

Book Reviews

FLOATING CITY: A ROGUE SOCIOLOGIST LOST AND FOUND IN NEW YORK'S UNDERGROUND ECONOMY, by **Sudhir Venkatesh**. New York: Penguin Press HC, 2013, 304 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1594204166 (\$27.95 Cloth, \$17.00 Paper).

Reviewed by

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Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York's Underground Economy is one of the most daring books that I have read in some time. In aspiring to tell a New York City story, author Sudhir Venkatesh weaves together an analysis of aspects of that city's underworld, its above-world (comprised of emerging elites in business and the arts), and himself. The relevant part about him is that he is a transplant from southern California who has come to New York to build upon a promising career in sociology that was established by his prior studies of the underworld and low-income African Americans in Chicago. Consequently, he appears in this work as much more than a self-reflective ethnographer taking stock of the field and the people that he is studying. Instead, and more provocatively, Venkatesh incorporates autobiography into his explication of how a research agenda unfolded for him in what has become his second city.

Floating City does not take the form of a standard academic book. There is no extensive commentary about research methods and design, nor any elaborate commentary on the scholarly intent of the project underlying this material. Venkatesh can negate those projects, fall back on his stature as a well-established sociologist, and venture into a strong story-telling effort predicated upon the reader accepting that he is a skilled interviewer, field note collector, and analyst of the urban scenario. The work begins with an introduction of a handful of seemingly archetypical New York City residents, including Ivy-League graduates, a drug dealer, and the dealer's cousin (who is a partner of sorts in that trade). The graduates stand at an opposing point on the social class spectrum from the other two, yet they all happen to be in attendance at the same private social event in Manhattan. Why and how they came to be there, and what they ultimately have to do with each other, is a central point of the book. That point is conveyed in nearly suspenseful fashion throughout its eight chapters.

Across those chapters, Venkatesh elucidates the connections between the underworld (the Harlem-based drug dealer being just one example) and the above-world (the Ivy League-educated twenty-somethings being just a few examples). The connections are fostered by drug distribution and consumption, participation in escort services and prostitution, and other formally organized means of indulgence. In the book, we learn much about the complex feelings, attitudes, commitments, and values of these and other actors: prostitutes, financiers, pimps, elite club-goers, drug dealers, and the ethnographer who is

studying them. In placing his story in the midst of these others, Venkatesh informs about how he became a New Yorker, a Columbia University sociologist, and a divorcee after achieving extreme professional success since being a graduate student at the University of Chicago, an ethnographer of that city's disadvantaged, and a partner in a marriage that did not last.

It may appear that telling all of these stories makes for a messy, if not a thoroughly self-absorbed, commentary. This is far from the case. Instead, readers are taken on a journey that illustrates how a researcher creates a new project in a new city, encounters and addresses bumps along the road in pursuing that agenda, tries to secure a new professional status in the midst of doing so, and handles the challenges that come with trying to work out developing a career and a personal life at the same time. The writing is lively and the narrative is intriguing. It reveals how virtually every actor in the book, including Venkatesh, appears sometimes as sensitive and benevolent, and at others callous or self-centered.

In the midst of presenting these portraits, *Floating City* provides an analysis of socioeconomic exchange that shows how the rich and poor, Black and White (and other ethnics), and Harlem and downtown Manhattan are much more interconnected than most urban sociology would allow us to believe. The connection is not only facilitated by the provision and access to underground services, but also reflected by how the various people that Venkatesh meets and encounters have similar goals and personal qualities. The similarities include the quest to establish publicly respectable and enamored social statuses and to have enough material resources to achieve long-term economic security and access the good life in New York City. As importantly, Venkatesh does not let readers forget that differences in social power are of great importance, not solely for whether people can achieve their goals, but how they evaluate others and are evaluated by each other.

In positioning so many people as both flawed and virtuous, Venkatesh urges us to reconsider how social power and status may prevent us from ever seeing the poor as virtuous even if we see the rich as flawed. He decisively ruptures the notion that people can be so easily or consistently divided into good and bad, saints and sinners, or street and decent (to draw from a popular disciplinary framing of lower-income urban residents). Indeed, he especially well demonstrates that the privileged can be quite indecent not solely because of involvement in drug consumption and prostitution, but in what they think of and how they act toward those (less financially secure) others who are embedded in those engagements with them.

This work will serve as a classroom complement to more formal sociological studies of race, class, and informal economies in the urban community. As it is not designed to be a text book in the traditional sense, it will require some explaining in the classroom if used as a foundational text for introducing undergraduates to the tools and concepts of urban sociology. For more advanced students, or for instructors prepared to engage the urban sphere in less traditional ways (that is, for those who can skillfully bring formal sociology into the conversation around this book) it will be a joy to utilize in the classroom. For people prepared to re-think their understanding of the values and outlooks of the rich and the poor in the urban community, and well as those who seek a more nuanced and sophisticated reflection on the practice ethnography, *Floating City* is an eye opener and a must-read.

