

6 Decivilizing and demonizing: the social and symbolic remaking of the black ghetto and Elias in the dark ghetto

Loïc Wacquant

This chapter is divided into two parts.¹ In Part I, I analyse the post-sixties transformation of America's black ghetto in material reality and public discourse as the product of two interconnected processes. At the *social-relational level*, the ghetto has undergone a process of 'de-civilizing' in Elias's sense of the term, caused not by economic 'mismatches', the excessive generosity of welfare, or the 'culture of poverty' and 'anti-social' impulses of its residents, but by the withdrawal of the state and the ensuing disintegration of public space and social relations in the urban core. This process is echoed, at the *symbolic level*, by the demonization of the black sub-proletariat via the trope of the 'underclass', a scholarly myth anchored by the loathsome imagery of the fearsome 'gang banger' and the dissolute 'welfare mother'. Decivilizing and demonization form a structural-cum-discursive couplet in which each element reinforces the other and both serve in tandem to legitimize the state policy of urban abandonment and punitive containment responsible for the parlous state of the contemporary ghetto.

In Part II this processual approach to the formation of class, caste and urban space is further elaborated using the theoretical tools of Norbert Elias's figurational sociology. Adopting a relational perspective and bringing fear, violence and the state to the analytical forefront makes it possible to specify the transition from the mid-century 'communal ghetto' to the contemporary 'hyperghetto', in terms of the dynamic interaction of three master processes: the *depacification of everyday life*, *social dedifferentiation leading to organizational desertification* and *informalization of the economy*. I argue that each of these processes is set off and abetted by the collapse of public institutions and by the ongoing replacement of the 'social safety net' of welfare by the 'dragnet' of police and prisons. Elias thus helps us spotlight the distinctively political roots of the urban patterning of racial and class exclusion of which today's hyperghetto is the concrete materialization.

I THE SOCIAL AND SYMBOLIC REMAKING OF THE BLACK GHETTO

To approach the controversial reality of what has become of the black American ghetto a quarter-century after the wave of race riots chronicled in the famous Kerner Commission Report of 1968 (see NACCD 1968), I would like to highlight two interconnected processes, the one material and relational, the other symbolic or discursive, whereby has operated an urban and racial mutation specific to *fin-de-siècle* America.

The first process is what I will call, after Norbert Elias, the *de-civilizing* of the segregated core of large US cities, these veritable domestic Bantustans that are the ghettos of the old industrial centres of the rustbelt states, such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Cleveland, owing to the retreat of the state in its various components and the ensuing disintegration of public space.

The second process, tightly linked to the first by a complex functional relation, is the *demonizing* of the black urban sub-proletariat in public debate, that is, the extraordinary proliferation of discourses on what has been called the 'underclass' for a little over a decade now on the Western shores of the Atlantic – a term that is better left untranslated in so far as it points to an alleged location in American social space and carries with it a specifically American semantic halo. We will see that the semi-journalistic, semi-scholarly trope that has given 'birth' to this fictitious group by refurbishing century-old prejudices concerning the supposed cultural peculiarities of the black community for contemporary tastes tends to effect a veritable 'symbolic enslavement' of the residents of the ghetto (see Dubin 1987).² This symbolic confinement in turn serves to justify the policy of abandonment of this segment of society by public authorities, a policy to which the theory of the 'underclass' owes its considerable and growing social plausibility.

Because my analysis focuses on an aspect of US society that is not well known, including by indigenous social science, owing especially to the notions of the national common sense, ordinary and scholarly, which tend to screen it from view, it is liable to be mistaken for a polemic against the United States stamped in the coin of anti-Americanism. To indicate that it is no such thing, it will suffice to suggest that an analysis of the same type could be made, *mutatis mutandis*, of the situation of the declining working-class estates that ring France's large cities and of the recent explosion of apocalyptic discourses on the *cités-ghettos* in the media and the political field, a thematic which constitutes in many regards a sort of French structural equivalent of the American debate on the 'underclass' (see Wacquant 1992).

The de-civilizing of the ghetto

In his masterwork *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Norbert Elias (1994) describes what he labels the 'civilizing process'. By this term the German sociologist designates not some Victorian idea of moral or cultural progress of which the West would be bearer and beacon, but the long-term transformation of interpersonal relations, tastes, modes of behaviour, and knowledge that accompanies the formation of a unified state capable of monopolizing physical violence over the whole of its territory and thus of progressively pacifying society.

For the sake of clarity, this process can be analytically decomposed into four levels. The first is a structural modification of social relations, of the form and density of social 'figurations', that manifests itself in the growth of the division of labour and the lengthening and multiplication of networks of interdependence and interaction among individuals and groups. In the second place, the civilizing process is distinguished, according to Elias, by a series of associated changes in modes and styles of life: the repression and privatization of bodily functions, the institutionalization and diffusion of forms of courtesy, and the increase in mutual identification bringing about a decline of interpersonal violence. A third family of transformations touches the structure of the habitus, i.e. the socially constituted schemata that generate individual behaviour: on this level one notes an increase in the pressure towards the rationalization of conduct (particularly by the elevation of the thresholds of shame and embarrassment) as well as the sociocultural distance between parents and children; with the domestication of aggression, self-control becomes more automatic, uniform and continuous, and governed by internal censorship more than by external constraints. The fourth and final transformation impacts modes of knowledge, whose fantasmatic contents regress as the principles of cognitive neutrality and congruence with reality are affirmed. The originality of Elias's analysis lies not only in linking these diverse changes to one another but, above all, in showing that they are closely connected to the increasing hold of the state upon society.

