EVENTS AND DEBATES

Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the American Ghetto*

LOÏC J.D. WACQUANT

> Now, what led men to consider these mythological propositions or beliefs as true? Was it because they had confronted them with a given reality? Not at all … It is, on the contrary, our ideas, our beliefs which confer on the objects of thought their reality (Emile Durkheim, *Pragmatisme et sociologie*, 1913).

Three deep-seated proclivities or premises have dominated the recent debate on racial division and urban poverty in the United States. These premises are rooted in long-standing American conceptions of the poor — and particularly the black poor — as morally defective and of the city as a nefarious place that disrupts and corrupts social life, especially among the lower classes (Boyer, 1978; Katz, 1983; Patterson, 1986; Fishman, 1988). Endowed with plausibility by the weight of cultural history and intellectual inertia, reinforced by an individualistic national idiom that de-emphasizes class and euphemizes ethno-racial domination, they form the cornerstones of the current *academic doxa* on the topic and therefore typically go unargued and unquestioned.[1] Yet these underlying tenets truncate and distort our understanding of the ongoing (re)articulation of color, class, and place in the American metropolis.

The first, more recent, tendency is the *dilution of the notion of ghetto* simply to designate an urban area of widespread and intense poverty, which obfuscates the racial basis and character of this poverty and divests the term of both historical meaning and sociological content. The second, century-old, tenet is the idea that the ghetto is a

1 A large number of works could be cited here. Suffice it to refer to Jencks and Peterson's (1991) *The urban underclass*, which assembles paradigmatic illustrations of each of these tenets. This is not to imply that the social science literature on race and urban poverty is wholly monolithic (see Wilson and Aponte, 1985; Marks, 1991; and Devine and Wright, 1993 for broad surveys) but that what variations it exhibits are largely contained within the analytic space demarcated by these three preconceptual commitments.

'disorganized' social formation that can be analyzed wholly in terms of *lack and deficiencies* (individual or collective) rather than by positively identifying the principles that underlie its internal order and govern its specific mode of functioning. The third, flowing from the idea of disorganization, is the *tendency to exoticize the ghetto* and its residents, that is, to highlight the most extreme and unusual aspects of ghetto life as seen from outside and above, i.e., from the standpoint of the dominant. Each of these premises is associated with a series of analytical missteps and slippages that are so commonly effectuated as to go unnoticed or, worse, to appear to be woven into the fabric of the phenomenon itself. Together, they make up a formidable 'epistemological obstacle' (Bachelard, 1938) to a theoretically rigorous and empirically accurate sociology of racial conflict and urban marginality in contemporary America inasmuch as they converge to efface the boundary between common sense perception and social scientific analysis, between the contested and complex realities to be elucidated and what people deeply desire to believe about them.[2] The following examination of these pernicious premises is offered as a critical prolegomenon to such a sociology.

Retrieving an institutionalist conception of the ghetto

Recent discussions of race and poverty in the American 'inner city' have tended to equate the ghetto with any perimeter of high poverty irrespective of population and organizational makeup. Paul Jargowski and Mary-Jo Bane (1991: 239, 241, emphasis added) offer an exemplar of this common elision of the racial and institutional dimension of the notion of ghetto when they write:

> We have defined a ghetto as an area in which the overall poverty rate in a census tract is greater than 40 percent. The ghetto poor are then *those poor, of any race or ethnic group*, who live in such high-poverty census tracts ... Visits to various cities confirmed that the 40 percent criterion came very close to identifying areas that *looked like ghettos* in terms of their *housing* conditions. Moreover, the areas selected by the 40 percent criterion corresponded closely with the neighborhoods *that city officials and local Census Bureau officials considered ghettos* ... It is important to distinguish our definition of ghetto tracts based on a poverty criterion from a definition based on racial composition. Not all majority black tracts are ghettos under our definition nor are all ghettos black.

This (re)definition of the term deserves to be quoted at length because it cumulates nearly all of the flaws that have marred recent such usages of the term: (1) it is perfectly arbitrary (as its authors readily concede on page 239): why exclude rural or even suburban zones and utilize census tracts as catchment area, the official 'poverty line' as measuring rod, and a rate of 40% poor persons as cut-off point? (2) it is asociological in that it is pegged on household income (a notoriously unreliable item in standardized surveys, especially among irregularly employed populations) and on the visual state of the housing stock, irrespective of the patterning of social and economic relations that determine them; (3) it is ostensibly 'deracialized' when in fact it denotes only urban enclaves of colored poverty, to the virtual exclusion of poor white areas; (4) it is essentially bureaucratic, derivative of administrative categories, since the viability of the concept is premised on the existence and availability of government data such as the Census Bureau designation of 'poverty area'; finally, (5) it unabashedly conflates a historical-analytical concept with the lay notions held by municipal and state elites ('what city officials and local Census

---

2 As Wittgenstein (1977: 17) once remarked: 'What makes a subject hard to understand — if it is something significant and important — is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and what most people *want* to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect'.

officials considered ghettos') without any possibility of assessing what these folk perceptions might be that serve as warrant for the delineation of the object under study.[3]

This is to forget that most urban areas of 'extreme poverty' (however measured) in America's Rustbelt are the direct heirs of yesteryear's urban 'Black Belts'. To say that they are ghettos because they are poor is to reverse social and historical causation: it is *because they were and are ghettos* that joblessness and misery are unusually acute and persistent in them — not the other way around. To call any area exhibiting a high rate or concentration of poverty a ghetto is not only arbitrary and empirically problematic; it robs the term of its historical meaning and obliterates its sociological import, thereby thwarting investigation of the criteria and processes whereby exclusion effectively operates in it. And it obscures the fact that blacks are the only group ever to have experienced ghettoization in American society, i.e., involuntary, permanent, and total residential separation premised on caste as basis for the development of a *parallel (and inferior) social structure*.[4]

