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An Anthropologist Bridges Two Worlds

With his insights into the culture of street addicts, Philippe Bourgois helps doctors make a difference

By CHRISTOPHER SHEA

Philadelphia

Philippe Bourgois, who has spent his career studying some of America's roughest neighborhoods and subcultures, got an unusually harsh welcome to his new hometown: Last May, during a trip to North Philly to make contact with some drug dealers, he got caught up in a police raid.

It was a rainy Friday night, and the air was already charged with adrenaline. The previous week, a dozen or more cops had been caught by a TV-news helicopter beating on three black suspects in a shooting. This time the cops, who seemed to come out of nowhere, shouted for everyone to drop. The dealers kissed the sidewalk and put their hands behind their backs, but Bourgois was slower to react.

"I didn't know what I was supposed to do," he says now. "It happened so fast." Evidently thinking he was a wiseass as well as a buyer, a cop threw him down. "They kicked me like a football," Bourgois says.

As the scene calmed down, he tried to explain that he was a professor doing research on the drug trade, but that met with eye-rolling. The anthropologist spent the night in a Philadelphia jail, with a vomiting cellmate.

Charges against Bourgois were dropped, and he did not file a complaint about his treatment. But only now is he getting back in touch with dealers. These days he carries a letter signed by the police commissioner explaining who he is.

The arrest was Bourgois's first, though hardly his first brush with risk. In his 1995 book, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge University Press), he recounts how one drug kingpin reacted after a newspaper article drew attention to Bourgois's fieldwork with dealers. The man pulled him aside to warn, "People who get people busted, even if it's by mistake, sometimes get found in the garbage with their heart ripped out and their bodies chopped into little pieces." Not the sort of stuff English professors have to deal with.

The University of California Press has just published *Righteous Dopefiend*, Bourgois's long-awaited follow-up to his first book. It's an ethnographic work based on more than a decade of studying homeless heroin addicts in San Francisco. Some of his findings, which have trickled out in journal articles and lectures, have already helped change how some doctors in the Bay City treat the most-destitute addicts.

Bourgois arrived at the University of Pennsylvania two years ago from the University of California at San Francisco, hired into a special program devised by Penn's president, Amy Gutmann, to expand the university's interdisciplinary offerings. His appointment bridges the anthropology department and the medical school, and

part of his mandate is to make sure that medical professors and students don't get so wrapped up in the biochemistry of disease and addiction that they forget about its social context. He also advises M.D./Ph.D. candidates with an interest in social science.

Having an interdisciplinary perspective, in a sense, means you serve different masters, and that is unusually evident in Bourgois's case. On the one hand, he is a cultural anthropologist in the humanistic, participant-observer tradition. He can emit at will great clouds of jargon that draw on the writings of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. But he also produces concrete recommendations about treating drug abuse and limiting the spread of blood-borne diseases, which is why the National Institutes of Health has long financed his work.

"Philippe, I just have to say, is one of the few anthropologists you can really dive in and get up to your elbows with," says Kimberly Page, an associate professor of epidemiology at San Francisco who studies injected-drug users from a more numbers-driven perspective.

"He's very authentic, very true to himself — he doesn't really change his shtick based on the audience," says Michelle Schneiderman, an assistant clinical professor of medicine at UCSF who treated "Hank," one of the down-and-out subjects of *Righteous Dopefiend*. "For a lot of overworked medical residents, things go in one ear and out the other. I found him incredibly engaging and his insights profound."

Righteous Dopefiend has both concrete and abstract aspects, too: At one moment it will relate a harrowing tale, often written in the first person (by either Bourgois or Jeff Schonberg, a graduate student at UCSF who took field notes, shot photographs that supplement the text, and gets a co-author credit). That story will be followed by an extended riff on theory. Delete the theory and you've got several seasons of *The Wire* — consumption side — only grimmer.

On a recent Monday night, Bourgois makes another foray into the predominantly Latino and black Philadelphia Badlands, as they are sometimes called, with an undergraduate student and a reporter. (Bourgois asked that the specific addresses they visited be omitted here, to preserve the privacy of his subjects.) As we cross over by car from an adjacent white, working-class neighborhood, the change is sudden and striking: Trash is everywhere, like the remnants of snow in early spring; whole blocks have been leveled and are covered in detritus; and many row houses stand orphaned, no longer part of any row.

We walk by men loitering on street corners, who seem curiously inactive until the student, a senior named George Karandinos, makes a suggestion: Put away the notebook. I do, and things spring to life. A green Pontiac rolls to the curb across the street from us, driven by a heavy-lidded white man in his late 30s or early 40s. His unseen passenger calls to the men on the corner: "Got any dope?"