The evolution of the black American ghetto since the 1960s can, following this schema, be interpreted in part as the product of a *reversal* of these trends, that is, as a process of *de-civilizing*³ whose principal cause is to be found neither in the sudden upsurge of deviant values run amok (as the advocates of the 'culture of poverty' thesis, an old theoretical carcass periodically exhumed from the graveyard of stillborn concepts, would have it), nor in the excessive generosity of what one analyst has rightly termed the 'American semi-welfare state' (as maintained by conservative ideologues Charles Murray 1984; and Lawrence Mead 1985), nor

in the mere mechanical transition from a compact industrial economy to a decentralized service economy (as claimed by partisans of the so-called 'mismatch' hypothesis, such as William Julius Wilson (1987); and John Kasarda (1988)), but in the multifaceted retrenchment, on all levels (federal, state and municipal) of the American state and the correlative crumbling of the public sector institutions that make up the organizational infrastructure of any advanced urban society. This is to say that, far from arising from some economic necessity or obeying a cultural logic specific to the black American 'lower class', I demonstrate that the current predicament of the ghetto and its unending deterioration pertain essentially to the political order of state institutions and actions – or the lack thereof.

I propose to treat briefly *in seriatim* three trends that materialize this decivilizing of the ghetto: the depacification of society and the erosion of public space; the organizational desertification and the policy of concerted abandonment of public services in the urban territories where poor blacks are concentrated; and, finally, the movement of social de-differentiation and the rising informalization of the economy that can be observed in the racialized core of the American metropolis. Along the way, I will provide a compressed statistical and ethnographic sketch of this concentration-camp-like space into which the black American ghetto has turned, relying mainly on the example of that of Chicago, which I know more specifically for having worked on and in it for several years.

The depacification of everyday life and the erosion of the public space

The most striking aspect of daily life in the black American ghetto today is no doubt the extreme dangerousness and the unprecedented rates of violent crime that afflict its inhabitants. Thus, in the course of 1990, 849 murders were recorded in Chicago, 602 of which were shootings, the typical victim being a black man under 30 living in a segregated and deprived neighbourhood on the South Side or West Side (the city's two historic 'Black Belts'). A murder is committed in Al Capone's old fief every 10 hours; there are 45 robberies per day, 36 of them involving guns. In 1984 there were already 400 arrests for violent crimes per 100,000 residents; this figure had increased fourfold by 1992. A disproportionate share of these crimes are committed, but also suffered, by the residents of the ghetto.

Indeed, a recent epidemiological study conducted by the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta shows that homicide has become the leading cause of male mortality among the black urban population. Of the rising tide of macabre statistics published on this subject in recent years, one can

recall that young black men in Harlem run a greater risk of violent death today simply by virtue of residing in that neighbourhood than they would have walking to the front lines at the height of the Vietnam War. In the Wentworth district, at the heart of Chicago's South Side, the homicide rate reaches 96 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. A police officer assigned to this neighbourhood laments: 'We have murders every day that don't even make the news. Nobody knows or cares.' And he complains that the young criminals commonly have access to high-powered weapons, automatic handguns and Uzi submachine guns: 'Before, the kids tended to use clubs and knives. Now they have better firearms than we do.' In the course of the single year 1990, the city police seized more than 19,000 handguns during routine operations (*Chicago Tribune* 1991a). A number of big cities have instituted 'gun exchange' programmes, offering a fixed sum of money for firearms turned in in the hope of reducing the number of pistols and rifles circulating in poor neighbourhoods.

It is true that in some public housing concentrations in the ghetto, gunfire is so frequent that children learn when they are little to throw themselves to the ground to avoid bullets as soon as they hear shooting; as for little girls, they are also taught to guard against the 'rape men'. Thousands of high-school students abandon their studies every year on account of the insecurity that prevails inside Chicago's public schools. Indeed, it is not unusual for families to send their offspring off to board with parents in the suburbs or in the Southern states so that they can follow a normal academic cursus without risking their lives. A recent study of residents of a large low-income housing complex on the South Side compares the area around the projects to 'a war zone where the non-combatants flee the frontlines'. The dangers to which the children of these neighbourhoods are exposed are, in decreasing order, shootings, extortion by gangs, and obscurity, propitious to violence of all kinds. In contrast a random sample of suburban mothers cite fear of kidnapping, car accidents and drugs as the main threats looming over their offspring. One South Side mother describes a typical scene as follows: 'Sometimes you see boys running from two directions; they start calling names; then they start shooting' (Dubrow and Garbarino 1989: 8). Another adds: 'People start shooting and the next thing you know you have a war on your hands.' In the projects of the West Side, families surviving on welfare payments allocate a share of their meagre resources to pay for funeral insurance for their adolescent children.

