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Tearoom Trade - Laud Humphreys

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ISSUES IN CRIMINOLOGY


Reviewer: Barry Krisberg

The "hip sociologist" constructs his ethnography much the same way a prospective bride gathers together her trusseau. The optimum recipe includes "something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue." Humphreys has given proper attention to each of these four elements in his study of impersonal sex in public restrooms.

The focus on a place or area within a city where deviants pursue their special tastes is as old as the "Chicago School" of the 1920's. The particular collection of methods of studying Tearoom activity employed by Humphreys may be thought of as new but certainly his conceptual framework is borrowed almost wholly and without much evidence of critical thinking from the work of Erving Goffman. Lastly, providing the reader with a detailed "blow by blow" description of oral sex between men certainly qualifies Humphreys as a first-rate sociological pornographer.

One feels a tremendous sense of uneasiness while reading Humphreys' ethnography or in fact, the ethnographies of other "hip sociologists" such as Howard Becker, Elliot Liebow, Ned Polsky, or the grand master, Erving Goffman. Perhaps the root of the dis-ease is that one senses that the sociologist appreciates his deviant subjects but is not compassionate with them. To be compassionate, it seems to me, requires that the researcher understands the fundamental passion or suffering of his subjects. This lack of sensitivity to human suffering leads the "hip sociologist" to ignore important dimensions of the social problem which he is describing. One needs, for example, to read through three-quarters of Tearoom Trade before obtaining a real feeling for why men are driven to the special deviant adoption of the public restroom sex encounter. There is little information presented about general societal proscriptions against homosexual behavior which might help us understand the urgency of the tearoom actors.

Homosexuality is not the issue, proclaims Humphreys. If the old two-bit whore house was still in operation there would be little need for resort to the public restroom. But even the problem of loneliness is not properly understood. The lack of compassion, we submit, forces the author to ignore some of the rich data which are presented to the reader. For example:

Well, I started off as the straight young thing. Everyone wanted to suck my cock. I wouldn't have been caught dead with one of the things in
my mouth! . . . So, here I am at forty—with grown kids—and the big-
gest cocksucker in [the city]!

or:

I suppose I was around thirty-five—or thirty-six—when I started giving
out blow jobs. It just got so I couldn’t operate any other way in the
park johns. I’d still rather have a good blow job any day, but I’ve gotten
so I like it the way it is now.

The analytic language of games, strategies, and payoffs offends our
sympathetic understanding of the sad outcome of alienating sex role
definitions in western society. The role transition from insertor to in-
sertee among tearoom participants, for example, is treated only as part
of an “aging crisis” and is not properly related to sex role norms which
constrain individuals.

_Tearoom Trade_ was selected for the _C.W. Mills Award_ by the
Society for the Study of Social Problems in 1970. It is not hard to
imagine how Mills, the great radical sociologist, would have responded
to such an irony. The moral relativism of the hip ethnography would in
Mills’ terms be evidence of “moral cowardice.” Compassionate analysis
of the victim or consequences of social injustice seems central to Mills’
radical perspective.

Contemporary students of deviant behavior need to confront and
critically evaluate the inadequacies of the ethnography of appreciation
sometimes called “ghetto tourism.” The cynical and sinister theoretical
world of Goffman needs to be demystified in the manner in which
Gouldner has recently proposed in _The Coming Crisis of Western
Sociology_. We need to develop a moral ethnography which provides
more than simply cocktail party conversation but rather an eth-
nography which furthers our understanding of the dynamics of social
control and social change.