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Jeff Ferrell

Empire of Scrounge: Inside the Urban Underground of Dumpster Diving, Trash Picking and Street Scavenging

New York: New York University Press, 2006. 256 pp. £15.50/\$22.00 (pbk). ISBN 0814727387.

- Reviewed by Martin O'Brien, University of Chester, UK

Jeff Ferrell is a great storyteller. His depictions of marginal groups are rich in visual detail; so rich, in fact, that anecdotes and reflections seem to tumble onto the pages of his books like snapshots from a family album. Whether the topic is graffiti writers (Ferrell, 1996), urban anarchists (Ferrell, 2002) or, here, the trash and scrap scavengers of Fort Worth, Texas, Ferrell shows himself to be a master of appreciative ethnography. Based on an extended period of, and long-lasting interest in, salvaging and scavenging the USA's trash piles, *Empire of Scrounge* is organized as an assemblage of vignettes and personal reflections on the art and technique of second-hand living: retrieving the lost and discarded objects of consumer society and reinvesting them with value, utility and meaning. It could equally be entitled *Adventures in Scroungeland* so faithfully does it attempt to articulate Ferrell's experiences of and feelings about the scavenger's world. At the same time it is also a lamentation on excessive consumption and the cultural and social forces that underpin the (allegedly) wasteful materiality of contemporary urban existence. In this, the book is both a celebration of the scrounger's life and a critique of consumerism, and its 'open-ended experiment in cultural criminology' (p. 29) stands or falls on the sociological connections between these social forms.

In the first case, Ferrell's vignettes are used to record a 'meandering series of scattered situations' (p. 32) that punctuate the urban landscape: an assortment of 'little theatres of the absurd' (p. 14) in which the 'ebb and flow' of discarded

goods reveals a 'constellation of values and preferences negotiated quite literally by the give-and-take of the streets' (p. 34). Like Strasser (1999: 18) before him, Ferrell adopts an intellectual stance equivalent to the urban raggicker or 'prospector' (p. 167), sorting through the material and symbolic dimensions of trash to expose something of the qualities of individual and collective life in a consumer society. Here, studies in human character and the situational dynamics of scrounging portray a vibrant world of urban reinvention through which the scroungers and street-scavengers survive, but hardly prosper, on the discarded bounty of post-consumption waste. These urban discards expose 'one trash pile and Dumpster at a time, a cornucopia of material culture' that offers 'all the benefits of shopping with none of the bills' (p. 45).

In this shopping mall of excessive debris, Ferrell unwittingly learns the essence of Michael Thompson's thesis that 'the process by which [discarded objects] and their meaning move about matters more than the objects themselves' and that today's trash can be tomorrow's collectible (pp. 98, 100). In Thompson's hands the 'delightful consequence' of this insight is that 'in order to study the social control of value, we have to study rubbish' (Thompson, 1979: 10). Ferrell takes the thesis rather more literally—as *actual* as well as *symbolic*—movement and sets off on a set of urban wanderings that generate unexpected, unplanned and unregulated encounters with the denizens of Scroungeland. On these wanderings many seemingly exotic characters and situations are encountered—the guy who 'comes out of the old garage carrying a rifle' (p. 62), the 'weathered, white, middle-aged homeless guy' (p. 85), the 'older white woman, worn down, darkly tanned, wearing a big cowboy hat' (p. 121), the 'beautiful working class woman' in the scrap yard (p. 124) the 'elderly black man' pushing a 'cart full of bottles' (p. 144), among many others. The encounters, and the fundamental humanity of the scrounger's life, encourage Ferrell to propose a 'philosophy of scrap that I'll refer to as democratic essentialism' (p. 119): a philosophy that contradicts and counteracts the regulation of everyday life that he sees as a hallmark of the 'class war of city capitalism' (pp. 178–9). As in his earlier work, Ferrell finds on the margins of urban existence those little bits of anarchy and subversion that point to something other than the mundane rhythms of modern existence; something other than doing what the respectables of modern American society get up to in their consumption-driven, ideologically blinkered public and private lives.

