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GHETTOS AND ANTI-GHETTOS: AN ANATOMY OF THE NEW URBAN POVERTY

Loïc Wacquant

Peter Beilharz: In *Urban Outcasts*, you draw a methodical comparison between the evolution of the black American ghetto and the French urban periphery or *banlieue* over the past three decades.¹ Why did you undertake this comparison and what does it reveal about the changing face of poverty in the city?

Loïc Wacquant: This book was born of the confluence of two shocks, the first personal and the second political. The personal shock was the first-hand discovery of the black American ghetto – or what remains of it – when I moved to Chicago and lived for six years on the edge of the city's South Side. Coming from France, I was appalled by the intensity of the urban desolation, racial segregation, social deprivation and street violence concentrated in this *terra non grata* that was universally feared, shunned and denigrated by outsiders, including by many scholars.

The political shock was the diffusion of a moral panic about ghettoization in France and through much of Western Europe. In the 1990s, the media, politicians and even some researchers came to believe that working-class neighborhoods at the periphery of European cities were turning into 'ghettos' on the pattern of the United States. And so public debate and state policy were reoriented toward fighting the growth of these so-called ghettos, based on the premise that urban poverty was being 'Americanized', that is, stamped by deepening ethnic division, rising segregation and rampant criminality.

Bring these two shocks together and you have the question that animated a decade of research: are the US ghetto and the European lower-class districts with concentrations of immigrants converging and, if not, what

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is happening to them? And what is driving their transformation? To answer these questions, I gathered statistical data and carried out field observation in a dilapidated section of Chicago's 'Black Belt' and in a deindustrializing suburb of the 'Red Belt' of Paris located between Roissy Airport and the capital. I also reconstructed their historical trajectory, because you cannot understand what happened to these declining neighborhoods in the 1990s without considering the full sweep of the 20th century, stamped by the bloom and then the demise of Fordist industrialism and the Keynesian welfare state.

PB: So what happened to the American Black Belt and the French Red Belt, and are they converging?

LW: On the American side I show that, after the riots of the 1960s, the black ghetto *imploded*, or collapsed onto itself if you wish, due to the concurrent retraction of the market economy and retrenchment of the social state. The result was a new urban form that I call the *hyperghetto*, characterized by double relegation on the basis of race and class and reinforced by a state policy of welfare withdrawal and urban abandonment. So when we speak about the American ghetto we must imperatively historicize it and not confound the 'communal ghetto' of the 1950s with its fin-de-siècle descendant. The communal ghetto was a parallel world, a 'black city within the white', as the African-American sociologists St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton put it in their master-book *Black Metropolis*. It served as a reservoir of unskilled labor for factories and its dense web of organizations offered a buffer against white domination. With deindustrialization and the shift to financial capitalism, the hyperghetto does not have an economic function and it is stripped of communal organizations, which have been replaced by state institutions of social control. It is an instrument of naked exclusion, a mere receptacle for the stigmatized and superfluous fractions of the black proletariat: the unemployed, welfare recipients, criminals and participants in the booming informal economy.

On the French side, the reigning media and policy perception turns out to be dead wrong: lower-class boroughs have undergone a process of pauperization and gradual *decomposition* that has taken them *away* from the pattern of the ghetto. A ghetto is an ethnically homogeneous enclave that contains all the members of a subordinate category and their institutions, and prevents them from fanning into the city. Now, declining *banlieues* are very mixed and have become more diverse in terms of ethnic recruitment over the past three decades; they typically contain a majority of French citizens and immigrants from two to three dozen nationalities. The growing presence of these post-colonial migrants results from a decrease in their spatial separation: they used to be barred from public housing and thus more segregated. And the residents who rise in the class structure through the school, the labor market or entrepreneurship quickly leave these degraded areas.

The Red Belt *banlieues* have also lost most of the local institutions tied to the Communist Party (to which they owed their moniker) that used to organize life around the triad of factory, union and neighborhood, and give people collective pride in their class and city. Their ethnic heterogeneity, porous boundaries, decreasing institutional density and incapacity to create a shared cultural identity make these areas the exact opposite of ghettos: they are *anti-ghettos*.

PB: This goes against the grain of the image painted by the French media, politicians of both Right and Left, and activists mobilized around issues of immigration, race and citizenship, especially after the wave of riots that swept the lower-class *banlieues* in November 2005.

