Books

Review: "Off the Books"

The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor, by Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh (Harvard University Press).

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Spring 2007

Every weekday morning, Eunice, a middle-aged mother who lives in a poor neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, rises at dawn to prepare large quantities of soul food before leaving for her job cleaning offices. She returns at midday and, with the help of her two children and six grandchildren, she sells meals out of her home to neighbors, policemen, and local construction workers. Eunice has supplemented her minimum-wage earnings this way since 1996, but she's never established a formal business. She's never sent a penny of her profits to the IRS nor been visited by city health inspectors.

In Eunice's neighborhood, where 50 percent of residents are unemployed, such under-the-table transactions are the rule, not the exception. Typical also are the weekly payments Eunice makes to her grandchildren's teachers to overlook their lunchtime absences, and the free meals she provides a handyman for doing household repairs.

In *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*, Columbia sociology professor Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh tells the story of how Eunice and her neighbors, for want of better work opportunities and adequate government services, have created a system of economic ties to feed their families and bind their community. Venkatesh challenges the assumption that the lives of the inner-city poor are marked by ineptitude and chaos: Our lasting impression of the subjects in the book isn't that they're lazy or dependent, but resourceful and resilient.

“I discovered that the seemingly random collection of men and women in the community — young and old, professional and destitute — were nearly all linked together in a vast, often invisible web that girded their neighborhood,” writes Venkatesh, who spent five years in Maquis Park, his pseudonym for this ten-block area, while researching the book in the 1990s. “Through it the local doctors received home-cooked meals from a stay-at-home down the block; a prostitute got free groceries by offering her services to the local grocer; a police officer overlooked minor transgressions in exchange for information from a gang member.”

Many residents in Maquis Park supplement earnings from legitimate jobs with undeclared income from repairing cars in alleyways or selling goods on the street. Some pastors and landlords, meanwhile, accept payments from gang members to store weapons and other contraband in their buildings.

Despite this unsavory element, Venkatesh argues that the informal economy maintains the neighborhood’s social fabric. Local business owners and landlords hire homeless drug users, prostitutes, and hustlers to live in or near their properties to provide security and prevent them from otherwise harassing customers and tenants. And without a strong police presence, the neighborhood’s clergy, small-business owners, mothers, gangsters, prostitutes, and street vendors are engaged in constant communication to ensure the financial viability and safety of every resident. When this system works, life proceeds peacefully. “This is the ghetto, Sudhir. This ain’t the suburbs,” one storeowner reminds Venkatesh when he questions the propriety of money lending between Maquis Park businesses.“We need to rely on each other way more than most folks do. . . . You lend me your hand — or your money — I lend mine to you. It’s a real easy way to know who’s in and who’s out.”

When this network is disrupted, the neighborhood suffers. Indeed, the book’s only consistent narrative thread — a chronicling of the local gang’s extortion of Maquis Park’s residents — reveals the fragility of a system that exists outside the laws and mores of the larger society. When the gang, the Black Kings, violates a tacit agreement to respect others’ need to earn a living, it upsets the delicate balance of things. Call the cops? Guess again. Residents take matters into their own hands, forming an ad hoc community court, which includes a Black King leader, to regulate the gang’s activity.

Off the Books opens and closes with the murder of the Black King boss, Big Cat, an event that causes much uncertainty in Maquis Park: Who will broker cheap, off-the-

books labor? Who will protect the small-business owners and hustlers? Who will the residents approach if gang activity gets out of control?

Venkatesh can be an effective storyteller but sometimes falls back on blanket statements that emphasize the “complicated” nature of this “shady world.” Thankfully, that heavy-handedness is offset by frequent use of long and colorful quotes from Maquis Park residents.

Ultimately, Venkatesh succeeds in creating a nuanced portrait of a small slice of this informal economy. Rather than moralize on lost tax revenue or the dangers of gangs, drugs, guns, and prostitution, he describes the neighborhood’s creative means of survival. And although Off the Books does not posit any suggestions for how to improve the economic mobility of this subsection of the working poor, it provides rare insights into the urban underground that will be of value to scholars, policymakers, and journalists alike.

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