"No, only powder." (On the street "dope" always means heroin.)

The car drives on. A young man raises his arm, beckoning to us. "Y'all all right?" he asks.

"We're fine," Bourgois says, and we keep walking. The drug market is hopping after all.

Some social scientists say Bourgois deserves credit for breaking a stalemate that long stymied the study of the American urban poor. In the 1960s, the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who also wrote about East Harlem, helped to popularize the idea of a "culture of poverty": Poor, urban parents passed along to children dysfunctional ways of thinking and acting. In the 1970s, leftist anthropologists pushed back, saying the poor should not be judged by the standards of the middle class, with the nuclear family, for example, held up as the ideal.

Fearful of being caught in the crossfire, many sociologists and anthropologists simply stopped looking, except via statistics, at poverty in the United States. Bourgois broke the deadlock in two ways, according to Sudhir Venkatesh, a sociologist at Columbia University and author of *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist*

Takes to the Streets (Penguin, 2008). He reframed drug dealers as people driven by essentially American aspirations: They wanted money, they wanted a career path that would offer new challenges over time, and they wanted the approval of their peers.

That subtle reframing points policy makers away from prison as a response and toward removing people from toxic networks or otherwise changing their incentives. Bourgois's evident empathy also gave him the cover to explore some of the seedier aspects of urban life. (*In Search of Respect* includes descriptions of gang leaders boasting of rape.) "He said, 'We have a duty to show these difficult scenes,'" says Venkatesh. "'We are culpable if we don't shine a light on them.' Single-handedly he just shook up the water."

To be sure, Bourgois's leftist credentials are never in doubt. He makes nods toward holding people responsible for their actions, but he doesn't miss a chance to condemn the depredations of "neoliberalism" or America's "punitive," "Puritanical" culture. (An in-house *New York Times* reviewer of *In Search of Respect* complained that the professor's account of dealers neglected "the possibility that these young men might simply be bad.")

The ailing, destitute subjects of *Righteous Dopefiend* live in an encampment Bourgois calls Edgewater, in the shadows of highway ramps that carry some of the wealthiest, best-educated people in the world to their high-tech jobs. ("Righteous dopefiend" is a phrase embraced by the addicts themselves, reflecting a rebellious, individualist interpretation of their drug abuse — an attitude that Bourgois says is distinctly American.) American drug policies, he says, "turn the filthiest nooks and crannies into the only objectively safe places for the indigent who are physically addicted to heroin to inject."

Dozens of addicts passed through Edgewater while he was doing fieldwork, but his book focuses on a smaller cast of characters, most of whom started using heroin in the late 60s or early 70s. At a talk Bourgois recently gave at Penn, he introduced some of the characters of the book with the help of images projected onto a screen behind him. First came Hank — scrawny, shirtless, white — viewed from behind, preparing to plant an American flag in the ground at Edgewater.

Hank showed up at the camp complaining about a stab wound under his arm. He was lying, if that's the right word: It was a scar from surgery to remove an abscess, a deep skin infection caused by unsanitary injection procedures. But lying is a form of hustling, and life at Edgewater is a constant hustle: for money, for drugs, and for sympathy — which gets you the first two.

Like everyone else in Edgewater, Hank was chained to the rhythms of heroin: He had to cadge enough money to buy a dose. Then, as his high diminished, and if he didn't have enough money for a follow-up, horrific withdrawal symptoms, called dopesickness, followed: vomiting and loss of sphincter control, among other physical torments, accompanied by agitated paranoia. One reason these people avoid hospitals is that if they have to wait in an emergency room they lose crucial hustling time, setting themselves up to be dopesick.

Another Edgewater regular was Tina, an African-American and a rare woman at the encampment. Before smoking crack with her partner, Carter, they "gently clink their glass pipes together in a formal toast," Bourgois and Schonberg write. Carter gives Schonberg a hands-on tutorial on how to "hit a lick," raiding supplies stored by a construction crew, to make money.

The most gruesome picture Bourgois displays is of Sonny, who has a great chunk of flesh missing from his upper arm: He looks like a zombie. He had just come back from an abscess operation at San Francisco General Hospital, where, Bourgois says, the staff neither bandaged him nor gave him follow-up pain medication.

"The majority of people got treated in a respectful way," says Daniel H. Ciccarone, an associate professor of clinical family and community medicine at UCSF who taught a course on addiction with Bourgois and sometimes went to Edgewater. "But maybe 15 or 20 people didn't. And the thing about street culture is that it

is very oral, so people became afraid."

