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

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From an occupational perspective, gang units seem to afford officers less structure, greater independence, and more excitement, along with special status. Officers often joined a gang unit with this expectation, hoping to be real "crime fighters," while those stakeholders in the officers' institutional environment often placed greater emphasis on functions such as intelligence and prevention. And while the great expectation was that gang units would embed themselves solidly in the community policing approach, this study provided little evidence of that. Instead, the authors found, overall, poor training and only a general appreciation for community policing, without any significant and meaningful integration of gang policing and community policing (ironically, Inglewood's gang unit was somewhat of an exception to this, even though the department had not formally implemented community policing!). Worse, the study produced some evidence of racial profiling, harassment, falsification of records, and fabrication of pretexts for aggressive enforcement actions. Such tactics, according to this study, rose to the level of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in two of the four study sites. Predictably, such tactics fueled gang resentment, with the unintended consequence of *enhancing* gang solidarity and cohesion. The authors found that most of these units were physically and organizationally disconnected and did not engage in the kind of problem-oriented community policing that was widely expected. Instead, they adopted a much more traditional style of interacting with the community. Although the representativeness of these four gang units cannot be assumed, the findings of this study generally parallel other scholarly studies of attempts to implement *and sustain* reforms in traditional police organizations.

Empire of Scrounge: Inside the Urban Underground of Dumpster Diving, Trash Picking, and Street Scavenging, by **Jeff Ferrell**. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2005. 233 pp. \$22.00 paper. ISBN: 0814727987.

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For about eight months in 2002, Jeff Ferrell was a "Dumpster diver and trash picker" in Fort Worth, Texas. He began scrounging after resigning from one tenured sociology job and before nailing down the next. Ferrell could rely on a modest house, a working partner, and a trickle of royalties from previous books, but he mainly "survived" by transforming what he found into personal possessions or cash at junk/antique stores and recycling centers.

Ferrell weaves carefully detailed fieldnotes into 200 continuously compelling pages. He reveals the distinctive practical activities required to scrounge successfully; provides subtle appreciations of how scroungers interact with others, such as other scroungers, residents, police, and managers of recycling centers; and he conveys the sensual-aesthetic dimensions of trash picking in a stream of surprisingly inspiring sociological reveries.

Labeling his analysis ethnomethodological, Ferrell details how the distinctive practices of scrounging are based on routine cognitions, which in turn are the product of the scrounger's uniquely crafted folk sociology. Seeing trash within an approaching time horizon defined by the garbage collector, scroungers discipline themselves tightly to the calendar. Scroungers interpret as they dig, inferring a move, divorce, or death in a given trash pile, picking up much more about abruptly abandoned social lives than they take away physically.

As an interaction analyst, Ferrell appreciates how scroungers interact with versions of themselves at different points in time and with others they never directly meet. Every scrounger, whether Ferrell on his bicycle, an apparently homeless man pushing a shopping cart, or the driver of a pickup truck, has a limited carrying capacity; thus all must constantly choose. Anticipating the journey ahead, scroungers "dress" the items they pick up, discarding less useful and heavier parts,

stomping cans, organizing materials into different carry away containers. Carrying tools and drawing on laboring skills acquired in other life phases, they disassemble items to isolate the most worthy parts. Recalling painful learning episodes, they distinguish between consumable and contaminated food. Wary of offending homeowners, scroungers at once envision lines of escape and develop habitual self-effacing gestures that they will project if someone comes out to complain.

Operating below the floor of enforceable morality, scroungers must work out their own solutions to pressing questions. How to allocate rights of scavenging among competitors who arrive at the same pile at different times? What is the boundary between what is available for anyone to take and what is still private property? Will residents be as hostile as are the city's politicians?

The specific challenge in reading this book is one shared with "auto ethnography" in general. How should we appreciate sociologically the sensual/aesthetic themes in the author's elegant descriptions, given that they are rooted in the author's singular biography? Readers may too quickly dismiss euphoric passages. Ferrell repeatedly plays off of the multiple social realities that congeal in trash—that what one discards is instantly appreciated as valuable within other lives. But this appreciation, that the poetics of everyday life are conditioned by biography, threatens to cut against him, highlighting the unrepresentative character of his short-term immersion.

The image of Ferrell gone feral entertains even as it risks putting the reader off. He gives many lists of the varied items he gathers from a given pile or on a given day, but the glimpses we get of others indicates that some cannot afford eclectic scrounging if they are to make their nut at the recycling center. Some scroungers may take pains to leave the trash pile neater than they found it, but not all will be so concerned with promoting a respectable appearance for eyes they will never see.

We do not learn enough about others' biographies to be sure that "We were all a bunch of urban prospectors." Do other scroungers working affluent neighborhoods feel superior for picking up German cabinet pulls that enable them to live better than

some in working-class neighborhoods, at least in this minor regard? Maybe scroungers feel virtuous as contributors to the city's recycling effort, but maybe they feel degraded by the official disgust that status-conscious local politicians project. Ferrell, echoing Veblen, focuses on the waste of capitalist markets, but maybe the excess consumption that the fellow scrounging next to him is focused on is alcohol. The fellow pictured on p. 191, who, apparently to secure his possessions, has woven the strap of a bag through a shopping cart and then around a fire hydrant; who is wearing a clean white shirt, sweater, jacket, and tennis shoes, not unlike a university professor; who sits with earphones on, holding a smoke in his left hand which rests palm upward on his left knee; and whose eyes are closed or cast downward, may be lost in a Zen moment, but perhaps what those unresponsive eyes see is a cyclical nightmare of paranoid schizophrenia. We have to suspect that Ferrell is scrounging the lives of scroungers who are not similarly *On the Road*, searching Ft. Worth's trash for truths about self and America's character.

But the themes of transcendence sustained in this book should not be cast aside. There is a general biographical truth that Ferrell is onto, and if it characterizes only some scroungers, it is not limited to them. For Ferrell, becoming a scrounger is becoming an urban alchemist, taking what is readily available to all in publicly accessible life, creating something valuable, even precious, by locating freely found objects in collectively inherited frameworks. For Ferrell, the framework is sociological theorizing; for other urban alchemists, such as the city's poets, photographers, journalists, short story writers, painters and backyard artists, other shared and historically continuous frameworks are relevant. Other scroungers get three cents a pound for what they collect; for the value he adds to capitalism's trash, Ferrell deserves an appreciable advance in his intellectual reputation.