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bowen paulle

# Philippe Bourgois in Amsterdam

*An interview*

Philippe Bourgois is one of the most creative and influential urban ethnographers working today. He has come to see Pierre Bourdieu as the greatest sociologist/anthropologist of his generation and one of the most important thinkers since Durkheim and Weber. As the following interview was carried out less than six months after the untimely death of Bourdieu it felt natural to begin with a few words about Bourdieu and to return to his work and ideas on several occasions. The interview's main focus, however, is Bourgois' general approach to carrying out ethnographic research into the often self-destructive coping (or survival) strategies which are at once cause and result of the intense circumstances one finds in the urban core of 'apartheid' America.

Bourgois' father is a French, non-Jewish, survivor of a forced labour plant in Auschwitz. Bourgois grew up in his mother's native upper class and upper East Side Manhattan milieu. Before moving onto Harvard's prestigious Social Studies program to receive his B.A. (in 1978) and Stanford for two M.A.'s (in Anthropology and Development Economics) and a PhD. (in Anthropology) Bourgois was educated at New York most elite private school (The Dalton School). Perhaps this explains, in part, Bourgois' attraction to the extremes of social space and what he now calls, after Bourdieu, 'social suffering'. Whether this interpretation is correct or not it is

clear that his own habitus formation trajectory could not be more different from those of the people with whom he chooses to immerse himself as a scholar, fieldworker and friend: those he refers to as 'lumpen sub-proletarians' in revolutionary Central America, 'crack dealers' in Spanish Harlem (with whom he lived less than a kilometer from where he grew up) and 'black and white' 'dope fiends' in San Francisco. Since 1998 Bourgois has served as Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology, History and Social Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. His modern day classic, *In Search of Respect* (1995) has recently been re-released (by Cambridge University Press) with an updated forward. Bourgois is presently preparing *Righteous Dopefiend: Homeless Heroin Addicts in Black and White* (Berkeley: University of California Press) with co-author Jeff Schonberg. A several pages long list of his scholarly articles and book chapters can be found on his website:  
<http://www.ucsf.edu/dahsm/pages/faculty/bourgoiscv.html>.



Bourgeois

## **Section One: Bourdieu and the Social Sciences**

*Out of respect for Pierre Bourdieu who recently and unexpectedly passed away perhaps you might begin by encapsulating the influence he had on your work?*

The world is a more dangerous place since Bourdieu died. He was an extraordinary man, who lived and worked in the classic politically-engaged tradition of the French public intellectual. He brought incredibly sophisticated, well-developed theories to bear directly on the urgent political, social problems of the day in France and across the world as well as through time - even if he did sometimes write in convoluted hyper-academic language. At the end of his life he was ripping into neo-liberalism; speaking at demonstrations and union marches and also publishing in scholarly and popular venues. He is one of my intellectual heroes.

In my work, I take Bourdieu in his more 'Marxist' directions. There are obviously a great deal of different influences on Bourdieu's oeuvre, from Weber to Marx to Durkheim - to name the obvious - or maybe it would be from Marx to Weber through Durkheim. Bourdieu's concepts most useful to me are: 1) symbolic violence; 2) symbolic capital (which people usually mistakenly call cultural capital - but symbolic capital is really the useful original and subversive concept); and 3) habitus. These concepts allow one to understand, in a non-economic reductionistic way, how power is maintained symbolically and culturally. It is a wonderful, much needed supplement to Marxism which used to have a tendency to overemphasize the

economic determinants of class power and which tended to oversimplify understandings of ideology by relegating them to the deceptive realm of superstructure, a weak concept. What excites me about Bourdieu's concepts are how they link the intimate and the personal with the social structural and historical.

One problem with Bourdieu is that he is a bit over determinist in his understanding of how power is maintained and reproduced via symbolic capital and habitus, despite what Loïc Wacquant, his most brilliant contemporary interpreter, claims. Following Bourdieu, one cannot see any way out of the constraints of one's habitus. We are trapped by the levels of symbolic capital that we unconsciously mobilize because of our socially-determined habitus. Habitus, of course, is our deepest likes and dislikes and embodied dispositions and is class-based, but not in a narrow means of production sense. The dominant field of power in Bourdieu's deep suffering understanding of the nasty, unfair world ends up completely dominating everything through the dynamic of symbolic violence. Of course, it may just be that Bourdieu is right - the socially vulnerable are crucified by the power structure through its symbolic structures and there may be no escaping that sad fact. We cannot stick our heads in the sand like ostriches and pretend agency and resistance are going to bring about magical liberating changes to profoundly hierarchical, unjust societies. I hate to admit it too loudly, but I think Bourdieu's determinism is realistic and anything else is naïve - or worse yet - obfuscates power hierarchies.

At the same time Bourdieu allows you to understand how people really participate in their own domination, how they naturalize their oppression. How hierarchy becomes embodied through

the concept of habitus. He shows how people's deepest likes and desires are expressions of the dominant structure and how they both constrain, and enable, their ability to do things in life. So the irony with Bourdieu of course is that his concept of practice is ostensibly a theory of agency. I mean Bourdieu really shows why and how people put one foot in front of the other; why they are so creative; why they are so outrageously complicated and self-destructive. We really act out our socially inscribed parts in life and torture ourselves and everyone around us in the process. Bourdieu also takes away agency - or renders it irrelevant - because every foot that you put in front of the other is determined by your class/cultural background and how your class/cultural background articulates with the symbolic structures of power.

*Is this 'irony' in his thought - which perhaps reflects ironies in empirical reality - the main unanswered question that he has left us with? Has he given us a language with which to raise these questions, in a certain way, and left it up to us to move forward in answering them?*

Bourdieu had a frankly right-on 19th century enlightenment vision that the act of developing and applying his analytical concepts would give people the power to break out of the structures of oppression that limit and oppress them. He was calling idealistically for justice. In the summer before he died - this is one of the highlights of my life - I had a chance to sit in a Café with Bourdieu in the Place de la Bastille in Paris and discuss with him an argument I had had with Loïc Wacquant about my understanding of the term symbolic violence. You see, I love the term symbolic violence. That's what life's all about for

me. The way the social suffering of the world gets maintained has everything to do with symbolic violence. Loïc says I over-use the term - and he might be right - but Bourdieu said something that was just music to my ears. He said that symbolic violence is one of his most politically useful concepts because it represents a way of doing some sort of political psychoanalysis of society [*une espèce de psychanalyse sociale*].

Bourdieu was fighting the good fight with total intellectual integrity. He gave people the theoretical tools (weapons) to tear down the structures oppressing them symbolically, psychologically, and hence structurally. At the same time Bourdieu tells people that every like and dislike that they have is a reflection of the structure of power in their society and that they are complicit in maintaining that power by naturalizing the concepts and creating the common sense that takes for granted the fact that things are the way they should be. In other words, they think they are dumb; that they are smart; that they are hard working; that they are lazy; that they eat too much; that they don't eat enough; that they hate school; that they fight; and in that process they legitimate their subordination to themselves and everyone around them to make it appear like a personal failing instead of social injustice and imposition.

