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Book Review

A SOCIOLOGY OF “DIFFICULT NEIGHBOURHOODS”

**CYPRIEN AVENEL,
SOCIOLOGIE DES “QUARTIERS SENSIBLES”,
2010, ARMAND COLIN EDITEUR, PARIS.**

Reviewed by: Phd. Luminita MIRON¹

The third edition of “A Sociology of ‘difficult neighborhoods’” (2010), written by Cyprien Avenel and edited by Armand Colin, primarily addresses the problem of the suburbs, such as stigma, and brings together a panorama of knowledge and sociological works on “sensitive areas”, which have in the last thirty years become a real “social problem”.

These sensitive neighborhoods tend to be defined as “ghettos” and represent, in French society, the social and political problem *par excellence*. Exclusion, urban violence and youth delinquency, insecurity, community introversion, families giving up: such topics fill the airwaves. There is a broad spread of varying testimonies on these themes; controversy abounds, and government authorities are trying to “target” their action.

Cyprien Avenel is a sociologist and professor at the IEP (Political Studies Institute) of Paris. He wrote his thesis at the Victor Segalen Bordeaux 2 University, where he was a research assistant, temporary secretary of education and research and then responsible for a Ministry of Research contract. He teaches the Masters course in Territorial and Urban Strategies at the Political Studies Institute of Paris and at the College of Social Security. He is involved in various debates aimed at private/public institutions on issues such as urban policy, exclusion, urban violence, territorial administration, as well as social and family policy.

His research topics focus on the residents of so-called “sensitive” French neighborhoods, in comparison to the situation of the American underclass. He works on topics such as urban policy, social work and urban renewal. His present

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research focuses on situations of hardship and on the Jobless Minimum Wage (RMI). In particular, he is in charge of the national assessment of decentralization project of the Jobless Minimum Wage (RMI) for the Notarial Tax Assistance Center (CNAF).

This book shows that it is important to consider the question of the suburbs not only as an accumulation of social and economic problems, “but also as a particular way of looking at this reality”. To start with, the author mentions that the purpose of his book is “to establish the state of knowledge and of the sociological work accumulated on the neighborhoods/districts, to update the nature of the problem undertaken, the debates, the main results, but also their limits”. (p. 5)

His sociological approach is organized around four major themes. The first themes highlight the mechanisms of the social and political construction of the “problem of the suburbs”. To define these areas, the author refers to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who emphasizes first of all that the so-called “difficult places” are hard to describe and apprehend; secondly, he ponders the mechanisms of segregations and of stigma presented in such “neighborhoods” (Grafmeyer & Authier, 2011). In his final paragraph, the author analyzes the sociological debate around the concept of “ghetto”, thus asking the questions: are these neighborhoods “ghettos”? The debate on this matter is very ambivalent, by contrasting two perspectives, that of Didier Lapeyronnie and that of Louis Wirth (Wacquant, 2006; Lapeyronnie, 2008).

The second part addresses the issue of lifestyle and sociability in the neighborhoods, founded in many studies, and seeks to identify what types of social relations and cultural identities are to workplace. In the same way, the author speaks of an urban culture, represented by hip hop that becomes, in the collective imagination, the epitome of suburban culture. The third part aims to put into perspective the work on urban violence and delinquency, particularly in terms of the meanings of youth, and of the people directly involved. Finally, the last part analyzes institutional responses and the policies geared towards addressing the “problems of the suburbs”, to the extent that the public authorities give a high level of support to the “neighborhoods”.

As the author notes in his introduction: “Through the issue of the “neighborhoods”, the terms of sociological debate show the convergence of a set of work around a spatial approach of social problems and of lifestyles”. With this theme of “sensitive areas”, both the fast cumulative aspect of inequality, and the limits of the principle of equality and of diversity of population are highlighted, leading “to new analyses of the social aspect of their segregation and violence”.

We are here, “at the crossroads of multiple themes: segregation, immigration, racism, “urban violence”, “the working classes”, “urban cultures”, social policy, the issue of the city, the urban policy, etc.” (p. 7). The usefulness of such a book cannot be overstated, handled on a “sensitive” field and publicized, for which however the summaries are missing. The challenges the overly hasty definition put about by the media, that the suburbs are merely only be the “negative” of the city, focusing on “deviations from a standard of integration and the restoration of the social bond where loss occurs... works on the neighborhoods invite to

guard against this vision. Sociological analysis sheds new light on the populations of the poorer suburbs, rather than the standard distancing and marginalizing. It shows that the issue cannot simply be boiled down to a “social problem”, and more specifically, to a certain image of a problem, which is that of exclusion”.

Although Avenel’s book is a sociological approach of some magnitude and manages to highlight the main problems of the “neighborhoods”, he does get lost in excess depth: for example, it is very difficult to discuss in a page or two such complex and frequently analyzed the themes such as “the ethnicization of social relations” (pp. 54-55), the “development of antisocial behaviors” (pp. 74-75) or the “rise of academic frustration.” (p. 89). As far as vocabulary and terminology are concerned, the author does not explore deeper meanings, for example, why the term “sensitive area” is required over other terms, such as “suburbs”?

In conclusion, the book represents a synthesis of the work over the past 20 years on these famous neighborhoods. The advantage of the sociological approach is that it gives these districts a human depth which the urban approach sometimes loses.

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