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Epistemic bandwagons, speculation, and turnkeys: Some lessons from the tale of the urban 'underclass'

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Abstract
Drawing on the *Begriffsgeschichte* of Reinhart Koselleck and the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, my book *The Invention of the 'Underclass'* draws a microhistory of the birth, diffusion, and demise of this racialized folk devil at the intersection of the academic field, the journalistic field, and the politics-policy-philanthropic field. This history illuminates the politics of knowledge about dispossessed and dishonored categories in the metropolis and suggests three notions that can help researchers parse the use and abuse of other social science constructs and thus practice better conceptual hygiene: lemming effects (illustrated by the wild rush to deploy 'diaspora'), conceptual speculative bubble (as with 'racial capitalism'), and turnkey problematics (such as the 'resilient city' and the 'creative city'). I discuss the factors that foster the development of epistemic bandwagons, speculation, and turnkeys, and specify the criteria that make for a robust concept in terms of semantics (clarity and neutrality), logics (coherence and type-specificity), and heuristics (empirical adequacy and theoretical productivity).

Keywords
Underclass, Bourdieu, Koselleck, concept formation, epistemic reflexivity

> The history of the social sciences is and remains a continuous process passing from the attempt to order reality analytically through the construction of concepts–the dissolution of the analytical constructs so constructed through the expansion and shift of the scientific horizon – and the

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> reformulation anew of concepts on the foundations thus transformed. (Max Weber, '"Objectivity" in Social Science and Social Policy', 1904)

My book *The Invention of the 'Underclass'* is an ethnographically grounded case study in the sociology and politics of knowledge (Wacquant, 2022). It draws on the conceptual history of Reinhart Koselleck and on the theory of symbolic power and fields of cultural production of Pierre Bourdieu to chart the stunning rise, multi-sited flourishing, and sudden demise of the urban 'folk devil' of the closing decades in the 20th century known as the *underclass*.[1]

Fusing the trope of disorganization with the drive to exoticism, cycling in and out of the social sciences, journalism, and the political-policy-philanthropic field, this wooly and inchoate notion dominated the academic and public debate on race and poverty in the American metropolis roughly from 1977 to 1997. Its advocates, conservatives and liberals alike, claimed that the novel term was needed to capture an unprecedented development: the insidious incubation and cancerous growth of a subpopulation of the black poor, distinct from the traditional lower class, characterized by self-destructive behaviors, social isolation and cultural deviancy, and responsible for the ravaging of the inner city.[2] During this same period, the category and its demonic imagery – anchored by the 'teenage welfare mother' representing a moral threat in the private sphere and the street-prowling 'gang banger' incarnating a physical threat in public space – were exported to the United Kingdom and continental Europe to agitate the international study of exclusion in the postindustrial metropolis at century's turn. German scholars, for instance, worried that such a group was crystallizing in the German metropolis as a result of accelerating deindustrialization and settled foreign immigration and wondered about the utility of the concept to capture novel forms of ethnicized urban poverty.[3]

Bourdieu, Koselleck, and the microhistory of a concept

It turns out, upon close scrutiny, that this 'terministic screen' was not a *reflection* of reality so much as a *deflection* from reality.[4] The 'underclass' started out as a proto-concept à la Robert K. Merton (1984), that is, 'an early, rudimentary particularized, and largely unexplicated idea', but it quickly morphed into an instrument of public accusation and symbolic disciplining of the threatening black precariat in the hyperghetto – the novel sociospatial constellation that emerged from the rubble of the communal ghetto of the Fordist era (Wacquant, 2008: chs. 2–4). It follows that the notion enters into the sociology of urban marginality, not as *tool*, but as *object* of analysis, and an object whose study has much to teach us about the political epistemology of dispossession and dishonor in the city as well as about the craft of concept-making more generally.

Inspired by the *Begriffsgeschichte* of Reinhart Koselleck (2002) and the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (2001), *The Invention of the 'Underclass'* offers a kind of 'microhistory' of the notion, centered on the period of its hegemony. From Koselleck, I take the granular focus on texts to trace the changing semantic charge of 'fundamental concepts' (*Grundbegriff*) and 'keywords' (*Stichwort*) as 'indicators' of evolving historical constellations and conflicts across conjunctures and epochs. I deploy the notion of 'asymmetric counter-concept' (*asymmetrisch Gegenbegriff*) to show that the rhetorical

desecration of the undeserving (black) 'underclass' effects the sacralization of the deserving (white) 'middle class' of national mythology. From Bourdieu, I take guidance in reconstructing the position and strategies of protagonists in three fields – academic research, the media, and political-policy-philanthropic organizations – and in mapping the relation of *structural complicity* between them.

