Exploiting the Urban Poor:

Eviction and Imprisonment of Afro-American Inner-city Dwellers

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Although urban poverty in the USA is a subject that was largely absent from the 2012 American presidential campaign, it has reached very high levels. For a new generation of ethnographers now addressing this issue, exploitation is replacing abandonment as the explanation for the reproduction of urban poverty, in particular in the case of Afro-Americans.

Articles discussed here:

- Matthew Desmond, "Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 118, no. 1, July 2012, pp. 88-133.
 http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/desmond.evictionpoverty.ajs2012_0.pdf

- Alice Goffman, "On the Run: Wanted Men in a Philadelphia Ghetto", *American Sociological Review,* June 2009, vol. 74, no. 3, pp. 339-357.

For several decades,[1] Afro-American slums in American cities – districts that once had a strong social and institutional life – have significantly deteriorated, as a result of deindustrialization, mass unemployment, and high levels of crime. Research in this field was transformed by *The Truly Disadvantaged*, the seminal study published by William Julius Wilson twenty-five years ago, and since then it has reemphasized the cultural dimensions of the production and reproduction of urban poverty (Harding, Lamont and Small, 2010; see Duvoux, 2010, for a review : "The Culture of Poverty Reconsidered").

Today a new generation of ethnographers is focusing on institutional domination and new patterns of economic exploitation as factors that drive the current transformation of social life in these neighbourhoods. Two highly gendered phenomena have deeply changed the lives of the most vulnerable residents: housing evictions, primarily affecting women; and imprisonment, which first of all concerns (young) men. These two by no means isolated phenomena join forces to weaken the material, social and symbolic resources of individuals and families. They are joint contributors to the reproduction of urban poverty.

In this paper, I focus on two recent articles: one by Matthew Desmond, Assistant Professor at Harvard University, "Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty"; and one by Alice Goffman, Assistant Professor at the University of Madison-Wisconsin, "On the Run: Wanted Men in a Philadelphia Ghetto". These articles are part of a series of ethnographic studies that suggest corrections to the observation of social isolation in these neighbourhoods. While other recent studies, such as the one by Mario Small (2004), have focused on the internal resources of these neighbourhoods, emphasizing in passing the ambivalent effects that the inhabitants' internal acquaintanceship networks can have on their links with the rest of the society, these studies by Desmond and Goffman (among others) encourage us to take into account the exploitation of the inhabitants as a central aspect of the *causes* of urban poverty. So it is not the neighbourhoods' lack of resources and their abundance of inwardly-turned social networks that produce and reproduce the poverty and endemic violence. On the contrary, their situation can be explained, in part, by certain kinds of predation and control targeted at their inhabitants.

Eviction: the Ultimate Stage of Exploitation?

Matthew Desmond locates his analysis of eviction in a field of research that has been vibrant since the time of the Chicago School: mobility and circulation within urban areas. It is necessary to take into account eviction – especially prominent today because of the subprime crisis – in order to understand the importance of the mobility of the poor, particularly of Afro-Americans. The poor have a high rate of mobility; usually this means moving from one poor neighbourhood to another. Research has demonstrated that this mobility impacts negatively on a number of things: it reduces income, educational attainment, mental health, and social ties with neighbours, and it increases delinquency among adolescents. Desmond thinks it is essential to clarify the reasons for this mobility in order to understand the underlying causes of urban poverty:

> If residential mobility brings about such outcomes, then determining why poor families move as often as they do is crucial to our understanding of the root causes of social disadvantage and to the development of effective policy initiative. (p. 89)

He considers several possible causes, and he plays down the significance of each of them in turn: dissatisfaction with one's current neighbourhood of residence, gentrification, and a particularly brutal and much criticized urban renewal policy (for a critique of the urban renewal programs of destruction, see Jane Jacobs, 1961; and for an example of resistance to their application, see the recent work of Sylvie Tissot, 2012). Even combining all these causes together is not sufficient to explain why poor families so often undergo the ordeal of moving. Rental eviction appears as a factor that is complementary to residential instability and its side effects.

Desmond thus raises several questions for research: How prevalent is eviction? Where within urban areas does it occur? Does it happen more to women? What are its consequences? Looking at Milwaukee before the onset of the real estate crisis in 2007, he notes that in this city of 600,000 inhabitants, 16,000 people were evicted annually from 2003 to 2007. Half of the evictions took place in Afro-American inner-city neighbourhoods, which reflected the overrepresentation of members of this group in the total number of the poor, as well as this group's spatial concentration. Women in these areas were twice as likely as men to be evicted. Eviction is for women what imprisonment is for men, as typical in its occurrence as it is tragic in its consequences.

