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Introduction

In their fifth studio album, *Resurrection* (1996), the Houston-based hip hop collective Geto Boys closes with dialogue from Larry Hoover—the founder of one of the most notorious street gangs in Chicago, the Gangster Disciples. Simply titled “A Visit with Larry Hoover,” the track begins with Hoover’s voice rising above the static of the prepaid penitentiary phone call.

Hoover takes a deep dive into what he views as the commodification of the prison industry. “Big companies own prisons now,” he complains. “They all got stock in prisons. Mastercard, Smith Barney. These honkeys so cold out this way.”¹ For Hoover, the only hope for disrupting and dismantling this novel form of socioeconomically anchored racial oppression is to mobilize the youth. “They ain’t worried about me,” he says confidently. “They got me.” He continues, “But they are worried about the kids. Because the youth is more feisty now than I was.”

While his emphasis on molding the younger generation is not so surprising, what is somewhat unexpected is the method by which Hoover thinks these “feisty” kids should go about changing

1. See “A Visit with Larry Hoover” (00:13).

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not only the American carceral system, but also, more importantly, the entire social structure that supports it. What method is this?

As a career gangster, Hoover is no stranger to violence. However, when laying out his vision of the future, he warns against relying exclusively on the conventional modes of violence that fueled his criminal activity and helped him grow wealthy and respected in inner city Chicago. Instead, he ends the call by advocating for the *political* education of *America's marginalized youth* and suggests that the powers-that-be fear this form of life far more than the violent persona that made his organization such a force in the criminal underworld.

"You know it's political," Hoover begins again. "But see the mayor is scared of me. . . . See, I'm telling these young boys to put them guns down and pick up that ballot, you know?"

He continues:

You know, you can kill as many niggas as you want as long as you don't go to the polls. But if you go to the polls, they gon' snatch you off the streets, you know? If we don't do nothin' about this stuff in a minute, shit, we at the point of no return.²

It might come to a surprise that a person with such an extensive history of violence would denounce it as a means of achieving a desired political goal. It may strike some as even more surprising that Hoover, a high school dropout and career criminal in the illegitimate economy, would push for a cooperative political strategy, like electoral politics, over impulsive coercive action.

Is this a contradiction? How can a "street" guy like Hoover reconcile a lifetime of socially deviant behavior with a mainstream political plan of action?

Part of why one might view this move by Hoover as paradoxical is because the street phenomenon is saturated³ with a countless

2. See "A Visit with Larry Hoover" (1:16).

3. See "A Saturated Phenomenon" (Marion, 2007).

number of pejorative conditions. Many people associate the word “street” with immorality, dysfunction, and political indecency, inspired by blockbuster films like *The Godfather* (1972) and *Paid in Full* (2002) and powerful TV dramas like *The Wire* (2002). All these programs depict street life primarily as a domain defined by illegitimate economic activity—the realm of drug markets, gambling rings, extortion, and murder. Though this portrayal does capture much of what Hoover’s life was about up until (and maybe even after) his Geto Boys interview, it fails to provide insight into the important sense in which his call for *political* action qualifies as street activity just as much as sellin’ dope or kickin’ doors.

If we consider the history of social movements, it becomes quite clear that there’s other connotative elements to “street” life that are rarely (if ever) depicted in popular culture or acknowledged in empirical studies. For example, in what sense do organizations like the Moorish Science Temple (MST), Nation of Islam (NOI), and the Black Panther Party of Self Defense count as “street?” All of these organizations called for the kind of political action Hoover defends, but there’s yet to be a philosophical framework developed that connects the criminal elements of the street mentality to its political features. In other words, we don’t have a way of reconciling the ways in which Hoover’s criminal persona and political personality can both play a role in his being “street smart.” These are not distinct psychological features. They are two sides of the same coin.

The problem begins at the level of language. With this in mind, the aim of Chapter 1 is to provide a better understanding of the *political* nature that is inherent in the term “street.” Here I want to show how, when interpreted as a *cultural* phenomenon, the street realm should be understood as any kind of marginal discourse (communication) that emerges when people feel silenced by a dominant social structure. As a social arrangement, the street domain functions as an inherently *political* form of life. I demonstrate the political nature of the streets by highlighting the internal strife within the Black Lives Matter movement. When

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it comes to understanding the political reality of the streets, the Black Lives Matter case is instructive, given that the mainstream media presented this movement (and its leaders) as a “grassroots” campaign, even though, almost from the very beginning, there were countless critics “on the ground” who viewed it as political theatre driven by elements of the status quo.

The story of the Black Lives Matter movement explains why the concept of the street is relevant for political contexts. It demonstrates how the mainstream media can showcase people and movements as representing the most marginal boundaries of a social arrangement (the street domain)—while being firmly anchored in repressive institutions of power.

