, conspicuous consumption, and gifts to kin. A year later, the streets have turned out too wild and treacherous for his own taste, and John wants to “cool out.” So he returns to begging for money, a suit, and a job from Anderson who, after unsuccessfully trying to enroll him in the military (John’s criminal record makes him ineligible) eventually lands the young man yet another entry-level position

in a restaurant kitchen, making him “the happiest man on earth” simply for having a job this time. When John later insists that he needs money to help his children, Anderson gives him \$150 as a means to sever their relationship.<sup>35</sup> Later, we learn that John got shot in the gut in a drug deal gone sour in Baltimore and finds himself a cripple for life at age 27.

As in previous chapters, Anderson asserts that “the system of legitimate employment is closed off to young men like John Turner: by prejudice, by lack of preparation, or by the absence of real job opportunities. But they observe others—usually whites—enjoy the fruits of the system, and through this experience they become deeply alienated. They develop contempt for a society they perceive as having contempt for them. The reality of racism looms large in their minds” (COS, p. 286). The trouble is, this explanation does not fit John Turner’s story at all: thanks to Anderson’s personal assist, the employment system was opened to him (as well as by his own mother, who earlier got him a job as a technician in the pharmaceutical company where she works), and he did gain access to a secure, well-paid, position with full benefits. Moreover, there were no whites on the scene to exclude or block him, as it was *black* janitors who “dogged” and harassed him out of the hospital: the shop steward who was supposed to sponsor him nicknamed him “the half-way man,” put his “shit out on the street” (revealing to others John’s paternity and family situation), and routinely “dissed” him by making derogatory remarks about his sexual habits (“Keep that thing in your damn pants!”).<sup>36</sup>

So neither deindustrialization nor racism provide a straightforward explanation for John Turner’s backslide to the demimonde of the street, that is, for why he could not *hang on* to a firm spot in the legal economy after he had been given a royal chance to ensconce himself in it. This is not to say that labor market restructuring and racial domination are not at play here, for clearly they are: the virulent *class* prejudice *among* African-American workers that detonates John’s relapse into the informal economy is overdetermined by their collective vulnerability in the age of desocialized wage labor and made potent by the embeddedness of black employees in a structure of authority governed and surveilled by whites. But it is equally clear that a number of crucial mediations are missing here if we are to link the macrostructures of class and caste inequality to

<sup>35</sup> Anderson is brutally honest about the motives and conditions of their parting: “I had continued to help John even after it had become apparent that he was using me, because I wanted to see how he responded to various situations. At this point, however, I felt I had developed a rather complete picture of him; furthermore, I was beginning to feel uneasy about our association” (COS, p. 285). No such negatively charged intercourse is reported with “decent families.”

<sup>36</sup> Likewise, in recounting Robert’s story, Anderson claims that “people associated with the criminal element . . . justify their criminal behavior by reference to racism, which they and their friends face daily” (COS, p. 317). Yet one striking feature of Robert’s trajectory is precisely that he never encounters a single white person; even when he runs into trouble with city officials, it is a black city inspector who gives him grief over his license as a street vendor.

the microsetting in which John Turner's actions acquire their logic and meaning. Nor is the "lack of an effective role model" responsible for John Turner's undoing (COS, p. 237). For surely, if a mentor as powerful as Anderson, with his extensive connections, impeccable cultural credentials, and multifaceted interventions (he gets John a top-flight attorney, contacts his parole officer, intercedes time and again to get him jobs, and supplies a supportive ear, stop-gap money, and sage advice throughout) could not extricate John from his troubles, what chance would a dispossessed and isolated "old head" from the neighborhood stand to have an impact?

The lesson Anderson draws from this biographical case study is that there exists "a basic tension between the street and the decent, more conventional world of legitimate jobs and stable families" and that, at the end of the day, "the draw of the street is too powerful, and [John] was overcome by its force" (COS, p. 285). But this merely *redescribes* the phenomenon at hand, it does nothing to explain it. Anthropomorphizing the street, as folk wisdom does, cannot reveal whence its power comes and how it operates. To unlock that enigma, one must recognize that John's conduct is neither the blind execution of a normative model ("the code") nor the rational pursuit of opportunities effectively offered to him at a given time, but the product of a discordant dialectic between the *social structures* he faces and the *mental structures* through which he perceives and evaluates them, which are themselves issued out of the chaotic world of the street and therefore tend to reproduce its patterns even when faced with a different environment. What ultimately foils John Turner's escape from the subproletariat is not a generic opposition between the "culture of decency" and the "code of the street" but the specific *disjuncture between* the social *position* opened to him and the *dispositions* he imports into it: John's strategies continue to be driven by a street habitus even as his objective possibilities momentarily expand beyond those usually afforded by the ghetto.

Adopting the static theory of "role enactment" and its correlate, Robert Merton's notion of "anomie," not only forces Anderson to regress to an ad hoc psychological explanation, as when he proposes that John Turner could not escape the street because "he never seemed fully committed to improving himself" (COS, p. 274).<sup>37</sup> It also prevents him from inquiring into the social constitution and workings of what is a *broken habitus*, made up of contradictory cognitive and conative schemata, disjointedly assembled via durable immersion in an entropic universe of extreme economic marginality and social instability, which continually generates irregular and contradictory lines of action that make its bearer ill-suited

<sup>37</sup> This argument also suffers from circularity, as the evidence for John's alleged lack of commitment to "decency" is the very behavior that the lack of decency is supposed to explain. Had John secured a foothold in the legal economy, one could argue *a contrario* that this proves that he is indeed devoted to conventional values. Nothing would be demonstrated in either case.



to the requirements of the formally rational sector of the economy.<sup>38</sup> The built-in limitations of role theory block Anderson from capturing the evolving dialectic between social position and disposition that governs the *double-sided production of urban marginality* and explains, in cases of disjuncture such as this one, how the latter may paradoxically be perpetuated by the very people upon whom it is imposed.

6

Because he starts from an overly monolithic vision of the ghetto and conflates folk with analytic concepts, Anderson cannot relate the *moral distinctions* he discovers in it to its internal *social stratification*. He thus boxes himself into a culturalist position with deeply disturbing political implications insofar as they render ghetto residents responsible for their own plight through their deviant values or role ineptness. To preempt this, Anderson must superimpose the trope of deindustrialization and racism onto his “role-model” theory, even though little in his field observations points to these factors. Had he started from a systematic map of social differentiation inside the ghetto, he would have found that what he depicts as the “coexistence” of two “codes” that seem to float up above the social structure is in fact a low-grade cultural war and social antagonism, centered over the appropriation of public space, *between two fractions of the black urban proletariat*, the one situated at the cusp of the formal wage economy and tenuously oriented toward the official structures of white-dominated society (the school, the law, marriage), the other deproletarianized and demoralized to such an extent that it is turning inward to the informal society and economy of the street. The distinction between these two categories is not a hard and fast one but, on the contrary, labile and porous, produced and marked by microdifferences imperceptible to the “distant gaze” of outsiders. But these small positional differences are associated with homological differences in dispositions that tend to reinforce them and, through a cumulative dialectic of social and moral distancing, determine divergent fates among people who seem to have started out from about the same place (especially if they are observed from afar and from above, as in survey research).

Much as a battle rages inside the ghetto between the “street” and “decent” orientations, that is, between two relations to the future anchored in adjacent but distinct social positions and trajectories, an unresolved clash runs through the pages of *Code of the Street* between two Elijah Andersons and two theories of the involution of the ghetto, “role-model

<sup>38</sup> For an empirical illustration of how a splintered habitus functions to produce unstable and volatile strategies in the ghetto economy that reinforce the objective irregularity of its collective organization, see Wacquant (1998); for further discussion of this dialectic of objective structure and subjective “agency” among deproletarianized African-American men, see Young (1999); for an interesting contrast with John Turner’s failure, see Fernandez-Kelly’s (1994) account, “Towanda’s Triumph.”

deficit” and “deindustrialization-cum-racism,” which express the different political facets of the work and carry with them divergent policy prescriptions. Anderson-the-conservative, propounding a *normative* theory of social action and a *moral* theory of social order, keeps asserting the importance of (masculine) values and commitment to (patriarchal) decency. Anderson-the-liberal, wedded to a *rational choice* model of conduct and a *materialist* conception of social structure, counters that lack of jobs caused by deindustrialization and persistent racial exclusion doom inner-city residents anyway. Anderson-the-moralist recommends the rebuilding of “the social infrastructure” of the ghetto, which requires that “the old heads of the community [be] empowered and activated,” that is, a conservative return to a past that never was. Anderson-the-materialist calls in mantric fashion for the “opening up [of] the world of work” via “a comprehensive plan that will allow no one to fall through the cracks” (COS, p. 316), that is, a liberal future that will never be.

In the first version, ghetto residents are *agents* of their own moral and cultural dereliction, but only insofar they are utter “cultural dopes” deceived by a “code” gone awry. In the second, they are hapless *victims* of structural changes in the economy and continued domination by whites. The stitching together of these contradictory theses effected by making the “code” an “adaptation” to circumstances and cultural alterity a by-product of structural blockage (a similar resolution of this antinomy is found in Wilson [1996]). But this move guts out the symbolic dimension of social life in the ghetto: it robs culture of any autonomy, it strips agents of all “agency,” and it takes us back to a mechanical model wherein behavior is deduced from a cultural code that is itself directly derived from an objective structure wholly external to the ghetto.<sup>39</sup> And this, in turn, negates the important lesson of Anderson’s book: that there exists significant if fine-grained cultural and moral distinctions inside the ghetto, inscribed in both institutions and minds, that help explain the diversity of strategies and trajectories followed by their residents that only long-term ethnography can detect and dissect.

