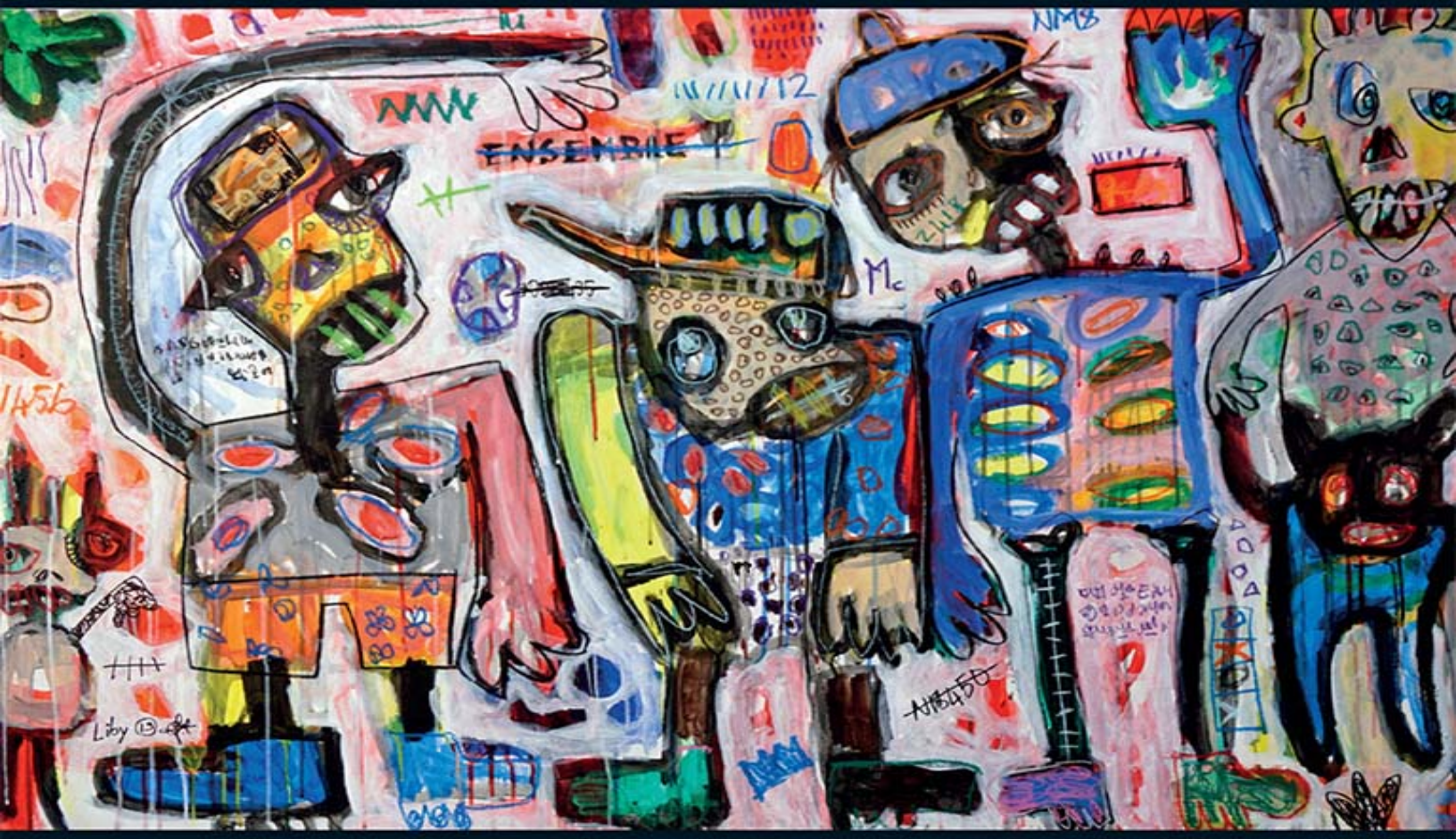
THE INVENTION OF THE "UNDERCLASS"

A STUDY IN THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE



LOÏC WACQUANT

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations

Part One

At century's close, American social scientists, policy analysts, philanthropies and politicians became obsessed with a fearsome and mysterious new group said to be ravaging the ghetto: the urban "underclass." Soon the scarecrow category and its demonic imagery were exported to the United Kingdom and continental Europe and agitated the international study of exclusion in the postindustrial metropolis.