Chapter 2 builds on this political interpretation of the street by presenting insights into a recent (and ongoing) social movement in the United States. The American Descendants of Slavery (ADoS) movement is a grassroots struggle that emerged in the early 2010s dedicated to highlighting the specific needs and concerns of Black-presenting people who are descendants of chattel slavery and other oppressive systems *in* the U.S. (e.g., Jim Crow, redlining, etc.). The main thesis of this chapter is what I call the *kinship network view*. This framework highlights the ways in which the *cultural diversity* of a social group (e.g., “Black people in America”) can be obscured by outsiders with the power to impose labels (scripts) onto the collection of people in question. The ADoS case provides insight into the value of an “insider’s perspective” for understanding diverse human collectives that are tied together by imposed structural designations. It’s also a prime example of why “street discourse” is an important element for understanding the ever-evolving cultural dynamics of political actors in a social arrangement.

Though street discourse is a group-level phenomenon, it is *individual people* who are responsible for breathing life into this form of social engagement. This aspect of the streets requires me to introduce (and explain) a feature of the human condition that I refer to as the *street disposition*, the subject of Chapter 3. The street

disposition is a person's psychological and spiritual capacity to resist an unjust social arrangement. Manifestations of street cultures don't just pop up out of thin air. Neither does social change. Throughout history, courageous individuals are "called" to step out on faith and challenge authority. Philosopher Jacques Derrida calls this practice freeplay.

In my reading, Derrida acknowledges two interpretations of freeplay—what I refer to in this book as *freeplay*₁ and *freeplay*₂. A person with a healthy street disposition always strives for freeplay₂. There are two prerequisites for practicing freeplay₂. The person has to be alienated *and* marginalized. Most importantly, they must have the *desire* to draw their critical strategies *directly from* other marginal actors rather than any resources the status quo makes available. Freeplay₂ helps ensure that a person develops a form of street knowledge that is *imaginative* and *creative*.

The rest of the book is focused on applications of these foundational philosophical concepts introduced in the first three chapters (e.g., *street discourse*, *kinship networks*, and the *street disposition*). Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 connect these ideas to popular concepts in social theory and real-world political organizing through the lens of what is often referred to as the Black Liberation struggle in America.

For example, in Chapter 4, I argue that the concept of the street disposition is vital for understanding what social theorists, activists, and organizers call *consciousness raising*.

People are often unaware of the injustices that structure their everyday lives. A single person exercising their street disposition can help others overcome what Marxists call *false consciousness*.

On many occasions, artists (e.g., poets, musicians, etc.) are the people who perform this consciousness raising role, especially in social movements. This is why much of Chapter 4 is an exploration of the intimate relationship that exists between the street disposition and artistic creativity.

Chapter 5 digs deeper into the value street knowledge has for disrupting and subverting injustice in the political sphere. The

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main argument of this chapter is that, *if* a person has sufficient street knowledge about a problem space, *violence* is *never* necessary for resistance. This thesis is in direct conflict with Frantz Fanon's point that "decolonization is always a violent event." Presumably, Fanon and his followers extend this doctrine to all forms of political unfairness. To defend my position, I highlight insights from experienced leaders of the American Civil Rights movement and show the effective nature a nonviolent direct action strategy in the face of a cruel (and unbelievably violent) Jim Crow social order. For me, nonviolent direct action is a perfect example how marginal actors can undermine a social order by developing creative "tools" of resistance that are *unimaginable* to the repressive status quo.

Not all repression is political. Some forms of dominance focused more on dictating the *cultural outlook* of subordinates, the subject of Chapter 6. The powers-that-be institute certain mechanisms of psychological control, often by shaping the metaphysical and religious aesthetic to which the subjugated group is exposed. Cultural hegemony (as opposed to political repression) is an important form of dominance to acknowledge because it diminishes the potential for a group to secure the sacred (political) value of self-determination. In this chapter, I describe what this problem looks like in relation to America's Black Liberation struggle and show how grassroots cultural groups like the Moorish Science Temple (MST), Nation of Islam (NOI), and the Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths developed creative strategies (street discourses) to combat the hegemonic control of the white supremacist social order that dominates American religion, media, and scholarship. In my reading, the main purpose for the creation of these organizations was to overcome a cultural problem that I call *white-mindedness*.

Chapter 7 is concerned with the ways in which the street disposition is used to overcome economic exploitation. This chapter is also meant to clear up the confusion that I mentioned earlier about the possibly misleading (structural) relationship that

obtains between “ghetto poor conditions” and the street domain. There’s no doubt that experiencing immense economic disadvantage can play a significant role in a person’s developing a critical attitude toward a sociopolitical system, especially one grounded on an exploitative economic base. However, we should be careful about how great an emphasis we place on poor economic conditions for being responsible for a street disposition. We should also not fall victim to the tendency to conceive of the attitudes tied to the street disposition as outlooks that we should demonize or discourage. To better illustrate this point, I draw on a set of concepts that philosopher Tommie Shelby calls “the hustler and gangster ethic.” Contrary to what other social theorists have suggested, I argue that, if it is possible to detach these two ethical expressions from what some Marxists call the “the profit motive,” people who embody the hustler and gangster ethic have the *most* revolutionary potential for a progressive social movement. Much of my argument is grounded in real-world testimonies of hustlers like Butch Jones and his clique Young Boys Incorporated (YBI), who made millions of dollars as teenagers selling heroin in some of Detroit’s roughest neighborhoods in the early 1970s. I also draw on the life experiences of Jeff Fort, one of the founders of the Black P. Stone Nation, a large street gang still operating in many ghetto communities today.

