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Good Cops, Bad Cops: Working the Binaries in the NYPD

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Jennifer C. Hunt, ***Seven Shots: An NYPD Raid on a Terrorist Cell and its Aftermath***. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 361pp. \$29.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780226360904

This is one hell of a book. Sweeping, energetic, lucid, rich in story and detail but sociologically informed and informing. Jennifer Hunt, a professor at Montclair State College, put years of deep and dogged fieldwork to work in crafting a superb and highly inventive organizational ethnography of the New York Police Department. Ostensibly, the story is a tightly focused one, concentrating on a pre-dawn raid on an apartment in Brooklyn in July 1997 by an ESU team (Emergency Service Unit). In the flat are two Palestinian suicide bombers in possession of highly potent explosives they plan to set off in a few hours in the NY subway. A courageous roommate of the two alerts the police who move into action with considerable skill, some dissension, and blessed good luck to prevent a major disaster. The informant, a recent Pakistani immigrant who spoke little English, is severely tested by the police trying to judge the credibility of his story and counter the risks faced by both the police and the local residents. The raid itself is recreated and described in excruciating emotional and hair-raising fashion. Two officers fire their weapons – the seven shots – on entering the bedroom, critically wounding both suspects just as one moves to detonate the explosives hidden in two black bags on the floor. Minutes later, as the wounded are being carted away, two detectives X-ray the bags and, after a robot failure, disarm the live bomb by hand. An officer on the scene later says, “if the bomb had gone off, it would have been a bag-and-broom job.” Parsed as

a single story, the book is about how in less than seven hours, one persistent Muslim informant, six dedicated NYPD cops and two cool and capable bomb squad detectives along with supporting units, back-up teams, various technologies and wise (and not so wise) commanders narrowly aborted this country's first suicide bombing.

The book is of course far more than a single story or simply a dramatic and carefully written police procedural. This is a die-hard empirical and scholarly work deeply concerned with the troubling moral complexities embedded in the police world where the use of coercive force is a defining feature of the trade and, as the raid makes so vivid, an ever-present possibility. The personal, situational and structural shaping of these complexities provides the grand arch of Jennifer Hunt's account. The heart of the book is located in the aftermath of the raid when the officers involved let their bosses (including Police Commissioner Howard Safir and Mayor Rudy Giuliani) know they do not want to attend a highly orchestrated press conference a few days after the raid for fear of retaliation by terrorists aimed at their families. Angered by their stance, the police command orders them to appear which they do yet their initial reluctance has a devastating and lasting effect on their personal lives, their work careers, and, in some unexpected ways, on the organization itself.

Author Hunt's detailed and episodic account of the aftermath – taking us up to, through, and beyond the events of 9/11 – offers one the most riveting and penetrating representations of the police life and culture(s) yet written. In brief, the ESU officers and bomb squad detectives involved in the raid find themselves surrounded by jealous colleagues, devious press reports, rumors and innuendos designed to dishonor them, credit seeking (and hording) supervisors, anxious family members, sympathetic friends and work partners, and a gaggle of self-serving managerial elites at headquarters, One Police Plaza, known to street cops for good reason as the 'Puzzle Palace.' Life goes on of course but, for the inadvertent heroes who serve as the protagonists of this police opera, it is marked by increasing disillusionment as they come to feel – and are -- victimized by forces within the department. Promised rewards are withdrawn or forgotten, bosses prove unreliable

and vindictive (“kiss up, kick down”), unsavory politics of a remarkably petty sort are exposed, powerful vertical and horizontal cliques ensure that trust among officers is limited, divided and highly problematic. What these career breaking accounts reveal is that the police culture is a many splintered thing; anything but cohesive or unified, neither supportive nor protective of its members.

The lines of discord drawn within the NYPD are many including rank, race, and gender as well as skill, interest, and ambition. They are brought to the surface for the most part without explicit analytic markers or frame breaking asides but are impossible to miss. This is fast-paced, multi-sited, chronological narrative that lays out its theory in the telling of tales – by the stories selected, the actors and roles displayed, the contemplation and action described, what comes to pass as a result, and -- more tentatively pursued perhaps but making the work recognizably ethnographic -- why the stories told take the shape they do. As the evidence accumulates, the reader begins to recognize and understand why many experienced and hard working officers in the lower ranks (including more than a few who are bruised and more or less alienated from the organization if not the job) take it as axiomatic that whatever those in charge decide to do, things will swiftly become infinitely worse.

Seven of the nine chapters are put forth in what the author tags “literary nonfiction.” This is an experimental or impressionist ethnography that echoes the literary journalism of Jonathan Rubinstein (1973) writing on street cops in Philadelphia in his much cited *City Police*, or David Simon’s (1993) edgy squad centered portrait of detective work, a forerunner to the HBO show *The Wire*, in *Homicide*, or, more recently, Peter Moskos’s (2008) recounting of his experience as a rookie beat patrolman in a crack infested neighborhood in *Cop in the Hood* (2008). Not all ethnographic conventions are breached in *Seven Shots* however for Hunt includes a crisp assessment of the social science (largely sociological) literature concerning American big city police in the synthetic and theory focused introductory and concluding chapters. There are also numerous (and welcome) footnotes and a thorough methodological appendix describing her activities in the

field as well as clarifying the analytic and narrative choices she made when writing the book.

As readers discover early on, there is a good deal of reconstructed dialogue and action in *Seven Shots* and Hunt herself is present throughout the work as a first-person guide struggling to understand the multiple perspectives (and the many realities), the conflicting tales, the agonizing uncertainties, and the voiced but always incomplete and foggy remembrances she encounters. The degree that many (but not all) of the police officers she worked with open up and speak to her candidly, often painfully, is astonishing given the light cover provided (pseudonyms are rarely used). Such apparent and unusual honesty certainly serves to mark to the level of trust Hunt was able to build over time with those among whom she worked. The result is a positioned if diverse truth-telling among those studied and an impressive display of contrasting meanings that underlie significant symbolic and all too real tensions in the police world between those who are inside or outside, high rank or low, local or central, open or closed, responsive or elusive, adaptable or sclerotic. What remains curious, indeed paradoxical -- to both the author and reader -- is just why the NYPD appears so inept and inadequate in the aftermath of a highly visible and laudable success.

Without question, Jennifer Hunt has produced an a engaging and spirited work, fully accessible to a broad audience and yet loaded with lessons and leads for a number of research communities beyond the criminal justice or police studies domains. Organizational sociologists, for example, might read Hunt's precise and insightful descriptions of the indulgency patterns present in the NYPD as generic examples for how supervision operates in public bureaucracies where there are seldom enough rewards -- both formal and informal -- to go around. Risk theorists can learn from Hunt's depiction of danger as seen personally from those inside, often on-the-ground and impersonally from those outside, typically on-high in the organization. Those concerned with management in the public or private sectors would gain from Hunt's persuasive conclusion that too many bosses in the NYPD abandon their charges or leave them unprotected and damaged in order to proffer some gain or save themselves from censure. Prolonged exposure to these bosses

drives good people away while greatly increasing the levels of dissension, duplicity, and distrust in the organization.

All this is to say that I think *Seven Shots* should be on many bookshelves. It is as suitable for undergraduate students as graduates, for police at all levels as well as those of us who are policed. It speaks evocatively of organizational uncertainties and ambiguities, of the spectacular and the mundane, of the good and bad associated with a job many police officers say 'they love but does not love them back.' This is at-home ethnography, up front and personal, and models a fresh and inventive way to do sociology that matters. We need more.

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