In this punchy book mating intellectual history, participant observation, and conceptual analysis, Wacquant retraces the invention and metamorphoses of this racialized folk devil, from the structural conception of Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal to the behavioral notion of Washington think-tank experts to the neo-ecological formulation of sociologist William Julius Wilson. He uncovers the springs of the sudden irruption, accelerated circulation, and abrupt evaporation of the "underclass" from public debate, and reflects on their implications for the social epistemology of urban marginality.

What accounts for the "lemming effect" that drew a generation of scholars of race and poverty over a scientific cliff? What are the conditions for the formation and bursting of "conceptual speculative bubbles"? What is the role of think tanks, journalism, and politics in imposing "turnkey problematics" upon social researchers? What are the special quandaries posed by the naming of dispossessed and dishonored populations in scientific discourse and how can we reformulate the explosive question of "race" to avoid these troubles? Answering these questions constitutes an exacting exercise in epistemic reflexivity in the tradition of Bachelard, Canguilhem and Bourdieu. And it leads to sounding a clarion call for social scientists to forge their own concepts and to defend their intellectual autonomy against the encroachments of outside

powers, be they state officials, the media, think tanks, or philanthropies.

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The Invention of the “Underclass”

A Study in the Politics of Knowledge

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Dedication

To Bill Wilson, role model extraordinaire of intellectual courage

“The history of the social sciences is and remains a continuous process passing from the attempt to order reality analytically through the construction of concepts – the dissolution of the analytical constructs so constructed through the expansion and shift of the scientific horizon – and the reformulation anew of concepts on the foundations thus transformed. It is not the error of the attempt to construct conceptual systems *in general* which is shown by this process – every science, even simple descriptive history, operates with the conceptual stock-in-trade of its time. Rather, this process shows that in the cultural sciences concept-construction depends on the setting of the problem, and the latter varies with the content of culture itself. . . . The greatest advances in the sphere of the social sciences are substantively tied up with the shift in practical cultural problems and take the guise of a critique of concept-construction.”

Max Weber, “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Policy,” 1904

Prologue

> The sociologist may find a special instrument of epistemological vigilance in the sociology of knowledge, as the means of enhancing and clarifying the knowledge of error and of the conditions that make error possible and sometimes inevitable.
>
> Pierre Bourdieu et al., *Le Métier de sociologue* (1968)

The Invention of the "Underclass" is an ethnographically grounded case study in the sociology and politics of knowledge. It draws on the conceptual history of Reinhart Koselleck and on the theory of symbolic power and fields of cultural production of Pierre Bourdieu to chart the stunning rise, multi-sited flourishing, and sudden demise of the urban "folk devil" of the closing decades of the twentieth century known as the *underclass*.[1]

Fusing the trope of disorganization with the drive to exoticism, cycling in and out of the social sciences, journalism, and the political-policy-philanthropic field, this woolly and inchoate notion dominated the academic and public debate on race and poverty in the American metropolis roughly from 1977 to 1997. Its advocates, conservatives and liberals alike, claimed that the novel term was needed to capture an unprecedented development: the insidious incubation and cancerous growth of a subpopulation of the black poor, distinct from the traditional lower class, characterized by self-destructive behaviors, social isolation, and cultural deviancy, and responsible for the ravaging of the inner city. During this same period, the category and its demonic imagery were exported to the United Kingdom and continental Europe to

agitate the international study of exclusion in the postindustrial metropolis.

Concepts matter

It turns out, upon close scrutiny, that this "terministic screen" was not a *reflection* of reality so much as a *deflection* from reality.[2] The "underclass" started out as a proto-concept à la Robert K. Merton, that is, "an early, rudimentary particularized, and largely unexplicated idea,"[3] but quickly morphed into an instrument of public accusation and symbolic disciplining of the threatening black precariat in the hyperghetto – the novel sociospatial constellation that emerged from the rubble of the communal ghetto of the Fordist era.[4] It follows that the notion enters into the sociology of urban marginality, not as *tool*, but as *object* of analysis, and an object whose study has much to teach us about the political epistemology of dispossession and dishonor in the city as well as about the craft of concept-making more generally.

