

Elias in the Dark Ghetto

Norbert Elias's theory of the 'civilizing process' and his notations on its obverse, spurts of 'decivilizing', offer a potent tool for diagnosing the mutation of the black American ghetto since the sixties. An adaptation of his framework can help us overcome some of the perennial limitations of conventional analyses of the conundrum of race and class in the U.S. metropolis (on these see Wacquant 1997a).

The ghetto in light of figurational sociology

First, Elias warns us against *Zustandreduktion*, the 'reduction of process to state', built into the idiom of poverty research, which typically fastens on descriptive properties of disadvantaged individuals and populations, and induced by the positivist philosophy of science that animates it. Instead of thinking of the ghetto in static and morphological terms, he suggests that we conceive of it as a system of dynamic forces interweaving agents situated both inside and outside of its perimeter. Forms, not rates (of segregation, destitution, unemployment, etc.), connections, not conditions, must be our primary empirical focus.

Second, Elias's notion of *figuration* as an extended web of interdependent persons and institutions bonded simultaneously along several dimensions invites us to skirt the analytic parcelling favored by variable-oriented social analysis. 'It is a scientific superstition that in order to investigate them scientifically one must necessarily dissect processes of interweaving into their component parts' (Elias 1978, 98). Race or space, class or race, state or economy: these artificial oppositions that splinter the normal science of urban poverty in America are unfit to capturing the complex causal ensembles and processes involved in making and remaking the ghetto as social system and lived experience.

Third, Elias offers a model of social transformation that spans and *ties together levels of analysis* ranging from large scale organizations of political and economic power to institutionalized social relations to patterns of interaction to personality types. This model exhorts us to hold together conceptually the most 'macro' of all macrostructures and the most 'micro'

of all microformations - all the way down to the 'bio-psycho-social' constitution of the individual, to speak like Marcel Mauss (1968). For sociogenesis and psychogenesis are two sides of the same coin of human existence and changes in the one cannot but reverberate upon the other.

Fourth, and most importantly for our purpose, Elias places *violence and fear* at the epicenter of the experience of modernity: together, they form the Gordian knot tying the outermost workings of the state to the innermost makeup of the person. The expurgation of violence from social life via its relocation under the aegis of the state opens the way for the *regularization of social exchange, the ritualization of everyday life, and the psychologization of impulse and emotion*, leading in turn to 'courtly' and thence courteous human commerce. As for fear, it supplies the central mechanism for the introjection of social controls and the self-administered 'regulation of the whole instinctual and affective life' (Elias 1994, 443).

Now, fear, violence, and the state are integral to the formation and transformation of America's dark ghetto. Fear of contamination and degradation via association with inferior beings - African slaves - is at the root of the pervasive prejudice and institutionalization of the rigid caste division which, combined with urbanization, gave birth to the ghetto at the turn of the century (Jordan 1974, Meier & Rudwick 1976). Violence, from below, in the form of interpersonal aggression and terror, as well as from above, in the guise of state sponsored discrimination and segregation, has been the preeminent instrument for drawing and imposing the 'color line'. And it plays a critical role also in redrawing the social and symbolic boundaries of which the contemporary ghetto is the material expression.

Depacification, desertification, and informalization

Elsewhere I have characterized social change on the South Side of Chicago, the city's main historic 'Black Belt', as a shift from the 'communal ghetto' of the mid-century to the *fin-de-siècle* 'hyperghetto' (Wacquant 1994), a novel sociospatial formation conjugating racial and class exclusion under the press of market retrenchment and state abandonment leading to the 'deurbanification' of large chunks of inner-city space.

The communal ghetto of the immediate postwar years was the product of an all-encompassing caste division that compelled blacks to develop their own social world in the shadow - or between the cracks - of hostile white institutions. A compact, sharply bounded, sociospatial formation, it comprised a full complement of black classes bound together by a unified racial consciousness, an extensive social division of labor, and broad-based

communitarian agencies of mobilization and voice. It formed, as it were, a 'city within the city', standing in a linked oppositional relation with the broader white society whose basic institutional infrastructure it strove to duplicate.

This 'black metropolis', to borrow the eloquent title of the classic study of Chicago's 'Bronzeville' by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945), has been replaced by a different urban form. The hyperghetto of the 1980s and '90s both expresses an *exacerbation of historic racial exclusion sifted through a class prism* and exhibits a novel spatial and organizational configuration. Because it weds color segregation with class bifurcation, it no longer contains an extended division of labor and a complete set of classes. Its physical boundaries are more fuzzy and its dominant institutions are not community-wide organizations (such as churches, lodges, and the black press) but state bureaucracies (welfare, public education, and police) targeted on marginalized 'problem populations'. For the hyperghetto serves not as a reservoir of disposable industrial labor but as mere dumping ground for supernumerary categories for which the surrounding society has no economic or political use. And it is suffused with systemic economic, social, and physical insecurity due to the mutually reinforcing erosion of the wage-labor market and state support. Thus, whereas the ghetto in its classical form acted partly as a protective shield against brutal racial exclusion, the hyperghetto has lost its positive role of collective buffer, making it a deadly machinery for naked social relegation.

