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THE (SUB)URBAN UNITED STATES:
SPATIALIZING THE CULTURE OF POVERTY DEBATES IN 'THE AMERICAN CITY'

The American City—as both a geographic region and an analytical concept—is intimately tied to American political development; thus, this essay outlines both: (a) the political economic processes that produced the socio-spatial formation called "The American City" (hereafter TAC); and (b) how those processes and formations have been studied.[1] Highlighting both the *object* of TAC and its anthropological *analyses*, I present the following literature within the historical period in which it was produced and consumed. While this might reinforce linear notions of space-time, it should reveal the entangled nature of social scientific knowledge production and political economic conditions. Highlighting urban anthropology's emergence within the postwar era, when TAC was associated with blackness and poverty, I conclude by considering how such origins can explain the sub-field's enduring tensions.

1700s-1929: From town and country to the "urban problem"
One of the first urban historians, Schlesinger (1940), suggested that the central question of U.S. history was "the persistent interplay of town and country" (p. 43). Schlesinger dates the seeds of U.S. urbanization to the colonial era, when colonists showed a preference for "town life" over "the countryside" (p. 44). As Boston, New York, and Philadelphia—then called "larger towns"—competed for economic control, they became "a symbol of deception and greed" (p. 45). Emerging from The Revolution, these growing towns were increasingly marked with prosperity and prestige (Jackson 1985). As a plantation economy fueled by the forced labor of enslaved Africans and West Indians, the boundaries between free/unfree and white/"Colored" were relatively stable.
As Wacquant (2001) details, the transition from a plantation economy reliant on fixed and unfree slave labor to an industrial economy dependent on mobile wage labor, entailed significant shifts in this socio-spatial topography. As the center of (commercial) production moved from agricultural countryside to industrializing centers, the Northeast (including CT) marshaled the region's rivers for its water-powered textile factories. After the Emancipation Proclamation, sharecropping and Jim Crow segregation replaced the South's plantation economy. European immigrants provided the initial supply of industrial labor, but when WWI limited immigration, the first wave of the Great Migration provided a new source. Immigrants and formerly enslaved peoples—then known as "Negroes"—who moved to the budding industrial hubs found criminally low-wages, dangerous working and living conditions, and socio-political exclusion. When they arrived tensions soared, and "patterns of ethno-racial

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[1] This statement is intended to fulfill the "Geographical/Cultural Area" requirement, so I review the scholarship within urban anthropology *and* the variety of other disciplinary literatures that theorize TAC.

discrimination and segregation that had hitherto been inconsistent and informal hardened" (p.102). While these segregated spaces offered some protections, "the ghetto" provided a technology for extracting workers' labor without having to integrate. According to Harrison (1988), the foundations of urban anthropology can be traced back to Dubois's (1899) pioneering study of these "black cit[ies] within the white" and the competing notions of "American-ness" and "Blackness."

At the end of the 19th century, the Chicago School of Sociology (CSS) coalesced to study "the urban problem" (Deegan 2014). While it initially focused on immigrants (e.g. Thomas and Znaniecki 1918; Thomas, Park, and Miller 1921), this was later subsumed under a fixation with "the city" and its seeming disorder. Park, Burgess, and McKenzie's *The City* (1925) marked the formal emergence of the analytical category—The American City—and introduced the ecological model, which described the city as a composite of various "zones" or "natural areas" differentiated by social group. They positioned TAC as a harbinger of disorder, wherein the imagined social ties of small communities disintegrated. While Powdermaker's (1939) landmark study of interracial communities in the "Deep South" was a notable exception, these early works helped conflate TAC with poverty and the ethno-racial Other (increasingly blackness).