Inspired by the *Begriffsgeschichte* of Reinhart Koselleck and the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu,[5] the present book offers a kind of "microhistory" of the "underclass," centered on the period of its hegemony. I pay close attention to the circumstances of the invention, the timing of the diffusion, and the variegated meanings of the term as well as to the institutional positions of those who pushed for and (more rarely) against its deployment. I draw up a genealogy of the notion by tracking its peregrinations across the boundaries of the scientific, journalistic and political fields from the heady days of the progressive 1960s to the somber years of the neoconservative 1980s and the late boom of the neoliberal 1990s.

Turning to anatomy, I distinguish three faces of the "underclass": the *structural* conception coined by the Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal to forewarn about the dire consequences of postindustrialism for working-class formation; the *behavioral* view favored by policy researchers and think-tank experts, which quickly diffused to achieve hegemonic status; and the *neo-ecological* approach developed by the sociologist William Julius Wilson to highlight the role of the neighborhood as multiplier of marginality. Together, these form what I call the "Bermuda triangle of the underclass," in which the historical nexus of caste, class and state in the metropolis effectively vanishes from sight.[6]

Conceptual history meets reflexive sociology

Two strands of social inquiry provide resources for probing the fabrication and fate of a concept: the *Begriffsgeschichte* of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck and the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, grounded in the applied rationalism of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem.

Drawing on historical philology and the hermeneutics of his teacher Hans-Georg Gadamer, Koselleck's "conceptual history" is exegetical; it focuses meticulously on texts to trace the changing semantic charge of "fundamental concepts" (*Grundbegriff*) and "keywords" (*Stichwort*) as "indicators" of evolving historical constellations across conjunctures and epochs. It stipulates that language is not "an epiphenomenon of so-called reality" but "a methodologically irreducible guiding authority, without which experiences could not be had, and without which neither the natural nor the social sciences could exist." It enjoins us to capture "historical arrangements of concepts" synchronically in their "concrete contexts" as well as diachronically as part of the "linguistic arsenal of the entire political and social space of experience" (1); to link them to the political conflicts of the period of their circulation; and to critically evaluate these concepts for their use in social analysis. A study of the "underclass" informed by Koselleck must thus excavate the layers of meaning of the term, check its sources, probe its dissemination, and establish its relation to current sociopolitical issues.

Koselleck relies on the political theory of Carl Schmitt, for whom politics is fundamentally about the opposition between "friend and enemy," to develop the notion of *asymmetrical counter-concept*, by which he designates

pairs of opposite notions (hellenes/barbarians, Christians/heathens, *Übermensch/Untermensch*) that serve at once to build self-identity and to effect the exclusion of others by denying them mutual recognition and social reciprocity: “Asymmetrical counter-concepts have a lot to do with the art of silencing. They are means of attributing things to other people, to those who do not belong to our group, through a binary conceptualization that reduces them to a purely negative semantic field” (2). Koselleck then urges us to ask: who benefits from the use (and abuse) of such pairs? In the case of the “underclass,” what is the “we-group” that forms the tacit component of this *asymmetrisch Gegenbegriff*(3)?

Reflexivity in social science comes in three varieties (4). *Egological reflexivity* involves a sociological return onto the person of the researcher in an effort to control how her social position and trajectory (gender, class, ethnicity, age, etc.) affect her intellectual output. *Textual reflexivity* concerns itself with the ways in which the rhetorical forms employed by the researcher (voice, trope, metaphors, style, etc.) shape her object. *Epistemic reflexivity*, as advocated by Pierre Bourdieu, aims to control the “scholastic bias” introduced by the categories, techniques, and theories the sociologist uses as well as by the “scientific attitude” itself, which differs fundamentally from the “natural attitude” of everyday life dear to phenomenologists. Accordingly, Bourdieu deploys the “science of science” as vehicle for a reflexivity aiming to increase our collective capacity to design, engage and master properly scientific problematics (5).

In this regard, the French sociologist extends to social science the principles of *historical epistemology*, the discontinuist philosophy of science developed by his teachers Bachelard and Canguilhem, according to which

science advances through rupture and reconstruction, thanks to an endless work of “rectification of knowledge” already there, and by overcoming “epistemological obstacles,” among them the contamination of scientific thought by ordinary constructs and turns of thought (6). Canguilhem urges us to ground the history of science in the genealogy of “conceptual filiations” to detect how these shape and displace problems over time. The present book is an application, to the thematics of the “underclass,” of the tenets of historical epistemology – a practical exercise in epistemic reflexivity.