LW: This is a good illustration of a key contribution of sociology to civic debate: through precise conceptualization and systematic observation, it discloses the yawning gaps – in this case a total contradiction – between public perception and social reality. Immigrants and their children in the French city have become more mixed, not more separated; their social profile and opportunities are becoming more similar to those of native French people, not more different, even as they suffer higher rates of unemployment. They are becoming more diffused in space, not more concentrated. It is precisely because they are now more ‘integrated’ into the mainstream of national life and compete for collective goods that they are seen as a menace, and that xenophobia has surged forth among the native fractions of the working class threatened by downward mobility.

What the urban peripheries of Western Europe suffer from is not ghettoization but the dissolution of the traditional working class caused by the normalization of mass unemployment and the spread of unstable and part-time jobs, as well as vilification in public debate. In effect, the discourse of ‘ghettoization’ partakes of the symbolic demonization of lower-class districts, which weakens them socially and marginalizes them politically.

Urban Outcasts demonstrates that the thesis of ‘convergence’ between Europe and America on the model of the black ghetto is wrong empirically and misleading policy-wise. Then it goes on to reveal the ‘emergence’ of a new regime of urban poverty on both sides of the Atlantic, distinct from the regime of the preceding half-century anchored in stable industrial work and the safety net of the Keynesian state. This *advanced marginality* is fed by the fragmentation of wage labor, the reorientation of state policy away from social protection and in favor of market compulsion, and the generalized resurgence of inequality – that is, it is marginality *spawned by the neoliberal revolution*. This means that it is not behind us, but ahead of us. It is bound to persist and grow as governments implement policies of economic deregulation and commodification of public goods. But this new social reality, spawned by the scarcity and instability of work and the changing role of

the state, is obfuscated by the ethnicized idiom of immigration, discrimination and 'diversity'. The latter are real issues, to be sure, but they are not the driving force behind the marginalization of Europe's urban periphery. Worse, they serve to hide the new social question of insecure work and its consequences for the formation of the urban proletariat of the 21st century.

PB: In the book, you stress the collective indignity felt by people stuck in the hyperghetto and the deindustrialized *banlieue*. The residents of the Black Belt have lost race pride and their counterparts of the Red Belt have lost class pride. You argue that 'territorial stigmatization' is a novel dimension of urban marginality in both America and Europe on the brink of the new century.

LW: Indeed, one of the distinctive features of advanced marginality is the suffusive *spatial stigma* that discredits people trapped in neighborhoods of relegation. In every advanced society, a number of urban districts or towns have become national symbols and namesakes for all the ills of the city: Clichy-sous-Bois (where the November 2005 riots started) in France, Moss Side in Manchester for England, Berlin-Neuköln for Germany, the South Bronx for New York, etc. This growing defamation of the bottom districts of the metropolis is a direct consequence of the political weakening of African Americans on the US political scene and of the working class on the European political scene.

When a district is widely perceived as an urban 'hellhole' where only the detritus of society would tolerate living, when its name is synonymous with vice and violence in journalistic and political discussion, a taint of place becomes superimposed onto the stigmata of poverty and ethnicity (meaning 'race' in the United States and colonial origin in Europe). Here I draw on the theories of Erving Goffman and of my teacher Pierre Bourdieu to highlight how the public disgrace afflicting these areas devalues the sense of self of their residents and corrodes their social ties. In response to spatial defamation, residents engage in strategies of mutual distancing and lateral denigration; they retreat into the private sphere of the family; and they exit from the neighborhood (whenever they have the option). These practices of *symbolic self-protection* set off a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby negative representations of the place end up producing in it the very cultural anomie and social atomism that these representations claim were already there.

Territorial stigmatization not only undermines the capacity for collective identification and action of lower-class families; it also triggers prejudice and discrimination among outsiders such as employers and public bureaucracies. The young men from La Courneuve, the stigmatized Red Belt town outside of Paris I studied, constantly complained that they must hide their address when they apply for jobs, meet girls or attend the university outside their city, to avoid negative reactions of fear and rejection. The police are

particularly susceptible to treating them more severely when officers find out that they come from this tainted town widely seen as a fearsome 'ghetto'. Territorial stigma is one more obstacle on the path to socioeconomic integration and civic participation.

