

GHETTO BLASTING: ON LOÏC WACQUANT'S *URBAN OUTCASTS*¹

Tom Slater²

Institute of Geography, School of Geosciences
University of Edinburgh
United Kingdom

Abstract: This commentary reviews Loïc Wacquant's *Urban Outcasts* and amplifies and extends his argument that ghettos are not forming in European cities by focusing on a public debate on ethnic segregation that took place in Britain in the autumn of 2005. It uses the example of St. Paul's, Bristol, to argue that urban marginality has indeed led to the formation of what Wacquant terms "anti-ghettos"—multi-ethnic areas deeply penetrated by the state. The commentary also considers the role of intellectuals in reinforcing and aggravating the "folk concepts" that enter the realm of urban policy with detrimental consequences, and argues that policy critique is preferable to "policy-relevant" urban scholarship. [Key words: ghettoization, *cité*, *banlieue*, anti-ghettos, ghetto blasting, Great Britain, folk concepts.]

Students can be tough critics, but sometimes their collective reaction is a good measure of the importance and quality of scholarship. I first became aware of the power of Loïc Wacquant's writing in 2004, when I started using some of his articles to teach undergraduates about some deeply problematic transformations of urban society in the U.S. and in Europe—precisely those transformations that are now so vividly captured and packaged in *Urban Outcasts*. I will never forget the excited reactions of many far-from-excitable students after we had discussed in class a typically pugnacious essay Wacquant published in 1997, entitled "Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the American Ghetto" (Wacquant, 1997).³ A couple of years later, I fed some more Wacquant to another round of undergraduates; when I invited him to give a public lecture at the University of Bristol in 2006, I was stunned to see the back third of the lecture hall packed with these students, voluntarily attending an event outside their usual class time. This is clearly a scholar with something special to offer.

In welcoming *Urban Outcasts*, I have two objectives. First, I wish to amplify and extend the argument that ghettoization is not occurring in European cities by focusing on a public debate on ethnic segregation that took place in Britain in 2005. Second, and by way of sympathetic critique, I want to focus a little more on something that only gets tantalizing

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²Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tom Slater, Institute of Geography, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, Drummond Street, Edinburgh EH8 9XP, United Kingdom; telephone: +44(0)-131-650-9506; fax: +44(0)-131-650-2524; email: tom.slater@ed.ac.uk

³This is a wonderfully exciting piece of writing; for me, right up there with the very best interventions ever made in urban scholarship. One particularly astute student came up to me after our discussion of it and said, "Damn! Why can't more academics write stuff like this?"

glimpses in the book—the role of intellectuals in reinforcing and aggravating the “folk concepts” that enter the realm of urban policy with detrimental consequences.

MORAL PANIC ROOM

The comparative perspective on the rise of advanced urban marginality is arguably the most important and original contribution of this book. Wacquant offers what is for me a most exquisite exposé of French urban policy toward its marginal neighborhoods—policy that has for some years now has been guided by the myth that the *cités* (housing projects) in the working-class *banlieues* (suburbs) of its largest cities are very similar, if not identical, to African American (hyper)ghettos in the United States. Wacquant’s fine-grained comparative analysis explains how surface similarities in lived experience, in both working-class French *banlieues* and U.S. ghettos, mask deep differences in their scale, structure, and function. The population residing within the French urban periphery is characterized by remarkable ethnic heterogeneity, as opposed to the strictly enforced ethnic homogeneity of the American ghetto. In no *cit  * or *banlieue* in France is there evidence of a set of parallel institutions forming to serve the basic needs of the excluded population—by contrast with what is common to ghettos, these are areas where the tentacles of the welfare state, while shorter than in previous decades, still stretch into and attempt to assist the lives of the urban outcasts. Furthermore, residents in the housing projects of the French urban periphery have regular contact with and dependency on (through employment and consumption practices) residents of adjacent neighborhoods or those in the central city, which is not the case for those residing in the U.S. ghetto. Finding similar patterns elsewhere in Europe, and dramatizing his point, Wacquant concludes that working-class territories of European cities are best conceptualized as “anti-ghettos.”

This *legend of structural and geographical equivalence* between very different urban phenomena was reinforced by the policy and media reaction to the major civil disturbances that occurred in several *banlieues* in city after city across France for a period of nearly one month in late 2005. In the postscript to *Urban Outcasts*, Wacquant outlines his reasoning for not providing a more “newsy” picture of these riots:

[T]he pace of research is not that of media commentary or public action, and ... the task of social science is not to surf the wave of current events, but to bring to light the durable mechanisms that produce them. (p. 282)

Only a vain “public intellectual” would disagree with this statement, but at the risk of being unscientific, I want to do a little surfing, and focus on 2005, something of a landmark year in the conceptualization of the ghetto.