I pay close attention to the circumstances of the invention, the timing of the diffusion, and the variegated meanings of the term as well as to the institutional positions of those who pushed for and (more rarely) against its deployment. I draw up a genealogy of the construct by tracking its peregrinations across the boundaries of the scientific, journalistic and political fields from the heady days of the progressive 1960s to the somber years of the neoconservative 1980s and the late boom of the neoliberal 1990s. I show that a network of philanthropic foundations (chief among them the Rockefeller Foundation) and 'think tanks' (such as the Urban Institute and the Social Science Research Council) played a lead role in packaging and diffusing the notion in scholarly and public debate.

Turning to anatomy, I distinguish three faces of the 'underclass': (1) the *structural* conception coined in 1963 by the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal (1963) to forewarn about the dire consequences of postindustrialism for working-class formation; the Myrdalian 'underclass' (a term adapted from the Swedish *onderklasse*) is a segment of the population rendered superfluous by technological upgrading and consigned to perennial unemployment or underemployment; (2) the *behavioral* view of policy researchers and think-tank experts, which quickly achieved hegemonic status, for whom the 'underclass' is a subset of the poor characterized by 'anti-social behaviors' detectible by such indicators as single-parent family, joblessness, school failure, and criminal activity (Ricketts and Sawhill, 1988; Mincy, 1994); and (3) the *neo-ecological* approach developed by the sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987) to highlight the role of the neighborhood as multiplier of marginality. Together, these form what I call the 'Bermuda triangle of the underclass,' in which the historical nexus of caste, class and state in the American metropolis effectively vanished from sight – and in particular the role of the state as a *producer* of racialized dispossession in the city, as distinct from its mission of control and succor of the same (Wacquant, 2014).

Through two decades of heated debate initiated by the Harlem blackout riots of 1977, the 'underclass' remained a stubbornly incoherent, heterogeneous, and specular notion, plagued by a host of semantic ambiguities, logical deficiencies, and empirical anomalies. Its spectacular if fleeting success expressed first and foremost the class fear and caste horror of the educated middle classes and state managers in the face of the deteriorating condition of the black precariat, and the desire to affix blame for mounting urban ills on this outcast category. Its sudden demise in public debate in the mid-1990s (contrasting with its continued silent circulation in social science as a descriptive stand-in for a variety of subaltern categories) reveals the fundamental *heteronomy of the category*. After the 'welfare reform' of 1996, policy-makers abruptly pivoted to other worrisome populations and conditions, and social scientists followed suit, finding new problem subgroups to study and shepherd: 'fragile families' expected to transition 'from welfare to work', parolees going through 'prisoner reentry', and inner-city residents redistributed in space through housing subsidies and 'moving-to-opportunity'-type programs.

I use the strange career of the 'underclass' to raise several questions that can shed light on the trials and tribulations of other concepts. What accounts for the 'lemming effect' that drew a generation of scholars of race and poverty over a scientific cliff? What are the conditions for the formation and bursting of 'conceptual speculative bubbles'? What is the role of think tanks, journalism, and politics but also academic reproduction in imposing 'turnkey problematics' soaked in moral doxa upon social researchers? And what are the special quandaries posed by the naming of destitute and stigmatized categories in scientific discourse? Answering these questions constitutes an exacting exercise in epistemic reflexivity in the tradition of Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem and Pierre Bourdieu.[5] This exercise leads me to elaborate a minimalist set of criteria, semantic, logical, and heuristic, for what makes a good concept in social science, liable to minimizing epistemic troubles such as those epitomized by the 'underclass'.

Lemming effects, speculation, and turnkey problematics

Three notions broached in *The Invention of the 'Underclass'* to scrutinize the travails of this phantom category may help us parse the use and abuse of other social science terms and collectively practice better conceptual hygiene. Lemming effects, conceptual speculative bubble, and turnkey problematic are intended as *sensitizing concepts* to assess the value of analytic constructs in circulation.[6] Admittedly, they overlap, hybridize and morph into one another; and they can be confounded with the normal life-cycle of a concept or research program (e.g. the fall of structural functionalism in the 1960s was not retroactively indicative of a conceptual bubble, but a result of the exhaustion of a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense). But, used pragmatically, they can alert us to the misapplication, maltreatment, or defects of concepts.

