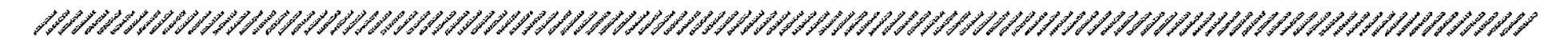
THE URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY READER



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AN INVITATION TO URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY

You have been told to go grubbing in the library, thereby accumulating a mass of notes and liberal coating of grime. You have been told to choose problems wherever you can find musty stacks of routine records based on trivial schedules prepared by tired bureaucrats. This is called "getting your hands dirty in real research." Those who counsel you are wise and honorable; the reasons they offer are of great value. But one more thing is needful: first hand observation. Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and the slum shakedowns; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter burlesque. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in *real* research.

—An unpublished 1920s quote by Robert E. Park,
recorded by Howard Becker.[1]

In the 1920s, Professor Robert Park, one of the founding fathers of American social science, enticed his students on a most unconventional quest. Through his lectures at the University of Chicago, he drew them into his effort to make sense of the forces that were transforming social life. All around them in the great metropolis they could see the effects of massive growth: the convergence of diverse peoples, the creation of new forms of community, the uprooting of traditions, and the swirling balance of order and chaos that constituted the modern city. They were not alone in this effort. Like the social workers and bureaucrats who had compiled these "musty stacks of routine records," scholars and intellectuals, artists and writers, were all in their different ways trying to understand these new forms of social life. Park, however, urged his students to take up a somewhat paradoxical method of investigation—one associated with the study of "exotic" members of traditional communities—and to apply it to their own society. He urged them to look at the commonplace with new eyes, to try to understand the world of the stranger next door, and to examine everyday life with both the discipline of scientists and the adventurous spirit of explorers.

At the risk of extreme immodesty, we would like to renew this invitation. With this volume we invite you on a journey into one of the richest traditions in social science: the firsthand study of urban community life.

"Ethnography" is a method of social science research that investigates people's

lives, actions, and beliefs within their everyday context. Surveys, experiments, and formal interviews are all situations created and largely controlled by the social scientist. The ethnographer, by contrast, seeks to understand life as it is lived. His or her conclusions are based primarily on "fieldwork," which involves entering the world of the people under study as a close observer or even as a participant over an extended period of time. By sharing in the daily life experiences of his or her subjects, the ethnographer becomes more attuned to the less visible conditions and situations that shape these lives.

This method has its origins in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century anthropology. In a classic ethnographic anthropological study, the researcher typically goes to live among members of a different society, usually geographically and culturally distant from his or her own. He or she learns the people's language and, to the extent possible, shares their daily life activities in an effort to understand their beliefs, worldviews, and systems of meaning-making. Of course, the anthropologist never fully closes the gap between him- or herself and "the other." Indeed, generations of anthropologists have been warned about the dangers of losing a critical distance or of coming to see themselves as members of (or, worse, spokespersons for) a different and usually less powerful society. Still, the assumption is that the more anthropologists immerse themselves in a social context, the better they will come to understand it.

But what does it mean to apply such a method to one's own society? The modern metropolis is full of strangers and "others," persons whose worldview may be fundamentally different from one's own. Yet the various "villages" that make up the modern city are less clearly bounded and sharply differentiated than the typical subject of classic ethnography, that is, the traditional small community dominated by face-to-face communication and dense social ties. Modern people may simultaneously belong to many overlapping social groups, or they may experience a sense of isolation from all of them. Still, at the core of the urban ethnographic enterprise lies the idea that observing people in their everyday contexts, in various unstructured situations over an extended period of time, may offer clues as to how they construct and make sense of their world.

Ethnography emphasizes the utility of personal experiences—the experiences of both the people being studied and the people doing the study. On the one hand, ethnographers are interested in what it is like to be alive at a particular moment, in the daily experiences of ordinary people on ordinary days, and in the interpretations that they themselves bring to these experiences. Over time, in fact, good ethnography can turn into great social history. On the other hand, ethnographers believe that they cannot know such things without relying on their own experiences of standing in (or at least near) other people's shoes. By subjecting themselves as much as possible to the daily circumstances of the people they write about, they hope to come to understand, although not necessarily to share, their worldview.

