



Urban Ethnography: A Handbook

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Reviewed: Richard E. Ocejo (ed.). 2013. *Ethnography and the City: Reading on Doing Urban Fieldwork*, New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Since the 1980s, the field of ethnography has enjoyed a return to favour in the social sciences. Richard E. Ocejo's recent work – the first collection of texts to deal specifically with the city and urban ethnography – offers a valuable introduction to the classics of the genre. It also highlights the efforts that are called for by an approach that is still all too often considered “easy access”.

This work begins with a scene that takes place in Milano's Bar, one of the “little social worlds” that Richard E. Ocejo invites us to explore, and which became his main research site. He provides us with a brief description: an old bar in a gentrified neighbourhood of New York with an intense nightlife, where long-time residents – from the time when the Lower East Side was still a slum district – rub shoulders with new residents who have moved in and contributed to the gentrification process, and with the visitors who come to take in the authentic culture of the working classes. In this bar, Ocejo saw an observation post from which he could record these different populations' experiences of the neighbourhood, the multiple tensions between them and their means of resolving these tensions to ensure a smooth cohabitation. In gaining access in this way to the texture of their day-to-day – or rather night-to-night – interactions, as experienced, felt and practised by them, he is perfectly placed to describe a set of urban and social transformations that transcend the stereotypes of received wisdom and which contrast with statistical or urbanistic surveys.¹

The Chicago legacy

The publication of this work – a veritable handbook of urban ethnography – in Routledge's “The Metropolis and Modern Life” collection is most welcome. It is part of a well-established tradition, namely that of fieldwork in urban environments as originally practised in Chicago. Its introduction provides a simplified, and thus pedagogical, account of an era dating back to the 1890s, when the city was reconceived as a “social laboratory” by the Progressive activists of Hull House² and the supporters of an emerging sociological discipline.

William I. Thomas and Robert E. Park remain the key characters in this story, as it is they who promoted the case method, the use of direct observation and the use of personal documents. This approach went hand in hand with the mapping of local communities in the city and the compilation

¹ Richard E. Ocejo is assistant professor in sociology at the City University of New York (CUNY). He is currently in the process of rewriting his PhD thesis, based on a field study, soon to be published by Princeton University Press under the title *About Last Night: Nightlife, Conflict, and Community on the Lower East Side* (2013).

² J. Addams. 1910. *Twenty Years at Hull House*, New York: Macmillan.

of statistical databases. It led to the creation of a series of urban monographs, ranging from Nels Anderson's *Hobo* (1923) to Louis Wirth's *Ghetto* (1928), together with Pauline Young's *Pilgrims of Russian-Town*³ (1932), Paul Cressey's *Taxi-Dance Hall* and Harvey W. Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum*.

This movement experienced something of a second wind in the 1940s: William F. Whyte published *Street Corner Society* (1943), W. Lloyd Warner's team studied Yankee City, a small town in the Midwest, and Everett McGill and Helen Hughes began their work in Drummondville, Quebec. This continued with subsequent generations of authors and the revival of urban ecology with William Kornblum, Gerald Suttles and Albert Hunter in the 1960s and the continuation of this legacy by younger researchers, some of whom are included in this book.

For Richard E. Ocejo, therefore, there is a true legacy of "Chicago-style fieldwork". But let us consider the texts he has selected for *Ethnography and the City*. This choice is essential, given the work's propaedeutic aims. After all, reading an extract of an ethnographical study is not just about enjoying a great story; it's also about gaining access to a *case* that has the force of precedent; it's about learning, by example, how to go about making the foreign familiar and the familiar foreign; and it's about becoming well-versed in past experiments in order to establish one's own path and methods. Here too, Ocejo's approach does not disappoint. The 20 extracts proposed, each 10 to 12 pages long, come for the most part from works that already have reputations as classics, which these excerpts encourage the reader to discover. Furthermore, by touching upon particular themes and methodological points, explained by an easy-to-read introduction by the editor, these texts are a good illustration of what urban ethnography can achieve.

Being there, up close

The work is divided into two parts of two sections, each of which addresses a classic question. The first part is entitled "Data Collection Strategies" and is split into two sections: "Being There, Up Close" (immersing oneself in the sights of everyday life) and "Being on the Job" (engaging in the contexts of informants' activities). The second part focuses on "Relationships with Participants", comprising the sections "Crossing Boundaries" (transcending barriers of status, gender, race or class) and "Doing the Right Thing" (dealing with the ethical challenges raised by fieldwork). Many of the practical problems facing the ethnographer are thus covered in this work.