The shift from communal ghetto to hyperghetto may be pictured dynamically in terms of the structured interaction of three master processes. The first is the *depacification of everyday life*, that is, the seeping of violence through the fabric of the local social system. Mounting physical decay and danger in America's racialized urban core, detectible in the dereliction of neighborhood infrastructure and in astronomical rates of crime against persons (homicide, rape, assault and battery), have forced a thorough revamping of daily routines and created a suffocating atmosphere of distrust and dread (Freidenberg 1995).

A second process entails *social dedifferentiation* leading to the withering away of the organizational fabric of ghetto neighborhoods. The gradual disappearance of stable working- and middle-class Afro-American households, the stacking of degraded public housing in black slum areas, and the deproletarianization of the remaining residents have undercut local commercial, civic, and religious institutions. Persistent joblessness and acute material deprivation have set off a shrinking of social networks while the political expendability of the black poor allowed for the drastic deterioration of public institutions. From schools, housing, and health care to the

police, the courts, and welfare, the latter operate in ways that further stigmatize and isolate ghetto dwellers (Wacquant 1997b).

A third process is *economic informalization*: the combined insufficiencies of labor demand, organizational desertification of neighborhoods, and failings of welfare support have fostered the growth of an unregulated economy led by the mass retail sales of drugs and assorted illegal activities. Nowadays most inhabitants of Chicago's South Side find the mainstay of their sustenance in street trades and the social assistance sector: wage work is too scarce and too unreliable for them to be the main anchor of their life strategies (Wilson 1996).

State retrenchment and hyperghettoization

The causal nexus driving the hyperghettoization of the urban core comprises a complex and dynamic constellation of economic and political factors unfolding over the whole postwar era - and further back since many of them can be traced to the era of initial consolidation of the ghetto in the wake of the 'Great Migration' of 1916-1930 - that belies the short-term plot of the 'underclass' narrative as a product of the 1970s. Against monocausal theories, I argue that hyperghettoization has *not one but two fundamental roots*, the one in revamping of the urban economy and the other in the structures and policies of the American federal and local state. And that rigid spatial segregation perpetuated by political inaction and administrative fragmentation (Massey & Denton 1993, Weiher 1991) provides the linchpin that links these two sets of forces into a self-perpetuating constellation highly resistant to conventional social mobilization and social policy approaches.

All told, the *collapse of public institutions* resulting from the state policy of abandonment and punitive containment of the minority poor emerges as the most potent and distinctive root of entrenched marginality in the American metropolis. Shorn of specifics, the theoretical model of the role of the state in hyperghettoization that Elias helps us specify may be sketched as follows. The erosion of the presence, reach, and efficacy of public institutions and programs entrusted with delivering essential social goods in the racialized urban core sends a series of shock waves that destabilize the already weakened organizational matrix of the ghetto. These shock waves are independent of, though closely correlated with and further amplified by, those emanating from the postfordist restructuring of the economy and ensuing dualization of the city (Sassen 1990, Mollenkopf & Castells 1991).

The massive *social disinvestment* spelled by the curtailment of state provision (i) accelerates the decomposition of the indigenous institutional infrastructure of the ghetto; (ii) facilitates the spread of pandemic violence and fuels the enveloping climate of fear; and (iii) supplies the room and impetus for the blossoming of an informal economy dominated by the drug trade. These three processes in turn feed upon each other and become locked into an apparently self-sustaining constellation that presents every outward sign of being *internally* driven (or 'ghetto-specific'), when in reality it is (over)determined and sustained *from the outside* by the brutal and uneven movement of withdrawal of the semi-welfare state.

The fact that the involutive trajectory of the ghetto appears to be driven by self-contained, endogenous, processes is pivotal to the political-ideological redefinition of the question of race and poverty in the 1980s. For it gives free rein to blaming its victims, as in the stigmatizing discourse of the 'behavioral underclass' (Gans 1995), which justifies further state retrenchment. The latter then 'verifies' the view that the ghetto is now beyond policy remediation as conditions within it continue to deteriorate.

