Waverly DUCK, *No Way Out. Precarious Living in the Shadow of Poverty and Drug Dealing*
(Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2015)

After Alice Goffman's *On the Run*[1] and Jacques and Wright's *Code of the Suburb,*[2] another ethnographic volume investigating US crime has been released by the University of Chicago Press. The author, Waverly Duck, is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. Duck's work began when he went to "collect ethnographic data about an impoverished black neighborhood to buttress an argument for mitigating circumstances in a federal death-penalty case" [IX]. He was tasked with explaining how the code of the street[3] could have influenced the behavior of Jonathan Wilson, a neighborhood drug dealer. Duck seized the opportunity to conduct in-depth research, which then took more than 10 years to publish [X].

To conduct his ethnographic work, Duck volunteered in camps and in an after-school program; he also worked as a community organizer at a neighborhood center [21]. In addition to this first-hand experience, Waverly Duck socialized with several people from the neighborhood: drug dealers, missionaries, single mothers, young fathers, and elderly people. He also wanted to understand the outsiders' vision, in particular the views of the criminal justice professionals. He thus regularly patrolled with a police officer. At the same, discretion was key in this research. Duck was "especially careful not do anything that would draw the attention of the more powerful dealers and suppliers. Most of my photographs were taken during the day, when drug sales were infrequent" [43].

The goal of the research was rather straightforward: understanding how all these different people managed to live together. How did the inhabitants and the drug dealers manage to remain safe? And what were the rules governing daily life in this community? [1]. The main thesis of the book is that "contrary to popular misconceptions,

[1] Alice Goffman, 2014, *On The Run*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

[2] Scott Jacques and Richard Wright, 2015, *Code of the Suburb: Inside the World of Young Middle-Class Drug Dealers*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

[3] Elijah Anderson, 1999, *Code of the Street*, New York, Norton.

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conditions in such communities do not indicate a lack of social order or morality, but rather a highly developed social organization that enables people to survive under increasingly desperate circumstances" [3]. To support his claim, Waverly Duck quotes a 78 year-old woman who explained to him during a conversation that she felt protected by the drug dealers: "they weren't going to let no one else break in on you" [1]. This type of response, Duck claims, "was typical rather than exceptional" [1]. In other words, "the culture of this community should be seen as an adaptation to isolation and poverty. It is not the cause, but rather the consequence, of racial isolation and poverty" [8]. Duck draws on the code of the street concept developed by Elijah Anderson but stretches it out to integrate not only the interactions between *insiders*, but also those involving *insiders* and *outsiders* [5]. Furthermore, whereas Anderson studied Philadelphia's inner-city ghetto, Duck's work "offers valuable insights into similar communities in other places, particularly the many small cities in economically depressed regions of the northeastern and midwestern United States" [9]. Contrary to the classic cultural stance, Waverly Duck focuses on what he calls *interaction order*, that is on "the expectations and rules of a place rather than its people" [16]. In other words, the social practices are considered as disconnected from the beliefs and values, for the inhabitants of these disadvantaged areas often have the same aspirations as the middle-class.

Jonathan's case would give Duck a first-hand example of the neighborhood organization (Chapter 1), for his "story illustrates a path that many young boys in the neighborhood followed into drug dealing" [30]. Jonathan comes from a family struggling to remain in the middle-class. He blames his mother for having left the house after she discovered that Jonathan's father was cheating on her; Jonathan thinks that she should have stopped him from hanging around with the drug dealers. The problem is that "the first arrest is the beginning of a downhill trajectory into a life of crime" [32]. The drug trafficking is so well organized that it replicates the characteristics of a professional trajectory [Chapter 2]. Interestingly enough, the dealers are not perceived by the inhabitants as the cause of their problems: the causes are to be found outside of the community. For example, the drug dealers attend funerals when a brawl goes awry [41]. However, this does not mean that the people living there morally approve what is happening, nor that their values lead them to support drug trafficking. In fact, Waverly Duck explains that "there is always some discrepancy between the norms and actions," and that since

