Class, ethnicity, Leviathan and place
Implications of Urban Outcasts for the comparative sociology of contemporary Western cities

Virgílio Borges Pereira

In the present phase of sociological research about contemporary Western cities, the publication of Loïc Wacquant’s *Urban Outcasts* forges new paths for highly stimulating and enriching debate. The book is a result of in-depth field research conducted, generally, over a long period of time of the two last decades of the 20th century in Bronzeville and North Lawndale, in the core of Chicago’s Black Belt, and in Paris’s periphery Red Belt city of La Courneuve. Although not an ethnographic work in the traditional sense, it provides relevant contributions to establishing, from a bottom-up perspective, a number of important propositions for the understanding of post-Fordist poverty and the processes of advanced marginality that are associated to it.

It is not an easy task to summarize the most relevant implications of *Urban Outcasts*. Nevertheless, I think that it is possible, at least, to establish three different detailed discussion domains. Thus, I will try (i) to highlight the main epistemological implications of the work; (ii) to identify its most crucial sociological achievements; and (iii) to briefly gather convergent research lines with the sociological study on the Portuguese urban situation.

1. Epistemologically and methodologically speaking, it seems clear that Wacquant has once again inscribed Pierre Bourdieu’s scientific project at the centre of his research and we can highlight three main key aspects.

The first one relates to the role of fieldwork and to its epistemological primacy (Bourdieu et al., 1999 [1968], pp. 54–64) in defining, from below, the most relevant questions elaborated pertaining to Chicago’s urban core and the Parisian urban outskirts. In close connection with this aspect, the second one identifies the specific significance of multi-sited ethnography (Bourdieu, 1980; Wacquant, 2004b, pp. 395–399) and comparison in the genesis of the research programme and its particular analytical meaning, since the dominant *doxa* makes the processes of poverty and marginality production in progress equivalent on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (Wacquant, 2008, p. 145).

Finally and related with the later mentioned aspect, this work can be taken as an accurate application of the epistemological legacies of Émile Durkheim and Gaston Bachelard, since it quite radically and precisely breaks away from the widespread media and academic misrepresentations of the problems of poverty and marginality in Western cities, revealing furthermore every effort for alternative conceptual construction and clarification (Bourdieu et al., 1999 [1968], Parts I, II and III). If the *break* can be exemplified with Wacquant’s recurrent critical reading of the folk notions of *ghetto* and *underclass* (Wacquant, 2008, pp. 149,
164–166, 199, 229–233) and with his treatment of the above-mentioned problem of the Americanization of the European metropolis (ibid., pp. 6, 8, 135, 165, 272–276), the alternative conceptual construction leads us to the sociological implications of the research.

2. As briefly mentioned in the outline of the epistemological entailments, the specific sociological results of Urban Outcasts are necessarily extensive. Yet, I think that it is possible to identify at least two major sociological achievements.

The first major specifically sociological achievement of Wacquant’s work is a result of the effort to develop a compared sociological analysis of the American dark ghetto and the French periphery.

The meticulous identification of the social properties of both socio-spatial formations is, undoubtedly, one of the most significant results of the study, with its analytic prism construed from a genetic and historical approach and with a clear commitment to overcoming sociological approaches anchored in readings of social disorganization.

In this regard, and taking Bronzeville and North Lawndale as research sites, Wacquant produces a dense objectivation of the involutive transformations experienced in Chicago’s inner-city since the 1960s. Materialized in massive deproletarianization, dispossession and the ghetto’s core compelled social homogeneity (as the author demonstrates, in this context of relegation, the social differences between core and periphery of the ghetto are highly significant and it is only in the ghetto’s periphery that the increase in the volume of the agents’ economic and social capital is identifiable), the process of hyperghettoization under development has economic and political roots (ibid., pp. 71–82) and

