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Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City

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that loosely weaves together ideas of relational subjectivity with the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann—I gave up.

The world is in flames. We need good, clear, accurate, and powerful explanations for what's happening so that we can figure out how to smartly move forward. Maybe a sociologist will read some critical realism and get inspired to produce a brilliant explanation she or he wouldn't have otherwise. I hope so. But neither of these two books makes a convincing case that critical realism is the royal road to sociological truth.

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City. By Matthew Desmond. New York: Crown Publishers, 2016. Pp. xi+420. \$28.00.

David J. Harding
University of California, Berkeley

Matthew Desmond's *Evicted* is first and foremost an ethnography about the daily experiences of poverty with a unique focus on the causes and consequences of housing instability and housing quality. Unlike prior poverty ethnographies that focus on a particular neighborhood, this book shadows eight poor families, both black and white, and two landlords who rent apartments, houses, or trailer homes to the poor. Following the experiences of these research subjects over multiple years in Milwaukee reveals in painstaking detail the central importance of eviction to the contemporary experience of being poor. These arguments are buttressed by other data sources as well, including surveys of renters and administrative records from housing court. In short, one cannot read *Evicted* without coming to the conclusion that eviction and its consequences play a central role in trapping individuals and families in poverty.

Despite the focus on public housing and housing vouchers in public and academic discussions of housing and poverty, *Evicted* points out that most of the poor are on their own in the private rental market, one in which there is surprisingly little variation in rents across neighborhoods and almost no options that are anywhere near affordable for a family trying to get by on low-wage work or public assistance. Landlords who rent to such families can rarely count on consistently receiving the full payment of rent, and, as a result, the apartments, houses, and trailers available to such families are typically in chronic disrepair, including broken plumbing, inoperable appliances and furnaces, and broken doors and windows. The state is absent from the market in many ways, with minimal proactive enforcement of building code violations, few resources devoted to affordable housing, and little regulation of rents. Yet when the state does play a role, it is overwhelmingly arrayed against the tenant. Nuisance complaints recorded by the police motivate evictions, sheriff's deputies execute evictions, child welfare agencies take children away when families become homeless or live in unsafe housing, and the complexities of housing courts favor the landlord

over the renter, who almost never has the services of an attorney. Private companies track credit histories and move evicted tenants' belongings onto the street or into storage, where they are held for ransom or sold off. A key strength of *Evicted* is that the reader sees all of these events from the perspectives of both the landlords and the tenants.

The result that *Evicted* so carefully documents is a chronic residential instability among the poorest of the poor. Each forced move, whether through formal eviction or otherwise, brings with it the risk of homelessness, the loss of many or all possessions, more damaged credit, severing or straining of social supports, challenges maintaining or finding employment, missed medical treatments, and disruptions of schooling. This chronic residential instability plays a role in trapping many families in poverty in both the short and long term. For those below the poverty line, energies and resources must be devoted to staving off the next housing crisis or reacting to it when it comes. The threat of eviction is omnipresent in the lives of the poor. Without the sure foundation that stable housing provides, little other progress is possible.

Evicted must be understood on its own terms: as a piece of public sociology, one that challenges us to consider the sheer brutality of the lives of the poor when the most basic of needs—stable housing—is left almost entirely to the market. The stories of the families and landlords, which illustrate both the struggles of life when 80%–90% of one's income goes toward rent and the risks and opportunities involved in making a living by renting to the poor, take center stage. These stories are presented as the author observed them, often with little interpretation and only with the bare minimum of context required to link them with the larger issues at stake. The product is powerfully effective, but the academic reader will need to venture into the detailed footnotes, the lengthy appendix, and the author's other publications for the customary justifications of research design, careful dissection of prior research, the implications for theory, and detailed information about the author's ancillary studies that also inform the arguments in the book.

Despite the fact that its primary audience is the public and policy makers, *Evicted* will be unlikely to escape controversy among academics. Some may find fault in the unfiltered portrayal of the families featured in the book. Their problems with domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, criminal justice system involvement, seemingly wasteful spending on small luxuries, and damage to housing units are all on full display. Such accounts are open to misinterpretation and to counternarratives that find fault with the poor themselves rather than with our particularly brutal contemporary form of market capitalism. However, to hide such aspects of poverty would be to leave unexplained the proximate manifestations of the larger issues the book seeks to address, and a careful reading of the book shows that such events are as much the symptom as the cause—or, at the very least, the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Others may find fault with the author's own involvements in the lives of his subjects, modest as they are, such as rides to look for a new rental or renting a truck to help a family move before an eviction and the loss of their pos-

sessions. Such involvements are clearly discussed in the appendix but could be criticized as a violation of the ethnographer's credo to observe but not intervene. Yet it is hard to imagine doing sustained fieldwork with people facing such material precarity and not occasionally helping them avoid disaster. Not offering assistance when such assistance is readily available would be so insulting and callous as to render continued fieldwork almost impossible. Instead, the author documents these events, and the evidence shows they did little to alter the life trajectories of the subjects anyway.

Down and Out and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday Life in Skid Row. By Forrest Stuart. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 333. \$27.50.

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In the mid-sixties, Egon Bittner studied policing and argued that policing studies should be based not on normative notions about what police should do, featuring their flaws and incapacities, but on seeing and documenting their actual practices. His argument was clear: only by observation of practices could one reveal the how and the why of policing. Forrest Stuart did this. He went out day after day and watched and listened. His work spanned five years and includes detailed, vivid, and chilling verbal pictures of the performances and settings. He has written an important and disturbing book, *Down and Out and Under Arrest: Policing and Everyday life in Skid Row*.

The “broken windows” conceit, long a popular idea, has come to rest in yet another guise—what Stuart in this extraordinary book calls “therapeutic policing.” While researching in Skid Row in the Bay Area, Bittner described how police sorted out conflicts, managed the severely mentally ill with skill, and carried out a form of peacekeeping (“The Police on Skid-Row: A Study of Peace Keeping” *American Sociological Review* 32 [1967]: 699–715), therapeutic policing in South Central Los Angeles meant harassment, multiple arbitrary arrests, surveillance, dehumanizing encounters, and coercion to force people to get “help” to improve their life chances. Here, Stuart lays out the pattern of policing poverty and the dehumanizing brutal tactics of policing described by police he interviewed as “helping people to get their life together.” The police cooperated with private institutions in part because this reduces the costs of the merry-go-round of arrests and jailing for minor delicts. This book’s description of policing of these black and Hispanic men (overwhelmingly the residents of the area) makes the predictions of Foucault and other observers of nondemocratic policing look optimistic. One has to query recent European history to find parallels.

Stuart was a young PhD student at UCLA when he decided to study some aspects of commerce in South Central Los Angeles. He wandered around, was rejected when he contacted vendors, made a few contacts, and did what