

Informal Ethnography in New York

By Francois BONNET

In an unusual genre between fieldwork account and memoir, Sudhir Venkatesh proposes a sociological exploration of the informal economy of New York City. His ethnography of drug-dealers and sex-workers constitutes an occasion for him to reflect upon the limitations of “academic sociology”.

Reviewed: Sudhir Venkatesh, *Floating City. A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York's Underground Economy*, Penguin, 2013, 304 p.

Floating City is not a social scientific work, but it will appeal to social scientists—sociologists firstly, but also anthropologists and economists—as its ostensible concern is New York City’s informal economy. The book deals with the informal economy, mostly sex work, but it is also a memoir, with a narrative arc and subplots; a melancholic, bittersweet reflection on ethnography; an attack on professional (as opposed to *public*) sociology; it is also about New York as a global city and a stern moral condemnation of inequality.

The Hardships of an Ethnography of Sex Workers and Drug Dealers

The plot revolves around Sudhir Venkatesh’s attempts at getting access to New York’s informal economy, with glimpses at Venkatesh’s career and divorce. After having spent his graduate education studying the Chicago ghetto, with a special focus on the drug trade, and after a stint at Harvard, Venkatesh is hired by Columbia University. He wants to continue studying the informal economy, but this time in New York, and with a focus on sex work. To this end he meets the various protagonists of the book, starting with Shine, the drug dealer who wants to expand his operations outside social housing; Manjun, a porn store owner; Angela and Carla, two poor sex workers; Margot, a cooperative madam; and Analise, the Harvard girl from an elite and wealthy family who also works as a madam. By the end of the book, these people have disappeared, died, or do not want to talk to Venkatesh anymore.

Indeed, *Floating City* is a personal reflection on the challenges of ethnography. As Venkatesh writes, “many social scientists study inequality for their entire lives—I was hardly the only one—but there were probably fewer than a dozen who chose direct interpersonal contact over weeks and months and years” (p. 250). The vocation of the ethnographer is to spend time with people, to create and sustain meaningful relationships, in order to *get access*. This is especially relevant in the context of the informal economy, where actors have to operate outside the gaze of legitimate institutions. Venkatesh is candid about the problems involved, and most of the book can be read as a succession of disappointments. Research subjects end up distrustful, bitter, or associate the ethnographer to a moment in their life they

prefer to not come back to. They feel betrayed. All this creates a toll on the author, who of course has the privilege of coming home to more comfort than most of his informants. The personal burden gets worse when people are driven into inextricable situations: “It was hard for me to watch Carla, but this was all part of ethnography: you learn about social life by watching people screw up, put themselves in danger, or otherwise act the fool” (p. 114). *Floating City* illustrates how difficult and painful collecting ethnographic data can be.

The book is informative about the informal economy. The story of Manjun, the porn store owner who rents the back room of his store to sex workers and one day disappears, is particularly heart-wrenching. If Manjun had landed a decently-paying job as a postal worker instead of having to work in the informal economy, he would not have ended up doing the things he did. Venkatesh documents the workings of sex work brokers (also known as pimps or madams), a notoriously under-researched subfield of sex work studies. Far from being the parasitical, exploitative figure that has come to dominate our understanding of procuring, the madams of *Floating City* spend their days educating their girls on how to please customers across racial boundaries and when to give freebies; managing appointments, hotel personnel and boyfriends; laundering money, sometimes with cash payments to landlords; finding drugs, babysitters and clothes, and so on. A key problem in the informal economy is the settlement of disputes. The market for paid sex is not registered at the Chamber of commerce, and commercial disputes are not solved in courts. In the informal economy, it is not possible to ask the justice system to give an impartial look at a conflict and impose a settlement ultimately backed by the coercive capacity of the police. As a consequence, violence ensues. Shines beats people up, Manjun gets beaten up, so does Carla, and nobody goes to the police or the courts, because selling drugs or sex is illegal. Sex workers, in particular, are gravely endangered by the informality of their trade. At a time when European politicians think of criminalizing sex work (*via* customers), *Floating City* is a powerful reminder that informalizing poor people is probably the best way to make their lives even more miserable. The emphasis on dispute resolution in the book is an excellent way to not lose sight of the bigger picture when one is tempted to marvel at the agency and resourcefulness of actors involved in the informal economy. There is no romanticizing of the informal poor in *Floating City*.

Academic Sociology vs. Public Sociology

By design (half-memoir, half-social science), the book is a systematic attack on professional sociology. *Floating City* marks the disillusion of Venkatesh with academic sociology. The book tells how the younger Venkatesh, freshly hired by Columbia, is told by his colleagues of the “lab coat” variety that only hardcore scientific publications matter for tenure. But Venkatesh does not believe in academic, professional sociology. In a revealing exchange with the chair of his department, Peter Bearman, he writes: “But I want to reach a bigger audience, I said. I want to reach people who would never crack a sociology book. How is that a bad thing?”. Bearman has no patience for “public sociology”, as the term has been popularized by former ASA president Michael Burawoy. When Venkatesh completes a documentary film about his Chicago informants who are being displaced from their demolished social housing high-rises, he writes about his colleagues: “they looked at me as if I’d just shown them a sweater I’d knitted, not a new professional venture” (pp. 167-168). *Floating City* continues the public-oriented path opened with his 2008 memoir, *Gang Leader for a Day*, which tells the personal story behind the research for *American Project* (2000) and *Off the Books* (2006), which are more traditionally academic.

