

Book Review: Badfellas: crime, tradition and new masculinities

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Postprint / Postprint

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Toth, S. A. (2006). Book Review: Badfellas: crime, tradition and new masculinities. [Review of the book *Badfellas: crime, tradition and new masculinities*, by S. Winlow]. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(1), 125-126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136754940600900109>

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Culture . . . is tantamount to education and morality, a morality that is nourished by exhortation, that is to say, by rhetoric, with its storehouse of authorities and exempla. Therefore a transition like that we are considering from one cultural style and tradition to another also involves a change in the forms of morality and, reciprocally, in the way of dealing with the authorities and examples. (p. 45)

Nevertheless, there is something I would criticize about this book, which is a certain 'narrowness' of approach, which 'narrowness', in the case of a work quite ambitiously titled *Humanism and Secularization*, becomes particularly annoying. I will give only one example out of several possible. Within the context (in Chapter 3) delineated by his discussing of Braccioolini's *De avaritia*, San Bernardino's sermons, Leon Battista Alberti's *Libri degli famiglia* and Bruni's translation of pseudo-Aristotle's *Economics*, Fubini does not find it at all necessary to allude (to say the least) to a possible 'conversation' with what Max Weber says in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. No doubt, Fubini's book would have benefited immensely from placing his own analysis within a broader comparative context, one discussing how some economic issues (usury, money, wealth, and so on) were dealt with theologically *before* and *after* the Reformation. Not to mention that such a discussion would be crucial to elucidating the book's topic: secularization.

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Simon Winlow, *Badfellas: Crime, Tradition and New Masculinities*. Oxford: Berg, 2001. 192 pp. ISBN 1-85973-414-6 (pbk), \$23.00

In this book, Simon Winlow provides a sociologically informed discussion of masculinity, violence and crime in and around the working-class city of Sunderland in northeast England. This particular locale is central to the study as the author was originally from the area and therefore subject to the same forces of socialization that are the focus of his work (p. 5). Given his local knowledge and perspective, Winlow enters the *demi monde*, interviewing disenfranchised and disaffected men in an effort to assess how they have adapted to a post-industrial milieu where masculine codes of behaviour are in a state of flux.

Winlow begins by situating masculinity in its sociohistorical context, placing it within the framework of an industrial economy. Thus we see how men in the shipbuilding and mining industries constructed their identities in relation to their manual labour. Not surprisingly, violence was also a crucial part of this self-identity, as men brawled to distinguish themselves from their fellow proletarians both on the shop floor and on



the streets of Sunderland. With industry on the decline in the post-war period – and in a state of freefall during the Thatcher years – the traditional class-bound process of male acculturation gave way to something far different.

Through an extensive set of interviews we meet a number of men including ‘Michael’, a criminal who fashioned his own identity in relation to his new economic reality. In this sense, he followed an unremarkable career trajectory in which he lost his position as an apprentice mechanic and after a stint on benefits, reinvented himself as a neighborhood enforcer, putting his penchant for violence in the service of local criminals. Capitalizing on his market value, Michael eventually diversified his criminal interests, expanding into car theft, forgery and counterfeiting, eventually ploughing his misbegotten profits into legitimate businesses. In essence, he typifies the small-time ‘criminal entrepreneur’ who spends his life straddling the boundary between legal and illegal activities.

Winlow also examines how many men have made violence (or the threat thereof) into a legitimate commodity through becoming nightclub doormen, or bouncers. The author worked briefly as a bouncer to facilitate his research, and in a detailed ethnography we discover a cast of characters that thrive on the heightened physicality of their job. Indeed, Winlow explores the ways in which bodybuilding provides a figurative and literal sense of empowerment for these men. Unlike Michael, whose power was derived from a simple willingness to inflict violence upon others, the bouncers’ sense of masculinity and identity is tied to their ability to deter or defuse violence by their sheer presence in the clubs where they are charged with maintaining order.

Clearly, the author’s covert research is innovative in that it provides a sense of verisimilitude and immediacy which is lacking in most treatments of crime and violence. What is also apparent is that these individuals have agency. The thugs and bouncers of this study have fashioned viable economic lives by transforming violence into a marketable asset.

However, what is absent from this picture of individual adaptive capitalism is a sustained focus upon popular culture, particularly film and television. These men are not just shaped by their immediate economic and geographic circumstances, but are awash in images of gangsters and violence that circulate globally. Yet aside from allusions to *Goodfellas* and *The Godfather*, there is no systematic examination of how such films might shape masculinity. This complaint aside, Winlow provides a fascinating glimpse into this subterranean world and his book should be of interest to anyone interested in the sociology of masculinity, violence and crime.

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