‘[…] can be construed in part as a retrogression towards the physical ghetto, a retrogression resulting in an intensification of exclusionary social closure, since it now combines racial division with class segmentation against the backdrop of deproletarianization without the compensating action of a canvas of strong homespun organizations.’ (ibid., p. 102)

In the American black hyperghetto, the daily experience of the physical decay of spaces and bodies (“It looks like Berlin after the war” (Wacquant, 2008, p. 53)), the spread of street capitalism, predatory crime, violence and danger (with its high morbidity and premature mortality) are the consequences of a permanent process of racial segregation and marginalization imposed on African Americans (legal apartheid), which, with its new properties, has been fuelled not by a moral crisis of family and individuals, as frequently sustained, but by the extreme deindustrialization, the local collapse of formal labour markets and the local abandonment by public and state institutions (with the exception of the police), namely, through ineffective or absent urban renewal, housing and schooling policies and practices (ibid., pp. 93–94, 121–132).

The history and situation of the French periphery is obviously different from the American black inner-city: ‘banlieues […] are not ghettos in the sense acquired by that notion in the US context’ (ibid., p. 135) and, even if they are the result of the French state’s post-World War II housing policy, banlieues are not all the same. Taking the city of La Courneuve, on the outskirts of Paris, as a research site, the author presents a historical and institutional diagnosis of the general social properties of French cités and contrasts them with the American ghetto. The most relevant of these properties stress the differences in the ecological organization of physical and lived space, ethnic composition, poverty vulnerability, criminality and dangerousness and urban policy. These differences reveal that French banlieues (i) have lower demographic densities and more specific urban functions that propel daily physical mobility, (ii) that they are very diversified in ethnic composition, combining a very strong presence of French nationals with a vast range of immigrants of different
European and non-European nationalities,\(^5\) (iii) that their vulnerability to poverty, all too real due to deindustrialization, rising unemployment and the working-class crisis, has no possible comparison with that of the American ghetto, (iv) that dangerousness and violence do not colonize local everyday life and (v) that, under the state’s housing interventions, with more or less investment, urban renewal is a common practice in the French periphery’s *grands ensembles*, at least since the mid-1980s (ibid., pp. 150–160).\(^6\)

Nevertheless, with their different histories and natures, poverty concentration in the American ghetto and in the French *banlieues* generates at least one relevant common feature: a certain similarity in the effects of territorial stigmatization that stimulates the development of local micro hierarchies, the breakdown of local solidarities and the spread of social atomism.\(^7\) Yet, together with different forms of class domination, the daily experience of stigmatization also reinforces and produces different principles of social vision and division in both socio-spatial formations: the crystallization of the opposition between blacks and whites in the American hyperghetto; the crisis of the old Red Belt institutions and practices (trade unionism, communist party activism, working-class pride) and the emergence of the opposition between young people and the rest of the world in French *cités* (ibid., pp. 183–184, 185–190; see also Coutant, 2005).\(^8\) This latter aspect is very important in Wacquant’s interpretation since it shows that, in France, even when this opposition emerges within the frame of pan-ethnic identity, which has been recurrent, it is an opposition of a defensive kind, anchored in space rather than ethnic or national origin and aiming for social integration (Wacquant, 2008, pp. 194, 196; on this matter, see also Beaud and Pialoux, 2003, p. 265).

In this sense, the comparative analysis of the Black Belt urban core in America and the Red Belt periphery in France also shows that different patterns of isolation and physical violence (re)production are associated with two very different configurations of institutional and organisational presence: institutional isolation in the French periphery (that generates apathy and the diffusion of insecurity feelings among its habitants) and organizational desertification in the American hyperghetto (that, in the present situation, propels physical and emotional social insecurity) (Wacquant, 2008, pp. 223–224).

