

Dopefiend Frank (pseudonym) injecting in "the hole," a no-man's-land of weeds, litter and exhaust fumes beneath the juncture of two San Francisco freeways. This photo and the one on page 24 are part of the exhibit "Righteous Dopefiend: Addiction and Poverty in Urban America" on display through May 2010 at the Penn Museum.







# NEXT DOOR BUT INVISIBLE

## STREET ETHNOGRAPHER SHEDS LIGHT ON THE LIVES OF THE URBAN POOR

BY PETER NICHOLS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF SCHONBERG

During three decades of fieldwork, street ethnographer and medical anthropologist Philippe Bourgois has found himself in some pretty dicey situations. “I was mugged only once the whole time I was in East Harlem,” he says in defense of the risks he runs in the name of research. “I was never mugged doing fieldwork with the homeless in San Francisco. And now here in Philadelphia, I just had that one bad experience with the police.”



# NEXT DOOR BUT INVISIBLE



**Bourgois (center) with his protector in San Francisco's Mission District. When things looked like they might turn bad on the street, Bourgois would step inside a corner store owned by a Palestinian immigrant (left) respected by gang members.**

A bullet ricocheted off a curb and snapped past him in Spanish Harlem, where he was documenting the lives of street-level crack dealers, spending nights on “copping corners” and in crack houses. “I think of myself as a cautious person,” he offers. “Frankly, I’m a scaredy-cat.”

As a graduate student investigating revolutionaries in 1982 El Salvador, he got caught in a scorched-earth maneuver by government troops. For two weeks, he fled with villagers from strafing jets, helicopter gunships and soldiers with machine guns. “Basically, they were shooting at us, and we were running as fast as we could,” he says. Dodging bullets and shrapnel, he leapt over a dead boy, blown in half by a grenade, and swam across a river to Honduras.

Bourgois is the Richard Perry University Professor of Anthropology, and Family and Community Medicine. His research interests range from global political economy to impoverished neighborhoods of the inner city, from the culture of drug dealers and homeless heroin injectors to the policies of medical and law-enforcement establishments. His books include *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labor on a Central American Banana Plantation*, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* and most recently (with photographer and University of California grad student Jeff Schonberg) *Righteous Dopefiend*, a study of homeless heroin addicts struggling to survive on the streets of San Francisco.

Long and lanky, Bourgois fits awkwardly in a chair and never seems quite settled in his seat. A tiny jeweled stud glints on his left ear. “The challenge,” he states, “is

how to address urgent social problems with scientific detachment and human engagement.”

Since coming to Penn in 2007, he has been studying the mix of drug dealers, users and residents on a block in North Philadelphia where he rents two floors of a dilapidated row home. The police assume any skinny white man lurking in the neighborhood is a junkie, says Bourgois. During one of their routine raids, when he was chatting up a clutch of young Puerto Rican men on a drug-selling corner, plainclothes officers, with guns drawn, charged the group and threw Bourgois to the pavement. Despite protests that he was not there to buy drugs—he had been recording stories about police brutality—Bourgois was handcuffed, then kicked into silence. With fractured ribs, he spent the night in jail, along with a shivering, moaning, vomiting cellmate in full-meltdown withdrawal. “Half the people arrested that night belonged in a hospital,” he recalls, “including me.” Now he carries a letter in his wallet from Philadelphia’s police commissioner identifying him as a Penn professor on an inner-city research mission.

Over the last quarter century, Bourgois has focused his field studies on the residents and street culture in very poor sectors of America’s cities—sifting through the quotidian joys and pain of what he has come to call “U.S. inner-city apartheid,” the structural forces that isolate

**“THESE NEIGHBORHOODS ARE AVOIDED BY THE GENERAL POPULATION. THEY BECOME INVISIBLE, DESPITE THE FACT THAT THEY OCCUPY HUGE SWATHS OF OUR CENTRAL CITIES.”**

violence, poverty and shoddy services in often racially segregated neighborhoods. Unlike most downtown districts, these are the areas where the streets are not maintained, the garbage is not collected, the schools are run down and the police are not civil, or just don’t come when called. “These neighborhoods are avoided by the general population,” he notes. “They become invisible, despite the fact that they occupy huge swaths of our central cities.”