<sup>39</sup> Another paradoxical consequence of this mechanical reversion to economic determination-in-the-last-instance is that it leads Anderson to dismiss the very cultural and moral distinctions that he has spent the entire book elaborating when he concludes: “The condition of these communities was produced *not by moral turpitude but by economic forces* that have undermined black, urban, working-class life and a neglect of their consequences on the part of the public. . . The focus should be on the *socio-economic structure*, because it was structural change that caused jobs to decline and joblessness to increase. . . But the focus also belongs on the *public policy* that has radically threatened the well-being of many citizens” (COS, p. 315; emphasis added). Why, then, devote 350 pages to anatomizing the “moral life of the inner city” if it is but an epiphenomenon of industrial restructuring and state neglect? And why does the book not contain a single statistic on the evolving economic and employment makeup of Philadelphia nor a single line on the changing public policies pursued at the municipal, local, and federal levels?

MODEL CITIZENS HIDDEN IN HARLEM: NEWMAN ON FAST-FOOD WORKERS

Newman's team study of "the working poor in the inner city" was sparked by a banal street scene: en route from New York's Upper West Side to the airport one morning to attend a conference, "The Truly Disadvantaged," she was struck by the sight of Harlem bus shelters packed with "lines of men and women dressed for work, holding the hands of their children on their way to day care and the local schools. . . . This place was a far cry from the jobless ghettos described by the literature on the 'urban underclass'." Stuck in traffic, from her car window, Newman "saw the working poor people who were still in the community, *soldiering on*" and wondered: "Should we not learn something from these people, whose *strength* we might be able to build on, before we consign our whole poverty policy to the ups and downs of the welfare system? . . . By the time I reached La Guardia Airport, the outlines of this book had formed in my head" (*No Shame in My Game* [hereafter NSMG], pp. x-xi; emphasis added). To demonstrate that the ghetto is "teeming" with unseen solid citizens, devoted to "family values" and steeped in the "work ethic," Newman hired a large "multiethnic research team" of graduate students whom she directed to interview and collect the life stories of 200 young workers at four Harlem fast-food outlets and to follow a dozen such laborers, who also turned in personal diaries, for about a year. While her "research team donned the crew uniform to work behind the counters of the restaurants for four months," she "spent time alone with the owners and managers of the same restaurant, . . . absorbing the admirable blend of profit motives and missionary zeal that led them to establish their firms" in Harlem and learning about the secret virtues of working at disparaged "McJobs" (NSMG, p. 36).

This initial revelation and the research strategy adopted to authenticate it contain *in nuce* the categories and concerns that organize *No Shame in My Game*, the ingredients for its contribution as well as the fount of its biases, shortcomings, and gaps. On the positive side, Newman launches a frontal attack on the reigning public image of ghetto residents as slothful and immoral freeloaders who burden the societal body, showing that "the nation's working poor do not need their values reengineered" but rather employment that would enable them to achieve a modicum of material stability and social dignity (NSMG, p. 298). By tracking at ground level the daily battles of Harlem fast-food workers to find, retain, and subsist on the famine-wage, part-time jobs that are the norm of that service sector, she shines a bright light on the plight of one salient segment of the 7 million Americans (7% of the country's labor force, one black man and one white woman in every four workers, two-thirds of them adults) who toil in the underbelly of the urban economy yet cannot escape the yoke of crushing poverty. By making visible "the invisible poor" who drudge under Third World conditions at the heart of the First World city just as "welfare reform" denies them vital social services and combines with

immigration to put downward pressure on wages by flooding an already overcrowded unskilled labor market, she demonstrates, after others, how profoundly miscast the U.S. debate and policy on poverty, welfare, and race has been.<sup>40</sup>

The problem is that Newman fights the prevalent stereotype of the inner-city social parasite by turning it squarely on its head and replacing it by *its mirror opposite*, the media-cum-political stereotype of the “working family,” which makes ghetto residents over into virtual clones of worthy middle-class suburbanites, indistinguishable from “mainstream Americans” save by the color of their skin, their unattractive residence, and their hapless circumstances.<sup>41</sup> In so doing she entrenches several misconceptions central to the very conventional wisdom she wishes to displace including (i) the presociological notion that social conduct is a direct, instantaneous precipitate of “culture” understood as a simple linear hierarchy of values (crowned by the national calling for work) consensually adhered to and untainted by power and interests; (ii) the dualistic division between “people . . . outside of the labor market, sitting on the welfare sidelines” and “the others, the hardworking people of communities like Harlem struggling to get to work on time” (NSMG, p. xi), which her own evidence reveals to be both artificial and misleading; (iii) the national obsession with moral valency and “family values” that purportedly enable the working poor to “summon the personal strength to blast past the stigma” of substandard wage employment (NSMG, p. xiv) in the deregulated service economy, even though sheer material necessity is more than sufficient to account for their practices; (iv) a remarkably benevolent view of business—she hails Harlem fast-food operators as “unsung heroes”—which blinds her to the brutal class relations and malign state policies that undergird and underwrite the despotic labor regimes she extensively documents; (v) the persistent confusion between issues of *mobility* (or “opportunity”), which concern the allocation and the movement of persons across positions, and issues of structured *inequality*, which have to do with the objective gap between places along the “occupational pyramid” and their associated rewards, risks, and penalties. This last

<sup>40</sup> Newman reinforces and extends recent studies of welfare and work (Wilson 1996; Handler and Hasenfeld 1997; Edin and Lein 1997), race and welfare (Quadagno 1994; Brown 1999; Gilens 1999), and low-wage and part-time work in the United States (Holzer 1996; Tilly 1996).

<sup>41</sup> “One of their greatest asset is the commitment they share with more affluent Americans to the importance of the work ethic. These are not people whose values need reengineering. They work hard at jobs the rest of us would not want because they believe in the dignity of work. In many instances they are not only not better off, they are actually worse off from a financial perspective for having eschewed welfare and stayed on the job. But it also benefits them, as it benefits their middle-class counterparts, because working keeps them on the right side of American culture. Nonetheless they are poor, and because of this unhappy truth, they are subjected to many of the same forces that the nonworking poor must contend with: decaying housing, poor diet, lack of medical attention, lousy schools, and persistent insecurity” (NSMG, p. xv).

confusion leads her to formulate policy recommendations guaranteed to perpetuate the very problems she diagnoses by further expanding desocialized wage labor and the life insecurity it entails.

Newman's depiction of the working sections of the ghetto population as run-of-the-mill middle-class Americans in poor people's disguise—"hard-working tax-paying citizens [who] are also poor" (NSMG, p. 36) and who, like the author, sacralize work even as it fails to sustain them—results from the methodical *inversion of material compulsion into moral impulsion* which gives *No Shame in My Game* a distinctive schizophrenic feel and skews its analyses from start to finish. One passage among many is paradigmatic of its continual conversion of economic necessity into cultural virtue. Early in the book, Newman notes that structural changes in the country's economy, welfare, and public services retrenchment, and the renewed influx of migrants "have pulled the rug out from under the low-wage labor market." But this "bad news" is counterbalanced by "the good news":

Despite all of these difficulties, the nation's working poor continue to seek their *salvation* in the labor market. That such a *commitment* persists when the economic rewards are so minimal is testimony to the *durability of the work ethic*, to the powerful reach of mainstream American *culture*, which has always placed work at the center of our collective *moral existence*. (NSMG, p. 61; emphasis added)

"Commitment," "ethic," "culture," "moral existence": these are the central categories that Newman deploys to describe and explain the life and labor of Harlem youths employed at fast-food outlets. As with Duneier, this spiritual language automatically suppresses coarse material matters of class, struggle, exploitation, and domination. But, here again, the major advantage of *a moral idiom to analyze the functioning of an economy* is that it is spontaneously adjusted to the cognitive and evaluative lens of "mainstream American" readers, and especially of policy makers who appear to be the book's primary target audience. This conceptual muzzling is redoubled by the design of the study, which effectively selects on the dependent variable: by focusing on the "working poor," who by definition participate in the low-wage sector of the economy, Newman is bound to find that ghetto residents do cling to the margins of the labor market. Indeed, where else could they "seek salvation" when the state is, on the one side, rolling back its social safety net and forcing the poor into inferior jobs via workfare and, on the other, widening and tightening its penal dragnet to sweep away those who would seek escape from servile wage labor in the illegal sectors of the street economy (Wacquant 1999)? Together, the research design and the moral(istic) reasoning of its author make the main conclusions of *No Shame in My Game* a matter of *petitio principii*.

1

In keeping with its purpose to raise the standing of minority low-wage employees in the symbolic hierarchy of the country, the book opens with a series of moral tales of family hardship and individual courage against formidable odds. These stories are intended to show that the “values” of the “working poor” of Harlem “place work and family at the center of their own culture in a form that would be embraced even by conservative forces in American society” (NSMG, p. 201). But, while these stories paint a grisly portrait of overwhelming material constraint and crushing socio-economic adversity, Newman’s gloss consistently stresses cultural valor and personal purpose—as if the analyst and the people she depicts somehow obeyed different laws of causality. The book’s core chapters narrate how young, uneducated Harlemites search for and find jobs in their borough and how they cope with the practical hardships and social disrepute attached to these jobs in order to cling to the world of work. We learn that ghetto youths pursue paid employment in clothing outlets, pharmacies, and bodegas, cosmetics and sporting goods stores, as well as security firms and fast-food establishments, first and foremost, to gain protection from the pressures of the street and to escape trouble at home and in the neighborhood. They are also anxious to relieve the financial burden they represent for their families, which explains why they start laboring in their early teens, bagging groceries and doing odd chores off the books in local stores, or at publicly funded summer jobs, to bring cash into their home and cover the cost of their clothing, food, and schooling.<sup>42</sup> For young mothers, low-wage employment offers an insurance policy of sorts against dependence on unreliable and often violent men, while having and gaining new friends at work is a major attraction for all.