In 2001, after Bourgois, Ciccarone, and others complained to the hospital about how it was treating patients with abscesses, surgeons opened a specialty outpatient clinic for the homeless. Now, Ciccarone confirms, the treatment is much more consistently humane.

Despite appearances, a "moral economy" of sharing prevails at Edgewater. Most users can't afford a bag of dope on their own, so they work with a running partner and divvy up their wares. Invariably, as they melt the heroin, soak it into a cotton wad, and pull the results into a syringe, they bicker — a "theatrical display of concern about cheating and generosity," the authors write. The sharing doesn't stop even when heroin prices drop; it is the glue of social life.

Sharing sometimes crossed racial lines, but brutally frank racism was more typical. White addicts spoke of black addicts in the vilest epithets and accused their black peers, absurdly, of being secret welfare kings and queens. Given that these people were peers in misery, the virulence of racism "was the thing that most surprised me," says Schonberg.

More interesting on a medical level, Bourgois and Schonberg detected racial differences in how blacks and whites injected heroin. Whites with long-abused veins tended to "muscle" the drug, injecting it directly into flesh — an open invitation to abscesses. Blacks would look painstakingly for viable veins, even if it took an hour. That made them more susceptible to blood-borne diseases. As an example of how differently doctors and anthropologists view the same data, Bourgois mentions a doctor who heard him describe that difference, and then mused aloud about searching for "the gene" underpinning it.

During his Penn talk, Bourgois — slim, a boyish 52, dressed in a dark sports jacket and pants and a tieless white shirt — was visibly energized. If the enthusiasm weren't so clearly intellectual, it might seem inappropriate, given the topic. Again, he spoke to two audiences: He would read a few paragraphs about Marx's idea of the "lumpen," a class left behind by modernization, and invoke Foucault to argue that the public-health system is often wielded by the state to control deviants.

But then he would shift gears and tell the future doctors in the room to ignore his "theoretical babble." Given their skills, he said, "you can do amazing things" to ease the suffering of these people.

His project does raise provocative ethical issues, of the sort that interest institutional review boards charged with protecting human subjects. For example, can a person high on heroin offer informed consent to be part of a research project? "They operate their lives on the drug," responds Bourgois. "They refer to getting high as 'getting well.'" Except during abnormal binges, it's when they *lack* heroin and are dopesick that they would be uniquely vulnerable.

It was the photos that caught the attention of one young anthropologist in the Penn crowd. It made no sense, he said during a question-and-answer period, to give the subjects pseudonyms but publish pictures of their faces. In response, Bourgois related what one addict had told him: "If you can't see the face," she said, "you can't see the misery."

Bourgois's main ethical concern was to avoid drawing police attention to the people he was studying. But the police displayed little interest in his activities. His subjects, however, did file in and out of jail, picked up on low-level charges and then spat out of the system so as not to clog it up. City and state work crews, too, regularly cleared the campsite, destroying everyone's possessions (including things like clean syringes).

UCSF's institutional review board did, of course, approve the project, and Penn's board has approved his trips into North Philadelphia, although the arrangements can be vexing. Consent forms, for example, unnerve dealers, making them think Bourgois is up to something more nefarious than just hanging around and asking

questions.

Robert Borofsky, a professor of anthropology at Hawaii Pacific University who oversees the California Series in Public Anthropology, which includes *Righteous Dopefiend*, offers a sweeping defense of the ethics of the project. "Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg are doing a wonderful job of giving life and voice to these homeless drug addicts," he says. "It brings them more fully into the human community and lets us understand more fully their understanding of the world." Such an agenda, he suggests, transcends picayune questions about pseudonyms and photographic angles.

Bourgois and Schonberg were not purely objective observers. They drove subjects to clinics and tried to get them into subsidized housing. They doled out small amounts of cash sometimes, and rebuffed other requests. The ethics were fluid and "human," Bourgois says: "The stakes are very much life-and-death. And at the same time, we are like fleas in terms of our ability to influence the outcomes. The thing was, we don't even know how to help them. That was part of the whole project: to find out their own logic for what their priorities were."

Intense fieldwork of the sort he engages in has costs. "It destroyed my relationship with my ex-wife," he says at one point, before backtracking. ("Who knows?")

His current partner, Laurie Hart, a professor of anthropology at Haverford College, confirms that his work "is a 24-hours-a-day proposition."

"It's a good thing I'm interested in this stuff," she says, "because we spend a lot of time talking about it, and working on it."