In this environment of pandemic violence, the mere fact of surviving, of reaching the age of majority and *a fortiori* old age, is perceived as an achievement worthy of public recognition. In the neighbourhood of North Kenwood, one of the South Side's poorest, murders became

so frequent in the late 1980s that the young people there 'seriously discussed whether it was possible to get past your thirties'. Some analysts of urban problems go so far as to speak openly of young black men as an 'endangered species' (see Duncan 1987; Gibbs 1988). Dying a violent death and going to prison have become eminently banal events, with the result that incarceration is often perceived as a simple continuation of life in the ghetto:

To a lotta *poor blacks America is a prison* . . . Jail, jail jus' an' extension of America, for black people anyway. Even in jail, the whites got the better job, I'm serious! They give the whites the *high-payin' jobs*, they give the blacks the *wors' jobs in d'jail*: cleanin' the basement, all kindsa har' an' crazy stuff.

So I was told by one of my informants, a former leader of Black Gangster Disciples, the gang which ruled the South Side at the turn of the 1980s, at the end of seven years spent in the penitentiary. In fact, today there are more black men between 19 and 25 under correctional supervision (jailed in preventive custody, serving prison sentences and on probation or parole) than are enrolled in four-year colleges (Duster 1988).

The first reaction of ghetto residents who are victims of violence is to flee, when they can, or to barricade themselves into their homes and to withdraw into the family circle, when it is not to avenge themselves. The reflex of resorting to law enforcement agencies quickly fades when, on the one hand, one is equally afraid of police violence, itself endemic (as was recently revealed during the trial following the brutal beating of black motorist Rodney King by the Los Angeles police, caught on videotape by an amateur cameraman), but also and above all when state services, overextended and direly short of means, are unable to respond to demand and incapable of guaranteeing the victims minimal protection against possible reprisals by the criminals. Alex Kotlowitz recounts the fruitless efforts of a South Side family to get the police or social services of the city to intervene to get back their 11-year-old son, who had been in effect kidnapped by a dealer who used him to distribute drugs to his resale network (Kotlowitz 1991: 84ff.). A paradox that speaks volumes: it is in the most dangerous neighbourhoods of the ghetto that the calls to 911 are the least frequent.

The organizational desertification of the ghetto

At once cause and effect of this erosion of public space, the decline of local institutions (businesses, churches, neighbourhood associations and public services) has reached such a degree that it verges on an organizational desert. The origin of the spectacular degradation of the institutional and

associative fabric of the ghetto is, here again, to be found in the sudden retreat of the welfare state, which has undermined the infrastructure enabling public and private organizations to develop or subsist in these stigmatized and marginalized neighbourhoods.

It is well established that, on the heels of Richard Nixon's re-election, the United States made a U-turn in urban policy. In the course of the seventies, the scaffold of government programmes put in place at the time of Johnson's Great Society was gradually dismantled and then abandoned, depriving the big cities of the means to meet the needs of their most disadvantaged residents. The policy of disengagement from the metropolis accelerated to reach its acme under the successive presidencies of Ronald Reagan: between 1980 and 1988, the funds allocated for urban development were cut by 68 per cent and those destined for federal public housing by 70 per cent. It was the same with social assistance: in the state of Illinois, for example, the real-dollar value of the basic package (the allowance for a single mother with offspring under Aid to Families with Dependent Children, plus food stamps) decreased by one half between 1977 and 1988. The maximum amount a family of three can claim is now barely equal to the average rent of a *one-room* apartment in Chicago. And only 55 per cent of those entitled to it receive public aid.

At the municipal level, deep cuts have been made selectively in the budget for public services, on which blacks living in poor neighbourhoods are the most reliant, whether it be public transport, subsidized housing, social and medical services, schools or city services such as trash collection and housing inspection. Thus, today there is not a single public hospital left on the South Side of Chicago, nor a single functioning drug rehabilitation programme that accepts patients who do not have the means to pay. And a chain of fire station closings allows the city to claim the highest rate of death by fire in the country. Indigenous institutions, which flourished up to the mid-sixties, are in their death throes. Even the two traditional pillars of the black community, hinges and mouthpieces of the ghetto in its classical form (as described by St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in their masterful book *Black Metropolis*, 1962[1945]), the press and the pulpit, have all but lost their ability to shape life in the inner city as the exodus of the black (petty) bourgeois and stable working-class families, who leave to find refuge in the adjoining neighbourhoods left vacant by whites fleeing the city, deprived them of their main clientele and source of support.

But it is the accelerated degradation of the schools that best reveals this process of institutional abandonment. Public schooling has become, according to the testimony of a former superintendent of the Chicago Board of Education, 'a reservation of the poor': 84 per cent of its clientele is black

and Latino and 70 per cent comes from families living below the official poverty line. Of 100 children entering the sixth grade in 1982, only 16 reached the twelfth grade six years later, even though no examination is required to move on at any level of the curriculum. In the eighteen poorest schools of the district, all of them located inside the ghetto, this percentage drops to a paltry 3.5. Three-quarters of city's secondary establishments do not offer a courses leading to college admission; most are cruelly lacking in rooms, books, basic equipment such as typewriters, desks or blackboards, and, even more so, teachers – a quarter of the city's teaching body is made up of permanent substitute teachers. No local elected official to the municipal council sends his or her children to a public school and the teachers who risk theirs there are far and few. And for good reason: Chicago spends, on average, only \$5,000 per student per year, as against \$9,000 annually for the pupils of the rich towns of the Northern suburbs (Kozol 1991).