1929-1970: From town/country to urban/suburban
After the Great Depression, Keynesianism wrought tremendous shifts in the country's socio-spatial landscape [see PE]. During WWII, federal war housing projects brought immigrants and so-called "Negroes" to military factories in the industrial centers. After the war, urban renewal policies (e.g., "slum clearance") dispossessed the urban core, shaping the "hyper-ghetto" into a container for "fixed surplus labor" (Wacquant 2004). As the Fordist Revolution made cars more affordable and the government-constructed highways made commuting feasible, the managerial class started moving to the newly-minted suburbs. More than mere "white flight," this suburbanization was a carefully coordinated "spatial fix" for the problem of over-accumulation (Harvey 2003; Self 2003). Fueled by the growing real estate industry, the bureaucratization of the banking industries, and the ecological model, the U.S. government--by way of HOLC and FHA's mortgage insurance programs--subsidized the birth of the American Suburbs (Jackson 1985, Hirsch 1983, Massey and Denton 1993, Rothstein 2017). Since FHA and HOLC directed federally-insured mortgages to the *areas* (not individuals) deemed as "safe" investments, and since the practitioners used both class and race to determine investment risk, these policies inscribed the existing racial hierarchies into the residential and financial landscapes, laminating the white/Other binary on top of the suburban/urban divisions.

Park and Burgess's students conducted "community studies" in American cities (Frazier 1932, Warner 1941, Whyte 1943, Drake & Clayton 1945). The anthropologists of the group--Drake, Clayton, and Warner, all of whom were African American men involved in the civil rights movement--offered the first glimpses of an urban anthropology. Drake and Cayton (1945) penned an intimate portrait of "Negro life in a northern city" and Warner conducted a five-year study of ethnic relations and social status in a New England community (1945, 1959). In

collaboration with Davis, Bradford-Gardner, and Gardner, Warner (1941) used the concept of caste to analyze race and class relations in urban and rural areas in the South.

Cox (1948) critiqued this "caste school of race relations" for casting "racial hierarchy as if it were a timeless, natural form" (Reed 2001). An early proponent of world-systems theory (1959, 1962), Cox examined race as a dynamic and historically specific tool of capital relations. As Thomas (2014) notes, Cox's critique arguably overlooked the nuance of Powdermaker, Davis, and others' ethnographies. While his attention to the relationship between race and labor was nonetheless pivotal, racial liberalism was far more intoxicating to the social science community and the broader public.

As the Civil Rights movement upset the social order, deindustrialization stripped the urban core of industrial jobs and The Fair Housing Act provided a potential path out of "the ghetto," for those who could afford it. Those who were left behind—who Wilson (1987) famously called the "Truly Disadvantaged"— were relegated to the "hyper-ghetto" (Wacquant 2001). After decades of drawing minoritized workers to the city, relegating them to "ghettos" of concentrated poverty, and disinvesting the urban core, cities erupted in "race riots" (Hirsch 1983). Many looked to social scientists to explain two increasingly intertwined problems: "the Negro problem" and "the urban problem" (O'Connor 2001). They found answers in cultural diagnoses of poverty and racial inequality, as expressed by Moynihan (1965), Banfield (1970) and others. Discussions of a "self-perpetuating culture of poverty" (Moynihan 1965) provoked heated debate over the causes of urban/black poverty (Bryan 1971, Rainwater & Yancey 1967) and set the stage for urban anthropology's formal inception.

1970-1990: Defending 'the urban poor'

Threatened by growing social upheaval and economic stagnation, the capitalist class embraced the neoliberal project (see PE), including: retrenchment of government assistance for all but the corporate elite; privatization; and financialization. With few jobs and a crumbling safety-net, the sub-proletariat—who's labor was rendered unnecessary by deindustrialization— was exploding. The "penal turn" (Wacquant 2002) and rise of the carceral state provided a new "caste control" (Gottschalk 2010; Gilmore 2007; Piven & Cloward 1971).

