

2015

## The New York Nobody Knows: Walking 6,000 Miles in the City by William B. Helmreich

David B. Broad  
*University of North Georgia*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Broad, David B. (2015) "The New York Nobody Knows: Walking 6,000 Miles in the City by William B. Helmreich," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 91: Iss. 1, Article 19.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol91/iss1/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized administrator of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

**Helmreich, William B. *The New York Nobody Knows: Walking 6,000 Miles in the City*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. xxi + 449 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.**

Sociologist William Helmreich walked every single block of the City of New York, creating an unprecedented empirical repository of knowledge of the city. We have the benefit of the author's summation: "*New York is a city with a dynamic, diverse and amazingly rich collection of people and villages whose members display both small town values and a high degree of sophistication*" (p. 2). This volume is an equally rich verbal narrative of that diversity, gleaned from ethnographic footwork that covered 120,960 city blocks and wore out nine pairs of durable shoes.

Helmreich's explanation of his unique methodology cites the social scientific predilection for the creation of categories of analysis which would wear out fewer shoes but create 'fractions' of the story. Geographic categories such as boroughs and neighborhoods, as well as ethnic categories such as African Americans, European ethnicities, and immigrant statuses, have long been ways to organize social scientific focus. Socio-economic trends like gentrification, growing income inequality, crime, and education all have also served as analytical categories. The present volume is an attempt to overcome many of the blind-spots created by such categorical analysis. By simply 'being there' in every location of the city, this researcher has created an empirical ethnographic 'whole.'

The role of walking is crucial to this approach. Walking provides the flexibility to pause, be visible to others, and notice people, things and relationships that other means of locomotion or arrival block from view. Here is a glimpse into the serendipity produced by this method and the many layers of meaning it yielded: the author encountered a Honduran man, waving an orange flag to signal that space was available in a parking garage. Helmreich asked the flag-waving man if he found the work boring, and the man replied that it was not his primary work. His main job was "menten." The perplexed author probed and learned that the flag-waver's job was maintenance. The researcher asked if he could wave the flag. The maintenance man then inquired whether Helmreich was okay, to which the researcher responded, "It's all right. I'm a professor" (p. 5).

While the author's holistic approach to experiencing the city creates much of the depth and color of this work, the social scientific categories persist as being of value. One category that seems to apply is the localite-cosmopolite typology. Many New Yorkers live their lives in the midst of culturally and historically significant locales, but are unaware of them. Helmreich visited a café on an Upper West Side street that has been named Edgar Allan Poe Street. Poe had lived at the location in 1844 when he wrote *The Raven*. Poe's poems, and images of him, are on the walls of Edgar's Café. When the author asked a server, a Ukrainian who is a student at City College, about the customers' knowledge of Poe, he learned that many local regulars think that Edgar is the owner of the café. A Ukrainian, who arrived three years ago, is now one of New York's cosmopolitans.

Helmreich also "hung out on street corners, attended community meetings, sat in parks, went to concerts, danced in nightclubs, and spoke with hundreds of people from every walk of life" (p. 346). From these diverse encounters, the author derived several rich observations regarding aspects of life in New York, including: crime reduction, the ambition of immigrants, the impact of real estate values, the gentrification of the outer boroughs, the 'daygration' of different ethnic communities to shared day-time locations, the significant rise in interracial marriage, and the resilience of New Yorkers in the face of the 9/11 tragedy. The future of

American society, as it long has been, is emerging in the laboratory of New York, our world city, and Helmreich's work provides insights and suggests further study.

*The New York Nobody Knows* exemplifies the richness that the ethnographic approach affords. The organization of this work is somewhat arbitrary and haphazard making its use as an academic source limited. It must be read with a flexible mind-set, but once read that way, can be revisited and mined for its rich data. .Helmreich added to the knowledge base typically gleaned from categorical analysis, and overcame many of the blind spots usually present in such research. Helmreich's work inspires social scientists to lace-them-up and do it elsewhere.

David B. Broad, Ph.D.  
Professor of Sociology  
University of North Georgia  
Dahlonega, Georgia