The pauperization of the public sector has debased schools to the level of mere *custodial institutions* incapable of fulfilling their pedagogic functions. At Fiske Elementary School, on 62nd Street, no more than a couple of hundred yards from the overaffluent University of Chicago Business School, the two daily priorities are, first, to ensure the physical safety of the children and staff by means of a parents' militia that patrols the school grounds all day long armed with baseball bats; and, second, to feed the children, a large number of whom come to school with empty stomachs and fall asleep from exhaustion during class. In May 1991, when the Chicago Board of Education announced the imminent closing of thirty-odd ghetto schools due to an unforeseen budget deficit, some 300 parents went on a protest march which wound up in a stormy meeting with the academic authorities: 'When you start closing these schools and transferring these kids, tell us if you're going to ensure that our kids will be able to stay alive when they walk out of one territory to enter another gang's territory? Do you want to have the blood of our children on your hands? (*Chicago Tribune*, 1991b) The lapidary response of the mayor on the evening news: 'We can't put a policeman behind every student.'

Social dedifferentiation and economic informalization

In keeping with the predictions of Elias's model, one can observe inside the black American ghetto a trend toward *social dedifferentiation*, that is, a functional and structural decrease in the division of labour, at the level of populations as well as institutions. This retreat of differentiation can be seen first in the growing occupational uniformity of the residents

of the segregated inner city, due principally to the vertiginous rise of unemployment: in 1950, half of ghetto dwellers over 16 years of age had a job; in 1980, three adults in four were without work and over half of all households subsisted mainly on public aid. At the institutional level, a parallel tendency towards forced multifunctionality asserts itself, such that an organization finds itself compelled to take on functions that ordinarily redound to other (especially public) organizations owing to the latter's crisis or outright disappearance. Thus the churches strive, as best as they can, to make up for the deficiencies of the schools, the labour market, and a social, medical and judicial system in an advanced state of decay, by running soup kitchens and food pantries, setting up drug rehabilitation programmes and literacy campaigns run by volunteers, and by maintaining 'job banks'. But they are themselves confronted with such a fall in their financial and human resources that they often have to devote most of their energies to their own survival. The same is true of the city's 'political machine', which, unable to maintain the networks of clientelism responsible for channelling the voters of poor neighbourhoods, now exists only on paper. At the close of the 1988 presidential campaign, the local Democratic Party was reduced to offering a free meal in a desperate attempt to attract potential voters to its meetings in Woodlawn in support of its candidate Michael Dukakis.

The dedifferentiation of the social structure is directly tied to the decline of the formal economy and the collapse of the job market in the ghetto. In the post-war decades, the segregated neighbourhoods of the big cities served as a convenient pool of cheap manual labour for a booming industrial economy. The restructuring of American capitalism during the period from 1965 to 1982 put an end to this role of reservoir of workforce, bringing about a rapid withering away of the productive fabric. The fate of the community of Woodlawn, on Chicago's South Side, provides a vivid illustration of this process of economic marginalization of the ghetto. Woodlawn counted over 700 commercial and industrial firms in 1950; today it holds little more than 100, the great majority of which employ no more than two or three people. The most common businesses in the neighbourhood are liquor stores, hair and cosmetics salons and store-front churches, small independent religious establishments the majority of which have closed down and are rotting away.

To this collapse of the official economy corresponds the vertiginous growth of the informal economy, and especially the drug trade. The commerce in narcotics is, in many sectors of the ghetto, the only expanding economic growth sector and the main employer of jobless youths – nay, the only type of business that the latter know firsthand and for which they can begin working as early as age six or eight. It is true that it is

also the only sector in which racial discrimination is not a barrier to entry (see Williams 1989, and also Bourgois, 1992). As a West Side informant explained to me as we drove past a row of abandoned buildings near his home: 'That's the thing, to be a *gang-banger*, to be a drug-dealer. An' that's what they doin', hangin' there, on the street corner, sellin' drugs, an' rippin' off people – that's *they art*. See they don' have anything else, so that's they art.'

Aside from the drug economy and informal work – whose development is visible in other sectors of the American economy, including the most advanced⁴ – the heart of the ghetto has witnessed a proliferation of small sub-proletarian 'trades' typical of Third World cities: itinerant hawkers, resellers of newspapers, cigarettes or soft drinks by the unit, porters, parking lot attendants, day-labourers, etc. There is no South Side neighbourhood without its 'gypsy cabs', its 'jackleg mechanics', its 'after-hours' clubs and its teenagers who offer to carry your grocery bags at the exit of the local food mart or to fill up your car at the gas station for a bit of change. Everything can be bought and sold on the street, from counterfeit Louis Vuitton handbags (for \$25 dollars each) to refinished stolen cars to handguns (\$300 for a 'clean' revolver at the current rate, half that sum for a 'dirty' one), defective clothes, homemade Southern-style cooking and dollar-store jewelry. The gambling economy – the 'numbers game', lottery, lotto and illegal card and dice games – knows no recession.

