

## On Desmond: the limits of spontaneous sociology

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**Abstract** Matthew Desmond’s “Relational ethnography,” is a manifesto for a relational turn in ethnography, liberating it from the “substantialism” of bounded places, processed people and group culture. Substantialism, however, proves to be a largely mythical category that obscures two types of relational ethnography: Desmond’s empiricist *transactional* ethnography and an alternative, theoretically driven *structural* ethnography. Drawing on Desmond’s own ethnographies, *On the Fireline* and *Evicted*, I explore the limitations of his transactional ethnography—a “spontaneous sociology” that rejects the theoretical engagement and comparative logic. I elaborate and illustrate structural ethnography, drawing out the implications for public and policy sociology.

**Keywords** Bourdieu – Empiricism · Ethnography · Eviction · Extended case method · Relational sociology

Matthew Desmond is an ethnographer extraordinaire. His talents as an observer and raconteur set new standards for fieldwork. He has published two major ethnographies to date. The first, *On the Fireline*, published in 2007, examines the dangerous lives of firefighters, while the second, *Evicted*, published in 2016, is devoted to housing insecurity in the inner city. Both are meticulously researched, beautifully written, brilliantly capturing the common sense of their subjects, and offering much insight about life on the edge of existence. *On the Fireline* asks how and why people enthusiastically partake in life threatening occupations while *Evicted* examines the relations between landlords and tenants in the reproduction of urban poverty. Whereas the firefighters choose to play with fate, the evicted are forced to play with fate. The one is based on participant observation, what Desmond calls the “ethnography of habitus,” while the other is based on non-participant observation or as Desmond calls it “ethnography as a way of seeing”. *Evicted* is already a widely read ethnography, winning the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction as well as nine other prestigious

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awards. It is a searing exposé of life at the margins of urban America, underlining the necessity of housing security to human well-being. There is no doubt about Desmond's prowess as a careful fieldworker and talented writer. But his methodological stance, as expounded in his manifesto for a "relational ethnography" (Desmond 2014), is problematic—both with respect to how it positions ethnography within the field of sociology and to how it limits his own scientific practice.

## The relational turn and the new empiricism

Matthew Desmond sees himself as part of a "relational turn" that has overtaken sociology and other disciplines.

Network analysis has blossomed throughout the social and biological sciences, producing some of the most exciting methodological and theoretical developments in recent years.... Historical sociologists have broken ranks with conventional studies of nation-states or people groups and instead have developed influential accounts of social change based on relational units of analysis.... Quantitative analysts have ushered in new methods to study social relations, including advanced spatial statistics.... Contemporary social theorists have championed the relational perspective, subjecting it to sustained review and critique, expanding it to various subfields of sociology, generating concepts that promote its use, and devoting attention to field theory ... (Desmond 2014, pp. 574-575).

Desmond ends by citing Andrew Abbott's (1995, p. 93) peroration: "All this has amounted to a 'quiet revolution ... underway in social science, [marked by analysts] turning from units to context, from attributes to connections, from causes to events,' and one might add, from substances to networks, from essences to relations...." Yet, according to Desmond, there is one great exception to the "quiet revolution":

[S]ociological ethnographers—and qualitative sociologists more generally—seem stuck in substantialism. As the social sciences bend toward relational theories of action, as network analysis and other relational methods move from margin to center, ethnographers seem left behind" (Desmond 2014, p. 575).

Thus, Desmond's manifesto for a "relational ethnography" is a rectification campaign to bring ethnography into the twenty-first century. I argue here, however, that his relational turn is a *return* to the naïve empiricism of the early Chicago School in which truth is confined to the field site—a naïve empiricism that Pierre Bourdieu has labelled "spontaneous sociology." Desmond's "relational ethnography" is, therefore, a regressive turn. As I show here, it becomes a polemic against theoretical engagement and comparative logic.

This new empiricism is rooted in an ontology (the nature of the world) that claims to make epistemology (how we should best explain and understand the world)

superfluous. In Desmond's view, if we adopt a relational ontology, then theory will look after itself.

Relational methodology takes as its scientific object neither a bounded group defined by members' shared social attributes nor a location delimited by the boundaries of a particular neighborhood or the walls of an organization but rather processes involving configurations of relations among actors or institutions. (Desmond 2014, p. 547).

Following Mustafa Emirbayer (1997) Desmond's "relational turn" is designed to rescue ethnography from *substantialism* in which the object of study is confined to isolated places, bounded groups and homogeneous cultures. In this paper I contest Desmond's two key claims: the backwardness of existing ethnography and the progressivism of his "relational ethnography".

As I shall show, Desmond is hard-pressed to document the very existence of "substantialist ethnography," let alone demonstrating that it characterizes "most sociological ethnographies" (Desmond 2014, p. 547). The distinction between "relationalism" and "substantialism" has the double effect of making "relationalism" appear (falsely) novel and, at the same time, obscuring a more important distinction between what I argue are two types of "relational ethnography": Desmond's empiricist *transactional* ethnography and a theoretically-grounded *structural* ethnography.<sup>1</sup>

It is often assumed that participant observation is a "natural sociology" that offers spontaneous and privileged access to truth. Here we find the empiricism of Grounded Theory, influentially formulated by Glazer and Strauss (1967) in reaction to the abstract theory of Talcott Parsons and his followers. Grounded Theory focused on gathering data to discover theories of social interaction within an enclosed field site. The Extended Case Method (Burawoy 2009, Burawoy et al. 1991 and Burawoy et al. 2000) restores the balance by recognizing already-existing theory, in other words, that the accumulated findings of sociology have not been in vain. It calls attention to the limitations of relying on theory induced from field observations, namely, the denial of context and history. Yet, for all their differences, both Grounded Theory and the Extended Case Method take for granted the logic of comparison. By spurning comparison as well as prior theory—two defining features of structural ethnography—Desmond's transactional ethnography retreats to an even deeper empiricism than the interactionism of Grounded Theory.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> My use of "transactional" to describe Desmond's "relational ethnography" derives from his teacher Emirbayer (1997) and, in turn, from Emirbayer's teacher Charles Tilly (1998). The use of "structural" is intended to convey the underlying limits of transactions, limits set by forces beyond the field site that can only be explored with theoretical frameworks and comparative logic. Structural ethnography derives from the Extended Case Method (Burawoy et al. 1991 and 2000; Burawoy 2009).

<sup>2</sup> In their departure from grounded theory, Tavory and Timmermans (2014) recognize the importance of preexisting bodies of theory invoked by participant observers to make sense of their field experiences. Nonetheless, they remain locked in the field site as the sole source of truth, and the point of engaging existing theories is still to discover new theory. In their view the sociological community exists not as a community that advances particular research programs but as a regulatory body that ensures goodness of fit, explanatory power, and relevance.

I argue here that, starting with William Foote Whyte's (1943) *Street Corner Society*, classic ethnography has always been relational—whether transactional or structural. Even Desmond's supposed examples of “substantialist ethnography” turn out to be at the cutting edge of “relational methodology.” Still more paradoxical, Desmond's own practice of ethnography—conscientious though it is as observational research—retreats from his own transactional prescriptions in the direction of substantialism. Both *On the Fireline* (2007) and *Evicted* (2016) resurrect the empiricism of the early Chicago School. They return to old style inductive ethnography in which sociological insights emerge spontaneously from the data. He expresses contempt for theoretical work as “out-of-touch scholasticism,” but also dismisses comparative research as substantialism.