Can street knowledge be corrupted? That is the topic of Chapter 8. A great deal of this discussion revolves around philosopher Olúfemi O. Táíwò’s concept of *elite capture*. My main argument is that people in power are always looking to incorporate wisdom from the streets into their political agendas. Once this “redoubling” is complete, a ruling element has all the resources it needs to contain or retaliate against a resistance movement. I use examples from the Civil Rights movement and other moments in the Black Liberation struggle to highlight this insight.

In Chapter 9, I attempt a formal analysis of what is often referred to in popular culture as *street credibility*. Philosophically, understanding the nature of street credibility is crucial for

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evaluating what I call *lived experience claims*. When a speaker utters a statement of the form “As an X, [therefore] p . . .,” they seem to be signaling a relationship between their social identity (X) and the legitimacy of the stated proposition. The qualifier “As an X” seems to suggest to a listener that, *because* this person identifies as an X, their statement can be trusted. We pay special attention to lived experience claims because we care that people are *authentic* representatives of a cultural group or movement.

Finally, I close with a story from my life as a community organizer in the rural South. The purpose of this narrative is to show not only that street knowledge is alive and well but also that it can lay the foundation for a radically new way of doing philosophy: what I call *street philosophy*.

Note on Method

There may be some who wonder why this book doesn’t engage with a great deal of recent scholarship in social philosophy arising from academic research programs like standpoint epistemology and decolonial studies, and the growing literature emerging from what some refer to as the “epistemology of resistance.”⁴ To help these readers gain a better understanding of why I have chosen not to engage (in a deep sense) with these interesting (but very technical!) academic debates, I need to describe the scholarly methods that shape the way this book is structured.

Much of *Street Knowledge* is grounded in *linguistic* analysis. Specifically, this book was written with philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *use-theory of meaning* in mind. “The meaning of a word,” writes Wittgenstein, “is its *use*⁵ in a language.”⁶ Wittgenstein’s use-theory is representative of a broader methodological approach toward the problems of philosophy known as *ordinary language*

4. See *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Medina, 2012).

5. My italics.

6. See Section 43 of *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953).

philosophy. Ordinary language philosophers are interested in elucidating the meaning of a word based on how ordinary speakers of a (natural) language apply it in everyday life. Part of why street culture has been propagated across TV screens and social scientific studies is because the public *uses* this word to talk about (describe) various kinds of persons, activities, and dispositions.

For example, it's not uncommon to hear ordinary people talk about someone being "street" smart or a person having "street" cred.⁷ We even hear people talk about a piece of clothing being "street" wear, a criminal organization being a "street" gang, or a party administering (or receiving) "street" justice. All of these locutions communicate different "senses"⁸ of the term "street." One of the main goals of this book is develop a comprehensive theoretical framework that helps the reader understand (1) that the word "street" is what philosophers of language refer to as a "cluster concept,"⁹ a term that can have different meanings in different contexts; (2) how the various connotations associated with the "street" are compatible¹⁰ with each other (what Wittgenstein called *family resemblance*); and (3) why its negative associations (such as drugs, crime, etc.) are often privileged over its progressive connotations, in both popular culture and social science.

In addition to ordinary language philosophy, *Street Knowledge* was also written with the history of ideas in mind. Of more an *intellectual orientation* than a scholarly discipline, a theorist committed to the history of ideas is interested in connecting a new thesis or framework to prominent ideas or systems of thought that have had a significant impact on the character of (Western) intellectual thought (e.g., Platonism, Liberalism, Marxism, etc.). There are two reasons why I approach the subject of street knowledge in this way.

7. I.e., street credibility.

8. See "Sense and Reference" (Frege, 1892).

9. See *Meanings as Species* (Richard, 2019).

10. Not contradictory.

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First, orienting the concept of the street in the history of ideas helps provide a solid scholarly base that is digestible for a broader *nonphilosophical* audience. I wanted to avoid bogging readers down with technical jargon from niche academic debates. Instead, by wrestling with some of the most influential ideas of Western intellectual thought, the book becomes more relevant to social theorists who lack professional philosophical “training” (e.g., sociologists, criminologists, anthropologists, literary scholars, etc.), as well those who have no familiarity with academic parlance at all. Lastly, writing about the streets through the lens of the history of ideas has pedagogical (teaching) significance. For those who know little about history of social theory and criticism, this book has the potential to serve as their first exposure to some of the “big ideas” of Western culture—ideas that we all (arguably) work with or use every day.

I want to close this introduction with a cautionary note. There are parts of this book that are very technical. I’ve tried to write in a style that is sensitive to the general reader. Despite my efforts, there was no way for me to eliminate every piece of philosophical jargon. My hope is that I’ve provided the guidelines for a “language game”¹¹ that will help people understand the psychological, spiritual, and cultural tools required to make a difference in *this* world.

11. See *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953).

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