The development of this parallel irregular economy is closely tied to the disintegration of public space and the depacification of the local society. According to anthropologist Philippe Bourgois, the ghetto streets have become the crucible of a 'culture of terror' that grows functionally with the drug trade:

Regular displays of violence are necessary for success in the underground economy – especially the street-level, drug-dealing world. Violence is essential for maintaining credibility and for preventing ripoff by colleagues, customers, and holdup artists. Indeed . . . behaviour that appears irrationally violent and self-destructive to the middle-class (or the working-class) outside observer can be reinterpreted according to the logic of the underground economy, as a judicious case of public relations, advertising, and rapport-building. (Bourgois 1989: 631–2)

To complete this summary portrait of the decivilizing process in the ghetto, one would need to evoke the shortening of networks of interdependency (as in the case of one resident of the South Side who no longer visits her cousins on the West Side due to the intense insecurity prevailing there, or the children of public housing projects who resign themselves to not having friends out of fear of finding themselves entangled in dangerous

situations – Kotlowitz 1991: 154); the production of structurally unstable habitus due to the internalization of socioeconomic structures that are increasingly precarious and contradictory; the rise of political-religious fantasies of a millenarist kind, of which the growing popularity of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakan is one indicator among others, etc. In short, all the practices of an ‘infra-civil’ society that has developed to fill the organizational vacuum created by the retrenchment of the state and the collapse of public space as well as of the social regulations of which the state is the bearer.

The invention of the ‘underclass’, or the demonizing of the black ghetto sub-proletariat

The symbolic flank of this decivilizing process is the invention of the *underclass* as a novel, yet pivotal, category of political and scholarly common sense in the debate about the ghetto after the Civil Rights revolution.⁵ If we are to believe the media, policy research experts, but also a good number of sociologists, a new ‘group’ has made its appearance at the heart of the country’s urban ‘Black Belts’ in the course of the past three decades: the ‘underclass’. One would be tempted to translate this term as *quart-monde* [Fourth World], the excluded, or sub-proletariat if it did not precisely designate an indigenous ‘reality’ without true counterpart outside of the United States (much like, for example, the notion of ‘*cadre*’ in French society – Boltanski 1987), which justifies our retaining the American word, even as, unbeknownst to most of its users, it derives from the Swedish *underklasse*. This ‘group’ can be recognized by a collection of supposedly closely interconnected characteristics – pell mell: an out-of-control sexuality, female-headed families, massive absenteeism and failure rates in school, drug consumption and trafficking and a propensity for violent crime, an abiding ‘dependency’ on public aid, endemic unemployment (due, according to some versions, to a refusal to work and to fit into the conventional structures of society), isolation in neighbourhoods with a high density of ‘problem’ families, etc.

Definitional criteria vary, as do the estimates of the size of the group, which range from a modest 0.5 to a gigantic 8 million. Some analysts depict the ‘underclass’ as a category that includes vast numbers and is growing at a frightening pace; others argue, to the contrary, that its volume is quite restricted and that it is stagnating, even shrinking. But nearly all agree on one key point: the ‘underclass’ is a new entity, distinct from the traditional ‘lower class’ and separate from the rest of society, which bears a specific culture or nexus of relations that determines it to engage in pathologically behaviours of destruction and self-destruction.

Genesis of a scholarly myth

Whence comes the 'underclass'? The name strictly speaking emerged in that murky zone situated at the intersection of the political field and the field of the social sciences, from where it was first propagated in the media before making a forceful return within sociology. Borrowed by journalists from the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal (1962), who used it to designate something else altogether – those fractions of the proletariat marginalized on the labour market due to an ethnic or racial stigma and technological upheavals in the production system – the term has become virtually synonymous not simply with the 'undeserving poor' (Katz 1989), but with the undeserving *black* poor. For, curiously, there seems to be no white 'underclass', or if there is, it is so insignificant as to be hardly worthy of mention.

One can sketch an abbreviated genealogy of the emergence of the swirling discourse on the 'underclass' by retracing its course through the media, since it is they who gave the term its remarkable power of attraction. Its first national appearance dates from the summer of 1977, when, following the looting that broke out during the great blackout in New York City, *Time Magazine* (29 August: 14–15) devoted its cover to 'The American Underclass', which it presented in these terms, buttressed by the picture of a young black man sporting a fearsome grimace: 'Behind its crumbling walls lives a large group of people who are more intractable, more socially alien and more hostile than almost anyone had imagined. They are the unreachable: the American underclass.' And it defined the 'underclass' by the deviant norms and the pathological practices of its members: 'Their bleak environment nurtures values that are often at radical odds with those of the majority – even the majority of the poor.'

In 1982, journalist Ken Auletta published a book soberly entitled *The Underclass*, which caused a sensation and gave the term broad currency in public debate. According to this author, 'millions of social dropouts' who 'prey on our communities', would be the chief culprits for the 'street crime, long-term welfare dependency, chronic unemployment and anti-social behaviour in America today', Auletta identified the four components of the underclass as 'the passive poor', 'the hostile street criminals', 'the hustlers' and 'the traumatized alcoholics, drifters, homeless shopping-bag ladies and released mental patients'. And he lamented the fact that 'traditional anti-poverty programmes and the criminal justice system have both failed to socialize these most virulent and increasingly disorganized members of our society'.

