

Political Research Beyond Political Science



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Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City. By Matthew Desmond. New York: Crown, 2016. 432p. \$28.00.

In spite of growing political rancor over increasing inequality and widening economic precarity, many political scientists steer clear of such issues, focusing more on how to best study political behavior and institutional processes. In fact, for some, Political Science is about the science more than the politics. Recent debates about the standards for published research were intensified by a scandal concerning fabricated data for an article published in the December 2014 issue of *Science*.¹ The DA-RT (Data Access-Research Transparency) initiative led to journal editors agreeing to require that published articles be explicit about how the research was conducted and that the data be made publicly available. Some have noted the standards would force different types of research to conform to the strictures of positivist, quantitative analyses at the expense of the nuanced interpersonal relationships associated with field research.²

The merits of DA-RT aside, the debate has highlighted an enduring semiotic divide in research orientations: scientific vs. humanistic, positivist vs. interpretivist, quantitative vs. qualitative, etc. Surely, not all political scientists insist on this sort of methodological sectarianism; however, the problem seems longstanding. As Sheldon Wolin once emphasized, “methodism” pushes political scientists away from studying the real world of politics in the name of perfecting methodological specialization.³ Gabriel Almond noted that political scientists prefer to sit at “separate tables,” where distinct methodologies were associated with different ideological orientations.⁴ In fact, methodological sectarianism characterizes the social science in general, where each discipline has a dominant method with an implied political orientation as Alan Wolfe emphasized years ago.⁵ Economics is at one end of the continuum with a top-down scientific,

positivistic modeling of economic behavior; and Anthropology is arguably on the other end with a bottom-up humanistic, ethnographic approach for interpreting behavior in culturally specific settings. Nonetheless, power creates its own resistance and today there are a growing number of researchers across disciplines who pursue what Ian Shapiro and Rogers Smith call “problem-driven research” that employs whatever methods help understand the problem being studied, even mixing methods to understand their object of inquiry.⁶

Problem-driven researchers, especially those who focus in on pressing public problems, can find more allies if they look beyond disciplinary boundaries. Sociologist Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* is a stellar example of problem-driven, mixed methods research on the very public and political problem of growing economic precarity of those on the bottom of the socio-economic order. The book ostensibly is an ethnography following eight families in two different neighborhoods in Milwaukee (one white, one not) as they struggle with the adversity associated with the emerging cardinal practice of the low-income housing crisis in the United States—eviction.

Eviction was historically a relatively rare practice until recent decades. It was reserved for extreme instances of renter misbehavior (primarily falling behind on the rent but also violation of landlord behavioral restrictions). Yet, “in 2013, 1 in 8 poor renting families nationwide was unable to pay all of their rent, and a similar number thought it was likely they would be evicted soon” (p. 5). Many others are close to that edge. This is most especially a problem for poor families seeking housing in the less-studied private market where most Americans find a home; however, it can be a problem for those poor families in the more often studied public housing market as well. This problem has intensified as more of the poor find affordable housing increasingly scarce in our age of growing inequality and economic precarity. “Families have watched their incomes stagnate, or even fall, while their housing

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costs have soared. Today, the majority of poor renting families in America spend over half their income on housing, and at least one in four dedicates over 70 percent to paying the rent and keeping the lights on” (p. 4). They increasingly resort to desperate coping strategies. They sometimes put their children at risk of getting basic nutrition. Sometimes the rent is sacrificed to pay the utilities. Tenants sell their food stamps for cash. The shell game inevitably leads to a variety of bad choices. Families now increasingly get evicted, formally by law enforcement or even more frequently it turns out, according to Desmond, informally by their landlords acting sometimes with agreement from the renters in exchange for forgiving part of the past rent due or not pressing charges on other violations.

Not surprisingly, this sort of precarity is much more likely among non-white, African American families—single mothers with children most especially. Yet, others are not immune. In all cases, the risk grows with eviction of suffering a wide variety of negative consequences, from children dropping out of school, to mothers selling sex for permission for their families to sleep on someone else’s couch, from loss of ability to get to a job, to loss of one’s mental health. The chances of suicide skyrocket with eviction and with more evictions the suicide rates have crept upward rapidly in recent years. “Suicides attributed to evictions and foreclosures doubled 2005 and 2010, years when housing costs soared” (p. 298).