The *lemming effect* denotes a bandwagon of enthusiastic scholars rushing en masse to invoke a notion because everyone around them is invoking it, only to fall into a scientific precipice because that notion was flawed or impertinent to the phenomenon at hand. (For the zoological record, let it be noted that, in reality, lemmings do not blindly follow their leaders into danger and commit collective suicide by jumping off cliffs.) The formula here is given by sociologist Christopher Jencks's (Jencks and Peterson, 1991: 28, my italics) candid admission in 1991 that 'the old lower class has grown larger and perhaps more isolated from mainstream society. In my judgment these changes are not large enough to justify substituting the term underclass for the term lower class. But *since almost everyone else now talks about the underclass* rather than the lower class, *I will do the same*.'

This is an apt characterization of the proliferating deployment of Carl Schmitt's 'state of exception' in political science and Giorgio Agamben's 'bare life' in anthropology – Gilles Deleuze's 'assemblage' and Homi Bhabha's 'hybridity' also come to mind. States of exception have multiplied at such rapid pace in the most varied settings that they threaten to become the rule, which impoverishes the very notion of the political that Schmitt was supposed to enrich (Huysmans, 2008; Teschke, 2011). Anthropologists, of all people, should know that life is never 'bare': their richly textured ethnographic inquiries show time and again that, even under the most stripped down of circumstances, such as famine, war, or the radical destitution and disorientation of migrants crossing a

deadly border desert, the sheer biological fact of life (*zoé*) is never completely dislodged from a way of life (*bios*), as Agamben would have it.[7] Lemming effects are especially strong when the author of the concept(s) entailed is freshly (re)discovered or suddenly canonized, or when a novel phenomenon is believed to have appeared on the social horizon. Disciplines that borrow their theories from their neighbors are particularly susceptible to these effects. Dedicated funding streams, media attention and political currency reinforce their force and frequency.

A *conceptual speculative bubble* develops when an inchoate, unbounded or unfinished notion, often borrowed from political discourse and action, is invoked to capture an ever wider range of historical realities before its semantics have solidified – in the language of Giovanni Sartori (1970), its 'extension' (the universe of cases to which it is applied) grows out of proportion with its 'intension' (the meaning it evokes). Epistemic speculation differs from epistemic bandwagon in that its mechanism is cognitive, whereas lemming effects are activated by networks of scholars who watch, read, and imitate one another, but admittedly in many cases the two dynamics blur into one another.

The anticipation of future cognitive profits, empirical or theoretical, that fail to materialize helps us understand the extraordinary diffusion and dispersion of the notion of 'diaspora' since the 1980s. In his lucid dissection of the '"diaspora" diaspora' inside and outside of the academy, Rogers Brubaker (2005) refutes the view that the concept spread because it encapsulated a novel analytic perspective and/or captured a fundamentally new phase in historical development. Its astounding success – if one may call it that – comes from the headlong rush toward new usages promoted by the continual confusion between analytic and folk understandings of the term and by activist mobilization invoking it.[8]

Similarly, Julian Go (2021) has pointed out that invocations of 'racial capitalism' have recently boomed across disciplines even as definitions of the same remain murky, incomplete and inconsistent across authors. Its users have failed to specify the fundamental constituents of the concept, including what is meant by race (and whether such a construct can be universalized), what is meant by capitalism, and why race, rather than some other social criterion (religion, citizenship, gender, etc.), must be harnessed to grease the wheels of capitalist exploitation. Yet, surprisingly, Go ends up further inflating the speculative bubble when he recommends that we 'embrace rather than overthrow the racial capitalism concept', in spite of its current glaring deficiencies, presumably as a political bet on its future cognitive payoffs. Should we rather not pause and submit the concept to further scrutiny and elaboration, rather than run with it as is?[9]

Four factors exacerbate the anticipative valuation of concepts: the academic or policy success of intellectual leaders, the creation of dedicated scholarly journals and professional networks, novel lines of research funding, and the push of social movements or the pull of political actors with a vested interest in the scientific legitimation of a particular notion (as with the recent saturation of academic and public debate with the term 'structural racism'). I will not speculate here on the range of factors that trigger the bursting of conceptual bubbles, other than to note that it can be sudden and translate in the instant bankruptcy of a research program in which a generation of scholars may have invested their entire scientific savings. Think of the sudden discrediting and sometimes

outright disappearance of such influential concepts as 'mass society', 'role', and 'reference groups' in the 1960s; 'culture of poverty' and 'articulation of modes of production' in the 1970s; 'structuration theory' and 'new class' in the 1980s; 'postmodernity' and 'globalism' in the 2000s; and 'creolization' in the 2010s. And there are telltale signs that the bubble of 'cosmopolitanism' may burst this decade.