Bourdieu takes us beyond historical epistemology with his theory of *symbolic power and fields of cultural production*, which serves to map the nexus of institutional positions and symbolic position-takings adopted by cultural producers such as artists, journalists, knowledge experts, state officials, and scientists (7). Thus, the *scientific field* is a space of forces that orient the strategies of scholars (their choice of objects, methods, theories, publishing outlets, etc.) and a space of struggles for the monopoly over the definition of scientific competency. The scientific cosmos itself is embedded within the *field of power*, where holders of rival forms of capital – artistic, scientific, religious, journalistic, juridical, bureaucratic, and economic – vie for establishing their supremacy and their particular interest as universal (8). It follows that to decipher a body of texts, such as competing discourses on the “underclass,” one must link the position of their producers and consumers, not in society at large, but in the relevant microcosms – in this case, the social scientific, journalistic, and political-policy-philanthropic fields – to the particular stance they take

on the existence, makeup, and predicament of the "group."

The combination of Koselleck and Bourdieu promises to be fruitful: the former brings an interpretive focus on texts and sources, the latter a relational framework within which to locate the producers and consumers of those texts, and to trace their practical repercussions. Together they pave the way for a *structural hermeneutics* of the "underclass."

1. Reinhart Koselleck, "*Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History" (1982), p. 411, and idem, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (2002). See also Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (2012).
2. Reinhart Koselleck, Javiér Fernández Sebastián, and Juan Francisco Fuentes, "Conceptual History, Memory, and Identity: An Interview with Reinhart Koselleck" (2006), p. 125.
3. Reinhart Koselleck, "The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetric Counterconcepts," in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (2004), pp. 155–91.
4. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), pp. 36–47.
5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Science de la science et réflexivité* (2001), and idem, "The Scholastic Point of View" (1990), and "Participant Objectivation: The Huxley Medal Lecture" (2003).
6. Gaston Bachelard, *La Formation de l'esprit scientifique. Contribution à une psychanalyse de la connaissance objective* (1938), and Georges

Canguilhem, *Connaissance de la vie* (1952). A lucid and compact presentation of the tenets of "historical epistemology" is Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *On Historicizing Epistemology: An Essay* (2010 [2007]). Bourdieu's indebtedness to historical epistemology is fully documented in his book (with Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Jean-Claude Passeron), *Le Métier de sociologue. Préalables épistémologiques* (1968, 2nd ed. 1973).

7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Fields of Cultural Production* (1993c).
8. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Peculiar History of Scientific Reason" (1991), and idem, *La Noblesse d'État. Grandes écoles et esprit de corps* (1989), Part 4; Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, "From Ruling Class to Field of Power" (1993); and Pierre Bourdieu, "Champ du pouvoir et division du travail de domination" (2011).

Through two decades of heated debate initiated by the Harlem blackout riots of 1977, the "underclass" remained a stubbornly incoherent, heterogeneous, and specular notion, plagued by a host of semantic ambiguities, logical deficiencies, and empirical anomalies. Its spectacular, if fleeting, success expressed first and foremost the class fear and caste horror of the educated middle classes and state managers in the face of the deteriorating condition of the black precariat, and the desire to affix blame for mounting urban ills on this outcast category.[7] Its sudden demise in public debate in the mid-1990s (contrasting with its continued silent circulation in social science as a descriptive stand-in for a variety of subalterns) reveals the fundamental *heteronomy of the category*: after the "welfare reform" of 1996, policy-makers abruptly pivoted to other

worrisome populations and conditions, and social scientists followed suit, finding new problem subgroups to study and shepherd: “fragile families” expected to transition “from welfare to work,” parolees going through “prisoner reentry,” and inner-city residents redistributed in space through housing subsidies and “moving-to-opportunity”-type programs.