"Being There, Up Close" considers how to give a detailed account of a place, by knowing which elements are important to those who practise, frequent or inhabit it, and by being able to communicate the meaning that they give to these elements, both "on stage" and "backstage". In order to observe and describe effectively, and go beyond the public faces that insiders offer outsiders, it is necessary to live *in situ*, engaging with others, gaining their trust, building relationships, and learning about their world. This is exactly what Herbert J. Gans did in 1957–58 in a working-class neighbourhood of first- and second-generation Italians in the West End of Boston, which, he discovered, its inhabitants did not see as a slum, condemned by city planners, but rather as their "village" where they were happy to live, albeit without any mobilisation of the local community against the city authorities.

Richard Lloyd and Maria Pattillo study two sites that have been the subject of fieldwork on gentrification. Richard Lloyd became a regular on the Wicker Park scene in Chicago, and presents the transformation of this neighbourhood from a red-light/"problem" district to an area that attracted the city's most fashionable bars and clubs in the 1990s. He also asks questions regarding the recycling of bohemian culture as a business argument. Maria Pattillo, on the other hand, slips into the role of the middle-class newcomer in the North Kenwood–Oakland district of the city and observes, first-hand, conflicts between neighbours from the "black bourgeoisie", to which she

³ P. V. Young. 1932. *The Pilgrims of Russian-Town. The Community of Spiritual Christian Jumpers in America*, with an introduction by R. E. Park, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

belongs, and the area's poor African-American residents. Tensions occur not just on racial grounds, but also within the same ethnic group.

Philippe Bourgois moved to *El Barrio* (1995) in East Harlem, New York City, where his ringside view of events in the neighbourhood led him to describe crack as a "way of life". He becomes close to Maria and Primo, two addicts who are expecting a baby, and reflects upon the trajectories of neighbourhood children who are happy during their early years but destroyed from early adolescence. Crack is a question not just of psychological addiction, but also of urban ecology.

Finally, Gina Perez followed a number of families in their back-and-forth lives, split between Humboldt Park, Chicago and San Sebastián, Puerto Rico. This multi-site ethnography required her to be present both *here* and *over there*. These outsiders ("*los de afuera*"), worker ants in North America, have chosen to return to Puerto Rico to build a house, start a small business (*la tienda*) and raise their children – with all the domestic troubles, in terms of gender and generation, that migration can bring.

Being on the job

"Being on the Job" introduces an additional dimension to this intense presence and proximity on fieldwork sites: taking on a role as a "first-person" participant, discovering the roles and attitudes of others, and discovering the expectations of others with regard to oneself. A prime example of this is provided by Mitch Duneier when he decided to become a participant-observer in *Sidewalk*. By looking after the newspaper and book stand of his main informant, Hakim, on 5th Avenue in New York, he discovered the complexity of interactions that street vendors maintain with the police. He extensively recorded his transactions one Christmas evening with a patrol officer who tried to force him to pack up his (perfectly legal) stand.

The other examples presented in this work are equally informative. Peter Moskos became a police officer in Baltimore and observed the various perspectives of the other officers, the dilemmas they face, the obligations they must fulfil, and the decisions they make in carrying out their functions. This portrait also dispelled the suspicions of corruption that so often hang over them.

David Grazian conducted a remarkable study into the symbols of the authenticity of black culture in Chicago, and of their marketing and consumption, by playing the saxophone in blues clubs. He described the relationships, assessments and advice that created a shared experience between the musicians who jam after work, offstage. Jonathan Wynn took part in guided tours in New York and analysed the types of skills and storyteller's tricks that tour guides must master in order to keep their audience spellbound and, as a counterpoint, the image of the city that emerges through their stories.

Lucia Trimbur trained as a boxer at Gleason's Gym, Brooklyn, a breeding ground for champions, and explains how Jerry, the coach, shows firmness and affection (tough love) in the way he mentors and tutors his protégés, and forges in them a sense of individual responsibility. Courtney Bender brings this section to a close with a fine example of ethnography, *Heaven's Kitchen*, in which she recounts her volunteer activities for a charity, God's Love We Deliver. In the excerpt chosen by Ocejo, she carefully dissects ordinary conversations between volunteers and typifies the kinds of discourse where categories of religious experience are more or less relevant.

