

Academia on the Run?

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Two years ago Alice Goffman published *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American Ghetto*—first attracting great praises, then even greater controversy. While most criticisms focused on the accuracy of the ethnographic research and some were pertinent, they might have been distractions from what was really disturbing sociologists at the time: the intrusion of market economy in academia.

Alice Goffman's *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American Ghetto* was doomed to controversy from the start. The book, an extraordinary firsthand account of the effects of intensive policing on the residents of a black neighborhood in Philadelphia, was published in April 2014, on the eve of the Black Lives Matter movement. In July of that year, millions of Americans saw video of New York City police officers choking and suffocating a black man named Eric Garner to death on suspicion of evading a cigarette tax. By August, Garner's last words ("I can't breathe") had become the watchword of a mass movement—and some police and their right-wing allies had begun to mobilize a political response. The early reception of *On the Run* was difficult to distinguish from commentary on the unfolding crisis. Many reviewers read the book as an indictment of racially biased policing. Others thought the book was unfair to the police (e.g. Betts 2014). Still others argued that Goffman was too easy on the police, and objected to the very idea that she, a "white lady," should be taken as an authority on the experience of black men—"who thought this was a good idea?"—particularly at a time when an assertive black-led movement was taking to the streets (Sharpe 2014). Americans could not even agree about what they saw in the video of Eric Garner's death, so maybe it is unsurprising that their interpretations of this book varied so widely.

The controversy about the book that developed over the next year, however, had just as much to do with dynamics internal to the profession of sociology. Even before the book appeared, the American Sociological Association had already honored Goffman's research with two awards. Upon its publication, *On the Run* received not one but two adulatory reviews in the *New York Times* (Kotlowitz 2014, Schuessler 2014). It also scored the author a prized postdoctoral fellowship, and then an assistant professorship in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison—by reputation,

one of the leading graduate departments of sociology in the United States. It seemed like Goffman's research had propelled her to the pinnacle of professional success.

Then the pinnacle began to seem less secure. The department where Goffman was hired had held its position as a leading department of sociology for almost 100 years because of two great Wisconsin traditions: public investment in reform-oriented social science, and statutory protections for academic freedom. But in early 2015, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker proposed a new budget bill that would redirect the university to "meet the state's workforce needs" instead of identifying and solving social problems, and that would permit the administration to terminate the employment of faculty in programs that weren't aligned with the new mission of the university (Stein, Marley and Herzog 2015). This was more than just bad news for faculty at the University of Wisconsin. It was bad news for the profession of sociology in America, which has always had a strong base in public universities, and a melioristic impulse. If the profession could be threatened in its historic citadel, then it was threatened everywhere.

In the spring and summer of 2015, American sociologists confronted the urgent question of whether their profession could survive the intrusion of a market ethos into the university. Many of them spent that summer instead discussing the question of whether Alice Goffman's book had received more than its share of acclaim. The latter question might seem petty by comparison. It is, however, in a roundabout way, the same question.

A Controversial Methodology

On the Run reports the results of six years of the author's ethnographic observation of a group of young, black men in Philadelphia who are intermittently wanted by the police. The thesis of the book is that police pursuit is what Marcel Mauss called a total social fact: it pervades and perverts *every* aspect of social life in the neighborhood where these wanted men live. Extended families come together for court dates and scatter for birthdays and funerals. Men avoid banks and store their money at the bail office. Economic values are inverted: wanted men may pay a premium to receive their medical care from an *unlicensed* provider, for example, and spend good money for a bag of urine (which will allow a man on parole to pass a drug test). Some neighbors profit from the desperation of wanted men. Others who want nothing to do with them nonetheless must structure their lives and their routines to avoid becoming entangled with them. Given the prevalence of arrest in black communities in the United States—according to one recent estimate, 49% of black men have been arrested by age 23 (Brame et al. 2014)—this picture of a world turned upside down, if it is true, seems like it might be one of the most important things to know about American society.

The question is whether it is true. *On the Run* belongs to a genre, ethnography, that often inspires mistrust. Goffman is the daughter of the great American sociologist Erving Goffman, and she has clearly studied his works carefully; with something of his flair for unpretentious language, she has described his (and her) preferred method of fieldwork as "cutting yourself off from your prior life and subjecting yourself as much as

possible to the crap that people you want to know about are being subjected to” (p. 242). Maybe that is what it looks like to the researcher. To the people the researcher wants to know about, this kind of fieldwork often looks instead like espionage: the ethnographic fieldworker insinuates herself among strangers in order to betray their confidences. As if that is not bad enough, the impression of untrustworthiness is compounded by an unseemly resemblance between ethnographic writing and stage magic. The skilled ethnographic narrator redirects your attention, now drawing attention to her presence in the scene she describes (as if to say, ‘you should believe what I tell you because I was there’), now deflecting attention from her presence (as if to say, ‘you should believe it is like this even when I am not there’). Goffman, who is a very skilled narrator, says she tried “to become as small a presence as possible” (p. 237). Still, she looms large in the book, because the most compelling evidence that she has to offer is the evidence of her senses.

