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## The discipline of urban ethnography

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## Book Reviews

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### The Discipline of Urban Ethnography

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Alice Goffman: *On the Run. Fugitive Life in an American City*. New York: Picador, 2015, 279 pp. ISBN 9781250065667.

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The United States currently hosts the largest black middle class in the country's history, with African-Americans entering neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces and institutions previously reserved for the white population. At the same time, unprecedented numbers of poor, young, black men are put in prison. In 2010, more young black male high school dropouts were in prison than in gainful employment. President Obama's current efforts to reform the criminal justice system read against this backdrop – and so does Alice Goffman's book, *On the Run. Fugitive Life in an American City*. With this book, Goffman takes

up a timely, politicized issue touching upon novel forms of institutional racism in what some have claimed to be a “post-racial America”. Goffman provides a poignant analysis of how the criminal justice system shapes the everyday lives of the residents of racially segregated inner-cities and how the punitive system, instead of producing safer communities, actually stimulates new types of criminal activity and further fragments the lives of marginalized inner-city residents.

30 years back, illustrious sociologists like William Julius Wilson and Elijah Anderson drew attention to the disastrous combined effects of economic restructuring and racial prejudice on African-American men and families. Alice Goffman follows their lead by analysing the lives of young men whose fathers and grandfathers have fallen victim to the disappearance of jobs from the inner-city and in the lives of whom the school and employment as so-

cializing institutions have been replaced by the courtroom and the prison. She does this by conducting ethnographic fieldwork in an impoverished Philadelphia neighbourhood with a large black population, the “6th Street”. During her fieldwork spanning six years, Goffman effectively befriended a group of young men, aged between 13 and 23, involved in criminal activity. As a part of her research project she spent time with the young men, their friends and family, in the neighbourhood and outside it – notably in the prison and at the courthouse. From her field notes emerge staggering regularities in the boys' process of coming of age amidst an everyday social fabric weaved of fear, distrust and unpredictability. It is from this vantage point that the sociologist criticizes the national criminal justice system.

The seven chapters of the book grew out of Goffman's doctoral dissertation. The first two chapters present the key informants,

the “6th Street boys”, their legal entanglements, and the art of “running” when under police warrant. Goffman examines running – hiding from the police while paradoxically stuck in the neighbourhood – as a collective accomplishment requiring the effective transmission of the skill, and the active involvement of the fugitive’s entourage. Chapters three and four demonstrate the neighbourhood’s reaction to “hyper-policing”. The strategies of intimidation the police routinely mobilizes in order to capture the men on the run are largely targeted at the formers’ mothers and girlfriends and contribute to weaving suspicion and fear in the most intimate of social relations. However, Goffman has the merit of showing how the targets themselves can – occasionally – use the criminal justice system to their advantage: men can for instance use the jail as a safe haven when too entangled in local conflicts, while women can threaten the men with denouncing them in order to advance their often family-related rationales. These analyses are important as they shed light on the agency of the dominated and contribute to the dialectic analysis of intense crime control. Chapter six pursues a similar agenda, as it focuses on analysing the “market of protections and privileges” that has emerged in response

to the modern technologies of policing. From producing “clean” IDs and urine, to imitating a fugitive’s voice on the telephone to smuggle drugs and mobile phones into the prison, a large illegal economy employs those socially or spatially close to young men *on the run*.

Chapter five is one of the most enjoyable, and yet disturbing. Here, Goffman depicts how the young people strive to construct an identity as good people at the margins of American society. This involves making sense of one another’s social position and identity by making use of a peculiar gift economy of protection that develops in response to the imperative of running. Personal worth is gained through protection reciprocated through strong ties – notably between mothers and sons – and quickly lost should one’s caretaking be considered either wanting or provided too promptly, subject to betrayal or misuse. Goffman remarks on the fragility of social life in the “6th Street”:

“Thus, the moral world that people weave around the courts, the police, and the threat of prison involves suspicion, betrayal, and disappointment. To repair these damages that so frequently occur to the self and to relationships, young men and women try to cover up

the bad things they are made to do, or spin them positively. Relationships between friends, partners, and family members require a good deal of forgiving and forgetting. Still, people create a meaningful social world and moral life from whatever cards they have been dealt, and young people growing up in poor and segregated Black neighbourhoods, under heavy policing and the threat of prison, are no exception.” (p. 141)

The major strength of the book lies precisely in the careful depiction of how the fugitive men and their close ones navigate their everyday life in a hyper-policed community. Chapter seven mirrors the “6th Street boys” experiences with the “clean people” of the neighbourhood, i.e. those without legal trouble. Although the strategies of “staying clean” that Goffman describes are plausible, the chapter reads as a bit of an artificial appendix to the core of the research, probably written in anticipation of critics.

Besides social and racial inequalities, Alice Goffman’s book and the controversy it has sparked puts on the table a question concerning the politics of representation in an era of doing ethnography in one’s own society: *Who can study whom, how, and with what credibility?* The academic community has

generally welcomed Goffman's study as an example of conducting ethnographic fieldwork as well as a brilliant analysis of the social and racial inequalities that the federal program of the *War on Drugs* perpetuates. However, the initially enthusiastic reception of Goffman's book, first published by the Chicago University Press in spring 2014, has since soured into an avalanche of critics. Critical voices have pointed out discrepancies in Goffman's empirical materials and accused the sociologist of yielding a homogenizing portrayal of *all* black men in the inner-city as delinquents. The most virulent critics have come from outside the social sciences, from specialists of the normative science of law in particular. The fact that a young, white, privileged woman – and a daughter to a classical sociologist – studies a black inner-city community from the underdogs' perspective has aroused suspicion towards her depictions' veracity and the ethnographic method's scientific validity. The disciplining of the ethnographer for serious research misconduct and for conspiracy to commit murder reveal that ethnography is yet far from being accepted in the canon of *normal sciences*, in Thomas Kuhn's sense. Indeed, if the legal scholars involved in debating *On the Run* had their way, urban ethnographers striving to understand the lives of the

contemporary US criminal justice system's underdogs would soon follow their research subjects behind the bars – and sociology would lose much of its revolutionary potential.

**Linda Haapajärvi**