As a follower of Bourdieu, Desmond insists on the importance of constructing a scientific object that breaks with common sense. Yet his own ethnographies, far from breaking with the common sense of his participants, faithfully reproduce it. His objects of study, such as eviction, spring directly from the experience of his subjects, so that his work exemplifies what Bourdieu et al. (1991, p. 38) condemn, namely a “hyperempiricism” that “abdicates the right and duty of theoretical construction in favour of spontaneous sociology.” Paradoxically, the spontaneous sociology of *Evicted* makes it highly effective as a “public sociology” of exposé, but it comes at the cost of a critical perspective that would break with common sense and generate convincing policy proposals.

In what follows, I begin by questioning “relational ethnography's” claim to novelty. I then show how Desmond's own practice of ethnography often veers toward substantialism, and I argue that the ethnographies he dismisses as substantialist are actually advanced forms of “relational ethnography”—what I term here structural ethnography—that work within theoretical frameworks and deploy a comparative method to go beyond common sense. Desmond not only misconstrues other ethnographies but also misreads Bourdieu, whom he cites as the inspiration for his methodological treatise. He confuses his own “ontological break” with Bourdieu's “epistemological break,” which depends on theory from start to finish. Having shown the centrality of both theory and comparative method to the advancement of science, finally, I point to the limitations of public sociology based on a spontaneous sociology of exposé.

### “Relational ethnography” and its corollaries

The Manifesto for “relational ethnography” is founded on three claims.

The first is a conception of *science* that calls on ethnographers to work much harder at constituting the object of their knowledge as an epistemological break with the common sense of the subjects. Desmond argues that ethnographers have worried too much about “how” but not enough about “what” to study (Desmond 2014, p. 549).

The second claim is a conception of *conventional ethnography* as paying insufficient attention to social processes and social relations. Ethnography, says Desmond (2014, p. 575), needs to catch up with sociology's relational turn and its focus on transactions. He aims to replace a *substantialist ethnography* with *relational ethnography* that focuses on fields rather than places, boundaries rather than bounded groups, processes rather

than processed people, and cultural conflict rather than cultural homogeneity. “Relational ethnography gives ontological primacy, not to groups or places, but to configurations of relations” (Desmond 2014, p. 554).

Finally, there is an assumption that *common sense* itself is “substantialist” (Desmond 2014, p. 561). In everyday life people act and think in terms of groups and places, not in terms of processes, relations, and transactions. *Ipsa facto*, therefore, “relational ethnography” makes the all-important break with common sense—the epistemological break that is the basis of science.

Three corollaries follow. The first is a *rejection of comparative research*, which Desmond writes “only further legitimates ‘groups’ or ‘places’ as basic objects of analysis” (Desmond 2014, p. 550).

Relational ethnography is not propelled by the logic of comparison, as is multisited<sup>3</sup> ethnography of sociology. It does not seek to understand if a certain group or community is peculiar vis-à-vis their counterparts in other contexts. ... Rather, it is “designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions [that come to support] the argument of the ethnography” (Marcus 1998, p. 90). (Desmond 2014, p. 554)

In rejecting comparisons, however, Desmond not only denies himself the most basic tool of social science, but the very possibility of examining transactions. To study a transaction between two entities requires that they first be compared and classified. Thus, Desmond’s “relational ethnography” is founded on a false opposition between comparative logic and transactional analysis. The point of social science is to combine the two, but that requires a theoretical framework.

The second corollary is Desmond’s *hostility to theoretical engagement*, which is replaced by “relational ontology”.

Rather than getting bogged down in theoretical debates ethnographers can adopt a pragmatic approach: certain relationships can be accentuated and others minimized depending on the relevance to a specific research question. The relational ethnographer should spend a considerable amount of time articulating a set of research questions and constructing a scientific object molded around them. What I have in mind is much more demanding than searching for ways to fill gaps in a literature or extending a theory of which one is particularly fond (Desmond 2014, p. 559).

Here research questions are prior to constructing the scientific object, but elsewhere Desmond (2014, p. 553) says the opposite: “[T]he kinds of questions asked, in turn, depend entirely on the constitution of one’s scientific object.” Ultimately, neither the

<sup>3</sup> Here Desmond confuses “multi-sited” ethnography with “multi-case” ethnography. Multi-sited ethnography is the method proposed by George Marcus (1998), based on tracing out connections, whereas multi-case ethnography asks “what is this a case of?” and making the comparison of sites a precondition for examining their connection (Burawoy 2009, chapter 4).

questions nor the scientific object appear from nowhere but are rooted in theoretical debates that define the state of the literature and propel research.

The third corollary follows from the second. In constructing the scientific object without the aid of theory or comparative method, Desmond risks *reproducing rather than breaking with common sense*. This is the most problematic aspect of his ethnographies. He takes us back to the inductivist view that the field reveals insights in and of itself without explicitly engaging relevant literature, which is either dismissed as wrong-headed or ignored. Far from breaking with their common sense, Desmond's ethnography mimics the experiences of those he studies.

Desmond supports his methodological arguments with examples of recent as well as classical ethnographies in order to illustrate the virtues of "relational ethnography." But a puzzling feature of the manifesto is the paucity of references to actually existing "substantialist" ethnographies—the supposedly predominant form of ethnography. The few he mentions are dismissed in cursory fashion, yet even they turn out to be far from substantialist.

"Substantialism" turns out to be a rare and largely mythical creature, created to justify celebrating its opposite—"relational ethnography" that studies relations "between at least two differently positioned people or organizations" (Desmond 2014, p. 554)—as "new" or "revolutionary." It may be true that few ethnographies of poverty have studied the relations between landlords and tenants, but studying the relations between two distinct positions is anything but novel. This is the very bread and butter of ethnography—whether the relations examined are between managers and workers, husbands and wives, workers and clients, offenders and victims, different types of bureaucrats, or family members linked across national boundaries.

Ethnography is *always* relational whether those relations are discovered empirically to produce "theory" tabula rasa or whether relations are constructed theoretically before they are explored empirically. The distinction between "substantialist" and "relational" ethnography therefore should be replaced by a distinction between two types of "relational ethnography"—an empiricist *transactional* ethnography hostile to comparison and theory, and an analytical *structural* ethnography that relies on prior theoretical framework and comparative logic. These distinctions are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** The classification of ethnography

What's at stake – Ontology	Relational Ethnography		Substantialist Ethnography
What's at stake – Epistemology	Transactional Ethnography • Empiricist • Connections	Structural Ethnography • Priority of Theory • Comparative Logic	(bounded groups, isolated places, homogeneous cultures, processed individuals)
What's at stake – Source of Theory	Grounded Theory (Interactionism)	Extended Case Method (Reflexive Ethnography)	

## ***On the Fireline*—a case of substantialist ethnography**

Given that the case for the novelty of relational ethnography rests on the existence of its “other,” namely substantialist ethnography one might expect Desmond to have devoted some attention to the existence of such ethnographies. Yet he lets the substantialism of the Chicago School off the hook by referring to Zorbaugh’s (1929) treatment of Chicago’s Gold Coast, he substitutes Eric Wolf’s (Wolfe 1982) indictment for his own analysis of anthropology, and he does not mention such obvious candidates as Mitchell Duneier’s (1994) *Slim’s Table* or Elijah Anderson’s (1981) *Place on the Corner*.