*So there is a way out but the door is only very slightly ajar?*

Maybe. But we do not have to expect to resolve or to understand these kinds of dynamics fully. Especially in the United States with our ideology, we are just absolutely trapped in the belief in agency. It becomes part of our habitus. Ultimately, we just cannot escape our history of being

immigrants striving for upward mobility, getting a piece of the pie, being rugged individualists, etc. So it is fine not to nail down the structure/agency debate because our instinct as Americans is to assign agency to absolutely every damn thing possible. Bourdieu's theories possibly go in the other direction of taking all meaningful agency away. He allows you to see the details of the practices that other people call an agency, but they end up reproducing and naturalizing your oppression. Bourdieu did not use the concept of agency. He resolved the structure/agency distinction through practice. Our minds may not be coherent enough to resolve the structure/agency debate and we are probably not looking at the problematic correctly by setting it up as an either/or dichotomy i.e., individual control and responsibility versus societal political economic and cultural constraint. Come to think of it, perhaps we are entrapped in a symbolic violence of accepting those two poles. At least that is what Bourdieu suggests. Wacquant wrote an eloquent passage ripping apart a reviewer who had accused Bourdieu of being a reductionist saying that Bourdieu rejected the bipolarity of structure and agency and instead used the concept of praxis and doxa, and hexus and so on.

*This notion of symbolic violence played a rather implicit role in In Search of Respect (1995, Cambridge University Press); will it be more central and explicitly used in your new book on homeless drug addicts in San Francisco?*

To tell you the truth I am embarrassed to say that I had only just begun reading Bourdieu while writing *In Search of Respect*. I owe my deeper exposure to Loïc Wacquant and I met Loïc while finishing the fieldwork for my book. I had been



more influenced at the time of doing my fieldwork than by the people who Bourdieu had influenced, such as Paul Willis who is well-known for his work on cultural reproduction in education where he documented the self-destructive cultural resistance of oppositional working-class adolescents (*Learning to Labor. How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, 1981 Columbia University).

Now I have come to see that symbolic violence is an extraordinary rich concept. Especially in the United States it is a crucially important concept politically and intellectually. The United States par excellence is the neo-liberal bastion of upward mobility, of savage capitalism, of old-fashioned cruel capitalism. For example, we have by far the highest levels of income inequality of any industrialized wealthy society and it is getting worse - not better. In settings like the United States symbolic violence is needed to justify social suffering. Members of the U.S. working class honestly believe that they are dumb; that they are at fault for not being millionaires; that anyone who is poor is stupid. That symbolic violence is such a deep form of U.S. common sense. Europe is more complicated. There are more cracks and fissures in the symbolic violence that justifies inequality. In all the European societies that had powerful working class movements and much less fluidity of upward social mobility you have significant pockets of people who are proud to be working class. They are proud of fighting the power so to speak and are not slavishly trying to get a bigger sports utility vehicle in their garage after they move to the suburbs as are most working class people in the United States.

*So you can, again ironically, turn the often-heard concern that Bourdieu is too French to be used in the U.S. on it's head and argue that his central*

*concept of symbolic violence is more applicable within the U. S. context with its supposedly greater level of upward social mobility, 'rugged individualism', and inequality?*

Bourdieu - and more so Foucault - often repeat that what makes power powerful is its positive element, its positive effects. The reality of upward mobility in the U.S., the fact that new immigrants can waltz in and become millionaires within a lifetime; the fact that most of the upper class is hardcore nouveau riche in the United States renders the symbolic violence of the ideology that 'the poor are stupid' all that much more persuasive i.e., all that much more violent. Right this minute in El Barrio<sup>1</sup> you'll find new Mexican immigrants who go from saving while working for sub-minimum wages in Korean supermarkets to - within three years - boom! - opening thriving stores and starting delicious cheap restaurants. Some of their children are going to, presumably, become the valedictorians of inner-city schools. This upwardly mobile new immigrant dynamic absolutely rips apart the third generation Puerto Rican child who has been beaten up all his or her life by a relative and has been disabled by the experience of American racism. This is what is so nefarious about symbolic power - it works. It is so persuasive that it becomes fact. The American Dream, the Jimmy Cliff song 'You can get it if you really want... but you must try! Try! Try!' does motivate people to work hard. Savage capitalism does make certain people very productive. The United States, for example, brutally kicks the rear of the half-disabled to go out and get a job rather than letting them sit back

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. New York's East Harlem where the field work for *In Search of Respect* was carried out and Bourgois and his family lived for almost five years.

in their apartment depressed on social security. There is the classic, crass U.S. expression that you probably remember from growing up in New York City, 'Get up off your fat ass'. Or 'Get the lead out of your ass'. If your mother did not shout it at you, certainly your teachers and sports coaches did. We believe in brutally punishing sick, lazy and depressed people in the United States.

It is not a question of merely finding a happy medium between social democracy and neo-liberalism, we need to understand how contradictory and cruel these processes of symbolic violence are. Certainly the symbolic violence one encounters in the United States does make people work harder. It makes people kill each other also. That is partly why we have an eight times higher per capita murder rate in the United States than does the Netherlands; and why we have six to eight times more people in prison per capita than the Netherlands; and that is why you are always scared to death of getting mugged in New York City when you walk around late at night. It is also why public parks in the United States are not pretty; they have to become privatized before they can become pretty unless they are out in the wilderness - then they are gorgeous. Our public sector is underdeveloped. We have an underdeveloped sense of the social good, but a very developed eye for individual advantage.

*Let's move from away from Bourdieu for a moment and towards the explosion of postmodern writing in ethnography during the last two decades. What do you make of this development?*

Post-modernism's critique of 19th century moralizing enlightenment is crucial. The contradictory realization that Auschwitz was the crowning height of western European civilization is tragically brilliant. Without postmodernism we

would not understand that fact with any subtlety. Colonialism and the greatest genocides in history have taken place in the name of science - specifically in the name of science, moral progress and civilization.

On a separate dimension reality is probably fragmented and multi-vocal and collecting ethnographic data is really a dialogic process in which we project onto our subject our own concepts, which in a Derridean sense, trap us. We cannot escape the totalizing logics of our 'science'. So, yes, postmodernism has been refreshing. It is important to render ourselves more humble, to question ourselves, to be insecure about what we think are facts and coherent theory. To realize that progress, righteousness and political salvation are a lie. The self-reflexive turn in anthropology for ethnography was salutary.

The problem, of course, is that self-reflexive post-modern deconstruction has become an excuse for upper class alienated intellectuals to babble to one another and to narcissistically - yet again - de-link themselves from any kind of blood, sweat and tears of the reality of social suffering. Instead, postmodernists write ad nauseam about the meaning of meaning of what was meant in a total political vacuum. Part of the problem is that the researchers who have taken up postmodernism most intensively, in the United States at least, are those who came out of the traditions of symbolic anthropology and in sociology of symbolic interactionism - not the Marxists concerned with power, conflict and inequality. Symbolic interactionists and symbolic anthropologists were always very weak on the subject of power. They just don't care about it. Forgive my polemics, but symbolic anthropology has always been an upper class exercise in voyeurism. So the post-modern legacy of symbolic anthropology is basically that

of very upper class people bouncing ideas off of one another in a sort of righteous and hyper relativist way that is primarily oriented towards academic turf empire-building. They do not care about blood, sweat and tears. They do not care about it on the level of theory, at least. Why should they? Intellectuals never sweat and rarely bleed.

