

Q and A with Author: Erich Goode, *The Taming of New York's Washington Square: A Wild Civility*. New York University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1479898213 (Paperback). 336 pages. \$30.00.

Erich Goode¹ Interviewed by Robert M. Worley²

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In his new book, *The Taming of New York's Washington Square*, Erich Goode employs rich and detailed observations, as well as in-depth interviews, in order to study deviance in one of the nation's most famous parks. Recently Robert M. Worley, Book Review Editor of *Theory in Action* asked the author a few questions related to this scholarly work.

RW: I really enjoyed this book! One of the things I found interesting is the way that Washington Square is a place that truly celebrates diversity.

EG: Yes, the Greenwich Village neighborhood surrounding Washington Square Park is roughly 98% non-black (mostly white, with a growing Asian population), and largely upper-middle class in income, yet the park welcomes outsiders from all walks of life and unconventional characters, including the mentally disordered, the homeless, and marijuana sellers.

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Robert M. Worley

RW: Why do you suppose this is?

EG: I'm usually suspicious of "Why?" questions. Answers are often tautological, common-sensical, nonsensical, or offer a pile-on of factors, each one of which itself needs explaining. The "how" question is usually my domain. How do social relations work? What's involved in the action-reaction-interaction sequence? Who does what? What direction does the interaction take? I'm a symbolic interactionist, not a positivist; and I generally work and think on the micro level, not the macro level.

RW: That makes sense. I know there are many students who work and live around the park. And, some of these students may engage in deviance, right?

EG: Yes, it is true that some of this illicit activity comes from the fact that college students tend to be less conventional than the population at large. But, the history of the park also suggests that unconventionality was likely to be nurtured there historically. For a variety of reasons, bohemians, beatniks, and radicals were attracted to the Village generally and the Park specifically.

RW: Interesting. I wonder why.

EG: The reasons are partly demographic, geographic, and economic. Little Italy and Chinatown are just south of the Village, an easy 6 to 8 or so block's walk to the Park, so many of their residents were attracted there. During most of the 1800s, there was an African American neighborhood just south and west of the Park, which was dubbed "Little Africa." Washington Square has had a long history of diversity, resistance to authority, dissensus, unconventionality, radicalism, liberalism, bohemianism. Who knows how these things get started? Jack Reed encourages Lincoln Steffens to move to the Village. Mark Twain knew Robert Louis Stevenson, and they sit on a Park bench and fed the pigeons. Eugene O'Neill has an affair with Louis Bryant, and they leave their apartment in the Village and move to Provincetown. Something attracts one person to a place, and chains of associations bring like-minded people together. Before long, there's a network, a community of people who share friends and interests. Artists show one another their work and hang out together; one decides to sponsor an exhibition. One writer moves to the (then) cheap apartments in the Village, then another, then another. A bookstore holds readings and attracts a literary crowd.

RW: And, you got one of your first teaching jobs at NYU, right?

EG: In 1965, when I got a job teaching sociology at NYU, I rented an apartment on MacDougal Street, a block and a half from the Park—four tiny rooms comprising a rail-road flat, with a tub in the kitchen and a stove that didn't work, for \$70 a month.

RW: Sounds reasonable, even for 1965.

EG: Yeah, and that tells you something about the housing market, which was fluid at that time, and, in pockets of the Village, still inexpensive and hence, attractive to students, artists, writers, bohemians and beatniks without money.

RW: Interesting.

EG: There's a long history of all this unconventionality. In 1833, a labor riot erupted on the Square when stonecutters objected to NYU's use of Sing Sing convict labor to cut their stones for its buildings. During the Civil War, a draft riot broke out in Astor Place and troops that drilled in Washington Square were called to disperse the crowd. In 1911, after the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, which took place in a factory a couple of blocks from the Square (NW corner of Washington Place & Greene St.); 120,000 people gathered in the Park to mourn. In 1915, 25,000 women marched from the Park up Fifth Avenue to campaign for the right of women to vote. In 1933, an anti-Nazi rally was held which marched through the Arch. WSP is a node, a launching pad, a convenient gathering place. In 1918, I believe, the NYC subway system builds a station 6 blocks from WSP, on Christopher St. & Sheridan Square; tourists flock to the Village to see the beatniks. In 1961, in response to a ban on music being played in public places, thousands rallied in WSP, and the demonstration got out of hand; dozens were arrested. During the '60s, WSP became a focus for folksingers, including Bob Dylan and Joan Baez.

RW: Love Bob Dylan.

EG: Yeah, me too. And in '64, an anti-Vietnam rally was held in the Park. Officials decided that its originally-planned locus, Union Square, would have disrupted Christmas shopping along 14th St. In 1959, the City decides to ban all vehicular traffic from the Park. NYU begins

buying up real estate all around the Square & artists are evicted from their lofts. There's a lot of fortuitousness to how an area, a neighborhood, evolves. Over time, things happen in shreds and patches, and before you know it, there are informal networks of like-minded people who populate a place.

RW: From reading your book, it seems that occasionally some park-goers do get out of hand and create minor problems; yet, in most cases, no formal social control is exercised.