Finally, social scientists are always in danger of falling for a *turnkey problematic*, that is, a set of prepackaged categories, questions, methodological moves and data banks encapsulated by a term, often promulgated by research agencies, public bureaucracies, political officials, and private philanthropies to suit their own agendas, or propelled by the mere routine of professorial reproduction. A turnkey differs from the disciplined application of paradigmatic principles in that it invites the *routinized and unthinking* implementation of a rhetorical and technical formula whose social parameters are taken for granted by scholars and officials alike. Salient cases in the 21st century are the thematics of 'urban resilience' and the rise of the 'creative city', two of the many visages of the brave new neoliberal metropolis.[10]

In his bold book, *Shaking Up the City: Ignorance, Inequality and the Urban Question*, geographer Tom Slater (2021) recounts how the notion of 'resilience', borrowed from ecology and engineering, was promoted around the world by the Rockefeller Foundation through the '100 Resilient Cities' competition funding cities to 'build their own capacities to prepare for, withstand, and bounce back rapidly from shocks and stresses'.[11] Scholars rushing to work in that policy stream, on such topics as shrinking cities, green infrastructure, energy systems and disaster response, have accepted the terminology, boundaries, indicators and purpose of 'resilience', a construct that naturalizes the social consequences of market rule, exculpates the state by devolving responsibility to the municipal, neighborhood, and even individual level, and endorses the generalized downsizing of city government after the financial crash of 2008. Buying lock, stock and barrel into a planning practice guided by the notion, researchers have failed to stop and ask the elementary question: 'resilience for whom and against what?' (Vale, 2014: 191).

The turn to catering to the city's upper class is blindly endorsed by urban scholars working in the stream of Richard Florida's international best-seller, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), which has spawned a cottage industry of research and policy advocacy. In this model, 'creative cities' compete to attract the mobile 'talent' of the 'creative class' (knowledge- and form-producing occupations) by valorizing the arts, culture, and heritage, and fostering a climate of tolerance, diversity, and hipness. The notion has informed a blizzard of studies documenting the antecedents, dimensions, and consequences of the urban clustering of culture professionals, complete with myriad rank correlations between the 'Talent Index', the 'Melting Pot Index', the 'Bohemian Index', and the 'Gay Index'.[12] These studies leave unexamined the dubious assumption that we have moved into a 'post-scarcity, post-material' stage of capitalism, where the 'creatives' are a benevolent dominant class, mobility an intrinsic value, inter-city competition and gentrification public goods, and the free market and self-actualization reconciled. Not to mention that much of the research conducted under this label reads like a garrulous tautology: cool cities attract the creatives because they harbor high densities of creatives – and the uncreative two-thirds of the city be damned (Peck, 2005: 758). Ironically, the very success of the creative-city model has brought about its denunciation

by its erstwhile advocates as it deepens class bifurcation and escalates the costs of collective consumption and social reproduction.[13]

Turnkey problematics are particularly profuse in the applied sectors of social science, such as public policy, urban planning, and management, where scholarship meets professional action, and opportunities for outside lecturing and consultancy arise. But they also develop in the more autonomous sectors of sociology where methodological normalization, the use of large-scale administrative data sets, and a panoply of plug-and-play analytic moves offer a safe formula for rote research replication (as with 'prisoner reentry'). Turnkeys also finds a fertile terrain in the regions of social science interfacing with civic mobilization, as attested by the recent diffusion of 'intersectionality' (itself now challenged by 'post-intersectionality') across and beyond the academy.

Realizing that, like all scientists, sociologists must elaborate their own concepts, rather than accept them ready-made and prepackaged by common sense – ordinary, policy or scholarly – does not tell us how to construct *good ones*. Based on the trials and tribulations of the 'underclass' as keyword of the debate on race and urban poverty at century's end, let me suggest three pairs of criteria that make for a robust analytic concept, aiming to strike a balance between comprehensiveness and compactness.

1. *Semantics – clarity and neutrality*: the meaning of the concept is clear, distinct, and stable. It minimizes the possibility of discrepant interpretations. It does not play on emotions, ride on political belief, or imply a moral verdict (what Max Weber puts under '*Werturteilsfreiheit*').
2. *Logics – coherence and type specificity*: the attributes of the concept 'stick together' and do not contradict one another. The concept identifies a distinctive configuration and separates it from neighboring configurations, preventing the lumping of related but different objects.
3. *Heuristics – empirical adequacy and theoretical productivity*: the concept serves well to generate rich and varied observations. It suggests hypotheses and fosters theorizing extending across cases and linking up with other theories (to validate, develop, or challenge them).