Through the reflexive sociology of the rise and fall of the “underclass,” I offer a critique, not just of the normal science of “race and poverty” in the American “inner city,” but of a particular style of sociology one might call *normalized empiricism*. This sociology is empiricist in that it borrows its categories unfiltered from the social world, it is driven by data collection and mining, and, paradoxically, it is maximally distant from the phenomenon. This sociology is normalized in that its parameters, tools, and sources are embraced as a matter of course, without systematic examination or explicit justification. In that regard, the present book is an extension of, and a complement to, my earlier critique of *moral empiricism* in the normal practice of urban ethnography in America.[8]

I use the strange career of the “underclass” to raise several questions that can shed light on the trials and tribulations of other concepts. What accounts for the “lemming effect” that drew a generation of scholars of race and poverty over a scientific cliff? What are the conditions for the formation and bursting of “conceptual speculative bubbles”? What is the role of think tanks, journalism, and politics but also academic reproduction in imposing “turnkey problematics” soaked in moral doxa upon social researchers? And what are the special quandaries posed by the naming of destitute and stigmatized categories in scientific discourse? Answering these questions constitutes an exacting exercise in epistemic reflexivity in the tradition of Bachelard, Canguilhem and Bourdieu.[9] This exercise leads me to

elaborate a minimalist set of criteria for what makes a good concept in social science, liable to minimizing epistemic troubles such as those epitomized by the “underclass.”

In conclusion, I draw on these epistemological criteria to tackle the most ductile and flammable category of them all: “race.” I propose to *rethink race as veiled or denegated ethnicity*, a pure form of symbolic violence through which a classificatory schema trading on the correspondence between natural and social hierarchies is turned into reality – inscribed in the subjectivity of socialized bodies (habitus) and in the objectivity of institutions (social space).[10] The dialectic of classification and stratification based on quantum of honor supplies the core of an analytic of race and distinguishes it from other bases of division (class, gender, age, etc.). I advocate for breaking down ethnoracial phenomena into the *elementary forms of racial domination* that compose them: categorization, discrimination, segregation, ghettoization, and violence. Reversely, I spotlight the dangers of lumpy notions such as “structural racism” as guides for knowledge production and civic action.

At multiple junctions in this inquiry, I sound a *clarion call against epistemic promiscuity* – the tendency of scholars to deploy a mix of instruments of knowledge and criteria of validation circulating in different universes (science, journalism, philanthropy, politics and public policy, everyday life), without duly checking their origins, semantic span, logical coherence, and the social unconscious they carry. *The Invention of the “Underclass”* will have fulfilled its mission if it increases the epistemological vigilance of its readers and assists them modestly in the “perpetual reconstruction of those concepts through which we seek to comprehend reality.”[11]

Chasing after an urban chimera

In his reflections on the philosophy of science, Max Weber stresses that every social scientist "operates with the conceptual stock-in-trade of [their] time" and that "concept-construction depends on the setting of the problem, and the latter varies with the content of culture itself."[12] In other words, the formulation of a problematic in the social sciences – in contradistinction to the natural sciences – is *doubly* influenced by the state of the scientific field *and* by the state of the surrounding society. As a French citizen landing in Chicago in the summer of 1985 to pursue a doctorate in the Mecca of American sociology, I was initially attracted to the intellectual stream drawn by the "underclass." The emerging notion was a hot intellectual commodity that promised to energize urban sociology, extend class theory, and nourish bold arguments across the academy and the policy world. Its dramatic tenor seemed to match the lunar landscape of black dispossession surrounding on all sides the rich white enclave of Hyde Park, home of the University of Chicago.

My novice fervor for this thematics, lasting about a year, came from a close reading of William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race*, in which the term designates a fraction of the working-class marginalized by the forward march of capitalism.[13] It was further stimulated by Bill's infectious passion for the study of the social transformation of the ghetto, correlated with the shift of the flashpoint of ethnoracial conflict from the economy to the polity. So, when he offered me the opportunity to work closely with him on his new team study of the topic, I eagerly accepted. Class, racial domination, ghetto, state: those were the categories that I naively associated with the term "underclass." I soon discovered that the keywords of the emerging debate on the topic

were welfare dependency, female-headed family, teenage pregnancy, concentrated poverty, high school dropout, and violent criminality.