The second major achievement of *Urban Outcasts* has to do with Wacquant’s effort to stabilize a theory and synthesis on the contemporary crisis of Fordist socio-economic regimes and its impact on the reproduction of relegation and stigmatization as ‘effects of place’ (Bourdieu, 1993a, pp. 159–167) in American and European cities (Wacquant, 2008, pp. 6, 270–272).\(^9\)

According to Wacquant, contemporary economic and social dynamics cluster around rising income and class inequalities, the desocialization of wage labour and occupational dualization, with massive unemployment and precariousness, thus producing working-class decomposition in a way not necessarily connected with macroeconomic trends (ibid., pp. 263–267).\(^10\) Following the main set of propositions of such a theory not only reveals it to be compatible with some of the most important researches accomplished on the structuring of work and the economic field in various contexts and countries,\(^11\) but also presents a comparative heuristic research agenda, capable of overcoming the inevitable and generic (top-down) formulations of certain globalization theories and the unquestioned neo-liberal vision of society that frequently sustains some of its variants:

‘Everywhere the litany of “globalization” and the budgetary strictures imposed by the Maastricht Treaty (and successor treaties of the same ilk) have served to […] excuse social disinvestment in formerly working-class areas highly dependent on state provision of public goods.’ (ibid., p. 269)\(^12\)

On this specific matter, probably the most significant contribution of Wacquant’s work relies on the conceptualization of the action
and inaction of states in the genesis and growth of post-Fordist poverty in advanced capitalist societies: ‘The ruling classes and government elites of rich nations have, to varying degrees, proved unable or unwilling to stem the rise of inequality and marginality’ (ibid., p. 37). This concern with Leviathan (Hobbes, 2002 [1651]) and state nobility (Bourdieu, 1989), power and domination opens the way to revisiting, from new and very different perspectives—but also through a sociological lens focused on the flow of daily life—of an often indicated (although forgotten or not actively used in research practice) ancient constituent of urban sociology: political power (Lefebvre, 1972).13 Thus, in Wacquant’s view, contemporary production of urban violence, in its different shapes, is undoubtedly related to the different answers that states give to promote social policies and welfare regimes;14 in this sense, a truly emancipating fight against poverty cannot coexist with the mere announcement of the return of the dangerous classes,15 with ethnoracial or ethnonational arguments, and the criminalization of the poor.16 It must involve a deeper work of citizenship constitution and collective political negotiation (Wacquant, 2008, pp. 24–34).

3. The main sociological achievements of Urban Outcasts are also relevant to understanding the contemporary Portuguese urban setting.

In Portugal, where we find a decades-old pattern structured around high levels of inequality structuration, the processes of transformation in economic activity and class structure that have occurred in the last two decades indicate an increase in inequalities and the emergence of new properties in the production of the economic field. Such properties, which are closely connected with the traditionally high levels of the country’s economic informality, include rising levels of unemployment (which until recently had a low official expression) and rapidly growing levels of wage labour precariousness that affect in particular the most stable fractions of industrial workers, routine employees and those who possess reduced volumes of cultural and economic capital, young and old.17

These developments are associated with very important processes of spatial relegation, which, in Portugal, have been on the rise and gained more complex forms in regions with long industrial and urban histories.

If we take, for instance, the case of Porto (a city of 260,000 residents, 42 square km and head of the region of Greater Porto), it is clear that the processes of class formation occurred in the city since the 1860s produced consolidated spatial divisions (Pereira, 2005, ch. 2). Focusing on contexts of relegation, it is possible to identify a complex configuration of socio-spatial formations in Porto. Within city limits we can identify at least three types of relegation contexts. The first can be found in the city’s medieval historic centre (where, after a long period of overpopulation, we still find 5 per cent of the city’s population, but where more than 80 per cent of the buildings need to be repaired); the second is constituted by the old ilhas (slums) located, predominantly, in the backyards of petit-bourgeois houses in the city’s central area inherited from the 19th-century industrial period (according to 2001 records, the ilhas, which were supposed to disappear decades ago, still gather almost 4 per cent of the city’s population); the third is formed by different public housing projects built since the mid-1950s on the city’s boundaries (together these projects assemble 1/5 of the population of the city).