But I am an overpaid intellectual and like most bourgeois intellectuals I have been very influenced by postmodernism and find its critique of reality and totalizing theory exciting. Anyone who claims to know the theoretical answers, especially the positivist ones, is just making the trains run on time to Auschwitz. I insist, however, on moving on from post-modernism's by now obvious insights and taking its humbling and important self-critical deconstructionist lessons and re-focusing them on power.

*Like Bourdieu you seem to embody the hopelessness of academic borders between sociology and anthropology. Is there anything positive about keeping these two disciplines institutionally separated?*

The difference between anthropology and sociology is frankly embarrassing. As far as I am concerned it is just department chairs competing for money from the Dean's office at their universities. Why should anthropology exist as a separate discipline when it traces all of its core theory back to the exact same three or four dead white men as sociology? But, having said that, I love anthropology and I only like sociology. There is this incredible cultural difference between anthropologists and sociologists that keeps coming as a shock to me every time I encounter it. Part of it is the arbitrariness of our different, but

related methods. The participant observation version of ethnography is so central to cultural anthropology that it has become sort of a hegemonic common sense in the discipline. In contrast, the dominant force in sociology, at least in the U.S., remains in the methods of the number crunchers who are just a step away from being statisticians or applied mathematical epidemiologists.

As an anthropologist when you are hanging out with sociologists you keep seeing how klutzy sociologists are with regard to the practice of ethnography. For example, sociologists will mention the precise number of people they interviewed or they will interview their subjects only once briefly yet they still call what they do ethnography. In anthropology you do not even need to describe your participant-observation methods because everyone knows that it involves an attempt at creating an organic insertion in a natural setting and to elicit answers unobtrusively via free flowing conversations. So we do not use these strange sociological oxymoron phrases in our methods sections like 'semi-structured interview'.

Should a method determine a discipline? One would think that something more than antisocial methods should determine a discipline. The best part of anthropology as I see it is two simple things neither of which do I understand well. First, is the method of ethnography and second is our bizarre article of moral faith known as cultural relativism. Sociology is underdeveloped with respect to both ethnography and cultural relativism. For example, you and I earlier argued over your use of the term 'broken habitus' to describe some of the South Bronx and Bijlmer children who do badly in school. One just would not use such a term in anthropology because it is too judgmental. By the way, that is another reason why postmodernism is so popular in anthropology. It

resonated profoundly with our ideology that you cannot judge a culture. Cultures are never good nor bad. They just have an internal logic or, to be pmo about it, they have multi-vocal, fragmented ways of expressing themselves.

*And you find this, for better and for worse, to be much more deeply embedded in anthropology than sociology?*

Cultural relativism is anthropology's faith. It is our religion. It got to the point that we critique it and have even thrown out the culture concept. Anthropologists hesitate to use the word culture, right now because it is considered a racist term; it is an essentializing term. And yet, ironically, our whole discipline is organized around prioritizing culture. Even Marxist anthropologists like me worship the primacy of culture. The right to be proud of one's culture is taken as a fundamental human right by anthropologists. Anthropologists often do not care if the people they study do not eat, but they are outraged if the people they study are not allowed to speak their natal language in school or to practice their traditional religion.

Of course, not to be glib, there is the whole historical - or à la Foucault - genealogical development of anthropology coming out of colonialism and imperialism more directly that differentiates it from sociology. Think of the enlightenment-style expeditions on the big multidisciplinary boats that were going around the world in the late 1900s measuring the brains of seals and humans and that sort of thing. The sociologists at the time tended to stay in their own countries and study the poor at the gates of the Bastille.

But I respect sociology because it asks the

right questions - unlike anthropology, which most of the time degenerates into upper class zookeeper voyeurism. Sociology's heart and history are in the right place. Sociologists are concerned about the phenomenon of inner-city segregation and social injustice and substance abuse and the forms of violence that revolve around these types of contemporary power dynamics. Anthropology on the other hand because of its cultural relativism, does not want to see these ugly topics. Anthropology's fetish of the exotic other condemns most anthropologists to looking at the pretty natives dancing to their beautiful music.

*And functioning together...*

Right, and then of course there is the centrality of functionalism in anthropology's British roots inspired by colonialism's indirect rule strategy.

*In an impassioned 1996 essay ('Confronting anthropology, education, and inner-city apartheid', American Anthropologist, 98 (2): 249-258) you close by arguing that understanding and representing the dynamics of ghetto marginalization is not just an important intellectual task but nothing less than an 'urgent political challenge'. Do we, as human scientists, really have enough influence to make even our best works urgent anywhere or even heard within the political realm?*

Yikes! I am not sure. Most of us might be useless. I force myself to think there is an important role for intellectuals in influencing mainstream public discourse even if it is only from elite rarified margins. We must continue moving in and out of the media, but without losing the nuances of our analysis. That is the contradiction. To influence politics we need to analyze social problems in a



coherent popular language. But to advance intellectual ideas we need to be fluent in rarified jargon. We need to figure out, for example, exactly what the confusing term symbolic violence means in order to develop equally confusing terms like 'social suffering' - or in my case 'U.S. inner-city apartheid'. We then argue the pro's and con's of these terms and try to figure out, for example, how the experience of ethnicity interfaces with class. These are things that can ultimately become very scholastic. Take the categories I find useful, for example, everyday violence versus structural violence versus political violence versus institutional violence. As intellectuals we need to explore those concepts in order to be able to create different popular frameworks for debate accessible to the public.

That is what I was hoping to do in *In Search of Respect* or in that little article in *American Anthropologist* that you mentioned. The goal is to try to open up concepts relevant to inner-city apartheid, like structure versus agency and on a more popular level as well as, on a more artistic level, rub them into people's faces through the ethnographic text - especially through humanizing the actors or highlighting the fact of social suffering in the U.S. inner city. In the U.S. case I am trying to extricate poverty and racism from the polarized either/or debates about the worthy versus unworthy poor. That is the central challenge in the United States. Most U.S. inner-city ethnography is still trapped in the moralistic media debates that accept the basic commonsense that there are worthy and unworthy poor and that justice is about differentiating between the two. As a result, three quarters of all critical sociologists and anthropologists who study poverty in the United States end up spending their lives trying to prove that the poor are worthy. They

claim that the poor don't beat each other up; that they do use a condom every time they have sex; that they work hard. It leads to a ridiculous politics of positive representation.

*Sanitization..*

Yes. In the United States there is an imperative to completely sanitize research subjects. Researchers are trapped within the moralizing framework of their society. The poor aren't allowed to behave badly otherwise they do not deserve to receive social services. The poor have to be worthy victims always. It is stupid for social scientists to get trapped in that kind of moralizing discourse. I can see sanitizing maybe when you only have time for a 30 or 15 second sound bite on television. You might want to emphasize the positive resistance or noble victimization parts of your argument about the experience of oppression. But in our obscure journal articles that no one reads besides us we should lay things out in their full contradictions otherwise we just do the right wing service by remaining trapped in their frameworks. We reproduce symbolic violence in a sort of Derridean trap which leads us to be caught by reactionary words and concepts. We have to completely destroy the polarity between worthy and unworthy poor. The easiest way of doing it is by showing that in the same person, and at times even in the same action, the 'good' and 'bad' are simultaneously intertwined. We live in gray zone described by holocaust survivor Primo Levi.