Very quickly, the trickle of more or less sensationalist stories swelled into a veritable torrent; the image of a new group endowed with a culture

at once passive, hostile and destructive was consolidated, and the implicit association between blackness and the 'underclass' was cemented. In 1986, *US News and World Report* could authoritatively present the 'underclass' as a 'nation apart, a culture of have-nots that is drifting further and further from the fundamental values of the haves', and whose 'growth constitutes the main problem of country's urban centers' (17 March 1986). An article in *Fortune Magazine* appeared the next year, under the worried title, 'America's Underclass: What To Do?' and described 'underclass communities' (for the term was by then also used as an adjective) as 'urban knots that threaten to become enclaves of permanent poverty and vice' (Magnet 1987); and always these pictures of poor blacks, alternatively threatening and pitiable, irrefutable visual proof of the emergence and spread of a untamable new social animal. By 1989, the Joint Economic Committee of the US Congress found it urgent to organize a hearing to officially alert the nation to 'the tragedy of the underclass' and shine a light on 'underclass neighbourhoods' in which 'poverty is being passed from generation to generation'. Remarkably for a panel ostensibly concerned with economic issues, two of three experts asked to testify were African American. Economist Ronald Mincy supplied bold statistical measurements of the size, evolution and demographic makeup of the alleged group; political scientist Lawrence Mead adduced as the cause of its emergence a 'complex of social isolation, permissive welfare and attitudes contrary to work'; and sociologist Elijah Anderson insisted that 'a lot of the problem of the underclass is drug related now'. Worrying that 'the threat' of the 'underclass' was 'beginning to spread', Chairman Lee Hamilton, representative of Indiana, closed the discussion by musing: 'It is still going to take a lot more work to understand the phenomenon: is that right?' (Joint Economic Committee 1989: 1, 19, 24, 47, 64–5).

Indeed it was. Today, one can barely keep track of all the books, articles and reports devoted to the 'underclass'. Conferences are regularly organized where the most eminent specialists of the country grimly debate the distinctive characteristics of the 'group', its extent and location, the causes of its formation and the ways of integrating (that is, of domesticating) it into the 'mainstream' of American society. Most of the big private and public foundations – Ford, Rockefeller, the Social Science Research Council and even the National Science Foundation – presently finance gigantic research programmes on the 'underclass', underwrite dissertations, diffuse publications and put forth policy recommendations about it. Impeccably scholarly books, such as *The Truly Disadvantaged* by William Julius Wilson (1987), *The Urban Underclass* edited by Jencks and Peterson (1991), and *Streetwise* by ethnographer Elijah Anderson (1990), have taken up and developed this concept – (retroactively) granting it

titles of academic nobility. Even though these authors deny, with good reason for some, sharing the openly culturalist theses propagated by the advocates of continued state retrenchment,⁶ it remains that they lend credibility to the idea that a new group has 'crystallized' in the ghetto which is, in whole or part, responsible for the crisis of the cities. And one can find even in the writings of the most progressive among them, with greater or lesser degrees of euphemization, a number of moral and moralizing elements that explain the enthusiastic welcome their work has received from the politicians and bureaucratic intellectuals charged with articulating the public policy of urban abandonment, the first victims of which are the supposed members of the 'underclass'.

'Gang-bangers' and 'welfare mothers': a fantasmatic social threat

The iconography of the 'underclass' rapidly became polarized around two paradigmatic figures: on one side, the 'gangs' of young, arrogant, violent black men, who refuse to occupy the scarce, unskilled, low-paying jobs for which they could apply, and thereby take up their appointed function at the bottom of the social ladder; on the other side, the 'teenage mothers' who subsist 'on the backs' of the taxpayer via receipt of social assistance in large public housing estates, who typically get photographed complacently sitting doing nothing, infants sprawled across their knees, in front of their lit television sets. These emblematic figures are in fact but the two visages of the same fantasy, that of the threat that 'uncivilized' blacks – those who have no place in the new division of labour among the castes and classes – pose for the integrity of American values and the nation itself: the 'gang-bangers' represent moral dissolution and social disintegration on the public side, in the streets; the 'welfare mothers' are the bearers of the same dangers on the private side, inside the domestic sphere. Conceived according to a punitive logic, the state management of these two categories 'by excess' translates, on the one hand, in the astronomical rise in incarceration rates, and, on the other, in the overcrowding of the welfare offices of the ghetto. For it is not so much their poverty and desperation that is a problem as their *social cost*, which must be reduced by all means necessary.⁷