With respect to many details in the book, you either believe Goffman, or you don’t. Some critics doubted her claim that police officers who are in the hospital for unrelated reasons will occasionally check the registry of hospital visitors for the names of wanted men; spokespeople for Philadelphia police and hospitals denied it (Forman 2014, Lubet 2015). Goffman reports first-hand observation of the practice: she was visiting the hospital for the birth of a friend’s child when police showed up and took the new father away in handcuffs (p. 34). On another occasion, two officers took Goffman into custody and interrogated her, and her field notes of the episode record a barrage of lewd and racist innuendo that, one imagines, the police department would also deny if a fact-checker asked them about it (p. 70). On still another occasion, police officers broke into the house where Goffman was sleeping. One officer handcuffed her at gunpoint, threw her on the ground, stepped on her back, and ground her fingers under his boot (p. 61). She describes this experience as a source of first-hand information about what happens “when the police knock your door in” (p. 56). Among other things, what happens is that you start to have panic attacks at the sight of men who look like police officers (p. 249). This is the sort of detail that you will not find in a statistical analysis of Census data.

Not everyone believed these first-person details, and not everyone who believed them liked what they read. In April 2015, a major commercial publisher released a new, mass-market paperback edition of the book. Before the month was out, an anonymous person drafted a 57-page letter accusing Goffman of fabricating research results, with a point-by-point recitation of alleged discrepancies in the text (and between the text and available public records), and mailed it to her current and former employers in an effort to have her dismissed (Lewis-Kraus 2016; see Anonymous 2015). The University of Wisconsin appointed a panel of faculty to investigate the allegations. On 3 June, just as this panel concluded that there was no reason to think Goffman had fabricated evidence, a law professor published an online book review in which he argued that *On the Run*, if it was *not* fabricated, contained sufficient evidence to convict Goffman of a felony—namely, conspiracy to commit murder (University of Wisconsin - Madison 2015; Lubet 2015).

That was Wednesday. On Thursday, the top news about the University of Wisconsin was the governor's attack on academic freedom (the *New York Times* front page: "Unions Subdued, Walker Turns to Tenure at Wisconsin Colleges") (Davey and Lewin 2015). On Friday, it was back to Goffman. The *New York Times* reporter who had written the first, glowing review of *On the Run* now published a more equivocal article on the brewing controversy (Schuessler 2015). A *Los Angeles Times* columnist speculated that the book would be "the next big publishing scandal" (Hiltzik 2015). Around the same time, a reporter for *New York Magazine* traveled to Philadelphia to fact-check the book by tracking down and interviewing the research subjects whose identities Goffman had tried to disguise (Singal 2015). The tide of published opinion within the profession of sociology also began to shift. A demographer submitted a critique of her research methods to the *American Sociological Review* and published it on his widely read blog (Cohen 2015b). Critical reviews from urban sociologists also began to appear in professional journals, including the *Social Service Review* (Sharkey 2015) and the *American Journal of Sociology* (Rios 2015).

Some of the methodological criticism had merit. One of the most persistent questions concerned the warrant for drawing conclusions of any generality from what is, in some respects, a very peculiar experience. The men to whom Goffman was closest during her research may have been under an unusual degree of surveillance because they did unusual crimes. These particular men both endured and perpetrated more violence than other young men on their street; their street was one of the most violent parts of the broader neighborhood; the neighborhood experienced more violence than most of the rest of Philadelphia; and Philadelphia was, itself, experiencing rather more violence than other American cities during this period (Forman 2015; Sharkey 2015). It is reasonable to wonder whether this book describes anything more than one idiosyncratic clique. Goffman's attempts to establish the generality of her findings by surveying an ill-defined sample of neighbors did not settle the question (Cohen 2015b). The text of *On the Run* is noticeably vague about the scope of the argument, describing its findings first as a characterization of "one poor and segregated Black community" (p. xiv)—and then, in order of diminishing caution, as a characterization of "poor and segregated Black neighborhoods like 6th Street" (p. 196), "poor and segregated Black neighborhoods" (p. 141), and even "poor urban communities" (p. 201) in general. Some of Goffman's critics hailed from poor urban communities, did not recognize their communities in her description, and perceived the book as an insult (e.g., Betts 2014).