*You have written elsewhere about - and implied in this interview again - the need to resist 'resistance'. You think we should not be too quick to credit dominated groups, whether in schools, in streets or elsewhere, with being 'oppositional'. How does this Levi's gray zone concept relate to*

*the often-heard terms like 'street culture' and 'resistance'?*

One can critique the term 'street culture', and another one which I do not use, 'culture of drugs'. Whenever you have a construction such as 'culture of...' anything it immediately becomes a dangerously essentialist term that then does not have to be explained. Such terms are symbolically violent, they become a common sense in and of themselves that just describe the status quo while covering over all the structures of history, political economy, and naked, brutal, power relations.

That is the story of anthropology, which created this concept of culture and in the process created these ossified images of natives who are determined by their culture, trapped by their culture. But at the same time, there is something very powerful about the notion of culture. The concepts that we have been talking about - habitus and symbolic capital - without the notion of culture which is about creating common habituses and ways of valuing symbolic capital. So ultimately the only thing relevant about culture for me is understanding how it organizes power relations - how it is at once a product of and a generator of power relations.

*And ethnographic fieldwork in oppressed settings forces you to try to do this?*

Well, whether you are working out of an anthropology or a sociology department, I think that ethnography forces you to break out of the confines of any traditional subject area and forces you to violate what I call apartheid. And so it is a powerful methodology. And this is why so often the best U.S. inner-city ethnographies are school-based ethnographies, because so many people working in these schools are faced with that ethnographic

experience everyday of crossing class and ethnic boundaries while at the same time having an organic relationship to the school. They have to be there; they are supposed to be there; no one questions why they are there. So critical visions of educational establishments emerge. As we were saying, however, these school-based studies often become trapped within the boundaries of the institution and people start to hallucinate that the problems are going to be solved with better curricula or some other magic fix internal to the school system.

*Critical pedagogies...*

Yes, and thus focusing on something like a culturally more appropriate curriculum can quickly start to mask the real sets of power relations that are organizing everything, including both large scale social inequalities as well as more localized systems of patronage, corruption and bureaucratic indifference.

So in or outside of schools it is easy to glorify inner-city violence as a 'culture of resistance'. This is certainly a way to sanitize the hideous every day destructiveness of violence and drugs. What is so amazing is that the direct administrators of social suffering are not the school teachers or the parole officers, the police officers and the welfare officers - but rather the crack dealer; the rapist; the violent uncle and the gang. That is what the child comes into contact with and is terrified of. And this is what the child adapts to, tries to out-smart, but too often becomes a part of.

This brings us back to Primo Levi's notion of the 'gray zone'. I do not want to overstate this, but for Levi, in settings of extreme social misery and social inequality where victim becomes victimizer survival takes place in this gray area.

In order to survive, you have to collaborate with the grotesqueness and with the violence around you. And this is something which emerges on the street with the dealers and the rapists and the gangs and the brutality of friends to one another. As we know the reality of physical violence in the U.S. is mostly black on black and brown on brown [i.e. Latino on Latino]. There is no race war of people of color against whites, or even of the poor against the rich. It is the poor beating up on each other. But then the institutions are there making sure that it does not get out of bounds and start affecting the quality of life of the rich too negatively. For example the prisons lock people up; the segregated housing market keeps people in their places in their segregated neighborhoods.

## **Section Two: Inside the Gray Zone**

*Yet this 'good' and 'bad' dichotomy that you want to get beyond, or transform into a continuum, is not totally useless in your work. In In Search of Respect you got inside and stuck close to the cocaine dealer's worlds, representations and intimate networks and, in so doing, you made it clear that they were not the only 'types' of people in the hood. But we did not hear much about the 'other' elements of the Puerto Rican community living in El Barrio who had much more 'mainstream' ways of searching for dignity and autonomy. Was this because of editing and space constraints or a choice or...?*

I did address the relation of the crack dealers to the rest of the community by talking about the 'working class majority' and by distinguishing between the daytime street scene when El Barrio is a working class '9 to 5' community and the

nighttime street scene when it is a lumpen-controlled community dominated by drug dealers and addicts.

In a positivist sense, I would like to really know what proportion of the population is composed of the people I wrote about and lived with. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the dealers I studied are a minority of the overall population, my argument is that they are setting the tone for daily life - especially after dark. They are forcing the working class majority to triple lock their doors and to move to the suburbs as soon as they can afford to, thereby further lumpenizing the neighborhood. I would love to really be able to understand that dynamic more precisely. I think that one can only get at it by taking a longer historical trajectory and of course by doing fieldwork in more mainstream families in the neighborhood.

Originally I thought I would have several chapters on my 'worthy' neighbors. What was amazing is that yet again the worthy/unworthy distinction breaks down when I searched for worthy subjects. For example, I had a totally heroic neighbor who had adopted his uncle's adolescent child. The poor kid had been burned with cigarettes at the age of thirteen by his biological father. Thirteen is a difficult age to adopt a child, but that neighbor was raising the boy. He was working as a tutor in an after school homework program, and he was also going back to City College to get a degree. The ideal worthy poor person, not only lifting himself up by his bootstraps in the classic American sense, but also taking care of his community and extended family. Well, he did not want to be in the book because he was ashamed of the fact that he misstated his income in order to qualify for subsidized daycare for his youngest child. He did not want that to come out in the book.

Anyhow, I had intended there to be a whole other set of working-poor people as case studies to contextualize the larger community surrounding the crack dealers. Let me give you another example, there was an African American man living in the building next door who was working in a job training program. He was a very together person, but when I asked him how he survived growing up in the neighborhood he said: 'It's because I was fat and klutzy as a kid. I was too scared to go outside. I was a wimp; I was a momma's boy.' Another man who I did mention in the book escaped the streets by becoming a Jehovah's Witness and by completely internalizing racism. He moved to a white middle class neighborhood and persuaded himself that he was not upset when his new neighbors start calling him 'spick' and 'nigger'. He said they shriek and jump out of the way when he jogs down the sidewalk. He forgives them saying: 'I understand why they are scared. I wouldn't want any Puerto Ricans to move in next door to me either because it's gonna lower the property values.' In some sense this is the tragedy of the United States, in order to be upwardly mobile you have to internalize and accept the commonsense of oppression and racism.

*Due to my own research interests I would like to talk for a moment specifically about 'School Days: Learning to be a better criminal' (chapter five of In Search of Respect). You never set foot inside a neighborhood school, never spoke with a single teacher or administrator and yet, through your conversations with the dealers about their school experiences and your analysis, I think that any sociologist or anthropologist of education who reads the chapter will agree, you have given us a remarkable and provocative piece of educational ethnography. Explain how or why that is possible.*

Well, many of the best ethnographies on the U.S. inner city have been set inside schools. Schools are, as you know, one of those amazing places in the inner city where there is a place for the middle class intellectual - namely the teacher - who can, and must violate apartheid. In fact, teachers cannot escape violating apartheid. So to a certain degree it offers a safe place to do inner city ethnography. I can think offhand of three great school ethnographies. There is Willis's classic study of British working class schoolboy culture, *Learning to Labor*. There is *Ain't No Making It* by Jay MacLeod (1987, Westview Press), and John Devine's book (1996, *Maximum Security. The culture of violence in inner-city schools*, University of Chicago Press). And there are dozens more, Signithia Fordham's *Blacked Out* (1996, University of Chicago Press).