One finds a hyperbolic expression of this loathsome fantasy in an article by Charles Murray, published in England in the *Sunday Times* (for a princely fee), and for this reason less subject to the censorship of the national academic field, where the famed author of *Losing Ground*, the Bible of Reaganite social policy, could for a moment disregard the rules of socio-racial decorum that normally govern American public policy discourse, and say plainly what most analysts of the 'underclass' must ordinarily

content themselves with writing between the lines. In two call-outs taken from the text of this paper, entitled in huge letters, 'UNDERCLASS: THE ALIENATED POOR ARE DEVASTATING AMERICA'S INNER CITY – IS THE SAME HAPPENING HERE?' (Murray 1989: 26, 39, 43), one reads: 'Young [black] males are essentially barbarians for whom marriage is a civilizing force'; 'Single young women get pregnant because sex is fun and babies are endearing.' Murray's analysis (if one may call it that), which presents the ghetto residents as a tribe of savages bent on cannibalizing their own community, is not so much a *reductio ad absurdum* as a return of the repressed. Is not this, the same vision that is unapologetically projected by the (Italian and Jewish) lower-class whites in the neighbourhoods adjoining New York's black 'inner cities', for whom 'the ghetto is a jungle infested with dark-skinned "animals" whose wild sexuality and broken families defy all ideas of civilized conduct'? (Rieder 1985: 25–6, 58–67).

From the late nineteenth-century 'theorists' of the race question, to Charles Murray, by way of Edward Banfield, there exists a long tradition of pseudo-scientific analyses aiming to buttress the stereotypical representation of ghetto blacks as lazy, deviant, amoral and unstable beings who bathe in a pathogenic culture that is radically discontinuous with the dominant American culture. What is new is that the terminology of the 'underclass' claims to be *race-blind*: it has this great virtue that it allows one to speak of African Americans in a superficially 'de-racialized' language. The theory of the 'underclass' presents this other significant advantage of being tautological, since the two defining elements of the 'group' – a deviant and devious 'culture of poverty', a gamut of pathological and destructive practices – reciprocally warrant one another in a process of circular reasoning: the members of the 'underclass' conduct themselves in 'aberrant' manner (another term that recurs to describe them) because their values are abnormal; the proof that they participate in an abnormal culture resides in their errant behaviour.

CODA: WHAT USE IS THE UNDERCLASS?

It should be clear by now that the notion of an 'underclass' is nothing other than what Pierre Bourdieu (1980) calls a 'scholarly myth', that is, a discursive formation which, under a scientific wrapping, reformulates in a way that is apparently neutral and based on reason social fantasies or common prenotions pertaining to differences between the so-called races. Historian Lawrence Levine (1982) has shown that the masters of Southern plantations had much to gain by emphasizing the cultural distance that separated them from their slaves by use of qualifiers such as

'barbaric', 'primitive' and 'childlike' so as better to justify reducing them to chattel. Similarly, there exists an 'unconscious interest' in exaggerating the cultural differentiation of the urban black sub-proletariat to the point of radical alterity. Its demonization allows it to be symbolically isolated and cast off, and it thereby justifies a state policy combining punitive measures, such as programmes of forced labour or workfare, the 'War on Drugs' (which is above all a guerrilla war on drug addicts and dealers in ghetto neighbourhoods) and penal policies that have led to the doubling of the prison population in a decade, and confinement in crumbling inner-city neighbourhoods left fallow.

A fuzzy and malleable term with changing and ill-defined contours, the notion of 'underclass' owes its success to its *semantic indeterminacy* which allows for all manner of symbolic manipulations aiming to contract or enlarge the frontiers of the 'group' according to the ideological interests at hand. But what then is the principle of unity of this concept of variable geometry? It does seem that, as in the case of the marginals of Paris in the high Middle Ages, according to Bronislaw Geremek (1976: 361), it is mainly the 'feeling of animosity, of mistrust and contempt' that ghetto blacks inspire in the rest of American society that serves to cement this category.

The ultimate reasons for the success of the concept of 'underclass', then, are to be sought not in its scientific fallout, which is nil in the best of cases,⁸ but in its social effects, which are threefold. The first effect is the *dehistoricization* (or naturalization) of the dereliction of the ghetto: the illusion of the radical novelty of this group makes one forget that a sub-proletariat – black and white – has always existed in the United States and that the 'hyperghetto' of the 1980s is nothing but the sociospatial exacerbation of a double logic of racial and class exclusion tendentially at work since the very origins of the dark ghetto a century ago. The second effect is the *essentialization* of the racial/urban question: the slide from substantive to substance makes it possible to attribute to the individuals whose mere statistical aggregation constitutes this fictive group properties that pertain in reality either to the mental structures of the analysts or to national urban structures, and thus to falsely circumscribe within the ghetto itself a problem that finds its roots in the racial division of US politics, city and state. Thirdly, and relatedly, the thematic of the 'underclass' tends to *depoliticize* the dilemma posed by the accelerating decline of the dispossessed black neighbourhoods of the American metropolis: for, if the 'underclass' is indeed a collection of failing individuals carrying within themselves the germ of their predicament and of the bane they inflict upon others, then collective responsibility cannot be invoked either at the level of causes or when it comes to remedies.

The discourse on the 'underclass' is an instrument of discipline in Foucault's sense of the term, not so much for the poor themselves as for all those who struggle not to fall into the urban purgatory which the name symbolizes (that is, the working class in its various components, especially black and Latino), and the best warrant for the policy of *de facto* abandonment of the ghetto by the country's dominant class. Far from illuminating the new nexus that links together race, class and state in the American metropolis, the tale of the 'underclass' contributes to masking the preeminent cause of the decivilizing of the ghetto in Elias's sense: the political will to let it rot away.