My initial enthusiasm thus turned quickly into a cautious stance of principled skepticism. My intellectual training in a European tradition at once more theoretical and more historical than the American alerted me to the danger of characterizing as novel and unprecedented a phenomenon that must surely have had historical precedents or analogues. Indeed, the comparative social history of marginality in the industrial city, as represented by such classic studies as Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Louis Chevalier's *Classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses*, and Gareth Stedman Jones's *Outcast London*, readily revealed that the intersection of capitalist industrialization and urbanization had repeatedly destabilized laboring populations and spawned the belief, among the coalescing bourgeoisie, that the city's underbelly harbored culturally distinct, socially secluded, and vicious populations.[14] The notion that the festering of these categories, *Lumpenproletariat*, underworld, *bas-fonds*, whatever the designation, posed an urgent moral and physical threat to the social order that called for innovative public policies designed to thwart it was not news either: had not the wave of beggars and vagrants that flooded the burgeoning cities of Northern Europe at the end of the sixteenth century led to the twin invention of poor relief, on the one side, and the penal prison, on the other?[15]

My European skepticism grew into a gnawing American suspicion about the "underclass" when I turned to the arc of race, class, and space in Chicago over a century. Here I benefited from the fact that the Windy City is the most studied metropolis in America (if not the world), and so I delved into the rich lineage of historical inquiries that

recapitulate the trajectory, structure, and experience of "Bronzeville." Monographs on the topic cover a full century. Allan Spear's pioneering *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* recounts the birth of the "black city within the white," while James Grossman's *Land of Hope* probes the springs and consequences of the Great Migration of black Southerners to Chicago in the interwar years. St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's monumental *Black Metropolis* dissects the structure and experience of African-American social life at the apogee of the communal ghetto around the mid-twentieth-century point. Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto* picks up the story of race, housing, and politics for the period 1940–60, focusing on the revamping of the dark ghetto from above via city, state, and federal policies. Bill Wilson's watershed book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, maps the hollowing out of the black inner city under the press of deindustrialization and class bifurcation after 1970.[16]

Put together, these studies suggested permanence, recurrence, and novelty in the making of the "underclass." Permanence of the sharp social and spatial division of the city by race; recurrence of phases of class consolidation and dissolution that caused tectonic shifts in city politics; novelty in the virulence of the territorial stigma draped over the remnants of the dark ghetto, amplified by the sulfurous corona of the "underclass" said to have emerged in their midst.

I grew frustrated as my efforts to articulate clearly what the "underclass" was designating confusedly proved vain: the more I read on the topic, the less it seemed to make sociological sense. My suspicion soon morphed into full-scale alarm as I attended the working seminars, think-tank meetings, and policy conferences on the topic to which Bill Wilson took me or dispatched me in his stead. Between 1987 and 1990, I was placed in the eye of the "underclass"

storm and given a minor insider role in what the historian Alice O'Connor nicely christens "the poverty research industry" that was then in a state of intellectual flux and organizational recomposition.[17] Armed with my foreign lenses and cushioned by historical reservations, I carried out rough fieldwork on the constitution of the mixed problematic of the "underclass" by scholars and experts based at the Brookings Institution, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, Mathematica Policy Research Inc., the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, and the Urban Institute, as well as by researchers from leading universities across the country.

When the Rockefeller Foundation disbursed $6 million to the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) to launch a "Program of Research on the Urban Underclass" in 1988, I was invited to the two planning meetings. At the first meeting, the historian Michael Katz and I kept raising the question of the origins, meaning, and (mis)uses of the term "underclass." The two program officers coordinating the Committee's work were visibly embarrassed; they kept punting and would not so much as provide a working definition of the central notion motivating our presence. Other participants were stoically uninterested in dispelling the semantic fog around the "underclass" and were quite content to carry on with their mission regardless. Over a three-year period, I got to meet, hear, and engage the leading students of the topic; to bump into and tussle with top government experts and policy luminaries (including a vitriolic clash with none other than Daniel Patrick Moynihan that dismayed Bill Wilson); and to discover first-hand the concerns, styles, and strategies of the policy institutes and philanthropies taking the lead in constituting the academic-cum-policy nebula of the "underclass."

I was also shocked to discover that the vast majority of the country's leading experts on the question had never set

foot in a poor black neighborhood and were constantly stuffing the gap between their macro-level data and everyday reality with racial commonplaces that are part of a national common sense I did not share. This discovery convinced me that, in order to break with what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "car-window sociology,"[18] I needed to start from scratch through a historical-analytical reconstruction of the ghetto, on the one side,[19] and from close-up observation of social relations at street level, on the other. For this, I resolved to find an observation post inside the hyperghetto to figure out from the ground up how the realities of class, race, and space shaped the social strategies and experience of young black men caught in the undertow of economic restructuring and state abandonment.

