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978-0-521-01711-4 - In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio, Second Edition

Philippe Bourgois

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

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”¹ – 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.² 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.³ The sidewalk in front of the burned-out abandoned

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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 as international suppliers of heroin have regained their lost market share of substance abuse by lowering their prices and increasing the quality of their product.⁴

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.⁵ 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

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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.⁶ 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 their 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.⁷

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,⁸ 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

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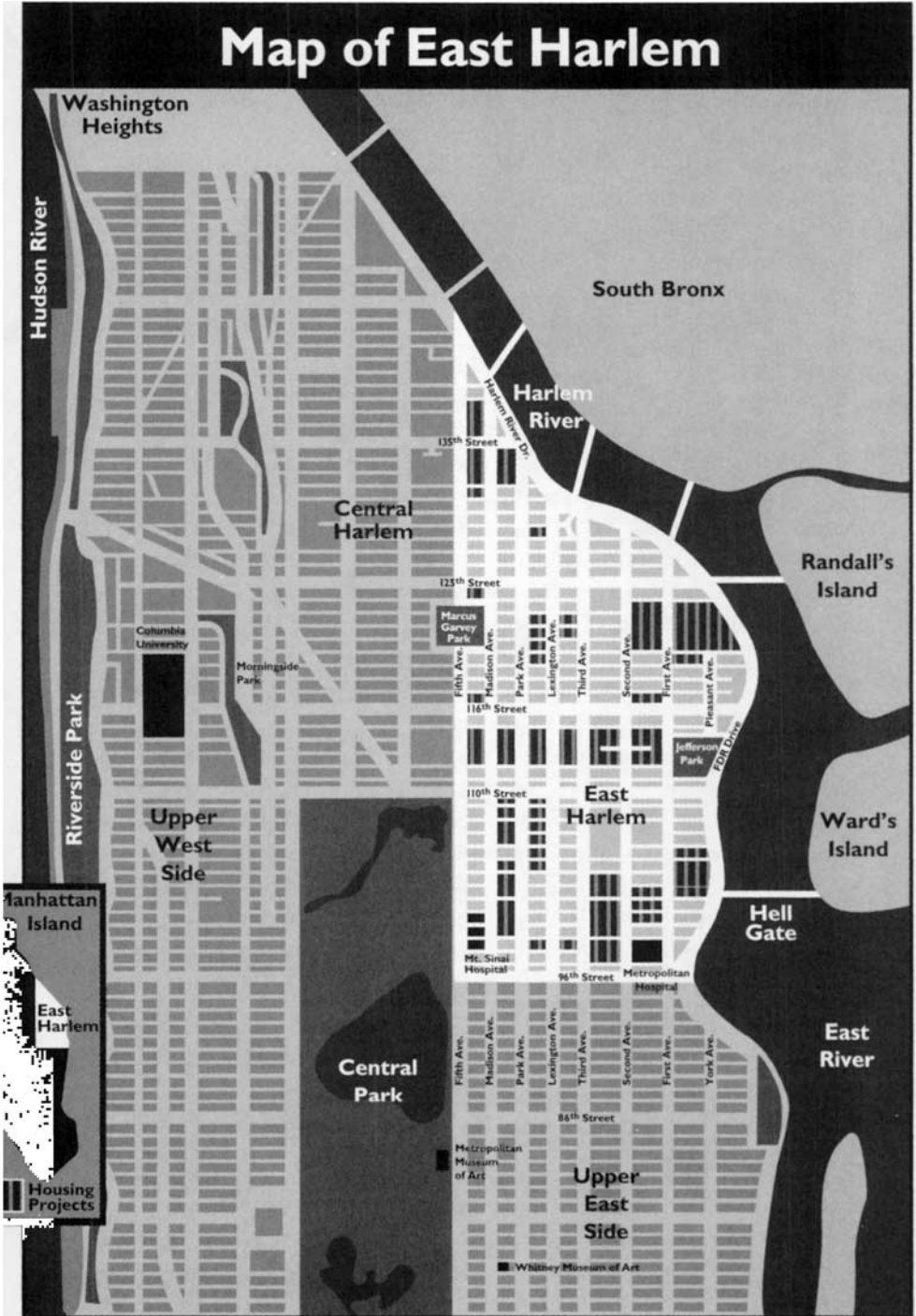
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down, in one of several local “pill mills,” a doctor wrote \$3.9 million worth of Medicaid prescriptions in only one year, receiving nearly \$1 million for his services. Ninety-four percent of his “medicines” were on the Department of Social Services’ list of frequently abused prescription drugs. Most of these pills were retailed on the corner or resold in bulk discounts to 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 opposite 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-one pounds 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 youths 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 citywide average of 64 percent for men and 49 percent for women.⁹ 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 (1,307 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.¹⁰

The difficulty of making generalizations about inner-city neighborhoods on the basis of official U.S. Census Bureau statistics cannot be

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

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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.¹¹ 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 increase in expenditures of their maintenance departments.¹² 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 27 percent of the number counted, were missing. In New York City as a whole, 18 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 36 percent of all men were "missed."