Note that the same phenomenon is observed in Latin America, among dwellers of the ill-reputed *favelas* of Brazil, the *poblaciones* of Chile, and the *villas miserias* of Argentina. I suspect that the residents of Villa del Bajo Flores, La Cava or Villa de Retiro in Buenos Aires know too well what 'address discrimination' is. This territorial stigma attaches to these lower districts of the Argentine city for the same reason that it coalesces around the hyper-ghetto of the United States and the anti-ghettos of Europe: the concentration in them of the jobless, the homeless, and paperless migrants, as well as the lower fractions of the new urban proletariat employed in the deregulated service economy. And the tendency of state elites to use space as a 'screen' to avoid facing problems rooted in the transformation of work.

PB: Does not this territorial stigma facilitate the turn to the penal state and the implementation of the policy of 'zero tolerance', whose global spread you analyzed in your previous book *Les Prisons de la misère*.

LW: Spatial taint grants the state increased latitude to engage in aggressive policies of control of the new marginality that can take the form of dispersal or containment, or better yet combine the two approaches. *Dispersal* aims at scattering the poor in space and recapturing the territories that they traditionally occupy, under the pretext that their neighborhoods are devilish 'no-go areas' that simply cannot be salvaged. It is currently at work in the mass demolition of public housing at the heart of the historic ghetto of the US metropolis and in the pauperized peripheries of many European cities. Thousands of housing units are destroyed overnight and their occupants are disseminated in adjacent areas or poor districts further out, creating the appearance that 'the problem has been resolved'. But dispersing the urban poor only makes them less visible and less disruptive politically; it does not give them work and grant them a viable social status.

The second technique for dealing with the rise of advanced marginality takes the opposite tack: it seeks to concentrate and contain the disorders generated by the fragmentation of work and the destabilization of ethnic (racial or national) hierarchy by throwing a tight police dragnet around the neighborhood of relegation and by expanding the jails and prisons in which their more unruly elements are chronically exiled. This *punitive containment* is typically accompanied on the social welfare front by measures designed to force recipients of public aid into the substandard slots of the deregulated service economy, under the name of 'workfare'. (I describe the invention in the United States of this new politics of poverty wedding restrictive 'workfare' and expansive 'prisonfare' in my next book, *Punishing the Poor*). But the

policy of *mano dura* or 'zero tolerance' is also self-defeating. Throwing the jobless, the marginally employed and petty criminals behind bars makes them even less employable and further destabilizes lower-class families and neighborhoods. Deploying the police, the courts and the prison to curb marginality is not only enormously costly and inefficient; it aggravates the very ills it is supposed to cure. And thus we re-enter the vicious circle pointed out long ago by Michel Foucault: the very failure of the prison to solve the problem of marginality serves as justification for its continued expansion.

Moreover, in second world countries like Argentina and Brazil which went through decades of authoritarian rule in the 20th century, the police is itself a vector of violence and the judicial apparatus is rife with inequity. So rolling out the penal state at the bottom of the order of classes and places is tantamount to re-establishing a dictatorship over the marginal fractions of the working class. It violates in practice the ideal of democratic citizenship that theoretically guides the authorities. What the state needs to fight is not the symptom, *criminal insecurity*, but the cause of urban disorder: namely, the *social insecurity* that the state itself has spawned by becoming the diligent handmaiden to the despotism of the market.

Loïc Wacquant is Professor at the University of California-Berkeley and Researcher at the Centre de sociologie européenne-Paris. His work centres on urban inequality, ethnoracial domination, the penal state, embodiment and social theory.

His recent books include *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (Oxford University Press, 2004), *Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics: The Mystery of Ministry* (Polity Press, 2005), *Das Janusgesichte des Ghettos* (Birkhauser Verlag, 2006), and *Punishing the Poor: The New Government of Social Insecurity* (Duke University Press, in press). [email: loic@berkeley.edu]

Note

1. See Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2008); French translation: *Parias urbains. Ghetto, banlieues, État* (La Découverte, 2006 and 2007); Spanish: *Los Condenados de la ciudad. Gueto, peripherias, Estado* (Buenos Aires, Siglo 21, 2007); Catalan: *Pàries urbans. Gueto, banlieues, Estat* (Barcelona, Edicions de 1984, 2007); Japanese: (Shinyousha, 2008); Italian: Macerata, Quadlibet, 2008; Turkish Bogaziçi Üniversitesi Yayinevi, 2008; German: *Die Verdammten der Stadt* (Leverkusen, Barbara Budrich Verlag, forthcoming in 2009).