As Desmond (2014, p. 550) himself admits, one example of what he calls substantialism is his own study of firefighters. *On the Fireline* is a captivating ethnography of habitus, written while Desmond was a graduate student. To his credit he is ready to reject his early work, but he does so too quickly. Being a rare and exceptional example of substantialism, that early work offers important similarities and contrasts to his second book, *Evicted*, as well as lessons for the conduct of ethnography.

Desmond worked as a wildland firefighter for four summer seasons but only in the last one did he come out as a researcher, notebook in hand with a digital recorder. His book asks how and why these young firefighters voluntarily, nay enthusiastically, put their lives on the line. This is surprising as their pay is low and interrupts the jobs they have during the year. The conventional responses—masculine bravado or calculated risk—make little sense in the light of his observations. His fellow firefighters are more committed to competent performance than feats of heroism. They accept the organization’s mythology that as long as they follow the rules they will be safe. They believe in this mythology because the expectations of their employer, the US Forest Service, converge with the dispositions they acquired in their youth. They grew up appreciating the drama and danger of the forest. These young men, including Desmond himself, come to their jobs with a generalized habitus of country masculinity that dovetails with the specific habitus of individual responsibility and competence inculcated by the organization.

*On the Fireline* has a powerful internal logic—the development, cultivation, and actualization of the firefighter’s habitus. It begins with an account of the “country masculinity” of backcountry boys, expressed in hostility to both the city and its suburbs, and then explores the appeal of the forest as a sanctuary, the on-the-job training firefighters receive, and the mutual policing among them to ensure conformity to group norms. Finally, the book turns to firefighting itself, the actualization of the specific habitus of competence.

At every turn the focus is on the unity of the firefighting brigade: its rootedness in a particular place, not simply the forest but the Elk River Fire Station where they live; the rituals of solidarity forged through joking relations, common adherence to formal rules, and stereotyping other fire-fighters as Hotshots, Smokejumpers, Helitack Crews, and Engine crews. This is substantialist ethnography par excellence: centered on place, on a specific bounded group, and on the maintenance of cultural homogeneity.

*On the Fireline* is a convincing ethnography of habitus that renders intelligible the practical sense of firefighting. But there is no break with the common sense of the firefighter—quite the opposite: the task is to explicate how firefighters “make sense of danger, safety and death” (Desmond 2007, p. 4). Furthermore, as Desmond’s Appendix

demonstrates, none of the firefighters had any serious objection to the contents of the book, only complaining it revealed too many secrets, “airing our dirty laundry.”

Yet, there are hints of a potential break with common sense when, toward the end of the book, Desmond begins questioning the “illusio of self-determinacy”—the firefighters’ belief that survival depends on themselves and that death only comes to the incompetent. Desmond is shocked by the indifference of his crew to the death of firefighter Rick Lupe. Celebrated on the outside as a hero, on the inside his death won little sympathy: he was simply blamed for breaking the rules. Desmond’s consternation was aroused when he realized what everyone already knew, namely that the sacred rules were frequently violated by all concerned when actually fighting a fire. Thus making Lupe responsible for his own death on the basis of breaking some rule did not make sense. Pursuing this paradox further Desmond turned to the fatality report and discovered how flimsy was the case for blaming the victim. He shows how the report can be read not as it was intended—demonstrating that Lupe failed to follow the rules—but as the forestry service failing to pursue safe practices in the protective burning of wildlands and thus endangering its workers lives. Desmond hints at conflicts among the various organizations involved over the decision to start the fire, but he never moves into the wider “field” beyond the purview of his crew. To explore such wider institutional forces in which the firefighters were enmeshed would, however, have taken him beyond an ethnography of habitus, and thereby broken with their common sense.

Here then is an exemplary case of substantialist ethnography. Indeed, the ethnography of habitus lends itself to constituting the object of study as a bounded, isolated, and homogeneous group.<sup>4</sup>

### Evicted—a case of transactional ethnography

If *On the Fireline* is a substantialist ethnography, then *Evicted* exemplifies “relational ethnography.” Desmond appears regularly in the pages of *On the Fireline*, demonstrating the firefighting culture by the sanctions he faced, for example, for failing to memorize the rules of the organization or to meet the expectations of his crew. But he studiously removes himself from the pages of *Evicted*, even to the point of referring to himself in the texts as an anonymous friend. Arguing against what has become conventional, namely to reinsert the ethnographer into the ethnography, Desmond insists that the focus should not be on the ethnographer but on the devastating consequences of deplorable, costly, and insecure housing conditions. He opens up the lives of deep and inescapable poverty, recording day-to-day struggles, brittle and violent social relations

<sup>4</sup> This is not only true of *On the Fireline* but of substantialism’s *locus classicus*: Loïc Wacquant’s (2004) *Body and Soul*, an ethnography of a boxing gym in South Chicago, presented as a cohesive, bounded sanctuary from the ghetto. Since Wacquant did not have that “generic” habitus that would have eased him into the “specific” pugilist habitus—he was white, middle class, and French not black, poor, and from the US ghetto—so his book is riveted to the ethnographic self. To justify substantialism Wacquant (2015) coins the term “carnal sociology” that focuses on the formation of habitus, the shaping of corporeal and mental dispositions, accomplished through observant participation. Given their interest in the formation of habitus, it is not surprising that Desmond and Wacquant should produce substantialist ethnographies but these are actually rare. Moving outside the haven of the gym or the fire station into the habitat of the inner city calls for a very different type of ethnography.



but also spontaneous generosity, the stunted lives of those in shelters or dilapidated homes, the temporary relief of drugs and alcohol. All this and more is examined through the complex relations of antagonism and interdependence between landlords and tenants. Desmond was there observing and digitally recording, like a proverbial fly on the wall, the rawest of human interactions. While one can appreciate his desire to have the reader focus on the destitute, this move to make the observer invisible also constructs him as the neutral conveyor of a singular truth.<sup>5</sup> The lens through which the observer sees the truth is left unexamined—the first step to empiricism.

Thus, *Evicted* dispenses with the notion of habitus—the focus of his earlier book—in favor of a strong situational analysis in which behaviors are shaped by the immediacy and urgency of survival in the inner city or the run-down trailer park. Desmond explains reactions to material precarity not by reference to some ingrained and inherited culture but as a rational response to poverty by those who have experienced it much of their lives. At the center of his account are the concrete relations between landlord and tenant, studied from both sides, showing how their consequences ramify into all spheres of existence. He traces the activation of “disposable ties,” usually non-kin ties that are spontaneously created to deal with emergencies. In a tantalizing intervention he proposes that “eviction” is the equivalent for women of what “incarceration” is for men—the one locked out and the other locked in. These powerful themes are taken up and then dropped as the book follows a chronology of life stories, a succession of 26 engrossing and intersecting vignettes that capture the different dimensions of survival among the very poor in Milwaukee—reserving the endnotes and professional journals for engagement with the sociological literature. Thus, Desmond banishes not only himself the sociologist from the ethnographic pages of *Evicted*, but also references to other sociologists and, indeed, to sociology tout court. Yet there is no self-conscious epistemological break with his subjects’ “relational” common sense; his account is a celebration of “folk theory,” a “spontaneous sociology” interpreting the transactions as a self-contained truth.

