Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography 13

POVERTY, ETHNICITY, AND THE AMERICAN CITY, 1840–1925
Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography

Series editors:

ALAN R. H. BAKER  J. B. HARLEY  DAVID WARD

Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography encourages exploration of the philosophies, methodologies, and techniques of historical geography and publishes the results of new research within all branches of the subject. It endeavors to secure the marriage of traditional scholarship with innovative approaches to problems and to sources, aiming in this way to provide a focus for the discipline and to contribute toward its development. The series is an international forum for publication in historical geography that also promotes contact with workers in cognate disciplines.

1 Period and place: research methods in historical geography. Edited by A. R. H. BAKER and M. BILLINGE

2 The historical geography of Scotland since 1707; geographical aspects of modernisation. DAVID TURNOCK

3 Historical understanding in geography: an idealist approach. LEONARD GUELKE

4 English industrial cities of the nineteenth century: a social geography. R. J. DENNIS

5 Explorations in historical geography: interpretative essays. Edited by A. R. H. BAKER and DEREK GREGORY

6 The tithe surveys of England and Wales. R. J. P. KAIN and H. C. PRINCE

7 Human territoriality: its theory and history. ROBERT DAVID SACK

8 The West Indies: patterns of development, culture and environmental change since 1492. DAVID WATTS

9 The iconography of landscape: essays in the symbolic representation, design and use of past environments. Edited by DENIS COSGROVE and STEPHEN DANIELS

10 Urban historical geography: recent progress in Britain and Germany. Edited by DIETRICH DENECKE and GARETH SHAW

11 An historical geography of modern Australia: the restive fringe. J. M. POWELL

12 The sugar-cane industry: an historical geography from its origins to 1914. J. H. GALLOWAY
POVERTY, ETHNICITY, AND THE AMERICAN CITY, 1840–1925

Changing conceptions of the slum and the ghetto

DAVID WARD

University of Wisconsin–Madison
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521277112

© Cambridge University Press 1989

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1989
Re-issued in this digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Ward, David, 1938–
2. Ethnic groups—United States—History—19th century.
HV4044.W37 1989
362.5’0973—dc 19

ISBN 0 521 25783 2. ISBN 0 521 27711 6 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-521-25783-1 hardback
Contents

List of illustrations vii
Preface xi

1 The slum, the ghetto, and the inner city 1
The relationships formulated 3
The relationships reformulated 6

Part I: The relationships formulated

2 The slums discovered: 1840–1875 13
The residents defined: moral isolation 20
The environment defined: sanitary indictments 28
The search for civic order 31
A “scientific” moral order 39

3 The slums defined: 1875–1900 46
The residents defined: social polarization 53
The environment defined: indecent homes 61
A contingent environment 79
The submerged residuum 86

4 From slum to ghetto: 1900–1925 94
The residents defined: low and uncertain incomes 97
The environment defined: overcrowding reconsidered 105
Interdependent “complexity” 118
The panacea of decentralization 135
Contents

Part II: The relationships reformulated

5 Ethnicity and assimilation 151
   The residents defined: temporary social disorganization 154
   The environment defined: ecological settings 158
   Assimilation decomposed 170
   Ethnicity redefined 174

6 Ethnicity and industrialization 180
   The residents defined: discrete communities 182
   The environment defined: migration fields 189
   The ethnic division of labor 200
   Ethnicity, employment, and residence 212

Notes 218
Index 259
## Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Five Points, New York, 1827: the center of poverty and squalor</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Boston, Burgess Alley, 1849</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>New York, typical court, 1865</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Five Points, 1852: from brewery to mission</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Noxious land uses, New York, 1866</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Lot congestion, New York, 1866</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Shanty squatters, near Central Park, New York, 1869</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Polarization on the urban fringe, New York, 1889</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Polarization: sunshine and shadow in New York, 1868</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Polarization: sidewalk contrasts, New York, 1876</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Garbage box, First Ward, Chicago, ca. 1900</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Immigrant slums, near West Side, Chicago, ca. 1900</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Model tenements, Improved Dwellings Association, New York, 1879–82</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Regulated congestion: “Old Law” air shaft, ca. 1900</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Increasing lot coverage: New York, 1850–1900</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Shanties in a rear court: New York, ca. 1900</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Block model of maximum lot coverage: the Tenement House Exhibition, New York, 1900</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>Block model of actual lot coverage: the Tenement House Exhibition, New York, 1900</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Illustrations