What is strange about many educational ethnographies, however, is that they often stay solely within the confines of the classroom when most of the tough children who are most crucial to understand have long since stopped coming to class. Over half of Puerto Rican children drop out of school. Furthermore, the tenor of the school is not being set by the dynamics of the school or by the curriculum, but rather by the missing kids on the surrounding violent street corners and in the violent hallways.

It would have been good if I had gone into the schools. But I did not have the patience to go through the bureaucratic hoops of asking for permission from the teachers and administrators in order to get access to school children in East Harlem. I just did not have it in me to deal with that hostile bureaucracy. I know people don't believe it, but the truth is that I am actually a bit shy. I am intimidated by academic institutions.



So I never put the effort into trying to get through the front door of the school. But I wanted to deal with the school because it is the crucial institution for administering social marginalization. It is also the one hope for upward mobility. I felt it necessary to address the school experiences of the crack dealers in my book. The way I did that was by purposefully bringing them to their old school's playground - which happened to be the 'graffiti hall of fame' in East Harlem, by the way, on Park Avenue and 108th Street - a gorgeous and inspiring artistic spot. We would go in the middle of the night after they had shut the crackhouse and sit in their old schoolyard drinking beer and they would reminisce about what it was like to be in that school. Sometimes they would sniff cocaine and heroin to jog their memories - sort of truth serum - to break their inhibition about talking about childhood fears and vulnerabilities in cruel institutional settings.

*Inner city schools are portrayed at different times in your writing as the one way out for the truly disadvantaged, the institution charged with managing and naturalizing marginality, mainstream society's socialization institution par excellence and the place where the more extreme pupils learn to sharpen their decidedly non-mainstream skills which they will use in their future street-based lives while they destroy the school setting for the other students. That's quite a lot all at once, explain.*

Well schools are another one of these institutions where you've got positive power in the sense that the good - or potentially good - dimensions make the overall repressive dynamics of the power that much more powerful. The argument I have in the book is that it is in school that the crack dealers

learned that their mothers were considered morons by society; that their mothers were incapable of talking to the teacher; that their culture was 'inferior'; that is to say all those forms of symbolic violence that the schools socialize working class and lumpen kids into. With immigrant families it is even more dramatic because most of the mothers are monolingual, so the six-year-old child all of a sudden becomes more powerful than his or her mother. Plus the kids typically do not yet speak very good English at that early age so they are also viewed as being stupid by the teachers and the English-speaking kids. And they are not dressed right. They lack all the deep down symbolic capital that makes you seem smart, worthy and effective in the middle class white-defined institutional setting. So it is in school that you discover that you are dumb, that your culture is bad; that you deserve to be where you are: poor. So the guys I focus on in the book rebel like hell against school. They cannot stand to be disrespected and subordinated. But above all they learned to be violent in school. They learned to sell drugs in school. The girls learned to get pregnant in school. It was extraordinary to watch those trajectories take place, especially the learning to be violent in school. In the U.S. inner city there is no learning-to-labor hidden curriculum a la Paul Willis and working class youth in 1970s England. In the 2000s, U.S. inner city schools are much more out of control.

*Many of the girls are raped however. Both technically, according to legal and illegal ages, and just in terms of brutal rape and gang rape about which you write. Do you think they learn to get pregnant?*

Getting pregnant gets you attention and all of a

sudden gives great meaning to your life. So there are a hell of a lot of good rational reasons for girls to get pregnant. When you are flunking all your classes; when you do not have a room of your own at home; when society is treating you like a moron then dropping out and getting pregnant is a great alternative. All of a sudden there might be a counsellor or a nurse available to talk to you for a minute at least. You might get beaten by your parents, but you will not be neglected anymore.

*Is there a way to integrate students with the 'wrong' types of habitus and the 'wrong' types and amounts of cultural capital without violating them symbolically?*

You would know that a lot better than I. One has to believe that things could be managed in a much less cruel manner than they are being managed now. The school curriculum scholars and technicians would point to things like smaller classes, for example. The thing that is not at all a mystery right now is that in inner city America the kids are just scared to go to school. I mean school is where you get mugged, going to school and inside school. School is where the gangs form; school is scary as hell. And despite—or rather because of—the rhetoric there is no security for the protection of the children. So, just law and order would ironically be a number one priority for making schools less destructive to the hearts and souls of poor children. Also smaller classes and a curriculum that even vaguely responds to something they are in touch with culturally.

School is the institution par excellence for managing inequality. It is one of the places where society comes crashing down on the child and on the family. A lot of the kids simply get tracked into special education, declared emotionally disabled. The other big relationships with mainstream society

are with the labor markets, the welfare system, prison - in some cases for very long periods of time - and probation.

*Let's talk about the supposed Seductions of Crime (1988, Jack Katz, New York: Basic Books) and the draw of the fast life and indeed this search for respect...*

I asked kids who were not in the mix what they thought of selling crack and they often replied by saying things like, 'I'm jealous, but I'm too scared to do it'. The tragedy right now is that those who do not get into the street economy experience 'going legal' as if they were 'losers' who are not 'tough enough'. They are not 'hard'. There is this huge drug economy offering an instant half-way decent wage and such a concrete alternative to poverty and cultural subordination in the legal labor market.

*And allowing young men, mostly, to maintain a sense of masculine dignity?*

Right, and to excel, to do something they can do well.

*Would you talk about a fit between the habitus and the positions available to them in the low-level underground drug economy?*

Right. They have the right habitus to be drug dealers. They know when to express violence; they know how to posture; they know when to retreat; when to scare people, but also refrain from using violence. Those are very complicated sets of knowledge that are very hard for someone without a street-wise inner city habitus to master. You have an advantage when you grow up in a violent family

and/or are surrounded by violence neighbors, friends and acquaintances since birth.

*Do you think it feels right, in terms of bodily dispositions and the sub-worlds they are in?*

Well yes and no. I mean they are scared much of the time. They often ask if someone will walk down the street with them. They do not want to be alone when they make a drug or money delivery. It is not as if their jobs in the underground economy are easy. It is not as if they enjoy being nervous and constantly looking over their shoulder to see if someone is going to mug them. As they say, they sprout eyes in their backs. All of them have been beaten up many times in their lives whether at school or on the block or in their housing project buildings or in the park.

*And there is a great amount of boredom as well, or no?*

Well that is the other thing. Selling crack, like any other retail job, is basically boring. You have long hours to whittle away. So Primo [a drug dealer in *In Search of Respect* and still a good friend of the author's] always wanted people around him both to break up the monotony, but also because he did not want to get held up. And he did get held up at gunpoint - three times that I can remember.