Engaging in a study of this kind requires an investigator to have the "nerve" to go up to strangers and enlist their help and cooperation. This is most difficult when researchers take on roles as participant observers that are not their own. This is also a method that frequently requires courage or naiveté (or both) from research subjects, who must trust that a researcher will not exploit or take advantage of them. Much ethnography involves a complex negotiation between the observer and the observed, as well as considerable self-reflection as each party interrogates his or her own position in relation to that of "the other."

It is in this interaction between the personal experience of the subject and that of the investigator that ethnography lies. The method requires a commitment to "being there" for an extended period, to spending a great deal of time with research subjects, and to ensuring that the subjects are able to accept the researcher's presence at least on a minimal level. It also entails a kind of subjectivity that is often absent in more statistical types of research, meaning that the ethnographer needs to work very hard to maintain a scientific disposition. Striking the right balance of subjective insight, empathy, and scientific rigor is never easy.

Ethnography is not based exclusively on interviews, even though interviews frequently form part of the research. It is difficult to know about people's practices without talking to them about the meanings these practices have to them (Wuthnow 2012, vii.). But while interviews have great value, even the best ones are limited to what subjects actually know and are able or willing to articulate to a relative stranger. This is true regardless of whether the results are quantified, as in a survey, or presented in narrative form. Although ethnography is sometimes said to "give voice" to its subjects, one of its greatest strengths lies in its ability to examine the relationship between what people *say* and what they actually *do*. For this reason, the ethnographer must come to grips with the subject's understanding of his or her situation but also go beyond simple reportage in his or her own analysis. Great studies often emerge from efforts to understand the unspoken rules and "*definition of the situation*" (Thomas 1923) that make a life reasonable, meaningful, and normal to the people who live it (Hughes 1971) as well as the social categories that people use to make sense of their world.

The ethnographer needs to understand things that are taken for granted but never defined (Hughes 1971). This usually requires him or her to observe how social life operates in the long run. In this respect the old canard that ethnography is merely "slow journalism" is half true; good ethnographic work *is* slow! It has to be, because, unlike all but the best journalism, it seeks to go beyond what people might say in interviews and to reveal understandings that emerge only after countless interactions over the course of time.

Furthermore, while the survey researcher, interviewer, or experimenter needs to have a pretty good idea of the kinds of topics he or she will learn about through questionnaires or experiments, the ethnographer who puts him- or herself in a "natural" setting is more likely to be surprised by what he or she discovers. Indeed, one of the method's great strengths is that it is not limited to questions composed in advance. Ethnographic researchers do not—or at least should not—"insulate" themselves from insights that are only tangentially related to the questions with which they begin. They must deal with "surprise data, things [they] didn't ask about but were told anyway" (Becker 1996, p. 56). One of the founding stories of urban ethnography allegedly occurred on a morning in 1910 when W. I. Thomas, Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago, "had to duck to avoid some garbage being tossed into an alley on Chicago's West Side. The bundle contained several packages of letters in Polish" (Bennett 1981, p. 123), which became the basis of Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's classic, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-1920). Such surprises are the essence of ethnography, in which research is sometimes indebted to serendipity and the discovery of valuable things that had not been originally sought. Of course, good luck is not a methodological tool, and interviews too may take unintended directions. But a pivotal aspect of ethnography is that it does not depend heavily on a research design or an initial research question.

For many years after Park taught that first generation of students in the 1920s,

urban ethnography ranked among the mainstays of social scientific research. Practiced by anthropologists, social workers, political scientists, urban studies specialists, and most often by sociologists, it made many important contributions to the conceptual vocabulary of scholars and social theorists, journalists, and social critics. From the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, however, urban ethnographic research was reduced to a somewhat marginal position within the social scientific profession due to advances in, survey techniques, statistical methods, and computer technology. It began to appear outmoded, if not quaint. Fine work continued to be done and leading practitioners of the craft were much honored as elder statesmen, but few aspiring social scientists were encouraged to follow in their footsteps.