ONE IN THREE: IMMIGRANT NEW YORK IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY, by Nancy Foner. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013, 312 pp. ISBN 978-0-231-15936-4

Reviewed by

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In *One in Three: Immigrant New York in the Twenty First Century*, Nancy Foner points out that more than one in three persons residing in New York City is an immigrant (37 percent). If we count the second generation (U.S. born children of foreign born parents) the percentage soars to 55 percent. Even more impressive, almost half (45 percent) of the New York City workforce is composed of immigrants. New York City at the beginning of the 21st century is still an immigrant city par excellence, “more multiracial and multiethnic than at any time in its history” (60). It is fitting then, that Foner should provide an updated version of *The Newest New Yorkers*. As in earlier editions (1987, 2001) Foner’s framework is “the city as context”—the idea that place-specific conditions (built environment, institutions, political structure, and culture) shape settlement patterns, ethnoracial identities, and intergroup relations of immigrants. She argues that New York City is exceptional because of its history as an immigrant city and as a result of the structures and institutions that have developed around the large and successive waves of immigrants that have arrived to its shores.

The book contains an introductory chapter, two contextual chapters, one on population and one on the economy, and case studies of seven ethnic groups. A new thematic chapter on the second generation in New York City appears at the end. The contextual chapters are some of the most interesting for those who want an overview of migration to New York City. Lobo and Salvo’s chapter explores how immigration has transformed New York City’s population. The chapter profiles the various immigrant groups (the top eight immigrant groups account for half of the immigrant total) It also documents settlement patterns in the city and the metropolitan region. The chapter shows that more immigrants are settling in the suburbs and that the city now receives more domestic immigrants, many of whom are college-educated young adults who move to the city for jobs in financial services, the arts, and publishing.

In his chapter on the economic impacts of immigration, Kallick argues that immigrants have played a critical role in the city’s economy. He explains that while the stereotype of the immigrant as low wage worker is partly correct, more than half of immigrants in New York City work in white collar jobs and immigrants have high rates of self-employment.

Seven chapters are devoted to case studies of immigrant groups. These chapters are based on quantitative and qualitative data and explore the experiences of a range of immigrant groups including the top four largest groups in the city (Dominicans, Chinese, Mexicans, and Jamaicans) as well as Koreans, Russian Jews, and Liberians. Zhou

explores the adaptation of Chinese immigrants in New York City. She profiles New York City's Chinese enclaves including Chinatown, Flushing in Queens, and Sunset Park in Brooklyn. In the 2001 edition, Min's chapter was titled "Koreans as an Institutionally Complete Community." In the current edition, he argues that the Korean community has become less segregated and more assimilated. Among the reasons for this trend are the decrease in self-employment and declines in retail business ownership among the first generation and incorporation of the second generation in the mainstream labor market.

Orleck's interesting chapter on Russian Jewish émigrés discusses the Soviet Jews who settled in South Brooklyn and Forest Hills, Queens. She emphasizes the often tense relations between new and old Jewish groups, and looks at the ways that this large refugee influx has reshaped the Jewish enclave in Brighton Beach. Vickerman uses the idea of "crosspressures" to explain how Jamaicans negotiate their identity as a racialized group. Vickerman argues that Jamaicans ultimately become black in the American sense as their race trumps their ethnicity (p. 190); however, referring to the younger generation, he says that boundaries between West Indian and African American youth are blurring resulting in a new, melded culture. Smith's essay points out that the huge growth in Mexican immigration to the city between 1990 and 2000 was driven by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. However, large numbers of Mexicans in the city are more recent entrants to the United States, and many lack legal status. The chapter focuses on the liabilities of undocumented status (the low rates of educational attainment among Mexican youth) but also chronicles the civic and political mobilization of Mexicans around education and immigration reform.

The new chapters and/or contributors include a chapter on Liberians in the Park Hill neighborhood of Staten Island, a group that entered the United States primarily as refugees. Although narrowly focused on intergenerational relations, the chapter adds value to the book, as relatively little information is available on African immigrants in the city. In their chapter on Dominicans, Torres-Saillant and Hernandez reject the characterization of Dominicans as "transnational," a label sometimes used too loosely, and instead focus on the political and cultural achievements of this group in New York City. The chapter by Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters on the second generation provides a summary of the main findings of the Immigrant Second Generation in Metropolitan New York survey, which was carried out between 1999 and 2001.