As suggested by the historic origins and historiographic usage of the term (Wirth, 1928: 11–62; Cooperman and Curiel, 1990), a ghetto is not simply a topographic entity or an aggregation of poor families and individuals but an *institutional form*, a historically determinate, spatially-based concatenation of mechanisms of *ethnoracial closure and control* (Wacquant, 1991).[5] In ideal-typical terms, a ghetto may be characterized as a bounded, racially and/or culturally uniform socio-spatial formation based on (1) the forcible relegation of (2) a 'negatively typed' population (Weber, 1978: 385–7), such as Jews in medieval Europe and African-Americans in the modern United States, to (3) a reserved, 'frontier territory' (Hogan, 1980) in which this population (4) develops under duress a set of parallel institutions that serve both as a functional substitute for, and as a protective buffer against, the dominant institutions of the encompassing society (Spear, 1968; Meier and Rudwick, 1976: 232–70) but (5) duplicate the latter only at an incomplete and inferior level while (6) maintaining those who rely on them in a state of structural dependency (Weaver, 1948; Fusfeld and Bates, 1984; Logan and Molotch, 1987). Put differently, the ghetto is an ethnoracial formation that combines and inscribes in the objectivity of space and group-specific institutions all four major 'elementary forms' of racial domination, namely, categorization, discrimination, segregation and exclusionary violence (Wacquant, 1995).

The fact that ghettos have historically been places of endemic and often acute material misery does not mean that a ghetto has to be poor, nor that it has to be uniformly deprived. Certainly, the 'Bronzeville' of the 1940s was more prosperous than southern black communities and contained perhaps the largest and most affluent Afro-American bourgeoisie of its era (Drake and Cayton, 1962; also Trotter, 1993, for a broader discussion). Conversely, not all low-income areas are ghettos, however extreme their destitution. Declining white cities of the deindustrializing Midwest or of the Appalachian hollows, depressed rural counties of the Mississipi delta, Native American reservations

---

3 All of these mistakes are repeated and amplified in Jargowski's (1996) *Poverty and place: ghettos, barrios, and the American city*, which effectively equates ghettoization with urban decay.

4 The uniqueness, intensity and persistence of black segregation and institutional exclusion over the long century of the ghetto's lifecourse is amply documented in the works of Spear (1968), Osofsky (1971), Kusmer (1976), Zunz (1982), Farley and Allen (1987), Jaynes and Williams (1989), Hirsch (1993), and Massey and Denton (1993).

5 In his classic historical overview, Louis Wirth (1964: 84–85) rightly insists that the ghetto is at once 'an instrument of control' and 'a form of accommodation through which a minority has effectually been subordinated to a dominant group'. Where he errs gravely is is in portraying ghettoization as a 'natural process' that affects 'every people and every cultural group'. For a cogent delineation of the basic principles of institutionalism (and neo-institutionalism) in the sociological tradition, see DiMaggio and Powell (1992). An exposition of the concept of closure and its usage in (neo-)Weberian theories of class and group inequality more generally is in Parkin (1979), Murphy (1987), Brubaker (1991: Part 1), and Manza (1992).

and poor *barrios* of the Southwest (not to mention vast sections of the United States during the Great Depression) do not present the organizational pattern of the 'dark ghetto': they are not, nor have they ever been, 'philanthropic, economic, business and industrial colonies' of the wider white society (Clark, 1965; also Connolly, 1977).[6]

An institutionalist (i.e. relational) conception of the ghetto is not only more consistent with the historic root and usage of the term. It foregrounds and interrogates variables that more nominalistic or gradational approaches tend to treat as background conditions requiring no further investigation, such as racial division, whose structural effects may vary over time even when rates remain unchanged, the weak presence and functional inefficacy of those public service institutions that are standard organizational fixtures of other urban neighborhoods, the protrusive role of police and penal institutions, and the absence of 'an indigenous exchange value engine' (Logan and Molotch, 1987: 131; Davis, 1991: 304–9). In particular, it problematizes that which a linear, 'demographic' perspective takes for granted: the bases and mechanisms of triage that determine relegation within the penalized space of the ghetto. And instead of situating the latter along *continuous* linear distributions of income, housing, segregation, or neighborhood poverty, an institutionalist approach seeks to locate *underlying breaks* in the urban fabric and to trace the (re)drawing of the dividing lines of which the ghetto is the physical manifestation.[7]

Accordingly, the boundaries, form, internal makeup, external linkages and structural supports of the territory of exclusion considered all become central questions that have to be answered by empirical analysis, rather than dissolved by definitional fiat. And each of the traits that compose the ideal type of the ghetto sketched above — constraint, stigma, territorial separation and boundedness, institutional differentiation and parallelism, functional duplication and dependency — can be turned into a variable subjected to precise measurement, as can their degree of mutual 'meshing'.

Forsaking the trope of 'disorganization'

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1992) has shown that certain places come cumulatively to be represented and discussed in terms of 'strong tropes', i.e., recurrent sets of images and narrative strategies that predetermine and skew the ways in which they are perceived and conceptualized. In American society and social science, the 'strong trope' enveloping the ghetto since its origins at the close of last century has been that of 'disorganization'.[8]

---

6 For a portrait of the ecological, social, and institutional structure and location of poor Latino neighborhoods in the American metropolis that spotlights differences with the black urban core, see Moore and Pinderhughes (1993). Whether Native American reservations qualify as a subtype of ghetto or are best understood as a distinct mechanism of ethnoracial subordination would require an extensive discussion that is not possible here; materials for an answer can be found in Snipp (1986) and Cornell (1990).

