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*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.*

Marcel Mauss, *Les civilisations.*  
*Éléments et formes* (1929)

## RESUMEN

Este artículo bosqueja una caracterización del régimen de marginalidad urbana que ha emergido en las sociedades avanzadas, desde el cierre de la era fordista, resaltando cuatro razones que se combinan para producirlo: una tendencia macrosocial hacia la desigualdad, la mutación del salario de mano de obra (trayendo como consecuencia tanto la desproletarianización como la economía informal), recortes de los programas de ayuda estatales, la concentración espacial y la estigmatización de la pobreza. El aumento de esta nueva marginalidad no es indicio de una convergencia transatlántica del modelo americano: las vecindades europeas de relegación están profundamente penetradas por su condición y las tensiones etnoraciales que en ellos son explosivas, no por el creciente abismo entre los inmigrantes y los nativos, sino por la creciente proximidad social en el espacio físico. Para hacer frente a las formas emergentes de marginalidad urbana, las sociedades encaran esto con una alternativa de tres vértices: ellos pueden adecuar los programas existentes de ayuda estatales, criminalizar la pobreza vía la contención punitiva del pobre, o instituir nuevos derechos sociales que rompan con la subsistencia de esta práctica en el mercado laboral.

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## URBAN MARGINALITY

## IN THE COMING MILLENNIUM

## ABSTRACT

This article sketches a characterization 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 labor (entailing both deproletarianization and casualization), the retrenchment of welfare states, and the spatial concentration and stigmatization of poverty. The rise of this new marginality does not signal a transatlantic convergence on the American pattern: European neighborhoods of relegation are deeply penetrated by the state and ethnoracial tensions in them are fueled, 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 programs of the welfare state, criminalize poverty via the punitive containment of the poor, or institute new social rights that sever subsistence from performance in the labor market.

### Palabras clave

Marginalidad urbana avanzada, adolescentes, jóvenes, pobreza.

### Key-words

Advanced urban marginality, teenagers, youth, poverty.

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This article analyzes 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 characterization 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 standardized 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 as “advanced marginality”. Identifying the distinctive properties of this consolidating regime of urban marginality helps us pinpoint what exactly is new about the “new poverty” of which the city is the site and fount.

Second, I turn to the question that implicitness informs or explicitness guides European debates on the resurgence of destitution, division, and tension in the metropolis: namely, are we witnessing an epochal convergence of urban poverty regimes across the Atlantic? I argue 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 underlay ghettoization in the United States.

Despite its title, then, this paper is not a contribution to the fadish millenarist 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 twentieth century is witnessing a momentous transformation of the roots, makeup, and consequences of urban poverty in Western society. Along with the accelerating economic

modernization caused by the global restructuring of capitalism, the crystallization of a new international division of labor (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 modernization 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 neighborhoods 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 United States and the United Kingdom, it has been greatly facilitated by the policy of wholesale state retrenchment pursued by conservative and liberal parties alike over the past decades and by the rigid or rising spatial and social separation of white and colored in the major urban centers. In other nations with strong corporatist or social-democratic welfare states and less segregated cities, such as 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 crystallization of immigrant “ghettos” gripping the continent from Marseilles to Munich and Brussels to Brindisi (for e.g., Hadjimichalis and Sadler, 1995; Mingione, 1996).

Whatever the label used to designate it —“underclass” in America and England, “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 transportation 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 deindustrialization and technological upgrading; the sense of retrogression, despair, and insecurity that pervades poor neighborhoods locked in a seemingly unstoppable downward spiral of deterioration; and mounting ethnoracial violence, xenophobia, and hostility towards and amongst the poor. Everywhere state elites 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. Thus 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 Program on exclusion and integration), the OECD, and even NATO on the European side, and major philanthropic foundations on American shores.

## ■ FOUR STRUCTURAL LOGICS FUEL THE NEW MARGINALITY

But the distinctive structural properties of “modernized misery” are much less evident than its concrete manifestations. Schematically, the emerging regime of marginality may be characterized 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-seventies.

### 1. 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 indeed 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 impecuousness have flourished right alongside each other. Thus the city of Hamburg, by some measurements the richest in Europe, sports both the highest proportion of millionaires 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 work force and polarizing access to, and rewards from, durable employment. Postindustrial modernization 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 is not a utopian possibility but a bittersweet reality. Witness the virtual emptying of the harbor of Rotterdam, perhaps the most modern in the world and a major contributor to the rise of unemployment in this Dutch city above the 20-percent 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 in the throes of misery with neither respite nor recourse, even as official unemployment drops and income rises in the country. In September of 1994, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that the American poverty rate had risen to a ten-year high of 15.1 per cent (for a staggering total of 40 million poor persons) despite two 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 neighborhoods of relegation of Europe and the United States 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.

