

The Ghetto, the Hyperghetto and the Fragmentation of the World

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Abstract

Reflecting on Loïc Wacquant's Urban Outcasts, my observations focus on two points: the ghetto and the hyperghetto. On the one hand, over and above the France–USA comparison, the text suggests that 'the ghetto' is a relative urban position, not one that establishes an identity. Within that framework, some French banlieues or Palestinian refugee camps are in a position of urban, social and political relegation that is well conveyed by the term 'ghetto' or 'ghettoization'. On the other hand, if we are agreed that it is distance from the state that constitutes the ghetto, then transference of this notion of relegation to the global scale is a possible definition of 'the hyperghetto'.

Loïc Wacquant's work *Parias urbains [Urban Outcasts]*¹ is in itself a reference point for any reflection on the analysis of spaces of spatial and social relegation, as well as, obviously, for any sociological or political analysis of the ghetto as a form. Like *Les prisons de la misère* (Wacquant, 1999), it is a work built in tension. It engages partly in a dialogue with the media, politics and civil society, and partly with the world of social-science research. It is, in this sense, a profoundly committed work, and in no way succumbs to the temptations of the exoticizing monograph. What makes this commitment possible, is the fact that it is based on long personal experience in urban ethnography, which is also attested, in a different tone and style, by the famous *Corps et âme. Carnets ethnographiques d'un apprenti boxeur* (Wacquant, 2002). Wacquant grounds his *Parias urbains* on familiarity with the subject, the basis, for anthropologists, of all writing and all analysis. But, in an intellectual trajectory that has for several years been moving between fieldwork, sociological analysis and political commitment, the particular strength of *Parias urbains* lies in its use of the tool of comparison and its taking account of diachrony.

In my commentary I shall tackle two questions connected with these two major qualities, comparativism and diachrony. One is the France–US comparison in relation to the description of the 'ghetto'; the other concerns the particular point in the history of the ghetto at which it becomes transformed into a 'hyperghetto'.

The ghetto

The French *banlieue* is not the American ghetto. At the same time as showing equivalences that are not apparent but structural, or homologies like the one that links the

Translated from French by Iain L. Fraser.

1 I would stress that my observations are based on the French version of *Urban Outcasts (Parias urbains. Ghetto — banlieues — Etat*. La Découverte, Paris, 2006).

socially degrading stigmatization of the ‘city ghetto’ in France with that of ‘the underclass’ in the United States, Wacquant develops a rigorous and convincing comparison that deconstructs overhasty equating of the two, using a Bourdieu-style approach that positions sociology in an epistemological break with the deceptive evidence of ‘common sense’. Both cases are indeed a question of ‘territories of relegation’, notes Wacquant, but with different histories, populations and social structures.

Though I take the findings of this comparative research to be an undeniable gain, I wish to bring Wacquant back to the evolution of the French context in recent years. As he well knows, that context is no longer the same as it was in the 1990s. The term ‘ghetto’ is in circulation, despite its inadequacy for comparative purposes, and appears in slogans at demonstrations and in the words of French rap songs. Moreover, researchers today use it as an urban marker for continuously confirmed marginalization at the social, economic and political levels — as a place that one cannot but want to escape from, yet where a certain identification with the ‘place’ nonetheless takes shape. Taking the constructivist approach further may enable us to grasp how the ghetto, as both an *urban* and a *French* phenomenon, has now become ‘fixed’, and how the ‘fiction’ of the ghetto has come about. This is the path explored in a recent work by Didier Lapeyronnie (2008). Taking care to challenge the American model as the archetype of the ghetto and basing himself, among other authors, on Wacquant’s work, Lapeyronnie describes the simultaneous presence of ‘two narratives of the ghetto’, positive and negative (Lapeyronnie, 2008: 189).

Places people want to leave as soon as social mobility permits, yet places of identification, of social, cultural and possibly political rootedness — the same description can be seen to fit Palestinian refugee camps. In a piece of research on the camps I put forward the idea that being a refugee in a camp on Palestinian territory, such as the Balata camp in Nablus, may on the one hand mean being part of the arrangements for dealing with undesirables in a humanitarian fashion, but it also means living in the city of Nablus in a subordinate position: refugee is the inferior status in the Palestinian urban condition. There is indeed an urban form that has arisen during the history of Palestinian refugees: the result of the ‘ghettoization’ of the camps (in the sense of a relative spatial, socio-legal, cultural and political enclosure) is a form of ghetto that encourages refugees to leave the camps if they wish to rise socially or else to transform them by developing an informal economy, but that also encourages them to *locate there* their identity as a victim of the *Naqba* (the 1948 Exodus) and their expectation of return. Prior to coming to this conclusion, and on the basis of field research on African camps, I also asked myself whether, ultimately, a ghetto is not worth more than a camp, in the sense that the ghetto, within the confined space given as its primary constraint, might not consist in this development of a social, cultural and political life of one’s own that enables one to emerge from the destitution of the camp when one first settles in (see Agier, 2008: 118, 281).

