



**In  
search  
of**

**Second edition**

**Respect**

**Selling  
Crack  
in El Barrio**

**Philippe Bourgois**

## In Search of Respect

Second Edition

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Philippe Bourgois's ethnographic study of social marginalization in inner-city America won critical acclaim when it was first published in 1995. For the first time, an anthropologist had managed to gain the trust and long-term friendship of street-level drug dealers in one of the nation's roughest ghetto neighborhoods – East Harlem. This new edition adds a prologue describing the major dynamics that have altered life on the streets of East Harlem in the years since the first edition. In a new epilogue Bourgois brings up to date the stories of the people – Primo, Caesar, Luis, Tony, Candy – whose lives readers come to know in this remarkable window onto the world of the inner-city drug trade.

Philippe Bourgois is Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology, History and Social Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. He has conducted fieldwork in Central America on ethnicity and social unrest and is the author of *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labor on the Central American Banana Plantation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). With photographer Jeffrey Schonberg he is writing a book on homeless heroin addicts in San Francisco.

<http://www.ucsf.edu/dahsm/pages/faculty/bourgois.html>

“A poignant and riveting description of the violent world of crack dealers in East Harlem. Once I began reading this book I could not put it down.”

– William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geys

University Professor at Harvard University

“Remarkable field research. . . . Philippe Bourgois . . . lived for three and a half years in a tenement apartment in East Harlem – otherwise known as El Barrio – studying the culture, the mores, the values, the behavior, the fears, and the self-inflicted wounds of several members of a gang of drug dealers with whom he patiently established close relations.”

– Richard Bernstein, *The New York Times*

“With this devastating ethnography of the raw realities of the crack trade on the streets of Spanish Harlem, Bourgois lays bare the struggle for individual dignity amidst collective destitution in the underbelly of the richest society on earth. He offers a powerful indictment of the United States exposing the country’s dirty secret of savage inequality and state neglect. This book is a red-hot gauntlet thrown in the face of the national mythology of the American dream to reveal its twin: the real nightmare of Darwinian violence.”

– Loïc Wacquant, University of California-Berkeley and Centre de sociologie européenne du Collège de France

“This explosive book is not for the gentle reader or the faint of heart. Bourgois invents a new genre, an ‘up in your face’ anthropology. Hello, America – where ‘hard working’ low-income crack dealers engage in the only work for which they have the qualifications, while they dream of reentering a legitimate job market that is decisively closed to them. Bourgois invites readers to confront a culture of violence, terror, and death that is just a few subway stops from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. . . . Though Bourgois is brutally honest and refuses to sanitize the ugliness or let his crack-selling subjects off the hook, after one reads the merciless life stories told to the constant background of gunshots, he makes it hard to blame these mixed-up aggressors who are also the victims of America’s failed promises.”

– Nancy Scheper-Hughes, author of *Death Without Weeping*  
*The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*

“Philippe Bourgois’s profoundly disturbing book dispels much of the received wisdom on this sector of society. No other account combines so insightfully a structural assessment of their way of life with their own understanding of their circumstances.”

– Eric R. Wolf, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology  
City University of New York

“[The book] offers one of the most closely observed accounts we are likely to get of the urban crack scene. It is not an attractive world and Bourgois – hearing stories of gang rape as an accepted rite of adolescent passage, seeing mothers casually pushing strollers into crack houses, and witnessing the calculated use of violence as an accepted business practice – does not hesitate to express his disgust. At the same time, Bourgois seeks to understand the sources of such behavior. . . . A fascinating account.” . . .

– Michael Massing, *The New York Review of Books*

“*In Search of Respect* . . . brings the lives of these crack sellers into brilliant focus. Bourgois’s raw and poignant book delivers a message about the economics of exclusion that should shake public

perceptions of the inner-city drug trade. For anyone interested in the brutal truth about drug dealing in our inner cities, *In Search of Respect* is the place to look.”

– Greg Donaldson, *The Washington Post*

“Vigorous and often harrowing, this book is an eye-opener.”

– *Kirkus Reviews*

“The beauty of the book is in the author’s sharing of his academic mind with the organic intellect of the people who are forced to live in ghettos for economic reasons. Philippe has put together between two covers the harsh reality of the streets. . . . *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* is must reading for those who care to learn.”