As in *On the Fireline*, there are clues as to how Desmond might have broken with common sense. In the Epilogue he invokes the concept of “exploitation” to capture what is distinctive about his study of urban poverty, namely the relations between landlord and tenant. He writes: “Exploitation. Now, there’s a word that has been

<sup>5</sup> Desmond’s commitment to a singular truth is marked by the hiring of an “independent fact-checker.” While there is nothing in and of itself objectionable about a fact-checker, its use does convey a false sense of objectivity. It would have been interesting to know what facts Desmond got wrong and how he corrected them. In what way can an “independent fact-checker,” who knows little about the field site itself, check years of embedded fieldwork? A fact-checker can check the “accuracy” of a given text; she does not check for other truths eclipsed by the text, but consistent with the field, thereby once again giving the imprimatur of a singular truth. In another example of his pursuit of an illusory objectivity, Desmond suppresses participant reactions to his manuscript: “I provided a copy of the manuscript (either the entire work or relevant chapters) to everyone featured prominently in its pages. In some cases, I read relevant portions to people to *check factual details*” (2014, footnote 8, p. 404, emphasis added). Desmond is only interested in correcting “factual details” but not in their divergent interpretations. Since we hear nothing more of their reactions, so we are left to presume the participants all agreed with his account, thereby giving it that final stamp of confirmation. Such a spontaneous consensus is rare indeed; ethnographies are replete with methodological appendices that speak of dissident voices, especially vocal when subjected to the objectifying gaze of the sociologist. Could it be that exploiter and exploited, landlord and tenant, all agreed on an outsider’s rendition of their conflicts? Or if, indeed, they did agree could this reflect the tenants’ suspicion of Desmond’s close relations to their landlords. It is curious that Desmond has so little to say about his ethically as well as methodologically problematic insertion into a coercive relation - an insertion that was on the side of domination.

scrubbed out of the poverty debate. It is a word that speaks to the fact that poverty is not just a product of low incomes. It is also a product of extractive markets” (Desmond 2016, p. 305). But how can Desmond invoke the concept of exploitation without referring to the myriad debates in Marxism about this concept, and in particular the work of such leading urbanists as David Harvey and Neil Smith, not to mention Friedrich Engels, all of whom conceptualize exploitation as ground rent?<sup>6</sup>

Not only does Desmond ignore the ways in which others have deployed the concept successfully, but he himself makes no effort to develop it. In contrast to exploitation based on wage labor, which is invisible to both exploiter and exploited, exploitation based on rent is more transparent and therefore becomes the target of struggle and justification. Eviction itself is not exploitation but a form of dispossession that, under certain circumstances, *guarantees* exploitation, i.e., the payment of rent. Desmond’s surveys of Milwaukee show that evictions are far more frequent among the poor than one might have imagined. But it is the threat of eviction that propels the dynamics of exploitation. On the face of it, exploitation is a simple zero-sum relation, what the landlord gets the tenant does not. But the relationship works because the landlord—at least in these cases—makes concessions: allowing tenants to go into debt, or to sublet parts of the home, or to turn money rent into labor rent. The further a tenant falls into debt the more costly eviction becomes for both tenant and landlord. The landlord’s revenge is to refuse to maintain the dwelling—the plumbing, the floors, the ceilings, saving on costs.<sup>7</sup>

Tenants are not without resources in this cat and mouse game. Having chalked up debt they can secretly escape by seeking another dwelling, but if the landlord hears of this she will threaten to take the tenant to court, leaving a permanent blemish on the tenant’s record, and making it difficult if not impossible to find another place to live. The tenant can also call in government agencies that will bring on punitive sanctions against the landlord. But the tenant knows that such a move is likely to lead to her peremptory eviction.

If evicted, the tenant will, in all likelihood, lose many of her possessions, dumped out in the street or put in storage at a monthly cost, which if not paid will result in dispossession.<sup>8</sup> They then will either move into a homeless shelter, or with friends, or strike up a relationship with another tenant and share the rent for an already overcrowded and dilapidated home. Under these conditions of overcrowding, together with

<sup>6</sup> In his concluding chapter Desmond writes, “We need a new sociology of displacement that documents the prevalence, causes, and consequences of evictions. And perhaps most important, we need a committed sociology of inequality that includes a serious study of exploitation and extractive markets” (2016, p. 333). How could he write this without referring to the voluminous work of Erik Wright who taught in the department where he was trained? Charles Tilly, who also makes exploitation central to his account of inequality, sets the template for *tabula rasa* sociology when he writes: “Although my ideas of exploitation spring from the Marxist tradition, I have no talent or inclination for the sorts of point-by-point critique and reconstruction of Marxist models that John Roemer, Jon Elster, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, Howard Botwinick, and Melvin Leiman have undertaken” (Tilly 1998, p.16).

<sup>7</sup> The struggle between landlord and tenant calls for an analysis of the class relations of exploitation analogous to Adam Przeworski’s (1985) account of the material bases of hegemony that involves an optimal militancy of labor that would extract the most concessions from capital in the long run. Only in Przeworski’s case the concessions are always monetary whereas here they involve labor rent and even rent in kind as well as monetary payment.

<sup>8</sup> Gretchen Purser (2016) describes how the evicted become the evictors, employed by eviction companies to remove tenants and their possessions ruthlessly. In becoming insulated from the rest of society, she shows how the process of eviction contributes to the invisibility of the very forces of dispossession.

drugs, domestic violence is all too common, leading women to make 911 calls in self-defense. This can bring on eviction as the police punish landlords for “nuisance activity” on their property.

Once one makes “exploitation” the analytical concept that sheds light on “eviction,” the folk concept, then a theoretical exploration would focus not only on the dynamics of bargaining, but also an analysis of *dispossession* (Harvey 2003, 2008). Landlords made a killing from buying up foreclosed homes after the 2008 mortgage crisis. Rents for these run-down houses remain so high in part because there is no effective rent control and in part because there is such a shortage of affordable housing. At the same time there are few jobs for marginalized populations, especially those with criminal or eviction records. Without access to the internet or a car, residents of the inner city are at a severe disadvantage in competing for jobs in other parts of the city, leaving aside questions of employment discrimination.

As in *On the Fireline*, Desmond only hints at an analysis of the broader context within which exploitation takes place. To go beyond the lived experience of landlords and tenants would require analysis of the politics of housing production in Milwaukee as well as rent control and, indeed, control of evictions—a Bourdieusian analysis of the housing field that would bring into play the police, Department of Neighborhood Services, the City Council, banks, developers, and above all the relations among them that are shaping the fortunes of the poor. Overlapping this field is the skewed development of Milwaukee’s economy. Instead of the “relational ethnography” he advocates, Desmond’s description is largely place bound. The relations between landlord and tenant are circumscribed, ignoring other actors who are making dispossession and then exploitation possible. In short, Desmond’s transactional ethnography often descends into substantialism.

Had Desmond taken the notion of “exploitation” more seriously, he might have asked whether there are different types of landlord-tenant exploitation, going beyond *narratives* of residents in the trailer park and the inner city to a systematic comparison of the two. Furthermore, explaining the difference between trailer park and inner city would have steered him beyond his immediate field sites. The trailer park was inhabited by white men and women and governed by office staff members (Lennie and Susie) who, in turn, represented the land owner (Tobin). Most of the residents were not actually tenants but owned their trailer homes and paid a ground rent. This gave a certain entitlement to the tenants, but had the advantage, as far as Tobin was concerned, that the occupants were responsible for the upkeep of their homes. It was different in the inner city where Sherrena and her husband Quentin were both owners and managers of their inner city properties across the North Side. There was much strife about who was responsible for the maintenance of their properties. Thus, these black tenants were also immersed in struggles, parallel to the white tenants of the trailer park, only the latter were more likely to have connections outside of extreme poverty whereas the former had to rely on each other—on what Desmond calls disposable ties.