Overall, *One in Three* is a good primer on immigration to New York City and is an excellent resource for both undergraduate and graduate courses. If there is a weakness of the collection it is its inattention to one of the most crucial changes in New York, and other global cities, over the last decade—the unsettling increase in inequality and the spiraling cost of housing. Moreover, with the exception of Smith's article, there is little attention given to the increasingly unfriendly national immigrant climate. Does this suggest that New York is insulated from the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment characteristic of many other places? This should be explored more in future studies of the city.

CONFRONTING SUBURBAN POVERTY IN AMERICA, by Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013, 169 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8157-2390-5.

Reviewed by

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The geography of poverty in the United States has undergone a great transformation. For the first time in American history, the suburbs now house the largest share of the population in poverty. Over the last decade, Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube have been at the forefront of documenting these changing patterns, tracing their causes, and supporting research that examines their implications for people, places, and policy. In *Confronting Suburban Poverty in America* they bring this body of work together and use new data and analyses to provide the most comprehensive portrait of poverty in suburban America to date. The book is an invaluable resource on an understudied topic.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that this book is only about the suburbs. Its contribution is much greater than this. It is a book that is, at its core, about the state of American poverty and antipoverty policy in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the authors argue that the spread of poverty into the suburbs should not detract from the deep, extensive poverty that remains in our cities. Instead, it prompts us to rethink the relationship between poverty and place. Doing so is not simply a theoretical exercise. It is essential conceptual work for moving beyond the existing, failing architecture of antipoverty policies that are built upon antiquated notions of the spatial landscape of poverty.

Drawing on census data and case studies, the book has three distinct parts. The first is data-heavy, providing demographic and economic data to describe trends, causal factors contributing to regional variations in suburban poverty, and characteristics of the suburban poor. Here the authors turn on their head a number of commonly held beliefs about suburban poverty. For example, we learn that suburban poverty is not an artifact of the Great Recession; it results from a combination of economic changes, population and immigration settlement patterns, and housing policies dating back to the 1980s. Suburban poverty is also not exclusive to older, inner-ring suburbs; poverty has taken hold in suburbs that are newer, on the periphery, prosperous, and experiencing job and population growth. Further, while the suburban poor are more likely to be white and homeowners than the urban poor, these two groups share a number of attributes in common: A very similar proportion live in deep poverty, hold a bachelors degree, and are employed.

Though the suburbs conjure up images of prosperity in the American consciousness, in the second part of the book, the authors argue that suburban living does not always translate into greater opportunity for poor people. Despite the fact that the majority of low-skilled work is in the suburbs, poor suburbanites are not likely to live in “job rich” suburbs. This puts a premium on access to transportation, yet public transportation in the suburbs is often limited and car ownership can be financially untenable for poor families. In some cases, suburban living has given children access to better performing

schools, but in others, it has not. Exacerbating all of this is the weakness of the suburban safety net.

In the final third of the book, the authors shift their focus to potential policy solutions. They argue against expanding the existing place-based antipoverty policy framework to the suburbs for several reasons. First, these initiatives have done little to alleviate poverty in cities; there is little reason to think they would do so elsewhere. Second, a lack of political will and limited governmental and organizational capacity are barriers to their effective implementation in the suburbs. Additionally, current policies impede political jurisdictions from collaborating regionally, which will be necessary for addressing the new geography of poverty. Inspired by successful, innovative models from around the country, Kneebone and Berube propose a new, modernized antipoverty agenda they call the “Metropolitan Opportunity Agenda.” Their vision is to develop a federally run competitive funding stream (think Race to the Top) aimed at state-level reform incentivizing metropolitan approaches to creating opportunity for low-income families by rewarding and supporting regional collaboration, capacity building, high-performance organizations, development of robust evaluation data, and the leveraging of public and private dollars.

In many ways, this is a book written for a policy audience. It employs policy jargon like “flexible and strategic funding” and “pay for success.” And it is solution oriented. The authors present a compelling case that suburban poverty is a significant problem and explicate why current policies fail in order to convince decision makers that the evidence-based proposal they offer is a viable solution.

