

An Ethnography of Evictions in the United States

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In the United States, tenant evictions have become a mass phenomenon. The sociologist Matthew Desmond traces the fate of eight Milwaukee families in the grips of an extraordinarily violent housing market. This outstanding study concludes with a new conceptualization of poverty.

Reviewed: Matthew Desmond, *Evicted. Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Allen Lane, 2016, 418 p.

Even if one leaves aside the systemic destabilization resulting from the subprime crisis of the late 2000s, the housing crisis has, in the United States, become a national catastrophe. At the very moment when the subprime¹ crisis struck, the sociologist Matthew Desmond was in the middle of an ethnographic study in Milwaukee. To understand the causes and effects of the tenant eviction process, which affects a very significant percentage of the city's residents (as it does in other major American metropolises as well), particularly black women (one in five experience an eviction over the course of their lives, compared to one in twelve Hispanic women and one in fifteen white women), he studied the residents of a trailer park and a black ghetto.

Evicted, a book that was preceded by a suite of first-rate scholarly articles,² at last provides readers with the ethnographic data that Desmond accumulated over two years of fieldwork. As the book takes the form of a description of a series of places and moments in the lives of these individuals and their families, it is difficult to do justice to all the issues it raises. Similarly, it is impossible to fully convey the subtlety and energy of this immersion into the lives of Larraine, Arleen, Pam, Ned, Scott, and Crystal as they experience the trauma of eviction.

To encourage the reader to follow Desmond into a world utterly bereft of the stable anchor that a home provides, we shall make three points. What makes this book a *tour de force* is its deliberately depersonalized use of ethnographic methods, which allows Desmond to grasp poverty as a practice, notably dictated by the imperative of paying rent. This reconstruction of the necessity that poverty imposes, as well as its relentless effects, has important theoretical consequences for understanding the phenomenon. Finally, the meticulous reconstruction of the political dimension of the way the housing market functions and its collateral effects on American society is part of the book's broader horizon—and explains, perhaps, its inception.

Ethnography as Sensibility and Access to Sensibility

¹ "Subprimes" were housing loans with fluctuating interest rates that financial middlemen sold to families of modest means who wanted to become homeowners.

² Of these, we will mention an article that was reviewed on this site ("[Exploiting the Urban Poor](#)," February, 2013) and another, "Disposable Ties and the Urban Poor," *American Journal of Sociology* 117: 1295-1335, a partial French translation of which appeared in issue 98 of *Communications*, edited by Nicolas Duvoux and Jacques Rodriguez. <http://www.iiaa.cnrs.fr/article2870.html>

In the reflective afterward (“About this Project”) that concludes the book, Desmond addresses a methodological point which is essential to understand its tone. In his view, ethnography is not exactly a method. Its style must be as lacking in subjectivity as possible. The presence of the self, which is so valorized in anthropological and ethnographic practice—and which reached a kind of fever pitch in the ethical debates surrounding the publication of Alice Goffman’s book³—, constitutes a double filter that must be dispensed with to access to “the heat of life at play right in front of” the investigator (p. 324). Ethnography is not a method, but a way of being in the world. Ethnography, which is explicitly tied to the legacy of Harry Walcott, is first and foremost a sensibility that seeks to bypass the filter—and violence—of interpretation. Similarly, in writing, the narrator’s presence is an obstacle to the social reality being considered. Consequently, Desmond practices a “relational” ethnography, which is mostly depersonalized, compared to the other uses, which associate fieldwork with the ethnographer’s self-reflectivity. In this book, to the contrary, everything is done to dissolve the investigator’s presence and to make of him a seismographer of emotions, thoughts, and practices that have been seized from circumstances that, while perhaps banal from society’s standpoint, are nonetheless exceptional, and even, from an individual perspective, tragic.

The book’s greatest qualities are its vigor and readability, as it brings readers into direct contact with the trajectories of the families Desmond follows in his study. Their reactions, emotions, and thoughts are conveyed with all the colors, smells, and sounds that characterize life among the most underprivileged layers of contemporary American society. The advantage is not simply that an ethnography which presents social phenomena in this way is likely, given current editorial standards, to attract a wide readership. The purpose of this practice is to reconstruct the sequence of phenomena leading to eviction, as well as the effects of the latter on the individuals who undergo this experience. This sequence is material (lack of money, the need to place furniture and other possessions in storage boxes, the loss of all physical anchors in the world), relational (involving interactions with roommates, friends, girlfriends and boyfriends, and family members; the loss of connections to a neighborhood and one’s children’s school), institutional (the loss of one’s job, the risk of losing one’s children, the risk of eviction, the loss of social benefits, and so on), and emotional (being unable to fulfill one’s needs, anger, stress, frustration, depression, irrationality, and so on).