– Piri Thomas, poet and author of *Down These Mean Streets*

“Bourgeois spent hundreds of nights with a handful of small-time, mainly Nuyorican dealers and, when they got high and recovered from the daily grind, recorded their comments about work, politics, sexuality, substance abuse, and style. . . . The crack dealers’ talk – ribald, morbid, and improvisatory – crackles with a brio that would be the envy of Quentin Tarantino.”

– Adam Shatz, *The Nation*

“Once in awhile, a new book will offer up a rich, deep, interesting, even exciting look at the entrenched, complex social problems that plague the country’s most troubled urban neighborhoods. Philippe Bourgois’s book does just that.”

– Marjorie Valbrun, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“An intimate, disturbing portrait of an alternate world in which the crack-dealing and -using minority dominates public space. . . . The author does not absolve his subjects of individual responsibility, but he compellingly concludes that drugs are more a symptom than the root of the problem: class and ethnic ‘apartheid.’”

– *Publishers Weekly*

“[The book] intercuts five years’ worth of interviews with Puerto Rican crack dealers in New York’s El Barrio district with popular press and scholarly research on informal economies and immigrant communities, as well as numerous informative yet unobtrusive statistics. . . . For Bourgois, the dealers’ main problem is not lack of skills – they manage a complex system involving marketing, distribution of resources, and human relations – but rather their lack of ‘cultural capital’ – literacy savvy in handling city agencies, or the ability to switch between the street and white-collar worlds.”

– Carolina Gonzalez, *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*

# Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences

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Mark Granovetter, editor

The series *Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences* presents approaches that explain social behavior and institutions by reference to *relations* among such concrete entities as persons and organizations. This contrasts with at least four other popular strategies: (a) reductionist attempts to explain by focus on individuals alone; (b) explanations stressing the causal primacy of such abstract concepts as ideas, values, mental harmonies, and cognitive maps (thus, “structuralism” on the Continent should be distinguished from structural analysis in the present sense); (c) technological and material determinism; (d) explanations using “variables” as the main analytic concepts (as in the “structural equation” models that dominated much of the sociology of the 1970s), where structure is the connecting variables rather than actual social entities.

The social network approach is an important example of the strategy of structural analysis; the series also draws on social science theory and research that is not framed explicitly in network terms but stresses the importance of relations rather than the atomization of reductionism or the determinism of ideas, technology, or material conditions. Though the structural perspective has become extremely popular and influential in all the social sciences, it does not have a coherent identity, and no series yet pulls together such work under a single rubric. By bringing the achievements of structurally oriented scholars to a wider public, the *Structural Analysis* series hopes to encourage the use of this very fruitful approach.

## Mark Granovetter

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# IN SEARCH OF RESPECT

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Selling Crack in El Barrio

Second Edition

PHILIPPE BOURGOIS

*University of California, San Francisco*



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## Born Anew at Each A.M.

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The street's got its kicks, man,  
like a bargain shelf.  
In fact, cool-breeze, it's got  
love like anywhere else.

*Vaya!*

It's got lights that shine up the dark  
like new.  
It sells what you don't need  
and never lets you forget  
what you blew.

It's got high-powered  
salesmen who push *mucho* junk,  
and hustlers who can swallow you  
up in a chunk.  
Aha, check it out.

It's got out beautiful children  
living in all kinds of hell,  
hoping to survive and making it well,  
swinging together in misty darkness  
with all their love to share  
smiling their Christ-like forgiveness  
that only a ghetto cross can bear.  
Oh, yeah, *vaya*, check it out!

Hey, the street's got life, man,  
like a young tender sun,  
and gentleness  
like a long awaited dream to come.  
*Oye, vaya*, check it out.

The children are roses,  
with nary a thorn.  
Forced to feel racist scorn.

Ha, ha, *vaya*, check it out!

Our children are beauty  
with the right to be born.  
Born anew at each A.M.  
like a child out of twilight  
flying towards sunlight  
born anew at each A.M.

Punto!

Puri Thomas

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*Acknowledgments*

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This book could not have been written without my friends and neighbors in El Barrio who welcomed me so openly and generously. I changed everyone's name and camouflaged the street addresses to protect individual privacy. Above all, I thank my close friend whom I have called Primo in these pages. He followed my work since the beginning, and he guided much of it. His comments, corrections, and discussions on the half-dozen versions of the manuscript that he read and/or listened to were most helpful. The other major character, whom I have called Caesar, also provided me with analytical insights and critiques on various early drafts of this book. Similarly, Candy was extraordinarily helpful and supportive throughout the fieldwork process and in the early stages of writing. María provided me with comments and moral support right through the final phases of writing the book. More recently, Esperanza and Jasmine, who appear only in the epilogue to the second edition, greatly facilitated my follow-up visits to El Barrio by making me feel warmly welcome in their homes and among their extended families following the publication of the first edition.

