

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

David Grazian, *On the Make: The Hustle of Urban Nightlife*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 256 pp. \$US 25.00 hardcover (978-0-226-30567-7)

Long identified with its colonial past, the Liberty Bell, and Benjamin Franklin, in the latter part of the 20th century Philadelphia became better known for its proletarian culture, heavy industry, and a cityscape most often equated with the dour grey backdrops of iconic films such as *Rocky* and *Philadelphia*. Today, Philadelphia is abuzz with urban regeneration, well-heeled conventioners with expense accounts, and swanky nightclubs and resto-bars that draw in an international bourgeoisie.

David Grazian guides us through this emergent “postmodern” and “global post-industrial city” where “nighttime patrons confront one another in escalating moments of high-stakes interaction” engaging in “combative games of negotiation, deception and risk.” *On the Make* is based on Grazian’s 4 years of study while residing in Philadelphia’s Rittenhouse Square. The data are gleaned from his visits to 175 downtown establishments ranging from nightclubs to cafes; 24 formal interviews with key players in Philadelphia’s nighttime economy; a tiered analysis of 526 separate narrative accounts produced by his students at the University of Pennsylvania; and 19 focus groups with 71 students. His heavy reliance on student respondents is justified by the fact that Philadelphia’s emergent nighttime economy caters to a young and educated downtown demographic: two-thirds are college graduates, the third highest proportion in the United States.

The data are rich and compelling. As a tour guide, Grazian’s account of Philadelphia’s nightlife is vivid and well organized. The reader is left with an indelible impression by his analyses of: the social and symbolic context of preparing oneself for nighttime revelry — which he terms “pre-gaming”; the homosocial yet homophobic organization of masculine performance in the “girl hunt” and the myth of the pick-up; the techniques of hustling the hustlers employed by savvy women (culminating in an interesting tabular representation of “defensive dancing”); staged “pseudo events” designed for a regurgitative and complicit local media; and “Katie Klein” patrons, who act as a paid team of attractive females “engineering a fun-loving, party-hearty environment.” In this sense,

Grazian's work is in the finest tradition of classic American sociology, epitomized in the rich qualitative works of the Chicago School.

On the other hand, Grazian's heavy reliance on Maurer's *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man* (1940) and the notion of the "hustle" wears thin in the analysis. While his insight into the marketing logics behind a \$50-a-pound sautéed foie gras or a \$100 cheesesteak, or even one establishment's decision to accept Euros is indeed enlightening, everywhere he looks Grazian sees cons and hustles. His analysis actually belies the logic of consumption that his own data provide him. For Grazian, the smiling barman, winking cocktail waitress, flirty hat check girl, back-slapping bouncer, hunky table server, or eyelash fluttering, coquettish barmaid all set about "to dupe customers" and "deceive an unwitting audience for monetary profit." These actors are cast as shills and confederates in a big con. Styrofoam interiors, muted lighting, hidden roach spray and mouse traps are but their theatrical backdrop.

It is true that late capitalist consumption often makes us feel empty, and that we increasingly live in a society of the spectacle where alienation and "lonely crowds" are common. But in a con or scam of any sort the mark or victim is left with either nothing or clearly not what they paid for. Grazian's data itself, however, demonstrates that the nighttime economy delivers. It provides us with myriad experiences such as exaggerated personal narratives of sexual prowess, condescending accounts of low-brow patrons, and superficial brushes with supposedly crazed taxi drivers or belligerent fellow drinkers. Excited patrons continue to queue outside exclusive nighttime spots every Saturday night. Are they being conned by the same game over and over, night after night?

If Grazian's Penn students are "particularly vulnerable marks"; if "in the context of [being sold an] urban nightlife" they foolishly believe they can purchase "status at a downtown cocktail lounge for a \$10 cover charge"; if they are therefore ideological dupes because they naively think they can "buy [their] way into the glamorous life for the simple cost of admission," then we are all dupes by virtue of the rather superficial consumption choices we make every day.

Despite my overstated reservations about theory, *On the Make* is not just readable but riveting. It is an exceptional piece of sociology in the finest traditions of qualitative analysis. Perhaps Grazian's work is even better appreciated in the context of cultural studies. It is in this light that his reliance on the notion of the "hustle" can be more favourably appreciated as piercing cultural critique.

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