France is not the only country to experience ill-informed, policy-led “ghetto blasting.” The fear of nascent ghettos is a recurrent one in Britain, but went into overdrive in September 2005 following a declamatory yet high-profile speech, entitled “After 7/7: Sleepwalking to Segregation,” by a leading politician close to the New Labour project, Trevor Phillips (2005), then-Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. Phillips argued that Britain has some residential districts (specifically in Bradford and Leicester) that are nearly as segregated as Chicago’s South Side:

Some districts are on their way to becoming fully fledged ghettos—black holes into which no-one goes without fear and trepidation, and from which no-one ever escapes undamaged.... If we allow this to continue, we could end up in 2048, a hundred years on from the Windrush, living in a New Orleans–style Britain of passively co-existing ethnic and religious communities, eyeing each other uneasily over the fences of our differences.⁴

Not surprisingly, the national media picked up on this part of the speech and massaged it into a colossal Stanley Cohen–style moral panic about “Ghetto Britain,” the failures of multiculturalism and “integration,” and of immigration policy (with asylum-seekers as the despised “folk devils”).

However, the speech was written without careful attention to the 2001 census,⁵ which revealed that there is not a single administrative ward, let alone neighborhood, in the United Kingdom in which the population is 90–100% ethnic minority, whereas tracts with such percentages are commonplace in the U.S. Moreover, for all ethnic minority groups identified by the census, indices of segregation in fact fell between 1991 and 2001. Phillips, in fact, misread some high-profile research on ethnic segregation by geographers Mike Poulsen, Ron Johnston, and James Forrest, presented at the Institute of British Geographers annual conference in 2005, which used a novel typology to show that, for Pakistanis since 1991, increased spatial assimilation, integration, and spatial segregation have all been happening simultaneously⁶—but Phillips chose only to focus on the “increased spatial segregation” part of the findings, something for which he later apologized.⁷

Geographers have actually been at the forefront of research confirming that Britain does not have ghettos. In Leicester, for example, the only city in which a segregation index rose between 1991 and 2001 (from 30 to 39 for people of Black Caribbean descent), local residential concentrations of ethnic minorities are most definitely *not* a consequence of the involuntary spatial containment and control of an outcast single group that has since developed its own parallel institutions for survival. Marginal ethnic minority groups in that city and elsewhere remain heavily dependent on the welfare state to supply basic needs, and even if discrimination is present both in public and private institutions (such as in housing and employment), Britain’s often ethnically diverse marginal neighborhoods display no signs of the exclusionary closure that historically and geographically characterizes ghettoization. A classic “anti-ghetto” is St. Paul’s in Bristol, a dangerous “Black ghetto” to many Bristolians who have never set foot in it, but in fact one of the two most multi-ethnic neighborhoods in the city (Table 1), and a place with a remarkable array of state-funded or subsidized institutions to assist the working class (11 have their offices on a single street), even as the instituted fraud of “urban regeneration” threatens to displace them (in fact, most Blacks in Bristol do not live in St Paul’s and they move out when they ascend the class structure). Table 1 shows some basic demographic indicators of a classic European

⁴This passage is strikingly similar to that of Alain Touraine on the “French ghetto,” quoted on page 144 of *Urban Outcasts*.

⁵A devastating analytical indictment of the fear of ghettos in Britain can be found in the remarkable new book by Nissa Finney and Ludi Simpson (2009), who show the dissimilarity percentage to be stagnant or falling in the cities where Phillips thinks segregation is on the rise.

⁶See Poulsen and Johnston’s (2006) corrective of the policy and media misreadings of their research.

⁷See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/5297760.stm>

TABLE 1. SELECTED KEY STATISTICS FOR BRISTOL'S ST. PAUL'S NEIGHBORHOOD, 2001 (PERCENT)

Ethnic groups	Economic activity						Housing tenure		
	City of Bristol		St. Paul's		City of Bristol		St. Paul's		City of Bristol
	St. Paul's	Bristol	St. Paul's	Bristol	St. Paul's	Bristol	St. Paul's	Bristol	
Total White	56.8	91.8	Employed	48.9	60.1	Owner-occupied	26.4	63.0	
Total mixed ethnicity	8.6	2.1	Unemployed	9.2	3.1	Rented council	20.8	17.0	
Total Asian	7.8	2.9	Economically active students	4.7	3.8	Rented HA/social landlord	26.5	4.1	
Indian	1.0	1.2	Retired	5.1	11.0	Rented private landlord agency	21.4	14.9	
Pakistani	4.9	1.1	Economically inactive students	8.1	8.0	Other ^a	4.9	1.0	
Bangladeshi	0.8	0.3	Looking after home/family	8.1	5.9				
Other Asian	1.1	0.3	Permanently sick/disabled	8.2	5.0				
Total Black	24.9	2.3	Other economically inactive	7.7	3.1				
Black Caribbean	15.2	1.5							
Black African	7.5	0.6							
Other Black	2.2	0.2							
Total Chinese/other	1.9	0.9							

^aIncluding rent free.

Source: Office of National Statistics, UK Census of Population, 2001. Output areas distinguishing St. Paul's from Ashley Ward: 0002-9, 0033, 0039, 0040.

anti-ghetto. Clearly, this is not a place that can be sensibly compared to Bronzeville, East New York, or North Philadelphia.

