

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Matthew Desmond**, *On the Fireline: Living and Dying with Wildland Firefighters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 368 pp. \$US 24.00 hardcover (978-0-226-14408-5)

In the wake of 9/11, firefighters became popular heroes. In addition to whatever role they, as one of several paramilitary occupational groups (police, border guards, coast guard), play in what Althusserians referred to as the repressive state apparatus, they also serve a protective function that requires that the mostly working-class men who typically fill such jobs willingly step into situations that everyone else should and does, at least if they are able, flee. How this happens, why such individuals accept and deal with this kind of risk, is the central issue of this book. In the wake of 9/11 one might fear that this is going to be another celebration of unsung American heroes. There is no need to worry. Desmond's presentation is full of respect for the men that were his research participants, but it is a thoughtful and at times critical analysis of the interactions between the structuring structures of a specific masculine habitus, the perception and management of risk by the firefighters, and the bureaucratic cultures and institutions in which they are enmeshed.

*On the Fireline* is explicitly situated as an analysis of risk, especially how it is perceived and managed by rural working class men who fight forest fires in the hot, dry, American southwest. At its core is a focus on what the author calls country masculinity and how this fits in an almost totalizing manner with the US Forest Service's wildland firefighting bureaucracy. At one level the argument is quite simple. The answer to the question "why do wildland firefighters take such a risky job?" is that the country masculinity of the firefighters that Desmond worked with, studied, and writes about provides them with the dispositions, the habitus, that the firefighting bureaucracy needs. They find themselves reflected in the "organizational common sense" of the Forest Service. The institution itself does not have to work very hard to socialize these men into a reality in which firefighting is not perceived as overly risky if the rules of engagement are followed. It only needs to tweak them a little. Their combination of practical, technical skill, physical toughness, sense of individual responsibility, love of wild rurality, and eschewal of the etiquette of polite urban society comprises many of the values that are essential to being a successful wildland firefighter. Interestingly, Des-

mond emphasizes that the young men are not reckless on the job. They do not celebrate foolish acts of supposed bravery. They do, however, largely accept the notion that death and injury are for the most part the result of individual error.

The book succeeds on several levels. It is a highly readable, at times funny, very insightful, Bourdieu-inspired ethnography of country masculinity, and as such very useful for courses on masculinity. It is a fine example of how to apply structuration theory and, therefore, a good resource for classes in social theory. It also offers a penetrating examination of the logic of bureaucratic organization and the way it creates a common sense world in which blame is always individualized and thus diverted from the structural and institutional factors that may lead, in the case of wildland firefighters at least, to unnecessary injury and death. Indeed, Chapter 8, a deconstruction of the official explanation of the death of a colleague from burn injuries caused by being caught in a fire is a great case study in critical thinking, as well as an indictment of the common sense understanding of a firefighter's death within the US Forest Service. Finally, the book as a whole is a detailed exposition of the view that risk is a context-dependent concept.

The key theoretical concept employed by Desmond is Bourdieu's habitus. It has, of course, proven to be very useful but it is well known that even though Bourdieu argued that any particular habitus had to be historicized, the concept lends itself more to synchronic than to diachronic analyses. This book does not totally escape the problems this generates. Marxian-influenced thinkers have held that one of the features of working-class culture that distinguishes it from bourgeois dispositions is its collective rather than individualist orientation. The country masculinity of Desmond's rural working-class men is shot through with a kind of individualism, one that easily falls prey to blame-the-victim explanations. Some discussion of the characteristics of the political economy of rural America that produces this perhaps unique working-class individualism would help here. Details of the family backgrounds of the key informants and workmates that form the subjects of the book are offered but some broader social, political and economic contextualization of country masculinity would add some dynamism to the interpretation. Contemporary country masculinity emerged from and in a particular set of circumstances and will transform as the circumstances evolve. The appeal of dangerous jobs to rural working-class men is undoubtedly somewhat influenced by the labour market opportunities open to them, as well as by their culture. In *Distinctions* Bourdieu argued that working-class culture was marked by necessity; individuals come to prefer that to which they are in any case limited. Some discussion of the limitations of

the rural United States that generated the tastes and dispositions of Desmond's key informants would make their habitus seem less *sui generis* and free floating.

None the less, *On the Fireline* offers a thick and rich take on a particular version of rural, masculine, working-class culture in the United States and how it fits with an institutional setting that requires young men to do dangerous work. It offers another example of how social systems are unconsciously reproduced and thus helps us understand how and why young men willingly put themselves in harm's way.

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