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### Classics in Human Geography Revisited: Ley, D. 1974: The black inner city as frontier outpost: images and behavior of a Philadelphia neighborhood

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## Classics in human geography revisited

**Ley, D.** 1974: *The black inner city as frontier outpost: images and behavior of a Philadelphia neighborhood*. Washington, DC Association of American Geographers

### Commentary 2

I first read David Ley's *The black inner city as frontier outpost* in 1974, when I was asked to review it for the AAG Annals (Palm, 1975). At the time, urban social geography was a relatively new field and was heavily influenced by 'spatial science'. Empirical studies were aimed at such intellectually limited topics as factorial ecologies of various cities, descriptions of the emerging spatial configurations of segregated communities using the simplifying assumptions of simulation models, and studies identifying distance or directional 'biases' in intra-urban migration. Non-urban or even anti-urban biases of traditional cultural geography did not encourage the systematic study of cities by this cadre of geographers (Pierce Lewis's outstanding monograph on New Orleans (1976) was a notable exception). We needed a geography that combined the insights of a field account of a real and complex place with the analytical and theoretical advances of the urban geography of this day. Ley's book fit this bill.

In my 1975 review, I stated that: 'some recent work in urban social geography has been faulted for its emphasis on highly aggregated statistics and also for its failure to achieve "explanation", in the sense of providing empathy or understanding of the community or social problem described. David Ley's monograph cannot be so faulted; it stands with *Leibow's Tally's corner* (1967) as exemplar of how research in community studies must be undertaken if geography and other social sciences are to come to grips with the complexities of urban social areas'. When I described it as 'a study which combines the rigor of positivist science with the insights of experiential exposition', I was paying it the highest possible compliment I could at the time.

In a study centered on a black neighbourhood in Philadelphia, Ley examined the dilemma of the outsider trying to understand the complexities of a new territory: the problem of the geographer as 'outsider' (or explorer), the problem of identifying and examining process when what one observes is a series of pattern-states, the biases brought to any observation by the experiences and viewpoints of the observer, and the ways such biases filter and distort information, as well as more straightforward scientific problems of sampling (do the observations made by the researcher reflect the complex reality of that which is observed?) and method (do the measurement instruments delve at what the researcher really wants to learn about?).

Ley used several approaches to gather his data and observations. He studied the community as a 'participant observer': by living in the community, participating in community association activities, and by becoming acquainted with community residents. He also conducted a formal survey of 116 residents through the local Community Association. These survey data were analyzed statistically (for example, using semantic differential tests to determine stress profiles, and using factor analysis to derive components of a 'stress index'). Further, he added a 'model' using the analogy of Caesar's Gallic Wars to describe the interaction of a system to a hostile environment: a frontier outpost.

There are two reasons why this work has remained a classic. The first is the subject-matter. It

would be difficult to argue that the problems identified in Ley's book have been solved - that is, the racism, segregation, mutual suspicion which sometimes erupts into violence, and the massive 'filtering and coding of information' (p. 253) which afflict race relations in the contemporary American city. For example, Ley's finding that 'fear of gangs is a major deterrent upon adolescent movement, including the journey to school' is of no less true today than it was in the early 1970s. The need for a deeper understanding of the nature of residential communities within American cities remains high on the agenda of scholarship as well as public policy.

Secondly, it remains a classic because the methodological lessons of this study remain current. Although Ley does not report that the items used in his questionnaire were developed iteratively through the use of unstructured interviews, as would be recommended if this survey were to be done in the 1990s (Pratt, 1996; Smith and Bond, 1994; Matsumoto, 1996), he did supplement the survey findings with accounts of the complexities of actual decision-making, providing the reader with a rich and complex view of the nature of this place. By reporting the response of community members to several issues facing the community, 'the true complexity of life in the inner city is revealed, the contradictory forces and pressures prompting first in this direction and then in the other, the power of suggestion and innuendo, and most distressing and most human, the role of personality' (p. 180). Furthermore, his observation that 'social scientists, in their own search for order in chaos, [may impose] a structure upon their own conceptual environments, and then unwittingly and inaccurately project that structure' (p. 257) remains an important cautionary note.

A final word of praise: the empirical study on which this monograph was based was submitted as a PhD dissertation at Penn State in 1972 and published in revised form as an AAG monograph in 1974. Few others in our generation or the next will merit the distinction of having our first major work honored as a 'classic' in human geography.

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