This near-silent crisis occurs far beyond the view of the mass media and out of sight and mind of those more fortunate. Desmond’s narrative is written explicitly to not let us look away. It vividly depicts the personal struggles of those confronting the looming threat of eviction. Written in the third-person to foreground the people being studied, *Evicted* reads like the most heart-breaking of novels. The characters’ dialogue drives the plot. It is a chilling tale of systematic mistreatment of people who are neglected, exploited, and abused (sometimes to the point of death) simply for being born poor with almost no escape and all the while living in total squalor.

As the drama unfolds, Lorraine, Arleen, Patrice, Vanetta and Crystal, Pam and Ned, Lamar or Kamala, and even Scott, the gay drug addict who lost his nursing license, converse on their predicament and the mounting personal crises it imposes. In the process, the eviction crisis gets revealed for all its horrendous ramifications. The larger story comes through while the personal stories are presented in dramatic novelistic form. The story told reads as compelling as William Kennedy’s *Ironweed* or any of his lyrical novels. The personal struggles that are foregrounded in the third-person narrative become part of the larger allegory of today’s housing crisis and the growing role of eviction in compounding its worst consequences.

But the writing is not the half of it. Desmond’s ethnographic skills are remarkable. In an afterword entitled “About this Project,” he writes: “To me, ethnography is what you do when you try to understand people by allowing their lives to mold your own as fully and genuinely as possible” (p. 318). Desmond notes he learned to check his emotions because the depression that haunted his informants soon came to be his own. He adds: “There’s this idea that ethnography is a ‘method’...I tend to think of ethnography as a *sensibility*, a ‘way of seeing’... It’s a fundamental way of being in the world... If we approach ethnography as a sensibility, then we can begin cultivating a set of skills or disciplines long before we actually enter the field” (p. 404). For Desmond, ethnography is about relationships. The book stands as a testament to how the interpersonal ties he formed enabled him to learn not just how the housing crisis is experienced first-hand, but what are its broader contours as a societal phenomenon.

In fact, Desmond makes relationships central to not just how he conducted his study, but also how to understand the substantive character of the problem. He frames it in terms of “relational sociology.” Relational sociology posits that most sociological research topics are better understood in terms of interpersonal relationships. Poverty is not so much a condition that individuals endure as it is an artifact of relationships. Rather than focusing on the traits, the capacities, the deficiencies, cognitive, emotional or otherwise, of poor individuals, a relational approach to studying poverty looks primarily at it through the lens of the socio-economic-political relationships that bring that poverty into being and make it persist for particular people, specifically in terms of how they have been positioned in the social order. Given that poverty is better understood as a relationship than a condition, Desmond’s ethnography includes not just renters but also landlords, police, judges, social workers, family, friends, and others whose proximate involvement with those living under the threat of eviction critically affect the chances of experiencing, enduring, surviving, or succumbing to its effects. He shows how whole industries arise to profit from the travails of the evicted: from the marshalls who evict the movers and who take away your belongings if you choose not to leave them on the roadside, to those who charge you for storage, or those who administer homeless shelters, and others still. These people are not strictly speaking good or bad, they may even aid as they often exploit the renters confronting eviction. They personify larger forces of the private housing market that is an increasingly oppressive force in poor people’s lives.

The relational approach enables us to highlight the social, economic, and political dynamics that make the affordable housing crisis an avoidable problem. The last chapter specifies how we can change public policies to

