

PLACE, SPACE, AND AGENCY:
MOVING BEYOND THE HOMOGENOUS “GHETTO”¹

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Abstract: In *Urban Outcasts*, Loïc Wacquant has advanced our understanding of contemporary poverty through an international comparative analysis of Chicago and Paris that pays close attention to the role of the state in producing marginality. Yet, Wacquant’s analysis falls short at more fully explaining recent changes in the United States or pointing us in the direction of political change because of limitations related to his theorizing of “the ghetto,” the welfare state, and advanced marginality. Specifically, I argue that Wacquant essentializes place and space through his conceptualization of “the ghetto”; relies too heavily on the South Side of Chicago as representative of U.S. cities; ignores contemporary conditions such as the increasing diversification of poverty; minimizes the agency of poor people; and lacks attention to the role of the local state and the gendered nature of the state. As such there is no discussion of the actual or potential emancipatory politics that may come from diverse (both within and between) communities facing extreme marginalization. [Key words: poverty, United States, agency, welfare state.]

In *Urban Outcasts* (2008), Loïc Wacquant has made important theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions to our understanding of the “new poverty” through his comparison of the late 1980s/early 1990s Chicago Black “ghetto” to the Paris *banlieues*. In so doing, he makes four central arguments drawing on a wealth of ethnographic and quantitative data. First, he argues that poor, Black, inner-city neighborhoods in the United States have become “hyperghettos” that experience extreme isolation, marginalization, stigma, and social disorganization. Second, he suggests that the argument of transatlantic convergence is highly problematic, demonstrating that the American hyperghetto and the French *banlieues* are dissimilar in profound ways, particularly in terms of the relative importance of race/ethnicity and class, variations in state policy, and the depth of material deprivation as well as social and spatial isolation. Third, he focuses on the role of the state in shaping marginalized urban areas both in terms of the relative strength of the welfare state and the penal state. Finally, he develops the concept of “advanced marginality” to provide a framework and research agenda for exploring the poverty that lies, as he emphasizes, ahead of us. While arguing against the idea of a superficial transatlantic convergence, Wacquant does see convergence in structural and institutional processes he defines as “advanced marginality” (pp. 234–246), including waged work as a source of instability, a disconnection from macroeconomic trends, territorial fixation and stigmatization, the

¹This article is part of a review symposium on Loïc Wacquant’s *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*.

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loss of community and survival networks, and the lack of class consolidation as a basis for response to marginalization.

The strengths of *Urban Outcasts* lie in its combination of innovative methodological approaches, including the triangulation of ethnographic and quantitative data; the international comparative analysis that has been sorely lacking in poverty research; its attention to the role of the state in addition to economic processes and institutionalized racism in producing marginalization; and the nuanced framework of advanced marginalization that he develops, which provides the basis for further research and policy directions. These strengths underscore that *Urban Outcasts* is required reading for anyone doing research on urban poverty and social policy.

There are, however, a number of theoretical and empirical issues that collectively weaken his argument and require further examination to fully comprehend more recent societal and institutional changes in the United States. To be frank, I found these limitations surprising given Wacquant's theoretical framework and methodological approach. They include the following: (1) an essentialist conceptualization of space and place; (2) the reliance on the South Side of Chicago as representative of other American cities; (3) the need to update the conceptual framework in light of more recent and changing conditions in the United States, including increased diversification of poverty, the suburbanization of poverty, and immigration patterns; (4) a lack of attention to the agency of poor people; (5) a lack of attention to the local state; and (6) a lack of attention to the gendered nature of the state. These limitations converge in three areas that are central to his analysis: theorizing the ghetto, the welfare state, and advanced marginality.

THEORIZING THE GHETTO

Wacquant's theorizing of the "ghetto" in terms of essentialized place and space is problematic for a number of reasons. Although he correctly, if not originally, critiques the underclass concept as an essentialist and stigmatizing chaotic conception, I have argued elsewhere that the conceptualization of the ghetto in terms of space as container is a crucial part of the underclass concept (Gilbert, 1997, 2000). It is unclear to me why the concepts "ghetto," "Black ghetto," and even "hyperghetto" are the most useful way to conceptualize urban poverty since it negates the ways in which "the ghetto" is created and maintained through wider social, economic, and political processes—exactly the point that Wacquant is trying to make. This leads Wacquant to see the U.S. "ghetto" as a homogenous space in comparison to the French *banlieues*. This tendency is exacerbated by his use of the Chicago Black ghetto as the main basis of theorizing. It also leads him to write of the poor in ways that, surprisingly perhaps, rely heavily on "underclass" terminology.

Yet there are substantial differences in the social and spatial organization of poor neighborhoods in the United States. Furthermore, there is more heterogeneity within poor U.S. neighborhoods than Wacquant's case study implies. In 2000, Latinos constituted 26% of Chicago's population, ranking the city third in Latino population behind Los Angeles and New York (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The lack of analysis of Latino urban poverty in the United States is a major weakness of the book given the increases in Latino urban population over the past 20 years. Therefore, Wacquant's conceptualization of the "ghetto" in the United States, and the relationship of the "ghetto" to advanced marginality need to be reconsidered in light of these theoretical and empirical considerations.