7 For a model study of the socio-political production of urban cleavages as an institutional (as opposed to ecological) process, cf. Abu-Lughod's (1980) reconstruction of 'urban apartheid in Morocco' and of the transmutation of caste division into class lines in postcolonial Rabat; read also Hirsch's (1983) masterful reconstruction of the paramount role played by the federal and local states in recreating Chicago's 'Second Ghetto' between 1940 and 1960.

8 Ward (1989) offers an extended analysis of continuities and changes in the social characterization of slums, ghettos and other territories of urban relegation in the era of industrial capitalist expansion. Geoffrey Biddle's (1992) *Alphabet City* provides a vivid, up-to-date, photographic illustration of the 'disorganization' perspective as applied to Loisada, the Puerto Rican section of New York's Lower East Side. A valuable corrective to this monochromatic picture is Camilo Vergara (1995), who draws a nuanced visual portrait of different types of 'ghettos' (he uses the term in its common-sensical meaning of segregated and decaying enclaves): the 'green ghettos' reclaimed by nature, the 'institutional ghettos' that warehouse the undesirable 'poorhouses of the twenty-first century' (drug dens and treatment facilities, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, prisons, etc.), and the dynamic and fluid 'new immigrant ghettos'.

From the early Chicago school of human ecology to studies of the urban crisis of the 1960s to recent inquiries into the emergence of the so-called 'underclass' and its fearsome implications (e.g. Park and Burgess, 1925; Wirth, 1928; Shaw and McKay, 1942; Frazier, 1949; Banfield, 1970; Wilson, 1987; Anderson, 1991; Jencks and Peterson, 1991, Harrell and Peterson, 1992), analysts have accepted as a given that the ghetto can be satisfactorily analyzed in essentially *privative terms*, by pinpointing its shortcomings and those of its residents and by specifying how (and how much) both diverge from 'mainstream' society as measured by putative 'middle-class' standards. The categories 'mainstream' and 'middle class' are usually left undefined so that their boundaries may be stretched at will to fit the analytic or ideological need at hand.[9] Thus the ghetto is characteristically represented as a place of *disorder and lack*, a repository of concentrated unruliness, deviance, anomie and atomization, replete with behaviors said to offend common precepts of morality and propriety, whether by excess (as with crime, sexuality and fertility) or by default (in the case of work, thrift and family).[10]

This profile in defect — in the twofold sense of portraiture and epistemology — is deeply entrenched in American social science. Historian Alice O'Connor (1992) has shown that the assimilationist framework of the Chicago school consistently depicted 'poverty, social 'disorganization' and segregation as inevitable outcomes' of the quasi-biotic 'processes of city growth' and studiously omitted the strategies of employers and the 'role of politics and local government in creating and maintaining ghettos'. E. Franklin Frazier, the first African-American chair of Chicago's sociology department, all but equated the northern urbanization of blacks with disorganization. His analysis of *The Negro family in Chicago* (Frazier, 1931) stressed the marital disruption, moral decadence, material destitution, crime and vice into which 'Negroes' inevitably sunk upon migrating into the industrial metropolis. Revealingly, he elevated family structure to the rank of cardinal indicator of social disorganization among the African-American community — anticipating by a full half-century one of the chief concerns and strategies of his successor William Julius Wilson (1987) in *The truly disadvantaged*.[11]

Understanding the ghetto as an institutional form, rather than as an accumulation of 'pathology', allows one to recognize that it does not suffer from 'social disorganization' — a morally loaded concept (see Wirth, 1964: 44–9) that is best erased from the sociologist's lexicon, its illustrious intellectual pedigree notwithstanding. As William Foote Whyte (1943: 273, emphasis added) noted half-a-century ago in his classic study of

---

9 A representative usage of this commonsensical duality is Christopher Jencks's (1991: 215–8) excursus on 'Underclass versus Mainstream Mothers'. Elsewhere, Jencks (in Jencks and Peterson, 1991: 28–9) admits that, while 'there is widespread agreement that 'underclass' is an antonym for 'middle class', or perhaps more broadly for 'mainstream' (a term that has come to subsume both the middle class and working class)', it remains that 'Americans have never agreed on what it meant to be middle or working class'. So that the key concepts organizing his dissection of the 'growth of the American underclass' are marred with epistemic confusion and semantic indetermination (as well as suffusive moral overtones). Jencks goes on to confess that conformity to scholarly fashion is his only warrant for using this half-scholarly, half-journalistic notion: 'In my judgement [relevant social] 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' (ibid.: 28).

10 'The pathology of the ghetto has served as a continuing anomaly tarnishing the ideals of American life', write Goldfield and Lane (1973: 4–5). 'The ghetto has symbolized poverty in a country of plenty, discrimination in a nation of equals, disease in a country of advanced technology, and crime in a society predicated on law'.

