

Researching the Urban Margins: What Can the United States Learn from Latin America and Vice Versa?

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Over the decade and a half that I have been conducting research on poverty and marginality in Latin America (with a specific focus on Argentina), I have become increasingly aware of the lack of dialogue between scholars working on similar issues north and south of the border. The striking similarities in the ways neoliberal economic policies and political transformations are now affecting the lives of the urban poor throughout the Americas might present a good (and well overdue) opportunity to break down artificial, but well-entrenched, “area-studies” boundaries and to scrutinize the manifold (sometimes similar, sometimes not) processes that are shaping the dynamics of urban relegation throughout the continent.

True, ghettos, inner-cities, *favelas*, *villas*, *comunas*, *poblaciones*, *colonias* (to mention a few of the terms used to describe the territories where multiple deprivations accumulate throughout the region) are not the same urban forms. While a few economic, political, and/or demographic dynamics that gave birth to, say, a *villa miseria* in Buenos Aires and the ghetto in Chicago (such as rapid industrialization and mass migration) may have some resemblances, the differences (racial segregation, housing policies, etc.) are far too important to be ignored. The causes and experiences of destitution in the developed North and the (always) developing South are, indeed, quite varied. And yet, years of field research at the urban margins armed with theoretical tools developed with diverse realities in mind have convinced me that sustained and serious engagement between researchers of urban poverty and/or marginality throughout the Americas can lead to better understandings and explanations of the diverse ways in which neoliberal states and economies bolster social and economic vulnerabilities.

What can urban sociologists in the United States take away from reading about current dynamics in the sprawling informal settlements in Latin America? Conversely, what can urban sociologists in Latin America learn from reading about the living conditions in enclaves of urban poverty in the United States and the predicament of their residents? In this brief essay, I highlight a few themes found in both bodies of urban poverty research, which have rarely converged in a fruitful exchange; themes present in one literature that can benefit the other; and one theme that, surprisingly enough, has received little (if no) attention in either the United States or Latin America. In doing so, rather than focus on the substantive similarities in the forms and meanings of dispossession, I draw attention to the ways in which social scientific studies of urban poverty in some places

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can help us to ask original, unexpected questions about other locations—how lessons learned about one urban reality can act as interrogating arrows pointing us toward new kinds of inquiry. In other words, rather than trying to figure out whether the African-American ghetto of the 1980s resembles or not the *favela* of the 1990s or the *villa miseria* of the 2000s, I compare and contrast—and reason analogically (as Diane Vaughan [2004] recommends)—processes and mechanisms that lie at the center of the reproduction (and in some cases, extension) of urban relegation.

For more than four decades now, Latin American sociology of urban poverty has been grappling with some of the questions that now worry urban sociology in the United States. Discussions about “marginality” and “informality” that have recently occupied the intellectual energy of scholars working in the United States have, for a long time now, been at the center of the study of urban poverty in Latin America. Questions such as the economic and political relationships that “excluded” populations establish with the rest of society (and whether or not the “marginal” can be considered “disposable” and/or if they have an economic “function” to fulfill) have long preoccupied Latin American social scientists. Scholars working north of the border can profit from that discussion; whether or not the debates have come to a satisfactory conclusion is beside the point. Think about the concern with “informality” that, now a recurrent theme in the study of the economic strategies in the ghetto and/or the inner city (Bourgois 1995; Duneier 2000; Venkatesh 2006), has long been a staple in the study of urban poverty in Latin America (Castells and Portes 1989; Tokman 1982; Fernandez Kelly and Shefner 2006). Likewise, the struggles of growing homeless and precariously housed populations to secure shelter can benefit from the lens of informality developed in decades of studies on self-help and squatter housing in Latin America. In more ways than one, this general theme encompasses a version of what Matthew Desmond (2011) recently called “the survival question”—that is, how do poor people survive in the absence of formal jobs and state assistance? Scholars north and south of the border have sometimes reached similar conclusions: Note, for example, the attention paid to informal networks of survival in the United States (Stack 1970; Edin and Lein 1997) and in Latin America (Lomnitz 1975; Gonzalez de la Rocha 2004). At other times, researchers have produced quite different assessments—take, for example, the key role played by “political networks” in helping the poor make ends meet in Argentina (Auyero 2000), Brazil (Gay 1994), and most of the Latin American countries and their lesser role in the contemporary United States.

