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A wake for urban theory

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Duneier, M. *Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea* 2016 Farrar, Straus and Giroux 304 pp. $28.00 (hardback) $16.00 (paperback)
Desmond, M. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in an American City* 2016 Crown 432 pp. $28.00 (hardback) $17.00 (paperback)

In the standard account of urban sociology in the United States, the subdiscipline emerged from white analysts' take on the black ghetto. Initially an outlying zone in Robert Park and Ernest Burgess' concentric city, it became a self-sufficient object of analysis in the work of Louis Wirth and his disciples, and ultimately the site of poverty research in Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*. But in a new intellectual history of the idea of the ghetto, Mitchell Duneier recovers a black sociological tradition that did not simply respond to white sociology, but actually pioneered the field.

Ghetto begins with the promise of a comprehensive history of the ghetto, but the object of analysis quickly shifts. As Duneier observes in the case of the Nazi ghetto, 'well-educated journalists and even social scientists also played an important role in legitimating the new usage' (22). This is a book not about the ghetto itself – Duneier never attempts to actually define it – but instead about its conceptual history in sociology. From DuBois' encounter with the Jewish ghetto we move to the Bronzeville of St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, Kenneth Clark's dark ghetto, and ultimately to William Julius Wilson's underclass. In the background throughout – and this is the greatest strength of the book – is the white sociological tradition as foil. For example, Duneier demonstrates just how pioneering the work of Cayton actually was, detailing his challenge to the Chicago School's tendency to view ghettoization as a natural and evolutionary process. Instead, Cayton explicitly highlighted the role of restrictive covenants in ghetto formation. In a similar vein, Clark's

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work shows how the ghetto functioned as a 'powerless colony', a concept that would subsequently influence the Black Power movement.

At this point in the book, Duneier's treatment of the ghetto as such essentially ends. The subsequent chapter on Wilson focuses on black poverty rather than the ghetto *qua* socio-spatial institution. What is most striking about this chapter is Wilson's resonance with the pre-Cayton Chicago School. Like Park, he denied the relevance of race to understanding ghetto formation, and like Wirth, he refused to specifically define the ghetto as an institution of socio-spatial confinement. More generally, what we might call the Wilsonian turn in urban sociology ushered in the beginning of the end for studies of the ghetto. Indeed, by the time Mario Small implored sociologists to 'abandon the idea of the ghetto' (2008), it was hardly in use – at least not substantively.

While the chapter on Wilson treats black poverty rather than the ghetto, the penultimate chapter on Geoffrey Canada leaves the realm of social science altogether. If Duneier critiques Drake and Cayton for ignoring 'the significance of national real estate and financial institutions' (73), we could say the same thing about his book. Cayton once debated Wirth over whether the ghetto was deliberately designed or emerged naturally and spontaneously, as the Chicago School sociologists tended to assert. But Duneier projects this debate into the present, pitting neoliberal ideologues (who assume Wirth's position) against sociologists (for whom that antiquated debate has been settled for decades) rather than considering debates *within* the field. This leads him astray, abandoning a sociological analysis of the ghetto and instead turning to empiricist accounts of black American poverty.

He concludes by reiterating his thesis that historicizing the ghetto allows us to see its multiple iterations and therefore to think comparatively. But mass incarceration, racist policing practices, racialized geographies of gentrification, and other emergent forces remain absent from the book, or else are hastily discussed in closing. Beyond this book, this is a problem with an emergent empiricism in urban sociology, which has largely neglected the ghetto *qua* institution (or lack thereof) since the work of Clark. The subfield is marked by a latent reluctance to theorize, whether this means thinking through emergent patterns of urban change, identifying novel trajectories of urbanization, or simply exploring new ways in which states, investors, and other actors collaborate on multiple scales to transform racialized urban spaces. With the decline of theoretically informed urban research and the ascension of the post-Wilsonian consensus, sociologists rarely study cities these days, but instead treat urban poverty that happens to occur in cities. Divorced from the theories of racialization, urban political economy, and space that once defined the field, the alternative has been to shift toward a localist empiricism, describing what Castells once called phenomena *in* the city, but not *of* the city.

One obvious reason for the lack of treatment of the ghetto in contemporary sociology is the disappearance of the ghetto itself — what Wacquant calls the

shift from ghetto to hyperghetto marked by depopulation and deproletarianization (2008). In its place, a new round of spatially relegating processes have emerged in cities since roughly the 1970s, from gentrification to foreclosure to most recently, as described in the work of Matthew Desmond, eviction. In *Evicted*, he traces how eviction can befall just about anyone short of income, deploying the 'relational ethnography' for which he has become renown (cf. Desmond 2014). The idea is to move beyond the empiricism of most urban ethnography – the bulk of it following what I describe above as the Wilsonian turn – and instead to begin to understand emergent social relations constituting a Bourdieusian field. But the book falls short of this lofty goal, instead describing a few instances of quotidian eviction without explaining why evictions are on the rise, let alone who beyond landlords and tenants are involved in the process. In other words, far from laying out the field of evictions, Desmond treats immediate landlord-tenant relations, never exploring how the state, investors, and other key actors are involved in the process.