Paradoxically, the white trailer park was subject to greater oversight from the city council, which demanded its clean-up as an eyesore and environmental hazard, whereas the inner city was governed by more repressive agencies—police, department of neighborhood services, court orders, nuisance violations. A comparison of the two sites, rather than legitimating “‘groups’ or ‘places’ as basic objects of analysis,” compels the researcher to go beyond the group or place to their relations to the wider

context of their determination, in this case the racially structured order of regulation. In this way, race is strangely removed from the analysis.

In avoiding the comparison of his two sites, Desmond may be following the *proscription* of his “relational ethnography” (no explicit comparisons) but he does not follow the *prescription* of “relational ethnography” (study transactions between people in different positions). He cannot study the overt connections between the inner city and trailer park precisely because of the segregation between North and South sides of Milwaukee. To connect them would reveal how they are both the product of wider forces, including the racial dispositions of the landlords who determine who should rent their properties, but more widely the patterns of racial segregation that dominate the urban scene.

There are other comparisons to be made. Desmond (2016, p.5) writes “There is a nothing special about Milwaukee when it comes to eviction ... This book is set in Milwaukee, but it tells an American story.” But cities differ considerably, not least in the way eviction relates to exploitation. As Desmond shows, Milwaukee is a city in which eviction—formal and informal—is the threat landlords wield over tenants to extract their rent. But in Eva Rosen’s (2014) study of Baltimore the relations of exploitation are different. There tenants with Housing Choice Vouchers are an attractive source of profit because landlords can secure above-market rents from their tenants, who pay only 30% of their income in rent while the federal government pays the rest. Both tenants and landlords, therefore, have a common interest in those vouchers. Landlords eagerly seek out and retain tenants who give them the chance to obtain the “voucher premium,” even offering them monetary concessions and beautifying home interiors. In this way landlords manage to obtain a secure rent for their properties in the poorest of areas. In Milwaukee, by contrast, it would seem, landlords are less interested in accepting vouchers: market rates for rentals are higher and so vouchers give them less and, in addition, the regulations concerning the landlord’s responsibility for maintenance make vouchers more costly.

We can already distinguish between Desmond’s account that focuses on the transactions between individuals and a structural analysis of the underlying relations that give rise to those transactions—be it rooted in the analysis found, for example, in Marx’s theory of capitalism, Weber’s account of bureaucracy, or Durkheim’s treatment of the division of labor. This distinction points to two types of “relational ethnography”: *transactional* ethnography (which Desmond follows) and a *structural* ethnography.<sup>9</sup> Below I elaborate these two types of “relational ethnography,” focusing on what transactional ethnography rejects and structural ethnography embraces: a comparative logic and a theoretical logic. Only with these logics is it possible to move

<sup>9</sup> As Ben Shestakofsky pointed out in a personal communication, the “relational turn” to network analysis has been subject to a parallel critique. Thus, Graeme Thompson (2004) criticizes the endless openness and fluidity of much network analyses, obscuring underlying structures that account for the stability and durability of social life. Neil Fligstein and Luke Dauter (2007, p. 107, emphasis added) write, “Network analysis is a *technique* for finding social structures in relational data. It is not a theory of the underlying relationships in the data and the mechanism that they represent.” In other words, network analysis is not a substitute for “theoretical constructs”. Greta Krippner (2001, p. 797) offers a similar criticism: in network analysis “social content is distilled away from social structure,” so that it is impossible to know how networks are created, reproduced, and transformed. The “relational turn,” whether in network analysis or transactional ethnography, becomes an ontology or meta-theory that by itself is bereft of theoretical or explanatory content.

beyond common sense to science. We begin, however, by deconstructing Desmond's artificial distinction between relational and substantialist ethnography.

### **Logics of comparison: from spurious substantialism to structural ethnography**

In sociology, modern ethnography begins with William Foote Whyte's (1943), *Street Corner Society*. Desmond (2014, pp. 550, 551, 564) claims *Street Corner Society* to be a substantialist ethnography par excellence because Whyte took the common sense category—"slum"—as his object of study. Yet Whyte's primary object of study is not "the slum" but the social structure of the Corner gang, embedded in a set of relations connecting racketeers, police, and political machine. Its focus is on the urban political field rather than a particular place, on the relations among groups rather than bounded groups, on processes rather than processed people.

Indeed, far from being substantialist, *Street Corner Society* fits Desmond's definition of "relational ethnography" to a T: it "incorporates fully into the ethnographic sample at least two types of actors or agencies occupying different positions within the social space and bound together in a relationship of mutual dependence or struggle" (Desmond 2014, p. 554). In Whyte's own words:

The corner gang, the racket and police organizations, the political organization, and now the social structure have all been described and analyzed in terms of hierarchy of personal relations based upon a system of reciprocal obligations. These are the fundamental elements out of which all Cornerville institutions are constructed (Whyte 1943, p. 272).

This is as much a relational ethnography as *Evicted* and in some ways more so. Unlike *Evicted*, which largely confines itself to the causes and consequences of the relation between landlord and tenant, *Street Corner Society* embraces the wider political field. It goes beyond the field site to the urban political field in which it is embedded. Moreover, it undertakes systematic comparison of the Norton gang and the Italian Community Club to draw the conclusion that social relations are prior to individuals:

In other words, there was a continuous change in the individuals who held particular social positions, but the positions themselves remained constant, and the people who participated at a given level of society over an extended period of time bore close resemblances to one another (Whyte 1943, p. 94).

Whyte's comparative logic combined with careful attention to unfolding social processes enables him to see how human behavior is shaped by underlying social relations on the one side and the wider urban field on the other. He is definitively not a substantialist; moreover, his relational ethnography is not limited to empirical transactions. *Street Corner Society* has strong comparative and theoretical components that make it an archetype of structural ethnography.

Desmond's manifesto also briefly mentions (and then dismisses) two other examples of "substantialist" ethnography, indicting them for their confinement to "groups" and "places," namely Rachel Sherman's (2007) *Class Acts* and Jeffrey Sallaz's (2009), the *Labor of Luck*. Far from substantialist, these are exemplary cases of "relational ethnography" of the structural kind, deploying theory and comparative logics to go beyond common sense.

Sherman's *Class Acts* is a participant observation study of two luxury hotels—Royal Court and Luxury Garden. Her concern is the way hotel workers—interactive and non-interactive—relate to management and guests. Just as Desmond spends time with both landlords and tenants, so Sherman spends time with workers, managers, and guests. But she goes further, examining how those relations vary both within the hotels (e.g. between the front and back of the house) and between hotels (the "hierarchical professionalism" of Luxury Garden and the "flexible informality" of the Royal Court). Moreover, Sherman constitutes the hotel as a "service theatre"—a complex field of labor processes. She uses the comparison of the two hotels—one catering to corporate business and the other to aristocratic wealth—to show what they have in common, namely negotiated power relations between guest and worker. These relations are understood through a particular theoretical lens: the relationship of entitlement in production-consumption as one of normalization and consent (in contrast to previous factory studies that looked at relations of exploitation between management and worker). By problematizing what her subjects take for granted, namely relations of servitude in which the dominated worker creates the superordinate client, she breaks with common sense. Thus, rather than a "substantialist" ethnography of groups or places, *Class Acts* is a structural ethnography that *constitutes* the hotel as a *field* of interacting labor *processes* accommodating different cultural practices.