### **Section Three: Structure vs. Agency and the need for multi-level analysis**

*You write about the 'hyper-visible cultural details' and warn us against the dangers of making the ethnographic fallacy? Clearly you think too many ethnographers conflate the hyper-visible*

*everyday cultural with the social, and to sound like Marx, deeper structural mechanisms. But how to avoid this?*

Well, this is the pitfall of ethnography. While doing ethnographic research you are confronted with, and seduced by, the hyper visible. One gets sidetracked by the hyper visible because structures of power are invisible or at least difficult to see, they are complicated. We can all see the guy punching the other guy in the face or injecting heroin into his arm, or a misogynist cursing at a woman. And when you are afraid of getting knifed or mugged or made a fool of because you are perceived to be street dumb instead of street smart - you forget to see, or you can't see the breakdown of public services or the disintegration caused by exclusion from the labour force.

That is one form of it. Another form is just miserable-ism. By this I mean only seeing victims and total destruction and, in the case of heroin addicts, only seeing the self-loathing and the cries for help. When you try to write about that, how do you do that in a way that is not just going to reproduce the cultural stereotypes? And this is why a lot of ethnographers sanitize. They are caught in the worthy/unworthy debate, and they try to get out of it by simply making everyone a worthy victim. They miss the fact of Primo Levi's gray zone; they do not see that in the same person, in the same act - worthy and unworthy coexists. Worthiness, goodness and morality are not the right concept. Within the same act both good and bad are often operating.

*So the only good ethnography is always already interpretive and critical? Ethnography that takes risks and dares to tie together various levels of analysis?*

Well this brings us to another fallacy, the a-theoretical fallacy of positivism and grounded theory. According to the grounded theory and symbolic interactionism tradition which is largely dominated sociological ethnography (most anthropologists do not know what grounded theory means), you just take what is coming and allow the data to create your categories. That is naïve and it is also not what researchers really do. Otherwise, you just become consumed with every hyper-visible stereotype around you: hyper-sexuality, hyper-self-destructiveness, hyper-weak character, etc.

So, given my theoretical orientation when researching *In Search of Respect*, as I said earlier I thought my entire book was going to be the chapter on 'Going Legit', the chapter that addresses their relationship to the traditional labor market. I was coming at it from Marxism, but not a traditional economic reductionist Marxist approach. Because I take culture and practice seriously. But I wanted to rein myself in from falling prey to too much focus on the hyper-visible and miserablizing, and other 'blame the victim' approaches which would have emerged from grounded theory, i.e., looking only at what was directly in front of me and allowing that to create my theoretical categories. So I kept steering the conversations with the dealers to their experiences in the formal economy. So yes, one does have to go in to one's fieldwork with a set of theoretically informed categories, a set of things to watch out for.

Having said that, what did emerge from the fieldwork itself, was the centrality of violence in gender power relations. This clobbered me over the head. The crack dealers wanted to talk to me about their girlfriends; about falling in love; and about

the violence in their homes. The guys and the girls just kept talking about this. Much of it was banal i.e., who they wanted to have sex with or who had a crush on whom. And so I started to listen closely to this and became aware of the need to really try to figure out what was going on there with respect to gender power relations - what the competing forms and types of patriarchy that come into conflict with immigration and rapidly forced economic transformations.

On the one hand, there is the more *Jibaro*-type [poor, rural Puerto Rican] of gender and generational relations which is tied in with religion and old-fashioned respectful tradition: 'Bless me, Grandmother. *Bendiga me.*' With a gently bowed head and politely closed eyes. And then there is the more notching of the belt, 'Yo! I-am-a-player' type of gender relations that is expressed in contemporary Hip Hop that combines violent machismo with heterosexual liberation and the zipless fuck. So in the book I addressed how a generation gap had emerged related to forms and expressions of patriarchy. Ray, the owner of the franchise crack houses was my age, in his 30's at that time. He thought abortion was a capital sin. He thought any woman who had an abortion should be put to death. But for some of the younger guys like Caesar and Primo, they spoke proudly about having gotten women pregnant and about forcing them to have abortions as a way of showing their masculinity and virility - 'She took that baby right out! Word up!'

*When did you find yourself in the field thinking - this is just an eccentric individual or a critical thinker, or here we need to leave room for volition and reflexivity?*

As soon as you get close to people and have to



survive in the street scene for any length of time, you quickly find yourself scrambling for interpersonal alliances. You want to find out fast who you can rely on; who has their act together; who will help you out in a pinch. And so you start making friendships and alliances with people. You discover huge differences between people on a daily human survival level. And I am seeing this every day now with the homeless addicts that I'm studying in San Francisco. I have been following some two dozen older men in their forties. And even though they are all from quite similar class backgrounds there are huge, personal differences in how they act. Some of them hustle me constantly; others are generous with me. They each have a different tenor in their relations with one another too, of course. Some of them are effective in the moral economy of giving and taking. They give a friend a shot of heroin to make them obliged to give them a shot in return on another occasion when they are in need. Others are just straightforwardly selfish or greedy. And they criticize each other in these terms - they differentiate between each person's moral worth and personality even though they also all share with some pride the 'righteous dopefiend identity'. In *In Search of Respect*, everyone in the crack scene identified Caesar as being 'fucked up'; of being a really violent guy. In contrast, Primo also mobilized violence when he needed to, but everyone knew he was not out of control. He engaged in a 'respectful' type of violence - not that I want to romanticize violence or him or anything. But you see these interpersonal differences and so you try to stay around the guy who is not going to attack people and whose friendship will cut you off from others and make it impossible for you to do effective ethnography. You want to hang out with the guy or the woman who is popular and respected as opposed to just too crazy. But you want that

person to be tough, too, of course. You want protection.

So there is a lot of leeway and latitude across individuals. On another level you can take it back further and find out that someone was addicted in the womb you can ask, where is the room for agency? And that dimension of determinism is also addressed in my book as well. I made sure to include an account of one of Caesar's first memories which was of his grandmother throwing a knife at him when she was carving up a ham. So ultimately this gets to our difficulty with structure and agency. We have not figured that relationship out yet. You can psychoanalyze people and reduce everything to just being totally determined by interpersonal abuse. But the hyper-psychological approach has a problem: everyone becomes an isolated victim trapped in their interpersonal and familial relationships so it does not take us very far and it misses social structural power determinants and blames victims. So this is a problem with respect to our concepts and to the interface between psychology, sociology and anthropology.

*In addition with dealing in a nuanced way with structure vs. agency would you say you also try to transcend the material vs. symbolic dichotomy?*

Well certainly I try to get beyond the material and symbolic distinctions. But I cannot escape the fact that I grew up in the United States and live there. And when I am teaching students in the United States I find that it is just incredibly useful to talk to them about the structure versus agency polarity in order to get them thinking about something other than agency and blaming-the-victim with respect to poverty. I hit them over the head literally with a baseball bat of oversimplified concepts to get them to think about structure and

more subtly à la Bourdieu I try to show them how their deepest likes and dislikes are determined by their class and cultural backgrounds - not by their moral worth and will power. In the United States, the ideology - hegemony à la Gramsci - is so much on the agency side that it is relatively harmless to be a little bit over determinist. Also, I cannot really help it. If you are not determinist how do you explain privilege without celebrating power and injustice?

Having said all this, it would be a waste of intellectual energy and politically dishonest to be over determinist in understanding the extraordinary contradictory subtleties and unintended consequences of practice i.e., understanding the way individual behaviors translate themselves into social suffering. There is nothing linear about the connections between all those structural processes and especially the cultural/symbolic reproduction of subordination through self-destruction and banal everyday violence.