3.11 Poverty map: the Tenement House Exhibition, New York, 1900  
3.12 An old image in a new medium: typical court, New York, 1900  
3.13 Mulberry Bend, before demolition  
3.14 Mulberry Bend Park, after demolition  
3.15 Sweatshop interior, New York, ca. 1900  
3.16 Cross-section of a sweatshop, Baltimore, ca. 1900  
4.1 Old and new tenements, New York, ca. 1900  
4.2 Alley property, Washington, D.C., 1912  
4.3 Alley property, Chicago, 1900  
4.4 Tenements and tuberculosis: the “lung block,” New York  
4.5 The social world of the tenement, Boston, ca. 1909  
4.6 Interdependent complexity: housing conditions in Philadelphia, 1915  
4.7 The changing focus of social work, 1880–1920  
4.8 The social space of charity work  
4.9 Pittsburgh Survey, cartographic correlations  
4.10 Complexity: organization of the Pittsburgh Survey  
4.11 Interdependency: the 1915 Boston Exposition  
4.12 The Social Unit plan  
4.13 The neighborhood unit formula  
5.1 The zonal social geography of the city  
5.2 The ecology of delinquency, Chicago  
5.3 The internal stratification of urban blacks  
5.4 Social networks among urban blacks  
5.5 Variable land use in Boston’s inner city  
6.1 Residential patterns of Italians, by province, Boston, 1880–1925
6.2 Sources of the “old” and the “new” immigration to the United States 195
6.3 Regional clusters of “old” immigrants in U.S. cities, 1910 197
6.4 Regional clusters of “new” immigrants in U.S. cities, 1910 198
Preface

For almost two centuries periodic preoccupation with the problems of poverty has emphasized the relationships between the poor and their immediate environment. This essentially geographic formulation of poverty is usually expressed as the relationships between the adverse environments of the inner city and the presumed pathological social conditions among its impoverished residents. These conditions are often directly attributed to the adverse environment of the inner city, but whenever they seem to be unresponsive to environmental improvements, they are judged to be part of a deviant subculture or the result of personal deviance. Assumptions about high levels of personal deviance among the poor and within the inner city have, therefore, encouraged a strong emphasis on clinical and therapeutic approaches at the individual or familial level. Nevertheless, the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities among the poor has tended to reinforce arguments about the distinctive social world of the poor. Although poverty is confined neither to ethnic minorities nor to the inner city, several presumed indicators of pathological social behavior have for long been attributed to those minorities that are concentrated in the inner city. The validity of these associations remain questionable, but they are entrenched in much of the current debate about poverty.

This debate has taken the form of evaluations of public policies initiated in the late 1960s and designed to respond to changing interpretations of poverty. In retrospect critics of policies that necessitated an enlarged commitment to public expenditures have argued that these efforts have exacerbated the problems they were intended to resolve. These unintended consequences of reform were attributed to the inability of the poor to respond to policies that failed to consider the implications of the deviant or pathological way of life within the inner city. In particular, a range of social problems were directly linked to the fragility of the nuclear family and the looseness of household arrangements among the poor.
xii Preface

Other critics, with more confidence in the benefits of intervention, have attributed the persistence of poverty to an unnecessarily narrow view of poverty. This narrow perspective resulted in a misguided emphasis on those obstacles to advancement that are associated with the inner-city environment. The environmental and institutional limitations of the inner city are themselves consequences of the uneven development of a capitalist political economy. Under these circumstances the adverse environment of the poor in both the inner city and elsewhere results from the economic insecurity of low wages and unemployment. Under conditions of inadequate social insurance the apparently deviant household arrangements of the poor are viewed as a means of coping with their economic predicament.