Desmond's argument involves putting together quantitative and ethnographic materials. His quantitative analysis rests on two sources: data from interviews with evictees, and analysis of a

collection of court actions on evictions. His ethnographic analysis was conducted during two periods at the end of the 2000s, when he lived in two poor neighbourhoods in Milwaukee, one white and one Afro-American, and was thus able to follow in their daily lives families going through the process of eviction. Eleven of these families were studied in depth.

Analysis of the quantitative data demonstrates the large spread in the distribution of kinds of people who are evicted. While men and women had the same rate of eviction in the poor white neighbourhoods, women evictees were overrepresented in the poor minority neighbourhoods, both Latino and, to a still greater extent, Afro-American.

Analysis of the ethnographic data is then brought in to explain why black women in Milwaukee, though only 9.6 % of the population, comprise 30% of the rental evictees. Interactional patterns are spotlighted. They reinforce structural constraints in explaining the disproportionality of the harm to women of colour.

Paradoxically, it is women's greater economic stability and their participation in the legal labour market that makes them so vulnerable. In fact, many of the men have criminal and prison records (Afro-American male school dropouts have a 70% probability of being imprisoned at some point during their lives), which makes them ineligible to sign rental agreements. In addition, they experience endemic unemployment and are denied welfare benefits, which prevents them from having stable legal incomes. Since in the poorest Afro-American neighbourhoods the women are more likely than the men to have regular income, they are also more likely to be evicted.

The frequency of these evictions is also a result of the mismatch between rising costs of property and stagnant wages. Women's resources are simply insufficient to cover their housing costs. They are most often employed part-time in the personal services sector, with low pay and little or no related benefits (see the well documented NDWA report on employment and working conditions of women who work in this sector[2]). Moreover, the educational tasks falling back onto these women increase their expenses. For single mothers receiving welfare payments, household expenses amount to almost the total of those payments. And the majority of poor tenants receive no federal government benefits. So unforeseen expenses for education or health care, which are problems that regularly arise with children, weaken women in their relations with their landlords.

These factors account for most of the overrepresentation of Afro-American women in the total number of evictees. Nevertheless, Desmond supplements these factors by giving an account of certain aspects of interactions. To give a quick summary of his very detailed arguments in the section where he brings back in his ethnographic material: it appears that men excel women in working illegally for their landlords. Odd jobs are considered to be men's work, and even if the women have the necessary skills, both men and women find it quite simply unthinkable to give women this kind of work – sexual services being the exception (Rosen and Venkatesh, 2008). Moreover, the gendered construction of social roles (Ridgeway, 1997, cited here by Desmond) often prevents women from directly confronting their landlords, as men can. A more institutional strategy of seeking mediation just worsens the situation, by inciting the landlord's anger and retaliation.

Desmond then proceeds to document the short- and long-term consequences of evictions. He emphasizes that these events reinforce the reproduction of poverty and social disorganization. With many poor families allocating 80% or more of their income to housing, the data produced by Desmond

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2   http://www.domesticworkers.org/pdfs/HomeEconomicsEnglish.pdf.

make clear the importance of economic exploitation in the construction of the ghetto. His work challenges us to abandon the view that the disadvantaged status of ghettos can be accounted for by relying on the idea that something is missing in these places. Sociological research has successively explained the situation of poor neighbourhoods by the lack of jobs and public services (the structural explanation), or by the lack of positive role models and attachment to dominant social values such as work and family (the cultural explanation). Both of these kinds of explanation explain the production and reproduction of urban poverty by pointing to something that is absent, but according to Desmond[3], they underestimate the presence of economic exploitation of vulnerable people. The disproportionate increase in housing costs and the abusive practices of landlords (see the works of Stefanie DeLuca[4]), who can take advantage of people's insecurity, explains the severity of the constraints and the endemic difficulty of reducing them. Similarly, Jacob S. Ruth and Douglas Massey have demonstrated[5] that racial segregation of a neighbourhood is the factor that best explains the occurrence of evictions associated with subprime mortgages. Spatially segregated minorities have thus constituted an ideal prey for a form of economic extortion, of which the two successive and indivisible faces have been loans at progressive and prohibitively high rates of interest, and evictions.[6] This phenomenon extends to several patterns of consumption, as a Brookings Institution report by Matt Fellowes has clearly documented.[7] Taken together, these analyses recover an outlook that the description of the segregated and impoverished inner-city neighbourhoods had obscured, namely the multifaceted economic exploitation to which they are subjected (Caplowitz, 1967). With this article and another (also published in the *American Journal of Sociology*) on the ties by which ghetto inhabitants survive (Desmond, 2012), Matthew Desmond's work has become essential reading in the literature on urban poverty.

Imprisonment and the Production of Mass Legal Insecurity

The intensity of this exploitation is possible only because of people's insecurity. Desmond associates eviction, which strikes women, and imprisonment, which strikes men, and shows that the two things are interrelated. The imprisonment of men partly explains why financial and parental responsibilities fall back onto women, and this, together with women's low level of wages, explains in turn their own vulnerability.

