

Indian born Sudhir Alladi Ventakesh, former student of renowned ‘liberal’ sociologist William Julius Wilson at the University of Chicago, is currently director of Columbia University’s Institute for Research for African-American Studies. Over the last decade, Ventakesh has established himself as the leading ethnographer of the contemporary social and economic organisation of the ‘ghetto poor’. His research is amongst the best known of urban sociologists working in America today, due in part to a memorable contribution to Stephen D. Levitt’s hugely successful Freakonomics (2004) which soberly and persuasively dispelled the cultural myth of the upwardly mobile ghetto crack retailer. Ventakesh’s first book, American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto (2000) grew out of field research that he undertook for his graduate dissertation in the twenty-eight high-rise buildings which comprised the recently demolished Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, at one point the largest enclave of welfare recipients in the world.

Ventakesh explicates how in the early 1960s, a confluence of local agitation and federal policy led to the construction of a housing ‘project’ unprecedented in both scope and density. Despite the progressive ideals of many of its architects, both literal and conceptual, the new complex merely replaced deteriorating housing in Chicago’s South Side black belt and thus served to reinforce racial divisions of space in the city. Moreover, macroeconomic restructuring which crippled the employment prospects of urban blacks conspired with inadequacies of the built environment to create a host of social problems by the end of the decade. The result was the emergence of the Robert Taylor Homes, along with other Chicago complexes such as the North Side’s infamous Cabrini-Green, as emblems of what Arnold Hirsh has described as the socially and spatially isolated ‘vertical-ghetto’ of the late twentieth century. This narrative of optimism and decline characterises histories of post World War II public housing across the West. Ventakesh’s valuable contribution to this well-trodden story is his micro-ethnographic research into the economic and social exchanges between the residents of the Robert Taylor Homes, the distinctive cultural and commercial forms they produced by way of a pragmatic response to their environment. He labels the ‘clandestine systems of exchange, sharing and support’ which developed in Robert Taylor and other ghettos as a vast and unregulated urban economy based on the axial principle of the ‘hustle’. This designation encompasses a host of licit and illicit activities, ranging from unregulated tax preparation and baby-sitting, to the organised defrauding of grocery (food stamp) vouchers, drug dealing, and prostitution.
Ventakesh observes that the expanded bureaucratic environment of a publicly administered housing complex, in which the official welfare of residents was underwritten by federal subsidies, created new avenues and imperatives for the residents to augment their incomes with ‘hustles’. In particular, he persuasively argues that the Chicago Housing Authority’s (CHA) creation of tenant committees (LAC) in the late 1960s to give greater representation to housing residents engendered a functional socio-economic hierarchy in Robert Taylor. As the liaison between residents and local channels of political patronage, including CHA and law enforcement authorities, LAC representatives emerged as the mediators, regulatory agents, and often direct financial beneficiaries of a complex negotiation between the imperatives of underground commerce and environmental stability that sustained the project’s operation as a viable community.

In Ventakesh’s assessment, the major deleterious shift in the life of the Robert Taylor Homes occurred after the 1970s and comprised two facets. First, a deterioration of relations between the tenant body and outside institutions—most notably its alienation from the workforce, local police, and the CHA—severely weakened the power of the LAC to exert effective control on the public life of the project. A transformation in local gang activity affected by rise of the ‘crack economy’ posed the second major challenge to the internal organisation of the project and its public space. Robert Taylor’s dominant gang, the Black Kings, had historically been primarily a ‘social’ agglomeration of alienated youths. By the late 1980s, however, it had reinvented itself as a streamlined and profit-driven organisation linked in the distribution of narcotics to a metropolitan network of neighbourhood gangs. The newly-incorporated ‘super-gang’ began to contest with the LAC for both supervision of the economic underground and, perhaps more significantly, for the ‘social esteem’ accruing from the status as the local ‘leadership’ cadre.

