



Urban Marginality in the Coming Millennium

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Summary. This paper sketches a characterisation of the regime of urban marginality that has emerged in advanced societies since the close of the Fordist era, highlighting four logics that combine to produce it: a macrosocietal drift towards inequality, the mutation of wage labour (entailing both deproletarianisation and casualisation), the retrenchment of welfare states, and the spatial concentration and stigmatisation of poverty. The rise of this new marginality does not signal a transatlantic convergence on the American pattern: European neighbourhoods of relegation are deeply penetrated by the state and ethnoracial tensions in them are fuelled, not by the growing gap between immigrants and natives, but by their increasing propinquity in social and physical space. To cope with emergent forms of urban marginality, societies face a three-pronged alternative: they can patch up existing programmes of the welfare state, criminalise poverty via the punitive containment of the poor, or institute new social rights that sever subsistence from performance in the labour market.

Introduction

All social phenomena are, to some degree, the work of collective will, and collective will implies choice between different possible options. ... The realm of the social is the realm of modality (Mauss, 1929, p. 470).

This paper analyses the modalities whereby new forms of urban inequality and marginality have arisen and are spreading throughout the advanced societies of the capitalist West. The argument unfolds in two steps.

First, I sketch a compact characterisation of what I take to be a new regime of urban marginality. This regime has been ascendant for the past three decades or so, since the close of the Fordist era defined by

standardised industrial production, mass consumption and a Keynesian social contract binding them together under the tutelage of the social welfare state. Yet its full impact lies ahead of us because its advent is tied to the most advanced sectors of our economies—this is why I refer to it here as ‘advanced marginality’. Identifying the distinctive properties of this consolidating regime of urban marginality helps us to pinpoint what exactly is new about the ‘new poverty’ of which the city is the site and fount.

Secondly, I turn to the question that implicitly informs or explicitly guides European debates on the resurgence of destitution, division and tension in the metropolis:

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namely, are we witnessing an epochal convergence of urban poverty regimes across the Atlantic? It is argued that we are not: urban relegation follows different social and spatial dynamics on the two continents. Yet European societies must beware of pursuing public policies that isolate distinct urban zones and populations, thereby encouraging them to pursue divergent and even oppositional life strategies that can set off self-reinforcing cycles of social involution not unlike those that underlie ghettoisation in the US.

Despite its title, then, this paper is not a contribution to the fadish celebration of '2000'. Rather, it is an attempt to diagnose the social forces and forms with which our current urban predicament is pregnant and that promise to shape the metropolis of tomorrow—unless we exercise our 'collective will' and act to check mechanisms and steer trends in a different direction.

Symptoms of Advanced Marginality

The close of the 20th century is witnessing a momentous transformation of the roots, make-up and consequences of urban poverty in Western society. Along with the accelerating economic modernisation caused by the global restructuring of capitalism, the crystallisation of a new international division of labour (fostered by the frantic velocity of financial flows and workers across porous national boundaries) and the growth of novel knowledge-intensive industries based on revolutionary information technologies and spawning a dual occupational structure, has come the modernisation of misery—the rise of a new regime of urban inequality and marginality. (For a fuller argument, see Wacquant, 1996a.)

Where poverty in the Western metropolis used to be largely residual or cyclical, embedded in working-class communities, geographically diffuse and considered remediable by means of further market expansion, it now appears to be increasingly long-term if not permanent, disconnected from macroeconomic trends and fixated upon disreputable

neighbourhoods of relegation in which social isolation and alienation feed upon each other as the chasm between those consigned there and the rest of society deepens.

The consolidation of this new regime of urban marginality is treading diverse routes and taking different forms in the various countries of the First World. In the US and in the UK, it has been greatly facilitated by the policy of wholesale state retrenchment pursued by conservative and liberal parties alike over the past two decades and by the rigid or rising spatial and social separation of white and coloured in the major urban centres. In other nations with strong corporatist or social-democratic welfare states and less segregated cities, such as the countries of northern Europe and Scandinavia, it has been partly attenuated but not wholly deflected. And it has become embroiled with the vexed question of the integration of Third World migrants and refugees, as expressed in the anguish over the crystallisation of immigrant 'ghettos' gripping the continent from Marseille to München and Brussels to Brindisi (see, for example, Hadjimichalis and Sadler, 1995; Mingione, 1996).

