BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Randy Blazak, Portland State University.

Hamm has gone a long way to carve out a new voice in criminological writing since he and Ferrell presented the idea of a post-modern criminological ethnography at the 2000 meetings of the American Criminological Society. He opened the door in his 1997 book, *Apocalypse in Oklahoma: Waco and Ruby Ridge Revenged*. In that book, Hamm pioneered the idea of the sociology of space. If the goal of an ethnographer is to paint a picture using “thick descriptions,” Hamm’s reliving of McVeigh’s last days provided a vivid sociological insight into a subject of one – down to the television listings. It is a revolutionary way of doing sociology that should be explored further.

In Hamm’s new book, *In Bad Company*, he again pushes the boundaries of academic writing. Traditional sociologists and criminologists might fear the blurring of lines between (social) science and (tabloid) journalism. They might ask where the standard APA style of source citing is. They might ask where the discussion of methodology is. But the fact is that a question as specific as Hamm’s does not lend itself to concerns for t-tests and representative samples. *In Bad Company* he seeks to answer one question; who was John Doe #2?

The existence of Timothy McVeigh’s accomplice in the Oklahoma City bombing, dubbed by the FBI as John Doe #2, was a national obsession in 1995-1996; but a 1998 grand jury concluded the man never existed. Hamm counters this finding and suggests that the person was a member of the Aryan Republican Underground. The ARA were a nearly comical group of bank robbers who robbed 22 mid-western banks in the mid-1990s, and were modeled after 1980s bank-robbing terrorists The Order. Led by Peter Lagan and “Wild Bill” Guthrie, the ARA funneled cash into the radical right through Christian Identity pastor Mark Thomas and the white separatist community of Elohim City. The ARA provides the foundation for the John Doe #2
theory, the sketch of the suspect bearing a resemblance to ARA member Michael Brescia. Hamm’s contention is that the ARA link to McVeigh (and co-conspirators Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier) was buried by the government so they could get convictions on the bank robberies and avoid any allegation that there was information beforehand about the terrorist attack.

Hamm takes a 300-page journey through the lives of the central characters. The book reports on Peter Lanagan in Vietnam, exploring the roots of his gender dysphoria. It addresses the racist skinhead scene of Philadelphia, charting how racist music pulled young ARA members Scott Stedeford and Kevin McCarthy into the group. Along the way, the author includes relevant academic theories on everything from seductions of crime to hegemonic masculinity. Non-academics may see the commentary as an interruption in the storyline, while those looking for the theory may want more than a few sentences. The theorists have to wait for the epilogue. Here, Hamm links the rise of racist violence (starting with the Reconstruction-era Ku Klux Klan and the James Gang) to an anti-authoritarian construction of masculinity. As the movement evolves, so does its definition of masculinity, allowing a transsexual like Lanagan to lead the ARA. While Lanagan (and possibly Guthrie) may not have been exactly “he-men,” the right-wing underground is still dominated by sexist and homophobic ideology, as the work of Abby Ferber and Jesse Daniels has shown.

The methodology of this book is closer to journalism than science. Hamm’s main data sources are Cash, Guthrie’s unpublished manuscript entitled “The Taunting Bandits,” lengthy prison interviews with Lanagan, and more than 150 pages of FBI interviews. The “Notes” section indicates that Hamm also interviewed some of the secondary players (like Lanagan’s ex-wife) and pieced together newspaper accounts. The result is a detailed story that must have taken a massive effort to organize. Sometimes the information seems irrelevant. For example, discussing Scot Stedeford’s fairly typical adolescent fascination with hard rock, Hamm writes, “But his true love was music, he devoted long hours to practicing the drums until he could pound a beat into the music like a meat-fisted carpenter hammering a nail into the floor.” Huh? But this is Hamm’s art of storytelling.

As he did in his 1993 book, *American Skinheads*, Hamm puts a great amount of importance on the role of music, despite the research arguing that music does not cause any change in the behavior of listeners. From the skinheads in that book listening to Skrewdriver, to McVeigh listening to Nine Inch Nails in Oklahoma, to ARA members in this volume falling under the influence of The Doors, it is hard to tell if Hamm is truly making a causal argument or just continuing to paint that picture. Similarly, the index includes the names of more rock stars than criminologists. But music is important, and