The Intrusion of Market Economy in Academia

Still, these lapses do not account for why so much controversy attended this book, because they are among the most common sins of American social science. Many ethnographers are guilty of pretending that their findings enjoy greater generality than their observations warrant, and American social scientists more influential than Alice Goffman write insulting things about poor people all the time. That fact itself is, perhaps, scandalous, but usually no scandal results. This time, however, matters of high principle were said to be at stake. The question was not just whether or not it was a good book, but whether or not in pursuit of a good book the author had violated an important ethical rule,

even if few critics agreed exactly which ethical rule was the issue. She was an outsider who misrepresented her informants or an insider who was complicit in their crimes. She overplayed or underplayed how deviant they were. She went too far in changing details to protect her sources (a violation of the journalist's code of professional ethics) or else she failed to protect them adequately (a violation of the sociologist's). She was too quick to repeat hearsay about police practices or too eager to pander to popular stereotypes that excuse those practices. The controversy did not seem to result from a violation of any particular ethical norm so much as from a kind of collective anxiety about the power of ethics in general.

That anxiety may have something to do with the worries of many journalists and sociologists about the power of the market to erode their professional authority. Ethical regulation, as Émile Durkheim argued, is both the purpose of professional organization and the justification for professional autonomy. Durkheim thought that professional ethics were a necessary check on the anarchy of the market. Professions uphold standards—in this case, standards of truth and method—that competition otherwise would undercut. At the root of otherwise quite distinct and even incompatible objections that critics leveled against *On the Run* was the view that Goffman had strayed too far from *some* ethical norm proper to the journalistic or sociological professions because she had strayed too close to commerce.

Whatever else the critics said, and whatever the substance or merits of their criticisms, many of them struck this note. They insinuated that Goffman omitted relevant context for the sake of writing an emotionally engaging story (Pascoe 2014, Sharkey 2015). Or they said outright that she caricatured the neighborhood she studied because the market rewards sensationalistic stories of violence (Rios 2015). Or they implied that she prevented distribution of her dissertation in order to boost book sales (Cohen 2015a). In short, intellectual decisions that should have been kept pure of commerce were polluted by proximity to the market. The book was too readable, too saleable, too *profitable*. The problem with the book was that the market loved it.

It is easy to misunderstand such complaints as mere professional jealousy—and I certainly overheard some professional gossip about this book that I would characterize as sour grapes—but the potential for commercial competition to erode professional norms is real. Consider the plight of the sociologist who attempts to uphold some professional standard. The principle of peer review is supposed to provide academic sociologists with some protection from the corrupting influence of the market, by ensuring that they must compete for the esteem of their scientific peers rather than just competing for paying customers. But success in the mass market commands attention in the academy. Attention, in turn, is a *sine qua non* for academic success. If your scientific peers do not know of your research, you will not get the job, the grant, or the prestigious award. There is a genuine tension here: no professional sociologist thinks that the worth of a piece of research should be judged based on how many copies it sells in the airport bookstore, but getting your book onto the shelves of the airport bookstore is one way to be sure that enough colleagues see it. Worse still: one way to get your book onto bookstore shelves is to adhere with less than perfect rigor to the norms of the profession. Describe your

methods in less detail, say, than a very strict peer reviewer would demand; skip the scholarly apparatus that lay readers find so boring; go with the most dramatic anecdotes rather than the humdrum but representative minutiae of social life. From the standpoint of a commercial publisher, this is just good writing advice. From the standpoint of the profession of sociology, by contrast, it is worrisome.

Are the members of the profession still acting as guardians of professional standards if we are allocating our attention, and thereby, implicitly, judging the worth of each other's research, based on some publisher's advertising budget? What, then, if we make decisions about how we conduct or write about *our own* research, not in accord with the profession's ethical code, but in accord with what is most likely to get us the best publishing contract? And what if that means pandering to an audience that does not share, or that is even hostile to, some of our professional standards? If this concern seems overblown, consider that even apparently trivial matters of writing style may be encompassed by a profession's ethical norms. What appears to one reader to be an unnecessarily ponderous style of writing, say, may seem to another reader to be the minimum required by the American Sociological Association Code of Ethics, section 13.04 (d) ("Sociologists take particular care to state all relevant qualifications on the findings and interpretation of their research"). Some sociologists reading *On the Run* appear to have believed that in contemplating this particular book they were looking down a slippery slope into the abyss.

Sociology has always depended on commercial publishers, and this dependence has always created a problem for the aspiration to professional autonomy. But it is a symptom of the problem that sociologists do not ever get around to discussing it until a particularly well-publicized book catches everyone's attention at the same time. Then we discuss it indirectly by debating the merits of the book.