Eager to defend the urban, minoritized poor against culture-of-poverty's "blame the victim" ideology (Ryan 1971), anthropologists started studying impoverished parts of the U.S.: namely, the post-industrial city. Renouncing the anthropological fixation with "the exotic," Hannerz (1980) turned his attention to U.S. "ghetto culture" (1969) and Liebow's (1967) ethnography of "Negro street corner men" challenged the social disorganization theory by suggesting "ghetto culture" was not all that different from the "mainstream" (the unnamed white, middle class). Stack (1972) showed the organization of "black communities" in Midwestern cities and McDermott (1974) demonstrated how *allegedly* "deviant" or "disordered" behaviors of inner-city students were creative adaptations to structural inequality. Jones (1970, 1972) argued passionately for a "native anthropology," later (1995) elaborating that he was advocating for the study of oppressed groups with methods and tools that, unlike traditional anthropology, could

"deal with the realities of their oppression" (p. 58). Fiercely committed to "social justice and social equality" (p. 58), Jones depicted what he deemed a "culture of achievement" wherein oppressed people make enormous sacrifices in efforts to further their (and their children's') education(1993).

As McDermott (1997) later explained, the hope was that showing "the powers that be" that poor urban minorities were not inherently "broken" (only oppressed), then "the powers that be would fix the problem" (pp. 112). Historians fleshed out said "structures," locating the roots of racial inequality and urban impoverishment in the mortgage industry (e.g., Jackson 1985, Hirsch 1983), or the post-industrial labor market and "war against welfare" (Katz 1989). Sociologists highlighted "institutional discrimination" in the real estate market (Massey & Denton 1993) and condemned the "war against the poor" (Gans 1995, Piven & Cloward 1977). Wilson (1987) discussed the impacts of deindustrialization for the "underclass." While invaluable for countering individualistic diagnoses of inequality, their accounts often naturalized socio-spatial categories, thereby fostering a "disparitarian discourse" that emphasized inequality across identity groups rather than examining capitalist exploitation and its need for racialism and urbanization (Reed & Chow 2014).

Formally baptized by Hannerz (1980) and Eames & Goode (1977), urban anthropology emerged less as a study *of* urban America than an effort to defend those who lived within it. This focus evolved into an effort to document the impacts of neoliberalization on the urban poor. Mulling's (1987) edited volume, *Cities of the United States: Studies in Urban Anthropology,* for instance, focuses on those who are criminalized for drugs and violence, accused of "welfare cheating," and "failed" by a crumbling community network. Newman (1985) and Nash (1989) examined how deindustrialization impacted urban communities. Merry (1981) and Clark (1989) detailed the economic impacts of unemployment, socio-emotional ramifications of violence, and communal impacts of neighborhood disinvestment. While this shifted the anthropological gaze to the American Homefront, they continued explaining 'the Other' to largely white/middle class audiences, offering ethnographies *in* but not *of* the American city (DeGenova 2007).

1990-2007: Anthropology in The Neoliberal City

Drawing on Marxist geography's contention that capitalist reproduction requires urbanization (Lefebvre 1974, Soja 1980, Castells 1977, Harvey 1989), urbanists highlighted The Neoliberal City's polarized service economy and increasing inter-urban competition (Gottdiener 1994, Brenner & Theodore 2002). They traced the reduction of federal aid to urban areas (Fox Gotham 2001) and the ensuing emergence of entrepreneurial governance (Jessop 1998, Harvey 2005), wherein cities bolster their tax bases by luring businesses with tax cuts (Cowie 1999) and cultivating an aesthetic amenable to the "creative class" (Florida 2002). Their "urban regeneration" or "revitalization" projects gentrified the urban core (Smith 2006), and as companies like Amazon moved warehouses (and temporary/contract jobs) into the suburbs, many workers followed. This was facilitated by the "democratization" of (sub-prime) mortgages

and the construction of low- and mixed-income housing in racially and economically segregated enclaves of the city's margins and inner-ring suburbs (Harvey 2005; Foster and Magdoff 2009).

Some anthropologists discussed how the welfare state was replaced with a celebration of charity and volunteering and public-private partnerships (Hyatt 2001), and increasing penalty (Merry 2001; Pattillo, Western and Weiman 2004). But most U.S. urban ethnographies remained focused on the impacts of—and responses to—neoliberalization. After the 1996 Welfare Reform, anthropologists detailed its impacts on the urban poor (Newman 2001, Davis 2006). Bourgois (2003) theorized seeming deviance amongst East Harlem's residents as efforts to earn "respect" amidst the degrading conditions of urban marginalization and institutional racism. These works exemplify the growth of "activist" (Lyon-Callo and Hyatt 2003) and "engaged" (Bourgeois et al 2006) urban anthropology. Goode (2002) continued to advocate for using urban ethnography to "counter myths about the poor" and "critique the culture of poverty" (Goode & Edwin 1996).