The political scientist John Gerring (1999) is right to stress that concept formation always entails trade-offs between desirable properties.[14] This implies that we should give up the search for the 'one perfect concept' and seek instead to craft *good-enough concepts*, or better concepts than the ones we inherit and find at hand. For analytic constructs should be evaluated, not just abstractly by a set of formal criteria, but also pragmatically, *relative to their purpose and compared with rival concepts* serving to generate insights, data, and theory about the same sector of historical reality. The epistemic abacus proposed above, composed of six gauges – semantic clarity and neutrality, logical consistency and type specificity, and empirical adequacy and theoretical productivity – should be employed in that spirit. For concepts are living and breathing semantic-logical-heuristic creatures; they gestate and are birthed; they grow and change; they gain new usages, mate with other notions, and spawn offspring (Canguilhem, 1981). Some concepts, like good wine, grow better as they age and endure – thus Marx's

capitalism, Durkheim's division of labor, Weber's bureaucracy, and Du Bois's double consciousness. Others get worn out, produce quickly diminishing returns, and even become obstacles to knowledge. Some can be 'sent for cleaning' and 'put back into circulation';[15] others need to be retired and buried. Such is the case of the 'underclass': *requiescat in pace*.

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Notes

1. 'In the gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated, these groups have occupied a constant position as folk devils: visible reminders of what we should not be' (Cohen, 1972: 10). The present article draws on the introduction and conclusion of *The Invention of the 'Underclass'*.
2. Three canonical books, among a flood of publications, capture this intellectual discussion and moment: Ken Auletta, *The Underclass* (1982); William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy* (1987); Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson (eds) *The Urban Underclass* (1991). A historical critique is Michael B. Katz (ed.) *The 'Underclass' Debate: Views from History* (1993).
3. See, for instance, Thomas Faist, 'From School to Work: Public Policy and Underclass Formation among Young Turks in Germany during the 1980s'; Jens S. Dangschat, 'Concentration of Poverty in the Landscapes of 'Boomtown' Hamburg: The Creation of a New Urban Underclass?' (1994); Hartmut Häußermann, 'Armut in den Großstädten: eine neue städtische Unterklasse?' (1997); Martin Kronauer, 'Armut, Ausgrenzung, Unterklasse' (1998); Richard Hauser, 'Tendenzen zur Herausbildung einer Unterklasse?' (1999). This question and worry linger on in the 21st century: Johannes-Maximilian Brede, *Gibt es eine "neue städtische Unterklasse"? Armuts- und Ausländerquartiere in Berlin* (2010).
4. 'Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function as a *deflection* of reality' (Burke, 1966: 45).
5. The exemplary study here is Georges Canguilhem, *La Formation du concept de réflexe aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (1955).
6. On the opposition between 'sensitizing' and 'definitive' concepts, see Blumer (1954).
7. Kristin Phillips shows this by developing the concept of 'subsistence citizenship' in *An Ethnography of Hunger: Politics, Subsistence, and the Unpredictable Grace of the Sun* (2018). Jason De León's fascinating journey through *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (2015) is paradoxical in that its granular data undermine the analytic of 'bare life' it invokes.
8. I agree with Brubaker (2005) when he suggests that his double deflation of the notion would apply to a whole family of kindred concepts such as 'transnationalism, postnationalism, globalization, deterritorialization, postcolonialism, creolization, and postmodernity'.

9. See also the germane critique of Michael Ralph and Maya Singhal (2019) drawing on the historical sociology of Orlando Patterson.
10. See the panoramic critique of Tali Hatuka et al., "The Political Premises of Contemporary Urban Concepts: The Global City, the Sustainable City, the Resilient City, the Creative City, and the Smart City" (2018).
11. A representative sample of this research area is Michael A. Burramyid et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Urban Resilience* (2019).
12. A compact presentation is Florida (2003); a sample of uses of the concept is David E. Andersson et al. (eds) *Handbook of Creative Cities* (2011).
13. Thus the dramatic shift in Richard Florida's tone over a short decade: the 2002 celebration of *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* morphs into the 2012 deploration of *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, DeepeningSegregation, and Failing the Middle Class – And What We Can Do about It.* Both accounts, euphoric and dysphoric, are framed by one and the same concept: heads I win, tails you lose.
14. For Gerring (1999), the trade-offs involve eight criteria he calls familiarity, resonance, parsimony, coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical utility, and field utility.
15. 'Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning – then it can be put back into circulation' (Wittgenstein, 1977: 39).

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