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Reading Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* when I was in high school planted the seed for this book. I owe him a great debt for making me confront poverty, racism, and drugs in the city where I grew up. It is a special honor and pleasure for me, consequently, to have his permission to publish it from the front the fax he sent me after reading a manuscript version of this book.

Finally, I want to thank my family. I will always be grateful to Charo Chacón-Méndez for immigrating from Costa Rica directly to El Barrio, where we married at the very beginning of the research project. Her help was invaluable during our residence in the neighborhood. I apologize for imposing so much anxiety on her when I regularly stayed out all night on the street, and in crackhouses, for so many years. I hope that is not one of the reasons we are no longer together. If it is, I regret it profoundly. Our son, Emiliano (Nano), loved El Barrio. He was never intimidated by the street. His cerebral palsy was first diagnosed when we had no health insurance by a brusque, harried intern in a free clinic a few blocks from our tenement. I suspect that Nano's tremendous self-confidence, and his wonderful social skills, were partially forged by the success with which he carved respect for himself from even the toughest street hustlers on our block. He melted everyone's heart while proudly learning to use his walker over broken sidewalks littered with crack vials. Better yet, and through the often frustrating process, full of scrapes and tumbles, Nano exuded that magical joy-of-living that only two-and-something-year-olds know the secret to. He helped me appreciate some of the joys of life on the street. The bright flash in his eyes continues to guide me a dozen years later as he enters adolescence full of energy, appreciation, and empathy for most everyone around him.

My mother and father were also supportive throughout the research and writing of this book. I am sure I was deeply shaped by the fact that my mother violated apartheid almost every weekday during the 1980s through the 1990s while working with literacy programs in the South Bronx. In the same vein, my father provided me with the wonderful experience of growing up as a New Yorker in a bicultural household. His "typically French" trenchant criticisms of U.S. culture, and especially his abhorrence of the excesses of racism and class inequality in New York City, were a wonderful antidote to the stultifying ideological perspectives that bombarded those of us who grew up at the height of the Cold War in the United States. Perhaps the fact that he escaped on June 7, 1944, from I. G. Farben Community Camp Dwory at Auschwitz instilled in me a commitment to document institutionalized racism in my own lifetime, especially in my own hometown. He may also have first sensitized me to addiction when I was a teenager by telling me, as we were sharing a cigarette, "I was one of the

stupid ones in the camps who used to trade his bread for tobacco.” More importantly, my father’s ongoing humble outrage over the fact that so many of those living directly downwind from the Auschwitz gas chambers – himself included – managed to either ignore or joke about the smell of burning human flesh at the height of the Holocaust motivated me, I think, to write this book on the everyday violence of U.S. apartheid at the turn of the twenty-first century.

– *University of California, San Francisco*  
*August 2002*

# PREFACE TO THE 2003 SECOND EDITION

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In the seven years since the first edition of this book went to press in the fall of 1995, four major dynamics altered the tenor of daily life on the streets of East Harlem and deeply affected the lives of the crack dealers and their families depicted in these pages: 1) The U.S. economy entered the most prolonged period of sustained growth in its recorded history; 2) the size of the Mexican immigrant population in New York City and especially in East Harlem increased dramatically; 3) the war on drugs escalated into a quasi-official public policy of criminalizing and incarcerating the poor and the socially marginal; and 4) drug fashion trends among inner-city youth rendered marijuana even more popular and crack and heroin even less popular among Latinos and African Americans.

In 2002, crack, cocaine, and heroin were still sold on the block where I lived, but they were so less visibly by a smaller number of people. It was still easy to purchase narcotics throughout East Harlem, but much of the drug dealing had moved indoors, out of sight of the police. There were few small-time hawkers competing openly on street corners, shouting out the brand names of their drugs. Most importantly, heroin and crack continued to be spurned by Latino and African American youth who had witnessed as children the ravages that those drugs committed on the older generations in the community. Recovered crack addicts in New York City even developed a new genre of autobiographical literature (Stringer, 1998; S. and Bolnick, 2000). Nevertheless, in the U.S. inner city there remained an aging hard-core cohort of addicts. It is difficult to trust the accuracy of surveys of drugs that are conducted over the telephone by government-sponsored interviewers, but the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, which has been conducted every year in the United States since 1994, did not report a decrease in “frequent crack use” during the 1990s (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2000). Hospital emergency room and arrest statistics, however, reported dramatically decreasing cocaine-positive blood tests among males during the late 1990s through the year 2000 (CESAR FAX, 2001).