The recent and emerging concern with “urban marginality” (Wacquant 2007) also offers a formidable opportunity for meaningful and productive dialogue between both scholarly traditions. Almost three decades ago, in what would later become one of Latin America’s most original and controversial contributions to the social sciences, a group of sociologists tackled the relationship between the structural character of unemployment in the region and the escalation of urban marginality. Working within a structural-historical neo-Marxist perspective (as many a study of poverty did in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America), they recovered the notion of “marginality” from the realm of modernization theories (represented by sociologist Gino Germani and the DESAL school), which focused on the lack of integration of certain social groups into society due to their (deviant) values, perceptions, and behavioral patterns (Germani 1966, 1980; DESAL 1969, 1970; Perlman 1976; Portes 1972). Marginal groups, according to this approach (centered for the most part around the examination of attitudes rather than actual behaviors), lacked the psychological and psychosocial attributes that were deemed necessary to

participate in modern society. Emerging in the transition to modern, industrial society, marginality was thought to be the product of the coexistence of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors of a previous stage of a more “traditional” way of life. Rural migrants to the city were seen as carriers of a “baggage of traditional norms and values which prevent(ed) their successful adaptation to the urban style of life” (Portes 1972: 272).

Note the striking similarities (in both theoretical underpinnings and substantive claims) between this value-centered approach to marginality in Latin America and the emphasis on the alleged existence of an “underclass” of urban—usually Black—poor in the United States. I should add in passing that the thorough criticism that the “rural marginality” approach received both in the United States and Latin America (Stack 1970; Portes 1972; Roberts 1973; Perlman 1976; Valentine 1972) could still be a useful antidote to inoculate us against the pitfalls and political dangers of the ambiguous notion of the “underclass” (Gans 1995). With important affinities to both “rural/cultural marginality” and “underclass” perspectives, culture of poverty theories have also influenced political and intellectual debates throughout the Americas (Fischer 2011; Small et al. 2010; Valentine 1978; Lewis 1961, 1966).

In contrast to the cultural marginality approach, and largely contemporary to it, the structural perspective on marginality focused on the process of import substitution industrialization and its intrinsic inability to absorb the growing mass of the labor force. As Mollenkopf and Castells put it (1991:409), this intellectual tradition “aimed to understand why and how increased industrialization and GNP growth, concentrated in the largest metropolitan areas, went hand in hand with accrued urban poverty and an ever-growing proportion of people excluded from the formal labor market and formal housing and urban services.” At that time, and very much based in the Argentine case, Nun, Marín, and Murmis (1968) understood that the functioning of what they called “the dependent labor market” was generating an excessive amount of unemployment. This “surplus population” transcended the logic of the Marxian concept of “industrial reserve army,” and led the authors to coin the term “marginal mass.” The “marginal mass” was neither superfluous nor useless; it was “marginal” because it was rejected by the same system that had created it. Thus, the marginal mass was a “permanent structural feature” never to be absorbed by the “hegemonic capitalist sector” of the economy, not even during its expansionary cyclical phases.

In more way than one, then, the structural school of marginality anticipated the multiple effects of the structural character of “mass unemployment” in the Global North (depreciation of incomes, deterioration of working conditions, precarization of job opportunities). Decades later, countries in the North and South began to experience, in addition to this “industrial” marginality, a novel kind of marginality related to the functioning of the globalized post-Fordist economy, different forms of tertiarization, and neoliberal policies (Wacquant 2007). Recently, debates in Latin America began to draw upon the notions of “social exclusion” and “vulnerability” to examine the manifold ways in which both the economy and the state are involved in the reproduction of urban inequality. The “old” debate on the causes and extent of marginality can help us to figure out whether or not there is a new marginality operating in territories that have for quite a long time now been part of the urban margins and, if so, to diagnose its dynamics and manifestations—needless to say, always keeping in mind Latin America’s heterogeneity: with its extensive formal economy, its strong trade unions, and its recognizable category of the unemployed, the case of Argentina was quite different from, say, Ecuador or Mexico

with their extensive informal sectors. To what extent those differences are still operative in the present is an empirical question.