II 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 US 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, as 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 its perimeter. Forms, not rates (of segregation, destitution, unemployment, etc.), connections, not conditions, must be our primary empirical focus.

Secondly, 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 favoured 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 capture the complex causal ensembles and processes involved in making and remaking the ghetto as social system and lived experience.

Thirdly, 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 macro-structures and the most 'micro' of all micro-formations – all the way down to the 'bio-psychosocial' 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 epicentre 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 and 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 'colour 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 rearticulated

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 post-war 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 labour 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 1990s both expresses an *exacerbation of historic racial exclusion sifted through a class prism* and exhibits a novel spatial and organizational configuration. Because it weds colour segregation with class bifurcation, it no longer contains an extended division of labour 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 labour but as a 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-labour 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, detectable in the dereliction of neighbourhood 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 neighbourhoods. 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 labour demand, organizational desertification of neighbourhoods 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 it 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 post-war 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 1916–30 – 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 and Denton 1993; Weiher 1991) provides the lynchpin 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 programmes 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 and 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 'behavioural 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.

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 and 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-labour economy. Informalization and deproletarianization, in turn, diminish the purchasing power and life stability of ghetto residents, which undermines the viability of resident institutions – and thus 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 6.1.

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 neighbourhoods 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

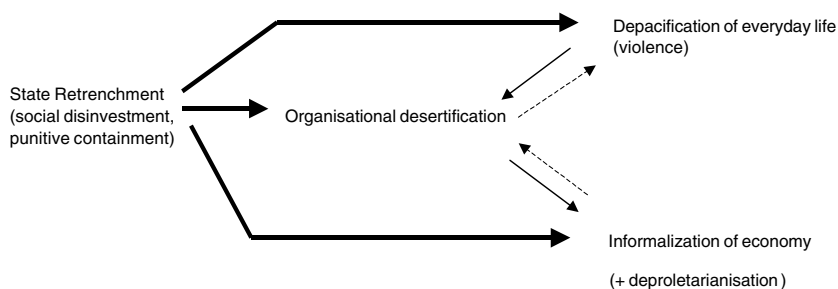


Figure 6.1 Simplified model of the relations between state retrenchment and hyperghettoisation

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, boot-camps 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 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: 1 black man in 10 between the ages of 18 and 34 is presently imprisoned (as compared with 1 adult in 128 for the nation) and fully 1 in 3 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 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 guerilla 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 unravelling 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 1990s, the homicide rate in that section of the South Side exceeded 100 per 100,000, the highest in the city), let alone effect a finer control of the so-called 'underclass behaviours' 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' 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.

NOTES

1. Part I of this chapter is based on two talks: the first was delivered at the Conference on 'Transatlantic Man/L'Amérique des Français' organized by

the University of Paris-Sorbonne and New York University in Paris on 10–12 June 1991; the second was given to the Sociology Department Colloquium Series, University of California at Berkeley, 18 February 1992. It appeared as 'Décivilisation et démonisation: la mutation du ghetto noir américain', in Christine Fauré and Tom Bishop (eds.), 1992, *L'Amérique des français*, Paris: Editions François Bourin, pp. 103–25 (it was translated into English for this volume by James Ingram and the author). Part II is based on a lecture given at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research on 26 November 1996; it was published as 'Elias in the Dark Ghetto', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 24(3/4) (December 1997), pp. 340–8.

2. The notion of 'underclass' thus tends to fulfill a role similar to that bestowed in an earlier era upon that icon of American racial ideology that is the familiar character of Sambo (cf. Boskin 1986).
3. Stephen Mennell discusses four possible cases of de-civilizing – the onset of the 'permissive society' in the 1950s, the recent rise of violence in the United States, the Holocaust and the collapse of the great empires – but none of them accords fully with his proposed definition of the process (1990: 205–23). The trajectory of the black American ghetto, on the other hand, comes very close.
4. The informalization of the American economy is a structural and not a cyclical phenomenon, spurred by its leading sectors (Sassen 1989). However, the growth of the informal sector of the ghetto economy is also 'residual', that is, due to the withering of formal wage work and regular economic activities.
5. For a useful review of various 'theories' of the 'underclass', see Marks (1991); for a devastating critique of the policy uses of this bogus concept, see Gans (1991). Two paradigmatic expressions of the orthodox view are Ricketts and Sawhill 1988; and *Chicago Tribune* 1986. One can readily detect from them the near-complete convergence of scholarly and journalistic visions of the alleged group.
6. This is the case of William Julius Wilson, who, more than any other author, rightfully insists on the economic roots of the decline of the ghetto and has recently declared himself ready to forsake the term 'underclass' if it turned out that it restrains research more than it facilitates it (see Wilson 1991).
7. In this respect, the 'underclass' is similar to (North African) immigrants in current French sociopolitical reasoning (Adbelmalek Sayad 1986).
8. One could make a strong case that it is in fact *negative*, as the prefabricated problematic of the 'underclass' prevents organized research into the social bases and intersection of deproletarianization and racial division in the US city and its articulation (and obfuscation) in public discourses and state policy.

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