While the celebratory and appreciative engagement with urban scrounging is thick with detail and ethnographic insight, the critical encounter with consumerism is thin by comparison and heavily dependent on the morality play penned initially by Dorothy Sayers in her essay 'Why Work?' (1948 [1942]), picked up by Vance Packard (1967 [1960]) and more recently revived by Susan Strasser (1999). In this morality play—which has taken on the status of common sense, at least among left-leaning sociologists—contemporary consumer society is 'awash in its own waste' (p. 169) because people have been transformed into rapacious desiring machines. The 'culture and economy of consumption', writes Ferrell, 'promotes not only endless acquisition, but the steady disposal of yesterday's purchases by consumers who, awash in their own impatient insatiability, must make room for tomorrow's next round of consumption' (p. 28).

This ‘programmed insatiability ... creates and sustains among its adherents a sort of existential vacancy—a personal void, a material longing promoted by the same corporate advertisers whose products promise its resolution’ (p. 162). As with Ferrell’s other ethnographic adventures, the ordinary citizen of contemporary (American) society comprises little more than a shadow figure who haunts the background of the lovingly celebrated outsider world in which Ferrell is immersed. In fact, in *Empire of Scrounge*, even more so than in Ferrell’s other major ethnographies, this character is virtually represented as the enemy of progressive change: duped into a consumerist mentality, morally panicked by conspiratorial media, disciplined and regimented by social institutions, the ordinary citizen is trapped in an ‘existential affirmation of domination and control’ (p. 192).

Thus, on the one hand, the book presents a dystopian vision of consumer society and its addled inhabitants as a morally vacated political territory. On the other, it expresses a ‘Zen of scrounging’ that subverts and reinvents the city as a series of negotiated ‘spaces and situations’ (p. 192). The criminological question that is begged here is: what connects the two visions? For Ferrell, the duty of the criminologist is to study the ‘dynamic by which certain activities come to be outlawed and legally suppressed [...] while other activities come to be protected, even encouraged, by the law’ (p. 6). Yet the book says next to nothing about this dynamic. Ferrell notes that some scrounging activities breach city ordinances and some are regulated by city officials—the Code Rangers (p. 132), as Ferrell wittily labels them. But the social dynamic behind the outlawing and regulation of these particular activities is absent, and only passing, morally tinged reference is made to the dynamics of the waste economy as a whole. A useful illustration of this excluded middle ground is provided on page 101. Here, Ferrell ‘imagines’ that ‘even the landfill may not be the final resting place of the empire of scrounge—that someday, when the present world of mindless hyperconsumption has finally failed, those thousands of tools and bicycle parts and lengths of copper pipe that I know are buried there will be dug up, reclaimed, reinvented. In that regard, as an urban scrounger, I figure I’m practicing for the apocalypse.’

Clearly, he is unaware, that ‘landfill mining’ is already happening—and has been for some considerable time—and has little to do with apocalyptic visions of callous consumption. As an official, technological rather than marginal, scrounged economy, it is most highly developed in Japan but is not uncommon in the United States and its (more limited) viability has been explored in the UK. I raise this issue simply to exemplify the dilemmas that attend the use of micro studies to make macro political and cultural criticisms. There is an entire social and political world between, around and beside the microcosm, in this case of the urban scrounger, and there seems little possibility of grasping the ‘dynamic’ that criminalizes their activities unless it is filled in sensitively with the necessary detail. It is true that Ferrell offers his readers a sympathetic and rewarding exploration of part of the scrounger’s world. As an exercise in urban ethnography it might well win prizes—it reads like an example of Mary Douglas’s ‘sociology in a teacup’ whose advantage is ‘to be able to discern calmly what would be confusing in a larger scene’ but suffers from the same drawback of being unable ‘to observe any real storms and upheavals’ (Douglas, 2002 [1966]: 138).

