

A CRITICAL ACCOUNT OF THE
RELATIONSHIPS OF EXPLOITATION
IN PHILIPPE BOURGOIS'S

In Search of Respect

Phillippe Bourgois's *In Search of Respect* is an award-winning ethnographic account of selling crack in El Barrio. Bourgois inserts himself into the fabric of the East Harlem Puerto Rican community and studies the "complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society."¹ He argues that street culture provides "an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity," but ultimately shows that "the street culture of resistance is predicated on the destruction of its participants and the community harboring them."²

Several series of complex and often exploitative relationships connect the members of the community to each other, their families, and the dominant mainstream culture. For example, Bourgois discusses the realities of being poor in one of the most expensive cities in America. "According to the official statistics, my neighbors on the street should have been homeless, starving and dressed in rags," given their earning power in the legal New York City economy.³ Instead, his friends and neighbors embraced the underground economy to make ends meet, through anything from drug dealing to off-the-books garment labor.⁴ Bourgois also provides an insightful account of gender relations on the street, the role of gang rape as a male right of passage, and the relationship of domestic violence with to male labor-market impotence.⁵ Overall, Bourgois provides a fair and insightful analysis of the lives of his friends and the relationships of exploitation that permeate their lives. Bourgois's analysis, however, falls just short of the mark. This is because Bourgois either overlooks or undervalues two crucial sets of exploitative relationships that lay the foundation for the success of his research. His failure to address these relationships in a straightforward

and intellectually honest manner undermines his credibility as a researcher and ultimately sells short an otherwise exceptional undertaking.

The first relationship Bourgois overlooks and undervalues is the relationship between himself and his young son, Emiliano. As an ethnographer, Bourgois needed to live within the community he chose to study. This meant moving his family, including his infant son, to El Barrio. It is unclear exactly how old Emiliano was throughout the course of the book. Emiliano likely spent the first three to four years of his life in El Barrio.

The second relationship of exploitation Bourgois overlooks and undervalues is his relationship with the crack dealers. Bourgois's research hinged on the extent to which the dealers were willing to open up to him and provide him with sincere accounts of their lives. At the same time, the exploitation was not unidirectional. The dealers used Bourgois and his project as a means to gaining the respect they were unable to find in their interactions with mainstream society.

I. EMILIANO

Bourgois moved to El Barrio, a neighborhood that is presumably less safe than the university community in which he would have otherwise lived, and Bourgois used Emiliano as an instrument in his integration into the East Harlem community. Critical to Bourgois's exploitation of his son is his simultaneous exploitation of his audience. He often reveals something unfavorable about the El Barrio environment for his son between critiques of mainstream racist and classist perceptions of East Harlem and people of color. So framed, Bourgois avoids reflecting on his own choice and redirects his audience away from critically evaluating his choices.

First, Bourgois exploits Emiliano in moving to El Barrio because the neighborhood is dangerous, and Emiliano is incapable of deciding for himself where to live. To some degree, Bourgois is aware of the heightened danger in his neighborhood. For example, in his first thirteen months in El Barrio, Bourgois saw the deadly shotgun shooting of the crack-dealing mother of a three-year-old from the window of his family apartment. He also saw the bombing and machine-gunning of a gambling establishment from the same window. He saw a shootout and police chase outside the pizza parlor where he was eating with his wife, the fire-bombing of a heroin house on his block, and countless brutal fights.⁶ Bourgois notes that “[n]one of these particular incidents came close to threatening me physically, but their traumatic nature and prominent public visibility contributed to a sense of an omnipresent threatening reality that extended far beyond the statistical possibility of becoming a victim.”⁷ Proving his point, gunshots pepper his narrative. He records them on at least eleven different occasions.⁸

Additionally, Bourgois notes that exposure to violence can have traumatic effects on very young children. “[A] child does not have to be the object of physical violence to be emotionally scarred for life. Simply witnessing violence can induce long-term trauma.”⁹ Bourgois speculates that the “knock-down fights” between Candy and Primo that her children witnessed—Bourgois reports approximately two—must have inflicted profound emotional scars.”¹⁰

Bourgois accepts both that there is a greater statistical probability of being victimized in El Barrio, and that witnessing violence and brutality can affect a child emotionally; however, he staunchly refuses to reflect on how his choice to live in El Barrio either did, or could have, affected Emiliano. When he references his decision to live in El Barrio, he frames his discussions with critiques of white racist mainstream culture. For example, his first reference is in the opening pages of the book in a section called *Racism and the Culture of Terror*. “It is not merely the police who enforce inner-city apartheid in the United States but also racist ‘common sense’ that persuades whites, and middle-class outsiders of all colors, that it is too dangerous for them to venture into poor African-American or Latino neighborhoods.”¹¹ Following his identification of racist common sense, he draws the comparison to his personal experience of the decision to live in El Barrio:

For example, when I moved to East Harlem, virtually all of my friends, whether white, black or Latino/a, berated me for being crazy and irresponsible. Those who still visited me would often phone me in advance to make sure I would meet them downstairs as they descended from their taxis. Indeed, most people still consider me crazy and irresponsible for having ‘forced’ my wife and infant son to live for three and a half years in an East Harlem tenement. When we left the neighborhood in mid-1990, several of my friends congratulated us, and all of them breathed a sigh of relief.¹²

Deconstructing the progression of Bourgois’s discussion reveals that he makes it extraordinarily difficult to think critically about or to actually criticize his decision as a parent to move to El Barrio. First, he discusses his decision in a section called *Racism and the Culture of Terror*. Second, he identifies “racist common sense” as one of the structures enforcing apartheid in the United States. While there may be substantial validity to both the subtitle and the identification of racist common sense, Bourgois immediately draws a connection between these loaded concepts and his

own decision to move his family to El Barrio. So to question his decision, as his own friends did, is an exercise of racist common sense. While Bourgois may have a valid point about the residential segregation in major United States cities, the macro-level discussion focusing at the level of adult movement and integration is not entirely analogous to moving a vulnerable individual who is incapable of either deciding for himself where to live or protecting himself once he gets there. Thus, not only does Bourgois exploit his son by moving to El Barrio, but also Bourgois exploits his audience by implying that critical consideration of his decision as an ethnographer and parent is racist.

Additionally, El Barrio may have been particularly dangerous for Emiliano because he has cerebral palsy. Of the few things that motivated Caesar to attend school, the opportunity to be cruel to children with special needs was a major one:

We used to come to school to fuck Special Ed niggas up-kick their asses. Because they had the retarded here, the ones that used to walk like this [scraping his toes, inflecting his knees, and pronating his arms to imitate someone with cerebral palsy]. We used to beat the shit out of them.¹³

Caesar substantiated his assertions by recounting specific acts of violence he perpetrated against a severely disabled child named Lucas that go well beyond cruel childhood teasing and poking. "One day, we had a rope and we pretended that we were going to hang him in the gym. We pull't him up a little bit, but then we dropped his when he started coughing... Another time, we stole a rubber hammer from the science class, and hammered his head."¹⁴ Like Lucas, Emiliano was particularly vulnerable in El Barrio because of his cerebral palsy.

Bourgois does not fully address Emiliano's special risk as it relates to his choice of residency. He follows Caesar's cruel story admitting that it was one of the first times that he "personally confronted the contradictions of anthropology's methodological caveat of suspending moral judgment. At the time, I was still in shock over having to deal with my own son's physical challenges, and I never forgave Caesar for his cruel brutality."¹⁵

Again, Bourgois diverts his audience from evaluating critically his decision to live in El Barrio as it related to his child with cerebral palsy. He reports Caesar's horrendous story, but then he channels it for the reader. First he reminds the reader that he is precluded from making moral judgment as an anthropologist. Second, he assures the reader that he was trying to cope with the painful diagnosis. In the end, Bourgois lets the reader know that he *did* pass moral judgment and was unable to forgive Caesar. For Bourgois, this is

the end of the inquiry, and the issue is closed. While no doubt it was extraordinarily painful for him, it would have been more satisfying had he explained in depth how he reconciled his mandate as an anthropologist with his mandate as a *father*. It is a gap in his analysis that he glosses over without challenging himself and his audience to question, and he effectively dodges any moral judgment his audience may make about his choice.

While Bourgois exploited Emiliano in exposing him to a potentially dangerous environment, he also exploited Emiliano in a more tangible, instrumental sense. "I had been trying to penetrate a new and particularly active crack-copping corner, and had been taking [Emiliano] along with me to allay the suspicions of the sellers that I might be an undercover cop."¹⁶ People at the corner would call out their crack brand names by the color of the cap on the vial; for example, pinktops, redtops, blacktops. Emiliano's first words were "tops, tops, tops."¹⁷

Bourgois similarly frames his anecdote to divert critical attention away from his decisions as a parent. Before explaining that he would take Emiliano to the crack-copping corner regularly, Bourgois explains that "El Barrio has a special energy and love for children."¹⁸ When he would take Emiliano out in the neighborhood, countless people would bless him, hold him, and adore him. Bourgois contrasts the child-friendly El Barrio community to his Anglo community on the other side of the racial divide:

When I took Emiliano to Anglo-dominated parties, I noticed that he was disappointed with the adults. He expected a more appreciatively physical reaction from them. Very few of my white friends and acquaintances even knew how to hold my baby comfortably; none of them grabbed him spontaneously out of my arms for a cuddle and a blessing... In fact, some of my downtown friends even requested I leave my son at home with a baby-sitter when they invited me to their homes.¹⁹

Bourgois's comparison sets up his discussion in two ways. First, it subtly racializes the context. Bourgois may have been trying to put the atmosphere for children in culturally honest and relevant contexts. That may be a fair use of the subtle racial identification. However, in the context of his prior use of race in the framework of his decision to move his family to El Barrio,²⁰ the use of race here seems to serve a similar purpose. Whether intentional or not, Bourgois fires a warning shot to the audience: criticize or judge and you might be a racist.

Second, his comparison predisposes the reader to a more favorable impression of the way children fit into the El Barrio community than into

the Anglo community. The impression Bourgois creates is not inherently unfair—it may well be true. However, his placement of the comparison immediately preceding his recounting of taking Emiliano to the crack-copping corner frames the narrative in such a way that diverts critical attention of the fact that he used his son to infiltrate a busy drug-dealing center.

Having framed the discussion to deflect critical attention, Bourgois goes on to report an anecdote that indicates the crack-copping corner was an area of heightened danger. One day, Bourgois and Emiliano found themselves in the thick of:

an angry crowd surrounding two white police officers who had just killed an African-American man high on angel dust. It was only when the crowd begun chanting ‘Open season on the black man! Murderers! Murderers!’ that I noticed that the only other whites present were the two ‘killer cops’ frantically shouting into their walkie-talkies for help.²¹

Three distinct dangers existed at the crack corner: (1) a man high on angel dust who may have been violent and/or hallucinating, (2) gunshots, and (3) an angry mob who clearly thought that the shooting was motivated by white racism as opposed to legitimate law enforcement. Any of the three dangers could have resulted in some kind of injury to Emiliano. Bourgois fails to evaluate the dangers and his son’s exposure to them. Instead, Bourgois uses the conclusion of his anecdote to deflect the audience’s attention from the dangerous moments. “Emiliano, perched on my shoulders, caused the tense crowd to burst into laughter by clapping his hands gleefully in time with the angry chanting.”²²

Bourgois follows the anecdote with a discussion of parenting in El Barrio: “As a parent, I was learning the lesson faced by all the working mothers and fathers on my block.”²³ He groups himself with the other parents on the block and identifies the lessons they, as a group, must learn. Notably, Bourgois is distinguishable from the other parents on the block particularly because he is *not* a working class parent who must make these difficult choices. He is an ethnographer who has chosen to live in El Barrio, and he has the resources to live in other areas where Emiliano would not witness drugs and violence on a daily basis.

After uncritically grouping himself with all of the other parents on the block, Bourgois articulates the difficult choices they must make. “Either I had to abandon public space and double-lock my child inside my cramped tenement apartment and assume a hostile attitude toward street culture, or I would have to accept the fact that my child would witness drugs and violence on a daily basis.”²⁴ The first half of the comparison is hyperbolic and

uses extreme language: abandon, double-lock, hostile attitude. The second half of the comparison is appealingly crisp and pragmatic. Bourgois inserts the discussion of these difficult choices alongside his admission to using his child as a cover to infiltrate a hot crack-copping corner. Significantly, there is a difference between permitting your child to play stickball in the street and taking your child to help you break into the drug-dealing corner.

To reconstruct the passage, the framework is: (1) an unfavorable comparison to Anglo culture, (2) the admission that he used Emiliano to infiltrate the crack corner, and (3) a discussion of the difficult choices working class parents in El Barrio have to make. In so framing the discussion, Bourgois diverts his audience's attention away from his own choice as a parent, and he avoids evaluating his own decision in an intellectually honest manner.

On one occasion, Bourgois notes that one could judge him specifically as a parent because of Emiliano's involvement in his project:

I realized that I, too, could be condemned as a deficient parent in my pursuit of street culture because of what I was exposing my son to. I became aware of this while sitting at a conference on drug use and listening to an outraged ethnographer: "They'll risk their own flesh-and-blood babies, bringing them into the crackhouses to camouflage their activities."²⁵

The language Bourgois uses in recounting the ethnographer's comment paints an extreme picture. The ethnographer was not critical; he was "outraged." The particular comment recorded and included in the book is one that speaks of "their own flesh-and-blood babies." The word choice and quote selection implicitly depict the critical ethnographer as an irate academic using loaded rhetoric to pass uninformed judgment on a community.