In opposition to the dominant doxa, the contexts of relegation have a certain degree of internal division, thus leading to the formation of social and cultural differences within and among the contexts. With their own specificities and histories, some of these contexts are now very important nodes of deindustrialization (before they were important industrial sites and working-class neighbourhoods), with high rates of unemployment (usually 3, 4 and 5 times above the city’s average rate), poverty and informal activity (where drug
dealing, with its corrosive consequences, is the most visible of these activities in certain sectors of specific neighbourhoods (Fernandes, 1998). They are also stigmatized places (Queiroz and Gros, 2002). To different degrees, according to the social history of the place, the experience of stigmatization (often driven by media exposure and oversimplified political discourse) is reinforced when (with the help of class decomposition) local (in)formal organizations close down, social atomism among residents develops (especially among adults and elderly) and local public institutions become ineffective, absent or radically reflect their more stabilized actions, as has occurred in specific neighbourhoods (Pereira, 2005, chs 6 and 8).

In short, the sociological study of the contexts of relegation in Porto does show that the state’s actions and inactions have great bearing in the production and in the reproduction of poverty and marginality. On this matter, the history of the constitution and diffusion of the ilhas as the main form of housing for workers during the industrial period of the city is quite illustrative, since it shows that City Hall authorities were forced by disease proliferation to acknowledge the need to regulate their construction, which they had refused to do for several decades, only to start almost 50 years later (Teixeira, 1996). The same can be said about the history of the construction of public housing projects; as a result of dictatorship’s action in the city, these involved a clearly punitive conception of housing production and daily life reproduction (Gros, 1982). Finally, with few exceptions, the state did not complete the renewal of the historic centre, thus frustrating populations’ high expectations and leaving behind a persistent unsolved problem with serious urban, social and economic dimensions (Pinto and Pereira, 2007).

Thus, the compared sociological study of the configuration of the economic and political fields and of their relations with daily life (re)production in Western cities seems to constitute a promising domain for future research.

Notes

1 On transformative involutions, see also, among various studies, the work on Russia by Burawoy et al. (2000).

2 ‘By introducing this new term, I wish to indicate that, in shedding its economic function as a “reservoir” of industrial manpower, the ghetto also lost its organizational capacity to embrace and protect its residents. The “pulpit and the press” [...] virtually collapsed as agencies for collective unification and action’ (Wacquant, 2008, pp. 101–102).

3 ‘For those who are repeatedly rejected from the labour market [...] underground activities offer a bounty of full-time employment opportunities. [...] The sums that can be grossed in the drug trade in the ghetto are extravagant in relation to the crushing poverty of the local population and the miserly level of wages and public aid. [...] the certainty of getting one’s hands on fresh cash and the possibility of rapidly earning large sums make it seem like an economic lottery worth playing to those hardened or desperate enough to put up with the acute psychological stress and high physical risks it carries’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 66).

4 For a detailed analysis of the processes of spatial and class decomposition in Bronzeville, see also Wacquant (2008, pp. 51–69, 95–117). For a sociological theory of urban space with a relevant discussion of urban abandonment, see Rémy and Voyé (1992, Part II, ch. 2).

5 ‘In French urban space, ethnic discrimination in access to housing is very real, but it is strongly attenuated when the members of families of colour improve their economic and cultural capital. Proof is the absence of middle-class neighbourhoods of North African or black tenor on French territory’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 155).

6 For further information, see also the classic compared research on housing policies in Britain and France by Willmot and Murie (1990). For an in-depth sociological and historical portrait of industrial cities in the first half of the 20th century, see Magri and Topalov (1989).

7 On this matter, as well as the French situation, see also Paugam (1991) and Schwartz (1989). For a seminal sociological analysis of the role of the media in the production of social and spatial stigmatization in the French periphery, see Champagne (1993, pp. 61–79).