Jeffrey Sallaz (2009) is no more guilty of substantialism than Rachel Sherman, but whereas Sherman uses difference to *constitute commonality*, Sallaz's study of South African and US casinos aims to *explain difference* by extending beyond the casinos where he works to the wider fields in which they are embedded in an extended comparison. For four years Sallaz moved between casinos in Nevada and South Africa, and between jobs as blackjack croupier and pit manager. He found that the two countries organize gambling in unexpectedly different ways—a discovery made possible by drawing on the theory of "production regimes." In Nevada, with its "neoliberal state," he finds a hegemonic regime in which remuneration of the croupier is largely based on tipping, surveillance is decentralized and technology is craft-like with the hand-shuffling of cards. In South Africa, croupiers are subject to punitive and centralized control from the pit managers. They receive a flat wage with the prohibition of tipping while dealing is deskilled through the use of shuffling machines.

One might have expected the neoliberal regime of Nevada with weak labor legislation to lead to despotism while the postapartheid regime with its stronger labor legislation would give more autonomy to the dealers. But the reverse turned out to be the case. To explain the unexpected divergence Sallaz is forced to go beyond the pit to the managerial structure of the casino and then beyond the casino to the wider political economy. Undertaking a Bourdieusian field analysis, he shows how the federally mandated cleanup of gambling in Nevada leads to the monitoring of capital that, as a quid pro quo, retains the right to regulate its own labor market. By contrast, in South Africa the postapartheid state permits the consolidation of white apartheid capital

but in a context of a regulated market that favors the “previously disadvantaged,” i.e., Africans. The result is a high-trust regime in Nevada awarding the dealer considerable autonomy, while in South Africa there is a low-trust regime in which a racially prejudiced management seeks to control every move of the new African dealers. Comparative logic, combined with the theory of production regimes, is essential to tracing the conflict among dealers, managers, and clients to the historical transformation of the political field, moving the study beyond place, group, and cultural homogeneity.

Far from legitimating “groups” or “places” as “basic objects of analysis” comparative logic makes it possible to go *beyond* places and groups to the study of fields and to decipher the meaning of boundaries. Nor does this approach privilege “the macro over the micro, seeing the macro as that which is global, causal and historical and the micro as that which is local, descriptive and current” (Desmond 2014, p. 559). Instead the ethnographer seeks out the macro conditions of micro processes, but those micro processes always remain in focus. Indeed, micro processes are conditions of the macro; but they can also challenge or reconstitute the forces shaping them; they can even create conditions for macro forces to transform or crush micro-institutions. This structural ethnography, or what I have elsewhere called the extended case method (Burawoy 2004, chapter 1), offers one way of studying how men and women make history but not under conditions of their own choosing; how personal troubles become public issues; how biography intersects history—the very definition of sociology.

### Logics of theory: Pierre Bourdieu and the epistemological break

So far I have argued that Desmond’s relational turn falsely represents the history of ethnography by introducing a spurious “substantialism,” while obscuring the distinction between an empiricist transactional ethnography, such as his own, that faithfully reproduces common sense, and a structural ethnography that breaks with the common sense of the subjects through comparative analysis. Desmond justifies his transactional approach by reference to the methodological writings of Pierre Bourdieu, especially, Bourdieu et al. (1991) *The Craft of Sociology*. Here Desmond captures something important. While Bourdieu does endorse comparison through analogy, he does not undertake systematic comparisons. Thus, when he compares the peasantry of the Béarn to the Algerian Kabyle, it is by suggestive allusion rather explicit comparison. Similarly, when he presents patterns of cultural consumption he is more interested in the way classes orient themselves to one another rather than comparing them independently.<sup>10</sup> When he “compares” fields, it is always as loose “homologies”. If Desmond correctly identifies Bourdieu’s reluctance to pursue comparative logic, he misreads

<sup>10</sup> In their endorsement of comparative methodology, Bourdieu et al. seem to go no further than the following: “The reasoning by analogy which many epistemologists regard as the first principle of scientific invention is called upon to play a specific role in sociological science, the specificity of which is that it can only constitute its object by the *comparative approach*” (1991, p. 51). Dylan Riley (in review) argues that Bourdieu has a “striking lack of interest in explanation.” Throughout his work what is missing is any comparative analysis of why things should be the way they are as opposed to some specific alternative arrangement. Riley concludes that the appeal of Bourdieu lies in the way his field analysis resonates with the experience and identity of critical intellectuals, and perhaps this explains why Desmond expresses such a deep attachment to Bourdieu.

Bourdieu's relation to theory. Without any explicit comparative methodology Bourdieu is all the more dependent on the priority of theory.

### Priority of theory

Desmond (2014 p. 548) states: "To break with everyday presuppositions and to construct a sound scientific object: these are the first and most fundamental steps of all analytical endeavors, together forming an essential prelude to social-scientific inquiry." He goes on to cite Durkheim's warning against "prenotions" that are easily mistaken for "things themselves": "[the sociologist] must free himself from those fallacious notions which hold sway over the mind of the ordinary person, shaking off once and for all the yoke of those empirical categories that long habit often makes tyrannical." Bourdieu makes the same point. Citing Bourdieu, Passeron, and Chamboredon's *The Craft of Sociology*, Desmond writes: "the social sciences have to perform the *epistemological* break that can separate scientific interpretation from all artificialist or anthropomorphic interpretations of society ... social facts demarcated, perceived, and named by spontaneous sociology, or 'social problems'..." (emphasis added. Desmond 2014, pp. 548–549). Yet Desmond's practice and his methodology belie Bourdieu's approach to constructing the scientific object.

How then does one construct the scientific object? For Desmond it is a matter of making an *ontological* break by replacing "substantialist ethnography" with "relational ethnography," replacing the focus on places and groups with the study of fields and processes. But it turns out that the actors in *Evicted* see their lives in terms of relations rather than substances, so Desmond's ontology does not break with common sense. Instead, it becomes the excuse to reject prior theory and comparative method. It is precisely this rejection that guarantees the reproduction of the common sense of his participants and to privilege what Bourdieu calls spontaneous sociology—the very antithesis of sociology as science. Here Desmond departs from Durkheim and Bourdieu for whom prior theorizing is essential for an *epistemological* shift, a shift from spontaneous sociology to scientific sociology. That shift lies at the heart of structural ethnography.

Bourdieu traces his own structuralist position to Marx, Weber, and Durkheim for whom social relations preexist individual and even collective consciousness that are their effects.

Marx was saying the same thing when he posited that "in the social production of their life, men enter into determinate relations that are necessary and independent of their will"; and so was Weber, when he refused to reduce the cultural meaning of actions to the subjective intentions of the actors. Durkheim, who insists that the sociologist must enter the social world as one enters an unknown world, gives Marx credit for having broken with the illusion of transparency: "We think it a fertile idea that social life must be explained, not by the conception of it created by those who participate in it, but by profound causes which escape awareness" (Bourdieu et al. 1991, p. 15)



For Bourdieu privileging social relations *requires* the priority of theory. Indeed, *The Craft of Sociology* is a relentless attack on empiricism—that the facts speak for themselves, that they can be collected by an invisible outsider (or verified by a diligent “fact checker”). Citing Karl Popper, Bourdieu et al. write “theory dominates the experimental work from its initial planning up to the finishing touches in the laboratory” (Bourdieu et al. 1991, p. 36).

No doubt one can and should collect the most unreal discourses—but only so long as they are seen not as an explanation of behavior but as an aspect of the behaviour to be explained. Whenever he believes he can avoid the task of constructing the facts in relation to a theoretical problematic, the sociologist submits himself to a construction of which he is unaware (Bourdieu et al. 1991, p. 38).