What seem to bother Venkatesh is less the quantitative-qualitative divide than the focus of much of professional sociology on technical questions with which normal people cannot relate with. Sociology is not sociography: it has to have a relationship with emerging social forms, with social processes and phenomena which are not yet obvious but highly significant. Venkatesh has collected detailed economic data on hundreds of sex workers. He will probably publish an academic article about the pricing of paid sex according to a number of variables. Is that sociology, sociography or economics? According to Venkatesh, the real sociology begins when boundary-breaking questions are asked. For instance, what is the socio-economic status of Analise, the girl from the wealthy Northeastern elite who is a pimp? Is she just a statistical freak, an outlier on the scatter plot, or is she the vanguard of a new social group working at informal economy's fringes? Another example is Shine, the African American drug dealer who finally manages to sell cocaine to wallstreeters (and not just crack to his Harlem neighbors). What new concepts and new categories should we forge to make sense of Shine's bridging of the cultural capital gap? These are questions that are not interesting to "academic formalists", who tend to like to work with surveys with standardized questions based on standardized concepts.

From Chicago to New York

Floating City is also about researching New York. Venkatesh made a name for himself as an ethnographer of a housing project in the South Side of Chicago, working at the University of Chicago, in reference to the Chicago tradition of urban analysis, from Park to William Julius Wilson. Venkatesh quickly discovers that New York is not Chicago. This point seems trivial but actually raises a number of questions. Chicago is a city of neighborhoods, with extreme racial and ethnic segregation, where the concepts of community, local ties, informal regulation ("social control", Chicago-style) make sense. As Venkatesh writes: "Now that was a setting handmade for a sociologist" (p. 23). In a way, there is something comforting that the concepts that Chicago sociologists devised to study Chicago are at least relevant for the sociological study of Chicago. But Chicago urban sociology is not universally valid, as Venkatesh realizes when he finds himself theoretically lost in New York. New York is about mobility, ambition, where "the key to success was the talent to use and lose improvised social ties" (p. 270). Community and neighborhood are synonymous in Chicago, but not in New York; as a consequence, Venkatesh understands he needs "a sociology built less on neighborhoods and more on the networks anthropologist Clifford Geertz called 'webs of significance'" (p. 25).

Floating City being a memoir and not a treatise in urban sociology, Venkatesh focuses on sketching a specific personality for New York rather than elaborating on what this theory of New York would look like. Another urban theme is New York, the global city. Drawing on Saskia Sassen, Venkatesh situates the dealings of his informants in the context of a highly unequal metropolis where the rich does not even reckon that reckless exploitation of the poor is necessary to their wealth. Here I think that the global city framework overshadows good old nation-state dynamics such as penal or welfare states. The fact that the United States criminalizes sex work (except for Nevada and Rhodes Island) is maybe more consequential to the lives of New York sex workers than the fact that it is a global city. Sex workers in Amsterdam make a living in an entirely different legal environment that protects them from some of the violence, exploitation, and powerlessness that is depicted in *Floating City*.

Social and Moral Boundaries between the Poor and the Undeserving Rich

Finally, the book is dispassionately yet powerfully indignant about inequality. Venkatesh is not an author of exclamation points and self-righteousness, but *Floating City* has a strong political and moral undertone when it comes to racial and social injustice. This point is introduced by a seemingly innocuous rumination over “cultural capital” and the idea that success in informal New York relies on so-called “soft” skills: “In the new world, culture rules. How you act, how you dress and how you think are part of your tool kit to success. (It’s a dangerous thought because it could easily lead to blaming the poor, but it’s been increasingly accepted by other sociologists)” (p. 201). Venkatesh is fascinated with the invisible force that prevents the poor from crossing boundaries, and protects the rich when they are down on their luck. This invisible force is cultural capital, which makes poor people look like poor people even when they try not to, and which surrounds rich people with ease and privilege. Precisely about the sense of entitlement of the rich, Venkatesh writes that “My first thought was that money could never buy this, but then I realized that only money could buy it” (p. 224).

This analysis becomes subtle critique when Venkatesh contrasts the rich’s and the poor’s relation to money. When Manjun and Carla keep invoking the divine, trying to justify and rationalize or socialize their earnings to purify them from their origin, Analise, the elite white girl, is a monster of cynicism. All the rich kids to whom Venkatesh has access are repugnant, from the J.B.’s father who pays Hell’s Angels to dismiss a strike to J.B. himself, who demonstrates with his life and works that wealth corrupts. Even as informants, the rich and the poor are not of equal moral worth: Carla, Manjun and Angela all are extraordinarily generous with Venkatesh when the rich kids make sure to manage boundaries. Venkatesh’s egalitarian and meritocratic ethos is best expressed by a friend of Manjun (the South Asian porn store owner), who says: “Surviving is easy (...). We are so much smarter than most of these people, so much better educated, and we work so hard and do nasty things, but they succeed without effort. And the demons visit you at night” (p. 92).

All in all, *Floating City* is a page-turner in a genre that has yet to be defined. Venkatesh shows that “the poor live in the same world as you and me” (p. 23) (and he adds “it’s the job of the sociologist to demonstrate these relationships”). It is not a book that provides literature reviews; it is more evocative than thorough. But it is thought-provoking, because it constructs an object of study that should speak to most people interested in the social sciences, and because it challenges the way academics communicate their findings.

Published in booksandideas.net, September 23rd, 2013.

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