Rhetoric aside, the ethnographer provides a poignant analogy to Bourgois's use of Emiliano to facilitate his own involvement in the drug community. Instead of responding substantively to the ethnographer's criticism and how it relates to Bourgois's own choices, Bourgois recasts the comment in terms of mainstream misunderstanding of inner-city culture:

The gasps and judgmental head-wagging of the audience reconfirmed to me the gulf between the inner-city and middle-class society. Mainstream society simply has no concept of how 'normalized' drug selling has become on inner-city streets. It is virtually impossible not to bring one's baby to the crackhouse if one spends any time on the street.²⁶

Again, Bourgois uses negative descriptive words in his narrative to describe those who may criticize exposing children to the drug community: they “gasp,” they are “judgmental,” and (worst of all), they are “head-wagging.” Bourgois thus frames the issue of exposing children to the drug community such that anyone who might question it—and/or Bourgois’s decision to expose his own child—is a gasping, judgmental, head-wagger who is comfortably insulated within middle-class society.

Following his recounting of the conference, Bourgois proceeds to offer his own conduct as an example of how it is impossible to avoid exposing one’s children. “[E]ven if I had not been solicitous of the friendship of drug dealers, had I simply been one of the dozens of sociable neighbors on my block who enjoyed public space, I could not have avoided ‘irresponsibly’ exposing my little boy to the violence of drug dealing on a daily basis.”²⁷ Here, Bourgois blends the issue of using Emiliano to facilitate his friendships with drug dealers and exposing Emiliano to the crack-copping corner in a more ‘normal’ use of public space, such as passing by on the way to the ice cream stand. The issue of bringing Emiliano to the crack-copping corner to make friends is distinct from passing by the corner occasionally. By blending the two issues, Bourgois avoids admitting that they are substantially different, and that the effects of each on a child may also be different—if not in kind, at least in degree.

Bourgois could respond to this criticism by pointing out that the project was about El Barrio, not parenting in the Bourgois family. On the contrary, Bourgois opens the door to critical evaluation of his actions as a parent by purposefully involving Emiliano in his research. He should have probed his choices more deeply, and he should have framed the issues in such a way that his audience could evaluate his actions without implicitly becoming racists.

II. BOURGOIS AND THE DEALERS

Unlike the unidirectional exploitative relationship with his son, Bourgois and the crack dealers exploit each other. Most obviously, Bourgois exploits the dealers for his project, and his professional and financial success depends on his ability to collect their stories. While Bourgois documents the dealers’ search for respect, his own success in his project is the means by which he garners respect in the academic community.

At the same time that Bourgois exploits the dealers, the dealers utilize their relationship with Bourgois as a means of seeking respect. Bourgois occupies a position of power relative to his subjects, possibly because his position in the mainstream social hierarchy is more powerful than theirs. Caesar calls Bourgois their “role model,” and refers to Bourgois as the

teacher and himself and the other crack dealers as the students.²⁸ Primo and Caesar temper their conversations and reactions when they think Bourgois might disapprove. For example, when Bourgois becomes visibly upset over their treatment of the Special Education students at school, Caesar changes the direction of the story claiming that Lucas “got initiated,” and that “[t]he nigga’ even took my girl, Felipe!”²⁹ In their conversations about schoolyard rape, Bourgois openly disapproves.³⁰ Primo “coaxingly” tries to get Caesar to ease off the triumphantly explicit recounting. Primo, “looking worriedly at [Bourgois] again,” tries a second time to get Caesar to tone down his reminiscences. Finally, Caesar, “changing his tone,” downgrades his claim from rape on the schoolhouse rooftop to smoking pot and “fingering” their female classmates.³¹ Primo and Caesar show a desire to maintain a position of respect in Bourgois’ judgment in their attempts to temper their conversations in a way that will be acceptable to Bourgois.