His son, Emiliano Bourgois-Chacón, shows signs of interest, too. A junior at Harvard, he's taken a year off to work with an anthropologist at San Francisco State University, interviewing teenagers about behavior that may put them at risk for AIDS. He was a toddler when his father moved to East Harlem in the 1980s. (In *In Search of Respect*, Bourgois recounts how Emiliano, who has cerebral palsy and used a walker as a child, charmed even the toughest street types.) Later he joined his father on trips to Edgewater, until a bodega that the homeless frequented removed the arcade games he liked to play. Emiliano says he never felt in danger, because the homeless "still lived by certain codes."

"One is to treat young kids well, to baby them."

Philippe Bourgois has reached an age when he'd be forgiven if he curtailed his fieldwork a little bit, especially the dicier stuff. "Maybe I lack that common sense, to tell you the truth," he says. "I was thinking of that when I was walking around North Philly. It's terrifying when you don't know the neighborhood, and you're wandering around on the street trying to find people willing to talk to you." But two things keep him going: first, the urgency of coming to grips with the intertwined issues of inequality, the war on drugs, and what he calls inner-city apartheid. And second, a confidence that counterbalances fear ("I can do this").

"It's always surprising to me, but when one treats with respect people who have been treated as pariahs, they become real human beings," he says. "You can become friends with them. That's part of what the magic of ethnography is: to bring out the humanness of the quote-unquote Other. And that's what *Righteous Dopefiend* was about: rendering human the absolutely inhuman homeless person."

One challenge of the project was recognizing that, whatever reforms may emerge from his work, they won't come soon enough to save some of his subjects. Several characters in the book, including Carter, are dead by its end. Tina, on the other hand, seems to have cleaned herself up. Another subject, Petey, who nearly died from a cirrhotic liver, now has a job at the Department of Veterans Affairs. He bought Bourgois lunch last time they saw each other. "He pulled out his new credit card. It was quite moving."

On the policy front, some of Bourgois's proposals are fairly mainstream: more mobile health, psychology, and methadone clinics; better case management for frequent emergency-room visitors (or separate clinics for them); expanded access to single-room-occupancy hotels with in-house medical staffs. (Without such staffs, SRO hotels can be deadly, because unlike at Edgewater, there's no one to revive you if you OD.)

Other proposals are more forward-looking. Bourgois has come to believe that the culture of shared needles and drug paraphernalia is so ingrained among addicts that you have to assume people will share when they are desperate. "I think the most important piece of information to get out is to rinse needles thoroughly," he says — even if that means just with water. On the West Coast, he has written in a paper with Ciccarone, people tend to rinse thoroughly out of necessity, because the black-tar heroin that is common there clogs syringes.

For the hard-core cases who have tried methadone as a substitute for heroin and failed, he wants the United States to allow prescription heroin, an approach the Swiss have adopted and Canada is experimenting with. That's in part an admission of defeat, but it would release addicts from the socially destructive gerbil-wheel of hustling, thieving, and brutal withdrawal.

Even Ciccarone, though, considers that a step too far in today's political climate. He puts two other things ahead of prescription heroin on his own policy wish list: easier access to methadone and a quicker rollout of Buprenorphine, a drug similar to methadone but somewhat less addictive and more convenient. "We have two good tools — let's get more money for those," Ciccarone says. A step further, but still less politically toxic than heroin scripts, are supervised injection sites, where users can shoot up their own drugs but also be counseled about health matters.

(Bourgois says that he endorses all of those measures, but that they won't reach everyone: "Addicts will travel anywhere for heroin. They won't travel for a safe injection.")

And the recommendation about rinsing needles with water strikes Kim Page, the UCSF epidemiology professor, as dubious. "Over the years we have seen very low and stable rates of HIV that we associate with prevention messages," she says — messages that have included the advice not to share paraphernalia. She would hate to see that message weakened.

In the dark landscape he surveys, Bourgois sees signs of hope. Hip-hop culture, for example, disdains injection-drug use as well as crack, even as it glorifies dealing. Perhaps as a result, the heroin-abusing population is aging (and disproportionately white). Doctors, too, are less likely these days to dismiss addicts as drug-seeking ER frequent flyers and are more willing to look for ways to manage their illnesses, even if the addicts have no interest in Narcotics Anonymous.

Bourgois's current project is to explore the differences in the "risk environments" of Philadelphia and San Francisco. Sounding a bit out of character, he says he wants to be sure his earlier findings hold true in "real America": a deindustrialized, East Coast city. One difference so far: More than San Francisco, Philadelphia appears to have a growing population of youngish, downwardly mobile blue-collar heroin users.

More important, he wants to move his righteous dopefiends permanently out of the shadows. People like Hank, Tina, and Carter, he writes in the conclusion of his new book, may strike readers as marginal characters. But they are "as all-American as the California dream."

Christopher Shea last wrote for The Chronicle Review about genetic sociology.

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