Each fate can be read through the psychological and social shocks provoked by different stages of these individuals’ relationships with their peers, landlords, and institutions. Desmond relies on first-hand observations, except (as in the case of fights) when he must rely on successive, intersecting interviews with the protagonists.⁴ What is most striking, however, is the emotional intelligence with which he approaches these situations and his ability to bring them to life, through language that naturally takes an apocalyptic tone when social reality becomes a ruthless and inhuman edict for the underprivileged individuals who are its objects and victims. This is the case when Desmond (pp. 266-267) recounts the inequity of a court decision in which a guilty verdict is pronounced, even when it is clear to all, the judge included, that it was poverty that led Vanetta (one of the subjects) to commit armed robbery. If poverty is what made her commit a crime and she is still poor at the time of the verdict, who would think that she would not turn once again to crime? This is infernal logic informing the decision to take two children away from their mother. The human density of these situations, the banal, almost trivial character of the verdict, its effects on a life that has been broken by inextricable social circumstances and on that of her children; and, finally, the perspective it provides on a situation—not to mention its tragic epilogue—that could have resulted in a different outcome had the coordinates structuring Vanetta’s life

3 Nicolas Sallée, “[La prison ou la fuite](#),” *La Vie des Idées*, July 2015.

4 The methodological scruples of this study, the results of which are corroborated by quantifiable measurements of phenomena, extend to hiring someone to verify statements made in interviews through the consultation of notes.

been different are only one example of the way Desmond's journey becomes an odyssey to the very heart of social despair and the emotional repercussions through which disadvantage breeds disadvantage. For Scott, a recovering drug addict, his descent into addiction led him to be fired and to wallow in a trailer park, like a ghost wandering on the margins of the city and the realm of the living.

The Politics of the Investigative Field

The second reason that makes this study so rich results in its ability to carefully reconstruct the institutional mechanisms that shape the lives of the poorest Americans and which contribute to urban poverty's relentless reproduction. Desmond first rejects a doubt as to whether observations of the kind he has gathered are generalizable, thus dismissing the accusation that is often leveled—in the United States, but in France, too—against the political dimension of ethnography, which is allegedly immersed in local data and thus incapable of accessing the broader structures of social life and the relationships of domination that shape it. If the prevalence and targets of eviction are the same in Milwaukee as in other cities, the burden of proof is reversed: how could the same causes not produce the same effects?

Desmond investigates landlords (Sherrera in the black ghetto and Tobin in the white trailer park) and sheds light on the opportunities as well as the constraints they encounter in investing in a sector of the housing market aimed at the poor. He calls attention to this raw but often unnoticed fact. Poverty is produced through inputs and outputs of money; outputs of money go into the pockets of other social actors. Among the latter, landowners have an interest in extracting profits that is enhanced by the fact that they are not subject to the constraints of low-income populations' living conditions.⁵ Poverty is produced through exploitation, which is made possible by segregation and institutional conditions that are unfavorable to poor people in general and poor blacks in particular. The book describes in detail the relationship between landowners and tenants, showing how landowners can make money off of their properties, pressure their tenants, and cooperate among themselves to validate and carry out evictions, thus allowing the reader to reconstruct the social conditions of possibility for extracting profit from different segments of urban society and society at large. Poverty is not isolated from the rest of society; it exists and is reproduced only because certain categories of the population are caught up in exploitative relations with other markets. To a very significant degree, the real estate market is a predatory site for the extraction of resources from the poor that benefits the wealthy.

On the other hand, eviction is not only an effect, but also a cause of poverty (severe material constraints, as well as the loss of social relationships and physical security, lead to depression and suicide). Exploitation is the root of the production and reproduction of urban poverty. There is money to be made in the ghetto (hence the saying "the hood is good"). Exploitation, notably through the extraction of resources by particular social actors through various financial techniques, has been institutionalized. Rejecting and deconstructing the argument for deregulating or not regulating a sector that Desmond asks us to see as every citizen's inalienable right, he brings to light the conditions that make this exploitation possible.

