HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Mitchell Duneier’s Conceptualization of Habitat and Formation of a Moral Economy

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**Mitchell Duneier’s Conceptualization of Habitat and Formation of a Moral Economy**

As a participant-observer, Sociologist Mitchell Duneier tries to understand the informal sidewalk economy of Greenwich Village in New York City in the 1990s. The main focus of his book is Sixth Avenue, one of the commercial hubs of Greenwich Village. Duneier acquaintance with a large number of low-income magazine and book vendors, panhandlers and scavengers help him understand the intricate economy of the sidewalk. He observes that these vendors left the formal economy for the street because of sociopolitical forces such as racism, stringent drug policies, inadequate job opportunities, disturbed family relations and dissatisfaction with corporate life. The author highlights several factors that he thinks are responsible for making Greenwich Village a suitable place for the vendors. The upper middle class of the Village residents is sympathetic towards them. In the informal economy of the Village, the complex relations among these vendors are sustained through competition, mentorship, informal social norms, etc. The author also explains how policing and law enforcement threatens the booming economy by hindering the conduct of the business of Sixth Avenue.

The author lauds the homelessness of street people on Sixth Avenue and their innovative solution of collecting, discarded, donating and selling books on the sidewalks. This remedy serves everyone so well. The place becomes a center for cultural exchange and commerce. To the author, it serves as a prototype for the power of ideas and inventiveness that integrates the misfits, creates sustenance for the homeless and builds a stable society for Sixth Avenue in general.

The author provides a critique of racial and class stereotypes and how it affects the work of vendors by recounting the story of a black man Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who is arrested for misconduct on the Sixth Avenue. The officers think he is insane when they hear his name. Kennedy decides to call himself John Smith or Kenny to avoid the hassle. These vendors are seen as trouble. Most politicians aim at eliminating such "troublesome" people by introducing stringent laws that criminalize homelessness and reduce the sidewalk space available to these vendors. On the one hand, this approach is flawed because it deals with the effect, no the underlying cause. Other the other, it fails to acknowledge the life of the sidewalk as a means of social order and cohesion.

Excluded from the mainstream, these stigmatized people define their own moral standards and live by them. They have developed bonds with customers and secured their dignity by “earning an honest living”. How the outside world looks at the life of the street is explained by the author as he narrates his own opinion about the earnings of these vendors. When he finds his own book in Hakim Hasan’s table, he supposes that Hasan might have stolen it. But Hasan turns out to be a well-educated man. Through this incident, Duneier makes the point how these street people are assumed to be criminals.

Duneier found an extremely sophisticated economy on the street that maintained an organized moral order. Every individual was held accountable, as in the street culture all members were closely associated and kept an eye on one another.

Although some had chosen to work on the street for making profits, most were there out of compulsion. There were addicts, homeless and jobless people. Despite that, there was despair. Instead, they sought "repair" and "self-respect" on the sidewalks. Mentors like Hasan played a vital role in helping addicts, novices and youngsters, even encouraging them to earn school degrees. The sophisticated economy of sidewalks is regulated carefully through community policies in order to avoid the dangers of a disordered marketplace for business. For instance, they arrive early in the morning to capture suitable spots; there are persons who scavenge the city for magazines and books; there are persons dedicated to bringing books from and to the lockers every day; etc. The author also mentions Hasan’s mentorship of Jerome, who is a low-wage worker in a vitamin shop. Since Jerome faces great pressures, the author, after observing how is being encouraged by Hasan, say, “I am thinking about the sidewalk. Thank goodness for the sidewalk.”

The alternative economy of the sidewalks will perhaps never rise to compete with traditional and mainstream economies but it is indeed a constituent of the system- an informal social system that keeps things running, safe and organized.

The author shows how the policymakers and the citizens, in general, fail to understand the life of these street people. The problems of these people living on the margins of society will never be solved by enacting more and more stringent law made with the lens of middle-class respectability. He remarks that problems such as housing segregation, after-effects of Jim Crow poverty and flawed drug policies can never be addressed by harassing people on the street. In fact, it is street people who contribute towards the solution by striving to live orderly, respectable and moral lives in an environment where they are deemed the “problem”.

The arguments of the author are compelling. However, there is one significant limitation in the research and study of the writer. The focus of the author in the book is solely on the Sixth Avenue of the Greenwich people. The readers wonder if the writer's observations, remarks, and suggestions will hold true for other localities as well. Since that area has many universities and more than its share of wealth, the vendors of books and magazines have quite a suitable market for what they sell. There are customers, both students, and professors, who buy the latest magazines, expensive journals and books. The question arises whether or not such an economy can flourish elsewhere as well.

