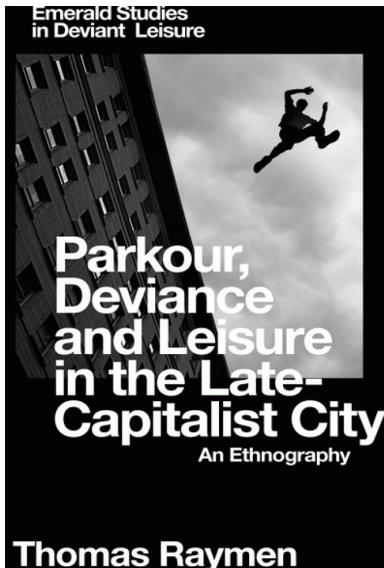


Book Review

Parkour as Hyper-conformity to Consumerism in Times of Austerity and Insecurity

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Book Review of *Parkour, Deviance and Leisure in the Late-capitalist city: An Ethnography* by Thomas Raymen; Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019; ISBN 978-1-78743-812-5



Traceurs and freerunners are often represented – by academics, media, or popular culture – as the very embodiment and symbol of transgression, politicized resistance, and urban activism; and indeed, in its non-commodified sense, parkour is ‘a spatial practice that is antithetical to the purposeful hyper-regulation of our contemporary urban centers of consumption’ (p. 5) and as such it is often marginalized and policed. However, if one looks closer, as Thomas Raymen did in this excellent *ultra-realist* (Hall and Winlow 2018) ethnography of Newcastle’s parkour scene grounded in two years of intensive field research, matters become more ambiguous. Parkour has not been co-opted or incorporated, as Raymen suggest, instead the real issue is one of *precorporation*, or else – of consumer capitalism that privileges the cultivation of unique consumer identities and (leisure) experiences vis-à-vis the ‘mainstream’ and

thus effectively precorporates parkour (and similar practices) which are always-already susceptible to marketization. Not to mention that faced with austerity, insecurity and anxiety-inducing zero-hour contracts, the traceurs themselves welcome parkour’s commodification. Hence, as Raymen convincingly argues, rather than with resistance, or subjects interested in unsettling the status quo, we are dealing with precisely the opposite – hyper-conformity to the cultural and ideological values of consumerism, and with subjects desiring to be part of the status quo; traceurs who are trying to establish a living for themselves and a source of income in times of economic precarity, in the area of North East England – a textbook example of deindustrialization marked by economic decline, social decay, crime, homelessness and by a simultaneous rise of post-



industrial economy based on debt, consumption and leisure, with its parallel drive towards beautification and rebranding of the city of Newcastle as the hub of culture and creativity. As Raymen writes,

...many of the traceurs were also low-level entrepreneurs with varying levels of success... they attempted to start their own parkour coaching companies, clothing lines and fee-paying gyms. They used their parkour skills to try and get work in advertising commercials or as stunt athletes... Parkour's transgression of the hyper-regulated city's spatial norms afforded its practice a veneer of authentic urban rebellion and transgression, which the traceurs could employ to market their associated entrepreneurial endeavors... Nothing sells better in hyper-regulated cities than an alleged critique of hyper-regulated cities; and traceurs and freerunners all over the world, including those in my sample, have actively solicited parkour's drift into the mainstream (p. 6).

A thorough analysis of this re-packing of 'resistance' into a profitable commodity is at the core of this ethnography, ultimately showing that what may at first appear as the paradox of parkour – the question of why parkour is excluded from urban space despite its hyper-conformity to the central values of consumer capitalism, and its commodification – is in the end not a paradox at all, but precisely the productive and functional tension which is *the* essential component of consumer capitalism's ideological apparatus, or else, a 'functional and deliberate outcome of capitalist ideology, which is predicated upon a series of engineered contradictions' (p. 11).

The first chapter, *The 'Paradox' of Parkour*, not only elaborates the aforementioned core argument of the book, but also wonderfully contextualizes the study through a brief history of the economic and cultural development of the research site, the city of Newcastle upon Tyne.

The second chapter, *Moving with the Times: Parkour, Leisure and Social Change*, offers not only a broad perspective on the transformation of leisure and identity in late-capitalism, but also a much needed critique of leisure as the opposite of work associated with freedom, enjoyment, and autonomy – offering instead a *deviant leisure perspective* that points to the darker problems of late-capitalist consumerist societies and their invocation of leisure: from the associated interpersonal, environmental and socially corrosive harms, anxiety, and depression, to the transformation of both work and leisure, where work becomes more like leisure and leisure more like work. This chapter ties ethnographic material brilliantly together with theory, showing – through parkour – the effects of anxious competitive individualism of post-Fordist consumerism, the obsessions with distinction, differentiation, and unique individualism grounded in the 'post-modernist revulsion of any notion of homogenous collective' (p. 32) which have led to the current social fragmentation and widespread *drive-to-distinction* common also among the traceurs. The chapter also nicely shows how the late-capitalist ideology at large, and of wellness and therapeutic culture in particular, is smoothly aligned with parkour,