11 The large-scale, interdisciplinary, multi-method, empirical research project directed by Wilson at Chicago from 1985 to 1990 to expand and fill in the 'theoretical sketch' set forth in *The truly disadvantaged* was officially entitled 'The urban poverty and family structure project'. It devoted considerable resources to assessing the correlates and implications of family (de)composition in different 'poverty areas'. It should be stressed, however, that in Wilson's view family 'dissolution' is not an independent causative factor but an *intervening variable* that both reveals, transmits and amplifies the deleterious impact of precarious (male) labor market status.

the 'street-corner society' of Boston's Italian slum, what appears to outside observers as social disorganization 'often turns out to be simply a different form of social organization *if one takes the trouble to look closely'*. But, in the case of the black American ghetto, close-up, first-hand observation is precisely what has been gravely lacking in the recent debate.

Of the 27 authors who contributed to the *The urban underclass* (Jencks and Peterson, 1991), a volume lavishly underwritten and promoted by a consortium of prominent philanthropic and research foundations and claiming to contain 'some of the best and most up-to-date research and thinking on the topic', *only one* conducted primary field research in the ghetto. And the one anthropologist invited to present at the conference upon which this 'standard reference work' is based saw her critique of the 'underclass' problematic from an ethnographic and culture-theoretic standpoint scuttled from the volume.[12] Because research on poverty and race is effectively ruled by economists, demographers, statistically-oriented sociologists working with census and survey data, social workers and social policy experts (or pundits), relevant anthropological research is routinely ignored or, at best, selectively mentioned to play a strictly ornamental function.

Remarkably, a mere handful of field studies of black inner-city life have appeared since the racial uprisings of the mid-1960s and even the few that have been published are more often than not overlooked — I think for instance of the superb book by Edith Folb's (1980) *Runnin' down some lines*, to mention but one. The result is that the same 'classic' monographs dating from the War on Poverty era, led by the obligatory quaternity of Oscar Lewis (1966), Elliott Liebow (1967), Ulf Hannerz (1969) and Lee Rainwater (1970), continue to be ritually summoned — and often grossly caricatured to suit current preoccupations (Peterson, 1991: 12–13) — as if the basis, structure and dynamics of the lifeworld of the ghetto (sub)proletariat had somehow been frozen and its patterns remained identical through three decades of massive economic, spatial and sociopolitical changes.[13]

Yet intensive, ground-level scrutiny based on direct observation — as opposed to measurements effected from a distance by survey bureaucracies utterly unfit to probe and scrutinize the life of marginalized populations — immediately reveals that, far from being disorganized, the ghetto is *organized according to different principles*, in response to a *unique set of structural and strategic constraints* that bear on the racialized enclaves of the city as on no other segment of America's territory (Wacquant, 1994a). These constraints include (1) the unrelenting press of economic necessity and widespread material deprivation caused by the withering away of the wage-labor economy, translating into outright deproletarianization for growing segments of the urban poor; (2) pervasive physical and social insecurity, fueled by the glaring failings of public sector institutions and the correlative debilitation of local organizations, fostering in turn irregular socio-cultural patterns; (3) virulent racial antipathy conjoined with acute class prejudice resulting in a severe and systematic truncation of life chances and conduits of opportunity; (4) symbolic taint and territorial stigmatization, contaminating every area of social endeavor, from friendship and housing to schooling and jobs, reinforced by (5)

---

12 Her name is not even mentioned in the list of participants and discussants (Jencks and Peterson, 1991: v–vi) and her paper had to be published elsewhere (Newman, 1991).

13 Apart from the works of Elijah Anderson, Mercer Sullivan, Martín Sánchez-Jankowski and Philippe Bourgois, the most informative accounts of everyday life in today's dark ghetto have been authored not by trained social scientists but by journalists: among them, Sylvester Monroe and Peter Goldman's *Brothers: black and poor* (1988), Alex Kotlowitz's *There are no children here* (1991), Greg Donaldson's *The Ville: cops and kids in urban America* (1993), Laurie Kay Abraham's *Mama might be better off dead* (1994) and William Adler's *Land of opportunity* (1995). (In all fairness it should be pointed out that journalists have also produced the most prejudiced, lurid and abjectly distorted depictions of the ghetto). Also relevant here, though only rarely used, are the works of novelists of urban black America, from James Baldwin, Claude Brown and Piri Thomas to Leon Forrest's *Divine days* and Jess Mowry's *Six out of seven*.

bureaucratic apathy and administrative ineptness made possible by the electoral expendability of the black poor in a political field thoroughly dominated by corporate lobbies and moneyed interests.

Today's ghetto comprises a Darwinian social order traversed by continual conflict over, and competition for, scarce (and diminishing) resources in an environment characterized by high levels of interpersonal and institutional mistrust, a 'dog-eat-dog' worldview, and high densities of 'social predators' (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991: especially 22–8). This internal order is continually reinforced from without by the routine functioning of state and market and it is kept structurally peripheral and dependent by the fragmentation of the political-administrative machinery of the American metropolis (Weiher, 1991; Weir, 1995). The socio-analytic reconstruction of the broken habitus and ambiguous strategies of a professional 'hustler' on Chicago's South Side discloses that the entropy characteristic of street life at the heart of the ghetto is in fact patterned and obeys a distinctive, if unstable, social logic that can be expounded provided one takes pain meticulously to link the ever-shifting game of daily options to the obdurate (and invisible) structure of political, economic, and symbolic domination that predetermine their availability, attraction and differential payoffs (Wacquant, 1993).[14]

The shift from a problematic of disorganization to one of 'organization' is not reducible to a simple change in terminology. It implies, rather, a transformation of the *object to be constructed*: it means that the analyst must explicate and display in some detail the concrete mode of structuring of social relations and representations operative within the ghetto — the work of *collective self-production* — whereby its residents endow their world with form, meaning and purpose, rather than simply report that this mode differs from those that hold sway in other sectors of society.[15] It also entails showing how the *activities of dominant institutions*, public bureaucracies and welfare offices, schools and hospitals, private firms and philanthropic associations, police patrols and parole officers, which are so conspicuously absent from the normal social science of the 'inner city', contribute powerfully to organizing the social space of the ghetto in particular and particularly destabilizing ways. It therefore involves recognizing, and specifying, the institutional bases and limits of the situated agency of ghetto residents, so that their practices and life forms emerge not as mere derivations of constraints that can be 'read off' structural conditions but as the product of their active engagement with the external and internal social forces that crosscut and mould their world (Abu-Lughod *et al*., 1994; Bourgois, 1995).