Urban scholars would be remiss, however, to cast it aside as a book for policy makers only. This is because what we find woven throughout its sophisticated and thoughtful analysis is a research agenda that demands attention. By presenting an abundance of new observations and novel insights, the book inspires as many questions as it provides answers. For example, the authors find that Blacks and Hispanics in the suburbs tend to live in higher poverty neighborhoods than do whites and are often subject to discrimination and scapegoating. How is suburban poverty experienced differently by whites, Blacks, and Hispanics? How does the race of a suburb’s poverty population shape how it responds to rising poverty? What does this mean for the reproduction of racial inequality across space? The authors argue that their policy proposal is a “bottom up approach” to poverty alleviation because it is based on the work that organizations they deem to be successful are doing “on the ground.” But how “on the ground” are these organizations? In suburbs where public transportation is limited, poverty is invisible, local newspapers are absent, and density is low, large numbers of poor residents may not be able to access safety net resources. Given the role of antipoverty organizations in political processes, what might this disconnect mean for how the interests of low-income people are incorporated politically in the suburbs? Understanding this is especially pressing given the potential for regional approaches to poverty to exclude people and areas lacking adequate representation or mechanisms for ensuring political accountability.

Just as massive changes in urbanization led to the Chicago School of sociology in the 1920s, contemporary transformations in suburban America call for something similar. In the words of Robert Park, the moment calls for scholars to “go get the seat of [their] pants dirty in real research” (quoted in McKinney 1966, p. 71) by going out into the suburbs and observing social life there. For too long, urban scholars have ignored the suburbs as sites of study. For anyone interested in broader issues

of race, poverty, inequality, and space, Kneebone and Berube show us that we can ill afford to continue to do so. *Confronting Suburban Poverty* invites us to take on this challenge, an invitation I hope we will accept.

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URBAN CHINA, by **Xuefei Ren**. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013, xx+218 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7456-5358-7 (\$64.95 Cloth, \$22.95 Paper).

Reviewed by

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This book aims to fill the need for a book that introduces the main themes of China's urbanization to the general reader and especially to students. It is an effective descriptive overview. Xuefei Ren points out that it has grown out of her own experience teaching an urban China course where an overview textbook seemed more appropriate than a series of more specialized readings. It is similar in many ways to another book with a similar intent: John Friedmann's *China's Urban Transition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Like Friedmann she devotes considerable attention to the long history of urban development in China, the nature of urban policy and restrictions on urban life that predominated in the socialist period, and the transformations occurring in the current "reform" era. These include changes in the governance of land development and its financing, migration and urban expansion, and new inequalities.

Ren's writing is reader-friendly. Like a good journalist, she often begins with an anecdote or story that illustrates the issues that she wants to introduce. She alludes to many recent events that readers are likely to have heard of (e.g., the Beijing Olympics, the prosecution of former Chongqing mayor Bo Xilai, the suicides at the massive Foxconn electronics assembly complex in South China). Like a good social scientist, she backs up her conclusions with well-chosen references to the current literature. Her presentation is theoretically grounded at a level that can be easily grasped. For example, she offers two interpretations of the rise of modern China: (1) that it is part and parcel of the expansion of global neoliberalism and (2) that it stems from specific and historically unique factors that positioned China in the 1980s to take advantage of growth opportunities. These views are developed just enough to make the reader think about larger theoretical questions, an approach that is well suited to an introductory text. As another example, in her chapter on the cultural economy she emphasizes state efforts to control and sanitize nightlife and the arts, which she contrasts with reliance on markets to regulate most private consumption. This is a simple dichotomy, but in fact there are profound questions

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here, and she succeeds in raising them without letting academic concerns dominate the text.

Ren is a specialist on the built environment, and her sensitivity to architecture and design shows up in her writing. Her descriptions of landscapes (Chapter 3)—new Central Business Districts, art spaces, historical preservation (and the loss of historic architecture), old socialist housing blocs, and new gated communities—are vividly visual even without photographs. She invites the reader to “see” these places and then offers useful explanation of their origins and what they represent.

Her final chapter on urban culture is also distinctive. She describes the sites of urban consumption and style making (in the home, shopping, dining out), nightlife, and arts districts. Her general point is that urban China, or at least its growing middle class sector, has become very consumption oriented. I suspect that especially for students this chapter will be evocative, allowing them to compare China’s young adult cultural styles with their own. Describing the massive growth in use of social media would have been another way to portray the changes in urban ways of living. This emphasis on style reminds me of Li Zhang’s study of middle-class living (*In Search of Paradise*, Cornell University Press, 2010).

Both Friedmann and Zhang discussed the political relevance of the middle class in the context of a Chinese state that severely limits public participation in political issues. How are “living better,” consuming more, and having more freedom in lifestyle decisions relevant to governance? Friedmann seems to conclude that these are disconnected, while Zhang discerns a trend toward middle class mobilization. Ren provides a clear exposition of the political system (the relations among different levels of government and the enactment and execution of development policies). She criticizes the current system of urban planning and decision making. However, she only briefly discusses conflicts over land grabs on the urban fringe and protests by urban homeowners associations. I would have appreciated more analysis of the possibilities of change or the obstacles to reform, since state policy is so fundamental to the development of urban China.