By contrast, in focusing on the lived experiences of the inner city and trailer park without theoretical preconceptions, Desmond necessarily fails to create an object of science. In refusing to move beyond the folk concept of eviction, Desmond is trapped in common sense.

### Epistemological break

Bourdieu’s epistemological break is based on a two-fold truth—the truth of the participant and the truth of the scientist between which there is an unbridgeable divide. That is to say, participants cannot connect their own world to the scientific understanding of the sociologist. In the game metaphor Bourdieu often deploys, players develop a commitment (*illusio*) to a taken-for-granted set of all absorbing and incontrovertible principles (*nomos*) governing the play of the game—while the scientist observing the game from without can see the conditions that make the game possible, conditions that are invisible to the players. Thus, in the oft-used example of gift-exchange, the giver’s experience is that of a freely given gift that hides the broader long-term pattern of domination that is only recognized as such by the scientist. The subjective truth may be “false” but it is a necessary illusion—*illusio*—that ensures that participants will act in a particular way to reproduce the social structure invisible to them.

Examples from Bourdieu’s work abound. In *Reproduction*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that schooling is seen by its participants as having a technical function, recognized by all, namely the pursuit of qualifications, and a social function, understood only by the sociologist, of reproducing class relations. The school transmits a middle class culture, benefiting middle class children who thereby out-perform working class children who feel they are simply not gifted and therefore destined for working class jobs.

Similarly, in *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) shows how the things we consume—art, cinema, music, food, and newspapers—both conceal and express our class background. Each area of consumption is organized into an (arbitrary) hierarchy of distinction and those who practice the most legitimate culture are seen to be the most gifted and refined, an attribute that is actively cultivated by their (dominant) class position. Again the ostensible truth of the field of consumption conceals an underlying class truth.

Bourdieu claims that none of the classes he considers—dominant class, new and old petite bourgeoisie, and working class—can see through and beyond the apparent autonomy of cultural fields within which their consumption is enmeshed. Instead they are subject to symbolic domination, a form of domination not understood as such.

In *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu (2000) argues that symbolic domination is impenetrable to the dominated. Naturalized through habitus, mystified through their participation in social structures the dominated can achieve a sociological understanding, only under exceptional circumstances involving symbolic revolutions and bodily retraining. Otherwise the epistemological divide is unbridgeable. In this view there is little point in the ethnographer engaging with her subjects to reach a sociological understanding of domination. The sociologist has the truth and no one else can achieve it—because they do not have access to the leisure of *skholé* that underpins the scientific field. One can see why Bourdieu is skeptical of participant observation, as it only reveals a partial truth, the subjective truth of the participant, unable of itself to reach an objective truth.<sup>11</sup> From Bourdieu’s point of view, Desmond’s ethnography and, indeed, the long empiricist tradition of participant observation, epitomizes the limitations of ethnography.

### Whose common sense?

The epistemological break refers to the break between common sense and science, but whose common sense? So far we have assumed it is the common sense of people being studied, but it is quite possible to have a break with the common sense of the dominant ideology, of the media, and even of sociology.<sup>12</sup> Desmond makes the crucial move from breaking with participant knowledge to using participant knowledge to break with “theoretical interpretation and its scholasticism.”

Constructing a relational object, then, entails breaking not only with common-sense categories and unexamined assumptions about social reality, but also with out-of-touch scholasticism that negates the complexity of social practice by interpreting it through theoretical categories considered to be superior to “folk” categories of everyday life.... On second consideration, then, constructing the ethnographic object requires a double break: a break with commonsense and its substantialism as well as with theoretical interpretation and its scholasticism (Desmond 2014, p. 560).

The overriding emphasis of Desmond’s work, including his articles in professional journals, is to break not with common sense of the participants but with more conventional sociology, specifically theories that do not recognize the centrality of

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Sallaz (in review) writes that, while Bourdieu is sympathetic to participant observation, he considers that it falls prey to three flaws: it offers at best a partial truth of micro processes; it cannot grasp the wide-ranging relations of a field; and it suffers from the projection onto subjects of the observer’s mistaken theories of practice. Through the deployment of theory, comparison, and reflexivity, structural ethnography has a response to each of these challenges.

<sup>12</sup> One thinks of Louis Althusser’s famous “epistemological break,” which distinguishes between the early, immature, and humanistic Marx and the late, mature, and scientific Marx.

exploitation in the cause and consequence of urban poverty. For him, exploitation is a hammer wielded against sociology of poverty, not as the basis for constructing an alternative understanding of the inner city. It is as if the spontaneous sociology of the participants *is* the scientific theory and it needs no further elaboration, except verification and quantification through social surveys.

Bourdieu et al (1999) do something similar with their popular, *Weight of the World*—a collection of in-depth interviews with diverse representatives of the dominated, from blue collar and white collar workers, teachers, immigrants, social workers, and judges. Here Bourdieu argues for a Socratic method of engagement in which the interviewer, as a sociologist familiar with the life-world of the respondent, is able to elicit a deep self-understanding from the interviewee. Here, too, the “epistemological break” is not between interviewer and interviewee but between the self-understanding of the participants and the stereotypes, conventional wisdoms, and media portraits that circulate in wider society.

Parallels though there are, *The Weight of the World* is decisively different from *Evicted* in the care taken by Bourdieu and his colleagues to match the background of interviewer and interviewee and to present the actual exchange between the two. The interviewer is no fly on the wall but an active co-producer of knowledge. Thus, consistent with his second warning against participant observation, Bourdieu would admonish Desmond for his self-banishment from his accounts of poverty and eviction: blinded by the mythology of the neutral observer, unconscious of his own deeply-held prejudices—especially those rooted in the scholastic habitus—Desmond avoids any engagement with even a minimal reflexivity.<sup>13</sup>

### Breaking with the epistemological break

In the last decade of his life Bourdieu, exasperated by the neoliberal turn of the French government, took to the streets, supporting strikers and social movements, writing in newspapers and magazines, giving interviews, and politicizing his sociology in short books. Suddenly, he lost sight of the epistemological break with subaltern common sense and saw his sociology as educating the public. Breaking with his more professional past, overnight he became a Gramscian, discovering good sense in the common sense (where before there had only been bad sense) that could be elaborated into a full-fledged sociology of critique (Boltanski 2011). While his political practice saw an emancipatory moment in social movements, his theoretical practice saw an emancipatory moment in the “realpolitik of reason”—holding the state accountable to its universalistic claims. It now became possible to lead spontaneous sociology toward a scientific understanding of the world. There is a profound shift here—in effect an epistemological break with the epistemological break—that establishes the conditions for a public sociology, a sociology that engages the public. How does Desmond’s public sociology compare to Bourdieu’s?

<sup>13</sup> It is curious that Desmond should take such an unreflexive stance, given his ringing endorsement elsewhere of Bourdieu’s three levels of reflexivity that interrogate the social, disciplinary, and scholastic unconscious (Emirbayer and Desmond 2012). As is the case with Bourdieu, it is easier to deploy reflexivity as a weapon against others than to apply it to oneself.

## Public sociology and policy sociology

Desmond and his publisher have been remarkably successful in promoting *Evicted* to a wider public, with excerpts, essays, and reviews in *The New Yorker*, *the New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Atlantic*, *American Scholar*, *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, *The Nation*, and *National Public Radio*. The narrative strategy, the powerful writing, and the gripping accounts of the appalling conditions of everyday life have proved highly effective in disseminating an important message of “poverty and profit.”