I do not really understand how a criminalizing dynamic can be usefully portrayed unless those doing the criminalizing are studied with the same commitment and eye for detail as those who negotiate the boundaries of crime and marginality. Without this detail what remains is a fable that celebrates the lives of fractions of a population normally ignored by criminologists but without the sociological detail necessary to expose the dynamic of criminalization.

Really, this book should be read alongside Gouldner's (1973 [1968]) essay 'The Sociologist as Partisan'. This is not because Gouldner's criticisms of Becker apply fully to Ferrell's ethnography but because Ferrell is forced to confront, and is equally unable to respond to, those problematic features of the ethnographer's critical art that Gouldner had observed in the 'Becker School': the difficulty of specifying who is the 'underdog' in sociological inquiry and why any particular underdog merits celebration (Gouldner, 1973: 34); the tendency to take up arms 'against the ineffectuality, callousness or capriciousness of the caretakers that society has appointed to administer the mess it has created' (1973: 40) (cf. Ferrell's 'Code Rangers' mentioned earlier); the 'ritual frankness' of a 'confession of partisanship' that is 'good for the soul' but 'no tonic to the mind' (Gouldner, 1973: 54–5). Indeed, I doubt that Ferrell would disagree with Gouldner's judgement that: 'The very empirical sensitivity to fine detail, characterizing [*Empire of Scrounge*], is both born of and limited by the connoisseur's fascination with the rare object: its empirical richness is inspired by a collector's aesthetic' (1973: 38). Given Ferrell's near-obsession with collecting—see the account of his 'plumber's jewelry' (p. 47)—it is little surprise that his scholarly work should resemble the life he chooses to lead.

What Ferrell invariably puts his finger on, and challenges criminology to address, is that the spaces and situations in which crimes occur can be full, and often overflow, with humanity, morality and interpersonal democracy. They are not necessarily spaces of evil, dissociation, disaffection or strain. They are often populated by marginalized individuals and groups but that marginality is not in itself a necessary cause for hand-wringing liberal concern. Instead, it is a situation from which criminology might learn something of the political and social alternatives to a law-'n'-order obsessed consumer culture.

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Jennifer Wood and Benoît Dupont (eds)

Democracy, Society, and the Governance of Security

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- Reviewed by Lucia Zedner, University of Oxford, UK

Security scholarship, once the exclusive domain of international relations and war studies, has become a cutting-edge theme in criminological scholarship. A diverse criminological literature seeking to tackle the multiple meanings and variant forms of security has sprung up. There is, for example, a growing body of work on the technologies of security (Norris and Armstrong, 1999; Low, 2003; Goold, 2004); on the private security industry (Jones and Newburn, 1998; Wakefield, 2003); and, more recently, on the impact of anti-terrorism policy on crime control (Deflem, 2004). Especially lively is the debate about the changing distribution of security and its provision as public good, club good or tradable commodity (Hope, 2000; Loader and Walker, 2001; Newburn, 2001). Here explanatory accounts of the changing distributions of security are inseparable from a larger normative debate about how security governs and is governed (Valverde, 2001; Johnston and Shearing, 2003). *Democracy, Society, and the Governance of Security* gathers together an impressive cast of leading security scholars to address head on the import of present changes in the distribution, production and governance of security.

Together the essays in this book map the ways in which the state's monopoly of security is being dispersed among public, non-governmental, private and community-based actors. They chart the political implications of this dispersal, not least in its effects upon democratic values. And they analyse the means by which this increasingly varied delivery of security might best be governed. Although the editors promise 'a "friendly dialogue" between those who argue that democratic transformation rests in the development of strong state institutions and those who propose a more de-centered agenda' (p. 1), the debate is more heated than they allow and no less productive for that. For this is a field in which political allegiances and strongly held beliefs as to the proper role of the state underpin divergent positions unlikely to be reconciled by dialogue, however amicable. The contributions of Shearing and Johnston and that of Loader and Walker illustrate the extent of this divergence. Shearing, in a