More recently, things have changed. Since the early 1990s the field has been experiencing an extraordinary revival as demonstrated by many new books, journal articles, and conferences in the discipline as well as the many ethnographers currently holding tenure or tenure-track positions in universities across the United States. Two decades ago, there were only a handful of sociology departments with ethnographers on their faculty. Today, there are only a handful of major departments that do not have any. After a long period of marginalization, methods that privilege the meanings people bring to their situations and the organization of everyday life are once again deemed vital and necessary.

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What is the "urban" in urban ethnography? The term as commonly used today is something of a misnomer. While most "urban" ethnographic research does take place in cities, it is also conducted outside politically defined city limits, in suburbs, or (to quote the title of a classic study) in a "small town in Mass Society" (Vidich and Bensman 1958). The term is a legacy of the nineteenth-century notion that "urban" society, with its complex division of labor and reliance on impersonal, often utilitarian social bonds, is the quintessential "modern" society. According to this line of reasoning, "urban" is the converse of "traditional," that is, premodern or precapitalist communities frequently epitomized by the rural village with its deep social ties and priority on face-to-face relationships. For most early twentieth-century anthropologists, ethnographic work meant living for a long stretch of time in a traditional community in a social world largely bound by relations among a few hundred or at most a few thousand people. "Urban" or "modern" ethnography, by contrast, took place in communities where social bonds were looser and social connections extended across a much broader network but were assumed to be more tenuous, contingent and less all-consuming. Of course, social scientists know that the urban/modern vs. rural/traditional dichotomy is a huge oversimplification. Cities do not always destroy dense primary relationships. Indeed, in the modern world, the social life of a dense urban neighborhood may be more village-like than it is in smaller communities (see, for example, Herbert Gans's selection in Part VII).

In another important respect urban ethnography is clearly "urban." It was only with the massive growth and unprecedented diversity of the mid-nineteenth-century city that there arose a nonfiction literary genre in which the conventions of travel writing and the emerging field of anthropology were applied to the developed world. In the early twentieth century such literature began assuming the form and discipline of a social science. Of course, authors have been writing about the ways of life of other groups of people since antiquity, yet their efforts to understand the lives of "the other" have usually focused on populations physically distant from their and presumably their readers' homes. The appeal of the classic traveler's tale lay in its ability to provide readers with a view of the lives of strange and different people and the vicarious thrill of identifying with the adventurous traveler, who had journeyed to distant lands and come back to tell the tale!

In early urban ethnography we see that the city—the familiar "home turf" of the literate minority in most societies—is a place of mystery, a strange collection of social worlds that begs to be explained and understood or, as is too often the case, to be exoticized, gawked at, or "reformed." The earliest proto-urban ethnography published in Britain and France in the mid-nineteenth century shares the intellectual climate of the period's popular fiction in bringing presumably middle-class urban readers into the mysterious worlds of the poor, the working class, bohemians, immigrants, and other exotic subcultures inhabiting strange worlds across town. High-minded social reformers often made direct analogies between their work among "denizens" of working-class districts and popular accounts of the "savage" colonial world. Margaret Harkness's 1889 social documentary of the East End, for example, was entitled *In Darkest London*! At their best, proto-ethnographic accounts such as Henry Mayhew's classic *London Labor and the London Poor* (1861) combined rich descriptions of the daily life of various communities with early quantitative analyses and trenchant social criticism.

In these publications and in much of the ethnographic work that followed, it was the modern city that was the world of "strangers," albeit the strangers next door. Once familiar territory, rapidly growing cities like Park's Chicago had become places of mystery. As with the social realism of novelists and the sensationalism of muckraking journalists, so too with early urban ethnography—its allure lay in its voyeurism into diverse social worlds that were all too close and yet so far from those of middle-class readers.