Nor is this public sociology of exposé divorced from professional sociology. The copious endnotes in *Evicted* refer to the relevant sociological literature. In some ways Desmond takes sociology as science very seriously, combining his ethnography with surveys designed to discover the generality of his observations within Milwaukee. To this end he was responsible for the Milwaukee Area Renters Study (MARS) that interviewed over 1000 tenants in their homes across Milwaukee’s private housing sector; an examination of the court records for all the formal evictions that took place between 2003 and 2013; and an in-person survey of 250 tenants appearing in eviction court over a six-week period in 2011. The surveys were designed to pursue questions that emerged in the ethnographic research and provided data for a series of journal articles that explored ideas presented in the vignettes of *Evicted*. These articles analyze the way housing insecurity affects job loss (Desmond and Gershenson 2016), the prevalence of voluntary as opposed to involuntary moves out of rental housing (Desmond and Shollenberger 2015), the consequences of Third-Party policing for inner-city women (Desmond and Valdez 2013), “disposable ties” (Desmond 2012a), and the incidence of eviction by gender, race, and co-habiting children (Desmond 2012b). One might note that these statistical techniques all imply comparisons and give short-shrift to relationality and social process!

The synergy of public and professional sociology, each bolstering and inspiring the other, is a virtue but it leads to a flawed policy sociology—a universal voucher program whereby poor families would dedicate no more than 30% of their income to rent and the voucher, i.e., the government, will pay the rest. He writes: “Vouchers are far more cost-effective than new construction, whether in the form of public housing or subsidized private development” (Desmond 2016, p. 309). Yet, as we have seen, his own account reveals how problematic vouchers can be. If they do not exist along with the inspection of housing and rent control, they simply feed the exploitation Desmond denounces. They become a subsidy for landlords as well as tenants and, as Rosen (2014) shows, exploitation becomes super-exploitation. If, on the other hand, vouchers do go along with rent control and housing inspection then landlords simply refuse to accept vouchers because, as Desmond shows, they make a handsome profit without them.

Unfortunately, demand does not create supply. Vouchers do not solve the underlying problem, namely the lack of affordable housing, which is causing astronomical rents for dilapidated dwellings. Desmond’s policy solution points to the limitations of his ethnography, especially its confinement to the neighborhoods he studies. He does not move beyond the field site to the political and economic field that shapes it—the operation of the housing market and the role of the municipality, banks, and developers. The exploitation he so deplores exists because there is a shortage of housing that cannot

be understood by studying eviction alone. Indeed, eviction rates are so high in Milwaukee precisely because there is so little housing for the poor. To answer that question, one has to explore not only the wider urban political economy, but also the history of public housing that Desmond dismisses.

In his famous essay, “Sociologist as Partisan,” Alvin Gouldner (1968) attacked the sociology of Howard Becker and the Chicago School. Becker had asked the question, “on whose side are we on?” and answered that we—sociologists—are on the side of the underdog. Gouldner questioned this stance, pointing to the ambiguity in the meaning of underdog and overdog. In the Chicago ethnographies the overdog usually proved to be someone near at hand, the immediate custodian of the poor, caretaker of the marginalized, while the more significant overdog—the state—remained untouched and out of sight. For Gouldner the real culprit was the welfare state, invisible in the studies but with which the ethnographers identified and from which they received their research funds. The welfare state set the parameters of poverty and marginality but also supported sociological research.

Today it is not the welfare state but the market and its sponsoring foundations that are embraced in an uncritical fashion. Desmond does not trace the plight of his subjects to gentrification and dispossession but to their effects, namely the relations of eviction. Yet the landlords that Desmond studies are bit players compared to the developers. The devastating consequences of the market should be the focus of any policy analysis—and here the salient actors are developers, the larger construction industry, the banks, and the multiple alliances of political actors from the municipal to the national level. This is the relevant field, not the circumscribed transactions between individual landlords and tenants. These wider forces are invisible in Desmond’s account—forces that have to be unveiled and tackled if there is to be any solution to the housing problem. Though Desmond draws—problematically as we have seen—on Bourdieu’s notion of field and epistemological break, he strangely overlooks Bourdieu’s (2005) own account of the housing market in France and his condemnation of the destructive power of the market (Bourdieu 1998 and 2003).

What is missing from Desmond’s ethnography is not only an account of the fields within which exploitation is embedded, namely the labor market and the housing market, but also a critical account of the destructiveness of markets. A critical account of exploitation without an equally critical account of market forces and the dispossession that makes markets possible (Harvey 2003) obscures the source of the problem. Karl Polanyi’s (1944) critique of the marketplace and the huge literature it has spawned points to the dangers of commodifying land, labor, and money, exposing the conditions of exploitation through rent. If exploitation is taken seriously as a theoretical concept it leads directly to the study of the housing market and real estate, rather than just the inner city or the trailer park.

Desmond’s public sociology, important as it is, is limited to an exposé of the lived experience of housing insecurity. It encourages unexamined solutions to unexamined problems. It does not situate the exposé in a sociological account that takes us beyond that experience. Whether through comparative analysis or theoretical labor, sociology must go beyond lived realities to their determinations. That would also lead to policy interventions that will not reproduce but regulate or transform the housing market. It could also involve an organic public sociology in which the fly comes off the wall to mingle with the people, engaging them and the organizations defending them in a

process of mutual education in which both sides work together to explore possibilities that are outside the lived experience. Then the evicted are no longer victims of their own agency or of the opportunism of landlords, but become players on a wider political canvas.

*Evicted* is an evocative ethnography and therein lies both its appeal and its dangers. Desmond's hyper-empiricism portrays the inner city as given, natural, inevitable, and unchanging. It leaves the dispossessed helpless in their endless struggle for survival. Ultimately, there are too many missing relations in Desmond's relational ethnography—relations that connect sections of the inner city, relations that connect the inner city to the world beyond, relations that connect the ethnographer to his subjects, and not least relations that connect the sociologist to the critical discipline from which he has emerged. Instead Desmond's "relational ethnography" leaves the ethnographer as a hero in a heartless world, disconnected from forces for change and alternative visions.

### Conclusion: the logic of science

Conducting ethnography, especially when it involves immersion in sites of deep deprivation, is a powerful and disorienting experience. It inspires ethnographers to speak for the people they study. It calls forth a moral accountability but too easily subsides into an empiricist genre of social science. Identification with the subject conspires to generate a mythology that there is only one truth—a *participant truth* that is confined to the field site. Desmond's empiricism breaks out of confined interactionism toward transactionalism but in so doing loses sight of a second *sociological truth* that *explains* the participant's truth—through the examination of wider forces of determination. This second truth advances through theoretical engagement and comparative logic.

Ethnographic research can be a powerful corrective to scholastic theoreticism. But to do so it must move beyond the spontaneous sociology of the participant. The growth of knowledge requires the elaboration of theoretical traditions, paradigms, research programs—call them what you will—through their confrontation with external anomalies and internal contradictions. When it does this, rather than a backwater of social science, reflexive ethnography is at its forefront. Especially today, when the academic workplace is threatened by forces beyond, the underlying dilemma of ethnography—that we are part of the world we study—is pressingly germane to all social science and the academic world more generally. So we have to develop an understanding of our relation to those we study. We cannot confine ourselves to processes within the field site but must recognize how they are tied to the past and thus to the future, as well as to social forces that establish their conditions of existence. We cannot broach these problems without inherited bodies of knowledge—theories—that we continually reconstruct. That is what gives meaning and distinctiveness to sociology.

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