“Ghetto”, “banishment”, “neighborhood effects”.

A critique of the “ghetto” image of French housing projects

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Are residents of French housing projects really “banished” to their neighborhoods and kept in “confinement” there? Does living there have nothing but adverse effects on their integration into society? Pierre Gilbert argues that empirical studies to date fall far short of bearing out this portrayal of French housing projects as “ghettos”. And yet this very “ghetto” image has served as the basis for the overhaul of urban policy over the past decade and the ensuing urban renewal program in France.

Are there “ghettos” in France or not? The social sciences have been stewing over this question for more than 20 years now. And recent years have seen increasingly widespread use of the term in French politics, social sciences and the media[1].

The term serves to highlight the geographic dimension of present-day poverty: segregation has purportedly reached such a high degree of geographic concentration that immigrants and the poor are now among the main causes of their own social exclusion. In the social sciences, this hypothesis is based on two main arguments: on the one hand, the mechanisms that govern access to housing effectively “banish” the most destitute segments of the population and most of the immigrants to “the projects”; on the other hand, this geographic isolation induces these neighborhood populations to develop a specific way of life, which, by dint of the values it transmits and the resources it offers, basically impedes their social integration.

Without reviewing here all the arguments and standpoints on this controversy[2], one may nonetheless challenge the portrayal of working-class neighborhoods that is implicit in branding them “ghettos” and the political ramifications of the spreading use of that label in France. Close scrutiny of the two mechanisms at the heart of these analyses (banishment and neighborhood effects) will show that the empirical bases for this view of reality are partial and debatable. The point is, the choice of words used to characterize these urban areas is not merely descriptive: it has real repercussions on the neighborhoods in question and on public policy. In particular, this portrayal advances a geographic explanation of poverty and social integration, which over the past decade has resulted in a radical policy shift towards urban renewal programs.

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1 For the social sciences, see Maurin (2004), Lapeyronnie (2008), Marchal and Stébé (2010) and Boucher (2010), as well as Wacquant’s dissenting opinion (2006). Outside academia, two representative recent examples would be Bronner (2010) for the media and Gerin (2007) for the political sphere.

2 In addition to Lapeyronnie (2008) and Wacquant (2006), who present both sides of the issue (as does Kokoreff 2009), we refer the reader to an excellent summary of the debates in the Strategic Newswatch by the Centre d'Analyse Stratégique [a government advisory think tank] (Boisson 2010).

Are residents banished captives?

The first argument of ghetto theories, that of "banishment", ensues from the concentration of immigrants and members of the working class in areas fraught with a combination of negative indicators (high unemployment and school dropout rates etc.)[3]. By implicit reference to the segregation of Afro-Americans in the US, the term "ghetto" serves to emphasize the subjection of these inhabitants to their residential situation, as they have little if any options in the housing market owing to their lack of resources.

However, this geographic banishment, a mainstay of ghetto theories, remains a hypothesis based on questionable arguments. Most of the time, the assertion that the inhabitants are captives of their neighborhoods is simply based on observed segregation. According to Marchal and Stébé, the persistence of that segregation goes to show that housing projects are not "airlocks for adapting to society" (2010, 44), for the gradual integration of immigrants, but "ghettos" in which the inhabitants are confined. In the first place, it might be objected that, despite a slight increase since the early 1980s, social and ethno-racial segregation in France remains relatively moderate and bears no comparison to the situation in the US (Wacquant 2006; Préteceille 2006 and 2009). Above all, the tool used to demonstrate said captivity seems rather ill-suited to its purpose: segregation studies traditionally consist of breaking down the population geographically by place of residence at a given point in time[4]. That approach says nothing about residential mobility, however, and a given area can by marked by high levels of segregation and of resident turnover at one and the same time. So the renewal of the poor population can explain the perpetuation of local poverty, even as those leaving the neighborhood may experience upward social mobility.

So to confirm or refute the banishment theory, the inhabitants' residential histories should be analyzed. One of the few such analyses is to be found in the 2005 report by the Observatoire national des zones urbaines sensibles (Onzus), which contains an in-depth study of residential mobility between 1990 and 1999 in "*zones urbaines sensibles*" (ZUS) [literally "sensitive urban areas", referred to below as "urban renewal zones" – Translator's note]. And its conclusions are rather surprising. It turns out that, of all the urban areas, these urban renewal zones exhibit the highest rate of residential mobility: 61% of ZUS households had moved elsewhere (as against 51% on average for other urban areas), and two-thirds of those moves were to "preferred" neighborhoods. The authors conclude that, *ceteris paribus*, "residing in an urban renewal ZUS does not constitute an impediment to residential trajectories: it is possible to leave and move to other neighborhoods" (Onzus 2005, 124). These departures often figure in upward professional and residential trajectories in which the neighborhood serves as a springboard. Far from bearing out the image of confinement to the ghetto, these results suggest that, for a significant segment of the population, housing projects function similarly to zones in transition – on the model, established by the Chicago School, of areas of first settlement that play a transitional role in the process of immigrant integration.