**2. Economic dynamic —the mutation of wage labor:** 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 labor competition. The other is qualitative, involving the degradation and dispersion of basic conditions of employment, remuneration, and social insurance for all but the most protected workers.

From the time when Fredric Engels wrote his classic exposé on the condition of the working class in Manchester’s factories, to the crisis of the great industrial heartland’s of Euro-American capitalism a century-and-a-half later, it was rightly assumed that expanding wage labor 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 likely never find 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 computerization, even miraculous rates of growth could not absorb back into the workforce those who have been deproletarianized, that

is, durably and forcibly expelled from the wage labor market to be replaced by a combination of machines, cheap immigrant labor, and foreign workers (Rifkin, 1995).

Second, and more importantly, the character of the wage-labor relation itself has changed over the past two decades in a manner such that it no longer grants foolproof protection against the menace of poverty even to those who enter it. With the expansion of part-time, “flexitime”, and temporary work 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 privatization of social goods such as health coverage, the wage labor contract itself has become a source of fragmentation and precariousness rather than social homogeneity and security for those consigned to the peripheral segments of the employment sphere (e.g., European Economic Community, 1989; Mabit, 1995; MacDonald and Sirrianni, 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.

**3. Political dynamic —the reconstruction of welfare states:**

The fragmentation and desocialization of labor are not the only factors fueling the rise of the new urban poverty. For, alongside with market forces, welfare states are major producers and shapers of urban inequality and marginality. States not only deploy programs 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 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 sociospatial order (Esping-Andersen, 1993): they provide or preclude access to adequate schooling and job training; they set conditions for labor 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 United States, where the population covered by social insurance schemes has shrunk for two decades while programs 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 substandard 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 fifty states and their counties, thus aggravating already existing inequalities in access to welfare and accelerating the incipient privatization of social policy.

A similar logic of curtailment and devolution has presided over wholesale or piecemeal modifications of social transfer systems in the United Kingdom, 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 “globalization” 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 has led regional and local authorities to institute their own stop-gap support programs (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 programs lifted most poor households near the median national income level in the Netherlands (62%) and France (52%); in West Germany only a third of poor families escaped poverty thanks to government support and in the United States 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 United States (these data are drawn from McFate, Lawson, and Wilson, 1995; a more analytical overview on this question is Kangas, 1991). States do make a difference—that is, when they care to. Therefore it is imperative to bring them back to the epicenter of the comparative sociology of marginality as generative as well as remedial institutions.

**4. Spatial dynamic —concentration and stigmatization:** In the postwar 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 laborers. 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 brook 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 demonization 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 neighborhoods of socioeconomic exile that adds its burden to the

disrepute of poverty and the resurging prejudice against ethnoracial minorities and immigrants (an excellent analysis of this process of public stigmatization is offered by Damer, 1989, in the case of Glasgow).

Along with territorial stigmatization comes a sharp diminution of the sense of communality that used to characterize older working-class locales. Now the neighborhood no longer offers a shield against the insecurities and pressures of the outside world, 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 privatized consumption and strategies of distancing ("I am not one of them") that further undermine local solidarities and confirm deprecatory perceptions of the neighborhood.

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 marginality. 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 neighborhoods of relegation are creatures of state policies in matters of housing, city, and regional planning. At bottom, then, their emergence, consolidation, and eventual dispersion are essentially political issues.

### ■ THE SPECTER 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 United States on the model of the latter (for instance, Cross, 1992; Musterd, 1994; van Kempen and Marcuse, 1998; Haüßerman, Kronauer, and Siebel, 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 "Americanization" of urban patterns of exclusion in the European city leading down the path of ghettoization of the kind imposed upon Afro-Americans since they urbanized at the beginning of this century (i.e., the formation of a segmented, parallel, sociospatial formation serving the dual purpose of exploitation and ostracization 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 ghettoization: it is not spawning culturally uniform sociospatial ensembles based on the forcible relegation of stigmatized populations to enclaves where these populations evolve group and place-specific organizations 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 fueled by ethnic affinity do exist in all these cities. Discrimination and violence against immigrants (or putative immigrants) are also brute facts of life in all major urban centers 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 is not ghettoization. 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 characterizes the neighborhoods of relegation that have sprouted across the continent as mechanisms of working-class reproduction 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, eventuating 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 “economize” 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 “racialization” of space is underway and that the societies of the Old World are witnessing the formation of “minorities” in the sense of ethnic communities mobilized and recognized as such in the public sphere. Second, 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 fueled 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 racialist)

register. Notwithstanding fadish blanket pronouncements about the “globalization 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 in patching up the existing programs 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 criminalize poverty via the punitive containment of the poor in increasingly isolated and stigmatized neighborhoods, on the onehand, and in jails and prisons, on the other. This is the route taken by the United States following the ghetto riots of the sixties (Wacquant, 1997a,b; 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 carceralization of misery inherent in the makeup of social-democratic states in Europe, punitive containment 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 the 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-labor (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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