In a seething critique of urban ethnographies-- including Newman (1999) and Anderson's (1999) ethnographies of life in the "inner city"--Wacquant (2002) derided the tendency to "make the urban poor, and to be more exact the black subproletariat of the city, into paragons of morality": "The task of social science… is not to exonerate the character of …dispossessed groups by 'documenting' their everyday world in an effort to attract sympathy for their plight…" (p. 1469). Rather than asking why capitalism needs urbanism or racialism, most ethnographies of the urban U.S. continued to argue against those who blamed the urban poor for their impoverishment (implying an idealism of their own).

Examining how the continual (re)production of socio-spatial categories inflected urban politics, some offered a more dynamic portrayal of the "practices through which purported abstractions...of urban neoliberalism are made and remade" (Maskovsky and Brash 2014, p. 256). Gregory (1998) detailed how activists in a Black NYC neighborhood resist increasing inequalities by remaking race and place. Jackson (2001) examined how the "doing" and "undoing" of "Harlemworld" is entangled in performances of race and class, or how Harlem's gentrification and changing notions of "blackness" shape and are shaped by seemingly abstract processes of globalization (2004). Ramos-Zayas and Yolanda (2003) highlighted how performances of Puerto Rican nationalism organize Chicago's socio-spatial structure. Hartigan (1999) examined how space and class are key to how whiteness is enacted and experienced in Detroit. Low (1997, 2001, 2004) and Caldeira (2000) showed how urban fear fueled a topography of hyper-segregated enclaves "fortified" by gates, walls, and robust systems of exclusion. Dávila (2004) showed how conflicts among residents, developers, and non-profit workers shaped "empowerment zone" policies. Patillo (2007) detailed the divergent class interests involved in the gentrification of one of Chicago's black communities. These accounts challenged depictions of neoliberalization as a homogenous, top-down process that is universally resisted by marginalized actors.

As many called attention to the "Global City" (Sassen 1991, Low 1999) and global interconnections (Hannerz 1996), some worried that emphasizing "actually existing neoliberalisms" (Peck and Theodore 2002), would preclude attention to "the variable ways in

which different 'local neoliberalisms' are embedded within wider networks and structures of neoliberalism" (Peck and Tickell 2012, p. 33). This micro/macro tension has haunted Urban Political Economy (Logan & Mollotch 1983). As Lamphere (1985) noted, studying urban political economy likely requires abandoning traditional anthropological units (people, families, communities). As Slocum and Thomas (2003)—drawing on Caribbeanist scholarship and feminist political economy—suggested, it requires a rejection of the local/global duality itself [see PE].

2007-Present: (Sub)Urban Anthropology?

After the Great Recession, a "crisis of state and local finance" exacerbated inequality (CBPR 2019). Social services like schooling and policing faced further fiscal cuts, leading to state-takeovers of urban *public* school systems and the near abandonment of community policing programs. Rather than strict divisions between urban/suburban and white/Other, the new spatial topography was one of segregated but abutting "enclaves" (Low 2006). Building on Cronon's (1991) groundbreaking account of "The Metropolis" as an interdependent and interconnected totality, scholars in emergent "suburban studies" challenged center-periphery divisions, calling for interrogation of the "polycentric metropolis" (De Vidovich 2019). Building on Low's (2000) contention that space and place were key arenas in which neoliberalization was actualized and resisted, many began examining the "politics of public space" (Low and Smith 2013) and discussing "the commons" as critical to urban social movements (Nonini 2007, Susser 2016). Anthropologists examined interracial and interethnic relations across the "divided cities" of Philadelphia (Goode and Schneider 2010) and Newark (Ramos-Zayas 2012).