Even though we can accept that the French working-class city *banlieue* and today’s American ghetto are places of ‘impossible community’, can we not take account in our analysis of less structural and more event-based phenomena than the ones this negative research is based on? For instance, in France, there are a number of events that might encourage us to think that there indeed exists an ‘Africa of the French *banlieues*’.² It can be noted that French urban sociology has a bias towards social history and a ‘classist’ reading of the French *banlieues*, which has problems nowadays accounting for the construction of a (francophone) black mobilization/identification/culture (*culture noire*), or even of a worldwide black culture (*culture Black*). The latter goes back just as much to French imperial history and the specific post-colonial features of racism *à la française*

2 The subject of a colloquium at the Centre d’études africaines which I organized together with Rémy Bazenguissa Ganga, at EHESS, Paris, in March 2006, i.e. a few months after the November 2005 riots in the *banlieues*.

as it does to the common history of the world and a 'globality' desired by Africans badly received or ill treated in France. In 'nine-three' (the department of Seine Saint-Denis, which has the departmental number 93, and is the location of the towns in the old 'red belt' that Wacquant talks about), the election of Barack Obama was loudly celebrated as that of a black (and even of an 'African') to head the world's foremost country. Thus, both in the declassed cities of France and in the heart of the American ghetto the question is: what makes community? Where is the 'positive narrative' constructed that makes possible the election of a black to the presidency of the United States and the commemoration of that in working-class neighbourhoods in the 'red belt' in France?

The hyperghetto

It is distance from the state that constitutes the ghetto, not cultural difference (Wacquant, 2006: 58); and it is the institutional abandonment of the ghetto by the political elites of town and state that has created hyperghettoization (*ibid.*: 76). My starting point is a very factual question: who goes into the ghetto now? In Columbia, in the vast district of Agua Blanca, on the edge of Cali, those who go in are the police and the humanitarian organizations.

The internal structure of the ghetto has come apart, Wacquant tells us, along with the institutional processes that tie its history to the rest of American society. The exodus of upwardly-mobile black families to other nearby neighborhoods (themselves left by whites because of their closeness to the ghetto), and the impoverishment (because of unemployment) of those left behind in the ghetto, 'deproletarianization' and 'increased social isolation' characterize the hyperghetto. Thus, a social and spatial division took place in Chicago within the black population in the 1970s and 1980s, the period when the hyperghetto emerged as a form. The prevalence of unemployment and the 'organizational vacuum' of the hyperghetto came violently up against the diversity and social structure of the 'community ghetto'. Here, then, is my second question, the theoretical aspect of which no longer concerns urban studies only, but our whole understanding of the globalization process. I am asking whether the hyperghetto is an internal transformation of the ghetto, or whether it is not also, and even more so, a global evolution in the direction of a 'hardened' fragmentation of the world, and towards the fabrication of a vast space of relegation. That would make it a matter of world history, with the ghetto in its 'traditional' form being, as it were, 'transcended' or 'swallowed up' in the process of globalization.

This question is an invitation to attempt a change of scale. For, in fact, the hyperghetto (too) departs from both the American model (the traditional ghetto) and from the French or European model of marginal peripheries. That means, then, that the hyperghetto (as I said earlier about the ghetto) has to be 'de-Americanized' in order to take on its global, worldwide theoretical dimension. The 'territories of abandonment' that Wacquant talks about are broader than those of the present ghettos in the United States or the relegated *banlieues* in Europe. They are intermediate spaces, neither properly urban nor rural. This is the approach we are invited to take by Zygmunt Bauman (2004), who bases his conception in particular on the *globalized* image of the hyperghetto, describing the supernumeraries in their extra-territoriality as 'human waste' on a planetary scale. Hyperghettos are, says Wacquant, 'spaces' rather than 'places'. To describe this chain, or naked expanse, of spaces for discarded lives, I have proposed the term 'off-places (*hors-lieux*)', as opposed both to 'anthropological places' and to the 'non-places (*non-lieux*)' of full supermodernity that Marc Augé (1992) talks about. In the camps and the transit zones, the possibilities of a 'community ghetto' or of the legal status of 'refugee' have become desired goals, because they are forbidden. This is the world of the 'people whose suits have been dismissed', the 'people without papers', the 'clandestine people' (the 'closed files', in the language of the High Commissioner for Refugees). In the

meantime, these places are built and lived in as spaces of rejection.³ I feel it is important to surround the research reported on in *Parias urbains* with current research that is still under way or whose findings are still to come, which has the essentially anti-culturalist objective of understanding the formation of new spaces that have been built up on the frontier, at the edges or other limits of the social and the national. The globalization of the hyperghetto necessarily leads us to do some thinking about the 'extraterritorial fiction', i.e. the political and cultural rhetoric at work today to legitimate the proliferation of walls, barriers, camps and closed neighbourhoods, by ceaselessly inventing new modes of marginalization, new types of alienness.

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Résumé

À propos de *Urban Outcasts* (Parias urbains), ce commentaire s'attache à deux aspects: le ghetto et l'hyperghetto. D'une part, au-delà de la comparaison entre la France et les États-Unis, le texte présente le ghetto comme une position urbaine relative, et non identitaire. Dans ce cadre, certaines 'banlieues' françaises ou des camps de réfugiés palestiniens sont dans une position de relégation urbaine, sociale et politique qui est bien rendue par le concept de ghetto ou 'ghetto-isation'. D'autre part, si l'on convient que c'est la distance à l'État qui fait le ghetto, alors une mondialisation de cette figure de la relégation est une définition possible de l'hyperghetto.

3 Engin Isin and Kim Rygiel (2007) list a set of frontier areas, zones and camps as so many 'abject spaces': what they have in common is to cast into extraterritoriality their occupants, who are nothings, undefined individuals, literally worthy of the most profound contempt 'neither subjects nor objects, but abjects'.