

Questions on Bourgois 1-337
In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in el Barrio

1. On p. 11, Bourgois says that “Any detailed examination of social marginalization encounters serious problems with the politics of representation...” What does he mean?
2. What does “the interface between structural oppression and individual action” refer to? (p. 12)
3. Bourgois both appreciates the postmodern trend in anthropology and critiques it. What does he mean by “postmodern”? By “self-conscious reflexivity?” (pp. 13-14)
4. Bourgois refers to “anthropology’s functionalist paradigm” in a critical manner. Discuss. (p. 14)
5. “Participant-observation requires researchers to be physically present and personally involved.” What are the risks of this research strategy? Compare Bourgois’ approach to Pascoe’s.
6. What does Bourgois mean when he writes about “succumbing to a pornography of violence that reinforces popular racist stereotypes”? (p. 15) How can one avoid doing this? Did you succumb while reading the book? Describe your reactions.
7. Bourgois refers to anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s research in Spanish Harlem in the 1960s as containing “psychologically reductionist descriptions.” What does this mean?
8. Bourgois says he cannot resolve the “structure-versus-agency debate.” What does he mean? (p. 18)
9. Bourgois talks about behavior that appears to be irrationally violent, “barbaric,” and ultimately self-destructive, as capable of being reinterpreted according to the logic of the underground economy. The behavior can be reinterpreted as judicious public relations and long-term investment in one’s “human capital investment” (p. 24). Give an example.
10. Bourgois refers to “Nuyorican culture” as a hybrid. Discuss.
11. Bourgois, describing Ray, says he lacks the “cultural capital” to join the middle class, despite earning a lot of money. Discuss.
12. Do you agree, or disagree with Bourgois’ characterization of social class structure?
13. How did Bourgois “enter” his research site? Compare to Pascoe.
14. What struck you about Bourgois’ participation in a street culture involving illegal activities? About his experiences with New York City police officers?
15. Bourgois speaks of a professional and personal imperative to deny or “normalize” the culture of terror – as do many local residents. What was involved in this?

16. Bourgois refers to a “profound moral – even righteous – contradictory code of street ethics” (p. 41). What does he mean?
17. What was Bourgois’ eventual relationship with the people he interacted with?
18. What does “white nigga” mean? (p. 41)
19. Why did folks in El Barrio at first think Bourgois was gay?
20. Discuss racial dynamics in El Barrio.
21. Describe the historical and current relationship between Puerto Rico and the US. What were the consequences for Puerto Rican immigrants to Spanish Harlem?
22. This can be described as an offensive book. Do you find it offensive? If so, what most offended you? Did Bourgois’ contextualization help you better understand the behavior and become more tolerant, or not?
23. Why was it useful for crack dealers to hire addicted workers? (p. 86)
24. Bourgois states:

I finally solved the mystery of why most street-level crack dealers remain penniless during their careers, when I realized that their generous binge-behavior is ultimately no different from the more individualistic, and circumscribed, conspicuous consumption that rapidly upwardly mobile persons in the legal economy also usually engage in. (p. 91)

Discuss.
25. Bourgois describes the “cultural dislocations” of the new service economy of Manhattan. Give three examples.
26. Discuss the symbolism of dress in El Barrio.
27. Discuss the ethnic bigotry Bourgois found in El Barrio. Discuss the prejudice against the disabled. Given that crack dealers are looked down upon, why aren’t they more tolerant?
28. Compare the performance of masculinity in El Barrio to how it was performed in River High.
29. Discuss gang rape. What were the reasons men raped women? Discuss both their conscious reasons as well as other ones they don’t know about/haven’t thought about. Compare to rape themes at River High.
30. How is Candy a New Woman? How not? (pp. 228-240)
31. Describe how the gender line is being redrawn in Spanish Harlem. With what negative social consequences?

32. Discuss the ways in which Bourgois communicated his own reactions to the pain and misery he found in El Barrio.
33. Jackie was kidnapped when she was 12 years old. Describe the reactions of people close to her. (p. 267-272)
34. Why do women get pregnant under very adverse circumstances in El Barrio?
35. What does Bourgois say about efforts to coax poor men back into nuclear households in neighborhoods like El Barrio?
36. Why are fathers absent, or, if present, so often abusive?

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