The difficulty of estimating the size of the underground economy – let alone drug dealing – is even thornier.¹³ 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 of untaxed, undeclared income in order to continue subsisting, and that drug dealing represents an important source of this supplemental

Table 1. Comparative Social Indicators by Neighborhood from 1990 Census

	Total population	% Puerto Rican	% African-American	% residents below poverty	% h-holds receiving public assistance	% h-holds with no wage or salary income	% females > 16 employed	% males > 16 employed	% males > 16 missing to balance # of females > 16
<i>Crack House micro-neighborhood</i>	11,599	56	33	49	42	46	28	53	27
<i>East Harlem</i>	110,599	52	39	40	34	40	35	48	36
<i>New York City</i>	7,322,564	12	25	19	13	26	49	64	18

Sources: New York City Department of City Planning, Population Division 1992 [August 26]; New York City Department of City Planning 1993 [March]; New York City Department of City Planning 1993 [December]; 1990 Census of Population and Housing Block Statistics.

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income. In any case, according to official Census Bureau statistics, 40 percent of all households in El Barrio as a whole received no legally declared wages or salary, compared to 26 percent for New York City as a whole. The blocks immediately surrounding my apartment were probably slightly more enmeshed in the underground economy, with only 46 percent of the 3,995 households reporting wage or salary income. The percentage of households receiving public assistance is another useful figure for gauging the relative size of the underground economy, since no household can survive on welfare alone and any legal income reported by a household receiving public assistance is deducted from its biweekly welfare check and its monthly food stamps allotment. On the blocks surrounding my tenement 42 percent of all households received public assistance compared to 34 percent in East Harlem as a whole and 13 percent for all households in New York City.¹⁴

Street Culture: Resistance and Self-Destruction

The anguish of growing up poor in the richest city in the world is compounded by the cultural assault that El Barrio youths often face when they venture out of their neighborhood. This has spawned what I call “inner-city street culture”: a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society. Street culture offers an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity. In the particular case of the United States, the concentration of socially marginalized populations into politically and ecologically isolated inner-city enclaves has fomented an especially explosive cultural creativity that is in defiance of racism and economic marginalization. This “street culture of resistance” is not a coherent, conscious universe of political opposition but, rather, a spontaneous set of rebellious practices that in the long term have emerged as an oppositional style. Ironically, mainstream society through fashion, music, film, and television eventually recuperates and commercializes many of these oppositional street styles, recycling them as pop culture.¹⁵ In fact, some of the most basic linguistic expressions for self-esteem in middle-class America, such as being “cool,” “square,” or “hip,” were coined on inner-city streets.

Purveying for substance use and abuse provides the material base for contemporary street culture, rendering it even more powerfully appealing

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Repopulating El Barrio: The stuffed animals were arranged by the former superintendent of this abandoned building to protest the decay of his block, which had become a haven for drug dealing. Photo by Henry Chalfant.

than it has been in previous generations. Illegal enterprise, however, embroils most of its participants in lifestyles of violence, substance abuse, and internalized rage. Contradictorily, therefore, the street culture of resistance is predicated on the destruction of its participants and the community harboring them. In other words, although street culture emerges out of a personal search for dignity and a rejection of racism and subjugation, it ultimately becomes an active agent in personal degradation and community ruin.

As already noted, it is impossible to calculate with any accuracy what

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Memorial to a youth murdered not far from the Game Room. He had aspired to be a professional boxer. Photo by Oscar Vargas.

proportion of the population is involved in the untaxed, underground economy. It is even harder to guess the number of people who use or sell drugs. Most of El Barrio's residents have nothing to do with drugs.¹⁶ The problem, however, is that this law-abiding majority has lost control of public space. Regardless of their absolute numbers, or relative proportions, hardworking, drug-free Harlemites have been pushed onto the defensive. Most of them live in fear, or even in contempt, of their neighborhood. Worried mothers and fathers maintain their children locked inside their apartments in determined attempts to keep street culture out. They hope someday to be able to move out of the neighborhood.

The drug dealers in this book consequently represent only a small minority of East Harlem residents, but they have managed to set the tone for public life. They force local residents, especially women and the elderly, to fear being assaulted or mugged. The sight of emaciated addicts congregating visibly on street corners provokes pity, sadness, and anger among the majority of East Harlemites who do not use drugs. Most important, on a daily basis, the street-level drug dealers offer a