

A Sociologist in the Ghetto

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After several years of fieldwork in a Chicago black ghetto, sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh gives a lively and thorough analysis of the survival strategies of its inhabitants. Halfway between solidarity and predation, the underground economy of the ghetto relies as much on money as on networks built on trust and exchange.

Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh, *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2006.

Sudhir Venkatesh, a sociologist at Columbia University whose field is the black ghetto in the United States, is one of the sociologists who attracts the most media attention in America today.¹ Fame in the academic world came when he provided the authors of the bestselling *Freakonomics* with the background for a chapter called “Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with Their Moms.” His two most recent books, *Off the Books* and *Gang Leader for a Day*, have sold remarkably well and made him a major reference in the world of contemporary American sociology.

Off the Books constitutes a major step forward in our understanding of the anthropology and sociology of the black ghetto in the United States. By tackling the underground economy at various levels (including undeclared work, drug dealing, prostitution and local gang activity) in the South Side district of Chicago, Sudhir Venkatesh places his ethnographical study at the heart of the ghetto experience, which is all about gaining access to limited and scarce economic resources and takes the form of solidarity as well as ferocious competition. Solidarity is a necessity in a hostile context and it requires “survival” strategies that in turn give rise to new ways of regulating social relations that function outside legitimate

¹ This is a modified version of an earlier review published in *Revue Française de Sociologie* (4: 49) that can be consulted via the CAIRN portal: <http://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-de-sociologie-2008-4-p-827.htm>
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institutional frameworks (such as the police, municipal policy, social services, etc.). Although they are often ingenious and help solve many problems and conflicts, and must in any case be reckoned with, these social relations also widen the gap between the ghetto and the “rest of the world.” Furthermore, the scarcity of available resources all too often causes the underground economy to prefer exploitation and punishment to creativity.

Sudhir Venkatesh manages to avoid two pitfalls — this is neither a panegyric to the originality of the indigenous culture of the ghetto, nor is it an attempt to legitimize the practices of ghetto dwellers. His many years of fieldwork (1995-2003) probably account for the detachment with which the author views the object of his research. In his book, Venkatesh provides a minute description of the way the underground economy works and of its various agents. He begins with a general description of the underground economy in the area of Maquis Park (renamed in order to protect the identities of its inhabitants), and the following chapters are each centered around one among a number of agents: women who work at home (babysitting, preparing meals, or as prostitutes, etc.) small-scale entrepreneurs, hustlers, preachers and members of the local gang.

This ethnographic study, which at first strikes the reader as extremely descriptive, proves in the end to raise a number of theoretical questions that do not apply only to the black ghetto in the United States. French readers may well want to use the study to further the comparison introduced by Loïc Wacquant, who based his arguments on research on the underground economy done in France, between the American ghetto and the French suburban *cités*. A comparative reading would help us to grasp just how much national and institutional contexts contribute to the underground economy: if one thinks of the underground economy as a response to partial or complete isolation from the legal economy, it is natural to see the institutional framework of — and the means of access to — the legal economy as directly or indirectly responsible for the workings the underground economy.

Sudhir Venkatesh blazes other trails as well, and in particular in his presentation of “social capital.” Social capital, too often thought to be the reserve of an elite, proves to be by far the most widespread sort capital to be found in the ghetto. When, for example, an opportunity to make money produces a deterioration of the trust placed in one of the agents — no matter how lowly — in the area, arbitration almost systematically works in favor of the preservation of existing trust. “Success” in the ghetto, although the concept is of course

relative, appears to be based on the ability to create and maintain a network of trust with a large number of agents (from the homeless hustler to the local policeman, or the pimp on the street corner) in the area. This economy of trust implies a complex system of exchange in which money hardly ever plays a central role. Gifts may include shelter for the night, useful information (about the doings of a competitor or of the police, or about ways to get access to new clients, etc.), a free meal, shelter for a week or a month, or even sexual favors. A shopkeeper may offer a homeless person food and shelter because it will cost him less than paying for a night watchman; a shopkeeper and a prostitute may not always use cash for their transactions; Leroy, a mechanic, actually got rid of his cash register simply because none of his customers seemed ever to use legal tender to pay their debts. In this type of economy, anyone who plays the individualist and behaves like a predator is soon made unwelcome and may even lose all his economic opportunities. Even the head of the local gang says he is working for the good of the community and has to cooperate with local worthies and make regular donations to local churches if he wants to carry on with his illegal activities. This permanent solidarity is probably stronger among hustlers even though they are at the bottom of the local socio-economic ladder. As one of them says to the interviewer:

“Don’t you think it’s strange, that the ones who ain’t got nothing, not even a roof over their head, we’re the ones who are caring for each other. We are the social vulnerables, the ones who really understand, I mean really understand, that you can’t live alone, that you always need somebody... If you’re rich, you always can buy a hotel, a friend. But, lot of us have nothing in our pockets. We have to know how to live with each other, or else we wouldn’t get by. See, this is what you must understand about the ghetto, about this community.”