In most large cities, crack was most visibly ensconced in predominantly African American neighborhoods on the poorest blocks. Crack sales spots often continued to be located in or near large public housing projects, vacant lots, and abandoned buildings. In New York City, Puerto Rican households also continued to be at the epicenter of the ongoing cyclone of crack consumption – even if it was more self-contained than it used to be.

In contrast to crack, heroin consumption increased in many cities during the latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s. Throughout most of the United States, heroin became cheaper and purer, belying any claims that the U.S. war on drugs was winnable. Heroin’s new appeal, however, was primarily among younger whites outside the ghetto for whom crack was not a drug of choice. Heroin, especially its intravenous form, remained unpopular among Latino and African American youth in the inner city. In East Harlem, crack-and heroin-copping corners in the year 2001 appeared to be almost geriatric scenes, with the average age of addicted clients hovering in their late thirties through late forties and early fifties.

To summarize, in 2002 both heroin and crack continued to be multibillion-dollar businesses that ravaged inner-city families with special virulence. The younger generations of East Harlem residents



however, were more involved as sellers than as consumers. Those Latino and African American youth who did use crack or heroin generally tried to hide the fact from their friends. We understand poorly why drug fashions change so markedly, but at the opening of the twenty-first century, we were lucky in the United States that for more than a dozen years, marijuana and malt liquor beer had been the substances of choice for use and abuse by African American and Latino youth who participate in street culture (Golub and Johnson, 1999).

More important than changing drug-consumption fashions or the posturing of politicians over drug war campaigns was the effect of the dramatic long-term improvement in the U.S. economy, which resulted in record low rates of unemployment in the late 1990s. Somewhat to my surprise, some of the crack dealers and their families featured in this book benefited from this sustained economic growth spurt, at least up to its nosedive in 2001–02. Slightly less than half of the characters in this book managed to enter the lower echelons of the legal labor market prior to the 2001–02 economic downturn. I outline this with greater personal details in the new epilogue to this second edition, but provide a brief overview during the 2001–02 recession: One dealer was a unionized doorman, another a home health-care attendant, another a plumber's assistant. Three others were construction workers for small-time unlicensed contractors. One was a cashier in a discount tourist souvenir store. Two of the sisters of the crack dealers depicted in this book were nurses aides and another was a secretary. One of the women companions of one of the crack dealers was a bank teller, another was a security guard, and a third sold Avon products. One of the sons of the dealers was a cashier in a fast food restaurant, while another sold drugs and yet another two were incarcerated for the sale of drugs and petty burglary, respectively. Three or four of the dealers were still selling drugs, but most of them were selling marijuana instead of crack or heroin. Another three of the dealers were in prison with long-term sentences and, ironically, were probably employed at well below minimum wage in the burgeoning prison-based manufacturing sector.

In short, the dramatic improvement in the U.S. economy in the late 1990s forced employers and unions to integrate increasing numbers of marginalized Puerto Ricans and African Americans into the labor market. This represented a structural contrast to the late 1980s and early 1990s when the research for this book was conducted and the economy was weaker. Nevertheless, even at the height of the surge in the U.S. economy in the summer of 2000, a large sector of street youth found themselves excluded. These marginals had become almost completely superfluous to the legal economy; they remained enmeshed in a still lucrative drug economy, a burgeoning prison system, and a quagmire of chronic substance abuse and everyday interpersonal violence. From a long-term political and economic perspective, the future did not bode well for the inner-city poor of New York, irrespective of the shorter-term fluctuations in the national and regional economy, as was evidenced by the economic downturn following the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center disaster. In the year 2000, the United States had the largest disparity between rich and poor of any industrialized nation in the world – and this gap was increasing rather than decreasing (*New York Times*, September 26, 2001:A12; see also U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). At a more local level, over the last three decades of the twentieth century the state of New York suffered the largest growth in income inequality of all fifty states in the nation (*New York Times*, January 19, 2000:B5).