Crossing boundaries

"Crossing boundaries" is what makes ethnographic inquiry possible. It reveals the compartmentalisation of our spheres of activity and the segregation of our social trajectories. It transcends barriers of age, race, ethnicity, gender and class, as well as the divisions between insiders and outsiders, according to the social worlds and subcultures involved.

W. F. Whyte's investigation offers a classic example of this by showing how a game of tenpin bowling in Boston in 1937 became the place where status inequalities were experienced – felt and tested – between members of the Norton gang. Elliot Liebow (1967), meanwhile, tells of the work- and money-related experiences of Tally, an African-American “streetcorner man”, along with his aspirations, dreams and fears, and the defeatist spiral in which he is caught up. Ethnography enables us to understand behaviours that elsewhere are passed off as irrational.

Carol Stack, a white ethnographer and mother of the young Kevin, manages to connect with the Jackson family and describes the ways in which family relationships are established, children brought up, budgets managed and essential goods exchanged in The Flats, a black ghetto of Cleveland, Ohio, in a world where everyone knows everyone else's business and nothing remains secret. Survival strategies necessarily involve the web of social obligations that are formed in this barter system. And Sudhir Venkatesh discovers he is viewed by the residents of the Robert Taylor Homes public-housing project, where he conducted his fieldwork, as a hustler. The rumour spreads that he is a drug dealer, close to the Black Kings gang, who is planning to set up a deal with students at the University of Chicago – until he calls things to a halt when informants ask him to find johns for girls from the Robert Taylor Homes.

But boundaries can also be of a different kind. Sherri Cavan, a student of Erving Goffman at Berkeley, was accepted by the regulars of neighbourhood bars in San Francisco in the early 1960s – public places that were also markets for goods and services, both legal and illegal. She explored some of these bars that had reputations as pick-up joints for sexual encounters, with or without payment. Javier Auyero and Debora Swistun, on the other hand, used photography in the Vila Inflammable district of Buenos Aires to try to understand the meaning that residents accorded to their environment, polluted by hydrocarbons and other chemicals.

Doing the right thing

The section entitled “Doing the Right Thing” concludes this extensive initiation to urban ethnography. Through three texts, the issue of ethics is considered, in a space delimited by professional and institutional codes of conduct (in particular the authorisations of institutional review boards⁴), by established ethical standards (that the discipline has more or less codified, informally, over time), and finally by the ethical standards of researchers and informants (which often do not coincide). Ocejó insists that ethnographers must have a contextualised understanding of what is the right thing to do so as not to harm their informants.

The text of Laud Humphreys, taken from *Tearoom Trade* (1970), was a landmark work because of the scandal it provoked. In 1965, the researcher, an Episcopalian minister and mental-health counsellor, posed as a lookout (“watchqueen”) who would keep an eye out for any intruders that might enter the toilets of public parks while anonymous partners engaged in homosexual acts. By identifying car registration plates, he then tracked down some of those involved, who turned out to be upstanding family men, and interviewed them as part of a survey-based study. For some, such an approach – doubly illicit – was completely unacceptable and had no place in the field of ethnography; for others, it was seen as a method that caused harm to no one, as all records were anonymised and the list of names destroyed. These ethical dilemmas are also exemplified by the extracts from Jeff Ferrell's study of a group of graffitists in Denver, which is guilty of complicity through his participation in a “deviant subculture”, and from Randol Contreras's work on “stick-up kids” who rob drug dealers, although Contreras refuses to participate in the illegal activities he witnesses.

⁴ Institutional review boards, or IRBs, exist in all American universities. In the social sciences, IRBs approve all research protocols that involve human subjects by insisting upon the protection of their identities.

Richard E. Ocejo's *Ethnography and the City* is a valuable guide to urban ethnography – the first of its kind – one of the merits of which lies in the interesting selection of texts on offer. One could, of course, think of other types of ethnography that might further enrich the book, covering themes such as the suburban experience today; the uses of places such as public squares and shopping malls; practices related to the execution, development and communication of urban policies; or forms of ecological cohabitation between humans and different species of plants and animals. And although the use of photography is represented in one of the articles, some types of analytical methods – film-based, conversation-based, statistical, cartographical, etc. – that come into play in certain field surveys are absent. Of course, the author could not include everything! This work is a very good introduction to observation, participation and ethnographic description that will be of interest to both professionals and teachers, while also remaining accessible to young students. Indeed, anyone interested in urban experiments will take great pleasure in dipping in and out of each of these “little social worlds”.

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Further reading:

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