*It seems like a wonderful balance - if you can keep it. On the one hand these institutions and the 'managing of marginality' as you call it, and on the other hand the rejection of top down hegemonic structures, this notion that it is them doing it to themselves and not nine white guys in a smoke filled room pulling all the levers. But this seems like a very difference balance to strike continually.*

Well this again is where the concept of symbolic violence is so useful. It is in people being angry at themselves, at their culture, at the local gang that is violating them that makes them incapable of seeing that their problems are really about the housing market, the labor market, the pathetic schools, the prison industrial complex and racism. When I used to talk to the Puerto Rican drug

dealers about racism in the scene I used to hangout at they did not know what I was talking about. They thought I was crazy to bring up the subject. Some of the African-American kids I spoke with, in contrast, did articulate a critical consciousness of the history of slavery and had a discourse in which to frame a critique of U.S. racism. But the Puerto Ricans, especially the older ones who were further removed from African-Americans, simply had no awareness of or concern over the concrete realities of racism. What was so amazing was that everyone, literally everyone blames him or her self. In the book I quote Primo saying, 'I don't blame the white man for where I am Felipe. I blame me, myself and I.'

*Maybe this is a fruitful point of connection forward to your present work as well as back to your pre-In Search of Respect work in Central America. Do you think this tendency to blame the self first and foremost, this internalization of an 'individual-as-central-sensibility' (to use Michael Lewis' phrase<sup>2</sup>) is a product of living in extremely opulent cities or wealthy industrialized countries which trickles down from the advantaged to the poor?*

You know something that really knocks you off your chair in the U.S. is coming to grips with how everyone totally believes in the American Dream and in meritocracy. I am getting a bit repetitive, but, that is a perfect example of symbolic violence in action - the most powerful dynamic of the artifice that keeps everything running so smoothly in some sense. Drugs are another place where this is at work, of course, in the United States. People can

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Lewis, 1978, *Culture of Inequality*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 578

blame themselves for getting addicted, for continuing to take drugs. So the heroin addicts I'm looking at (in San Francisco) participate in that. It is the same for me for that matter. I am addicted to cigarettes and I love to drink every day. I operate in a self-blame mode thinking I have a weak character for being addicted to cigarettes. I guess the drinking part I just enjoy - thank God I am half French!

*So the adults you study have zero structural or historical analysis? Just nothing?*

Well the closest some of the heroin addicts will get to a larger critique is with respect to drugs being illegal. They will say things like, 'I need my medicine.' I do not know if that is a specifically San Francisco discourse which is perhaps more open and progressive than most drug addict discourses in the United States. But the most they can hold onto a structural analysis of their oppression is through a medicalized discourse of, 'If I had my medicine [heroin] I wouldn't have to steal; I wouldn't be so destroyed; I would be harmless.'

But the crack dealers, they wanted everyone to be urine tested. For example, Primo thought teachers should be urine tested and fired if they came up positive for marijuana. They were also in favor of capital punishment; I mean they were hard-core.

*Did you press them in conversations on what you saw as contradictions in their arguments, on what you personally saw as ridiculous opinions they held? Did you ever say, look, we take a thousand kids from your hood and a thousand from mine and we can make these incredibly accurate predictions about outcomes, who is going to get locked up and accused*

*of murder, who has a greater chance of failing a drug test at some point?*

Yes, and it was in this context that Primo said: 'Look, it ain't no white man that is holding me down, it's me.'

It was awesome to listen to them. I mean I used to argue ferociously with them. Finally, I would just burst out laughing and say: 'Man, do you really believe that? That's sad!'

*You were pressing him and this was his response?*

That was it. And he won the argument. I mean as far as he was concerned nothing could be so clear as the fact that he was right and I was wrong. I mean they thought I was funny like that. At one point Caesar said: 'Oh Philippe, you make us sound like such sensitive crack dealers.' So I just sounded like a bleeding heart liberal, not that they used that term, it certainly was not part of their discourse.

#### **Section Four: Race, social suffering, the conservation of violence and apartheid**

*In your new work you stress race. For example, crack is the 'nigger's drug' and heroin is the 'white boy's drug' in the essentializing language of your subjects. Certainly the men in the streets believe this and these types of beliefs have real consequences. At the same time, however, the African Americans are coming from a quite different historical trajectory - from Eastern Texas and Louisiana than the whites who are, for example 'Okies', whose families came to California from Missouri. Very different experiences of labor relations, different amounts of access to*

*education, etc. Although it is a powerful folk concept and principle of social division I wonder how useful it is to talk about 'race' - as such - when it is so intertwined with all these divergent trajectories and institutions. I mean your subjects may talk about race incessantly as a fixed and clear thing rather than set of dynamic and fuzzy relations but must you risk falling into their commonsensical thinking?*

The fact that they talk about race incessantly is important. But of course you are right that ethnicity is constituted historically. It is reactionary and wrong analytically as a cultural essentialism or a biological determinism. You cannot understand NewYorican [i.e. New York/Puerto Rican] ethnicity without understudying the colonial relationship with Puerto Rico and the conjuncture of economic restructuring in New York when Puerto Ricans immigrated to New York. Similarly, with the addicts in San Francisco, the arrival of African Americans specifically during ww ii fleeing from sharecropping, Jim Crow, sugarcane plantations and the worst Klu Klux Klan infested parts of the South. Sure, that *is* what ethnicity is all about. And that is the analytical way to talk about ethnicity - to relate it to those structures of power. Now at the same time, it is also a discourse in and of itself. You can treat it as a powerful discourse - à la Foucault - it is a way of talking and thinking and acting that gives meaning to how you act. It becomes your way of understanding yourself and of constructing dignity. So in the case of homeless addicts you see a very different set of identities and options open to whites and blacks. The white men just do not have open to them the option of an identity as the successful masculine, intimidating smart and resourceful outlaw. So the 45-year-old white male just does not

have any credibility on the street as an intimidating 'outlaw'. The most he can do is just try to act as black as possible - so to speak if he wants to try to be an outlaw. In contrast, the African Americans have a sort of cultural hegemony over the tough street scene. If we treat it as a set of forces in a field they are the number one force in that field. And they pursue this in very specific ways, in more violent ways and in terms of being incapable of accepting humiliation, disrespect, or subordination, in terms of having much less access to social services. At the same time, structures of racism around the addicts reinforce these ethnic ways of being. You are punished for having an oppositional demeanor, for cursing at or stealing from the corner store owners who might employ you to sweep the sidewalk in front of their stores. I would argue that ethnicity also needs to be understood as a product of the experience of racism. Ethnicity, consequently, is really about power. As long as we keep power at the forefront of our understandings of the implications of cultural forms then we are much less likely to fall into essentialist traps of propagating 'culture of...' stereotypes and we can avoid reproducing tropes of racist common sense. But the amazing thing about everyday life is that people do cultivate the roles that society imposes on them. It is as if they play the part selected for them at the most intimate level. With the addicts we can follow this down to the most embodied details of how they use their drugs. For example, the whites just muscle their shots of heroin with a depressed expression. Sometimes they shoot right through their shirts or sweaters. African Americans, on the other hand, will often spend a half an hour trying to find a still-functional vein even delving into their jugular in order to get the benefit of the full intravenous rush of pleasure from their



heroin. (Heroin is not smoked in the United States as it is in Holland.) They are not giving up on 'I am an outlaw out here' and 'I am having fun', as opposed to the white way of talking about their need for heroin. 'I'm dopesick' and 'I need my medicine'.