Desmond weaves into his account historical and institutional explanations that allow the reader—who must make an effort to pull all these strands together in order to systematize the analyses presented in the descriptive chapters—to grasp how unjust and intolerable situations are created. He considers the historical origins of slum construction and its ties to the development of capitalism in major metropolises; he mentions the origins of the connection between the exploitation and segregation of African-Americans

5 This is particularly true for women, who both have more official income than man and fewer of the interactive resources allowing them to negotiate, for example by offering to do maintenance or odd jobs in exchange for remaining in their homes.

who, confined to downtown areas since the Great Migration from the south, did not enjoy, even after the Civil Rights Movement, the same legal protections as whites; and the creation of racial dividing lines in cities and the effects of deindustrialization and incarceration. All of these factors constitute the basic social framework that is regulated by institutions, either because they are collectively constructed by actors with interests in preserving exploitation, or because they place the poor before impossible choices. This is true of battered women who, due to regulations that make landowners responsible for such troubles, are placed before a dilemma: they can be silent and risk abuse, or call the police and risk eviction. The police are either involuntarily blind or cynical when they note that, of the battered women who fall victim to their partners' blows (at a rate of one per week), most do not call the police. If they had, the police would have turned to the landlords to make the calls stop (p. 192).

To mitigate the effects of this phenomena which, given the rising number of evictions, is fast becoming a social and public health disaster, Desmond proposes that we consider the household as the foundation of the mental and social security of individuals and families. Having a stable roof over one's head should be the right of every citizen in a country that, as the world's largest economic power, possesses colossal financial resources. In order to achieve this goal and to make up for the shortcomings of solutions that, like the vouchers system, ultimately benefit landowners and reflect their interests, Desmond proposes extending to all low-income families a universal program of housing assistance that would make it possible to regulate equitably a sector that is vital not only for the economy in the general, but for families of modest means in particular: this would give the poor the psychological stability they need to plan for the future and the financial means to satisfy their basic daily needs by releasing them from their pressure of an eviction threat. Thus it makes sense to limit the inventiveness of financial techniques and the ability to make money off of housing the poor. The human, social, and psychological stakes are too great for this sector to be unregulated.

The Sociogenesis of the Culture of Poverty

In reaching this conclusion, Desmond reviews some of the most commonly shared conceptions of how poverty should be defined. We have already emphasized the novelty (which is moderate but still significant vis-à-vis the abundant literature on inner-city poverty) of an approach emphasizing exploitation (see "[Exploiting the Urban Poor](#)"). The quest for profit and the lack of regulation are what exposes the poor to problems (and their reoccurrence) caused by the high probability of wealth resulting from being a landlord. This approach calls attention to the almost complete neglect of the issue of exploitation in research on urban poverty in the wake of William Julius' William's seminal work, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (see "[The Culture of Poverty Reconsidered](#)").

It is important to emphasize a further contribution that this approach makes to the field of sociology—one that is more discrete, as Desmond, to avoid overburdening the text, has largely confined it to the endnotes. By focusing on practices and paying extreme and occasionally obsessive attention to the contours and sequence of material facts, as well as to the thoughts and emotions triggered by the existential crisis of eviction, Desmond proposes a socio-genesis of the culturalization of poverty. He shows how the social circumstances that characterize poverty suffice to account for the behavior and phenomena that are attributed to poor people's mental state. Convinced that glorifying the poor, failing to present their flaws and pettiness, is just another way of dehumanizing them (rather than seeing these shortcomings as inherent to the human condition), Desmond makes no effort to hide the unfortunate ways that impoverished mothers treat their children. He describes the violent behavior that develops among the poor, and the total lack of solidarity or any sense of belonging to a common world. He describes, in short, a world that functions, for the most part, in total conformity with the empirical expectations of the anthropological model of the culture of poverty. His approach is, however, radically opposed to the latter.

Much of the theoretical discussion that engages the literature in the notes consists precisely in deconstructing the various ways that poverty has been culturalized. (Pathological) educational models are related to the conditions of oppression that blacks have experienced from the days of slavery to the present. Their linguistic deficit is the result of deficiencies in the educational system and social institutions more generally. All the extrapolations through which a culture is projected onto poverty (and all the resulting causal ascriptions, which, needless to say, present the poor in an unfavorable light) are ultimately tautological: poverty is poverty. To seek a culture of poverty that exists independently of this condition's brutal material effects adds nothing to our understanding of poverty. The confinement to the notes of this crucial debate in the literature on urban poverty is presumably an editorial choice; and it is a felicitous one, as it has preserved the text's vigor. But readers may also regret that this debate was not worked into the structure of a book that presents, in its entirety, the results of an investigation which is, at many levels, exceptional.

Published in Books&Ideas, June 27th, 2016

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First published in laviedesidees.fr, May 9, 2016. Translated by Michael Behrent, with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.