Urban Outcasts
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A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality

Loïc Wacquant
To my mother,

for teaching me the sense of social justice
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Ghetto, Banlieue, Favela, et caetera
Tools For Rethinking Urban Marginality

Ghetto in the United States, banlieue in France, quartieri periferici (or degradati) in Italy, problemområde in Sweden, favela in Brazil and villa miseria in Argentina: the societies of North America, Western Europe and South America all have at their disposal in their topographic lexicon a special term for designating those stigmatized neighbour- hoods situated at the very bottom of the hierarchical system of places that compose the metropolis. It is in these districts draped in a sulphurous aura, where social problems gather and fester, that the urban outcasts of the turn of the century reside, which earns them the disproportionate and disproportionately negative attention of the media, politicians and state managers. They are known, to outsiders and insiders alike, as the ‘lawless zones’, the ‘problem estates’, the ‘no-go areas’ or the ‘wild districts’ of the city, territories of deprivation and dereliction to be feared, fled from and shunned because they are – or such is their reputation, but in these matters perception contributes powerfully to fabricating reality – hotbeds of violence, vice and social dissolution. Owing to the halo of danger and dread that enshrouds them and to the scorn that afflicts their inhabitants, a variegated mix of dispossessed households, dishonoured minorities and disenfran- chised immigrants, they are typically depicted from above and from afar in sombre and monochrome tones. And social life in them thus appears to be everywhere the same: barren, chaotic and brutish.

Breaking with the exoticizing cast of media discourse as well as with the semi-scholarly approximations of conventional research, this book takes the reader inside these territories of relegation in two advanced countries – namely, the black ghetto of the United States and the working-class banlieue of France – to show that such is not the case: urban marginality is not everywhere woven of the same cloth, and,