

Recommended Citation

Stimpson, Natalee (2015) "Book Review: "Righteous Dopefiend," by Philippe Bourgois," *Spectrum*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum/vol5/iss1/7>

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Spectrum

Volume 5
Issue 1 *Fall 2015*

Article 7

11-1-2015

Book Review: "Righteous Dopefiend," by Philippe Bourgois

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Chapter 6

Book Review: *Righteous Dopefiend*, by Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg

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Righteous Dopefiend (2009) is the result of over a decade of research conducted by Philippe Bourgois (University of Pennsylvania) and Jeff Schonberg (University of California). The ethnography serves as a chronological narrative detailing the life of homeless drug addicts seeking shelter on the streets of San Francisco. Edgewater Boulevard is the main location of the book, encompassing an established freeway shelter, “the hole” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 4) and the surrounding urban area. Over the course of 12 years (1994–2006) Bourgois and Schonberg embedded themselves intermittently in the lives of dozens of homeless heroine injectors and crack smokers. Survival strategies, childhoods, love affairs, conflicts, gender relations, ethnic polarization, alliances, and the homelessness hierarchies are recorded and detailed to readers throughout the chapters. The book interweaves the feelings of anxiety, excitement, fun, violence and banality characteristic of the lives of the homeless.

Bourgois and Schonberg highlight that despite its overall extreme wealth, the United States generates many homeless drug addicts annually because of inadequate healthcare services, pathogenic law enforcement, and socio-cultural prejudice imbedded in the culture. The narrative clearly exposes the public’s negative stigma of drug addicts through documentation of various interactions between homeless and non-homeless individuals. The authors take an activist standpoint in their writing, their primary argument being that drug abuse on the streets is not addressed in a way that contributes to a long-term solution. Many American institutions and

government agencies are focused on capitalism instead of providing adequate health care and rehabilitation support that is needed for homeless drug addicts to break the cycle of relapsing. The homeless are viewed as social outcasts who are solely responsible for their situations. Sonny, one of the addicts states, “If we knew why we were out here, then something could be done. None of us is going to say, “I want to be a dopefiend all my life”” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 927). Withdrawal and addiction goes beyond a mental habit and are deeply embodied at the cellular level. It is important to understand this point about heroine addiction – each cell in the body craves the opiate proteins in order to function. Subsequently, one of the defining attributes of a righteous dopefiend is to hustle for heroine by any means possible, in order to avoid withdrawal symptoms and be able to function in daily life.

Deep hanging out is a term coined by Clifford Geertz (1998) to describe the anthropological research method of immersing oneself in a culture or social experience on an informal level. Bourgois and Schonberg engage in this type of research method, developing a relationship with the Edgewater community that begins on a very informal level and gradually develops into friendships. This was a necessary trust-building method of research, allowing the homeless addicts to feel comfortable enough to open up and share traumatic experiences from their lives. Such experiences were then documented and used to back the researchers’ claims. The researchers had to be patient when it came to obtaining life histories because the dopefiends often needed time to mentally prepare themselves to talk about their pasts. For example, when describing one of the informants, Tina, the authors note “sometimes she would say, “I’m not ready to talk about that now...some other time.” Tape recordings of Tina’s life story had to be planned days in advance” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 53). Only by developing trusting relationships were the researchers able to gain deeper insight into the lives of the informants and

develop compassionate understanding of their situations. It is essential for readers to keep an open mind and be aware of initial judgments they may pass about the dopefiends, just as the research team learned to do.

Bourgois and Schonberg come up with the concept of *lumpen* abuse in order to avoid the theoretical impasse of the conventional and ever debated structure-verses-agency debate. That is, are individuals capable of acting as free agents, or are their decisions dictated by a social structure or institution? The authors draw upon the philosophical views of Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault, intertwining aspects of each perspective together to create a way of analyzing their data. The lumpen abuse theory holds that although the American public knows that homelessness and drug use are problematic, they remain complacent to the everyday suffering generated by structural forces that give rise to violent and destructive subjectivities. People generally know there is a problem among this segment of culture but do not often consider the larger societal factors at work and instead tend to blame the individuals. “The *lumpen* subjectivity of righteous dopefiend that is shared by all the Edgewater homeless embodies the abusive dynamics that permeate all their relationships, including their interactions with individuals, families, institutions, economic forces, labor markets, cultural-ideological values, and ultimately their own selves” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 19). The term *lumpen* should be used as an adjective or modifier when describing a group of people rather than as a bounded class category (e.g., Marx used the term “lumpenproletariat” to refer to the complacent bourgeoisie).