Breaking with exoticism

The trope of disorganization, in turn, has reinforced the exoticizing of the ghetto, that is, the artificial exorbitation of those patterns of conduct, feeling and thought that differ the most from a norm presumed to represent the broader society and also, too often, from those prevalent and acceptable among ghetto dwellers themselves. This exotic bias is an old and tenacious one, as Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1970: 313) pointed out long ago:

> Ever since the beginnings of the study of black people in the Americas investigators have commented upon the ways in which black men and women — in particular some men and women — differ in their behavior from their white counterparts.

14 On the rationality of social structure and action in slums more generally, see also the germinal analyses of Portes (1972) and Perlman (1976) and the research they have spawned on urban marginality in Latin America. In the United States, the works of Gans (1962) and Suttles (1968) bear close rereading.
15 I tried elsewhere to highlight the theoretical and empirical gains made possible by the Copernican shift from disorganization to organization in the case of Sánchez-Jankowski's (1991) long-term participant-observation study of American urban gangs (Wacquant, 1994b).

Following this logic, the most destitute, threatening and disreputable residents of the racialized urban core are typically made to stand for the whole of the ghetto and the dilapidated remnants of the historic Black Belts of America, in turn, are taken to reflect upon, and impugn the civic standing of, the black community *in toto* (Franklin, 1992; Fainstein, 1995). The end result is the continual reproduction of stereotypical, cardboard-type, folk images of urban blacks — what Ralph Ellison aptly called 'prefabricated Negroes' — that resonate with and perpetuate historic racial prejudice under the impeccable positivist garb of survey categories and the falsely neutral idiom of policy advocacy.

Analysts of the nexus of race and poverty have thus devoted an inordinate amount of attention to the assumed 'pathologies' of ghetto residents, namely, to those behaviors that so-called middle-class society considers abnormal, offensive or unduly costly, from violent crime, school 'dropouts', teenage pregnancy and labor market 'shiftlessness', to the proliferation of 'female-headed households', drug consumption and trading, and 'welfare dependency'. Some have not hesitated to amalgamate these statuses or activities under the pejorative heading of 'underclass behaviors' while others have gone yet further and redefined the ghetto itself as an 'epidemic of social problems' (Jencks and Peterson, 1991: 30, 155–6, 172, 301, 322–3, 397 and passim).[16]

One could show that many (if not most) of these categories, far from reflecting a value-neutral perspective fostering detached analysis and impartial policy prescription, function as thinly disguised *instruments of indictment* of the putatively abnormal conduct of ghetto dwellers. Take the apparently innocuous bureaucratic designation of high-school 'drop-out' touted by many analysts as one variant of 'underclass behavior'. It insidiously points the arrow of responsibility for educational failure towards students and their 'dysfunctional' families and environment when in reality most inner-city public schools in large cities have been transformed into quasi-carceral institutions that devote more resources to security than to teaching (Devine, 1995) and actively *push students out* so as to economize on grossly inadequate space, staff and instructional equipment. 'The practice of cleansing the school of 'bad kids' [is] quite widely acknowledged and equally appreciated by administrators, teachers and counselors', reports Fine (1988: 99), based on extended fieldwork in a poor New York City high school. And for good reason: otherwise they would be faced with the impossible task of catering for tens of thousands of additional pupils for which physical infrastructure are non-existent due to the combination of political indifference and fiscal neglect that have turned public schools into warehouses for the children of today's urban outcasts.

Now, every anthropologist is liable 'to notice and to report behavior unlike that of his own culture more readily and more faithfully than he tends to notice and report behavior like that of his own culture' and thus to 'overlook or underemphasize those elements of the foreign culture which resemble his own' (Naroll and Naroll, 1965: 24–6). In the present case, the social and cultural distance between the analyst and the object, the paucity of sustained field observation and the demonic social imagery that enshrouds the ghetto have combined to hide the fact that forms of social action and organization that may appear deviant, 'aberrant', or downright inexplicable from afar (and above) obey a *local social rationality* that is well suited to the real-life constraints and facilitations of the contemporary Black Belt.[17]

16 Jonathan Crane's (1991) work is a caricatural example of such moralizing, thinly dressed up in social science data and rhetoric that, incredibly, found its way into the pages of the *American Journal of Sociology*, bringing into full light the political-cum-homiletic import of such research. As Sassier (1990) has shown, from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, discourses on poverty have always been reflective, not of the condition and state of the poor themselves, but of the key political disorders of the period *as perceived by social and intellectual elites*.