The article by Alice Goffman, published in 2009, is one of a series of works studying the effects of mass imprisonment on the lives of the inhabitants of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Like others, she emphasizes the significant and multidimensional impact of the prison experience, a "standard" step in the lives of young Afro-American men with few or no qualifications, on family life: from the lack of resources, or even simply of legal security; to effects on public health, linked to the transmission of HIV or to mental disorders that affect a large portion of (former) prisoners and therefore also spill over into their communities after they leave prison (Western, 2006); and not forgetting the effects linked to the prolonged absence of fathers on the psychic and social development of children. Imprisonment affects not just those near and dear to the convicts, but also the resources of

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3   The conceptual issues of this research were explained in a symposium on inequalities that was organized by Elijah Anderson and took place at Yale University on 7 September 2012: http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/is-poverty-a-kind-of-robbery/.
4   http://soc.jhu.edu/directory/stefanie-a-deluca/.
5   "Racial Segregation and the American Foreclosure Crisis", *American Sociological Review*, October 2010, vol. 75 no. 5, pp. 629-651.
6   On 14 September 2012, during a Harvard conference marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of William Julius Wilson's book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Loïc Wacquant cited "reverse redlining" to account for the massive economic and institutional investment in these districts, which has been damaging to the stability of their communities.
7   http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2006/07/poverty-fellowes

the communities that the prisoners come from. The penal state thus takes over some of the functions of the welfare state (for a review of the literature on this, see Comfort, 2007), and prisoner reentry programs increasingly involve mentoring strategies modelled on institutional management of the poor, with their dual feature of putting to work and incarcerating (Soss, Fording and Schram, 2011; Wacquant, 2010 and 2011).

Just as Desmond's data encourage changing our understanding of causal mechanisms and taking economic exploitation seriously, Goffman's work transforms the genre of ethnography. Her work greatly develops the shifts made in recent literature. She begins by pointing out that most ethnographic studies of ghettos were produced before the wave of mass incarceration hit the United States in general and in particular the poor neighbourhoods where the most disadvantaged Afro-Americans live. On the other hand, studies exploring imprisonment are first of all quantitative. Like Desmond, Goffman's opening move is rather to emphasize the impact of imprisonment on the opportunities of former prisoners, who face discrimination in the labour market, prohibition of access to subsidized housing, and loss of some civil rights. Moreover, imprisonment and its far-reaching consequences cut men off from their families and contribute to household destabilization.

Finally, this wave of imprisonment has been accompanied by a sophisticated system of surveillance of poor neighbourhoods – video cameras, helicopters, and a police presence inversely related to the inhabitants' sense of security – and Goffman examines these new forms of social control and their effects on people's lives. Significantly, ethnographic studies going back to preceding decades, when there was a huge increase in crime and social disorganization, emphasized the absence of law enforcement and the sense of impunity prevalent among, for example, drug dealers. This was before the war on drugs and the policy of zero tolerance were set in motion. The fact that the war on drugs started *before* the spread of the consumption of crack cocaine with its devastating effects on the inner cities in the late 1980s and the 1990s explodes the idea that repression was a response to a phenomenon that the penal regime actually helped to create.

In Philadelphia, the city where Goffman carried out her ethnographic investigations, police presence increased by 69% between 1960 and 2000, rising from 2.76 to 4.66 police officers per 10,000 inhabitants. After pointing out that the work of Loïc Wacquant had demonstrated the need to describe the role of the state in this penal regulation of poverty, Goffman shifts the question. Reflecting on the approach that Michel Foucault developed in *Discipline and Punish* (*Surveiller et Punir*), she clarifies the forms of resistance inspired by the omnipresence of police and judicial control in the ghetto. What she describes is not the production of self-discipline, but a climate of fear and general suspicion.

Her reflections draw on ethnographic investigations conducted over a six-year period with a group of fifteen basically unemployed young men, school dropouts living in an almost exclusively Afro-American neighbourhood, who "hung out" around the 6th Street area, sometimes calling themselves "the 6th Street Boys" (the street name is fictitious). Tallying up the searches, arrests and beatings, she demonstrates the omnipresence of the police-laden atmosphere by looking at social representations. In a world constructed like this one is, little children do role playing in which they learn how to behave as a suspect and as a police officer. Prison language penetrates into other conversations and representations, including those of the family; for example, the "Call List" of the friends and family that an arrested person is allowed to telephone has become a term meaning one's close friends. Many men are "on the run" because they have been accused of committing crimes, but many also because they have committed minor offenses or failed to pay the costs of court proceedings.[8]

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8   As this *New York Times* article shows, making private individuals responsible for these costs increases the likelihood of

Goffman here describes a social world in which not only all contact with the authorities but also relations with close friends and even family members are moulded by the prospect of being imprisoned.

