



In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio. Philippe Bourgois. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 392 pp.

CHARLES SHANNON, U of Missouri-St. Louis

Among the many recent experiments in "writing culture" that have emerged, few have shown more commitment toward the fieldwork part of the process than Philippe Bourgois's *In Search of Respect*. In this instance the field of study was only 20 blocks from the area in Manhattan's Upper East Side where Bourgois grew up. Yet those 20 blocks between the Upper East Side and the Puerto Rican population of East Harlem represent a socioeconomic chasm stretching from mainstream to marginal. *In Search of Respect* seeks to create a bridge across that vast social distance by documenting the range of survival strategies of those at the extreme end of that marginalizing distance, the crack dealers of El Barrio.

Bourgois and his wife moved into a tenement apartment in East Harlem, an area referred to as El Barrio, early in 1985 and spent the next three-and-a-half years living among the harsh realities of the ghetto streets in order to gain entrée to a network of Puerto Rican crack dealers and their friends and relatives. Bourgois eventually found himself at a storefront called the Game Room where video games provided a cover for the sale of crack. It was the manager of this establishment, Primo, who became Bourgois's friend and primary source of information about life in El Barrio. Through this hard-won quasi-intimacy, Bourgois seeks to tell us some things about the symbols and symptoms of ghetto life, the "Achilles heel of the richest industrialized nation in the world." It is this goal that is the source of both the strengths and the weaknesses of Bourgois's study.

The obvious strength of the work is its insight into the thought processes of the subjects involved in the underground drug economy of El Barrio. Bourgois's liberal use of transcripts of conversations from the many hours he spent with members of a gang of drug dealers in El Barrio relates the way these men and women view and understand their circumstances. The book's combination of the organic intellect of the crack dealers as seen in their own words and Bourgois's discussions of the broader social and economic framework surrounding the lives of these young men and women, provides an insightful emphasis on the interface between the structural constraints of their socioeconomic circumstances and the rationale behind the decisions guiding their individual actions. The reality documented here is often shocking. This is not the poetics of social interaction; it is, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes writes in the dustcover notes, the brutal "up-in-your-face" report of a street culture that is predicated on the destruction of its participants. While addiction, substance



abuse, and violence are the immediate facts shaping daily life on these streets, Bourgois's work does not fall prey to ethnographic voyeurism. *In Search of Respect* keeps its focus on the dynamics of the social marginalization and alienation experienced by the people caught in this economic niche. In this view, drugs and violence are merely symptoms, or symbols of deeper changes in the culture of modern America. The actions of these young drug dealers are, for Bourgois, nothing more or less than an alternative forum for an autonomous personal dignity denied them by mainstream culture.

Yet another strength of *In Search of Respect* is its innovative attempt to decolonize urban anthropology by synthesizing a number of reinventive streams--a form of new-Marxist political economy, experiments in interpretative and reflexive ethnographic analysis, and a feminism that underscores the impact race, class, and the misogynist violence of mainstream culture has upon gender. Underlying this synthesis is a concerted effort to resist reinforcing popular racist and socioeconomic stereotypes. Bourgois strives continually to contextualize the self-destructive daily life of the people he studies in El Barrio. The weakness of the work, however, is that the interpretative framework Bourgois employs to create this balance between individual responsibility and social structural context is often so abstract it becomes superficial.

The problem *In Search of Respect* has with balancing the "in-your-face" report of street culture and the contextualization of this report is that the organic intellect and life of El Barrio is all too quickly bracketed in an interpretative analysis that reifies and obscures the actions at center stage rather than illuminating them. Even worse, this interpretative analysis seems at times to be an ad hoc image of the reality it is supposed to represent. One example of this is that there are Puerto Ricans living in this same neighborhood who are very different from the crack dealers. These people hold steady legal jobs and subscribe to more mainstream values about dignity. Bourgois acknowledges that these people exist, but the strategy of their struggle is nowhere to be found in the interpretative argument Bourgois presents for life and dignity in El Barrio.

Other equally unexplained shifts occur in this book. Bourgois's analysis moves between the problems of poverty and structural change in New York and the problems experienced by people living through the social transformations that occur with immigration. The template behind much of Bourgois's documentation of the culture of El Barrio is derived in large part from the cultural residue of the diaspora from rural Puerto Rico with all the patriarchy and masculine gender-hierarchized community that controlled life there, not life in modern America. *In Search of Respect* shifts between these two worlds without clearly differentiating the source of the experience; in the



end, Bourgois seems to "conjugate" the two issues into one interpretative analysis. This is simply too much experiential baggage to pack into one interpretative argument.

Despite the weaknesses, Bourgois has written a remarkable story of an extraordinary extreme response to the marginalization of urban life. The beauty of Bourgois's story of these people is that it portrays them as but one end of the continuum with the ordinary; these crack dealers are neither passive victims nor glamorous gangsters-- they are vulnerable active human beings shaping their own future. The problem is that the caricatural responses of this extreme sample provide too narrow a basis for Bourgois's larger arguments about the experiences the majority of people living in urban ghettos use to shape their future.

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