Lumpen abuse is fueled by symbolic violence, a term used to describe acts, procedures, or laws that lead to discrimination of particular minority social groups based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic standing. Symbolic violence is highly prevalent in the lives

of the homeless community and, as the authors state, “is an especially useful concept for critiquing homelessness in the United States because most people (including the Edgewater homeless themselves) consider drug use and poverty to be caused by personal character flaws or sinful behavior” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 17). The health care these dopefiends receive is not equal to that of a person outside their circumstances and they are often treated as less than human because of the stigma associated with their lifestyle. There are multiple accounts of study subjects being prematurely released from the hospital with uncovered, open wounds that are dealt with in the absence of painkillers. Further, police efforts are geared more towards incarceration and assertion of authority among the homeless population rather than safety. “Police sweeps and evictions generally intensified in the fall, around the civic holiday of Thanksgiving, at the onset of California’s six month rainy season” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 111). The homeless addicts live in a “grey zone” where all of their possessions can be ripped away at an instant without notice. The unjust and demeaning treatment of this category of people is an example of symbolic violence at its worst.

Another issue the dopefiends deal with on a daily basis is known as *embodiment*, which describes how social influences impact and map onto physical bodies in an observable way. The dopefiends are recognizable by appearance -- the intense drug usage, along with poor living conditions, has mapped onto their bodies, resulting in an unhealthy, emaciated, and dirty appearance. Ethnic frames also heavily skew these appearances. For Caucasian dopefiends, this look perpetuates the “broken down white bum” stereotype expressed in the text (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 87). The black members of the dopefiend community embody the “black outlaw” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 87) persona, claiming to be in control of their lives and having fun. These recognizable appearances help to solidify the negative stigma our culture

associates with these people and to perpetuate the symbolic violence they experience. It is also representative of racist sentiments held within the community of dopefiends themselves.

Symbolic violence is not the only form of violence experienced by the Edgewater homeless community. Symbolic, structural, political and everyday violence operates along a continuum and although the dopefiends are theoretically and analytically aware of the structural violence imposed by larger institutions and societal pressures, they still internalize the blame of their living conditions to a significant degree. Bourgois and Schonberg argue that the individuals should claim responsibility, but that they are not solely responsible for the blame imposed by society. Their suffering is a result of the embodiment of the violence continuum and involves an array of factors including social policies, cultural judgment, and low rehabilitation rates.

Righteous Dopefiend is a highly respected piece of ethnographic literature. On the back cover page of the book, Mike Davis author of *City of Quartz* notes "Calling this book an ethnography would be like calling *The Wire* a cop show: what comes roaring out of these pages is almost as visceral and devastating as spending a night in 'the hole' itself." Personally, I thought it was an eye-opening read addressing the broader context of addiction and homelessness that most Americans are not exposed to. A unique aspect of the book is the inclusion of black and white photographs that elevate the stories, bringing the accounts of suffering to a new dimension that is hard to ignore. When the dopefiend Nickie was asked how she felt about the photo of herself preparing an injection, while another dopefiend injects into an abscess scar, she replied, "If you can't see the face, you can't see this misery" (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 11). An important strength of the book is that it encourages readers to recognize and examine their own preconceptions about the homeless and drug-addicted, while inspiring empathy towards the reality of this lifestyle.

On some levels, I question how well Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) established and maintained the boundaries of their developing relationships with the subjects of the study. For example, when participants Carter and Tina stole a piece of plywood that prevented cars from driving into a construction trench, no moral reaction from the researchers' was evident. At what point should a researcher interfere and how would this interference affect future interactions with research subjects? Another interesting weakness of the book is the lack of exploration of alternative treatments. Dopefiends would be ideal participants for a *whole systems healing* approach, which focuses on how the healing of the mind and spirit cannot be separated from the healing of the physical body. More research into these methods and a paradigm shift toward preventative treatments will improve medical understandings of what drives drug abuse and addiction, and in the long run, may help to decrease the overall population of drug abusers and homelessness.

This book should appeal to a wide range of readers and is important for anyone interested in social justice issues. Other students, medical professionals, social workers, and family members of addicts would benefit from this book's exploration of the broader issues driving drug abuse in the United States. Before reading this book, I never realized how much our social structures and institutions impact and fuel drug usage. Placing the blame on specific individuals will not lead to a solution. Only becoming aware of the broader social contexts will help. This is an ideal model for other ethnographic researchers, as it demonstrates how to analyze findings and provides a basis upon which further homelessness and addiction research can be conducted, at both the national and global level. Law and policy makers should be required to read this book in order to better understand how their decisions are helping to perpetuate addiction instead of resolve it. Finally, this book should be distilled and its message translated to everyone in our

society order to shift our judgmental, stereotypical outlooks on drug addiction and homelessness. As a society, we need to show compassion for these individuals because if we all could understand and care a bit more about each other, the world would be a much better place.

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