Goffman portrays the way that places, persons and connections on which individuals can rely to maintain their identity are transformed into so many potential doors into prison. One's place of work, but also the hospital, courts, and obviously in relations with the police: going into the places where you can or must be registered when entering can result in you being arrested for having violated a curfew, for having failed to show up for judicial proceedings, or for more serious charges. Goffman describes how a father was arrested in a hospital where he had attended the birth of his child; she gives us reflections about how to manage the results of being physically attacked when it is not possible to file a complaint without being arrested yourself; and so on. Even close relationships are affected by being a fugitive. For example, women can threaten to denounce men if they engage in certain behaviour.[9] Denunciation can be a way of retaliating within a relationship where there is disagreement or infidelity. Finally, Goffman shows how this collection of threats drives young men to cultivate a kind of secrecy and unpredictability in their behaviour and in their movements, including in their closest relationships.

Goffman goes beyond analysing the constraints weighing on young men because of this grip of the prison world on people in poor Afro-American neighbourhoods. Like Desmond, she shows that interactional dynamics combine with these constraints, and that the threat of imprisonment is also used to justify acts that would have occurred regardless. Referring to reflections by Liebow (1967) on the reasons that men give to account for their failures, she shows how the young men she is observing justify their breaches of family obligations and their unemployment by the imprisonment threat even when there have been other factors, sometimes less admissible by them, that need to be considered.

Goffman concludes that her work confirms Bruce Western's argument that criminal justice contributes to the transmission of social disadvantage, and Loïc Wacquant's argument that this justice is an instrument for the management of dispossessed and dishonoured groups. She adds that even the most disadvantaged people in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods are not passive and impotent victims: they resist the authorities, or they make use of them in their quarrels. In a shift away from the argument of *Discipline and Punish*, she also points out the gaps in control that leave room for the actors' strategies. Above all, she shows that the internalization of social rules is counterproductive for individuals who are issued on a large scale with warrants for arrest, and made into fugitives. Finally, she shows that fear has not been removed by all the surveillance, but has actually strengthened and seeped into all social relations. Rather than being prisoners, the inhabitants of the ghetto are deprived of basic legal protections by their status as fugitives, a situation that Goffman rightly compares to that of the eleven million illegal immigrants subject to deportation, whose situation, at this moment when the directions of President Obama's second term are taking shape, has not yet begun to find a political solution.[10]

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their ending up in jail and running up other debts, even for minor infractions: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/03/us/probation-fees-multiply-as-companies-profit.html?pagewanted=all

9 In her survey of the wives of men who are inmates at San Quentin Prison in California, Megan Comfort has shown that in some cases this goes as far as the women saying they prefer to see the men that they love in prison rather than having to submit to their abuse: Megan Comfort, *Doing Time Together: Love and Family in the Shadow of the Prison*, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

10 On this issue, see Douglas Massey on the *Scholars Strategy Network* (the website directed by Theda Skocpol): http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/ssn_basic_facts_massey_on_undocumented_migration.pdf Goffman also, less reasonably, compares their situation to that of Jews in Nazi Germany.

Conclusion

The research that I have focused on here shows that there has been an important shift in theoretical views on impoverished Afro-American neighbourhoods in the USA. The category of exploitation is dominant in these studies, whether it is economic or is linked to the influence of public or semi-public actors. In fact, that distinction is not absolute: action by public authorities is itself often ultimately connected to the economic interests of the prison industry – interests that manage to make themselves heard by decision makers at the local, state and federal levels. *A contrario*, dubious commercial methods are related to the lack of public regulation of loans, of insurance, and of wages in the sectors in which Afro-American women are overrepresented.

These kinds of exploitation are not *directly* related to the kinds that are deployed in the labour market. But in fact, one way of extending the reflections discussed here would be to connect them more closely with research on the regulation of the lower strata of that market (Chauvin, 2010). Multi-dimensionality and the connection of different areas of public action (or of inaction), such as housing, employment, health, and prisons, could then make for a more systematic analysis of the idea of exploitation and its part in the development of social inequality.

In this way, connecting class variables (today the dominant way of understanding inequality), race (which is always central in the issue of urban poverty and imprisonment), and gender (where the works discussed here show the importance and the power with which institutions shape differentiated social "roles" within minority groups as well as within neighbourhoods, and which is the dominant category in studies of social problems [see Sampson, 2012, and Poupeau and Tissot, 2005]) could well lead to a reconsideration of the idea of exploitation as a social relation.[11]

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11 Cf. Nicolas Duvoux and Pascal Sévérac, "Citizen Balibar: An Interview with Étienne Balibar": http://www.booksandideas.net/Citizen-Balibar.html

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