17 See, for instance, Fernandez-Kelly's (1993) effective rebuttal of Christopher Jencks's (1991) pseudo 'cultural explanation' of teenage pregnancy among ghetto adolescents (an *ad hoc* postulation arrived at by

At the same time, to say that a socio-cultural form follows a situated rationality does not necessarily imply that it is *specific* to that particular locale or group: many of the 'adaptations' found in the ghetto are not 'ghetto-specific' inasmuch as they have been recorded among (sub)proletarians in the industrial townships of Europe or Latin America as well as among working-class youths of white and Latino origins in the United States (e.g. Leite Lopes, 1978; Robins and Cohen, 1978; McDermott 1985; Foley, 1990; Jones, 1992; McLeod, 1994). Which means, again, that invocation of a ghetto culture à la Hannerz (1969) cannot substitute for the empirical dissection of the micro-structures in which social action and consciousness are embedded in today's ghetto. A further irony is that appeals to Hannerz's study of ghetto lifestyles in Washington's Winston Street typically turn its argument upside down since *Soulside* emphasized persistent differentation among a population now stereotypically represented as homogenous to the point of being faceless. Also, Hannerz viewed ghetto residents as fundamentally 'bicultural' and conceded that 'much of what has been labelled ghetto-specific here is directly related to poverty' (Hannerz, 1969: 192, 182). Such characteristics are therefore more properly conceived as derivative of class position (and trajectory, past and probable) than as effects of caste status and ghetto entrapment.

To guard against this exotic bias, it is indispensible to effect a *moral épochè*, to suspend judgement over the putative (im)morality of ghetto life and to focus, not on the most 'spectacular' and publicly salient practices, but on the most banal intercourse and doings of everyday life, the taken-for-granted forms of perception, conduct and organization that compose the 'paramount, wide-awake reality' (Schutz, 1962) of the ghetto as an ongoing strategic and interpretive achievement. Now, to assert that the ghetto is a 'meaningful, reasonable, and normal' social world[18] is neither to romanticize nor to glorify it. Ethnographic observation establishes beyond dispute that the ghetto is a brutal and crisis-ridden universe, one shot through with abuse, distrust, misery and despair — how could it be otherwise considering the crushing constraints and multi-sided compulsions of which it is the expression? It is simply to ask that the same principles of analysis and concepts be applied to it as to any other social system, high or low, glamorous or despised, familiar or alien, harmonious or acrimonious. Studies of war-front atrocities, death camps, rampant ethnocidal conflicts, high-security penitentiaries, or sudden human destruction wrought by manmade or natural calamities (Browning, 1992; Pollak, 1991; Spencer, 1990; Sykes, 1971; Erikson, 1976) demonstrate that, even in the most extreme of circumstances, social life is patterned, regular, and endowed with a logic and meaning amenable to analytical elucidation.

The task of sociology, then, must be to uncover the *immanent social necessity* that governs the practices and life forms of ghetto residents, not to participate in the fabrication of a new 'urban Orientalism' — in Edward Said's sense of the term — of which the 'underclass' would be the loathsome figurehead. In short, we should heed Everett C. Hughes's (1980: 99) warning in his insightful discussion of 'bastard institutions' — of which the ghetto offers a prime example — that:

default, for lack of a more obvious causative factor, and supported by common-sense inference instead of reasoned observation), and Catherine Edin's (1996) devastating empirical critique of the oxymoronic notion of 'welfare dependency'.

18 As Erving Goffman (1961: 7) reminds us in the introduction to *Asylums*: 'Any group of persons — prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients — develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it'. To say that a social world is 'normal', however, does not imply that those who participate in it experience or accept it as such, as the case of concentration camps readily demonstrates. For an ethnographic narration that tries to convey the forms of sociability and the tissue of expressive cultural forms through which ghetto residents actively produce the 'normality' (or social structure in the ethnomethodological sense) of their daily world in spite of the dilapidation and insecurity surrounding them, cf. Wacquant (1996).

[they] should be studied not merely as pathological departures from what is good and right, but as part of the total complex of human activities and enterprises. In addition, they should be looked at as orders of things in which we can see the social processes going on, the same social processes, perhaps, that are to be found in the legitimate institutions.

Loïc J.D. Wacquant, Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.

References

Abraham, L.K. (1993) *Mama might be better off dead: the failure of health care in urban America*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Abu-Lughod, J.L. (1980) *Rabat: urban apartheid in Morocco*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

—— *et al*. (1994) *From urban village to east village: the battle for New York's Lower East Side*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

Adler, W.M. (1995) *Land of opportunity: one family's quest for the American dream in the age of crack*. The Atlantic Monthly Press, New York.

Anderson, E. (1991) *Streetwise: race, class, and change in an urban community*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Appadurai, A. (1988) Putting hierarchy in its place. *Cultural Anthropology* 3.1 (February), 36–49.

Bachelard, G. (1938) *La formation de l'esprit scientifique. Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective*. Librarie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris.

Banfield, E.C. (1970) *The unheavenly city*. Free Press, New York.

Biddle, G. (1992) *Alphabet city*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Bourgois, P. (1995) *In search of respect: selling crack in El barrio*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Boyer, P. (1978) *Urban masses and moral order in America, 1820–1920*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Browning, C.R. (1992) *Ordinary men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland*. Harper Perennial, New York.

Brubaker, W.R. (1991) *Traditions of citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany*. PhD dissertation, New York, Columbia University.

Clark, K.B. (1965) *Dark ghetto: dilemmas of social power*. Harper, New York.

Connolly, H.X. (1977) *A ghetto grows in Brooklyn*. New York University Press, New York.

Cooperman, B. and R. Curiel (1990) *The Venetian ghetto*. Rizzoli International Publications, New York.

Cornell S. (1990) Land, labor, and group formation: Blacks and Indians in the United States. *Racial and Ethnic Studies* 13.3, 253–72.