It would thus seem that an array of *material factors and social forces* explain why poor black and Latino teenagers seek and hold on to substandard employment slots even as they gain little from them financially (often no more than a few dollars a day). Not so, insists Newman, who points time and again to the “dignity of work” and the inner desire of ghetto youths to honor the nation’s most sacred value. Willpower, character, resolve, and responsibility: not sociological concepts, but the everyday moral categories of the American middle class serve to depict and

<sup>42</sup> Throughout the book, we encounter Harlemites who engaged in state-tolerated and even state-sponsored child labor reminiscent of the 19th century, such as Tamara, who toiled selling newspapers at 11, and Tiffany, who bagged groceries at age 10 and worked as a clerk for a public agency providing assistance to victims of domestic violence before her thirteenth birthday (NSMG, pp. 71, 78, 95). None of this disturbs Newman in the least. In all other major OECD countries (except South Africa and Turkey), such preteen labor is considered child abuse and liable to criminal prosecution.

decipher their conduct.<sup>43</sup> This rhetoric of choice is so suffusive that it overlays even constraint, which enters into the analysis as the product of previous choices made by individuals: “Values are only part of the story. Social structure tells the rest. Some people are positioned to act on their ambitions and others are trapped,” not by an objective structure of relations made up of the confluence of socioracial inequality and super-exploitative job chains anchored by a given configuration of firm and state, but “*trapped by choices* they have made in the past” (NSMG, p. 159). Even the fact that fast-food workers flee their jobs in droves at the first chance because the drudgery is so dreary and unrewarding is presented as a positive effect of the “culture of work” and the aspirations it breeds in those who have the seed of the work ethic in them: “There is a collective culture behind the counter that sends hamburger flippers down to the civil service exam whenever they are held. Everyone wants to do better than minimum wage” (NSMG, p. 35).

Fast-food work is widely reviled not only because it is precarious, dull, soiling, and pays a pittance, but also because those who hold such jobs must display subservience to management and servility toward customers even when the latter are rude, scornful, and aggressive. One Harlem youth poignantly recounts how he hid his Burger Barn uniform in a bag, made up fake jobs, and walked to his place of work through roundabout routes so that his friends would not find out that he flipped hamburgers and subject him to razzing and ridicule. To “develop the backbone it takes to stay the course” in such tarnished and tarnishing jobs, ghetto residents again are said to “call upon widely accepted American values that honor working people, values that ‘float’ in the culture at large,” chief among them the notion that “self-respect comes from being on the right side of the chasm that separates the deserving (read ‘working’) and the undeserving (read ‘nonworking’)” (NSMG, p. 100). But to fully overcome the stigma of quasi-servitude in the deregulated service economy, “something stronger is required: a workplace culture that actively functions to overcome the negatives by reinforcing the value of the work ethic.” Here veteran employees and managers play the lead role by creating “a coonlike atmosphere in the back of the restaurant where they counsel

<sup>43</sup> In nearly every case presented, individual willpower seems to be the decisive factor. Thus Jamal “started drinking and taking the occasional hit of cocaine” one summer but soon “pulled himself out of it by *sheer force of character*” because he “is different” from those who would give in to such pressure: “He takes his *responsibilities* seriously. . . . Most notable about Jamal is his *commitment to work*, to the importance of trying to *make it on his own*” (NSMG, p. 12; emphasis added). Kyesha “is strong-willed. . . . The choice she made, to terminate the pregnancies, resulted directly from the *desire* she had to hold on to the one part of her life that really worked: her job. . . . There is little hope that Kyesha and Juan will ever marry, settle down, and give their son a home of his own,” given the famine wages they are earning (five dollars an hour each after years of hard labor), but “still, they are *responsible* parents who work for a living” and wish to avoid becoming “one more statistic in the long litany of problems in the welfare system” (NSMG, pp. 26, 30; emphasis added).

new workers distressed by bad-mouthing.” Assisted by their supervisors, fast-food workers thus “take the process of carving an honored identity one step further: they argue that their jobs have hidden virtues” (NSMG, pp. 102, 103) and that any job, even the most abject, is inherently worthy. And so does Katherine Newman after them. This self-mystifying motif of the sanctity of work and its corollary, the unseen blessings of super-exploitative wage labor, is drilled throughout her examination of the relationship between schooling, skills, and (im)mobility in low-wage employment, a relation she finds to be positive at every step and turn.

2

Precocious participation in the world of substandard work, Newman contends, not only supplies ghetto youngsters with the “financial aid” they desperately need to pay for their (formally free) high school education and minimal postsecondary instruction. The “culture of work” instills in them discipline, a sense of temporal organization, and the forbearance to set goals and meet challenges that inept inner-city schools are incapable of nurturing. Fast-food employers are “caring adults” who shoulder the role of surrogate teachers: they kindheartedly support their employees in their educational endeavors and steer their personal growth. They also improve the human capital of their staff by giving them ample “opportunities for learning, for developing skills that should make a difference in occupational mobility” (NSMG, p. 139).

By flipping hamburgers, handling the cash register, cleaning oil vats, and mopping floors, ghetto adolescents get to formulate and monitor information, develop their memory and their money-counting abilities, hone their “people skills,” engage in multitasking and cope with the stress generated by a frantic work pace, authoritarian supervision, and offensive customers. While their middle- and upper-class counterparts attend academies to study classical music and sojourn overseas to imbibe foreign languages, Harlem teenagers join in the modern “ballet [of] the multiple stations behind the counter” at their local Burger Barn, where they meet others like them “from a multitude of countries” who “come together and learn bits and snatches of each other’s languages” so that “they can communicate at a very rudimentary level in several dialects.” This pragmatic syncretism entices them “to reach across the walls of competition and cultural difference” and makes the fast-food outlet “a living laboratory of diversity, the ultimate melting pot for the working poor” (NSMG, pp. 144, 145). Even the menial, repetitive, and repellent nature of work in a fast-food joint turns out to be an invaluable motivational asset in the pursuit of education: “There is nothing quite like slaving over a hot, greasy deep fryer for eight hours to teach people that they need to put some effort into making sure they have the credentials to qualify for something better in the future” (NSMG, p. 133). It does not occur to Newman that the horrid working conditions, demeaning dress codes, high tension, in-



secure tenure, and starvation wages of such “slave jobs”—as they are commonly called in the ghetto—are powerful incentives for young men in particular to shun the formal labor market altogether and join in the “booty capitalism” of the street where, by entering into gangs and the commerce of drugs, they can at least salvage a sense of masculine honor, maintain self-respect, and even entertain hopes of economic advancement (see Bourgois 1995; Adler 1995; also Sánchez-Jankowski 1991; Williams 1992; Padilla 1992; Hagedorn 1998). The will to “make it,” which she celebrates among the “working poor” struggling to gain a foothold in the legal economy, is also the driving engine behind the careers of criminal entrepreneurs and their employees.<sup>44</sup>

Newman expresses just as little concern for the fact that school and degraded wage work compete for scarce time, limited attention, and finite energy, despite her own evidence that Harlem teenage wage earners routinely cut back on their sleep, drastically compress their social life, and forfeit all pastimes to accommodate their overburdened schedule.<sup>45</sup> And that sheer material constraint is the reason why they find themselves at work so young: “I don’t want to work—I fear that if I work I might be setting myself up to fail in school,” laments Ianna, “but then again, I don’t have any other money” (NSMG, p. 137). The bankruptcy of public schools is presented as a *datum brutum* of life in the ghetto that can be mitigated only by coupling what passes for education with low-wage servitude. “The best thing we could do to encourage school performance among those who are at the highest risk for dropping out” is not to mobilize to improve their schools so as to give them conditions of learning, academic achievement, and self-realization remotely approaching those enjoyed by their white, higher-class mates in charter schools, private establishments, or in the suburbs, but “to saturate their neighborhoods with part-time jobs and permit the structured environment of the workplace to work its magic on the other, often less orderly, parts of the day” (NSMG, p. 124).

3

Newman takes the structure of class and caste inequality in the metropolis as a given and, in the name of realism, urges ghetto residents to adapt to it by seeking low-wage work as the best stopgap remedy to just about

<sup>44</sup> Reviewing statistical and ethnographic studies, Richard Freeman (1995) finds strong support for a causal link between the rapid deterioration of the low-wage labor market in the 1980s and the sharp increase in the propensity to criminal activity among the noninstitutionalized population.