*Maybe you could unpack your understanding of a term you use quite often, namely 'social suffering'.*

Some people get irritated by the term social suffering because it is so commonsensical. Like symbolic violence, it can be used so much that it starts to mean nothing at all. Medical anthropologists developed the concept of social suffering over the past five to ten years. The idea is to take suffering away from an individualist, psychological-reductionist framework and to show how societal forces and criss-crossing webs of more or less autonomous fields structure intimate suffering. Social suffering - unlike suffering *tout court* - is not, in other words, a sort of random bouncing around of being depressed, neurotic or angsted; or of having been abused by a parent. Those expressions of individual psychological suffering are related to how the forces of society are organized. Suffering is embodied by vulnerable sectors of the population in patterned ways and that is what makes it social and a product of power relations.

*In a recent article you mention the 'law of the conservation of violence'. Please explain.*

Yes, I got in trouble for using this term in an article in which I took a retrospective look at the experience of violence of Salvadoran FMLN guerrilla fighters in the journal *Ethnography* ('The power of violence in war and peace: post-cold war lessons

from El Salvador', 2 (1), March 2001), I was attacked for being mechanical and reductionist by an anthropologist who I respect, Leigh Binford ('Violence in El Salvador: a rejoinder to Philippe Bourgois's "The power of violence in war and peace: post-cold war lessons from El Salvador"', *Ethnography*, 3 (2), 2002). Loïc Wacquant, an editor of *Ethnography*, had warned me against using the phrase. I took it from a speech by Bourdieu and Loïc told me to leave it out and to draw instead from Bourdieu's discussion of different violences in *Pascalian Meditations* (2000, Polity Press), which is more nuanced. Bourdieu used the phrase 'law of conservation of violence' in a speech he gave to Greek trade unionists.<sup>3</sup> Clearly it is an overly deterministic notion. He was popularizing a process that is much less linear and much more complicated. Bourdieu is using the phrase to debunk neo-liberalism and to argue that when you cut social services and put people in prison instead of getting them good jobs you create a form of structural violence that will catch up with you like a boomerang in the form of getting mugged, getting killed, getting raped or being beaten by parents, neighbors, friends, lovers. That is why Bourdieu used the phrase in such a clear and simple way.

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<sup>3</sup> 'You cannot cheat the law of the conservation of violence: all violence is paid for, and, for example, structural violence exerted by the financial markets, in the form of layoffs, loss of security, etc., is matched sooner or later in the form of suicides, crime, and delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence' (From a speech in Athens, 1996, reprinted in Bourdieu's 1998 *Acts of Resistance. Against the New Myths of Our Time*, Polity Press. p. 40, italics in original).

Of course, in the year 2002 saying 'law of anything' or 'conservation of anything', rings of dogmatic linearity - exactly what the postmodernists critique: a totalizing pseudo-theoretical template. But still I think that aside from the linear aesthetics of the term it can be a useful concept. There is no need to apply it linearly or dogmatically. Our job as ethnographers is to understand the everyday social tissue connections that translate structural violence into intimate violence.

*And finally you use a term in your work that is extremely emotionally charged here in the Netherlands: 'apartheid'. Do you ever find yourself thinking you might be more effective and clearer if you state your argument - perhaps even more strongly in terms of content - but without using such emotionally charged terms.*

I remember a girl who told me once that I was the only white person she had ever met because even her teachers were not white. And she told me that she just loved to hear me talk, 'because,' she said, 'you sound just like a T.V. commercial.' I think apartheid is a useful and accurate word in the U.S. context. I use it in combination with the adjective 'inner-city' and at times even with the qualifier 'de facto', i.e., 'de facto, U.S. inner-city apartheid'. There is a special management to inequality in the U.S. that is incredibly deeply inscribed on the cities. Our phenomenon of the ghettos - we have changed the term to inner-city - is very real, very concrete. It is set in the way highways have been built; the way transportation and public housing have been planned; the way the schools have been placed and their financing structured on local housing property taxes; the way credit has been distributed by banks; the way

public services are administered; the way tax money is spent. Look at the percentage of youth going to prison coming from a tiny number of inner city neighborhoods. Look at how postal zip codes predict hiv, tuberculosis, asthma, diabetes, obesity, murder etc. Right now young blacks have thirteen times greater chance of going to prison on drug charges than whites.<sup>4</sup> Only apartheid structures can produce those statistics. Blacks represent 12% of the population, but 49%<sup>5</sup> of our prisoner population. Tell me that is not an outcome of apartheid. I barely even need to qualify the term apartheid with 'de facto' since it is legislated into our drug laws and into the details of how we wage our War on Drugs. Apartheid is more pernicious in the United States because it is masked by logics of governmentality and no longer explicitly racial as it was through the mid-1960s with Jim Crow in the South. So if you just sort of sit back and look at these phenomena on some sort of a map you do see an extraordinary determinism by ethnicity and class.

We need to look at the way the public sector administers inequality. When I would take Puerto Rican kids from my block to a museum downtown, for example, guards, who were often Puerto Rican themselves, would immediately follow us around aggressively. The kids are deeply humiliated by that experience. They were not even aware of it all the time. But I remember once when one of the children turned around and, not hostilely but in genuine incredulity asked the guard why he was following him so closely. The guard answered: 'To

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mapinc.org/drugnews/v00/n771/a03.html>.

<sup>5</sup> BJS, *1998 Sourcebook*, Table 4.10 (arrests), Table 6.28 (jail inmates); Allen J. Beck and Christopher J. Mumola, 'Prisoners in 1998', Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice (August 1999).  
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make sure you do not lift your leg and piss.' And of course, again getting back to cultural and symbolic capital from the guard's perspective, the kids were getting too close to the paintings. They did not know that you are supposed to keep a certain distance between the artwork and yourself.

*So the chance of a kid reaching out and touching the Picasso, where is that higher, with which type of kid? The museum guards do not have a choice. This is the really painful part of it all, is it not?*

That is the really painful thing. Even when they are trying to be good, when they are policing themselves, 'Hey man act right, don't get too close to the painting', they still do not know how to behave and they are treated as pariahs. This is how power becomes so oppressively powerful, in some incredibly perverse way there is a real need on the part of the guards to watch these kids like hawks... they might touch the paintings. They have never been in a museum before, how are they supposed to know not to touch. So in the end they are always being watched and that makes them feel even worse every time they leave their neighborhood and enter upper class white space.

It was Baldwin who expressed this more poetically and succinctly than any sociologist or anthropologist could have. He said something like: 'It is bad to be poor, but it is much worse to be poor in the richest country in the world.' So that is a central dynamic to the experience of symbolic violence. To be surrounded by such extraordinarily wealth and opportunity and to be completely unable to get access to it. Ultimately, you are convinced it is your fault. The wealth and opportunity is right there in front of you, whether it is in the Leidsestraat, which we just walked on to get here,

or on Park Avenue in New York. To make you feel even more like a loser, there are new immigrants getting it and you are left behind. That is really painful.

## Summaries