The report also significantly qualifies the notion that living in a housing project results solely from objective constraints on housing options and is always subjectively experienced as a "comedown". In most cases, on the contrary, moving into a project amounts to an improvement in living conditions (in terms of comfort or floor space), particularly for households that are moving out of private-sector housing (p. 125). Although the image of these neighborhoods has deteriorated over time, there has been a certain continuity in the perception of residential advancement that prevailed in the 1960s and '70s for households from French shantytowns and slums. So that rather belies the argument that moving into a housing project is necessarily tantamount to a residential and social downgrade. Moreover, despite the limitations they are up against, the inhabitants still have

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[3] See e.g. the annual reports of the Observatoire National des Zones Urbaines Sensibles.

[4] This static approach to segregation has been dominant in France ever since Maurice Halbwachs imported studies by the Chicago School (Bacqué and Levy 2009).

some room for maneuver in the housing market: even for the most destitute, moving into a new domicile never results entirely from constraints, but is always the upshot of complex adjustments between a series of constraints and the realization of a choice (Authier *et al.* 2010). In fact, these trade-offs can fuel a certain degree of attachment to one's neighborhood. Some people, moreover, move into an urban renewal zone not by default, but simply because they actually wish to live there. Indeed, self-segregationist proclivities are not confined to the upper classes, and the predilection for living in a familiar environment, close to one's circle of friends and family, has long been established as a characteristic of working-class strata (Bozon 1984; Hoggart 1957; Bacqué and Sintomer 2002; Bonvalet 2003).

Consequently, an analysis of residential histories yields substantial reservations about the theory of geographic banishment. And yet this presupposition that a disenfranchised population is consigned and confined to housing projects serves as the foundation for the second pillar of ghetto analyses as well: that the very existence of poor neighborhoods has essentially adverse effects.

Strictly negative "neighborhood effects"?

Analyses of ghettos often proceed by generalizing from observations made of a minority of the population (youths involved in the black-market economy or in "street culture")[5]. They depict a world in which the social relations of the local population as a whole are organized and dominated by violence and a parallel economy. Based on in-depth studies, these portrayals do shed some light on part of the social life in these neighborhoods. However, they are far from providing an exhaustive description thereof. When Lapeyronnie (2008) describes the "counter-world" of the projects as a consequence of the structural process of banishment, for example, he is essentially defining it as a "social order" governed by street culture, endemic violence, an underground economy and a radical form of male dominance. In so doing, he is generalizing about the social relations of the whole project population based on observations made of a minority. Now although there is no denying the existence of these phenomena and the impact they can have on neighborhood life, it is nonetheless problematic to posit that the lives of all project residents are structured by what goes on in the local stairwells. Research into other domains and other types de relations – housing, associations, school etc. – shows a wholly different side of social life in the projects (Beaud 2002; Faure and Thin 2007; Schwartz 1990). In painting what is ultimately a very dreary picture of housing projects, these ghetto analyses overlook a great many positive resources and perfectly ordinary forms of existence that can evolve there. While less of a nuisance or less conspicuous than acts of juvenile delinquency, do the residents' religious, cultural and sporting activities, their local socialities, family relationships and forms of exchange and solidarity really merit less scrutiny? Because its ultimate object is to denounce the residents' confinement to these neighborhoods, resorting to the term "ghetto" can apparently yield nothing but a negative depiction of the forms of local social life that obtain there.

This portrayal of the ways of life in the projects takes after publications from the early 2000s in which the term "ghetto" serves to denote the harmful impact of geographic segregation on health, scholastic achievement and integration into the workplace (Maurin 2004; Fitousssi, Laurent and Maurice 2004). These approaches are directly inspired by American studies of "neighborhood effects" which "view […] the (poor) neighborhood and its effects solely in terms of handicaps" (Authier 2006, 208) and hinge on two main arguments: viz. that of the handicapping effects of social networks (negative social capital) and that of a subculture that impedes social integration.

[5] This focus follows first of all from the very choice of subject-matter: this category of the population (and its dealings with the police) constitutes the sole subject of Manuel Boucher's book (2010) and is overrepresented in the population studied by Didier Lapeyronnie (2008), so too in Luc Bronner's study (Mohammed and Mucchielli 2010). It adheres to a line of reasoning that consists in extrapolating observations made of its most conspicuous elements (teenagers occupying outdoor areas) to the population as a whole, the inference being that "street culture", violence and the underground economy reign not only over the lives of these youths, but over those of all the inhabitants.

But, as Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Sylvie Fol point out (2006), studies carried out in the US do not suggest that inner-city inhabitants' social capital has an adverse effect on occupational integration. In fact, the negative conception of neighborhood effects obscures the many resources that local ties may provide to members of the working class (Retière 1994; Renahy 2005).