A series of chance circumstances led me to land in a boxing gym on the devastated thoroughfare of 63rd Street in Woodlawn, only two blocks from my home at the southern border of Hyde Park – but as distant experientially as another planet.[20] I signed up to learn how to box as a conduit to get to know the club members; to my own surprise, I was drawn into the sensual and moral coils of pugilism and ended up apprenticing in the craft for three years.[21] I followed my gym mates in their daily round and observed how they dealt with the labor market, family, welfare state, and police. This prompted me to question root and branch the existing conceptual apparatus of the sociology of caste and class in the American metropolis. Here was a cluster of men who, *on paper*, matched most definitions of the urban "underclass" and yet displayed a personal sense of order, a love of family, respect for authority, the pursuit of long-term goals, and an iron-clad work ethic. Pierre Bourdieu turned out to be right when he told me at the time that this boxing gym and its members would teach me more about the sociology of the

(hyper)ghetto than all the tomes on the “underclass” I could read.

During the period when my intellectual distance from the ductile discourse on the “underclass” gradually grew, Bill Wilson and I had countless breakfasts and dinners during which we hashed out our epistemological, theoretical, and policy differences. It was an advanced tutorial in sociology the likes of which no university offers. He, patient, stolid, and confident in his ability to bend the policy debate to his scholarly arguments; I, irreverent, frenetic, and stubborn in my call of scientific purity above all. With his trademark intellectual generosity, in spite of our disagreements, Bill offered me to co-author with him the sequel to *The Truly Disadvantaged*, set to be entitled *The American Underclass* (the book that became *When Work Disappears*).[22] This was an enormously alluring offer to an impecunious graduate student, considering the mirific advance offered by the publisher Knopf. But I demurred, insisting that we first find out whether we could agree on the answer to this question: should we use the “underclass” as a *tool for* analysis, a formal construct with which to explore and parse the empirical world, or as an *object of* analysis, a historically dated discursive formation and collective belief about the remnants of the dark ghetto and its inhabitants? The present tome is a continuation of that dialogue and a closing of that chapter. This is why it is dedicated to Bill Wilson, with gratitude and affection.

Anti-urbanism and the fear of the (black) city underbelly

To elucidate the full meaning and mechanisms of the invention of the “underclass” in the late twentieth century, it is *essential to historicize* them, in this case to set them

against two staggered backdrops that reveal analogues and precursors of the category. The first and deeper backdrop is a centuries-long strand of *abiding anti-urbanism* in American culture and politics, with roots in the country's origin as an agrarian settler colony and the steadfast desire to distinguish itself from Europe and its great cities – which Thomas Jefferson famously viewed as "pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man." For this national tradition, the metropolis is an engine of class conflict, ethnic promiscuity, social disintegration, and moral perdition, as exemplified by the shrill denunciations of the "wicked city" that flourished in the mid-nineteenth century.[23]

The second backdrop is a more recent historical vision that recentered urban fear and fulmination onto the dark "inner city" during the postwar decades, making *race as blackness the paramount prism of public perception and policy* in the metropolis. This inflection of anti-urbanism, provoked by the ghetto uprising of the 1960s, portrayed poor blacks as agents of violence, disorder, and immorality, and the city itself as an ungovernable sociospatial form doomed to crisis, breakdown, and irreversible decline.[24] Both backstories suggest that the impulse to sociomoral control in the metropolis has a long and recurrent history; and that this impulse drives the symbolic delineation of the target populations viewed as desecrating the values of the Anglo middle and upper classes – and not the other way around.