Crane, J. (1991) The epidemic theory of ghettos and neighborhood effects on dropping out and teenage childbearing. *American Journal of Sociology* 96.5 (March), 1226–59.

Davis, M. (1990) *City of quartz: excavating the future in Los Angeles*. Verso, London and New York.

Devine, J.A. and J.D. Wright (1993) *The greatest of evils: urban poverty and the American underclass*. Aldine, New York.

Devine, J. (1995) Can metal detectors replace the panopticon? *Cultural Anthropology* 10.2: 171–95.

DiMaggio, P. and W.W. Powell (1992) Introduction. In W.W. Powell and P.J. DiMaggio (eds.), *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1–38.

Donaldson, G. (1993) *The Ville: cops and kids in urban America*. Tickno and Fields, New York.

Drake, St. C. and H.R. Cayton. (1945; 1962 ed.) *Black metropolis: a study of Negro life in a northern city*. Harper and Row, New York, 2 vols., rev. and enlarged edition.

Edin, K. and L. Lein (1997) *Making ends meet: how single mothers survive welfare and low-wage work*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.

Erikson, K.T. (1976) *Everything in its path: destruction of community in the Buffalo Creek flood*. Simon and Schuster, New York.

Fainstein, N. (1995) Black ghettoization and social mobility. In M. Smith and J. Feagin (eds.), *The bubbling cauldron: race, ethnicity, and the urban crisis*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 123–41.

Farley, R. and W.R. Allen. (1987) *The color line and the quality of life in America*. Russel Sage Foundation, New York.

Fernandez-Kelly, P. (1993) Social and cultural capital in the urban ghetto: implications for the economic sociology of immigration. In Alejandro Portes (ed), *The economic sociology of immigration: essays on network, ethnicity, and entrepreneurship*, Russell Sage, New York, 213–47.

Fine, M. (1988) *Framing dropouts*. State University of New York Press, Albany.

Fishman, R. (1988) *Bourgeois utopias: the rise and fall of suburbia*. Basic Books, New York.

Folb, E.A. (1980) *Runnin' down some lines: the language and culture of black teenagers*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Foley, D. (1990) *Learning capitalist culture: deep in the heart of Texas*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Franklin, R. (1992) *Shadows of race and class*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Frazier, E.F. (1931) *The Negro family in Chicago*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

—— (1949) *The Negro in the United States*. Macmillan, New York.

Fusfeld, D. and T. Bates (1984) *The political economy of the ghetto*. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale.

Gans, H. (1962) *The urban villagers*. The Free Press, New York.

Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums: essays on the social situation of inmates*. Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Goldfied, D.R. and J.B. Lane (eds.) (1973) *The enduring ghetto*. J.B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia.

Hannerz, U. (1969) *Soulside: inquiries into ghetto culture and community*. Columbia University Press, New York.

—— (1970) What black males are like: another look. In N.E. Whitten and John F. Szwed (eds.), *Afro-American anthropology: contemporary perspectives*, The Free Press, New York, 313–27.

Harrell, A.V. and G.E. Peterson (1992) *Drugs, crime, and social isolation: barriers to urban opportunity*. The Urban Institute Press, Washington, DC.

Hirsch, A. (1983) *Making the second ghetto: race and housing in Chicago, 1940–1960*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

—— (1993) With or without Jim Crow: black residential segregation in the United States. In A. Hirsch and R.A. Mohl (eds.), *Urban policy in twentieth-century America*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick , 64–94.

Hogan, R. (1980) The frontier as social control. *Theory and Society* 14, 35–51.

Hughes, E.C. (1980) *The sociological eye*. Transaction, New Brunswick.

Jargowski, P. (1996) *Poverty and place: ghettos, barrios, and the American city*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.

—— and M.J. Bane (1991) Ghetto poverty in the United States, 1970–1980. In C. Jencks and P.E. Peterson, *The urban underclass*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 235–73.

Jaynes, G.D. and R.M. Williams, Jr. (1989) *A common destiny: blacks and American society*. National Academy Press, Washington, DC.

Jencks, C. (1991) *Rethinking social policy: race, poverty, and the underclass*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

—— and P.E. Peterson (eds.) (1991) *The urban underclass*. The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC.

Jones, J. (1992) *The dispossessed: America's underclasses from the civil war to the present*. Basic Books, New York.

Katz, M. (1983) *Poverty and policy in American history*. Academic Press, New York.

Kotlowitz, A. (1991) *There are no chidren here*. Doubleday, New York.

Kusmer, K.L. (1976) *A ghetto takes shape: Black Cleveland, 1870–1930*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana.

Leite Lopes, J.S. (1978) *O Vapor do Diabo: O Trabalho dos Operários do Açucar*. Paz e Terra, Rio de Janeiro.

Lewis, O. (1966) *La vida: a Puerto Rican family in the culture of poverty — San Juan and New York*. Random House, New York.

Liebow, E. (1967) *Tally's corner: a study of Negro streetcorner men*. Little, Brown, Boston.

Logan, J.R. and H.L. Molotch (1987) *Urban fortunes: the political economy of place*. The University of California Press, Berkeley.

Manza, J. (1992) Classes, status groups, and social closure: a critique of neo-Weberian social theory. *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 12, 275–302.

Marks, C. (1991) The urban underclass. *Annual Review of Sociology* 17, 445–66.

Massey, D. and N. Denton. (1993) *American apartheid: segregation and the making of the underclass*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

McDermott, K. (1985) All dressed up and nowhere to go: youth unemployment and state policy in Britain. *Urban Anthropology* 14, 91–108.