Reasserting a publicly "engaged" anthropology (Davis and Craven 2011, Low et al 2010) that could help the most marginal (Mullings 2015), most urban anthropology in the U.S. remained focused on impoverished urban areas. For instance, in Chicago, Walley (2013) and Fennell (2015) examined family life, residential patterns and citizenship formation in the wake of deindustrialization, and Rúa (2017) discussed the impacts of urban revitalization for the city's Puerto Rican elders. In Philadelphia, Fairbanks (2009) explored how regulatory restructuring altered the experience of urban governance. Others emphasized how marginalized communities resisted, highlighting how residents of "Gangland Chicago" continued to strive for their aspirations (Ralph 2014) or how young Black women in a Detroit homeless shelter resisted postindustrial precarity and exclusion (Cox 2015). While this work rejected what Ralph (2014) called "ghetto porn," these ethnographies remained focused on relatively bounded areas, with only cursory mention of urban/suburban or municipal/state relations.

While American cities had not been "burning" with social unrest (Katz 2012), the country was soon enflamed by #BlackLivesMatter protests. At the 2015 AAA, many called for an anthropology of the US. Ethnographers detailed the criminalization of black and brown bodies (Rios 2011, 2017). Others explored the BLM activism a (Maskovsky 2017, Auston 2017), highlighting the role of new media (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, Jackson 2016). After Trump was elected, as white supremacy and other forms of xenophobia soared, anthropologists wondered

what they had "missed" within working class white communities (Walley 2018). Building on the work of the "decolonizing generation"—including Harrison (1991) and Trouillot (1991)—Allen and Jobson (2016) and Rosa and Bonillla (2017) interrogated anthropology's racial liberalism and questioned whether or not anthropology should be left to "burn" (Jobson 2020).

Just like the 1960s, as American cities were engulfed with protests of state violence against black bodies, the scholarly and popular imaginaries pondered the causes of racialized poverty" (Small, Harding, Lamont 2010; Massey et al. 2014)—some even asked, "Was Moynihan right?" (McLanahan and Jenks 2015). Academia—like the public—succumbed to heated brawls over who was malevolent or ignorant enough to "blame the victims." Whether in academic journals or the *NYT*, the moralizing crusades to identify "the racists" and "the classists" did little to clarify the collective mechanisms of producing inequality.

Urban anthropology emerged from the culture of poverty debates, when The American City was synonymous with its poor, minoritized inhabitants. While the socio-spatial hierarchies of America's topography have since shifted, these origins might explain some of the sub-field's enduring tensions, particularly the continued fixation on "the poor" and on blackness. At first glance, one might think these analytical tendencies are shifting. Indeed, as "suburban studies" arose (Nicolaides and Wiese 2006), some anthropologists turned to the suburbs. Mahler (1995) followed Central American immigrants on the margins of Long Island's suburbs. Interrogating suburbanization, Low (2003) detailed the urban fear that fuels gated communities, and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2014, 2015, 2020) highlighted the "aesthetic governmentality" that "protects" suburban America and its "civic virtue" (2010). But to my knowledge, anthropologists have not yet examined suburban/urban *relations*, even with the increasing inter-local competition (Theodore and Peck 2002). Eighty years after Schlesinger (1940) suggested the tensions *between* town and country--or city and suburb--lay at the heart of U.S. political development, traditional ethnographic methods seem to keep anthropology focus *in* a American city, suburb, *or* rural area, thereby obscuring the role of inter-local dynamics in broader processes of American political development [see Statement on Political Economy for a discussion of how anthropologists have transgressed this analytical limitation in their transnational work].

It seems troubling that scholarly interest in the suburbs started increasing just as capital is redirected back into American cities' revitalization zones. Perhaps this shift reflects the attachment to the "savage slot" (Trouillot 1991), or what Lipnitz (1995) calls "the 'White' Problem in American Studies". All along, scholars— particularly those at the margins—have resisted these analytical trends. As American cities are yet again "burning" with racial tensions and heated debates over issues of racism, capitalism, criminality, and citizenship, it seems prudent to learn from and build upon efforts to reshape both The American City and its anthropological analysis.