affect the relationships that have made this crisis such a trauma for the poor. This involves confronting the issue that racism produces segregated housing markets that have sentenced low-income blacks to neighborhoods where housing only declines (except in selected instances when neighborhoods are gentrified and non-poor whites displace poor blacks who must turn to other run-down neighborhoods for shelter). It includes addressing the malign neglect that sustains the failure to address the collapse of the low-wage labor markets. It also points to reversing the hollowing out of the welfare state that once helped the poorest of the poor pay the rent and feed their kids when decent paying jobs could not be had. It suggests that subsidizing poor people's participation in better-regulated private housing markets is a much-neglected collective responsibility we must finally embrace. Desmond's central proposal is a universal housing voucher program that enables poor people to access decent affordable housing. Rather than limit housing vouchers to a select few as we do currently, we need to expand them to all the poor and the near-poor, subsidizing rents based on an ability to pay so no one has to pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing. We need to stop making housing vouchers the social welfare policy equivalent of winning the lottery, where only about one-fifth of the poor get to be saved and the rest are left to endure the horrors of constantly living under the looming effect of eviction, which (when it comes) turns lives upside down for the worst.

The concluding chapter is chock full of statistics that come from Desmond's own surveys of Milwaukee renters and national statistical sources that provide a strong empirical basis for going beyond what he found in his ethnographic research. These statistics peeked out periodically in the main text throughout the book when they helped underscore the pervasiveness of the specific problems his informants were enduring. They often appeared when the narrative needed to highlight the general causes of what was happening in particular instances. They were most on display in the main text of the conclusion. Still, they were mostly in footnotes so as to not detract from the flow of the narrative.

Desmond's study is a deftly presented mixed methods study. He effectively highlights the dynamic relationship between the different types of data:

The multiple methods and different data sources used in this book informed one another in important ways. I began this project with a set of questions to pursue, but the lines of inquiry flexed and waned as my fieldwork progressed. . . . But it was only after analyzing court records and survey data that I was able to see the bigger picture, grasping the magnitude of eviction in poor neighborhoods, identifying disparities, and cataloguing consequences of displacement. My quantitative endeavors also allowed me to assess how representative my observations were. Whenever possible, I subjected my ground-level observations to a kind of statistical check, which determined whether what I was seeing on

the ground was also detectable within a larger population. When an idea was clarified or refined by aggregate comparisons, I would return to my field notes to identify the mechanisms behind the numbers. Working in concert with one another, each method enriched the others. And each kept the others honest (p. 332).

The book demonstrates the critical value of mixed methods research and suggests that the privilege of sitting at separate methodological tables comes at the expense of better political research.

The book also demonstrates the value of case studies. The main criticism of such studies is that they are not generalizable. Desmond again challenges the conventional wisdom:

[I]t is ultimately up to future researchers to determine whether what I found in Milwaukee is true in other places. . . . Still, I wonder sometimes what we are asking when we ask if findings apply elsewhere. Is it that we really believe that something could happen in Pittsburgh but never in Albuquerque, in Memphis but never in Dubuque? The weight of the evidence is in the other direction, especially when it comes to problems as big and as widespread as urban poverty and unaffordable housing. This study took place in the heart of a major American city, not in an isolated Polish village or a brambly Montana town or on the moon. The number of evictions in Milwaukee is equivalent to the number in other cities, and the people summoned to housing court in Milwaukee look a lot like those summoned in Charleston and Brooklyn. Maybe what we are really asking when we ask if a study is generalizable is: Can it really be this bad everywhere? Or maybe we're asking: Do I really have to pay attention to this problem? (pp. 333–34).

Bent Flyvbjerg has suggested that a carefully selected "critical case study" can provide a detailed look at a generalized problem.⁷ Matthew Desmond has provided a critical case study which demonstrates that social scientists from a variety of disciplines can do important research that informs understanding of urgent public problems, especially if they put aside their methodological sectarianism and focus on doing problem-driven, mixed methods research. Sometimes transcending disciplinary boundaries can free us from that tired, old methodological sectarianism. *Evicted* demonstrates that research can be conducted so as to offer the possibility to speak truth to power and make a difference in ongoing political struggle. It also shows that good Political Science research is not something limited to political scientists. It is undisciplined—in more ways than one.

Notes

- 1 LaCour and Green 2014.
- 2 The DA-RT initiative is explained at: <http://www.dartstatement.org/#!blank/c22sl>.
- 3 Wolin 1969.
- 4 Almond 1988.
- 5 Wolfe 1989.
- 6 Shapiro 2005; and Smith 2002.
- 7 Flyvbjerg 2006.

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