<sup>45</sup> The student-worker literature is much less cheerful than Newman about lower-class teens who combine school with employment. Greenberger and Steinberg (1986), e.g., found that when such work is routine and repetitive, devoid of initiative and problem-solving, and offers no training and learning opportunities, as is typical of restaurant labor, it tends to diminish school performance, to increase involvement in delinquency, and to stimulate drug and alcohol consumption.

every problem at hand.<sup>46</sup> To make this nostrum more attractive, she systematically *inflates the job qualifications of fast-food workers and exaggerates their chances for occupational mobility* within the firm and industry. In an effort to “enskill” restaurant labor, she portrays the ability to handle overloads, speed-ups, and the crush of multiple tasks created by deliberate understaffing as qualifications that deserve recognition and reward. But the fact that “fast food jobs provide the worker with experience and knowledge that ought to be useful as a platform for advancement in the work world” does not make them so (NSMG, p. 147).<sup>47</sup> For the recognition and reward of skills depends less on the intrinsic properties of an employment slot than on the relative scarcity of people to fill it and the power relations between employers and employees (Form 1987). And the brute reality here is that, what with all of their kitchen-floor know-how and counter dexterity, fast-food employees are eminently disposable and instantly replaceable. This is not because of “the popular impression that the jobs they hold now are devoid of value,” as Newman would have us believe, but because the tasks that compose these jobs have been methodically subdivided, impoverished, and routinized to make it “economically feasible to use a kid for one day and replace him with another kid the next day” (Garson 1988, p. 21). It is remarkable that fast-food outlets in Harlem have “never, in the entire history of their restaurants, advertised for employees” owing to the “steady flow of willing applicants coming in the door” (NSMG, p. 62) who have ample qualifications for jobs that require virtually none.

Newman is particularly sanguine about the promotion prospects of fast-food employees. Over and against their public image as occupational dead ends, she wishes to prove that “McJobs” offer real opportunities for movement into the managerial ranks because “fortunately, the industry is committed enough to its workforce to open those opportunities to promising internal candidates” (NSMG, p. 175). Her oratory to that effect is re-

<sup>46</sup> “While working may not be the ideal choice for them, it is probably the best choice under real-world circumstances, one that provides structure, sources of discipline, caring adults who watch over them, and a better shot at a future” (NSMG, p. 132). One is reminded of the arguments put forth by apologists of slavery in the 18th century and by advocates of child labor in the early era of industrial capitalism that highlighted, the ones the “civilizing virtues” of bondage for the inferior races, and the others the “moralizing” effect of factory work on the offspring of the dissolute working class. The more enlightened of them fully recognized that slavery and wage labor have many drawbacks but maintained that, on balance, “under real-world circumstances,” these institutions of labor extraction were a blessing for those upon whom they were enforced.

<sup>47</sup> The notion that routinized jobs require more skill and initiative than their official descriptions allow, that low-level employees skirt rules, use shortcuts, and develop shopfloor knowledges and strategies for “making out” that exceed official definitions of qualifications, is a staple of the anthropology of work (Burawoy 1979), a research literature curiously absent from Newman’s copious endnotes, perhaps because it could not be squared with her assertion that fast-food managers and workers share “a craft ethic” and have joint problems and common interests in the organization of labor.

lentless, but the evidence she adduces is less than compelling: her data indicate that at most 5% of those who stay on the job and exhibit both subservience and diligence in enforcing the order of the franchise have a chance to rise up to “swing manager,” a position that is managerial in name only since it entails little decision-making capacity and pays barely above minimum wage—Kyesha is promoted to “swing manager” at a wage of *\$6 an hour with no “benefits” after nine years of diligent services*, a full dollar more than a rank-and-file employee at that time; no wonder she “shows no great hunger for advancement on the job” and toils at a second job cleaning the grounds of her housing project in the mornings (NSMG, p. 299).

Fast-food workers themselves evaluate these prospects bluntly by “voting with their feet,” resulting in an average tenure of under six months and translating into a yearly turnover rate pushing 300% for the industry. They flee their industry en masse, dream of getting a public service job instead, and actively look for alternatives in clothing stores, drugstores, and grocery chains, which they regard as offering better employment because, even though they also pay poorly, at least in them one does not have to suffer grease, heat, stress, and behave like a menial with customers. Try as she may, there is no getting around the fact that, as Newman belatedly concedes in a conclusion that confutes her entire chapter on the topic, “the typical Burger Barn worker can expect to come and go from the firm without seeing much advancement at all,” because fast-food jobs “are built for churning, a pattern that is acceptable for teenagers looking for summer jobs, but distressingly limited for adults who are trying to make a real go of it in the private labor market” (NSMG, p. 185).<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Harlem fast-food employees have a far less enchanted vision of their condition than does Newman, and their quotes evince a fair degree of penetration of the reality of class superexploitation. As one of them put it: “You’re working, man, but you’re still struggling. You’re not laid back. You’re still humble. . . . What makes it difficult is when you’re smart. [Burger Barn] is not for anybody who has any type of brains. . . . *You’re being overworked and underpaid. You’re making somebody else rich. So . . . you really got to brainwash yourself* to say, ‘Well okay, I’m going to make this guy rich and I’m just happy to be making this little five dollars an hour’” (NSMG, p. 116; emphasis added).

Newman’s sermonizing about the hidden virtues of fast-food work is also directly gainsaid by the short chapter devoted to interviews with 100 job applicants who were turned away from hamburger outlets in Harlem. Despite having long histories of intermittent employment and very modest

<sup>48</sup> Even that acknowledgement is problematic, as it perpetuates the “unquestioned age-based prejudice against youth (teenage) workers in America” which, together with state tolerance and deregulation, continually replenishes a “low-wage, low-status, stopgap pool of youth labor” (Tannock 2001, pp. 1, 11) that is a central component of the national economy and a major medium for the reproduction of class and ethnoracial inequality.

expectations (their “reservation wage” stood below the legal minimum and their best job ever averaged \$6.77 an hour), and although they had searched hard all over the city, three-fourths of them were still unemployed a year later, due mainly to increased competition from older workers pushed down into “youth jobs.” Patterns of rejection further disclose that low-level credentials are of no value and confirm the marked preference of employers for immigrant over native labor, for Latinos over African-Americans, and for applicants commuting from distant areas over area residents, whom employers perceive to be more prone to crime—findings that contradict Newman’s image of a ghetto “community in control,” her insistence that “education matters, skills matter,” and her pet belief that fast-food operators are motivated by ideals of community service (NSMG, pp. 167, 242–45). All of this converges to indicate that fast-food managers are bent on recruiting the most vulnerable and docile workforce in the context of massive labor surplus at the bottom of the occupational tier fed by the collective downward slide of the working class.

4

To hold onto their jobs, fast-food employees must streamline their social activities, shrink or forsake their interpersonal ties, and compress their schedules to suit the needs and whims of their employer. Newman approves of this astringent reorganization of life around precarious and underpaid work for the “hidden benefits” that it brings:

The more workers withdraw from nonworking friends and neighbors, the more the influence of the workplace—its mores, customs, networks, and expectations—shape them. . . . What recedes from view is the more irregular, episodic culture of the neighborhood and the streets. Working people gradually leave those less ordered worlds for the more predictable, more demanding, and in the long run more rewarding life of a wage earner. (NSMG, pp. 106, 109)

In this schema, *the more despotic the work regime and the more desperate the worker is to retain subpar employment, the better off* she turns out to be: “The further Burger Barn workers sink into their jobs, the more they pull away from the negative elements in their environment” and separate themselves “in every respect from the friends and acquaintances who have taken a wrong turn in life” (NSMG, p. 109) and gone on to be hustlers, drug dealers, and welfare recipients, whom fast-food employees are keen to vituperate in their interviews with Newman’s research team. There are at least four problems with this argument.

The first is that it rests on series of *false dichotomies between workers and nonworkers*, the neighborhood and the firm, the world of the street—equated with disorder and immorality—and the world of wage

labor—presented as the serene temple of order and virtue.<sup>49</sup> For the strength of Newman’s field data lies precisely in documenting that social life in Harlem is *not* organized according to these dualities borrowed from policy discourse (and enshrined in the standard variables of census and survey research); rather, it incessantly intermingles formal and informal activities, legal and illegal pursuits in a mishmash of market, state, criminal, and kinship-based forms of support. The life stories presented in *No Shame in My Game* amply indicate that most Harlem youngsters cycle in and out of jobs that hardly provide a shield against daily insecurity anyway; their family trees reveal that licit and illicit money-making endeavors accrete in the same households, and that lineages commonly cumulate wage earners, artisans, workers of the street economy, and recipients of public aid who pool resources and services in a “never-ending swap system” (NSMG, pp. 189, 190–91). Low-wage employees thus remain embedded in the social webs of both the neighborhood and the workplace, and they draw on these two cultures simultaneously to construct their life strategies and *Lebenswelt*.

Second, in language evocative of 19th-century ideologues of ascending industrial capitalism (and contemporary neoconservatives), Newman presents most ghetto youths as “free to choose” between drug dealing and legitimate employment, between welfare check and paycheck, and between the shame of state “dependency” and the honor of servile wage work.<sup>50</sup> Couching these alternative paths in (and out of) the local socioeconomic structure in terms of individual volition and discretion thwarts the analysis of the mechanisms and conditions under which differently positioned youth follow this or that circuit and with what consequences. And it does nothing to elucidate the predicament of those Newman acknowledges are not “among the lucky ones who did find work” and had “no real choice, no matter how much they had internalized the work ethic” (NSMG, pp. 109, 111). Third, the idea of a radical opposition between

<sup>49</sup> On several occasions, Newman (NSMG, p. xiv) notes that “the working poor are perpetually at risk for becoming the poor of the other kind: they are one paycheck away from what is left of welfare, one sick child away from getting fired, one missed rent payment short of eviction.” Yet, instead of forsaking the untenable opposition between two “kinds” of poor, she makes it the pivot of all her analyses.