Current debates about the relationships among poverty, minorities, and the inner city are rooted in evaluations of policies initiated about two decades ago, but the issues of this debate have a much longer ancestry. In many respects the underlying arguments of this debate were formulated during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when the first wave of mass immigration from Europe exacerbated anxieties about the social order of the rapidly growing seaports of the northeastern United States. Interpretations of poverty became part of a set of assumptions about the immigrant slums and the presumed deviance of their residents. At different times these assumptions implied varying degrees of environmental or cultural determinism, as well as complex reciprocal interactions between environment and culture. Despite this range of interpretations of poverty, most policies recognized that inadequate sanitation, overcrowded housing, and the impoverished public environment of the inner city exacerbated the problem of poverty, but efforts to diminish these visible consequences of industrialization were more effective than those that confronted economic insecurity more directly. Primarily because improvements in urban living conditions coincided with periods of suburbanization, the precise environmental obstacles of the poor were often linked to their immediate residential circumstances rather than to their access to expanding employment opportunities.

Moreover, the majority of the past residents of the inner city eventually overcame their adverse environment and made their way at different rates into the mainstream of suburban America. Some interpretations of this selective mobility have concluded that the damaging impact of the inner city was contingent upon the cultural resources of different ethnic groups. The definitions of these resources are often imprecise and vary from adaptations of their ancestral culture to the rapid adoption of social arrangements that approximated those of middle-class America. Under these circumstances the inner city could be their temporary rather than their permanent abode. This genetic conception of inner-city poverty was
also part of a broader interpretation of assimilation. Ethnic resources were not only instrumental in coping with the adverse environment of the inner city, but they were often redefined in successive generations so that ethnic identities continued to influence the patterns of life in suburban America.

These conclusions are, however, based upon retrospective evaluations of groups over several generations; many of those groups were, in fact, judged to be deviant at the time of their initial settlement in the inner city. Moreover, discrimination complicated the degree to which ethnic resources made advancement possible. Not only have judgments about the same group changed over the course of several generations, but the degree to which the inner-city environment provided opportunities for advancement has fluctuated during the course of industrialization. These shifts in the degree to which various kinds of employment were concentrated in the central business district and in the complexity and fluidity of the internal stratification of the urban labor force radically altered the inner-city environment confronted by successive migrant groups.

The current debate about the problems of poverty retains many elements of these earlier dialogues. Some observers stress the cultural differences between the current and prior residents of the inner city while others emphasize changes in the location and kind of employment within and between cities. In the period of mass immigration, there was also a tendency to stress the moral and cultural limitations of the most recent immigrant arrivals during periods when shifts in the political economy exercised profound changes in the location and kinds of urban employment. Although there were clearly variations in the ways in which different ethnic groups coped with the inner city, for some groups and blacks in particular, discrimination in the labor market and shifts in the organization of the labor market presented obstacles that were beyond the capacities of the most flexible of ethnic resources. This book examines the changing conceptions of these relationships between migrants and the inner city from an explicitly geographic perspective during the period of mass immigration to the United States from about 1840 until the introduction of immigration restriction in 1923–4.

The evidence about these relationships is disproportionately drawn from the testimonies of both hostile and sympathetic outsiders. Moreover, in the formulation of public policies, these outsiders often created objects of reform that were closer to their interpretations of poverty than to the conditions of life among the poor. From time to time, outsiders did provide a rich ethnographic record of the poor and during these periods the interpretations of sensitive outsiders coincided more closely with the fragmentary records that the poor left about themselves. The bulk of these fragmentary records have, however, only become part of the inter-
xiv  Preface

Interpretation of poverty retrospectively and for these reasons, this book comprises firstly an examination of the changes in the formulation of the relationships between the migrant poor and the inner-city environment from 1840 to 1925 and secondly, a re-examination of those relationships on the basis of retrospective reinterpretations of ethnicity and poverty proposed during the past half century.

My debts are numerous and here I acknowledge only those in my immediate environment. The book was completed during my term as an Associate Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I thank Dean Robert M. Bock for providing the kind of flexibility in my administrative obligations that made it possible for me to keep my research in motion. The Department of Geography is a stimulating milieu for research and at various times, Martin Cadwallader, Robert Ostergren, Robert Sack, Yi Fu Tuan, as well as Paul Boyer of the Department of History, provided me with critical reactions to my efforts. I would also like to thank the Department of Geography at University College London for their support of a Visiting Professorship during which the final revisions were made.
POVERTY, ETHNICITY, AND THE AMERICAN CITY, 1840–1925