A side effect of New York's strong but poorly paid entry-level employment market was the accelerated immigration of undocumented Mexicans fleeing rural poverty, who were prepared to work hard for poverty wages. When I left the neighborhood in 1991, Mexican immigration was, of course, already extremely visible, and I discussed the rising violent tensions between young Puerto Ricans and new Mexican immigrants. In the original epilogue to the English edition written in late 1994 and included in this edition, I provide statistics on the rapid rise in the local Mexican population. This increase proceeded at an even faster pace during the second half of the 1990s and was palpably visible

on the street where I lived. In 1991 on the blocks immediately surrounding me, there were at least three buildings entirely occupied by Mexican new immigrants (not to mention two by rural Senegalese new immigrants). On one of my recent return visits to prepare the preface for this second edition, I found that an entire block (next to the one where I lived) had “become Mexican.” Throughout the rest of East Harlem, dozens of Mexican restaurants and specialty grocery stores were visible. In contrast to when I resided there, I knew of only one Mexican restaurant and it did not sport a sign, presumably because it was not licensed to sell food. In short, yet another new wave of ethnic succession was remaking East Harlem at the dawn of the twenty-first century on the fringes of the U.S. economy, but striving for the American Dream.

Throughout East Harlem, new small businesses in the year 2002 were visible on formerly boarded up, abandoned blocks. On the block where I lived, for example, the revitalization that I described as incipient in 1994 had accelerated significantly. The garbage-strewn lot, which had stood vacant for well over a dozen years on one side of the apartment where I lived, was occupied by a row of newly constructed four-story tenements. The large, abandoned building on the other side of my tenement, which had been burned down ten years before I moved onto the block, was a renovated halfway house for mothers recovering from substance abuse. There were five new legal businesses on the block: two hairdressers, a video rental store, a Chinese takeout restaurant, and a pizzeria.

Only one of the two original grocery stores on the block still sold drugs and its sales were limited to marijuana. Heroin could still be obtained on the corner, purer than ever, but no longer from three competing brand-name companies. At night, the working class majority of the population still ceded much of their control of public space to drug dealers and addicts, just as they had in the late 1980s and early 1990s when I lived there. Overall, however, the significantly strengthened economy, buttressed by the coincidences of evolving drug fashions and the logic of large-scale, low-wage labor migration streams, had reinvigorated working class culture on the street, decreasing the destructive magnetism of drugs, crime, and violence for those pursuing upward mobility.

In contrast to the invigorating effects on the neighborhood of private sector growth and undocumented working class migration, the U.S. public sector continued its policy of malign neglect toward the inner city, especially toward Latino and African American neighborhoods. During the 1990s, the formerly underfunded and rachitic U.S. social welfare safety net was refurbished into an expensive, rigorous, criminal dragnet. The already enormous U.S. penal system grew vertiginously to become a bona fide criminal industrial complex larger in the year 2000 in relative per capita terms than that of any other nation in the world except Russia and Rwanda. The U.S. incarceration rate doubled during the 1990s; it was six to twelve times higher than that of any of the nations in the European Union (Wacquant, 1999:72). The sheer mass of people locked up assumed an aura of apartheid when one examines the racial disparities involved (Wacquant, 2000). According to objective statistical probability, one in three African American males could expect to be incarcerated in the lifetime, compared to one in twenty-five white males and one in six Latinos. The ethnic disparities in incarceration rates were driven in the 1990s and 2000s by the “War on Drugs.” African American males were twenty times more likely to be incarcerated on drug offenses than were whites. In New York State, where 89 percent of the prisoners are African American or Latino, this carceral segregation was even more dramatic (Macallair and Taqi-Eddin, 1999).

The mayor of New York City from 1993 to 2001, Rudolph Giuliani, became known worldwide for promoting a zero-tolerance approach to petty crime, implementing the notorious “fixing broken windows” policy (Kelling and Coles, 1996). He targeted “quality-of-life crimes,” which meant aggressively arresting beggars, window washers, fare dodgers on the subway, and black and Latino youth dressed in hip hop style who loitered on the street. This policy came at a high cost in human rights violations due to a dramatic increase in racially targeted police brutality culminating in public

scandals, such as the torture of a Haitian immigrant who was repeatedly sodomized with a broom stick by police interrogators in a precinct office, and the murder of an unarmed Guinean immigrant who was shot forty-one times in the foyer of his own apartment building. New York's get-tough-on-crime policy was also extraordinarily expensive. The number of New York City police officers dramatically increased by more than 7,000 officers in the 1990s to 40,000, the largest in its history, even as the budgets for health, education, foster child care, public education, and so on were streamlined. During the 1990s, New York State spent more than \$4.5 billion building new prisons. This figure does not include operating costs, which in 1998 ran \$32,000 per inmate per year in the upstate prisons and more than \$66,000 per capita per year on Riker's Island, New York City's municipal jail (Camp and Camp, 1998).