However, the reader cannot object to the author’s approach for he does not claim to offer a universal solution or a panacea for all the problems of an American city. His message seems logical and reasonable that instead of dealing with symptoms, the major focus should be on addressing the underlying causes. Rather than presenting his argument from the perspective of racial or social limitations, Duneier refrains from making any argument at all. His solution is rather slanted and inorganic. Perhaps it is the most sustainable solution within the status quo. Therefore to deal with urban heterogeneity, only creative compassion seems to be a feasible solution.

**T-Shirt Travels: meanings attached to second-hand clothing by Zambians**

T-Shirt Travels is a documentary about the selling and use of second-hand clothes in a third world country, Zambia. The documentary introduces the viewer to the current economic crisis of Zambia and its debt status. It explains how used clothes from the developed world end up in Zambia and how they have far-reaching consequences for the third world country. Bundles of used clothes donated by citizens to charitable organizations such as Good Will and the Salvation Army are sold to private commercial enterprises. These private enterprises clean these clothes and ship them to the underdeveloped countries. In these third world countries, their market value is increased again, and they are sold to dealers and distributors.

The consequences of these clothes are far-reaching. Zambian clothing manufacturers argue that the indigenous industry was destroyed when the country allowed imports of clothes under free trade agreements. This opening of doors began in 1991. Consequently, hundreds of containers arrived in Zambia. As a result, the Zambian manufacturing companies were pushed out of business. One by one, the factories closed and now the skills, capital and infrastructure have become extinct. Not even a single manufacturing company has left the country. Those teachers, nurses and civil servants who lost their jobs entered the clothing trade and started buying and selling second-hand imported clothes.

The documentary highlights the insurmountable debt of Zambia and explores the role of stringent economic policies of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in bringing the country at the verge of economic collapse. "We do not have political colonialism in Zambia, we have economic colonialism," says Soph Phiri, an investment banker. She is of the opinion that if it is the World Bank and the IMF that are calling the shots, then Zambia is not an independent state in the true sense of the word.

The documentary explains how Africa is entangled in a vicious cycle. Since the workforce is sick, hungry and uneducated, the loans which are soaring high cannot be paid. The documentary warns that if the international organizations and first world countries keep imposing such policies on the third world, we will reach a point where one-sixth of the total population of the world will be deprived of their right to see their children live a healthy life.

**Can (Good) Shopping and Philanthropy Save the World?**

Shopping is a confusing term. The 21st-century jargon has added to the confusion by introducing the term sustainable shopping. In today’s world of unprecedented climate changes, sustainable shopping means eco-friendly purchases. However, the term can also encompass sustainability of society. Commercial activities and economic transactions are essential for the survival of any community. This has been an illustration by Mitchell Duneier in his book Sidewalks. In order to earn an honorable living, the street people of Sixth Avenue of the Greenwich Village embarked upon selling books and magazines. The innovative idea not only helped these street people earn revenue but also enabled them to connect with one another and customers in a way that resulted in a sustainable Sixth Avenue habitat. A whole moral economy was evolved with the passage of time.

Today, the distribution of wealth is not uniform at the global, regional, and societal level. 25% of the people of the world have more than 75% of the total world wealth. Perhaps the economic disparity is starker than ever before in the history of mankind. In such times, both good shopping and philanthropy are a way of distributing wealth and reducing economic disparity. International organizations such as the UN have come up with strategies, including Millennial Developmental Goals and Sustainable Developmental Goals, to bring people out of poverty, create job opportunities and combat malnutrition. The positive results have enabled the UN to set goals of bringing all the people below the poverty line out of it by 2030, thereby proving that donations can help alleviate poverty around the globe.

The world we live in today is facing global problems such as climate change, terrorism, refugee crises, and wars. More than ever, the world needs sustainable development. The terms such as green or good shopping have entered our vocabulary. Green shopping means buying goods and services that are environmentally friendly. Big businesses have embarked upon philanthropic activities under their self-imposed corporate social responsibilities in order to create jobs and help develop sustainable societies. Initiatives such as USAID help hundreds of people from the third world to acquire modern education, establish their own businesses and earn honorable livings.

It would not be wrong to say that in the face of global socio-economic disparity, climate change and a myriad of other problems, not only growth but sustainable growth is necessary to save the planet. Good and green shopping and philanthropic activities can indeed play a vital role in helping us achieve sustainable growth, and societies.