



Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain

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BOOK REVIEWS

Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain

Lisa McKenzie

Bristol, Policy Press, 2015, 225 + xiii., £14.99 (pbk)

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Lisa McKenzie's account of life in St Ann's, the Nottingham council estate where she has lived for more than 20 years, is a heartfelt and nuanced portrayal of the complexities of getting by in challenging circumstances. Her research challenges the dominant portrayal of council estates and the people who live there, providing 'alternative ways of thinking about poor communities and their residents' (p. 201). Living in St Ann's grants McKenzie 'insider status', unique access to the lives of people living around her who are also her friends and neighbours. Although this results in a rich ethnographic account, it also created ethical dilemmas such as a concern that some narratives could compound the stigma that those living in St Ann's routinely faced. That McKenzie shares these dilemmas with the reader adds to the sense of a balanced and thoughtful account of community life.

One of the strengths of the book is its accessibility. It is a clear, concise account written in a way which requires no prior knowledge of the sociological theories to which McKenzie refers. She demonstrates great skill in distilling complex theories of class, culture and gender to their core arguments and linking these to her account of life in St Ann's. This means that the book remains accessible to a wide readership; however, those with a sociological background may be disappointed that there is not more extensive discussion of these broader theories.

McKenzie highlights the importance of narratives in working class life. They are 'how we explain ourselves, how we understand the world around us, and how we situate ourselves in a wider context' (p. 6). This has carried through into the structure of the book, which uses narratives and stories to represent life in St Ann's. Whilst these stories give the reader a rich account of St Ann's and its residents, what is sometimes lacking is effective signposting to show how these sections relate to the whole chapter, why certain stories belong in one chapter as opposed to another, and how each chapter links together to create a coherent narrative.

The book's introduction outlines McKenzie's background and her aim of challenging simplistic representations of life on a council estate as represented by the dominant narratives of 'benefit scroungers' and 'broken Britain'. It also usefully introduces some of the key concepts (cultural theories of class, gender, place, race and ethnicity) and theorists (Pierre Bourdieu, Bev Skeggs) that feature throughout the book. McKenzie argues that working class practices are not valued by wider society, and that unofficial resources and community networks, which are essential to the lives of people living in places like St Ann's, are misrecognised. People are problematised as immobile and lacking the

aspiration to escape these communities, rather than recognising the resourcefulness that enables them to get by and their positive attachment to a place in which they have value. Understanding these value systems from the ‘inside’ is central to McKenzie’s account of St Ann’s.

The first chapter sets St Ann’s in the context of working class Nottingham, drawing on historical community studies to outline the history of the estate and how it is today. The physical layout of St Ann’s, with its complicated and confused spatial plan, is identified as especially important to daily life. Although the description is vivid, maps or drawings of parts of the estate would have been a useful addition. The book then moves on to focus on the working class women of St Ann’s, discussing the stigma that is associated with living on the estate and the strategies they use to get by and belong in their community. The second chapter describes the way women negotiated the physical space of the estate in their daily routines, their struggle to maintain respectability as white, working class women who had mixed race children, and the role of place—‘being St Ann’s’—in both generating and protecting them from stigma.

McKenzie followed up this research by seeking out the men of St Ann’s, whose experiences are represented in the third chapter. Finding them in different spaces (the gym, the barbers shop), McKenzie describes the places they meet, their networks, family ties and—as with the women—the way in which they found value and respect within the estate. For the men, ‘being valued on the inside of the estate—“being someone”—is always better than being “no one” on the outside’ (p. 100). Chapter four expands on the notion of value, identifying what is of value in St Ann’s, how it is constructed and how markers of value are misrecognised by ‘outsiders’. Chapter five focuses on feelings of safety, from personal safety when walking around the estate, to safety from class prejudice, racism and stigma. The final chapter describes the anger, frustration and mistrust that is stoked as a result of living in a stigmatised neighbourhood, the ‘pressure cooker’ that exploded in the 2011 riots following the shooting of Mark Duggan (which took place as McKenzie was finishing her research).

McKenzie seeks to introduce complexity into our understandings of life in working class communities. She does not shy away from discussing negative aspects to life in St Ann’s but tries to contextualise practices in order to make them understood, representing them to ‘outsiders’ through the eyes of an ‘insider’. Her research is a positive addition to the community studies literature, a rich ethnography that not only has important things to say, but also says them in a way that will encourage a wide readership.

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