Proponents of repressive drug enforcement policy point to significantly reduced crime rates in New York City during the late 1990s. They fail to note, however, that New York did not lower its crime rates significantly more than those cities that did not criminalize street people or increase police arrest rates. In fact, statisticians have calculated that states that increased their prison populations the most in the 1990s benefited from a smaller reduction in crime rate than those states with below-average increases in incarceration (*New York Times*, September 28, 2000). Most importantly, crime in New York, as well as throughout the nation, had already begun dropping in the years before the New York City's mayor's get-tough-on-crime measures were instituted in 1994. Policy analysts who crunch the numbers argue that the overall improvement of the economy and the demographic shifts that have reduced the number of eighteen- to twenty-year-olds have had a far larger effect on decreasing crime rates than have changes in crime-control strategies (Blumstein and Wallman, 2000). Academic and statistical policy critiques notwithstanding, New York City policing became a triumphant symbol for neoliberal solutions to urban plight: "locking up petty delinquents and especially addicts" and "criminalizing misery" (Wacquant, 1999:74, 151). The unsightliness of the poor living in crisis was removed from white, middle class public space in the city. With the festering signs of social suffering safely sanitized, property values soared and tourism reached record highs.

Almost surprisingly, most of the dealers I befriended, with the exception of the youngest, inexperienced, and more violent ones, have managed to avoid incarceration. The immediate concrete effect of the escalation in the war on drugs in the late 1990s on the lives of the major characters in this book has been the strict enforcement of federal public housing one-strike-you're-out rulings by New York City officials. The presence of a felon in a household living in public housing in the mid-1990s became legal cause for all the members of that household to be evicted, no matter their age or level of social vulnerability. Many cities have not chosen to enforce this federal edict aggressively, but New York City did. Most of the dealers consequently were evicted from their homes, usually with their extended families; most – including the two main characters in this book – were forced to move out of Manhattan or even out of state. Throughout New York City, grandparents found themselves on the street for sheltering their grandson or granddaughter on their living room couch. It did not matter that a grandmother may have been senile and was unaware of the criminal activity of her grandchild or was perhaps intimidated by the child (cf. *New York Times*, March 27, 2002). Most dramatically, because of New York's unconditional enforcement of one-strike-you're-out, in three separate cases newborns whose mothers allowed dealers (who are major characters in this book) to live with them ended up taking refuge in homeless shelters or doubling up in the living rooms of relatives.

The most troubling trend is the ongoing pattern of destruction befalling most of the children of the crack dealers in this book. I have returned to New York at least once or twice a year since the publication of the first edition of this book. I seek out the characters from the book to say hello and catch up on the old days. On my follow-up visits I have had a chance to meet, as budding adolescents and subsequently as young adults, the former children of the crack dealers, many of whom appear on

occasionally in these pages. Spending time with these children provided me with yet another glimpse of the chronic social suffering that continued to be generated in East Harlem despite any positive fluctuation in the economy, and despite the decrease in youthful hard-drug consumption. The most vulnerable inner-city residents are the children of children. They are chewed up and spit out by the American Dream, only to find themselves recycled a dozen or so years later at extraordinary financial and human cost into the prison industrial complex.

*San Francisco, April 2002*

# INTRODUCTION

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Man, I don't blame where I'm at right now on nobody else but myself.

Primo

I was forced into crack against my will. When I first moved to East Harlem – “El Barrio”<sup>1</sup> – as a newlywed in the spring of 1985, I was looking for an inexpensive New York City apartment from which I could write a book on the experience of poverty and ethnic segregation in the heart of one of the most expensive cities in the world. On the level of theory, I was interested in the political economy of inner-city street culture. From a personal, political perspective, I wanted to probe the Achilles heel of the richest industrialized nation in the world by documenting how it imposes racial segregation and economic marginalization on so many of its Latino/a and African-American citizens.