Framing issues aside, the series of vignettes recounted in the book are beautifully crafted. Never sensationalizing the subjects of his study, Desmond reiterates how misguided it would be to simply hold a petty landlord or trailer park operator to blame for a spike in evictions. Indeed, in Milwaukee, where Desmond carried out his study, one in eight renters face eviction every year. 'Even in the most desolate areas of American cities,' he argues, 'evictions used to be rare' (3). But now there is an entire coercive apparatus constituted solely to ensure evictions, including 'sheriff squads whose full-time job is to carry out eviction and foreclosure orders' (3). Landlords are not 'greedy or heartless' (307), he insists, but part of a larger system of exploitation. In a footnote he takes urban sociologists to task for only mentioning the term two times or four (399–400, n. 42), though I should point out that beyond the footnotes, Desmond himself only uses the term five times. One reason for its absence in urban research is that exploitation, a Marxian concept, is about labour at the point of production, whereas rent-seeking and dispossession are about land – and appear far more frequently in urban literature of all stripes. These latter concepts might help him explain why it is that individual landlords do not initiate the process, but are instead caught up in something that pre-exists them.

More generally, Desmond does not seek to fully answer his own question: why evictions used to be rare but are now abundantly common. As a renter in Oakland, California for the past decade, I have lived in two different apartments. In both cases, my next-door neighbours were evicted. In one case, a West African immigrant couple was evicted with their four children; in the other, two houses full of 20-something artists and musicians found themselves without a place to live. Both houses were purchased by development corporations. In Oakland, investors acquire nearly half of all foreclosed properties – almost all of which are located in lower income sections of the city. But why now?

In line with Cayton and Clark before him, Desmond points out that 'the ghetto had always been more a product of social design than desire' (249). 'The ghetto had always been a main feature of landed capital, a prime money-maker for those who saw ripe opportunity in land scarcity, housing dilapidation, and racial segregation' (249). If slumlording had always been a source of profitability, what was it that changed sometime around 1968? This is roughly the period after which sociologists begin to either describe the implosion of the ghetto, or else stop talking about the socio-spatial institution as such altogether.

'[H]ousing had become a business,' Desmond proclaims, pointing to the professionalization of property management since 1970 (28). A truly relational sociology might begin to uncover lateral linkages, tying localized cases of eviction to larger forces of dispossession. If eviction is a means of profitable extraction, but petty landlords are not to blame, as Desmond insists, why do they act as they do? To what extent are extra-local forces to blame? For Duneier, 'the black ghetto is created and controlled by outside institutions, whether these be large national real estate organizations or federal, state, and local government' (225). In the case of Oakland, only a third of investors snatching up foreclosed homes are actually located in the city, and one in six is not even located in the state. The two most active investors in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 crisis managed to acquire nearly 500 homes in Oakland alone. Granted for Desmond, only a quarter of the evictions in Milwaukee are tied to foreclosures, but I was left wondering how the field is constituted beyond the narrow relation between tenants and small-scale landlords.

While this might seem like a minor quibble, it is actually essential to understanding the policy implications of the book. Desmond concludes by recommending a universal housing voucher programme, something about as unlikely in a contemporary American context as universal basic income or a Piketty tax. In order to understand how evictions actually proceed, we need to first get to the bottom of the extra-local forces that compel landlords to evict in the first place. Much of this is of course racialized, as Desmond suggests. But much of it is presumably tied to a larger process of financialization in which real estate gained increasing salience after the onset of deindustrialization in urban cores across the United States. This is the process that David Harvey famously described as the 'urbanization of capital' (1985), in which declining profitability in manufacturing precipitated mass disinvestment in factories, with investors shifting their money into finance, insurance, and above all, urban real estate. Neil Smith has documented (1996) how investors were able to drive frontiers of gentrification, and we might ask how a similar process occurs with evictions. Part of the problem Desmond identifies is not exploitation as such but the commodification of housing in the form of rental stock. But given that policymakers are far too often in the pockets of real estate developers, where to even begin?

Where Desmond succeeds wildly is as an ethnographer, definitively documenting that people do not always get evicted because they are poor, but often the causality is reversed. This is an enormously important insight that has already grabbed the attention of members of Congress, major news outlets, and yes, even sociologists. When I began a dissertation on eviction in the mid 2000s, I had to turn entirely to other social sciences for my literature review, and Desmond had to do much the same. Hopefully *Evicted* will serve as a clarion call to connect the dots, bringing together all of the various post-ghetto processes of dispossession and dislocation in order to begin to theorize urban change since the 1970s. As Duneier unwittingly demonstrates in *Ghetto*, the intellectual history of studying socio-spatial institutions of confinement and expulsion essentially stops at precisely the moment when it is most sorely needed. Ethnographers would do well to piece together the astute theoretical fragments scattered throughout Desmond's book, moving beyond their hesitancy to promulgate an actually relational sociology.

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