<sup>50</sup> Among numerous passages: “*Everyone on the block had to choose* which means to glory was worthy of admiration. Tamara’s own hard work tipped her in the direction of the working man. [*sic*] . . . Juan, Kyesha’s ex, has had to make the same kinds of choices. Once he secured his Burger Barn job, he had to *decide what to do* with his friends and acquaintances who operate on the wrong side of the law. . . . Many a young woman *opts* for the work world and sacrifices some of her standard of living in order to live by the mainstream credo. . . . Patty has been on both sides of the fence. Her experience on the job convinced her that the honor gained has been worth the cost. But she has had to *make the conscious choice* to pull back from welfare. . . . Young people in Harlem are constantly *faced with choices*, presented with drastically *different models* of adulthood and asked to *decide* between them” (NSMG, pp. 110–11; emphasis added).

the hell of the ghetto and the haven of the workplace founders on the fact that fast-food jobs display many of the salient properties of the world of the street: they are irregular, episodic, and insecure; social relations on the kitchen floor are riven with distrust and brutality; and the pay they provide is so meager as to make it impossible to attain minimal financial stability, garner savings, and project oneself beyond tomorrow. By taking up employ in hamburger joints, then, Harlem teenagers join a segment of the service economy that looks like a first cousin of the street economy and keeps them close to the street, rather than isolates them from its pull. They also walk into the horns of an insuperable value dilemma.

5

Newman writes approvingly that American “culture confers honor on those who hold down jobs of any kind over those who are outside of the labor force. Independence, self-sufficiency—these are the virtues that have no equal in this society” (NSMG, p. 119). But therein lies the rub for fast-food employees and the fourth flaw in Newman’s model: by complying with the holy commandment of work in that deregulated service sector, they bind themselves to capricious employers for famine wages and thereby desecrate the value of independence; by submitting to degrading mistreatment at the hands of managers and customers (company policy strictly forbids responding to their insults), they daily violate the ideals of autonomy and dignity that are also core American values. And thus they are disparaged and *devalued* in the very movement whereby they “seek salvation” through work. To say that hamburger flippers “shift their identities from kid in the neighborhood to worker, albeit a worker with a complex identity: part admired, part scorned” (NSMG, p. 116) only displaces the contradiction; it does not and indeed *cannot* resolve it, for that contradiction resides in reality, in the antipodean makeup of desocialized wage labor that is the normal horizon of subsistence for the unskilled proletariat in the age of neoliberalism.

Newman cannot grasp this value conflict at the core of the existence of the low-wage worker in post-Fordist America because of the *built-in limitations of her normative concept of culture as a monolith* constituted of a single paramount value that trumps all others as well as overwhelms competing springs of action (such as interest, tradition, and affect, to recall Max Weber’s typology). Where Elijah Anderson diagnoses the cancer-like growth of an “institutionalized oppositional culture” in reaction to the confluence of economic dispossession and racial relegation in the ghetto (COS, p. 323), Newman maintains that the “mainstream culture” of work and abstemious individualism reigns supreme there as everywhere, so that all social, economic, and moral distinctions in American society are erased “in favor of a simpler dichotomy: the worthy and the unworthy, the working stiff and the lazy sloth. . . . Here in America, there is *no other metric* that matters as much as the kind of job you hold” (NSMG,

p. 87; emphasis added).<sup>51</sup> One need not be a fervent apostle of multiculturalism to recognize that there exist salient cultural differences between the ghetto and the so-called mainstream—a vague designation that fosters, and then papers over, the conflation of class, caste, and symbolic power—as well as within the ghetto; that values are diverse, contested, and not always congruent; and that they constitute not only guides for action, but also weapons and stakes in group struggles over work and worth. But Newman’s constrictive conception of culture, seemingly issued straight from a structural-functionalist textbook from the fifties, cannot accommodate such a dynamic relationship between values, social structure, practice and, even less, power.

*No Shame in My Game* offers the paradox of an anthropological analysis that pursues the cultural dimension of social and economic life in the ghetto *in order to obliterate it* through a series of nested reductions, first of practices to the simple “acting out” of a cultural model; second, of this cultural model to values; and third, of values, plural, to the sole supreme value of (wage) work. All noncultural sources of action are elided or given short shrift; all nonnormative dimensions of culture are omitted; the “polytheism of values” and the “deadly, unremitting struggle between them”—to speak like Weber—are replaced by cultural monotheism and static consensus. Thus, even as Newman denies Anderson’s thesis that the ghetto is now dominated by a “code of the street” antithetical to the “work ethic,” she joins him in depicting the social conduct of its residents as the mechanical execution of a cultural script over which they have no say or reach.

6

Much as she overlooks the contested nature of “values” and their dynamic shaping in and through (inter)action, Newman is blind to the relations of material and symbolic power that traverse the workplace and make it a site of struggle between collectives endowed with vastly different powers and interests, as opposed to a mere locus of production and sociability. She presents a stunningly benign portrait of the fast-food industry in which owners, managers, and employees are a “community” united by a common “culture of work” and mutual care, “trust and affection” (NSMG, p. 300). She endorses the business fiction that wages, tenure, and employment conditions in that sector are the natural product of “competitive

<sup>51</sup> Note the subtle but consequential difference between “equating moral value with employment” and measuring worth by “the kind of job” one holds (NSMG, p. 87): in the first formulation, all jobs, bar none, are a source of honor and employment anchors a categorical hierarchy (in/out, worthy/unworthy); the second suggests a gradational scale (more/less) in which honor is relative and leaves open the possibility that some jobs might be dishonorable and those who hold them unworthy.

pressure<sup>52</sup> rather than employers' ability to dictate contractual terms and successful efforts to deskill and disorganize the workforce in the context of state *laissez faire*. She politely avoids any mention of the long record of vigorous and vicious antiunion activism by its leading firms, both in the United States and in the foreign countries where they have expanded. Yet studies of the historical development, national deployment and international diffusion of U.S. fast-food franchises have shown that they have coupled new-age computerization with old-style Taylorism not *because* labor was unqualified and unstable but *in order to* make it so and to employ disposable workers needing no more than 15 minutes of training to be operational.<sup>53</sup>

When speaking of minority fast-food owners and managers, Newman resorts to the exalted language of the religious apostolate: these are people with "a special spark" who "often possess a missionary impulse" that took them to the heart of the ghetto "because it is important to them to bring job opportunities to depressed neighborhoods, to lift their own people up through the most mainstream of mechanisms: a steady job." But, aside from the bothersome fact that fast-food jobs are decidedly *not* steady, the observations of her research team consistently rebut this cheerful vision of Harlem hamburger franchises as "civic-minded" concerns whose endeavors are "more like social work" than conventional money making (NSMG, pp. 127, 183). First, fast-food owners locate their establishments along commercial strips at the edges of the ghetto and not at its core, where poverty is deepest. Next, they systematically discriminate against local residents and, like every other low-wage employer (Holzer 1996), hire in priority nonblacks and nonresidents (barely half of Burger Barn employees *inside Harlem* are African-American). They also manipulate the ethnic mix of their staff to the detriment of the local population so as to increase profits by extending their customer base, even as this generates serious ethnic tension and resentment among African-American

<sup>52</sup> Inverting cause and consequence, Newman borrows from the rhetoric of the National Restaurant Association to assert that "in order for the industry to keep functioning with such an unstable labor force, the jobs themselves must be broken down so that each step can be learned . . . in a very short time. A vicious cycle develops in which low wages attached to low skills are encouraging high departure rates" (NSMG, p. 96). Then, for good measure, she adds: "Fast food employers run businesses in highly competitive markets. Constant pressure on price and profit discourage them from paying wages high enough to keep a steady workforce" (NSMG, p. 287).

<sup>53</sup> According to the chief of labor relations at McDonald's through the seventies, "Unions are inimical to what we stand for and how we operate," and not a single one of the 400 serious drives for union organizing at McDonald's outlets during the early part of that decade succeeded due to tireless company opposition. In the 1990s, McDonald's strove to thwart or destroy unions not only in the United States but in countries across the world where it has exported its consumer products and marketing techniques as well as its flexible labor policies calling for the mass use of part-time, nonunion, student and dependent workers paid below prevailing wage rates (Fantasia 1995).



employees (NSMG, p. 178). And, last but not least, they almost never reside or reinvest in the neighborhood that Newman claims they wish to serve.

Why, then, do Harlem restaurateurs “monitor the report cards of their charges, pay for books, and sponsor tutoring programs for their workers,” or help them get prescription glasses and open bank accounts, when they also steadfastly refuse to supply regular hours, pay decent wages, and extend minimal health care? Because such firm-level personal favors are part of a *paternalistic power arrangement* that allows fast-food managers to retain and better control a transient workforce, much like, until the 1950s, Southern planters provided their black laborers with rudimentary social benefits to bind them to the farm at the same time as they opposed any national-level welfare program that would interfere with this highly profitable relation of asymmetric dependency (Alston and Ferrie 1999). As for the ostentatious sponsoring of education, which Newman makes much of, it is an industrywide policy imposed on all fast-food franchisees as part of a national public relations campaign to counter the negative image of “McJobs” as instruments of exploitation of young workers (as she herself reveals; NSMG, p. 127).