Bourgois grew up in New York’s Silk Stocking District, just seven blocks from Harlem. When he and his high-school soccer team drove through Harlem to



Bourgeois (right) and residents at a memorial mural in North Philadelphia

the practice field, the kids would throw stones at their school bus. “People from my neighborhood on the Upper East Side acted as if this were natural,” he recalls, “but I thought it was outrageous. It was clear to me this was something that just wasn’t right.” It was an early experience of how people “normalize” everyday occurrences, accepting them without seeing that there might be something wrong, something worth looking at more closely.

“Anthropology has great potential for addressing these issues of misrecognition,” he suggests, “of bringing to light situations that aren’t visible to the mainstream population.” The discipline’s core orientation and method—cultural relativism and participant observation—allow scholars to probe, analyze and report on the lives of marginalized people engaged in taboo behaviors like drug selling, heroin injecting and crime. Ethnographers typically establish long-term relationships with individuals in the cultures they write about—usually they live there. Bourgeois uses the term “befriend” to describe the associations he establishes, disclosing his identity as a social scientist and the purpose of his presence in the neighborhood.

Mostly, it’s a matter of being honest and building trust by hanging out with informants on their daily rounds. Over the years, he has spent long hours immersed in these cut-off communities, listening to stories and observing everyday activities while suspending moral judgment in order to understand the logic of people’s behavior. The method yields a rich and fine-grained description of individual lives and the culture of beliefs, values and facts that constrain and shape them.

In San Francisco, he spent 12 years studying homeless heroin addicts, sometimes sleeping in their encampments amid a wasteland of raised freeways, on- and off-ramps, and decaying industrial warehouses. “They liked, frankly, being around a professor,” he comments. “They liked talking with me; they liked having someone being interested in their life story. And they didn’t sanitize anything: they showed me just how bad they were, what failures they were and also what their dreams were.”

One of the first things he learned about this “community of addicted bodies” was that it was indeed a community—a small society of the homeless, banded together for safety and bonded by a moral economy



**North Philly family on stoop. Plywood on right covers broken basement window and serves as a memorial for a young man killed in the neighborhood.**

of gift-giving. The precariousness of life on the street weaves them into a web of mutual obligation in which they seek out one another for a “taste” of heroin, a sip of cheap wine, a little spare change or some other favor.

Heroin organizes their lives with a harsh and desperate simplicity, Bourgois explains. “The addicts’ primary concern—their life’s work—is to avoid ‘dope sickness,’ the bone-crushing pain of opiate withdrawal. Every day, within an hour or two of waking up, they *have* to find heroin. All the other problems that stem from lives of abuse, from unemployment and mental illness, from having failed their families and themselves

**“ANTHROPOLOGY HAS GREAT POTENTIAL FOR ... BRINGING TO LIGHT SITUATIONS THAT AREN’T VISIBLE TO THE MAINSTREAM POPULATION.”**

all go away because they need heroin.” On any given day, those unable to pay for a “fix,” if they’ve previously earned a reputation for being generous, can expect a “cotton shot” from others in the group.

When preparing heroin, the addicts cook it in the concave bottom of a crushed beer can and then filter the liquefied drug through a dirty cotton ball or the

fibers of a cigarette filter. The filthy cotton holds a residue of heroin, and it becomes the “generous gift” the dopefiends give to one another to stave off dope sickness. This and other unsanitary injection practices spread diseases like HIV and hepatitis C. Although outreach programs counsel addicts on how to avoid infection, Bourgois says the information is only partly helpful to junkies living in a moral community of reciprocal gift-giving. To stay alive in their street subculture—and to hold dope sickness at bay—they have to share.

“Structural forces beyond our control—historical change, shifts in the economy or in the politics of public policy—come crashing down on vulnerable sectors of the population and basically shove them around in very unpleasant ways,” Bourgois claims. Some of the forces pushing especially hard against people eking out lives on the edge include government cuts in the social-services safety net, globalization and the transfer of factory jobs overseas, and the harshly punitive measures inflicted by the war on drugs.