Whatever the label used to designate it—'underclass' in the US and in the UK; 'new poverty' in the Netherlands Germany and Northern Italy; 'exclusion' in France, Belgium and Nordic countries—the telltale signs of the new marginality are immediately familiar to even the casual observer of the Western metropolis: homeless men and families vainly scrambling about for shelter, beggars on public transport spinning heart-rending tales of personal disaster and dereliction, soup kitchens teeming with not only drifters but also the unemployed and the underemployed; the surge in predatory crime and the booming of informal (and more often than not illegal) street economies spearheaded by the trade in drugs; the despondency and rage of youths shut out from gainful employment and the bitterness of older workers made obsolete by deindustrialisation and technological upgrading; the sense of retrogression, despair and insecurity that pervades poor neighbourhoods locked into a seemingly un-

stoppable downward spiral of deterioration; and mounting racial violence, xenophobia and hostility towards and amongst the poor. Everywhere, state élites and public policy experts have become acutely concerned with preventing or containing the 'disorders' brewing within and around expanding enclaves of urban decline and abandonment. Hence the sprouting of research on urban decline and destitution supported by various national and transnational bodies, including the European Commission (with its Targeted Socio-economic Programme on exclusion and integration), the OECD, and even NATO on the European side, and major philanthropic foundations in the US.

Four Structural Logics Fuel the New Marginality

But the distinctive structural properties of 'modernised misery' are much less evident than its concrete manifestations. Schematically, the emerging regime of marginality may be characterised as the product of four logics that jointly reshape the features of urban poverty in rich societies. These features stand in stark contrast with the commanding traits of poverty in the era of Fordist expansion from the close of World War II to the mid-1970s.

The Macrosocial Dynamic: The Resurgence of Social Inequality

The new urban marginality results not from economic backwardness, sluggishness or decline, but from rising inequality in the context of overall economic advancement and prosperity. Arguably the most puzzling attribute of the new marginality is that it is spreading in an era of capricious but sturdy growth that has brought about spectacular material betterment for the more privileged members of First World societies. Notwithstanding ritual talk of 'crisis' among politicians, all leading capitalist countries have seen their GNP expand and collective wealth increase rapidly over the past three decades. Opulence and indigence, luxury and penury,

copiousness and deprivation have flourished right alongside each other. Thus the city of Hamburg, by some measurements the richest city in Europe, sports both the highest proportion of millionnaires and the highest incidence of public assistance receipt in Germany, while New York City is home to the largest upper class on the planet but also to the single greatest army of the homeless and destitute in the Western hemisphere (Mollenkopf and Castells, 1991).

The two phenomena, though apparently contradictory, are in point of fact linked. For the novel forms of productivity and profit-seeking in the 'high-tech', degraded manufacturing and business and financial service sectors that drive *fin-de-siècle* capitalism are splitting the workforce and polarising access to, and rewards from, durable employment. Post-industrial modernisation translates, on the one hand, into the multiplication of highly skilled positions for university-trained professional and technical staff and, on the other, into the deskilling and outright elimination of millions of jobs for uneducated workers (Sassen, 1991; Carnoy *et al.*, 1993). What is more, today, jobless production and growth in many economic sectors are not a utopian possibility but a bittersweet reality. Witness the virtual emptying of the harbour of Rotterdam, perhaps the most modern in the world and a major contributor to the rise of unemployment in this Dutch city to above the 20 per cent mark.

The more the revamped capitalist economy advances, the wider and deeper the reach of the new marginality, and the more plentiful the ranks of those thrown into the throes of misery with neither respite nor recourse, even as official unemployment drops and income rises in the country. In September 1994, the US Bureau of the Census reported that the US poverty rate had risen to a 10-year high of 15.1 per cent (for a staggering total of 40 million poor persons) despite 2 years of robust economic expansion. Meanwhile, the European Union officially tallies a record 52 million poor, 17 million unemployed and 3 million homeless—and counting—

in the face of renewed economic growth and improved global competitiveness.

Put differently, advanced marginality appears to have been 'decoupled' from cyclical fluctuations in the national economy. The consequence is that upswings in aggregate income and employment have little beneficial effect upon life-chances in the neighbourhoods of relegation in Europe and the US, while downswings cause further deterioration and distress within them. Unless this disconnection is somehow remedied, further economic growth promises to produce more urban dislocation and depression among those thrust and trapped at the bottom of the emerging urban order.

The Economic Dynamic: The Mutation of Wage Labour

The new urban marginality is the by-product of a double transformation of the sphere of work. The one is quantitative and entails the elimination of millions of low-skilled jobs under the combined press of automation and foreign labour competition. The other is qualitative, involving the degradation and dispersion of basic conditions of employment, remuneration and social insurance for virtually all but the most protected workers.

