

# STREET LESSONS

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Darrell J. Steffensmeier. *The Fence: In the Shadow of Two Worlds*. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986). viii + 295 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$28.50, \$13.50 (paper).

Dermot Walsh. *Heavy Business: Commercial Burglary and Robbery*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986). xii + 188 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.

Property offenses are matters of considerable public concern. Within this category, probably no crimes are more feared than burglary and robbery. The physical violation of one's home or business and the threat or infliction of force on one's person strike anxiety in most. Darrell J. Steffensmeier's case report of a fence and Dermot Walsh's study of burglars and robbers provide considerable information about property offenders and their crimes. This information, however, is not likely to soothe citizen fears. The portraits that Steffensmeier and Walsh draw, however, challenge certain tenets of conventional wisdom and suggest a reconceptualization of crime that may bear some theoretical fruit and carry some practical benefit.

Walsh set out to study robbers, including a sample of burglars for comparative purposes. Relying on 122 interviews in all, he offers a composite picture of both kinds of offenders. Although his study was based on inmates in British prisons, there is the suggestion that the ensuing portrait might hold for other industrial societies as well. However, Walsh does not ignore the limits of qualitative research and presumptuously make that claim.

Steffensmeier reports extended interviews with a single offender, one Sam Goodman (a pseudonym). As he describes in his introductory chapter, he did not set out to write a case study of a fence. Rather, he met Sam when conducting research on female criminality. As the book illustrates, Steffensmeier shifted his attention to Sam's fencing because Sam was a fascinating and gregarious inmate. The result is an exhaustive study of Sam's criminality, with considerable portions of the interviews quoted verbatim.

The two books differ on several counts. Walsh spoke with a large number of inmates, while Steffensmeier relied on a single source. Walsh looks at those who steal, while Steffensmeier focuses on those who market stolen goods. Walsh provides some descriptive statistical profiles, while Steffensmeier relies exclusively

on interview data. The similarities between the two works, however, outweigh their differences. First, both are fascinating reading. Although Walsh does not quote as extensively as Steffensmeier, he too offers the firsthand accounts that give the reader compelling and thought-provoking portraits of the lives of rather ordinary criminals. More substantively, both authors rely on qualitative research techniques, neither pretends more scientific scrutiny, both acknowledge the benefits and limitations of the type of analysis employed, and both strive to paint pictures of criminal offenders. In the process they effectively challenge many of our assumptions about criminality and crime control efforts.

The conventional wisdom that Walsh and Steffensmeier challenge consists of conceptions about both the offender and the efficacy of crime control efforts. Regarding the offender, Walsh takes decided aim at the concept of the career criminal. For his part, Steffensmeier challenges the notion of the solitary offender. Both take issue with the common assumption that criminals are completely different from the rest of society. While their respective conclusions are not compatible in every dimension, together they force the reader to step back and take a hard look at contemporary criminal folklore.

Walsh's challenge to the concept of the career criminal offers a good illustration. Reporting on extended conversations with burglars and robbers, he found that offenders do not distinguish between the two crimes. Nor do they ascribe a specific culture to either of the offenses or the norms guiding their practice. As Walsh (pp. 64–65) explains,

there is no distinct culture of robbery in which some criminals see themselves as specialists in robbery in a "career" sense, preferring to mix only with people with similar commitment, all of whom have a strong identification with Robbery with a capital R. . . . Very few men seemed to be specialists and most appeared to be generalists, "jack of all trades, master of none" in the criminal world.

Shifts from burglary to robbery were largely precipitated by personal crises, situational accidents, and tempting propositions and were heavily conditioned by drug or alcohol abuse. In his assessment of burglars and robbers, Walsh offers some evidence that few are truly rational in the pursuit of crime. To be sure he distinguishes burglars and robbers as planners and opportunists, the former carrying a rational dimension. Equally obvious is his finding that offenders are attracted by money, again suggesting a more calculating perspective. But few inmates evidenced the cost-benefit weighing so central to rational conceptions of crime. Supportive of this are Walsh's observations that burglars harbor very low expectations about the yield of criminality, that the most prepared and calculating offenders are the ones who report the most anxiety, and that in the face of practically limitless knowledge about poten-

tial victims, most thieves move on impulse with little information about potential rewards, surveillance, or detection.