If students of poverty in the United States can learn from revisiting past debates and reading current research on Latin America, the reverse is also true. Two (interrelated) issues affecting the lives of the dispossessed stand out and offer an opportunity for intercontinental cross-fertilization: interpersonal violence and incarceration. A decade ago, authors such as Kees Koonings (2001) and Roberto Briceño-León (1999) argued that a new kind of violence was emerging in Latin America (see Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). This violence was “increasingly available to a variety of social actors and [it was] no longer a resource of elites or security forces” (Koonings 2001:403). This new violence was, according to this strand of scholarship, quite varied; it included “everyday criminal and street violence, riots, social cleansing, private account selling, police arbitrariness, paramilitary activities, post-Cold War guerrillas, etc.” (Koonings 2001:403). How “new” this violence was (and still is) has been the subject of much debate among Latin Americanists (Wilding 2011), but a consensus seems to be emerging around the fact that, in many instances, it is intricately related to the dynamics of the (growing, in most cases) informal drug-economy (see, for example, Jones and Rodgers 2009). During the 1980s and 1990s, urban sociology in the United States paid a lot of attention to—and produced some superb studies on (Bourgois 1995; Sanchez Jankowski 1991)—the causes that fed the depacification of daily life in ghettos and inner cities and on the ways in which residents experienced and dealt with it. Scholars in Latin America are now wrestling with similar and/or analogous issues, and they can certainly benefit from a serious engagement with debates that took place in the United States. While the drug trade was and is behind much of the violence that ravaged territories of urban relegation both north and south, the state reaction to and/or clandestine involvement with drug trafficking mark a significant difference in need of systematic study.

The contemporary gargantuan expansion of the prison system and the concentration of this massive growth among specific racial and ethnic groups have been the subject of much social scientific research in the United States (Garland 2006; Western 2006; Wacquant 2009). Recently, scholarship in the United States has also begun to pay sustained and systematic attention to the ways in which the unprecedented level of mass incarceration is affecting everyday life in poor communities (Goffman 2009; Comfort 2008). From the work of Megan Comfort (2008), for example, we learn that the prison regulates poor people’s daily lives in visible and not so visible ways. From the work of Goffman (2009), we are now discovering the horrifying effects that incarceration is having in the everyday life of those living in poor African-American communities. On the one hand, the generalized fear, the mutual suspicion, and the feeling of being constantly “on the run” (Goffman 2009) pervade the lives of marginalized youngsters as they sometimes evade and other times resist the state’s “punishment of the poor” (Wacquant 2009). On the other hand, the prison “socializes” not only those who are behind bars but also their partners, relatives, and loved ones who regularly come in contact with it and end up “doing time together” (Comfort 2008). In countries such as Argentina, which have recently witnessed a growth proportionally similar in incarceration rates to that experienced in the United States (an almost fourfold increase [398%] in the population of federal prisons since 1985 [CELS 2009]), the prison is also becoming a constant presence in the daily life of the poor (Auyero 2010). Given that it is increasingly common to find residents of poor neighborhoods whose sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, fathers, partners,

mothers, or relatives are “doing time,” Latin American urbanists should ask, with Wacquant, Goffman, and Comfort, about the specific impact of incarceration in the everyday life of dwellers of shantytowns, slums, squatter settlements, and other poor barrios.

Finally, an absent theme on both sides of the Rio Grande: environmental suffering. For a long time, scholars working on urban poverty in Latin America have ignored what, paraphrasing Karl Marx, one could call the real grounds of poor people’s history, remaining silent about poor people’s degraded and hazardous environment, and the way it affects their present health and future capabilities (Auyero and Swistun 2009). Note, for example, the lack of attention paid to environmental factors in recent evaluations of the state of poverty research in the subcontinent (Hoffman and Centeno 2003; González de la Rocha et al. 2004). Despite a long tradition in the study of “environmental racism” and social disparities of health, the sociology of urban poverty in the United States is similarly silent (see, for example, Small and Newman’s [2001] recent review). In this way, and somewhat shockingly, social-scientific studies of urban poverty and marginality in the Americas have ignored the simple fact that the poor do not breathe the same air, drink the same water, or play on the same playgrounds as others. Any sociological sketch of urban marginality and its effects on socially organized suffering, any comprehensive understanding of “the texture of hardship” (Newman and Massengill 2006), should pay sustained and systematic empirical attention to the dangerous surroundings where the urban poor dwell. Together with income, employment, education, and networks, social-scientific analyses of the causes and manifestations of urban deprivation throughout the Americas should take into account poor people’s relentless exposure to environmental hazards.

Along with territorial stigmatization of destitute enclaves, racialization of their populations, and related themes, urban marginality, incarceration, and environmental distress are three topics around which, I believe, scholars working both north and south of the border could coalesce in a productive dialogue. And, we should probably begin by reading beyond the parochial confines of our respective area studies.

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