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Review of Sidewalk, by Mitchell Duneier

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The dust jacket of Mitchell Duneier's new book, *Sidewalk*, contains several prominent recommendations and one from an unusual source, Spike Lee, who as far as I know rarely endorses sociology books. If I were in Hollywood brokering a movie deal for Duneier, I might describe *Sidewalk* as Chic Conwell and Edwin Sutherland with a little of Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977), plus a touch of Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis. One of the remarkable features of Duneier's new book is that although its subject matter and supporters are thoroughly contemporary and interdisciplinary, the book itself openly acknowledges its debt to the tradition of symbolic interactionism and Chicago school sociology. In *Sidewalk*, as in *Slim's Table* (1992), Duneier wears his allegiances on his sleeve, and his is still extensively a world of Mead, Park, Hughes, and Goffman. Part of what is so impressive about Duneier's new book, then, is that it has found a wide, contemporary audience while, or perhaps by, affirming and developing the Chicago tradition. Further, it has done so without either large foundation grants or a research team.

In *Sidewalk* Duneier describes the social world of the men and women who work and sometimes live on Sixth Avenue in New York. Duneier's narrative is character driven: he names, presents photographs, and introduces us to many of the people he met through his research, telling us their stories. The book feels very concrete. It explains the norms of street life through descriptions of people living that life. As a result, Duneier succeeds in one of his goals: to humanize a marginalized group that in different ways, at different times, and by different groups has been either ignored or legally sanctioned.

Duneier's gatekeeper is a bookseller on Sixth Avenue, Hakim Hasan, whom he met by chance in 1992. Through Hakim, Duneier learned to see Sixth Avenue as an internally regulated world, with a status hierarchy of booksellers, recycled magazine sellers, panhandlers, and related groups who help with these street activities. Based on seven years of field observations and bolstered by a collection of twenty

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life histories, Duneier introduces us to their stories, attitudes, aspirations, and rationalizations. In the Appendix Duneier reveals that the first draft of *Sidewalk* had focused less on these disparate stories and more on Hakim himself but that Hakim had counseled him against this. Despite having the manuscript ready and accepted for publication, Duneier took Hakim's advice to heart and made further observations that led to the published version of the project.

Up to this point, Duneier comes across as a composite of some of the great ethnographers whom he admires. His appreciation of the value of personal documents and life histories is reminiscent of W. I. Thomas; his relationship with Hakim has echoes of Sutherland and Conwell. In this regard, it is striking that Duneier invited Hakim to the University of California, Santa Barbara, to team teach a sociology course, just as Sutherland had invited Chic Conwell to Indiana University many years before. Duneier attributes his sense of ethnography to his former teacher, Howard Becker, and also to Elliot Liebow and Elijah Anderson. However, Goffman seems an especially pertinent model here. Just as in *Asylums* (1961), Goffman was in effect an advocate for the institutionalized mentally ill, so in *Sidewalk* Duneier is an advocate for those who live and work on Sixth Avenue. But while Goffman gave voice to the life of those he studied, Duneier gives them a face. This is an important difference: Goffman *primarily* wanted to develop a theoretical understanding of the difficult, sometimes tragic, circumstances of the patients at St. Elizabeth's mental hospital. Duneier wants to present a more personalized narrative of the difficult, sometimes tragic, lives of the people he came to know. In this sense, perhaps Duneier is more like Sue Estroff, whose *Making It Crazy* (1981) described psychopharmacological life outside a mental hospital in a much more personalized way than Goffman had described an earlier time in one.

However, Duneier has a set of ambitions foreign to many ethnographers. He also wants to examine and criticize social policies concerning street vendors. The cornerstone for these policies is the "broken windows" theory that suggests that the accumulation of even small disruptions to city life through minor legal violations causes large social problems. Advocates of this theory argue that the formal control of street life, often through heavy-handed police strategies, is the best social policy. Ironically, the politicians, business leaders, and lawyers who promote the broken windows theory frequently appeal to some of the same sociological authorities—most notably Jane Jacobs—that impress Duneier and Hakim. This is surely an example of what Giddens calls the double hermeneutic: the way in which sociological research not only describes the social world but also permeates and ultimately changes it.

Duneier's response to the broken windows theory is to distinguish between a theory of things that are really physically broken and a metaphorical theory that perceives people as "broken." Duneier accepts that physical disrepair might promote vandalism and other kinds of street crime. However, he argues that it is wrong to extend this account to the people who live and work on Sixth Avenue. They are often trying to rebuild their lives through more or less legal entrepreneurial activity,

and in so doing they regulate the social world of the sidewalk. In this sense, their presence may make Sixth Avenue safer. However, Duneier also gives us reason to accept that Sixth Avenue can be dangerous, as when he reveals that Hakim was initially concerned about his safety, fearing that as an upper-class white Jew, Duneier might be more of a target than an observer of street life.

The people whose lives are chronicled by Duneier are present and accountable in multiple ways. They are called by their real names; their talk is transcribed very accurately, and they are portrayed in some remarkable photographs by the Pulitzer Prize–winning photographer Ovie Carter. At their best, Carter's photographs capture not only personal images but also social relationships, and in this sense they are comparable to the outstanding contemporary photography of Eugene Richards.

The intensely personal nature of this research raises questions about what psychoanalysts call transference and countertransference: how did Duneier's informants feel about him, and how did he feel about them? There aren't any simple answers to these questions. At times Duneier's informants trusted him, admired him, and were thankful for his various kinds of financial help. Duneier describes in wonderful detail the response he got to the news that he would share book royalties with his informants. And yet the chasm between him and them was never greater than when money was involved. As with Paul Willis, who in *Learning to Labour* allowed his schoolboy subjects to respond to his ethnography of them, we realize that Duneier's ethnographic position is less secure than his narrative suggests. His informants could both admire him and express anti-Semitic and other negative attitudes toward him, as he discovered when he inadvertently left his tape recorder running when he went out. Neither is there a simple account of how Duneier felt about his informants. At different times he showed affection, admiration, frustration, and dismay at their actions and attitudes.

In many ethnographic studies, character assessments are both impossible (because there is insufficient attention to individual lives) and somehow unwarranted, given the focus on group organization. By contrast, Duneier allows us to feel as if we are close to the people in *Sidewalk.* However, he also recognizes the limits of the information he presents. For example, Mudrick, one of the central characters in this narrative, is featured primarily because he approaches women on Sixth Avenue and attempts to engage them in either vaguely or explicitly sexual talk. By tape recording some of these exchanges and submitting them to conversation analysis, Duneier was able to show exactly how the sequential organization of these exchanges intensified the sense of harassment felt by many of Mudrick's victims. In particular, affluent white women felt set upon by Mudrick's tactics, and Mudrick himself clearly comes across as misogynistic. However, later Duneier revealed that Mudrick was also capable of great consideration and caring: for example, he chose to sleep on the concrete floor next to his mattress so that his girlfriend could be more comfortable. Duneier presents these contradictions without trying to resolve them. Perhaps they cannot be resolved.

Sidewalk is an important book because it grants us access to the social world of

Sixth Avenue. In so doing, Duneier reaffirms the value and tradition of Chicago school symbolic interactionism. However, he has also extended this tradition by integrating new approaches and insights, particularly from feminist theory and conversation analysis. The result is an impressive blend of the best of the past and present of our discipline.

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