Park and his contemporaries in the Chicago School tried hard to play down this aspect of ethnography. Indeed, the more potentially sensational or lurid the social situations they sought to investigate, the more they assumed an "objective" scientific pose (see Cressey's account of "taxi dancers"). For them, the goal was to portray situations that appeared bizarre, impenetrable, and threatening from the outside as understandable, reasonable, and even ordinary through the presentation of an "inside" point of view. All the same, there is a perennial danger that the ethnographer will create a narrative in which the reader identifies with the researcher and his or her journey, thus making the researcher the focal point of the story.

Yet we hope readers of this volume will agree that, at its best, urban ethnography can do exactly the opposite. At a time when so much urban life is so often seen in the most sensationalist terms, urban ethnography can help readers make sense of worlds that seem impenetrable during the first encounter. We hope readers will also agree that this literature clarifies how patient, skilled, and hard-working observers can render individuals of other than their own race, class, gender, and circumstances recognizable and understandable.

Finally, urban ethnography is also "urban" in the sense that over the years it has sought to reflect the ways in which people tend to think about cities and the social "problems" popularly associated with them. As the following pages illustrate, urban ethnographic accounts reflect issues confronting societies at the time in which they were written. When the discipline came into being in Chicago early in the last century, immigration was one of the most pressing issues facing American cities and American social science. Many US cities had a minority of native English speakers. Thus some of the earliest social scientific studies sought to comprehend how immigrants adapted to their new

environment. Within a decade of this first wave of scholarship, black migration from southern states to northern cities turned race into the second great problem tackled by US sociology. At this point, the questions faced by urban ethnographers had to do with the adaptation of former black sharecroppers and small farmers to their new surroundings as they flocked to look for better jobs and decent housing stock.

Recent arrivals in growing cities, regardless of their race or ethnic backgrounds, began negotiating new ways of life. The "rules" controlling social behavior often differed from those of the communities in which these people had grown up. Some observers saw such cities as inherently "disorganized" and beset with "deviance" and "anomie." For others, however, the communities of the modern metropolis enabled the creation of new types of social connections and the rise of complex subcultures that might not have been possible in less populous settings. Thus, in one form or another, the great problems of early urban ethnography had to do with migration, race, and the changing nature of social bonds.

As time passed and as the first generation of European migrants achieved upward mobility, African Americans were often left behind in urban slums. Whereas in the 1920s, it was Jews who lived in so-called ghettos on the Lower East Side of New York or the West Side of Chicago, by the end of World War II it was blacks who were exclusively identified with this type of living condition. Social scientists began to think of the ghetto as the central arena of African-American life.

New questions revolved around this community context of poor black people. In studies of the South Side of Chicago, Harlem, and Philadelphia, for example, ethnographers wrote about life in places where various kinds of people, who would normally have never lived together, were being forced to live among each other because they could not move elsewhere. In doing so, they focused on understanding values within the ghetto and explaining the differences between the value systems of ghetto dwellers and those outside.

In the wake of the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, urban African-American communities were once again defined as a social problem. Many citizens and politicians came to the conclusion that the values of the poor, particularly poor African Americans, were fundamentally at odds with those of the wider society. While some ethnographic studies appeared to show just this, others produced evidence that when it came to work and family, the aspirations of the poor were not so different from those of the rest of society; their life styles and values were adaptations to the racism and high unemployment they faced (for examples, see the chapters by Elliot Liebow and Carol Stack).

Around the same time, students of middle-class life in both the United States and Europe were trying to make sense of new modes of community emerging in the suburbs. Gender relations were changing, and domestic life was to an unprecedented degree becoming spatially separated from work life. What was more, the very organization of work life was changing in response to new technologies and changing class relations. Finally, the postwar reorganization of cities gave rise to new questions concerning the use of public space. All these issues offered fertile ground for ethnographic research.