The second "neighborhood effects" argument (subculture) is no less problematic. It turns on the notion that the difficulties the population has in integrating, particularly youths, are linked to the absence of any positive local model of social success with which to identify, and to prevailing local norms that run counter to those permitting social integration. Although the studies have a hard time empirically establishing the existence of any such mechanism (Kleinhans 2004; Bacqué and Fol 2006; Kirzsbaum 2008), it does figure implicitly as the backdrop to various French studies: descriptions of the ghetto are ultimately not all that far removed from positing an alternative subculture that leads people in the projects to replicate their own social exclusion. While ignoring various dimensions of social life there, these analyses focus exclusively on cultural forms (violence, underground economy, street culture, sexism etc.) that are deemed negative properties, antithetical to republican values. Ultimately, this view of the social order in the projects ultimately tends to concentrate heavily on the more sordid aspects thereof: the inhabitants are defined either according to their deficiencies or according to the dispositions that obstruct their social integration.

Political effects of the "ghetto" image

The ghetto image of French housing projects has been gaining currency in the political sphere since the 1990s. It is part of the whole trend towards the "spatialization of social problems" (Poupeau and Tissot 2005), in which prior social and economic policies have given way to policies targeting specific areas and their populations, particularly with a view to engendering social diversity[6]. As we have seen, however, the persistent poverty in these areas does not necessarily signify the perpetuation of the existing inhabitants' poverty. Conversely, increasing social diversity does not *ipso facto* generate upward mobility for poor residents.

Urban renewal, the principles of which were defined by the Jospin administration in the late 1990s and which has become the main lever of urban policy since the Borloo Act in 2003, directly follows from the representation conveyed by the image of the ghetto[7]. This change of approach was based on an acknowledgment of the failure of previous urban policies. But as we've seen, this acknowledgment is highly debatable: based on indicators that reflect the locals' situation in static terms only, it does not take into account the great many households that have lived in housing projects for a while and, before leaving, may well have benefited from local social development policies.

Though it is still too early to fully assess the effects of the whole urban renewal scheme, the first studies suggest, here again with regard to the "captivity" theory, that the vast majority of residents affected by the demolitions show a "marked desire to stay put" (Lelévrier 2010). These preliminary results underscore the risks of destabilizing not only households that are forced to leave their neighborhood, but also those who stay, seeing as the renewal of the population is liable to sap the resources deriving from integration in the established local social networks. It is those very resources, which are so vital to working-class society, that urban renewal tends to undermine.

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[6] On social diversity, see Éric Charmes: "Pour une approche critique de la mixité sociale. Redistribuer les populations ou les ressources ?" (http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Pour-une-approche-critique-de-la.html)

[7] In the United States, this diagnosis gave rise to a massive urban renewal program as well as a policy to promote residential mobility among the poor. Subsequent assessments come to the conclusion that these mobility policies have had a very limited impact (Fol 2009).

Adopted in France with the laudable intention of alerting policymakers to the trials and tribulations of life in the projects, the concept of the ghetto is becoming increasingly widespread. Its underlying arguments (banishment and neighborhood effects), however, seem to be on shaky ground. Instead of pointing up the residents' high degree of mobility and the mixed effects of housing projects on their social trajectories, the ghetto concept presents a static and by and large negative point of view. The resulting representation ultimately tends to reinforce the already widespread view of these neighborhoods as separate social realms breeding ways of life that pose a threat to society[8]. Rather than shoring up that portrayal and potentially further stigmatizing the projects, it seems to us that the task of the social sciences is, on the contrary, to bring to light the less conspicuous dimensions of reality in these neighborhoods. Several epistemological tools are available to that end. A first step would be to seek a more balanced approach, focusing less on the most conspicuous local phenomena and populations (youths occupying outdoor areas and/or involved in delinquency) and on the impediments involved in living in the projects and more on the resources people gain from living there. This is the approach taken in a number of (especially ethnographic) studies, which often describe the intensity of local social relations and the ambivalence of residents' relationships to their neighborhood. A series of recent studies do that quite effectively using the concept of "*capital d'autochtonie*" [i.e. the social capital that derives from putting down local roots – Translator's note][9].

Once again, however, the problem is largely due to the static nature of studies on housing projects. Hence the need to encourage, in parallel, dynamic studies of the social and residential histories of one-time project residents. That is one precondition for breaking with the myth of the ghetto.

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[8] In particular, the insistence in "ghetto" research on the preponderance of violence and the underground economy in the social organization of these neighborhoods provides very little grounds on which to base a rejection of the prevailing portrayal of these neighborhoods as "lawless enclaves". Marchal and Stébé, moreover, explicitly acknowledge their affinity for common sense reasoning: opposed to the principle of epistemological rupture (which they term a "naysaying philosophy"), they espouse an approach that involves taking up common sense conceptions, "drawing on perceptual schemas widely shared by the greatest number in order to perfect them conceptually and process them sociologically" (2010:1).

[9] See in particular Retière (2003), Renahy (2005) and the January 2011 issue of the journal *Regards Sociologiques*.

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