Before *On the Run*, for example, there was *Heat Wave*, Eric Klinenberg's 2002 book about a climate disaster that killed hundreds of people in the city of Chicago. It won awards from professional associations and became the subject of a profile by Malcolm Gladwell in *The New Yorker* (Gladwell 2002). Then the chorus of criticism swelled. Sociologists raised some of the same concerns about *Heat Wave* that others would later raise about *On the Run*: the book was said to have sensationalized its subject (Clarke 2004), overstated the generality of its findings (McLeod 2004), and implicitly pandered to racial stereotypes that it explicitly disavowed (Duneier 2004). Running through much of the criticism was the concern that the book was just too popular: it was a "trade book," rather than a contribution to scholarship (Miller and Perrucci 2004: ix). One critic even made his case by quoting extensively from Gladwell's summary of the book, instead of from the book itself (Duneier 2004: 144)—as if the mere fact that a popularizer got some details wrong was grounds for ethical suspicion of the original study.

And then there was *Gang Leader for a Day* (Venkatesh 2008). The sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh had already written two important scholarly monographs on urban poverty when he wrote this memoir of his fieldwork experiences and published it with a trade press. The book made it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list, won praise from

critics in popular magazines, and then became the object of professional controversy. Critics accused Venkatesh alternately of being complicit in the crimes of violent drug dealers, and of being too cozy with police; of exoticizing his informants, and of normalizing their deviance; of keeping records he should have destroyed (thereby putting people at risk) and of destroying records he should have kept (thereby calling his data into question). In 2012, the *New York Times* ran an unusual feature story on Venkatesh (“Columbia’s Gang Scholar Lives on the Edge”) that repeated a long list of these allegations. The story also reported, as an ethical concern of equal gravity, the worry of professional peers that Venkatesh’s work was just too commercial. He had stepped “too eagerly into the spotlight”; he had included in his book “the kind of satisfying narrative arcs and dramatic characters... that have more in common with Hollywood films than with most dry academic discourse”; he had succumbed to the “temptation to highlight the lurid” in order to attract a mass audience (Kaminer 2012). As would later be true of *On the Run*, sociologists offered many different criticisms, all perhaps worthy of consideration on their own merits, but collectively so diverse, even mutually incompatible, that they seemed to have nothing in common—except for the concern that the temptation of commercial success had somehow corrupted the conduct of research. Venkatesh had breached the sacred boundary between the temple of science and the marketplace.

It may be that all of these books deserved serious ethical criticism. Many works of sociology do. Few of them get it. When they do, the chorus of criticism sometimes has the stagey feel of ritual: the sociologists gather around a book and perform sacred rites to reinscribe the distance between the values of their profession and the profane world of money.

Academic Independence at Stake

Ritual is, as Émile Durkheim taught us, the essential means by which we establish and reinforce the sanctity of the values we hold sacred. But sometimes ritual is also, as Karl Marx taught us, a sideshow.

In the summer of 2015, while the sociologists were debating the merits of *On the Run*, the actual decisions about how far the market should intrude into the governance of the intellectual commons were being made by their employers and publishers. On 12 July, Governor Walker signed a state budget that eliminated statutory protections for faculty tenure at the University of Wisconsin. It was a centerpiece of his short-lived campaign for the presidency of the United States: at the campaign kick-off rally the following week, his boast that he “ended seniority and tenure” was an applause line (Kravinsky 2015). Faculty fought on to preserve employment security, but on March 10, 2016, the Wisconsin Board of Regents finally approved a new, much weaker policy that permits university administrators to close programs and lay off faculty with minimal consultation. “I do not believe that the academy is *precisely* like a business,” the board president said, “but we cannot have quality, serve students, have quality if we do not have a sound financial system” (quoted in Flaherty 2016, my emphasis). A tenure-track

assistant professorship at the University of Wisconsin is still more secure than most jobs in America, and it is still a dream job for many of my Ph.D. students. But it is not the dream job it was two years ago.

Publishing ethnographic research in the United States might not be quite the same as it was two years ago, either. Some urban ethnographers seem to have drawn the conclusion that publishing is now only the first stage of a trial by ordeal: the Harvard professor Matthew Desmond, for example, whose *Evicted* is this year's critically acclaimed mass market book about urban poverty, reports in that book that he hired a fact checker—perhaps to preempt, or to prepare himself for, the kind of scrutiny that Goffman received from journalists (Desmond 2016, p. 339). As for Alice Goffman, she wasn't charged with conspiracy to commit murder. She didn't become the publishing industry's next big scandal. At her publisher's request, she *did* subject herself to plenty of crap defending her reputation and that of the book, sales of which probably benefited from the publicity. The *New York Times* ran a feature article about the controversy in January 2016 that presented her in a sympathetic light (Lewis-Kraus 2016). It was the fourth article in that paper about *On the Run*, and the best publicity yet. From the standpoint of a publisher concerned about the bottom line, I suspect the lesson is to look for the next Alice Goffman, peer reviewers and their professional standards be damned.

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