As Walsh challenges the calculating, career definition of burglars and robbers, Steffensmeier attacks the notion of the solitary offender. This is explicitly announced at the outset, when he observes that his study of Sam challenges “the popular but inaccurate conception of crime . . . as an isolated act committed without regard to the perpetrator’s relationship with other people, groups, and organizations” (p. 12). Of course, a study of a fence provides an appropriate vehicle for such an attack, because fences, by definition, must deal with others. To this end, Steffensmeier probably does not challenge as much of the conventional wisdom as he would like. But he does offer a compelling portrait of a middleman who serves as “the layer between the thief and the buyer” (p. 13).

Steffensmeier suggests that criminals are not entirely different from the generally law-abiding members of society. In fact, he seems to take pains to draw out the legitimate dimensions of Sam’s “occupation.” First, Steffensmeier describes Sam’s legitimate business and acknowledges that all the goods he sells are stolen. Second, he indicates that Sam has intentions of “going straight.” More elaborate discussion, however, surfaces in later chapters, where Steffensmeier describes Sam’s conception of thieves (criminal, good, and Joe Citizen), outlines Sam’s pricing policies and general business goals, and details the characteristics of a successful fence (e.g., having “street smarts,” business skill and knowledge, and the ability to con and hustle).

Sam Goodman looks much more like the rational offender than Walsh’s burglars and robbers. In fact, he strikes the reader as a businessman who took the capitalist ethic a bit too seriously. As Steffensmeier (p. 233) observes at the end of the book,

fencing expressed values that were very important to Sam and enabled him to demonstrate his own mettle and moxie. . . . [F]encing tapped into values embedded in American culture: material success, acquisitiveness, competition, and freedom or independence.

Regardless of the degree to which Walsh and Steffensmeier would reject or qualify a rational conception of criminality, both offer little hope for the success of crime control. For one thing, both explicitly argue that burglary, robbery, and fencing are inevitable in industrial society. At the very beginning of *Heavy Business*, Walsh describes the environment that makes burglary and robbery possible. Central to this are the stability, relative prosperity, anonymity, and smaller households characteristic of Western industrial society. Steffensmeier (p. 10) makes much the same point when he notes that “the rise of large-scale fences who buy and sell stolen goods to consumers or to secondary purchasers parallels the industrialization of society.” To be sure, both authors

emphasize that burglary, robbery, and fencing have ancient origins. But they do take pains to point out that their contemporary forms and problems are, to a large extent, inevitable in contemporary society.

Relatedly, both Walsh and Steffensmeier argue that popular crime control efforts (e.g., more police and punishment) are not likely to have much effect. Walsh (p. 3) observes that "more police, even if they were to be forthcoming, could not strike at the root of the matter; that is, the protective anonymity of an industrial society which permits burglars to function." Similarly, he (p. 161) does not hold out much hope for a reduction in robbery, outlining "at least seven reasons why the crime might be expected to increase," including the sheer amount of money available, the moral acceptability of taking money not viewed as "personally owned," the reduced inclination of bystanders to interfere with the crime, the degree to which popular culture idolizes armed robbery, and the predictable displacement from burglary to robbery.

Steffensmeier's pessimism is similar although less pronounced. Although he does not accept Sam's rationalization that he is no different from ordinary, legitimate businessmen, he does acknowledge that Sam's criminal activity is indeed tolerated if not supported by at least a part of the law-abiding community. In this sense, Sam operates as part of a system that includes "prominent local representatives of the police, the judiciary, and other law enforcement agencies" (p. 156), not to mention the law-abiding public that shop at Sam's store. Steffensmeier (*ibid.*) concludes that "any real attempt at vigorous law enforcement against specific individuals or specific kinds of criminal enterprise would have multiple negative effects for the authorities as well."

More disturbing, perhaps, for crime-conscious citizens is Walsh's suggestion that some of the penalties society demands have a salutary effect on crime. To be sure, this is a variant of the "prison teaches criminals new tricks" argument, but it is compelling. As Walsh describes the sporadic and rather unpredictable life of a burglar, he notes that many reported a need for "time out" periods to recover from the exhilaration and anxiety that stealing engenders. Prisons provide a perfect place for such interruption, and may not, Walsh concludes, constitute any real or serious punishment.

