Code of the suburb: inside the world of young middle-class drug dealers, by Scott Jacques and Richard Wright, London, The University of Chicago Press, 2015, 194 pp., US$25.00 £17.50 (paperback), ISBN 9780226164113

Ethnographic work that directly or tangentially analyses the motives of 'drug dealers' and the mechanics of their illicit trades has traditionally focused on individuals, groups and communities living and operating on the margins of society[1]. Studies – such as those by Felix Padilla[2], Philippe Bourgouis[3] or Elijah Anderson[4] – have garnered crucial insights into the inordinate social and economic challenges faced by many embroiled in the illicit drug trade and have challenged many erroneous assumptions regarding them and their trade ('[drug] pusher myth' as Ross Coomber[5] terms them). Vital though they are, the disproportionate level of empirical focus fails to challenge the widespread contention that drug markets are principally the preserve of the urban poor or people of colour,[6] which national surveys indicates is not the case.[7]

Code of the Suburb: Inside the World of Young Middle-Class Drug Dealers complements a small yet growing body of ethnographic work that is progressively broadening the empirical focus of this highly expansive underground economy. In this distinctive account, criminologists Scott Jacques and Richard Wright direct attention towards an almost sanctified demographic: affluent upper-middle-class suburbanites. The book recounts and analyses the lives and operational practices of 30 young middle and upper-middle class, (principally) white male 'dealers' aged in their late-teens and early twenties, who lived and plied their trade in Peachville (pseudonym), a relatively small but highly affluent American city in Georgia. Within Peachville's leafy surroundings, and outside of their legitimate commitments, these young men bought, sold and consumed a range of illegal drugs.

The book's seven core chapters explore the composition and functioning of a discreet, yet flourishing, retail drug market. The book details: the underlying rationales for those who embarked upon an interim dealing career at some point during late adolescence (Chapter 1); the logistical methods by which stock was sourced and distributed and the social rules that dictated its trade (Chapters 2 and 3); perceptions and mitigation of risks that stemmed from the police and dealers' parents (Chapter 4); dealers' experiences of victimisation (e.g. being robbed or defrauded) and the protective techniques used to guard against such acts (e.g. using a person's race or class as proxy for potential risk and avoiding business with them) (Chapters 5 and 6); and, finally, market cessation among the cohort (Chapter 7). The final chapter (Chapter 8) juxtaposes key findings/observations from the study against the authors' earlier research on 'urban' drug markets, i.e. those frequented and operated by more marginalised populations.

The book is well ordered and insightful, and each chapter proffers fresh and interesting insight into arenas of this multi-billion-dollar economy that are largely unstudied and under-policed. Perhaps, what is most striking about this account is the pervasiveness of illicit drugs and the cultural and social importance drugs held among a youthful cohort growing up in privileged familial and community environments. Drugs were a seemingly integral component of social life and a routine feature of both weekend and school days: it was 'the glue that bonded these adolescents' social lives. Drugs gave them something to do, a reason to be together' (P21). It is telling how, for some, 'getting high' superseded the recreational pursuits we might typically associate with middle-American youth culture – as one user-dealer drily explained: 'We don't go to the arcade; we don't do any of that shit. We don't go to the ice cream parlor. We drive around in our vehicles and smoke [pot]' (P21). The unwavering demand for illegal drugs by friends, co-workers and classmates provided easily accessible and tempting opportunities on which to capitalise.

Satisfying their social networks' consumer demand for drugs – as Jacques and Wight's participants did – brought with it both economic and social rewards. Indeed, it was principally the social rewards that motivated these young men to deal drugs in the first place. In the absence of conventional social status (which the authors contend derived principally from holding a middle-class occupation) 'coolness' (i.e. social desirability) was of paramount importance. Drug dealing greatly aided the 'pursuit of coolness' as it provided sellers with

'free drugs' which could be shared (co-consumed) with peers; drug dealing also provided a surplus income that enabled the consumption of a range of 'coolness-enhancing items', e.g. an expensive sound-system for their car. 'Coolness' was a concept used throughout the book to help explain much of the group's behaviour (from drug use, to the absence of violent retaliation). At times, however, coolness was perhaps overemphasised at the expense of other possible theoretical insights.

The account, though often rich in description, is at times vague. Though this does not detract from the book's overall narrative, I felt the inclusion of certain key details would have been useful. For instance, though we are aware that these criminal careers were only transitory, there is no mention of the actual duration of these dealing careers (it is thus unclear just how committed or integral these individuals were to the drug trade). Similarly, though victimisation within the marketplace was cited as a crucial turning point for many, we are not told how many episodes of victimisation occurred (nor over what period) – thereby making it difficult to judge how risky this business was. Crucially, the chapter that explores desistance left me wondering precisely why and when individuals terminated their careers: at some point each individual reassessed the risks of the market and the importance of being cool and decided they were 'better to get out before it was too late' (P136). Such oversights do not, in my opinion, detract from the significance or poignancy of Jacques and Wright's account.

Code of the Suburb provides a stark counter-narrative to a literature heavily centred on marginalised urban populations and is one of the few criminological or ethnographic accounts to document the everyday nature of illicit drug use and dealing among the privileged middle classes. Jacques and Wright's account neatly illustrates the often-ignored truth that drug use *and* sales traverse class and racial boundaries.[8] The book also highlights the ineffectiveness and disparity of drug law enforcement in the United States. Without the encumbrance of a criminal record or time-served in a correctional facility, the socially and economically privileged are free to age-out of these criminal roles unharmed and largely unnoticed; unlike their urban (marginalised) counterparts they are able to reap the rewards offered by 'conventional' (i.e. middle class) society. Code of the Suburb: Inside the World of Young Middle-Class Drug Dealers is a must-read for those interested in this burgeoning (criminal) trade, criminality among the middle classes, youth culture and youth transition.

Notes

1. Page and Merrill Singer, Comprehending Drug Use.
2. Padilla, The Gang as an American Enterprise.
3. Bourgois, In Search of Respect.
4. Anderson, Code of the Street.
5. Coomber, Pusher Myths.
6. Bean, Drugs and Crime.
7. Alexander, The New Jim Crow; Shiner, Drug Use and Social Change.
8. Alexander, The New Jim Crow; Shiner, Drug Use and Social Change.

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