THEORIZING THE WELFARE STATE

Another area that needs to be addressed is the role of the local state in advanced marginality and how this varies in different places. Since the role of the state is so central in producing advanced marginality, it is surprising that there is little analysis of the local state in terms of how it mediates federal and state policies. This omission is particularly problematic for discussing the American situation given that the United States, as a federal system, grants states and counties considerably more powers than the more centralized French government. Moreover, given federal retrenchment, state and local governments are now playing a more crucial role in determining the nature and extent of services. Such variations will play a significant role in understanding how poverty is experienced in different places. Furthermore, a number of key federal policies in the United States are absent in Wacquant's analysis in any substantial manner (e.g., TANF and Hope IV funding). These policies have had a considerable impact on the spatiality of poverty and place-based differences in terms of how they are implemented by the state and local governments.

What also needs to be addressed is how state policies are gendered as well as racialized and classed, and how the experience of poverty is gendered as well. While much of the debate about poverty has focused on the significance of "race" versus class, Wacquant has made an important contribution by making the state central to his analysis. Yet there is a significant theoretical and empirical literature in feminist research that analyzes both poverty and the welfare state from a comparative perspective that he does not utilize (for reviews, see Brush, 2002; Walby, 2004; and Smith, 2008). This is important because the welfare state is gendered. For example, I suspect that the differences between France and the United States have much to do with the differing relationships among the state, market, and family/caring work and how each is gendered, racialized, and classed.

THEORIZING ADVANCED MARGINALITY

In theorizing advanced marginality, an essentialized conception of place in the form of the ghetto, a lack of recognition of heterogeneity, and—ironically—the neglect of the agency of the poor come together to weaken the conceptualization. More recent empirical changes in urban poverty highlight its weaknesses. Specifically, poverty in the United States has become less spatially concentrated, more ethnically heterogeneous, and more suburbanized.

One defining aspect of advanced marginality is what Wacquant labels "territorial fixation and stigmatization" (p. 237). He argues that

Rather than being disseminated throughout working-class areas, advanced marginality tends to be concentrated in isolated and bounded territories increasingly perceived by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous badlands at the heart of the postindustrial metropolis where only the refuse of society would agree to dwell. (p. 237)

However, this begs the question as to how the deconcentration of urban poverty and the suburbanization of poverty shift the processes of advanced marginality? Suburban poverty

has been growing, albeit unevenly, over the past several years and not just in inner-ring suburbs (Berube and Kneebone, 2006).

Two additional and related aspects of advanced marginality are the “spatial alienation and the dissolution of place” (p. 241) and the “loss of a hinterland” (p. 243). Wacquant argues that “there is a loss of a humanized, culturally familiar and socially filtered locale with which marginalized urban populations identify and in which they feel ‘at home’ and in relative security” (p. 241). He goes on to say that

the space of the hyperghetto is akin to an entropic and perilous battlefield upon which a four-corner contest is endlessly waged between (i) independent and organized street predators ... (ii) local residents and their grass-roots organizations (such as MAD, Mothers Against Drugs, on the West Side of Chicago, or block clubs and merchants’ associations where they have survived) who strive to preserve the use-and exchange-value of their neighborhood; (iii) state agencies of surveillance and social control entrusted with containing the violence and disorder within the perimeter of the racialized metropolitan core ... (iv) outside institutional predators (realtors in particular) for whom converting fringe sections of the Black Belt for the uses of the middle and upper classes coming back into the city can yield phenomenal profits. (pp. 242–243)

Furthermore, Wacquant argues there are few networks or neighborhood-based organizations to cushion economic hardship.

By contrast, the majority of the residents of the South Side in 1990 were jobless; the heart of the Black Belt has been virtually emptied of its means of collective substance; and bridges to wage work outside have been drastically narrowed if not cut off by the outright deproletarianization of large segments of the local population. (pp. 233–234)

My own research in Philadelphia, as well as the research of others in different American cities, would suggest that at the very least there is significant variation in the nature and extent of dissolution of place that Wacquant describes in the South Side of Chicago (e.g., Vargas, 2006; Gilmore, 2007). While there is no doubt that material deprivation, lack of employment and services, and violence (meted out by the state as well as citizens) are daily realities of life in poor neighborhoods in the United States, I could not help but react to Wacquant’s description of daily life as hypermasculinized. I suspect that he may have gotten an alternative sense of local networks, support systems, even organizing if he had spent some time talking with women activists or describing women’s lives. I am thinking here of recent books such as João H. Costa Vargas’ (2006) *Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles* and Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2007) *Golden Gulag: Prison, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Whereas both books differ in focus and methodology from each other and *Urban Outcasts*, they nonetheless succeed in linking economic, political, and social change, institutional contexts, and diverse communities in a manner that highlights the complex racialized, classed, gendered, and generational identities of people living under extreme conditions without falling into underclass stereotypes or mind-numbing victimization. They present

a clear-eyed analysis of the malevolent forces arrayed against the survival of poor people and their communities. Yet the authors also describe the humanity and agency of poor people in a manner that suggests the actual and potential emancipatory politics that come from within these communities. I was hoping that Wacquant would talk more about the possibilities for political change. And while he talks about the long-term need to decouple subsistence from waged labor, I would have liked to know more about how to get there. This is what I had hoped and expected to read from Wacquant. But the limitations of his theoretical framework and empirical evidence that I outlined above mitigate against it despite his sympathies with a progressive agenda. These limitations notwithstanding, *Urban Outcasts* is an important and thought-provoking book that should be read by anyone interested in international comparisons of marginalization.

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