From the time when Friedrich Engels wrote his classic exposé on the condition of the working class in Manchester's factories to the crisis of the great industrial heartlands of Euro-American capitalism a century and a half later, it was rightly assumed that expanding wage labour supplied a viable and efficacious solution to the problem of urban poverty. Under the new economic regime, that assumption is at best dubious and at worst plain wrong.

First, a significant fraction of the working class has been rendered redundant and composes an 'absolute surplus population' that will probably never find regular work again. At any rate, given the loosening of the functional linkage between macroeconomic activity and social conditions in the poor enclaves of the First World metropolis, and considering the productivity increases

permitted by automation and computerisation, even miraculous rates of growth could not absorb back into the workforce those who have been deproletarianised—that is, durably and forcibly expelled from the wage labour market to be replaced by a combination of machines, cheap immigrant labour and foreign workers (Rifkin, 1995).

Secondly, and more importantly, the character of the wage-labour relation itself has changed over the past two decades in a manner such that it no longer grants fool-proof protection against the menace of poverty even to those who enter it. With the expansion of part-time, 'flextime' and temporary jobs that carry fewer benefits, the erosion of union protection, the diffusion of two-tier pay scales, the resurgence of sweatshops, piece rates and famine wages, and the growing privatisation of social goods such as health coverage, the wage labour contract has become a source of fragmentation and precariousness rather than of social homogeneity and security for those consigned to the peripheral segments of the employment sphere (see, for example, European Economic Community, 1989; Mabit, 1995; MacDonald and Sirianni, 1996). In short, where economic growth and the correlative expansion of the wage sector used to provide the universal cure against poverty, today they are part of the malady.

The Political Dynamic: The Reconstruction of Welfare States

The fragmentation and desocialisation of labour are not the only factors fuelling the rise of the new urban poverty. For, alongside market forces, welfare states are major producers and shapers of urban inequality and marginality. States not only deploy programmes and policies designed to 'mop up' the most glaring consequences of poverty and to cushion (or not) its social and spatial impact. They also help to determine who gets relegated, how, where and for how long.

States are major engines of stratification in their own right and nowhere more so than at the bottom of the socio-spatial order (Esping-

Andersen, 1993): they provide or preclude access to adequate schooling and job training; they set conditions for labour market entry and exit via administrative rules for hiring, firing and retirement; they distribute (or fail to distribute) basic subsistence goods, such as housing and supplementary income; they actively support or hinder certain family and household arrangements; and they co-determine both the material intensity and the geographical exclusivity and density of misery through a welter of administrative and fiscal schemes.

The retrenchment and disarticulation of the welfare state are two major causes of the social deterioration and destitution visible in the metropolis of advanced societies. This is particularly obvious in the US, where the population covered by social insurance schemes has shrunk for two decades while programmes targeted to the poor were cut and increasingly turned into instruments of surveillance and control. The recent 'welfare reform' concocted by the Republican congress and signed into law by President Clinton in the summer of 1996 is emblematic of this logic (Wacquant, 1997a). It replaces the right to public aid with the obligation to work, if necessary at insecure jobs and for sub-standard wages, for all able-bodied persons, including young mothers with dependent children. It drastically diminishes funding for assistance and creates a life-time cap on welfare support. Lastly, it transfers administrative responsibility from the federal government to the 50 states and their counties, thus aggravating already existing inequalities in access to welfare and accelerating the incipient privatisation of social policy.

A similar logic of curtailment and devolution has presided over wholesale or piecemeal modifications of social transfer systems in the UK, Germany, Italy and France. Even the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries have implemented measures designed to reduce access to public support and to stem the growth of social budgets. Everywhere the mantra of 'globalisation' and the fiscal strictures imposed by the Maastricht Treaty have

served to justify these measures and to excuse social disinvestment in formerly working-class areas highly dependent on state provision of public goods. The growing shortcomings of national welfare schemes have led regional and local authorities to institute their own stop-gap support programmes (especially in response to homelessness and long-term unemployment).