EG: WSP is an unconventional urban public space; there's a great deal of tolerance for unconventional behavior. There's flexibility and leeway in enforcing park and municipal violations. If formal social control is regarded as overly rigid or repressive, park-goers are likely to complain to authorities about it. PEP (Parks Enforcement Patrol) and NYPD recognize this and observe it. They draw the line at violence and as I've seen, the consumption of alcoholic beverages and amplification that's too loud. Selling marijuana joints seems not to be as disruptive, and, for the most part, it is semi-tolerated. Most of the time, the owners of off-leash dogs will be warned about it, though usually not issued a citation. Mostly, feeding pigeons and squirrels is tolerated. The police follow a "hands off" policy when they feel that a heavy hand will disrupt the setting and anger park-goers.

RW: You conducted an informal survey of sixty park-goers and found that 67% of your sample reported that it was 'wrong' for park-goers to stare at one another. In fact, staring was regarded as being more of an incivility than marijuana smoking or having a dog off a leash. Did this surprise you?

EG: Staring is considered disruptive because it is perceived as threatening. "This man is staring at me. Why? What does he want? What is he going to do to me?" If it's a man staring at a woman, she feels there's a sexual intent and if it's unwanted, she'll want him to stop and won't invite further staring. At some point, she'll get up and walk away. If it's two gay guys and both are interested, chances are, they'll get together. If it's two straight guys, there may be a power contest going on. Often, one is wondering whether the other is queer, or whether the other thinks he's queer. There's a lot of heavy freight involved in staring, both emotionally and logistically. What should I do? What's he going to do?

Women rarely stare unless they want to invite the other party to join her. That's fairly rare.

RW: Staring, I think, is not a violation of park rules.

EG: True, staring is not a violation of *formal* park rules. But, it can be a violation of informal rules.

RW: Did you ever have any park-goers stare at you?

EG: Yes, I encountered it when someone engaged in a macho “staring contest” with me. But I was always on the lookout for it when observing others. I did see some gay guys who hooked up as a result of mutual eye contact, but as I say in the book, WSP is no longer the place to go in NYC for gay guy hook-ups.

RW: You witnessed quite a few marijuana sales during the course of your field work. Can you describe a typical transaction?

EG: The sales seemed brief and impersonal. Keep in mind that NYU students usually sell marijuana to one another, so these are, for the most part, not NYU students. Also, keep in mind that if drug sellers are observed selling to youngsters, the police will shut them down. And if they begin selling hard drugs, likewise, they'll get shut down.

RW: And, I remember reading that most of the marijuana sellers were African Americans who sold mainly to Caucasians.

EG: I don't think race played a role in the marijuana seller-buyer interaction, aside from the forces and factors that propelled the two interacting parties to end up in the role they played as buyer and seller.

RW: Do you think the dealers were competing with one another for customers?

EG: I didn't see competition in play among marijuana sellers; it's mainly who knows whom, who is out selling, and where, in a given spot, they are selling—logistical matters—that determined these things. My guess is there were repeat customers, but I didn't see enough transactions to track that. Maybe I saw a dozen instances of marijuana and cash changing hands.

Robert M. Worley

RW: In your book, you discuss Elijah Anderson's (2011) notion of a "cosmopolitan canopy." How do you think your field work contributes to our understanding of this concept?

EG: I consider WSP to be a "cosmopolitan canopy," along the lines of Anderson's conceptualization, but with one difference, and that is that the area of Philadelphia that Anderson studied, between the Schuylkill and the Delaware Rivers, is a POPS—a privately-owned public space; in other words, it is a commercial space that is owned and operated to make a profit. With WSP, there's no profit involved. Nobody around here has anything to sell except for the marijuana and occasional food truck. (Of course, the buskers want to "sell" their acts.) The area around the park is residential. That's a big difference and it influences behavior that takes place in one versus the other space. Tolerance for diversity in a POPS is limited to profitability; if someone threatens or disrupts the space's capacity to earn money, private guards, hired by the POPS, will hustle the intruder out of there. In WSP, the police and Parks Enforcement Patrol are there to protect the public interest, and that usually means safety and conformance with the park rules. Anderson and I don't disagree about this, it's just that the two places are similar in most respects—in that they are both cosmopolitan canopies—but differ with respect to the commercial angle.

RW: I thought it was great the way you provided a bit of a law enforcement perspective. What type officer do you think would be the most effective at Washington Square and why?

EG: An old-fashioned, law-and-order, "lock 'em up and throw away the key" officer would be the *least* effective agent of social control in the situation that prevails in WSP. Someone who's progressive, flexible, liberal, probably college-educated would be ideal. A light hand rather than a heavy hand. Law enforcement in an unconventional setting, in which there are many marginally illegal acts taking place, where "broken windows" does not prevail—where minor offenses tend not to escalate into major ones—where looking the other way on minor offenses is the best policy. I did observe an officer give a citation to the man who was drinking vodka out of a Tropicana orange juice bottle, which did surprise me.

RW: When you accompanied a male park-goer being a little too flirtatious with female park-goers, you discussed with him the

appropriateness of coming on to women. It almost seemed like you were temporarily stepping out of the researcher role and offering some sound fatherly advice. Was this a research strategy? Or, were you merely trying to help the young man – or perhaps a little bit of both?

EG: My “fatherly advice” to Philip (I called him “Justin” in the book) about flirting. Hmm. Well, some sociologists have used such tactics to gather information, to find out what the actor’s interpretation of the rules are, so, yes, it was partly a research strategy. It’s also an interpersonal thing in the sense that I was a friend who felt that he was engaging in behavior I thought was unacceptable. So, yes, it was a bit of both.

REFERENCES

Anderson, Elijah. 2011. *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.