I thought the drug world was going to be only one of the many themes I would explore. My original subject was the entire underground (untaxed) economy, from curbside car repairing and baby-sitting to unlicensed off-track betting and drug dealing. I had never even heard of crack when I first arrived in the neighborhood – no one knew about this particular substance yet, because this brittle compound of cocaine and baking soda processed into efficiently smokable pellets was not yet available as a mass marketed product.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the year, however, most of my friends, neighbors, and acquaintances had been swept into the multibillion-dollar crack cyclone: selling it, smoking it, fretting over it.

I followed them, and I watched the murder rate in the projects opposite my crumbling tenement apartment spiral into one of the highest in Manhattan.<sup>3</sup> The sidewalk in front of the burned-out abandoned building and the rubbish-strewn vacant lot flanking each side of my tenement began to crunch with the sound of empty crack vials underfoot. Almost a decade later, as this book goes to press, despite the debates of the “drug experts” over whether or not the United States faces a severe “drug problem,” this same sidewalk continues to be littered with drug paraphernalia. The only difference in the mid-1990s is that used hypodermic needles lie alongside spent crack vials in the gutter. Heroin has rejoined crack and cocaine as a primary drug of choice available in the inner city and international suppliers of heroin have regained their lost market share of substance abuse by lowering their prices and increasing the quality of their product.<sup>4</sup>

## *The Underground Economy*

This book is not about crack, or drugs, per se. Substance abuse in the inner city is merely a symptom and a vivid symbol – of deeper dynamics of social marginalization and alienation. Of course, on an immediately visible personal level, addiction and substance abuse are among the most immediate brutal facts shaping daily life on the street. Most importantly, however, the two dozen street dealers and their families that I befriended were not interested in talking primarily about drugs. On the contrary, they wanted me to learn all about their daily struggles for subsistence and dignity at the poverty line.

According to the official statistics, my neighbors on the street should have been homeless

starving, and dressed in rags. Given the cost of living in Manhattan, it should have been impossible for most of them to afford rent and minimal groceries and still manage to pay their electricity and gas bills. According to the 1990 census, 39.8 percent of local residents in East Harlem lived below the federal poverty line (compared to 16.3 percent of all New Yorkers) with a total of 62.1 percent receiving less than twice official poverty-level incomes. The blocks immediately surrounding me were significantly poorer with half of all residents falling below the poverty line.<sup>5</sup> Given New York City prices for essential goods and services, this means that according to official economic measures, well over half the population of El Barrio should not be able to meet their subsistence needs.

In fact, however, people are not starving on a massive scale. Although many elderly residents and many young children do not have adequate diets and suffer from the cold in the winter, most local residents are adequately dressed and reasonably healthy. The enormous, uncensused, untaxed underground economy allows the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers in neighborhoods like East Harlem to subsist with the minimal amenities that people living in the United States consider to be basic necessities. I was determined to study these alternative income-generating strategies that were consuming so much of the time and energy of the young men and women sitting on the stoops and parked cars in front of my tenement.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, slightly more than one in three families in El Barrio received public assistance.<sup>6</sup> The heads of these impoverished households have to supplement their meager checks in order to keep their children alive. Many are mothers who make extra money by baby-sitting the neighbors' children, or by housekeeping for a paying boarder. Others may bartend at one of the half-dozen social clubs and after-hours dancing spots scattered throughout the neighborhood. Some work "off the books" in their living rooms as seamstresses for garment contractors. Finally, many also find themselves obliged to establish amorous relationships with men who are willing to make cash contributions to their household expenses.

Male income-generating strategies in the underground economy are more publicly visible. Some men repair cars on the curb; others wait on stoops for unlicensed construction subcontractors to pick them up for fly-by-night demolition jobs or window renovation projects. Many sell "numbers" – the street's version of offtrack betting. The most visible cohorts hawk "nickels and dimes" of one illegal drug or another. They are part of the most robust, multibillion-dollar sector of the booming underground economy. Cocaine and crack, in particular during the mid-1980s and through the early 1990s, followed by heroin in the mid-1990s, have been the fastest growing – if not the only – equal opportunity employers of men in Harlem. Retail drug sales easily outcompete other income-generating opportunities, whether legal or illegal.<sup>7</sup>