The irrelevance of the 'national state' has become a commonplace of intellectual conversation the world over. It is fashionable nowadays to bemoan the incapacity of central political institutions to check the mounting social dislocations consequent upon global capitalist restructuring. But large and persistent discrepancies in the incidence and persistence of poverty, as well as in the living standards, (im)mobility and spatial distinctiveness of the urban poor in different countries suggest that news of the passing of the national welfare state has been greatly exaggerated. As of the late 1980s, tax and transfer programmes lifted most poor households near the median national income level in the Netherlands (62 per cent) and France (52 per cent); in West Germany only a third of poor families escaped poverty thanks to government support and in the US virtually none. Extreme destitution has been eliminated among children in Scandinavian countries, while it plagues one child in six (and every other black child) in the US (these data are drawn from McFate *et al.*, 1995; a more analytical overview can be found in Kangas, 1991). States do make a difference—that is, when they care to. Therefore, it is imperative to bring them back to the epicentre of the comparative sociology of urban marginality as *generative* as well as *remedial* institutions.

The Spatial Dynamic: Concentration and Stigmatisation

In the post-war decades of industrial expansion, poverty in the metropolis was broadly distributed throughout working-class districts and tended to affect a cross-section of manual and unskilled labourers. By contrast, the new marginality displays a distinct tendency

to conglomerate in and coalesce around 'hard core', 'no-go' areas that are clearly identified—by their own residents, no less than by outsiders—as urban hellholes rife with deprivation, immorality and violence where only the outcasts of society would consider living.

Nantua in Philadelphia, Moss Side in Manchester, Gutleutviertel in Hamburg, Brixton in London, Nieuwe Westen in Rotterdam, Les Minguettes in Lyon's suburbs and Bobigny in the Parisian periphery: these entrenched quarters of misery have 'made a name' for themselves as repositories for all the urban ills of the age, places to be shunned, feared and deprecated. It matters little that the discourses of demonisation that have mushroomed about them often have only tenuous connections to the reality of everyday life in them. A pervading territorial stigma is firmly affixed upon the residents of such neighbourhoods of socioeconomic exile that adds its burden to the disrepute of poverty and the resurging prejudice against ethnic minorities and immigrants (an excellent analysis of this process of public stigmatisation is offered by Damer, 1989, in the case of Glasgow).

Along with territorial stigmatisation comes a sharp diminution of the sense of communality that used to characterise older working-class locales. Now the neighbourhood no longer offers a shield against the insecurities and pressures of the outside world; it is no longer a familiar and reaffirming landscape suffused with collective meanings and forms of mutuality. It turns into an empty space of competition and conflict, a danger-filled battleground for the daily contest of survival and escape. This weakening of territorially based communal bonds, in turn, fuels a retreat into the sphere of privatised consumption and strategies of distancing ('I am not one of them') that further undermine local solidarities and confirm deprecatory perceptions of the neighbourhood.

We must remain alert to the possibility that this may be a transitional (or cyclical) phenomenon eventually leading to the spatial deconcentration or diffusion of urban mar-

ginality. But for those presently consigned at the bottom of the hierarchical system of places that compose the new spatial order of the city, the future is now. Relatedly, it must be stressed that such neighbourhoods of relegation are creatures of state policies in matters of housing, urban and regional planning. Fundamentally, then, their emergence, consolidation and eventual dispersion are essentially political issues.

The Spectre of Transatlantic Convergence

One question is at the back of everyone's mind when it comes to the deterioration of social conditions and life-chances in Old World metropolis: does the rise of this new marginality signal a structural *rapprochement* between Europe and the US on the model of the latter (see, for instance, Cross, 1992; Musterd, 1994; van Kempen and Marcuse, 1999; Häußerman *et al.*, in press). Framed in such simplistic, either/or, terms, the question hardly admits of an analytically rigorous answer. For regimes of urban marginality are complex and capricious beasts; they are composed of imperfectly articulated ensembles of institutional mechanisms tying together economy, state, place and society that do not evolve in unison and, moreover, differ significantly from country to country with national conceptions and institutions of citizenship. It is therefore necessary first to rephrase this query.

If by convergence, one means the wholesale 'Americanisation' of urban patterns of exclusion in the European city leading down the path of *ghettoisation* of the kind imposed upon Afro-Americans since they urbanised at the beginning of this century (i.e. the formation of a segmented, parallel, socio-spatial reality serving the dual purpose of exploitation and ostracisation of a bounded ethnoracial category), then the answer is clearly negative (Wacquant, 1996b). Contrary to first impressions and superficial, media-driven accounts, the changeover of the continental metropolis has not triggered a process of ghettoisation: it is not spawning culturally uniform

socio-spatial ensembles based on the forcible relegation of stigmatised populations to enclaves where these populations evolve group- and place-specific organisations that substitute for and duplicate the institutional framework of the broader society, if at an inferior and incomplete level.

