

Hunt, J. C. (2010). *Seven Shots: An NYPD Raid on a Terrorist Cell and Its Aftermath*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 344 pp., \$29.00.

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by Peter Moskos

In 1997, the New York City Police Department foiled a plot to bomb the subway. Fourteen years later, the lessons of police tactics and institutional culture remain as vital as ever. Jennifer Hunt, a professor at Montclair State University in New Jersey, succeeds at many levels in her outstanding new ethnography, *Seven Shots: An NYPD Raid on a Terrorist Cell and Its Aftermath*. Firmly rooted in a Goffmanesque tradition of qualitative methods and symbolic interaction, Hunt has amassed an astounding base of knowledge about NYPD culture through years of interviews and participant-observation research. The honesty in which police officers trust and open up to Hunt is especially impressive, given that Hunt has never worked as a police officer. The result is groundbreaking in academic research, revealing deep levels of understanding of police at the human, institutional, and cultural levels. The focus is on individual police officers in specialized units in a large bureaucracy, in this case the New York City Police Department (NYPD).

The core of Hunt's success comes through her thorough methodology. *Seven Shots* is a modern ethnography in that the presentation of data forgoes boilerplate academic form and is pleasantly lacking in sociobabble (further disproving the notion that academic work must be couched in verbose, dry, and soporific terms). About the only concession Hunt makes to more traditional academic form is the inclusion of endnotes, an informative appendix on methodology, and an introduction and conclusion that flow naturally from the narrative, providing theoretical insights rooted in police literature. Since Hunt does not slow down in the body of her book to signpost sociological lessons and applications, some will undoubtedly criticize her approach as unworthy of "serious" academic literature. But academics who are unwilling (or unable) to grasp the sociological implications so clearly presented within the book—and even more explicitly presented in the front and back matter—might do better to reconsider their own graduate school education. Lest some forget, Jonathan Rubinstein's classic *City Police* is basically a journalistic account. Part of the goal of ethnography is to develop an intersubjective construction of the world, filtered through the author, that permits the reader to understand the backstage world of the subjects. *Seven Shots* is extraordinarily successful in this account. Police officers will recognize the world she describes as their own. Others will begin to understand the almost mythic significance of NYPD's headquarters, One Police Plaza.

In style, *Seven Shots* is an ethnography that sustains the brisk pace of a thrilling police procedural. It is so engaging, in fact, that at times I felt an adrenaline rush as if I were back on the streets of Baltimore (where I briefly worked as a police officer). At alternate moments—and pardon the cliché—I laughed and cried (police officers' perspectives of their loss ' on September 11, 2001, are particularly moving). Such well-written prose would be noteworthy in any book, but to find it in the sociology section of a prestigious academic press is an event so rare that it makes me want to cry for altogether different reasons. It bodes well for my future that the best university presses are willing to experiment by publishing nontraditional sorts of ethnography. But to call Hunt's book enjoyable is by no means some sort of backhanded compliment. She combines general accessibility to a wider reading audience while building her narrative on a deep foundation of academic knowledge. As a classroom book, *Seven Shots* would be equally worthwhile to introductory-level undergraduate as well as graduate-level methods or policing classes.

*Seven Shots* describes how the potential suicide bombing in 1997 was foiled not by some high-tech CSI-style investigation but rather, as is far more typical, a fortuitous combination of police action, skill, and luck. In this case, the luck was a roommate who was not in on the fully operational plot by two Palestinian terrorists who were intent on killing people on the New York City subway, even before the official “war on terror” had begun. The night before the attack, the roommate, who did not speak English, snuck out of the apartment on the pretense of buying cigarettes. Eventually he was able to find officers who were willing to take his one-word warning of “bomba” seriously. After a translator was found, a six-man emergency service team—some of whom threatened to kill the informant if his information was bogus—raided the apartment, fired the eponymous number of shots, and stopped the terrorists as they moved to detonate their explosives. While the wounded were being loaded into ambulances, a Bomb Squad robot was sent in to defuse the explosives. But the robot failed, and police officers had to dismantle the bombs by hand.

This movie-worthy plot is told in the first 85 pages of *Seven Shots*. The heart of Hunt’s book focuses on the aftermath of the raid, examining how the officers involved in the raid and the dismantling of the bombs became immersed in departmental politics at the highest and lowest levels that undermined their extraordinary victory and resulted in alienation from a job they truly loved. We learn how and why this story went from front page to back burner: beginning when the officers, fearing for the safety of their families, expressed no desire to assist a thin-skinned and vindictive mayor who wanted to turn the event into a PR coup to make his administration look good.

My main criticism, which is perhaps a bit unfair, concerns not what Hunt has written but with what I wish she had discussed in greater detail: the negative security implications of “get tough” immigration policies, how improved police/community relations are necessary to help prevent future terrorist attacks, and what happened to the original informant. (The reader can only hope this brave man of unknown immigration status was not eventually deported in some “homeland security” bureaucratic juggernaut.) But these complaints, all things considered, are minor.

Hunt’s writing is particularly noteworthy in her dealings with a problem common to chroniclers of large-scale organizations: how to write about details and rivalries that are essential to institutional and academic understanding but are, at their core, petty and potentially soporific on the written page. A lesser writer might eliminate these details or fall back on a stolid academic structure. But Hunt manages to maintain an objective tone throughout *Seven Shots* while never losing this reader’s interest. At times Hunt seems almost to apologize when her data conflict or leave gaps. Sometimes she offers several perspectives in an attempt to bridge rumor and narrative truth. But as in Kurosawa’s classic film *Roshomon*, such moments are inevitable when single events are related through multiple perspectives. It is this very depth and honesty of Hunt’s data that is refreshing and also essential in quality qualitative sociological research.

*Seven Shots* superbly connects the gap between the Ivory Tower and the street. It brings to mind the response of sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh when asked, “What does America want of sociology?” He warned: “Frankly, I don’t think America cares about sociology. And, unless we change our conventions, our writing, and our relationship to the public(s), I’m not sure they should.” Knowingly or not, Hunt heeds Venkatesh’s advice, and in doing so she demonstrates how sociology in general and ethnography in particular can and should reclaim their rightful place at the forefront of public awareness, policy decisions, and intellectual discussion.