Subsequent urban ethnography turned to examine the implications of major policy shifts such as deindustrialization, "broken windows" policing, hypersegregation, gentrification, and mass incarceration, as well as the resumption of mass immigration to both the United States and Western Europe. This tradition has not been distinguished merely by its attention to the details of local contexts. The investigating ethnographer also strives to understand how parts relate to the whole, including that largest context, which transcends the local community. His or her interpretations can make visible the social forces of the time, which include local labor markets, policy regimes, and forces such as institutional racism, capitalism, and globalization. These connections extend from the macro to the micro and back again.

In all of these studies, old and new alike, we can see how the ethnographer's findings are shaped by a larger structural context and how his or her interpretations reveal the social forces of a particular period. The earlier studies in this volume were based on the social structure of their time. Urban ethnography lights up "structure" and is always interacting with it. As structure changes, ethnographers need to be aware of those shifts in order to "see" more clearly what is before them and to speak in a relevant voice. But this is also why they need to keep at it: ethnography must be continuous because the undergirding reality keeps changing. As in Park's day, armchair theorizing and trips to the library, or for that matter, excursions on the Internet, are not enough. Ethnographers need *to be* in a place to show how things work.

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Making the fifty-two selections for this volume from nearly a century's worth of scholarship involved many hard choices. We have tried to create a balance between older and newer pieces and to include well-written presentations of social life on the level at which it occurred. We have not included pieces that we felt show only as much of the people or scene as is absolutely necessary for making a theoretical point. In general, we have probably erred on the side of choosing compelling descriptions and insightful accounts of people's worldviews over more theoretical contributions and works that, however valuable, seemed overly focused on the inner life of the researchers or on how they knew what they knew. While such works are important to the connoisseurs of the discipline, we feel that they have a lesser place in a work for a broader audience.

Indeed, we do hope that after studying these selections, both undergraduates and graduate students will take up our invitation to urban ethnography and appreciate these works as readers. For as much as urban ethnography is a rigorous form of social science, it is also an influential form of literature—one that informs, challenges, and, at its best, captivates readers by helping them engage with a changing world. After spending time with the works in this volume we hope you will agree that ethnographic work can be both good science and a darn good read.

NOTE

1. Quoted in John C. McKinney, *Constructive Typology and Social Theory*, p. 71.

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PART I

FINDING COMMUNITY IN THE MODERN CITY

Since ancient times people have been fascinated by the lives of people different from themselves. Over the centuries, many talented writers have sought to make the "other" understandable to themselves and their readers.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the growth of the modern city saw a particular flowering of proto-ethnographic work in Europe and a bit later in the United States. Much of this American work, undertaken by journalists, social reformers, and the first generation of empirical social scientists, was focused on two groups of "strangers": immigrants and African Americans, both of whom were establishing enclaves in the nation's rapidly growing cities at the time.

"Chinatown," the selection by Jacob Riis from his book *How the Other Half Lives*, is an example of this type of proto-ethnographic work. In many ways it presages later ethnographic accounts by combining meticulous observation, analysis of official data, interviews, and the then new technology of mobile photography. A social reformer, Riis felt that by documenting conditions in growing urban slums he could help arouse the indignation of his middle-class audience. In retrospect, however, as Riis opens the lives of the "exotic" poor to middle-class inspection, his admirable reform impulse seems mixed with an appeal to his readers' voyeurism. In many ways Riis's use of photography to make his points and his career as a lecturer foreshadows the popularity of ethnographic film in later decades. The reader may notice, however, that in Chinatown not a single member of the Chinese community is consulted for an opinion or view. Everything the author says about the Chinese comes from inferences he makes on the basis of reports from police officers and other officials. Despite its many innovations in description and documentation of the lives of the urban poor, Riis's work is therefore not really ethnographic, though it clearly foreshadows much future ethnography.

W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro*, published in 1898, should probably be regarded as the first work of American urban ethnography, as well as one of the earliest empirical pieces of modern sociology. Du Bois spent fifteen months living with and talking to people in the Seventh Ward of Philadelphia. He later added census data to create a comprehensive portrait of African-American life in this neighborhood. His pioneering work was an effort to firmly establish the study of the black community as a central topic in American social science.