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ALIENATION OF THE SKID-ROAD TRAMP

Luvern V. Rieke*

YOU OWE YOURSELF A DRUNK: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF URBAN NOMADS. By James P. Spradley. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970. Pp. 301. \$3.95.

The life-style of the skid-road alcoholic has been subjected to analysis by both those who would treat him as an ill person and those who regard him as a common criminal. His problems have recently received scrutiny by the highest court in several states and by the United States Supreme Court.¹ In writing *You Owe Yourself a Drunk*, Professor Spradley has added another dimension to this analysis and, by analogizing to the circumstances which create the alcoholic nomad, has supplied an approach to the understanding of the numerous urban subcultures which have become alienated from our dominant institutions. He has done a superb job with his dual objectives.

The task involved in arresting, processing, and releasing the public drunk is massive. Spradley notes some pertinent statistics—every third arrest in the nation is for public intoxication;² Seattle police make approximately 12,000 arrests for drunk in public each year;³ and seventy per cent of Seattle police man hours and eighty per cent of Seattle jail space is required to handle what he terms the “chronic alcoholic offenders.”⁴ Reviewing the social costs and impact of such a

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1. See, e.g., *Powell v. Texas*, 392 U.S. 514 (1968) in which the United States Supreme Court held that the Constitution does not prohibit a state from making public drunkenness a criminal offense.

2. J. SPRADLEY, *YOU OWE YOURSELF A DRUNK: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF URBAN NOMADS* 9 (1970) [hereinafter cited as SPRADLEY]; cf. PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON LAW ENFORCEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE TASK FORCE REPORT: DRUNKENNESS 1 (1967).

3. SPRADLEY at 9. This was true when Spradley did his study. During 1968 there were 10,904 such arrests and, in 1969, 10,145. Source: data extracted by review author from the unpublished arrest records of the Seattle Police Department.

4. SPRADLEY at 9. Spradley did not have access to data concerning frequency of re-arrests and his reference to “chronic” offender may be a bit too general. The 10,904 arrests in 1968 involved 5,988 persons of whom 4,083 were arrested only once during the year. The remaining 1,905 persons, however, averaged over three arrests each and can fairly be called “chronic offenders.” The statistics for 1969 are similar: 10,145

volume of arrests, Spradley asks whether the gains are worth the price. What valid societal purpose is served by a system which subjects the offender to the ritual of "making the bucket" and waiting for a "kickout" a few days or weeks later? Passing the issue of society's immediate interest, the author develops a series of questions in which he inquires about the system's effect upon the individual involved. What, he asks, did it mean to the man who had, cumulatively, been sentenced to 5,340 days in jail—more than fourteen years—to realize that he could have avoided all jail time by posting bail totalling less than \$100 for each of those years. Did he conclude that society placed so slight a value upon his time and freedom? Does the man arrested for public drunkenness feel excluded from normal social contacts and does he assume that he must identify himself with a new sub-culture in order to survive?

These questions, Dr. Spradley believes, can only be answered by examining the attitudes of the offender. The opinions held by legislators, judges, and scholars concerning the value, or lack of value, inherent in current treatment of the alcoholic offender can be ascertained without much difficulty: one need only read the statutes, legal opinions and publications. But how does one discover the collective view held by a nomadic sub-culture populated by persons who write few books, deliver few lectures, and whose life style stresses the need for low visibility? Development of such information is a proper task for an anthropologist skilled in ethnography. Dr. Spradley is precisely that and his book describes how he obtained an "insider's point of view."

Aided by insights gained from identification with the alcoholic offender, the author is able to observe "how repeated arrest and incarceration changes identities, facilitates the assimilation of the patterns of this culture, motivates these men to take up the life style of urban nomads." He begins and ends his study with thought-provoking conclusions prompted by his observations: "incarceration in jail, intended as *punishment* for public drunkenness, is a *cause* of pub-

arrests; 5,305 persons, 3,637 of whom were arrested only once and 1,668 of whom were arrested an average of 3.9 times. It is interesting to notice that in both years approximately one-third of the offenders (31.8% and 31.5%) accounted for nearly two-thirds of the arrests (62.6% and 64.1%). Data extracted from the arrest records of the Seattle Police Department.

lic drunkenness”⁵ and “after thirty days in jail a tramp owes himself a drunk, not simply because he desires to gratify those impulses which have been denied while incarcerated, but because drinking and drunkenness are the prime symbols of acceptance for the man who has come through a ritual experience of alienation.”⁶