7

All told, Newman’s picture of unskilled work in the fast-food industry is one of a benevolent and enlightened wage-labor dictatorship that offers mostly benefits for those upon whom it is wielded, thanks to the ethnic compassion of inner-city business owners and the country’s reverent stress on work as a cultural obligation of citizenship. It is no surprise, then, if she concludes that “we need millions more of these entrepreneurs to help solve the employment problems of urban ghettos” (NSMG, p. xvii) and if her policy recommendations consist of measures designed to further expand irregular and underpaid labor for those consigned at the bottom of the class and caste order—so much so that some readers may find that the book crosses from social research over into outright business propaganda.<sup>54</sup>

Newman endorses “enterprise zones,” wage subsidies, and tax breaks for firms that hire the urban poor, on the one side, and programs to help prepare and shuffle the latter into those precarious jobs, on the other. For instance, she supports refurbishing the curriculum and pedagogical organization of ghetto schools to turn them into direct feeders of pliable labor for the city’s low-wage employers. She singles out for special com-

<sup>54</sup> In an interview published by the newsletter of the Russell Sage Foundation to promote her book, Newman confesses that, in carrying out this research project, she “became enamored with what the inner-city business people [are] trying to do and the limitations they face in providing good employment. . . . They are here to make a profit but they are also a social resource that makes a difference in the inner city” (*RSF News* 4 [1999]: 3).

mentation (“a hands-down winner”) the National Youth Apprenticeship Program developed by McDonald’s, the Hyatt Hotel chain, and Walgreen’s (NSMG, p. 279), three of the nation’s most notorious suppliers of substandard jobs who consume disproportionate quantities of disposable immigrant, youth, and elderly labor. Her prescriptions are definitely *not* a variation on the usual “liberal” agenda of “big government” intervention to fight poverty by shoring up the perennial failings of the market. Quite the contrary: they assign to the state the minimalist mission of bolstering market discipline by better outfitting the poor for it and giving low-wage enterprise incentives and room to prosper and proliferate. And this reduced social and economic role of the state comes complete with a reaffirmation of its charge to enforce law and order: “Employment training and opportunities need to go hand in hand with expanded programs of community policing” (NSMG, p. 296). But Newman diverges from Du-neier, who recommends that the state leave the poor to their own devices to fabricate a street economy out of the scraps of the regular economy, in that she urges business, churches, philanthropic foundations, and other private operators to roll up their sleeves and join in the battle against urban poverty.

Newman is so wedded to a business-first and “small government” vision that she does not so much as consider such obvious possible measures as increasing the minimum wage, mandating medical insurance and other “benefits” that are an integral part of the labor contract in every other advanced society, lowering the legal work week in order to share employment, and creating public-sector jobs, to say nothing of increasing the social wage, extending the state safety net, and bolstering the collective bargaining capacity of service workers. Arguing that “we should be pragmatic and accept political realities for the moment, focusing policy energy on improving access to better-paid jobs in the private sector,” she devotes all of *nineteen lines* to vague generalities on unions, only to stress their lack of traction on low-wage employees (NSMG, pp. 276, 274–75), a fact that is profoundly anomalous for her theory: If it is true that “the acquisition of a mainstream identity as a working stiff” (NSMG, p. 105) is a primary motivation of low-wage employees and that inner-city employers are dedicated to realizing the welfare of their personnel and community, how is it that that such prideful bonding “within the organization and across the nation of fellow workers” fails to lead to the formation of strong unions?<sup>55</sup> Newman repeatedly invokes the language of class con-

<sup>55</sup> In concert with business organizations, Newman explains that “the low-wage labor market is notoriously difficult to organize” by the inherent characteristics of those jobs and the surfeit of labor, without even a passing reference to employer opposition to and retaliation against unions. The fact that three-fourths of nonunion workers in the country believe that employees who seek union representation will lose their jobs is safely tucked away in a distant endnote (NSMG, p. 370) to avoid the distasteful topic of the balance of class power between low-wage employees and business and the even less savory question of the state’s role in upholding it.

sciousness and solidarity to depict the desperate attachment of subproletarians to their marginal jobs, but hers is the negation of the class analysis needed to unlock the *mysterium* of “working poverty” in the wealthiest society on earth<sup>56</sup>—a society, furthermore, in which workers toil ever-longer hours when every other advanced nation has reduced labor time.

The policies advocated by Newman, then, are not liberal but distinctly neoliberal. Accepting the unfettered rule of the market as their premise, they aim at enlarging the sphere of desocialized wage labor and “moving people into jobs” via business consortia that will tap into the national “culture of work” and “personal responsibility,” whose vibrancy she celebrates in every chapter.<sup>57</sup> But these prescriptions are at loggerheads with the central findings of *No Shame in My Game*, which conclusively shows that *low-wage work in the United States, far from being a cure, is a root cause* of material destitution and life insecurity in the urban core. More precisely, they demonstrate that the quandary of America’s “working poor” in and out of the ghetto is not that they stay too long in substandard jobs; it is that these jobs, pegged at Third World standards, are allowed to exist and flourish due to the gross power imbalance between employers and unskilled laborers and to state policies that actively foster commodification through a mix of welfare, workfare, police, and penal programs. They confirm that “the problem” of poverty and work in America is composed of two distinct yet closely linked and mutually reinforcing quandaries: *exclusion* from employment (deproletarianization) and *inclusion* into precarious wage labor (casualization) that maintains employees in a state of deprivation, dependency, and dishonor that is only marginally preferable to joblessness and “welfare dependency” and breeds many of the same secondary problems. This is something that black leaders discerned well on the morrow of abolition, as historian Jacqueline Jones reminds us: Frederick Douglass “understood that irregular and poorly paid employment could render even free men and women dependent, ‘at the mercy of the oppressor to become his debased slaves’” and that “the terms and conditions” under which a people works is the crucial determinant of “their place and their possibilities within American society”

<sup>56</sup> In this regard, the new discourse on the “working poor” is in full continuity with the scholarly myth of the “underclass,” which, while using the suffix “class,” impeded a class analysis of the transformation of the urban (sub)proletariat in the post-Fordist city with its diverting focus on antisocial behaviors, cultural deviance, and “neighborhood effects.”

<sup>57</sup> “The best recipe for ending a lifetime of working poverty lies not in government subsidies, but in imaginative reconfigurations of the matching and promotion process that harvests those who have proven themselves” (NSMG, p. 292). But what if the private sector does not generate enough above-poverty jobs for all those deserving of promotion? And what is to be done with those who, for whatever reason, do not “prove themselves” in the workplace?

(Jones 1998, p. 13). The struggle for *decent* jobs, not just *any* job, has always been at the center of the life of American labor, black and white.

A “reinvigorated escalator” that would lift a select subgroup of low-wage workers into more stable and better-paid position on grounds of “merit” (NSMG, p. 289) does nothing to alter the flawed design of a social edifice in which the vast distances between floors condemns the residents of its lower tier to a life of material misery and social indignity by leaving them and their families at the permanent mercy of the whim of unreliable employers, the vagaries of business cycles, and the hazards of the life course. Facilitating mobility up the occupational ladder does nothing to remedy the fact that the minimum wage puts a full-time, year-round employee well below the official poverty line; that American workers in the bottom decile of the employment distribution earn a paltry 38% of the national median, as against 68% for European workers and 61% for their Japanese counterparts; and that the vast majority of them toil without health care, without a retirement plans and increasingly without unemployment coverage as well (Freeman 1999). Moreover, given the clear preference of low-wage employers for hiring recent immigrants, expanding the number of contingent jobs will benefit primarily pliant foreign laborers and, absent a frontal attack on persistent segregation and ethnic queueing, can only “harden and institutionalize processes of labor segmentation” and intensify the “double marginalization” of African-Americans (Peck and Theodore 2001, p. 492; Portes and Stepick 1993; Waldinger 1996).<sup>58</sup> In short, the “employment problems of urban ghettos” are due not to a penury but to a surfeit of slavlike jobs. They pertain not to the hoary and ideologically consensual issue of *opportunity* but to the broader, and politically as well as intellectually more troublesome, question of the new *inequality* spawned by an “apartheid economy” (Freeman 1999) in which the state has allowed the bottom rungs of the workforce to collapse by both omission and commission. The remedy for precipitous inequality redoubled by the foundering of labor is not—and has never been—to “open up the opportunity structure”; it is to *alter that very structure* so as to raise its lower tier and thwart the spread of work insecurity and “flexibility” that now threatens not only the livelihood of the working class as a whole but growing segments of the middle class as well (Castells 1996, pp. 201–72; Sullivan, Warren, and Westbrook 2000).

To tackle extreme inequality and the social devastation wrought by the conflux of joblessness and servile jobs in the nether regions of social space requires one to think outside the narrow ambit of the market. This is precisely what Newman fails to do. Just as cotton was king in the slave economy of the antebellum South, in the United States of the early 21st

<sup>58</sup> Newman acknowledges the permanence of rigid racial segregation but sees it merely as “a discouraging backdrop” to “job-seekers from poor communities” (NSMG, p. 284) rather than as a powerful force actively contributing to the splintering of the labor market and to the collective weakening of low-wage workers in the face of business dictates.

century the deregulated market reigns supreme over the urban economy of low-wage services. *No Shame in My Game* fêtes its crowning and gives it the unction of official social science.

#### ON SOME PERENNIAL PITFALLS OF URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY

To counter common sense and to fight social stereotypes are well-established tasks of social science, and especially ethnography, for which it supplies one traditional “warrant” (Katz 1998). But this task is hardly fulfilled by replacing those stereotypes with inverted cardboard cutouts issued out of the same symbolic frame, as our three authors do. For Duneier, sidewalk vendors turn out to be not crime vectors but crime busters; according to Anderson, the majority of ghetto residents are or wish to be “decent,” despite street appearances to the contrary; and in Newman’s eyes, willing low-wage laborers, far from being extinct, overflow the inner city and need only more servile work to snap the bridles of stigma and poverty. In all three studies, the inquiry substitutes a *positive version of the same misshapen social figure* it professes to knock down, even as it illumines a range of social relations, mechanisms, and meanings that cannot be subsumed under either variant, devilish or saintly. But to counter the “official disparagement of ‘street people’” (COS, p. 255) with their byronic heroization by transmuting them into champions of middle-class virtues and founts of decency under duress only replaces one stereotype with another.<sup>59</sup> It does nothing to get us out of the binary logic of *categorization* (in the etymological sense of “public accusation”) and its twin tropes of prosecution and defense, incrimination and apology, which, however much they may satisfy our political urges and ethical yearnings, remain antithetical to the sociological devoir of “analytically ordering empirical reality” through interpretation and explanation, as Max Weber ([1904] 1946, p. 58) counseled long ago.