Parkour, something which is allegedly about freedom from the pressures and strains of daily life under advanced capitalism, quickly becomes re-packaged and reworked as a life tool or skill that can be used to one's advantage in everyday life. It is akin to the employability skills developed at universities and colleges, something which can be used instrumentally as a means to produce happier and more productive workers... Parkour reflects and conforms to many of the underlying cultural values of consumer capitalism. It is an identity-oriented prosumer leisure, which is actively solicited as a practice around which one can organize their entire life and identity in the absence of more stable collective identities of modernity. It adheres to the competitive individualism of late-capitalism, with its distinct cultural practice offering a means of distinction from homogenous mass of consumers; an example of peculiar kind of egoism that is specific to contemporary consumer capitalism... parkour's psychocorporeal 'well-being' offers a prime example of how a 'progressive' socio-cultural liberalism organized around freedom of expression and self-discovery works perfectly with the economic liberalism of the right, which seeks to undermine any sense of stability and security through flexibilization of labour (p. 39 - 41).

The third chapter, *Ultra-realism, Parkour and Capitalist Ideology*, outlines the theoretical perspective of ultra-realism underpinning the book. In particular, it focuses on its emphasis on transcendental materialism and its understanding of subjectivity rooted in Lacanian psychoanalysis and developed by Slavoj Žižek and Adrian Johnston, which 'incorporates an appreciation of unconscious drives and desires and how they operate within the present socio-economic context of advanced capitalism (p. 43), and focuses our attention on the ways in which ideology operates in relation to the complexity of human subjectivity – a matter that other perspectives have neglected. Furthermore, this chapter develops the argument about *precorporation*, mentioned earlier, in greater detail, showing nicely that

...what is also lost on those who find resistance everywhere is that whilst soliciting the ideological trap of consumer capitalism, forms of micro-cultural practices of spatial 'resistance' such as parkour cannot perform the crucial task of transcending what Bourdieu referred to as *doxa*. ...Practices such as parkour cannot transcend this *doxa* precisely because their motivations for participating in lifestyle sports are pre-emptively rooted in consumer capitalism's own *doxa*, relying upon its own logic of individualized and fragmented lifestyle identities as the basis to differentiate the self. The expression of discontent with the ambiguous 'status quo' through individual identity and cultural politics of music, style, fashion and lifestyle fads is merely a form of interpassive resistance that preserves the status quo they claim to despise (p. 59).

This chapter, and for that matter the whole book, reveals in practical terms what can be gained through such an ultra-realist perspective – e.g. an effective critique of the dated notion of ‘moral panic’.

Chapters four to seven – *Movers and Shakers*, *Zombie Cities*, *The Parkour City*, *‘Sorry Lads (But I’ve Got to Move You On)’* – are of a more ethnographic character, while they at the same time retain the same theoretical sharpness. They offer an insight into the traceur’s lived experiences of the post-crash consumer capitalism, precariousness, or prosumption, as they transition into adulthood. But they also deal with the spatial realms of parkour’s practice, its exclusion and control in the context of the neoliberal transformation of post-industrial cities such as Newcastle into ‘creative cities’ marked by the urban ambience of *living-death*. Raymen nicely shows how

late-capitalism created the conditions in which it must not only hyper-regulate the city, but also continue to stoke desire for ‘cool’ and alternative cultural identities and practices such as parkour. The energy and desire for these practices and their associated experiential identities is then harnessed and redirected into economically productive contexts of creativity and ‘life’ that is injected into the social dead space of the zombie city (p. 99).

But these chapters also explore how the traceurs engage with the city in their spatial practice, while also looking at the role of the private security guards policing and controlling this practice, and, by extension, at the fragmentation and privatization of the urban space which makes it increasingly difficult to establish what is a legitimate practice in urban space and what not. Or as Raymen puts it,

notions of justice, fairness, love or harm do not form the basis of spatial legitimacy. Rather, spatial legitimacy is determined more by political economy; the profit motive and what is best for the current or future accumulation of capital... Capital is blind, amorally interested only in its own reproduction and perfectly willing to inflict harm upon individuals, groups or the environment in order to ensure its growth (p. 143).

While some would possibly argue that the book tends to privilege certain elements over others, or even ruthlessly closes off competing perspectives, thus compromising nuance, I would argue that this is not its failure but precisely its strength; this is exactly what is needed to offer an *effective corrective* to both the academic and popular perceptions of parkour on one hand, and a *powerful critique of contemporary late-capitalist society* that goes far beyond the subject matter of parkour, on the other. The argument is well-crafted and convincing, the ethnography woven smoothly together with theory, while always keeping in mind the bigger picture, thus becoming far more than a mere ethnography of parkour. The book can be recommended as essential reading to scholars, students, and anyone interested in criminology, sociology and anthropology and for that matter contemporary consumer society – it makes for a good and important read. The arguments cannot be made often enough in the current cultural, economic and political moment;

abandoning left-liberalism's fantasy world of organic resistance and acknowledging, with honesty, the post-political landscape of contemporary cities constitutes an important first step towards the imagination and renewal of a properly social civic life, and, if we are lucky, the return of real politics (p. 19).

Hall, S. & Winlow, S. 2018. Ultra-Realism, In W. S. Dekeseredy & M. Dragiewicz (Eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Critical Criminology*, London: Routledge, 43-56.