Analogizing from these specifics, Professor Spradley reaches his broader thesis: our cities are wracked with the pain of stress and discontent; the integrity of our legal and political system is undergoing severe challenge; and gaping disparities exist among our sub-cultures largely because our lack of understanding of sub-populations inhibits making our institutions responsive to the needs of our people. “America is faced,” writes Spradley, “not simply with an urban crisis, but with a grand experiment in human community: can we create a society which recognizes the dignity of diverse cultural patterns?”⁷ Not only does he believe these patterns can be understood but:⁸

When that day comes we will have moved closer to destroying the separateness which now permeates our cities, closer to including all the various subcultures in our multicultural society. Institutional renewal must go on until we have a society based not on the unity of similarity, but on the acceptance of difference. Beyond our nation, living in other cultures, is a world of strangers. Recognizing the dignity of urban nomads is a small but important step to creating a world of strangers who are friends.

With surprising success, Professor Spradley integrates both themes throughout nearly all his book. He is indeed interested in those who are found drunk in public, but finds them *also* to be instructive concerning our many cultural “islands, each separated by wide stretches of turbulent sea. Puerto Ricans, the poor, suburbanites, police, Blacks, Indians, Mexican-Americans, students, moderates, extremists—all [who] seem to practice and believe in different life styles [who] adhere to different values.”⁹ Institutional reform, we are told, must await such illumination:¹⁰

5. SPRADLEY at 5.

6. *Id.* at 256.

7. *Id.* at 4-5.

8. *Id.* at 262.

9. *Id.* at 3.

10. *Id.* at 5-6.

Effective renewal requires an exhaustive knowledge of our sub-cultures, a knowledge that can be gained by the kind of study presented here. This book is not written for urban nomads to show them how to adapt to the social and cultural constraints placed upon them by our institutions; rather, it is intended for those of us who are not affected by these forces but who have the power to change them.

Although Dr. Spradley is too courteous to say so, it would seem that lawyers are among those who have the power to change our institutions and who should be interested in learning what changes are indicated.

You Owe Yourself a Drunk is organized in a helpful way. Following the chapter of orientation and an introduction to the arts of the anthropologists, the author introduces Mr. William R. Tanner. Fifty-three pages are spent examining quotations from Mr. Tanner's phone calls and conversations and excerpts edited from diary entries or letters written by Mr. Tanner from jails, drunk farms and hospitals. Thus the reader begins to see the tramp as the tramp sees himself.

Following chapters continue the process. Taxonomic and componential definitions are developed to explain what it means to be a tramp and to illustrate the reasons for that culture's division into mission stiffs, airedales, rubber tramps, bindle stiffs, box car tramps or into other subdivisions dependent largely upon mode of travel and means of acquiring a livelihood. The perspective provided by these chapters enables one to appreciate how law enforcement patterns force the impoverished alcoholic into a nomadic existence.

However, it takes longer to illustrate how the criminal justice system teaches the individual to be a bum. In chapter 5 the tramps, speaking through the author whom they have educated by hundreds of interviews, describe with chilling clarity what is involved in "making the bucket"—from the street to final deposit in the drunk tank.

Lawyers will not be surprised to read that the "trial" of the alcoholic nomad is rudimentary at best, but it may be shocking to learn that tramps regard the courtroom ritual as the stage at which "they make you feel like a bum." The court experience, described in chapter 6, is for the tramp the worst experience of all because it is there that the offenders are "herded around like a bunch of cattle—dumb animals"; where they learn that attempts to explain "almost always

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end in failure"; where they must quickly "comply with the system"; and where "you look and feel like a bum whether you are or not."¹¹

The next two chapters, "Doing Time" and "Freedom of Hustle," describe what may be thought to be the finishing school essential for life as a Skid Road drunk. It is the jail that teaches the alcoholic nomad to adapt and to absorb "attitudes, values, and skills required for survival." He learns:¹²

the very terms and meanings . . . crucial to his socialization. . . . Most important, as he is fully socialized into this culture he learns the underlying semantic principles of such domains as tramps, trusties, fops, time, place in the bucket, hustling, and ways of making it.

He is, finally, "alienated from the rest of society—but not from himself or others like him." His time in the bucket has been his ritual of passage into a new life.

11. *Id.* at 192.

12. *Id.* at 251.