The failure to construct a properly sociological problematic independent of the common sense of agents (Duneier), of mainstream poverty scholarship (Anderson), or of journalists and policy makers (Newman) leaves an embarrassing residue that cannot but resuscitate the original stereotypes—for there are plenty of homeless men who do not engage in “honest” street peddling, ghetto residents committed to the “street code,” and youths who seek subsistence and success in the illicit economy rather than submit

<sup>59</sup> Newman states in the preface to *No Shame in My Game* that she wishes to avoid “painting a saintly portrait of struggling heroes” but does just that throughout the book, and by the epilogue she cannot refrain from gushing about Jamal, one fast-food worker: “He seemed to me something of a hero” (NSMG, pp. xv, 303). Anderson hails the “inner-city grandmother,” the “old heads” and the “other ‘decent’ people” in the ghetto as “the heroes of this story” (COS, p. 324). And Duneier concludes his tome on these hearty and heartening words: “The people we see working on Sixth Avenue are persevering. They are trying not to give up hope. We should honor that in them” (SW, p. 317).

to the ignominy of substandard wage labor. This residue mandates the crafting of *bifurcated ethnographies of sameness*, in which the poor are first cleaved into two subgroups, the good and the bad, before the good ones are revealed to be just like you and me: homeless sidewalk vendors, regular folks, and low-wage workers in the ghetto have the same moral thirst for “self-worth,” the same attachment to “decency,” and the same “work ethic” as the middle-class reader; only their “opportunities” differ. This is what makes Duneier’s, Anderson’s, and Newman’s accounts *neo-romantic* tales, distinct from the straightforward romantic narratives of the liberal generation of the sixties and seventies which, in the main, labored to produce *unitary* tales of *difference*, encapsulated by the categories of “lifestyle” and “subculture”—then central and now forsaken (e.g., Becker 1964; Suttles 1968; Hannerz 1969; McCord 1969; Spradley 1970; Hochschild 1973; Valentine 1978). This also leads to policy prescriptions that leave untouched the plinth of material destitution and racial exclusion in the American metropolis or, worse, are doomed to perpetuate urban marginality even as they purport to attack it.

In every advanced society, the fate of workers, the jobless, and the poor hinges on the capacity of progressive political forces to harness the agency of the state to reduce economic inequality, bridge glaring social gaps, and protect the most vulnerable members of the civic community from the unfettered rule of capital and the blind discipline of the market (Esping-Andersen 1999; Gallie and Paugam 2000). Not so in the United States, according to the three books reviewed here, which advise that street-level self-help, local moral engineering and business altruism be entrusted with that formidable task. For Duneier the sidewalk, with its combination of entrepreneurial opportunity and morally uplifting sociability, offers a ready remedy to the predicament of the homeless. In Anderson’s scenario, the return and reinforcement of the “old heads” will help turn the ghetto around, though not without the concurrent return of steady jobs—which he does emphasize but without giving any hint of how it might come about. According to Newman, low-wage firms will save the nation from the scourge of urban poverty once they are provided sufficient leeway and assistance to tap the willing labor and the unexplored profit reserves of the inner city. By leaving social movements, politics, and the state out of the picture and by acquiescing to extreme levels of class inequality, urban ethnography spontaneously accords with and even endorses the ambient neoliberalism. And its recommendations, anchored in the presumption of individual responsibility, the centrality of “values,” and the sacralization of work, help legitimate the *new division of labor of domestication of the poor*, distributed among a dictatorial business class, a disciplining welfare-workfare state, and a hyperactive police and penal state, leaving a cosmetic philanthropic and private-foundation sector to mop up the rest.

Three reasons suggest themselves to account for the common limitations of these books. The first is that, in keeping with the established norm in

that sector of research, Duneier, Anderson, and Newman write in blissful ignorance of field inquiries conducted in other countries on the topics that exercise them. This unthinking *parochialism* fosters the false universalization of uniquely American patterns and preoccupations, in particular the national bias toward moral issues and away from class, power, and the state. Ethnographies of homelessness, street trades, urban violence, low-wage work, and everyday life in neighborhoods of relegation in Europe and Latin America are not similarly cramped by moralism.<sup>60</sup> This is because (1) other intellectual and political fields do not censor work alert to the class basis and political import of urban marginality; (2) these works are not written against the backdrop of an antiurban culture that casts the metropolis as a place of dissolution and disorder, constitutively injurious to morality; (3) liberal individualism is not the sole idiom in which the analysis and critique of inequality can be couched; (4) researchers are not under the compulsion to validate the public dignity of the poor—as these are not *presumed* to be “unworthy”—and therefore are less inclined to limit their agenda to the debunking of negative stereotypes of marginal groups. Taking a broader, international, or better yet comparative, view of “the street” would help inject a much-needed dose of critical reflexivity into U.S. studies of urban dispossession and assist in identifying the theoretic and political limitations inscribed in its tacit premises, accepted categories, and conventional questions.<sup>61</sup> It would reveal also the extent to which the insatiable hunger of American social science for *heroic characters*—indomitable individuals who overcome formidable odds and buck massive social-structural forces—bespeaks its continued attachment to the hackneyed belief in “American exceptionalism” and in the national ideology of “opportunity,” even in the face of over-

<sup>60</sup> See, among notable monographs, Damer (1989) and Laé and Murard (1989) on social life in stigmatized estates in Glasgow, Scotland, and Rouen, France, respectively; Lepoutre (1997) on youths in a declining housing project of the Parisian *banlieue* and Lanzarini (2000) on survival tactics of the homeless in French cities; González de la Rocha (1994) on everyday subsistence strategies among the working class of Guadalajara; Batista (2000) on young drug dealers in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro; Auyero (2000) on violence and the informal economy in the *villa miseria* of Buenos Aires; and Marquez (2000) on the same issues in Caracas.

<sup>61</sup> The other privileged instrument of reflexivity is the historicization of problematics. There exists a distinguished and productive current of historical research on the discourse, policy, and politics of poverty in the United States that has questioned (and overturned) virtually every major tenet of the contemporary debate—the propensity to categorize the poor, the belief that urbanism and welfare undermine their morality, the association of single motherhood with social decay, the racial skewing of images and treatment of the destitute and dangerous, the novelty of an “underclass” (e.g., Boyer 1978; Gordon 1994; Katz [1986] 1996, 1993; Scott 1997; O’Connor 2001). But, curiously, it runs parallel to official poverty research without the latter ever paying attention to or being affected by it, almost as if they dealt with different countries.

whelming empirical evidence of its bankruptcy at the bottom of urban social space.<sup>62</sup>

A second reason is the deeply problematic relationship between theory and observation in *Sidewalk, Code of the Street*, and *No Shame in My Game*. Together these three books illustrate well the perennial pitfalls of ethnography as embedded social research when it is carried out under the banner of raw empiricism.<sup>63</sup> It can get so *close* to its subjects that it ends up parroting their point of view without linking it to the broader system of material and symbolic relations that give it meaning and significance, reducing sociological analysis to the collection and assembly of folk notions and vocabularies of motives (Duneier). It can stand too *far* and force observations into the procrustean bed of a preconceived causal schema that does not do justice to the complexities detected on the ground (Anderson's deindustrialization-plus-racism thesis). Or it can push theory ostensibly *aside* and stay marshaled in the doxic formulations of current public discussion even as it brings forth materials that directly challenge the latter's categories and parameters (as with Newman and the incoherent notion of "working poor"). The remedy here is to recognize that there is no such thing as ethnography that is not guided by theory (albeit vague and lay) and to draw the implications, that is, to work self-consciously to integrate them actively *at every step in the construction of the object* rather than to pretend to discover theory "grounded" in the field, import it wholesale postbellum, or to borrow it ready-made in the form of clichés from policy debates.

A conventional counter to the critique of the theoretical flaws in field-based studies is that such works are more "modest" than the critic implies, that their only ambition is to "dig out" fresh empirical materials to accurately "document" the inner workings of a local social world, and that it is therefore unfair to take them to task for their lack of conceptual clarity and muddled causal claims beyond their insular site. This defense is based on the assumption, instilled by professional training and sustained by the organization of careers in U.S. academe, that doing serious fieldwork somehow gives one *license to theoretical absent-mindedness*—that, just as "social theorists" should not muddy their hands in empirical research, lest they no longer be taken seriously as theorists, ethnographers need not concern themselves with the theoretical underpinnings, architecture, and implications of their work. This assumption is both unwarranted and deeply detrimental. For there is, *pace* Geertz, no such thing

<sup>62</sup> On this theme, see the articles collected in the two special issues of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* on "L'Exception américaine" (vols. 138 and 139, June and September 2001) and Ross (1993) for a homegrown historical view on the umbilical relationship between American social science and American exceptionalism.