In addition to using their relationship with Bourgois as a means of seeking respect, the dealers use their participation in his project as another means to the same end. At first, they are suspicious of Bourgois’s project. When Bourgois suggests it may create “tangible political benefit[s] for the community,” Caesar accuses him of “talking an immense amount of shit.”³² But their relationship with Bourgois’s project becomes one in which they seek dignity and affirmation. They regularly check on his progress and become concerned when he develops tendonitis and is unable to work for several weeks.³³ Bourgois is their emissary to the mainstream community by whose standards the dealers had miserably failed—at school, at work, and within their families. Significantly, Bourgois accepted the dealers where the rest of the mainstream had rejected them. For example, the difference between Bourgois and the other teachers with whom the dealers had contact is significant. Primo’s and Caesar’s memories of school are “overwhelmingly negative,” even at a very young age.³⁴ The teachers at school thought Primo was “uncooperative and slow-witted;” Bourgois thinks Primo is “precocious.”³⁵ Caesar reveals that “[t]he teachers used to hate me;” he wants Bourgois to serve “as a lifetime reference” for him.³⁶ Upon reading the manuscript for the book, Primo remarks, “[o]h Felipe! You make us sound like such sensitive crack dealers!”³⁷ Despite his teasing, Primo does not appear angry at Bourgois’ sensitive portrayal of him. Thus, not only do the dealers seek respect and affirmation from their relationships with Bourgois himself, but also from the potential audience of his book.

In addition to using their relationship with Bourgois as a means of seeking respect and dignity, the dealers exploit Bourgois in a very instrumental way. Bourgois is safer in El Barrio because he is white. “[T]he few

whites residing in the neighborhood are probably safer than their African-American and Puerto Rican neighbors because most would-be muggers assume whites are either police officers or drug addicts—or both—and hesitate before assaulting them.”³⁸ The dealers are acutely aware of Bourgois’ relative safety. Caesar informs Bourgois that “people think you’re a fed if anything. But that’s good; it makes them stay away from you.”³⁹ It was to their benefit to have a white guy hanging out with them in the Game Room as a subtle security measure.

III. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, *In Search of Respect* is a poignant illustration of the difficult and almost always self-destructive search for personal dignity that the marginalized members of the Puerto Rican community in Spanish Harlem undertake. The success of Bourgois’ ethnography depended critically on his ability to develop and maintain relationships with the crack dealers. In order to develop and maintain those relationships, Bourgois had to exploit his son, Emiliano, and his subjects, the crack dealers. His uses of Emiliano invariably appear sandwiched between critiques of mainstream, middle class, racist America and comparisons of himself to the working poor of El Barrio. He deflects his own critical analysis away from his actions as a parent, and he leads his audience in the same direction.

Bourgois and the dealers exploit each other. Notably, both Bourgois and the dealers actually benefited from their mutual exploitation: Bourgois ultimately wrote an outstanding ethnography that garnered both the 1996 C. Wright Mills Award and the 1997 Margaret Mead Award; the dealers gained Bourgois’ respect and the respect and understanding of Bourgois’ audience. Bourgois’ portrayal of them is sympathetic and dignified. Whether the book has created the “tangible political benefits for the community” that Bourgois had hoped is unclear.

NOTES

- 1 PHILLIPPE BOURGOIS *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, 8 (Cambridge University Press 1995).
- 2 *Id.*, 8.
- 3 *Id.*, 2.
- 4 *Id.*, 2–8.
- 5 *Id.*, 231–258.
- 6 *Id.*, 34.
- 7 *Id.*, 34.
- 8 *Id.*, 25, 44, 60, 84, 94, 162, 203, 210, 232, 255.
- 9 *Id.*, 259.
- 10 *Id.*, 259.
- 11 *Id.*, 32.
- 12 *Id.*, 32.
- 13 *Id.*, 188.
- 14 *Id.*, 188.
- 15 *Id.*, 189.
- 16 *Id.*, 263.
- 17 *Id.*, 263.
- 18 *Id.*, 262.
- 19 *Id.*, 263.
- 20 *Id.*, *supra*.
- 21 *Id.*, 263.
- 22 *Id.*, 263.
- 23 *Id.*, 263.
- 24 *Id.*, 263.
- 25 *Id.*, 280.
- 26 *Id.*, 280–281.
- 27 *Id.*, 281.
- 28 *Id.*, 47.
- 29 *Id.*, 188, 189
- 30 Interestingly, when he passed judgment on their treatment of the Special Education students, he reminded the reader that he had a mandate as an ethnographer to refrain from passing judgment. He appears to have passed judgment on schoolyard rape without noting his mandate to suspend moral judgment.
- 31 *Id.*, 189.
- 32 *Id.*, 46–47.
- 33 *Id.*, 47.
- 34 *Id.*, 175.
- 35 *Id.*, 198.

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36 *Id.*, 177, 47.

37 *Id.*, 318.

38 *Id.*, 33.

39 *Id.*, 33.