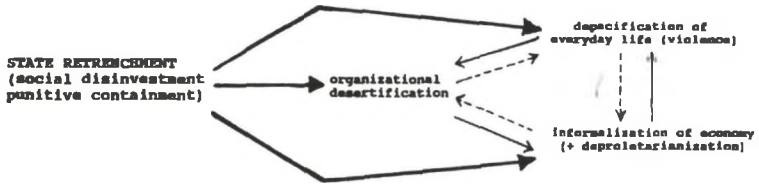


Figure 1. *Simplified model of the relations between state retrenchment and hyper-ghettoization*

Thus the thinning of the ghetto's organizational ecology weakens its collective capacity for formal and informal control of interpersonal violence, which, in the context of widespread material deprivation, leads to increased crime and violence (Bursick & Grasmick 1993). Above a certain threshold, the tide of violent crime makes it impossible to operate a business in the ghetto and thus contributes to the withering away of the wage-labor economy. Informalization and deproletarianization, in turn, diminish the purchasing power and life stability of ghetto residents, which undermines the viability of resident institutions - and thence the life-chances of those who depend on them. It also increases crime since violence is the primary means of regulation of transactions in the street

economy, which violence feeds organizational decline that yet furthers economic informalization, as indicated in figure 1 above.

From safety net to dragnet

State retrenchment should not be taken to mean that the state withdraws *in toto* and somehow disappears from America's neighborhoods of relegation. To stem the public 'disorders' associated with acute marginality caused by the downgrading - or termination - of its (federal) economic, housing, and social welfare component, the (local) state is compelled to increase its surveillance and repressive presence in the ghetto (Davis 1990, chapter 5).

In point of fact, the past two decades have witnessed an explosive growth of the penal functions of the American state as prisons and related carceral devices (parole, probation, electronic monitoring, bootcamps, and curfews) were deployed to stem the consequences of rising destitution caused by the shrinkage of welfare support. Today, the United States are spending upwards of 200 billion dollars annually on the crime-control industry and the 'face' of the state most familiar to young ghetto residents is that of the policeman, parole officer, and prison guard (Miller 1996). For the tripling of the incarcerated population in fifteen years, from 494,000 in 1980 to over 1,5 million in 1994, has hit poor urban African-Americans with special brutality: one black man in ten between the ages of 18 and 34 is presently imprisoned (as compared with 1 adult in 128 for the nation) and fully one in three is under supervision of the criminal justice system or admitted in detention at some point during a one-year period.

However, the substitution of disciplinary functions, carried out by the police, criminal justice, and prison system, for social provision functions has been only been partial, so that the net result of this 'simultaneous reinforcing-weakening of the State' (Poulantzas 1978, 226) is a marked diminution of the depth and breadth of state regulation in the urban core. This is visible even in the area of public order, notwithstanding the guerrilla war on the urban poor waged by the police and the courts under cover of the 'War on Drugs'. Even in those parts of the ghetto where police forces are highly visible, the 'dragnet' simply cannot make up for the unraveling of the 'social safety net'. For instance, despite the presence of a police station *inside* the Robert Taylor Homes, the country's most infamous concentration of social housing and social misery, the Chicago Housing Authority found it necessary to create its own, supplementary, private police force to patrol the project grounds. And, even then, it cannot

deliver minimal levels of physical safety to its residents (in the early '90s, the homicide rate in that section of the South Side exceeded 100 per 100,000, highest in the city), let alone effect a finer control of the so-called 'underclass behaviors' that worry political elites and policy experts.

This is because welfare state retrenchment impacts the ghetto not simply by curtailing the investment and income streams flowing into it but also, more significantly, by unknitting the entire web of 'indirect social relations' (Calhoun 1991) sustained by public institutions and by the private organizations that these in turn support. The substitution of the penal state for the semi-welfare state cannot but reinforce the very socioeconomic instability and interpersonal violence it is supposed to allay (Wacquant 1996).

Elias thus helps us to 'bring the state back in' the analysis of the nexus of caste, class, and space in the American hyperghetto. Examination of the state's role ought to include (i) all levels of the governmental apparatus (federal, state, county and municipal) as well as the strategies and practices of ghetto residents towards them; (ii) not only welfare and 'anti-poverty' policies but the whole gamut of state activities that affect the sociospatial structuring of inequality, including criminal and penal policies; (iii) both what public authority does and what it fails to do, for the state moulds urban marginality not only by commission but also - and perhaps most decisively in the case of the United States - by (socially and racially selective) omission.

Taking Elias into America's dark ghetto suggests that theoretical models of the latter's transformation (and beyond it, of the reconfiguration of the metropolitan order) that omit the state, its organizational capacities, policies and discourses, and its actual street-level modalities of intervention, do so at the cost of forbidding themselves to unearth the *distinctively political roots of the patterning of racial and class exclusion* of which today's hyperghetto is the concrete materialization. And they are at grave risk of being invoked to recommend prescriptions that can do little more than provide *ex post facto* legitimation for the policies of urban abandonment and repressive containment of the black (sub)proletariat that are the main cause of the continued aggravation of the plight of America's urban outcasts.

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