In this somewhat fuzzy evocation of a historical transition between the benevolent chicanery of the LAC era and the would-be autocrats of the corporate gang, Ventakesh treads the same conceptual ground as William Wilson. He uncritically reproduces, with a flourish of economic specificity, his mentor’s declension model of inner city social organisation, commonly described as the ‘golden age of the ghetto thesis’. In Ventakesh’s case, this contention is supported by ethnographic research and quantitative analysis of population trends, although he presents this information in a relatively opaque manner. Ventakesh should be applauded for not hampering with moralising his discussion of the LAC and Black Kings conflict of (vested) interests in controlling the project’s public space. He fails, however, to adequately assess the impact, both psychological and economic, of an illegal and noxious industry on the social fabric of the project. Neither does he engage in potentially valuable comparisons between off the books activity in
Robert Taylor and illicit economies in different national and regional contexts. An instructive comparison would have been with the historic, and until recently ongoing, interconnection of local politics, organised crime, and illegal commerce in South Boston’s all-white federal projects, or with Robert Taylor’s European equivalent, the Toryglen Estate in Glasgow.

The single most compelling theme of *American Project*—that of a complex relationship between modes of commercial activity undertaken by the poor and the communal and familial structures which they develop—is the subject of more thorough investigation in Ventakesh’s second major work: *Off The Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor* (2006). The South Side ghetto again provides the geographic and social territory for Ventakesh’s research. His ethnographic lens has widened from Robert Taylor however, to encompass the economic manoeuvrings of the entire surrounding community, given the pseudonym of Marquis Park.

Wilson reaffirmed the lapsed ‘liberal’ correlation between macro-economic developments and the social organisation of the inner city. Ventakesh’s explication of the moral universe of the ghetto poor, however, substitutes everyday economic exigency for deterministic theories of ‘culture’. Numerous social scientists have deployed the notion of cultural pathology, whether understood as the result of history or psychology, to distinguish invidiously between deserving and undeserving sections of the poor, or as Elijah Anderson conceptualises, competing ‘street’ and ‘decent’ value-orientations at work in ghetto America. It is this demarcation of the inner city by the assertion that its residents hold qualitatively different values to those the mainstream which Ventakesh seeks to break down. He theorises a link between the ghetto dweller’s development of ‘ethical and moral systems and the material world that supports them’. Participants in the unlicensed economy, who range from prostitutes to soul food vendors, do not exhibit aspirations that diverge in the abstract from those of other Americans, but develop short-term strategies in response to the ‘rules’ of the ‘game’ on which their livelihoods are predicated.

In the chapter ‘Our Gang’, Ventakesh finds in the Marquis Park of the early twenty-first century a terminally advanced case of the corporate gang’s challenge to the autonomy of the economic underground and its ‘regulators’. He charts the incursion of local gangster ‘Big Cat’, next generation Czar of the Black Kings, into various community-controlled facets of the underground economy following a downturn in the drug trade. Big Cat attempts to centralise the vast array of neighbourhood ‘hustles’ by turning a park into a 24 hour market of contraband goods and illicit services. In doing so he raises the ire of both local leaders, whose Faustian bargain with him to limit activity to certain times of day breaks down, and of other gangs, setting in motion a spiral of events which lead to his murder.

Less subtle commentators would have surely succumbed to the natural temptation to frame the incident as an inner city morality play, emphasising the
complicity of the local community in negotiating with a known murderer to ensure public safety. Without entirely foregoing novelistic flourishes, Ventakesh concentrates on the fiduciary conflict of interest between the gang’s need to diversify and the community’s imperative of maintaining both its shady livelihood and the safety of public space. As the local Pastor observed, ‘I don’t know what’s worse: that these brothers are peddling … [drugs] to the community or getting in the way of everyone’s livelihood, harassing folks, not letting up’.

This understanding of community as an intricate system of vested interests and exchanges, made explicit in Ventakesh’s repeated referral to Marquis Park’s residents as ‘stakeholders’, reportedly forms the basis for his forthcoming work, which explores consciousness of collective uniqueness and solidarity amongst inner city residents. The zero-sum logic of community organisation which Ventakesh advances in both American Project and Off the Books both challenges conservative images of a passive poor, and contributes a more pragmatic dimension to traditional ‘liberal’ conceptions of the economic and social bonds that bind subaltern populations.

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