

Book review

Pamela Davies reviews *SEXED WORK: Gender, Race and Resistance in a Brooklyn Drug Market* (1997) by Lisa Maher. Clarendon Studies in Criminology Clarendon Press: Oxford

SEXED WORK: *Gender, Race and Resistance in a Brooklyn Drug Market* is a rich and careful analysis of the economic lives of a group of women drug users. Drawing upon research that has been conducted by ethnographic means the book remains both faithful to the women's lives on the street and also provides a sophisticated theorising of gender, race and class a three dimensional character. This avoids an overriding concern with class and economic determinism in the informal sector and also avoids treating each construct as an independent and discrete variable. Closely related to this theoretical examination of intersectionalities and women's agency are the questions that are raised in respect of cultural reproduction theory.

Using the ethnographic method to explore these theoretical avenues in the context of women crack users, Maher has succeeded in evoking a vivid but real insight into street life in a Brooklyn drug market. The author has taken pains to write in a manner that is faithful to and respectful of the women's lives. A critical appraisal of this book must acknowledge the author's ability to convey the importance and value of research conducted by ethnographically informed theory. In this respect the book presents a forceful theoretical argument which is neither bolted on nor superficially lightweight. Also included is a detailed appendix of twenty-five pages 'On Reflexivity, Reciprocity, and Ethnographic Research'. Such accounts of the unfolding of research projects are all too rare. This should be read as an important and integral part of the book as a whole. It is an honest, professional and critical articulation of 'the messy business' involved in 'doing' and 'writing'... (p207).

Maier challenges three orthodox presentations and readings associated with women crack users. First the highly sexualised images of women crack users. Second that the informal drug economy is an emancipating and 'equal opportunity' employer. Third, that criminal women are becoming more violent. Maher provides a convincing critique of these popular representations of women drug users and refocuses our attention on what she sees as more pertinent and research-worthy theoretical domains. She locates the street women's positions in between the traditional dichotomies where women are either passive victims, submissive objects or active subjects, volitional agents 'gangsta bitches and corporate criminals' (p1). This alternative reading of women's lawbreaking explores the tensions between women's agency and women's victimisation; consequently the middle ground is examined. Maher contributes to this charting of new territory and believes future research could do the same. She takes this to task in the context of women crack users and this involves the exploration of the boundaries between various disciplines including anthropology, criminology and

sociology which in itself requires a formidable literature search.

Another major theoretical domain that is explored in detail is indicated by the sub-title of the book: *Gender, Race and Resistance in a Brooklyn Drug Market*. The idea of 'intersectionalities' is borrowed from Crenshaw (1989) and operationalised to illustrate the overlays between gender, race and class. This is developed most expansively in chapter seven where convergences of race/ethnicity and sex/gender are shown to contribute to labour market segmentation. The author clearly demonstrates her arguments in three areas: social networks, drug distribution and sales and sexwork. This examination of intersectionalities is the strongest of the theoretical ambitions tackled in the book and it is achieved in a way that brings the stratifications of gender, race and class a three dimensional character. This avoids an overriding concern with class and economic determinism in the informal sector and also avoids treating each construct as an independent and discrete variable. Closely related to this theoretical examination of intersectionalities and women's agency are the questions that are raised in respect of cultural reproduction theory.

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The conclusions in respect of the plight of women's economic lives on the street are not so encouraging. Despite evidence that women crack users resist devaluation of their bodies by 'viccing' (thieving or robbing dates), and that they try to maintain occupational norms, they remain marginalised, victimised and criminalised in the oppressive structure of street level sexwork within the drug economy. 'Like contributions to the formal economy, contributions to the drug economy are gendered' (p166). Moreover, within this 'secondary' secondary labour-market, gendered opportunities are cleverly structured by race/ethnicity. Crime as work for women often means sexwork and this further serves to reinforce and reproduce their marginal and vulnerable positions.

As we head into the new millennium a small but growing volume of literature is emerging that will reawaken academic interest in women as offenders. The avenues beginning to be explored by this work include reconceptualisation of gender, race and class and this particular example is rare also in that it is written from an appreciative perspective. This book is a treat to read and will hopefully be a part of a welcome new tradition that theorises women's participation in crime, illegal work and the informal/criminal economy.

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