In the collective imaginary of the United States, and especially among its educated elite, the emergence of the first urban centers in the 1830s was experienced as a mortal threat to the young nation and its exceptional character, as it undermined the mythic pioneer virtues of independence and self-sufficiency. The city was considered the dissolute redoubt of the "three Ms," mongrels, mobs, and money, a dumping ground for the dregs of European

society, a foul and sinful place that made a dignified life impossible.[25] The flourishing of urban-reform societies rooted in Evangelical Christianity at mid-century, with their missionary visitors, tract associations distributing bibles, and Sunday schools aiming to revive the moral order of the village, was no match for the surging urban masses at once "vicious, abandoned, debased." Tidal waves of migration and working-class formation soon triggered trepidation over the "replication of European conditions" and alarm at the spread of "popery" and "pauperism."[26]

"The refuse of Europe"

"The refuse of Europe . . . congregate in our great cities and send forth wretched progeny, degraded in the deep degradation of their parents – to be the scavengers, physical and moral, of our streets. Mingled with these are also the offcast children of American debauchery, drunkennesss, and vice. A class more dangerous to the community . . . can scarcely be imagined."

American Bible Society, *Annual Report*, 1857

By the 1870s, the idiom of wilderness was transferred from the Western frontier to the urban frontier, and the inner ring of cities portrayed as an abyss of anonymity, depravity, and artificiality, whose "semi-barbarous" residents threatened to capsize the societal edifice *in toto*. Theories of hereditary degeneracy and moral delinquency were combined to develop the doctrine and practice of "scientific philanthropy" based on the partitioning of the urban poor into worthy and vicious.[27] Of particular concern was the size, growth, and menace of a submerged stratum of the urban proletariat known as the *residuum* – a notion borrowed from Charles Booth's mammoth survey of the London poor[28] – nested in the most squalid tenements of

the metropolis. Criminality, casual work, moral dissolution, and family disintegration were the defining features of this fearsome and unreformable population, which makes it a close ancestor to the “underclass.”

During the Gilded Age, the anxiety of the Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie took on hysterical proportions in the face of “the triple menace of class warfare, alien radicalism, and urban mass violence.”[29] Colossal demographic changes turned the old urban centers into the province of foreign migrants splintered by language and religion, spawned the squalor of the slums, and fueled the growth of patronage politics. Religious groups, such as the Salvation Army and its “slum brigades,” and the charity organization movement sprang into action, based on “the assumption that the urban poor had degenerated morally because the circumstances of city life had cut them off from the elevating influence of their moral betters” – shades of the lament that the “underclass” lacks proper “mainstream role models” a century later.

To battle indolence and ameliorate the character of the poor required investigation, visitation, and the compiling of dossiers made available to prospective landlords, employers, banks, and even the police.[30] Imported from London, the settlement house movement led by Jane Addams favored environmental remedies over individual solutions and made the neighborhood the focus of inquiry and remediation, anticipating its adoption by the Chicago school of sociology two decades later. The urban reform of the 1890s thus followed two tracks: a coercive approach seeking to rein in the immoral behavior of the poor through surveillance and supervision in their own best interest (Jacob Riis summed up this perspective with the formula, “Those who would fight *for* the poor must *fight* the poor to do it”), and an environmentalist approach aiming to ameliorate the tenements with bathhouses, parks, and

playgrounds suited to restoring the moral health of the proletariat.[31]

Faced with the pestilence and violence of the teeming immigrant working class, the bourgeoisie fled to the emerging suburbs, also imported from England and consciously crafted as the sociomoral opposite of the city. Inspired by Puritanism, the ideal of urbane living among the American bourgeoisie has always been suburban, that is, socially homogeneous, ethnically exclusive, spatially separate, and bucolic.[32] The suburb promoted and protected middle-class ideals of property, familial privacy, and moral propriety; it allowed the gracious single-family home, set in its large green lawn and drained of profane concerns, to function as the cradle of domesticity and religiosity. It expressed, not just the desire for self-seclusion, but also the fear of the class and ethnic other as well as trepidation at the rapid social changes wrought by the market.[33] The suburb thus defined itself through a series of homological oppositions that systematically devalued the first term: city/suburb, industry/family, poor/rich, ethnic promiscuity/ethnic purity, paganism/religiosity, artificial/natural, and depravity/morality. It is a key "asymmetric counter-concept" of America's urban imagination.[34]

During the Progressive Era, the taming of the city, viewed as a continued menace to the state and the nation, took two forms. The first strand extended the coercive and moralistic approach to stimulate crusades against such ills of urban life as sexual deviancy (the brothel) and intemperance (the saloon). The second, with Jane Addams as its figurehead, drew on a more sanguine view of the metropolis; it embraced positive environmentalism to remake the urban setting in ways believed to nourish sound habits and good conduct among the laboring class. The development of