"the practices that so closely circumscribe daily interaction support an illegal activity that conflicts with residents' deeply held values, they have no opportunity to act on their values" [46]. In other words, "the social order of such neighborhoods rests on the nature of the underground or illegal economic enterprise and the orderly practices necessary to succeed in it, not on what people believe, value, or want for themselves and others" [47]. The people who do not take part in the illegal activities have limited access to mainstream social resources, and their economic growth is thereby impeded. Thus, they are forced to deal with the reality of the neighborhood and with these practices that they do not value but that are geographically close to them and that they can observe every single day.

The area's social and racial isolation acts as an additional obstacle (Chapter 3). In 1994, several poor African American families went to live in Lyford Street—a small neighborhood located in the suburbs of Bristol Hill—following the temporary closure of the projects. Although older residents describe this event as the turning point, the exodus of the White and Black middle-class had already begun, step-by-step, in the 1940s, "family by family, house by house" [63]. In fact, the area's decline ~~is~~ was not so much the consequence of the arrival of these poor families in the 1990s, but rather the aftermath of ill-conceived housing policies that gave way to racial segregation and "concentrated the poor" [64].

In this deprived area, information sharing is key for the conservation of the community (Chapter 4). The gossip networks help to render daily life more predictable, the information allowing the inhabitants to understand and anticipate practices and expected reactions in a given social situation. Yet, there is a distinction between gossip and snitching: information is to be shared with insiders only. Thus, "if a person is known to be providing outsiders with information that will lead others to be punished, he or she may be excluded from information-sharing networks" [67]. The definition of a snitch is quite blurred: "a person considered a snitch is generally part of a group that commits a crime and later provides information in hopes of receiving a lighter sentence or exculpating himself entirely" [69]. All of this explains why outsiders, in particular the police, use the networks as a resource in the solving of crimes for which they would otherwise obtain very limited information. Penetrating the information-sharing networks is not that easy, however, for the inhabitants deploy defensive strategies to gauge the people they talk to: they want to be sure that the information is going to remain in the neighborhood. This suspicion is clearly visible vis-à-vis those who

ask too much questions, a situation that Waverly Duck encountered during the course of his research [74-75].

Interestingly, there is a gap between the insiders' and outsiders' understanding of the criminal activities (Chapter 5). The inhabitants understand the events as well as the reasons that might have led to one or another murder. Their social knowledge constitutes an advantage over the criminal justice system professionals, who often interpret the killings as the result of gang wars. Not only did the locals understand the reasons, but they also admitted that they found some of these murders to be justified according to the neighborhood rules. Hence, it is only in the case where they believe the criminal act was *not* legitimate, that they might be more cooperative with the police and justice system [93].

Through the life stories of six African Americans of the neighborhoods (Chapter 6), Waverly Duck sheds light on "the forces that push these men into poverty and keep them there" [96], that is on this centrifugal force resulting from the combined effects of "family dynamics, inadequate education, unemployment, debt, drug dealing, contact with law enforcement, imprisonment, and criminal records" [96]. Usman is one of these men. A former convict, he obtained a business degree from a prestigious university. Despite this undergraduate degree and a non-negligible professional experience, Usman would have difficulties finding a steady job because of his criminal records [98]. Dave constitutes another example of this centrifugal force, with his difficulties in romantic relationships. His drug dealing activities make him vulnerable, not only because of the physical and judicial dangers he has to face, but also because he knows that his girlfriend might use this to exert pressure on him in the course of an argument [99]. This situation is very problematic since the poorer African American communities have a very skewed marriage pool with an important deficit of young males because of imprisonment and high rates of mortality. In fact, the women's choice is even more limited given that, among the available men, many occupy marginal social positions characterized by low incomes. This lack of control over a principal masculine trait (earning income for the home) is offset by a hyper-sexualization of behaviors. For example, Fred "highlighted the one thing that he was able to provide: sex" [105], an activity that allowed him to accumulate social capital and to create social relationships with people he could rely on. Not only are these men kept away from employment and education; they also are suspicious vis-à-vis the social institutions that are supposed to protect their rights, such as the

police, for they know that they can easily shift from a the status of victim to that of a criminal. This is precisely why Justin did not even bother to call 911 when he was illegally ejected from his apartment after his landlord changed the lock [110].