However this sort of mutual reliance (which the author says is never disinterested, never really altruistic) has its limits and the activities of the local gang in the area destroy any idealized image of solidarity in the community. Extortion, threats, corruption, slander, beatings and sometimes murder organize the life of the ghetto just as much as the need for solidarity. In the end, these extreme situations lead hustlers and others to put survival and personal interest before solidarity. The local gang leader epitomizes the contradiction between solidarity and personal interest when he resorts to any means available to become someone who works for the good of the community, someone to be reckoned with. Big Cat likes to brag about his “good works:”

“Ask anybody around here. I’m a man of the community, a community man. I give money, my boys clean up the parks, we help old ladies cross the street. Anything to help people get what they need.”

Yet many of the evils that prevail in the area are due to Big Cat. He runs the drug trade with the cynicism of an unscrupulous businessman. He tries to control all the economic exchanges within Maquis Park, thus destroying local solidarity and replacing it with competitive and

predatory behavior. He has no qualms about sending his men to deal in the park, one of the most lucrative places to sell, even though it has dreadful consequences for the children in the area.

The achievement of Sudhir Venkatesh's book lies in the author's constantly precise ability to describe the conditions of life in the ghetto while placing it in the larger structural context that determines its existence. The whole constitutes a powerful examination of the "effect of closure." The ghetto is a world with its own laws of exchange, its own control mechanisms, and its internally managed conflicts (although the author never refers either to innate "ghetto habitus" or even to "ghetto culture"). To leave the ghetto in the hope of finding a better position elsewhere in the city is not something that is often attempted simply because, in the case of failure, coming back would be no easy task and would be paid for by the loss of any accumulated social capital. It would take many months, many years perhaps, to find a new place for oneself in the local economy.

When he underscores the absence of any equivalence between the qualities promoted inside and outside the ghetto, Sudhir Venkatesh insists on the distance between the ghetto and "the rest of the world." He reminds us that to be able to repair a car efficiently on a sidewalk is not worth much on a CV, and that helping to resolve a conflict between pimps and crack dealers so that children can get to school safely will never get you a job with the diplomatic corps. The fact that most respected ghetto activities are underground, only increases the distance between the inhabitants of the ghetto and the official economy.

However, no matter how distant, "the rest of the world" remains a presence and is never entirely forgotten in the book. Sudhir Venkatesh goes to some lengths to demonstrate how municipal policies, or the workings of the Greater Chicago economy, or even variations in drug prices have an impact on the ghetto economy. He demonstrates that the position of the local police force is ambiguous, simply because it has no choice but to use indigenous institutions of social regulation and yet cannot condone either their illegal activities or the way they compete with the official legal system. And, although the American way of life has no place in these surroundings, it is surprising to read how Bird — to take an example from the book — thinks of her life (which, for an outside observer, looks like the result of poverty and coercion and seems to be merely a strategy for survival) as a project, as a way to further her own social mobility (40). The "sociodicy" of the American Dream has been assimilated, it seems, by the very people it has left out.

Just as prostitution is sometimes thought of as a strategy to promote social mobility, the line between right and wrong is never clearly traced in the ghetto. When the local preacher rents his church to a local gang so they can organize a game of poker, or when a preacher enjoys a prostitute's free favors in exchange for services rendered, Elijah Anderson's famous typology (*Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*, 1990), which distinguishes between those who are motivated by "decent values" and those who are guided by "street values," is deprived of any foundation.

Clearly, *Off the Books* is not simply a report on an economy that manages to stay out of the account books. It is also a journey into a realm that has until now remained largely outside books other than the biographies perhaps of a few African Americans who have managed to make their way out of the ghetto. It is nevertheless to be regretted that Sudhir Venkatesh remains "off the books" himself in the sense that he prefers to concentrate on the restitution of his ethnographic study and does not draw sufficiently on the theoretical implications that the complexity that his ethnographic work would have allowed. He might, for example, have attempted to take on concepts such as those of social capital, or effect of closure between the upper and lower classes, or even those of habitus or rational agents. Although his work with the economist Steven Levitt leaves little doubt as to his approach, Sudhir Venkatesh remains vague about his definition of the agent, for example. In the same way, giving details of the conditions in which his ethnographic work was carried out and about his rapport with the local gang, with which he seems to have established strong ties would have been helpful. Venkatesh shows that his South Asian origins ("neither Black nor White") allowed him to assume a privileged position, but the reader would like to know more. The fluid narrative occasionally serves to mystify the reader and does not always reveal the "bribes" that are a part of any ethnographic study undertaken in difficult circumstances. To obtain more information, it is necessary to read the methodological essay published by the author in the journal *Ethnography* (2002), *Freakonomics* (2005), or to buy Venkatesh's latest work, *Gang Leader for a Day* (2008).

Still, these are minor quibbles and do not alter the general quality of Sudhir Venkatesh's book. His long ethnographic marathon has clearly paid off, and his book is essential reading for anyone interested in the black American ghetto and more particularly in underground economies.

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