As Walsh and Steffensmeier challenge some of the conventional thinking about crime and its control, their analyses offer theoretical, practical, and even moral implications worth noting. In this sense, both authors demonstrate the heuristic merit of the qualitative research they conducted.

Theoretically, it is obvious from both studies that our conceptions of crime must be broadened. Although this is by no means a novel point, both authors demonstrate quite effectively that crime must be considered and evaluated as part and parcel of human be-

havior rather than a separate and distinctive entity. As Walsh describes the contemporary burglars and robbers who evoke an earlier era and as Steffensmeier details the degree to which Sam's criminality parallels and involves the law-abiding sector of society, it is obvious that there is a fine line distinguishing the offender from the rest of society. To be sure, neither author suggests that we close our eyes to crime because some crime types bear some semblance to more conformist behavior. But they do suggest that we look at parallels. For example, Walsh argues that it is very difficult for a burglar or robber to change careers, even if those careers are not focused on a single crime. Steffensmeier makes the same point when he details Sam's history with crime. Observing that few law-abiding citizens make dramatic career changes, Walsh (p. 144) suggests that we try to "find out under what circumstances people would change jobs in ordinary life, and how and when satisfactory changes are made." Then, he suggests, we may have a basis for directing change in the lives of common criminals.

Related to conceptions of criminality is the emphasis on context in the work of both Walsh and Steffensmeier. As indicated previously, both authors put particular emphasis on the degree to which contemporary theft is related to modern, industrial society. This contextual focus is different from more simplistic environmental approaches that suggest that specific conditions such as poverty are responsible for crime. In fact, Walsh takes issue with this somewhat when he notes that few offenders stole in proportion to the number of their dependents, admittedly a crude test but a comment nonetheless. Rather, both authors suggest that we take a more global approach and examine the degree to which crime types and volume reflect changes in the social and economic character of a culture. The immediate theoretical pertinence of this is not as obvious as the aforementioned rejoinder to consider criminal behavior as behavior generally, but it is possibly even more consequential.

The practical implications of both studies have been noted. In summary, neither holds out much hope for typical crime control. Walsh argues that increased police activity is not likely to have any pronounced effect on burglary and robbery, that some criminal punishment may actually facilitate and not deter crime, and that life or career behavior patterns are extraordinarily difficult to change. Steffensmeier makes much the same point in his case study. Although he notes at the beginning that Sam expressed a desire to be "legit," he doubts that such is possible. Steffensmeier's pessimism is perhaps more deeply rooted than Walsh's. As he details Sam's rationalizations, notes the parallels between Sam's criminality and legitimate businesses, and acknowledges the support that some law enforcers and law-abiding citizens give to Sam, he reminds us that efforts to single out and punish isolated offenders are not likely to have any impact on crime.

In many ways, this last point raises the moral implications of both studies. While neither Walsh nor Steffensmeier pretend to be moralists, much less moral philosophers, both speak to related issues. Steffensmeier takes pains to sort through Sam's rationalizations and notes the degree to which Sam's arguments fall apart. Walsh, too, observes ironically that what burglars say they want (freedom, independence, and self-reliance) is obviously missing from their lives. Both authors leave the reader with the conclusion that neither honesty nor success is possible in criminality.

Walsh and Steffensmeier, however, do not leave the moral implications at the individual level. Amidst evidence that simple exhortations to change or take the moral high road are not likely to have much effect on criminals, both suggest that the general law-abiding citizens have some responsibility for crime. At the most obvious level, Steffensmeier seems to hold those who tolerate or benefit from Sam's fencing at least partially responsible for the failure of crime control efforts. At a more general level, Walsh suggests that industrial society has left a good number of people behind. Efforts to deal with those who are obviously left out of the mainstream of industrial society and to compensate for some of the dysfunctional characteristics of contemporary life (e.g., anonymity and materialism) perhaps constitute the more substantial moral challenge.

The theoretical, practical, and moral rejoinders derived from both Walsh's and Steffensmeier's books speak to the contributions that each has made not only to the study of crime but also to public discourse and policy making.

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