The street in front of my tenement was not atypical, and within a two-block radius I could – and still can, as of this final draft – obtain heroin, crack, powder cocaine, hypodermic needles, methadone, Valium, angel dust,<sup>8</sup> marijuana, mescaline, bootleg alcohol, and tobacco. Within one hundred yards of my stoop there were three competing crackhouses selling vials at two, three, and five dollars. Just a few blocks farther down, in one of several local "pill mills," a doctor wrote \$3.9 million worth of Medicaid prescriptions in only one year, receiving nearly \$1 million for his services. Ninety-four percent of his "medicines" were on the Department of Social Services' list of frequently abused prescription drugs. Most of these pills were retailed on the corner or resold in bulk discounts at pharmacies. Right on my block, on the second floor above the crackhouse where I spent much of my free time at night, another filthy clinic dispensed sedatives and opiates to flocks of emaciated addicts who waited in decrepit huddles for the nurse to raise the clinic's unidentified metal gates and tape a handwritten cardboard DOCTOR IS IN sign to the linoleum-covered window. I never found out the volume of this clinic's business because it was never raided by the authorities. In the projects opposi-

this same pill mill, however, the New York City Housing Authority police arrested a fifty-five-year-old mother and her twenty-two- and sixteen-year-old daughters while they were “bagging” twenty- or thirty-pound bags of cocaine into \$10 quarter-gram “jumbo” vials of adulterated product worth over \$1 million on the street. The police found \$25,000 cash in small-denomination bills in this same apartment.

In other words, millions of dollars of business takes place within a stone’s throw of the youth growing up in East Harlem tenements and housing projects. Why should these young men and women take the subway to work minimum wage jobs – or even double minimum wage jobs – in downtown offices when they can usually earn more, at least in the short run, by selling drugs on the street corner in front of their apartment or school yard? In fact, I am always surprised that so many inner-city men and women remain in the legal economy and work nine to five plus overtime, barely making ends meet. According to the 1990 Census of East Harlem, 48 percent of all males and 35 percent of females over sixteen were employed in officially reported jobs, compared to a city wide average of 64 percent for men and 49 percent for women.<sup>9</sup> In the census tracts surrounding my apartment, 53 percent of all men over sixteen years of age (1,923 out of 3,647) and 28 percent of all women over sixteen (1,300 out of 4,626) were working legally in officially censused jobs. An additional 17 percent of the civilian labor force was unemployed but actively looking for work compared to 16 percent for El Barrio as a whole, and 9 percent for all of New York City.<sup>10</sup>

The difficulty of making generalizations about inner-city neighborhoods on the basis of official U.S. Census Bureau statistics cannot be overemphasized. Studies commissioned by the Census Bureau estimate that between 20 and 40 percent of African-American and Latino men in their late teens and early twenties are missed by the Census. Many of these individuals purposely hide their whereabouts, fearing reprisals for involvement in the underground economy.<sup>11</sup> A good example of the magnitude of concealment in the inner city is provided by a 1988 New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) report, which calculates that 20 percent more people lived on their premises than were officially reported in the official rolls. The Housing Authority arrived at this “estimate of overcrowding” by cross-tabulating statistics from the Welfare Department and the Board of Education with the increases in expenditures of their maintenance departments.<sup>12</sup> On the blocks immediately surrounding my tenement a vague idea of how many men were missed by the Census is provided by the imbalance between males and females over sixteen years of age: 3,647 versus 4,626. In other words, if one assumes an equal ratio of males to females, 979 men, or 21 percent of the number counted, were missing. In New York City as a whole, 16 percent more men over sixteen years of age would have been needed for there to be a perfect balance between adult males and females. Using this same yardstick of men to women, in El Barrio as a whole 24 percent of all men were “missed.”



Sources: Housing Environments Research Group, City University of New York; Kevin Kearney, New York City Housing Authority; New York City Department of City Planning

The difficulty of estimating the size of the underground economy – let alone drug dealing – is even more thornier.<sup>13</sup> By definition, no Census Bureau data exists on the subject. Because fewer households than individuals are missed by the Census in urban settings, one possible measure for the size of the underground economy is the figure for households that declare no “wage or salary income.” This provides only the very roughest comparative measure for the size of the underground economy in different neighborhoods because some households survive exclusively on retirement income or on strictly legal self-employment revenues. Furthermore, this proxy figure measures drug dealing even more tenuously since many, perhaps most, of those households that rely on the untaxed economy for supplemental income, work at legal tasks and shun drugs. Conversely, many people involved in the underground economy also work at legally declared jobs. Nevertheless, one has to assume that a high proportion of households with no wage or salary income probably rely on some combination



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