<sup>63</sup> This is a problem that afflicts not simply these three books but ethnographic inquiry in the United States generally, owing to the sharp methodological cleavages, the hegemonic hold of instrumental positivism, and the bifurcation of research and "theorizing" that characterize American sociology.



as a description, thick or thin, that does not engage a theory, understood as a principle of pertinence and protomodel of the phenomenon at hand adumbrating its nature, constituents, and articulations. Every microcosm presupposes a macrocosm that assigns it its place and boundaries and implies a dense web of social relations beyond the local site; every synchronic slice of reality observed has built into it a double “sedimentation” of historical forces in the form of institutions and embodied agents endowed with particular capacities, desires, and dispositions; every property selected for depiction is predicated on hunches or unstated hypotheses, which orient the cutting up of discrete data out of the infinity of the empirical manifold. To fail to exercise theoretical control at every step in the design and implementation of an ethnographic study—as with every other method of social observation and analysis—is to open the door to *theoretical simple-mindedness* whereby ordinary notions issued out of common sense fill in the gap and steer crucial decisions on how to characterize, parse, and depict the object at hand (e.g., in Duneier’s case, the ordinary American view of morality as a medium for the construction of a worthy self). So much to say that far from being antithetical, vivid ethnography and powerful theory are complementary and that the best strategy to strengthen the former is to bolster the latter.<sup>64</sup>

A third factor contributing to the shared shortcomings of *Sidewalk*, *Code of the Street*, and *No Shame in My Game* is the sea change that has swept through publishing in America over the past decade. University presses have turned into clones of trade presses, while trade houses, having been absorbed by huge media conglomerates, strive relentlessly to hike up their profit margin. The result is a mad scramble for accessible books on “sexy” topics and controversial issues liable to catch the fancy of a broad, educated audience and thereby generate high sales and quick commercial success (Schiffrin 2000). This creates intense pressure on academics who investigate such topics to tailor their work to the popular expectations of the “generalized market” rather than to the scientific norms of the “restricted market” of their discipline, in accordance with the well-established opposition that structures every field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1994). The politics of publishing in America today makes any volume mixing black men, criminal violence, and poverty enormously appetizing, while the economics of bookselling virtually prescribe that such work, to “cross over,” take the form of a set of *depoliticized moral tales*, thick with vignettes of individual trials and personal challenge, spontaneously fitted to the categories of judgment of the educated middle

<sup>64</sup> To stay with the question of homelessness, youth, and crime, see the effort of Hagan and McCarthy (1997), which starts from the side of criminological theory.

class.<sup>65</sup> Award-winning journalist Leon Dash (1996, p. 279) reports that his editor “had a favorite expression when cutting entire sections of [his] prose: ‘Too academic,’ he’d say.” It is an open secret among sociologists that “too much sociology” is also a favorite refrain of trade-press editors who balk at manuscripts that they deem conceptually too demanding for a lay public.

Now, there is nothing wrong—quite the contrary—in reaching beyond the narrow confines of one’s academic discipline, in tackling salient social issues, and even in having literary agents negotiate lucrative contracts to publish with a prestigious trade press. So long, that is, as one does not for that unduly constrict one’s questioning, curtail conceptual complexity, and streamline one’s writings, in short, compromise scientific standards in the quest for readability, topicality, and congeniality. In the case at hand, there are abundant marks of *intellectual heteronomy* that raise the worrisome question of the analytic sacrifices consented to produce books friendly to journalists and accessible to neophytes. To mention but three: the absence of discussion of design and data and the striking paucity of references to scholarly works in *The Code of the Street* (which leads, e.g., to featuring child advocate Marian Wright Edelman as an authority on the black family); the dragging transcripts of tedious and vacuous conversations (such as the 11-page section devoted to choosing a Christmas tree; SW, pp. 295–303) that needlessly lengthen *Sidewalk* and the absurd reduction of the ethnographic method to a variant of investigative journalism in its methodological appendix;<sup>66</sup> the uncritical embrace by New-

<sup>65</sup> Newman’s book is unabashedly aimed at policy makers, as indicated by Herbert Gans’s back-cover endorsement: “A story-filled and surprisingly hopeful book. . . . Written for the general reader and social scientist alike. . . . [It] should be required reading in every corporate and governmental executive suite.” Anderson confessed at the Author Meets Critics Session of the American Sociological Association devoted to *Code of the Street* that he wrote the book at the behest of W.W. Norton who saw it as a means to capitalize on the success of Anderson’s 1996 *Atlantic Monthly* article by the same title. It is clear also that Duneier’s monograph would not muster quite the same appeal if it dealt with white book vendors in a mid-sized Midwestern city.

<sup>66</sup> This appendix makes it clear that, for Duneier, there is no epistemological divide separating ethnography from journalism: these are kindred practices that employ the same techniques and obey similar canons, except that journalists are apparently more honest and more rigorous. “To use the tape recorder effectively, the sociologist can *mimic the photojournalist*. . . . One of the basic ideas of my method was *simply following my nose*, going to great lengths to check stuff out and make sure there is a warrant for believing what I’ve been told. Here I was *simply doing what any competent reporter was doing*, but something which ethnographers have not taken as seriously in their work. . . . The genre of books based on sociological fieldwork can be distinguished from many firsthand works by journalists by the way each genre deals with anonymity. . . . I . . . *follow the practice of the journalists* rather than the sociologists” because it “holds me up to a higher standard of evidence. Scholars and journalists may speak with these people, visit the site I have studied, or replicate aspects of my study” (SW, pp. 340, 345, 347–48; emphasis added). The personal afterword to *Sidewalk* by vendor Hakim Hasan also contains gratuitous disparagement of a “sociological tradition which

man of the ideological notion of “family values” (even after it has been exposed and exploded by feminists sociologists and historians such as Kristin Luker, Judith Stacey, Linda Gordon, and Stephanie Coontz) and her correlative neglect to provide the slightest justification for resuscitating a normative concept of culture long ago discarded by anthropology and other cultural disciplines in favor of cognitive, semiotic, dispositional, and discursivist conceptions that organically tie it to power and difference (see Calhoun 1996; Joas 1996; Daniel and Peck 1996; Dirks 1998; Bonnell and Hunt 1999; Ortner 1999).

There is today a resurgence and blooming of ethnography in American academe, as attested by the notable increase in the number of practitioners and hires by top departments in sociology, the cautious return of anthropologists to the field after years of nihilistic rumination over the impossibility of ethnographic analysis, and its diffusion and rising popularity in new disciplines, such as geography, history, education, human development, gender studies, literature, the health sciences, media, law, and even management and design.<sup>67</sup> Even more so than policy-oriented research, ever more governed by criteria of direct political pertinence and technocratic utility, field-based studies couched in a narrative format are the public face of sociology.<sup>68</sup> This creates a unique opportunity for ethnography to contribute to the collective consciousness by bringing what Durkheim called the “special competencies” of sociology to bear on critical debates around civic issues. But this opportunity is fraught with the danger of *exoterism*, the desertion of these same competencies in favor of the facilities of “magazine sociology” (in wide currency in the contemporary French intellectual field, where the mixing of genres is prevalent), sociologically colored “human-interest” storytelling in which rationalism gives way to sentimentalism, reportage trumps analysis, and witnessing smotherers theory. A century ago, Durkheim complained that, as it flowered, sociology was threatened by “too much worldly success.” The ethnographic tradition in American social science is facing the same dilemma today.

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historically has found it all but impossible to write and theorize about blacks, especially poor blacks, as complex human beings” (SW, p. 321). One thinks here of the works of DuBois, Johnson, Frazier, Zora Neale Hurston, Drake and Cayton, Gunnar Myrdal, Hortense Powdermaker, Kenneth Clark, Ulf Hannerz, Orlando Patterson, Douglas Massey, and William Julius Wilson, and wonders whether Duneier and Hasan deemed their writings worthy of being assigned to the class they taught together, or whether only “black books” offer accurate enough a racial “history of navigation through the society” (SW, pp. 34–37, quote on p. 34).

<sup>67</sup> See respectively, for starters, Stacey (1999), Marcus (1998), Mintz (2000), Herbert (2000), Mayne and Lawrence (1999), Jessor, Colby, and Shweder (1996), Wolf (1996), Cottle (2000), and Wasson (2000).

<sup>68</sup> The new ASA journal *Contexts*, which seeks to create a bridge between academic sociology and the broader public, features a section called “Field Notes: Brief descriptions from an author’s own ethnographic field work and the insights it generated.” No comparable section exists for other methods of inquiry.

This danger is all the more pressing in light of the unwritten “code of writing about the (black) poor” in U.S. sociology, which one can extract from these three books and the enthusiastic reception they have received. It comprises five cardinal rules. First, you shall scrutinize their morality and separate the worthy from the unworthy (if under less openly judgmental terminology). Second, you shall spotlight the deeds of the worthy poor, exalt their striving, strength, and creativity, and emphasize success stories, even as they are marginal and nonreplicable. Third, you shall scrupulously eschew issues of power and domination, and therefore studiously repress the political roots and dimensions of the phenomenon—whence the ritualized exhortation to the “opening of opportunity.” Fourth, you shall at once highlight empirically and euphemize analytically the intrusion and specificity of racial subjugation. Last but not least, you shall bring good news and leave the reader feeling reassured that individual- and local-level remedies are ready at hand to alleviate if not resolve a societal quandary. These precepts of academic etiquette inscribe the century-old commonsense vision of poverty and racial division in the United States into its sociology, ensuring the smooth expurgation of everything that would so much as graze this bedrock of national self-understanding. In their queer coupling under the aegis of empiricism, moralism and depoliticization paradoxically transform social inquiry into an endlessly renewed exercise in *social denegation and collective exorcism*—of class bad faith, racial guilt, and liberal impotence. Together, they allow too many American social scientists to keep their heads buried deep in the soft sand of sentimentalism even as their own observations reveal the wretched state of the urban subproletariat teeming at the gates of their townhouses and campuses.

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