8 On this matter, see also Bourdieu (1979, ch. 7, 1993b), the classic study on French working-class culture by Verret (1988), the analysis of the political transformations experienced in the Red Belt French periphery by Masclet (2006) and the in-depth analysis of the emergence of the French
industrial working class as an ‘object class’ by Beaud and Pialoux (2003, pp. 389–404). For a detailed study of working-class experience in a context of deindustrialization in the UK, see Charlesworth (2000).

9 For an overview of the large-scale incidence of urban poverty, relegation and stigmatization in Latin America, Africa and Asia, see Davis (2006). Focusing on the case of São Paulo, in Brazil, Marques and Torres (2005) provide detailed sociological research on the matter. For an ethnographical analysis of the environmental consequences and suffering of daily life in shantytowns, in Argentina, see the recent study by Auyero and Swistun (2007).

10 For an enlightening exposure of sociological theory on the relation between space and the crisis of the Fordist labour regime, see Mela (1996, chs 2 and 3).


12 The political work and agenda setting underlying the actions of states and international institutions is scrutinized in detail by Lebaron (2003, pp. 63–91); a sociological analysis of the processes of economic transformation, via market and state policy constitution, is developed by Bourdieu (2002, ch. 2); for an in-depth sociological analysis of the processes here involved, see also Boltanski and Chiapello (1999).

13 As Wacquant puts it right at the beginning of the book: American black ‘[...] hyperghettoization is primarily a chapter in political sociology’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 4).

14 The differences in welfare state constitution within Europe and between America and America are studied, as it is well known, by Esping-Andersen (1990). For an overview of the analytical implications of Esping-Andersen’s work, see Arts and Gelissen (2002). A detailed study of the differences between Europe and the USA in the fight against poverty may be read in the work by Alesina and Glaeser (2004). For a socio-historic portrait of the emergence of the category of unemployed in France, England and the USA, see Topalov (1994).


16 For detailed compared sociological research on these specific questions, see also Wacquant (1999, 2004a).

17 For an in-depth study of the Portuguese urban situation, focusing on topics such as demographic structure, spatial occupation, class structure, poverty reproduction and cultural practices, see Pinto (1997). For a compared analysis of the Portuguese class structure, see Almeida et al. (2006). The processes of labour market dualization now occurring in Portugal, with a special attention paid to youth transitions to work, are analysed by Guerreiro and Abrantes (2004).

18 Time bomb metaphors, ghettoization and related topics have been a regular presence in public and media debates every time the social problems of Porto’s relegation contexts are brought to public, especially during electoral campaigns. For an analysis of the political agenda and social vision of Porto’s local authorities regarding the city’s ongoing downtown urban renewal, see Queirós (2007).

19 With a different urban history, similar conclusions could be drawn from the discussion of the general logic of Lisbon’s contexts of relegation. Yet, in this case, the element of ethnicity is also part of the equation since Lisbon’s peripheral contexts of relegation also include the visible presence of African immigrants (immigrants who come from the former Portuguese colonies). Against all prejudice, socially and politically, in short, recent sociological research has shown that, although predominantly occupied by immigrants of African origin, these contexts are not homogeneous in ethnic terms (and that Portuguese nationals also reside in them).

Focusing, for instance, on the case of the immigrants from Guinea-Bissau (mainly men who have recently arrived in the country, a profile that differs from the family based and not so recent immigration process of the nationals of Cape-Verde), it was possible to verify that their residential trajectories tend to be complex, non-rigid and that the pattern of spatial mobility in the rest of the country (namely, in Porto and the Algarve) tends to be dispersed instead of concentrated, as in Lisbon; in this regard and with ethnic and social class specificities, the same research demonstrated that the contrasting social and spatial profile of (first generation) immigrants has changed significantly to one of continuity when discussing the case of the second generations (Machado, 2002, ch. 3).

References


Virgílio Borges Pereira is Professor of the Departamento de Sociologia and Researcher of the Instituto de Sociologia Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, Portugal. E-mail: jpereira@lettras.up.pt