There is another, more cynical explanation for Phillips's irresponsible diagnosis of "ghetto Britain"—his speech came right after the announcement that the Commission for Racial Equality was being merged with two other institutions to form the Commission for equality and Human Rights, and the top job of that powerful new Commission was up for grabs. A high-profile speech bound to generate massive media attention was a clever short-listing tactic. Indeed, Phillips concluded his speech by saying that "my job cannot involve sitting on the sidelines when we are facing such a huge challenge."

There are two dangers of labeling as "ghettos" those British neighborhoods that house a greater proportion of ethnic minority groups than others. First, it creates what Ceri Peach (1996) has called *reputational ghettos*, bogus territories that are nonetheless avoided through fear and damaged through stigma, perpetuating the harmful discourse of "self-segregation" and stirring up another myth identified by Deborah Phillips (2005)—that of ethnic withdrawal from society. Second, as Danny Dorling (2005) and Ludi Simpson (2007) have pointed out, it deflects social policy attention away from widening class inequality and inappropriately toward fictitiously broad racial divisions.⁸

Therefore, I can only agree with Wacquant: to designate as ghettos the European marginal neighborhoods where class, not race, is the main organizing principle of social life, is to rob these areas of an appropriate conceptual and analytical framework that otherwise may go some way toward explaining their plight. Wacquant (pp. 160–162) calls the French ghetto "a sociological absurdity"—and surely the same can be said of "the British ghetto."

INTELLECTUALS AND FOLK CONCEPTS

A less constraining alternative to policy relevance is policy critique, recognizing, however, that the same external perspective that fosters incisive policy assessment may leave us outside the cozy circle of policy intimates when the warm brandy is doled out around the fire. (Lake, 2003, p. 463)

In the preface to *Urban Outcasts*, Wacquant states that:

[I]t is imperative to establish a clearcut separation between, on the one hand, the *folk concepts* used by state decision-makers, city authorities and the residents themselves to designate neighborhoods of exile and, on the other, the *analytical concepts* that social scientists must construct, against the pre-notions of urban common sense." (p. 8)

But upon reading further the reader is left with a strong sense that it is the social scientists who constitute what one might call the "urban poverty research establishment"

⁸At the same conference where I delivered this commentary, Ceri Peach argued in a special lecture that Phillips's speech has two damaging effects: it exaggerates ethnic segregation in Britain, and trivializes ethnic segregation in the United States.

that have been using folk concepts with the most reckless abandon on both sides of the Atlantic. Wacquant has for some years now worried about what he calls the “growing heteronomy of urban research” (see Wacquant, 2008)—research driven by the priorities of policymakers and city rulers, or worse, the worries of the mainstream media, which obliterates the intrinsic value of autonomous intellectual projects carrying a higher theoretical payload. The implications are without doubt serious—public policy errors follow from analytical slip-ups and conceptual confusion; take, for instance, the demolition of housing projects in the U.S. under the federal HOPE VI program, wherein academic discourses of “concentrated poverty,” which completely ignore the role of race and the state in creating the ghetto, have been used to justify the displacement of thousands of low-income African American families against their wishes, with little concern for their future housing situation (Crump, 2002; Goetz, 2003).

Rob Imrie (2004) has recently asked: how and why have certain types of urban knowledge “filtrated [sic] into public policy institutions and gained ‘good currency’?” (p. 706). *Urban Outcasts* goes some distance toward showing how “policy-relevant” research need not be policy-driven research (Wyly, 2004), but a pressing question now is how the fundamental importance of Wacquant’s arguments, and those of others engaged in the critical urban studies movement, might gain even better currency. Throughout *Urban Outcasts*, the sustained indictment of the deployment and dissemination of folk concepts by eminent urban poverty researchers, while refreshing to see, is largely reduced to footnotes. Here was a golden opportunity for Wacquant to offer a strategy for reinstating more autonomous urban inquiry, divorced from urban policy dictates. In my mind, this has to go further than providing analytical principles for the comparative study of urban marginality emerging under neoliberal capitalism, however valuable those principles may be.

A strategy for more autonomous inquiry requires nothing short of a revolution in the politics of knowledge production. The policy-scholarly fusion that has strengthened in the neoliberal age holds immense financial rewards and career prestige for those who promote it, making the leap of perspective required to see the world as an urban outcast writ large. The technocrats of advanced urban marginality are comprised partly of academics who sit on the executive boards of funding bodies and policy think tanks. Some of them have always been conservative, but more than a few, especially in Europe, sailed with the prevailing political wind in the 1970s. Now, however, they seem to have less tolerance for radical approaches and the radical organic intellectual as their folk concepts gain ideological weight. Given technocratic power, not to mention the institutional contexts in which we all work, is it possible for urban inquiry to be truly autonomous? My mischievous hope is that *Urban Outcasts* forces those who read it to ask awkward and unanswered questions about urban knowledge production, and about the social and political organization of urban poverty research. Wacquant is ideally positioned to lead this collective effort.

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