Nor is women's position enviable either. Hence, Benita's precarious situation is the focus of an entire chapter (Chapter 7): "every few months, she was evicted for not paying rent and had to move, she lost her job because of some crisis related to her children at home, or she changed her phone number because she couldn't pay the bill" [120]. The emergence, since the end of the 1990s, of a poorly paid service economy for non-educated workers, combined with the reform of social assistance and the steadily growing incarceration rates of poor young Black men, has had side-effects: "corroding" the already fragile networks on which Black women used to rely [129]. Hence, the incarceration of the two fathers of Benita's children indirectly affected her income. Interestingly, Benita does not blame social conditions and external forces. She sees her situation as the result of personal choices and of her parents' failure: this individualistic vision strongly contrasts with what we learn from urban sociology.

Duck's research undeniably enriches the urban sociology and delinquency literature. The distinction that he outlines between the cultural codes of a neighborhood and its inhabitants' personal values is particularly interesting. Indeed, several examples of empirical research measure culture by interrogating individual beliefs, interpreting expected social practices as what people really want for themselves. Yet, although it is theoretically possible that community culture and individual values are correlated, there might also be a gap between the two. In other words, Duck shows that researchers should not assume their equivalence. Through concrete examples, we see that these people leading precarious lives cannot always do as they wish, and that graduating from a prestigious university does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with having a stable job. They also have to slip through the cracks of the criminal justice system, which does not seem that evident when we know than one young Black man in three will end up in prison during his lifetime. Thus, in a neighborhood where drug trafficking leads to a redistribution of incomes from White middle-class clients to the poor Black families of the community, taking part in criminal activities could appear as a necessary evil. This would explain why the inhabitants do not blame the drug dealers for their problems.

Yet, we can also address to Waverly Duck the same critics that Loïc Wacquant addressed to Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street*.[4] Duck's conception of culture is quite mechanistic—the constrained adaptation to external structural conditions—so that the inhabitants' behavior is the forced result of a situation over which they have no control. But Duck precisely departs from Anderson when he distinguishes cultural practices from individual values, a distinction that leaves space for personal strategies and diversity. It thus helps us to understand why the members of a community subjected to the same structural forces do not make the same choices. For example, they do not all take part in drug trafficking, even though they all are confronted by the serious lack of economic opportunities. Furthermore, by going beyond the distinction outlined by Anderson—probably too simplistically—between delinquent families and honest families, Waverly Duck sheds light on the intertwining, in a single person or family, of conventional and delinquent activities (such as Benita who drives to work even though her licence has been suspended).

Hence, "de-individualizing" the cultural norms and the social expectations paradoxically amounts to reasserting the heterogeneity of individual trajectories. The multiplicity of possible positions in the social field mirrors the mobilization of different types of capital that all have in common the fact of being an organized reaction to precariousness: a woman could take advantage of the law to request money from her child's father, while a man could use his sexual performance ~~s~~ to underscore his masculinity and establish social links with women that might be able to support him financially. In brief, this research maintains a fine equilibrium between the social imperatives of the code of the street, on the one hand, and all these individual behaviors that are not ruled by the code, on the other. Those individual behaviors are in a certain way "infra-public," but they still contain valuable information for those who want to understand the social organization of an isolated US neighborhood and the strategies that its inhabitants have developed to fight deprivation.

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[4] Loïc Wacquant, 2002, "Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography", *American Journal of Sociology*, 107 (6): 1468-1532.