From the roof of the house he rents in North Philly’s “badlands,” Bourgois can count the dead husks of 11 factories that provided jobs and supported families in once-thriving neighborhoods. “Some of the factories look like palaces,” he observes. “They were built in the 1800s, and a few have big clock towers.” As



# NEXT DOOR BUT INVISIBLE

deindustrialization stripped manufacturing jobs from America's cities, the residents left behind, most of them unskilled, had few employment options. Many turned to the underground economy that sprang up—babysitting, curbside car repair, home food preparation and drug dealing. “The tragedy of the inner city,” Bourgois notes, “is that young men and women are selling drugs literally in the shadows of abandoned factories because that’s the only economy offering them employment.”

**“STRUCTURAL FORCES BEYOND OUR CONTROL ... COME CRASHING DOWN ON VULNERABLE SECTORS OF THE POPULATION AND BASICALLY SHOVE THEM AROUND IN VERY UNPLEASANT WAYS.”**

In 1985, he moved into an East Harlem tenement and befriended the young crack sellers. “Highly motivated, ambitious inner-city youths have been attracted to the rapidly expanding, multibillion-dollar drug economy during the 1980s and 1990s precisely because they believe in Horatio Alger’s version of the American Dream,” he writes in *In Search of Respect*. “They are aggressively pursuing careers as private entrepreneurs; they take risks, work hard, and pray for good luck.” His point is not to lionize the dealers but to show how closely they parallel conventional aspirations as they play out in the street economy, rather than Main Street.

As the 20th century wound down, U.S. incarceration rates increased fourfold, and they continue to spike. Among the world’s developed countries, the United States now has the largest proportion of its population in prison—a trend driven largely by a get-tough response to the drug epidemic. By any measure, Bourgois contends, we had already lost the war on drugs by the 1990s. “We’ve been throwing more and more and more people in jail, and drugs have just gotten cheaper and purer. We need to restructure how we spend our resources. Instead of locking people up in prison, where they’re often brutalized and become even more violent or get more training at becoming criminals, we should be investing in treatment programs that we know will work.”

Bourgois has found that harm-reduction measures that provide housing, employment training, health care

and various networks of treatment and counseling have been the most successful in minimizing the damage addicts do to themselves as well as for putting them on a path to rehabilitation. Once their basic needs are taken care of, drug users can begin the hard work of facing the deeper issues that led to addiction in the first place. Some European programs that provide heroin injectors with opiate prescriptions have proven more successful



Smashed beer-can heroin cooker

at helping them quit than methadone maintenance. Mandatory treatment can also work sometimes. As a rule, Bourgois stresses, treating addicts as patients rather than criminals is a more effective and more humane way to go. But many harm-reduction solutions are politically toxic in the United States—even if they are less expensive and more successful than the unforgiving law-and-order strategies.

Over the years, he has worried about his street-ethnography friends whose stark deprivations and constrained choices have brought upon them great hurt, if not ruin. “I don’t want my research to be purely for building pretty theories about social suffering and injustice,” he declares. “I want it to have practical effects and to engage with the real world in ways that benefit the people I’m studying. That’s why my research is oriented toward bringing medicine and anthropology together in dialogue.”

Bourgois has long received funding from the NIH for his field research, and he has begun to work with clinicians in Penn’s School of Medicine. The Philadelphia

## NEXT DOOR BUT INVISIBLE



**Dopefiend Hank (pseudonym) raising the flag at a new “white” encampment. The homeless Bourgois studied were “deeply divided along racialized lines.”**

neighborhood he is studying is home to some of the worst murder and shooting statistics in the nation. In his participant-observer work, he is looking at the “risk environment”—the kinds of things residents are killing for, how the shootings happen and what victims seeking medical help experience. Penn’s hospital has initiated a pilot program to provide gunshot victims with access to social workers and follow-up medical care. Being shot is a “golden moment,” he says, a crisis that can lead victims to re-evaluate the path that led them to this point. Intervening at that moment, not just with trauma care, but with “more systematic and beefed-up” counseling and social services offers the best hope for changing the course of people’s lives. Bourgois also is collaborating with a Penn medical school epidemiologist on HIV prevention and with a clinician developing protocol for ER doctors dealing with domestic abuse.