McLeod, J. (1994) *Ain't no makin' it*. Westview Press, Boulder, 2nd expanded edition.

Meier, A. and E. Rudwick (1976) *From plantation to ghetto*. Hill and Wang, New York.

Monroe, S. and P. Goldman (1988) *Brothers: black and poor – a true story of courage and survival*. William Morrow, New York.

Moore, J. and R. Pinderhughes (eds.) (1993) *In the barrio: Latinos and the underclass debate*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.

Murphy, R. (1988) *Social closure: the theory of monopolization and exclusion*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Naroll, R. and F. Naroll (1963) On bias of exotic data. *Man: A Monthly Record of Anthropological Science* 63 (February), 24–6.

Newman, C. (1991) Culture and structure in 'The truly disadvantaged'. *City and Society* 12.3, 67–83.

O'Connor, Alice (1995) Race and class in Chicago sociology. Paper presented to the Social Science History Association Meetings, November.

Osofsky, G. (1971) *Harlem: the making of a ghetto — Negro New York, 1890–1930*. Harper, 2nd ed., New York.

Park, R.E. and W. Burgess. (1925) *The city*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Parkin, F. (1978) *Marxism and class theory: a bourgeois critique*. Columbia University Press, New York.

Patterson, J. (1986) *America's struggle against poverty*. Harvard University Press, 2nd ed., Cambridge.

Perlman, J. (1976) *The myth of marginality*. The University of California Press, Berkeley.

Peterson, P. (1991) The urban underclass and the poverty paradox. In C. Jencks and P.E. Peterson (eds.), *The urban underclass*, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, 3–27.

Pollak, M. (1991) *L'expérience concentrationnaire*. A.-M. Métaillé, Paris.

Portes, A. (1972) Rationality in the slum: an essay in interpretative sociology. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 14.3 (June), 268–86.

Rainwater, L. (1970) *Behind ghetto walls: black families in a federal slum*. Aldine, Chicago.

Robins, D. and P. Cohen. (1978) *Knuckle sandwich: growing up in the working-class city*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.

Sánchez-Jankowski, M. (1991) *Islands in the street: gangs in urban American society*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Sassier, P. (1990) *Du bon usage des pauvres. Histoire d'un thème politique, XVIe–XXe siècle*. Fayard, Paris.

Schutz, A. (1962) *Collected papers I: the problem of social reality*. Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague.

Shaw, C. and H. McKay. (1942) *Juvenile delinquency in urban areas*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Snipp, C.M. (1986) The changing political and economic status of American Indians: from captive nations to internal colonies. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 45.2 (April), 145–57.

Spear, A.H. (1968) *Black Chicago: the making of a Negro ghetto, 1890–1920*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Spencer, J. (1990) Collective violence and everyday practice in Sri Lanka. *Modern Asian Studies* 24.3, 603–23.

Suttles, G.D. (1968) *The social order of the slum: ethnicity and territory in the inner city*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Sykes, G.M. (1971) *The society of captives: a study of a maximum security prison*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (orig. 1958).

Trotter, W.J., Jr. (1993) Blacks in the urban north: the 'underclass question' in historical

perspective. In M.B. Katz. (ed), *The underclass debate: views from history*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 55–81.

Vergara, C. (1995) *The new American ghetto*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick.

Wacquant, L.J.D. (1991) *What makes a ghetto? Notes toward a comparative analysis of modes of urban exclusion*. Paper presented at the Working Conference on Poverty, Immigration and Urban Marginality in Advanced Societies, Paris, Maison Suger, 10–11 May.

—— (1993) 'The zone': le métier de 'hustler' dans le ghetto noir américain. In Pierre Bourdieu *et al*., *La misère du monde*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 181–204. [Translated as 'Inside the zone'. In P. Bourdieu *et al*., *The poverty of society*, Polity Press, Cambridge (1997)].

—— (1994b) The new urban color line: the state and fate of the ghetto in postfordist America. In C.J. Calhoun (ed.), *Social theory and the politics of identity*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 231–76.

—— (1994b) Le gang comme prédateur collectif. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 101–102 (March), 88–100.

—— (1995) Elementary forms of racial domination. Rockefeller Lecture presented to the Nucleo da Cor, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Sociais, Universidade federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, October 10.

—— (1996) Un mariage dans le ghetto. *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 113 (June), 63–84.

Ward, D. (1989) *Poverty, ethnicity, and the American city, 1840–1925*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Weaver, R. (1948) *The Negro ghetto*. Russell and Russell, New York.

Weber, M. (1818–20, 1978) *Economy and society*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Weiher, G. (1991) *The fractured metropolis: political fragmentation and metropolitan segregation*. State University of New York Press, Albany.

Weir, M. (1995) The Politics of racial isolation in Europe and America. In P.E. Peterson (eds.), *Classifying by race*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 217–42.

Whyte, W.F. (1943) *Street corner society: the social structure of an Italian slum*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Wilson, W.J. (1987) *The truly disadvantaged: the inner city, the underclass and public policy*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

—— and R. Aponte (1985) Urban Poverty. *Annual Review of Sociology* 11, 231–58.

Wirth, L. (1928) *The ghetto*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

—— (1964) *On cities and social life*. Edited and with an introduction by Albert J. Reiss, Jr, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Wittgenstein, L. (1977) *Vermischte Bermerkungen*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt.

Zunz, O. (1982) *The changing face of inequality: urbanization, industrial development, and immigrants in Detroit, 1880–1920*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.