There is no Turkish ghetto in Berlin, no Arab ghetto in Marseilles, no Surinamese ghetto in Rotterdam and no Caribbean ghetto in Liverpool. Residential or commercial clusters fuelled by ethnic affinity do exist in all these cities. Discrimination and violence against immigrants (or putative immigrants) are also brutal facts of life in all major urban centres of Europe (Wrench and Solomos, 1993; Björge and White, 1993). Combined with their typically lower-class distribution and higher rates of joblessness, this explains the disproportionate representation of foreign-origin populations in urban territories of exile. But discrimination and even segregation are not ghettoisation. Such immigrant concentrations as exist are not the product of the institutional encasement of the group premised on rigid spatial confinement—as evidenced by rising rates of intermarriage and spatial diffusion when education and class position improve (Tribalat, 1995). Indeed, if anything characterises the neighbourhoods of relegation that have sprouted across the continent as mechanisms of working-class reproduction have floundered, it is their extreme ethnic heterogeneity as well as their incapacity to supply the basic needs and encompass the daily round of their inhabitants—two properties that make them *anti-ghettos*.

If convergence implies that self-reinforcing cycles of ecological disrepair, social deprivation and violence, resulting in spatial emptying and institutional abandonment, are now operative on the continent, then again the answer is negative because European areas of urban exile remain, with few exceptions (such as southern Italian cities), deeply penetrated by the state. The kind of 'triage' and purposive desertion of urban areas to 'economise' on public services that has befallen the American

metropolis is unimaginable in the European political context with its fine-grained bureaucratic monitoring of the national territory. At the same time, there can be no question that the capacity of European states to govern territories of relegation is being severely tested and may prove unequal to the task if recent trends toward the spatial concentration of persistent joblessness continue unabated (Engbersen, 1997).

Finally, if convergence is intended, more modestly, to spotlight the growing salience of ethnoracial divisions and tensions in the European metropolis, then the answer is a qualified and provisional yes, albeit with the following strong provisos. First, this does not necessarily imply that a process of 'racialisation' of space is underway and that the societies of the Old World are witnessing the formation of 'minorities' in the sense of ethnic communities mobilised and recognised as such in the public sphere. Secondly, ethnoracial conflict is not a novel phenomenon in the European city: it has surged forth repeatedly in the past century during periods of rapid social and economic restructuring—which means also that there is little that is distinctively 'American' about it (Moore, 1989).

Finally, and contrary to the American pattern, putatively racial strife in the cities of the Old World is fuelled not by the growing gap between immigrants and natives but by their greater propinquity in social and physical space. Ethnonational exclusivism is a nativist reaction to abrupt downward mobility by the autochthonous working class before it expresses a profound ideological switch to a racist (or, rather, racialist) register. Notwithstanding fadish blanket pronouncements about the 'globalisation of race,' the increased salience of ethnicity in European public discourse and everyday life pertains as much to a politics of class as to a politics of identity.

Coda: Coping with Advanced Marginality

In their effort to respond to emergent forms of urban relegation, nation-states face a

three-pronged alternative. The first, middle-ground, option consists of patching up the existing programmes of the welfare state. Clearly, this is not doing the job, or the problems posed by advanced marginality would not be so pressing today. The second, regressive and repressive, solution is to criminalise poverty via the punitive containment of the poor in increasingly isolated and stigmatised neighbourhoods, on the one hand, and in jails and prisons, on the other. This is the route taken by the US following the ghetto riots of the sixties (Wacquant, 1997b; Rothman, 1995). One cannot dismiss its appeal among segments of the European ruling class, even in the face of the colossal social and fiscal costs entailed in the mass confinement of poor and disruptive populations. Incarceration rates have risen through much of the continent over the past two decades and imprisonment is a seductive stop-gap solution to mounting urban dislocations even in the most liberal societies (Christie, 1997). But, aside from the powerful political and cultural obstacles to the wholesale confinement of misery inherent in the make-up of social-democratic states in Europe, punitive confinement leaves untouched the root causes of the new poverty.

The third, progressive, pathway points to a fundamental reconstruction of the welfare state that would put its structure and policies in accord with emerging economic and social conditions. Radical innovations, such as the institution of a universal citizen's wage (or basic income grant) that would sever subsistence from work, are needed to expand social rights and check the deleterious effects of the mutation of wage labour (van Parijs, 1996). In the end, this third option is the only viable response to the challenge that advanced marginality poses to democratic societies as they prepare to cross the threshold of the new millennium.

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