Peter Cronholm, an assistant professor and Penn physician, is trying to set up therapy programs at primary-care sites for victims and perpetrators of family violence. Doctors tend to think about disease at the “cellular, biomechanical level,” he notes, and that tightly focused model informs how they think about most problems. “Philippe has helped me the most in thinking about the big picture as a framework for approaching a

medical problem,” Cronholm says, “and how to translate that into medical interventions, making sure that what we’re doing is sound.”

In *Righteous Dopefiend* Bourgois writes, “During the 1990s and the 2000s, the United States was the wealthiest and most militarily powerful nation in the world, yet a larger proportion of its population lived in abject destitution than that of any other industrialized nation.” More than half the homeless heroin addicts he wrote about have died. “We keep finding out bad news whenever we call back to our various contacts there,” he reports.

The cars still zip by on the overhead ramps and pedestrians hurry past on sidewalks where, just beyond the bushes, the dopefiends scrounge for a little food and a few hours of drug-addled forgetfulness. If they are seen, their presence is normalized by the tide of commuters that flows past each day, as indifferent to them as any other river. The stories they told Bourgois about their highs and lows, their petty crimes and failed rehabs are more than a collection of autobiographies narrating broken lives. “I’m convinced they tell us a great deal about America,” the street ethnographer says. “I think we learn a lot about a society from how it treats its most vulnerable population.” ♦

George Karandinos (left)  
and Philippe Bourgois



## STREET SMART

On a Friday night raid in North Philadelphia, police arrested two people and kicked in a door on a city block known to be an open-air drug market. Senior George Karandinos was walking in the neighborhood with bags of food he'd just bought at a nearby restaurant. He could see the undercover police with flashlights scanning the sidewalk ahead.

"Get on the other side of the street," one of them ordered.

"I live right here," Karandinos pleaded. "I'm on my way home."

"Why don't you move?" they demanded.

Karandinos, a health and societies major on a pre-med track, won't move because he's a resident on the block, which he is studying with Philippe Bourgois. His neighbors are mostly Puerto Rican with a few African-American households. "It's actually an extremely warm and welcoming community," he says. "Everybody knows each other, and there are people out on the street all day playing music."

The row house he and Bourgois rent has 42 code violations: the roof leaks, the showers drip into light fixtures on ceilings below, the electric oven gets power through a yellow cord that runs out the second-floor window and is plugged into an outlet in the basement. But the big problems are on the street where poverty, drugs and violence afflict the neighborhood.

Karandinos commutes to campus for classes, but mostly he hangs out and talks to neighbors on the street and in their homes. "I'm collecting life histories, taking field notes and observing the dynamics of the block," he says. Living in the neighborhood permits him to form deeper ties and to document the subtle details of 24/7 life there. "Ethnographic work is really time-consuming," he explains, "and it doesn't respect boundaries or personal issues."

That's a lesson he picked up from his mentor. "Philippe doesn't distinguish between work and life," he points out. "I've learned a lot from him—all the way from being a good fieldworker to being a creative social theorist to being a successful academic."

Living in North Philly, which is thick with memorial murals for people who've been shot, taught him another kind of lesson. Karandinos says that people who grow up in areas permeated by violence learn to respond instinctively. Not long after he started his inner-city fieldwork, he was hanging out with neighborhood friends at a pizza place. Someone just a few feet away pulled out a gun and threatened a bystander. Karandinos froze. Without a word, the teenager next to him immediately turned, sprinted down the block and cut around the corner. "I thought to myself, 'that seems like a really good idea,'" he recalls. "I had no learned response for this sort of situation, and I didn't have the instinct—or good sense—to overcome my surprise. Now, if I ever find myself in the same situation, I'll know to take off immediately."