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## Manufacturing Marginality among Women and Latinos in Neoliberal America

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### Abstract

Intersectionality is the study of how categorical distinctions made on the basis of race, class, and gender interact to generate inequality, and this concept has become a primary lens by which scholars have come to model social stratification in the United States. In addition to the historically powerful interaction between race and class, gender interactions have become increasingly powerful in exacerbating class inequalities while the growing exclusion of foreigners on the basis of legal status has progressively marginalized Latinos in U.S. society. As a result, poor whites and immigrant-origin Latinos have increasingly joined African Americans at the bottom of American society to form a new, expanded underclass.

### Keywords

Intersectionality; race; class; gender; immigrants; legal status

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In his essay on urban marginality, Loic Wacquant begins by noting a lack of communication between social scientists of different persuasions and the general absence of a holistic appreciation for interactions between race, class, and the state. I must confess, however, that I don't see such parochialism among my social scientific peers. Indeed, it seems to me that in the past two decades the nexus between race, class, and state has become the focus of a growing number of works and that the center of gravity among scholars has shifted to the analysis of what U.S. scholars call "intersectionality—the interaction not only between race and class but also between race, class, and a variety of other categorical distinctions around which the structures of inequality cohere, very often with state support (see Massey 2007).

The disproportionate effects on poor minorities of America's uniquely harsh and punitive criminal justice system have received considerable attention, for example (Western 2006; Alexander 2010), as have the myriad failures of U.S. public education (Kozol 1991, 2012) and the heavy hand of a coercive state in the lives of the poor (Piven and Cloward 1971; Brady 2009). The justification for repressive, punitive institutional arrangements in neoliberal ideology has also been subject to intense scrutiny and withering criticism (Harvey 2005; Hackworth 2006). The plutocratic structure and operation of the contemporary state has been thoroughly vetted in recent academic and popular works (Bartels 2010; Gilens 2012); and the role of segregation by race, ethnicity, and class in consolidating and

perpetuating structures of inequality is more appreciated than ever (Wilson 2010; Sampson 2012; Sharkey 2013).

In his account of intersectionality, Wacquant focuses on the interplay of race and class to the exclusion of gender as a categorical mechanism of stratification, which is a bit odd given that poverty throughout the world tends to be highly feminized. Beyond the question of who is poorer, men or women, structures of economic inequality and social marginalization play out in very different ways for males and females in the post-industrial, neoliberal world. While deindustrialization, failing schools, and the rise of a punitive justice system have served to create a precarious existence for poor minority men (Goffman 2009), the emergence of a two-tiered service economy, cutbacks in state supports for children, and high rates of foreclosure and eviction have increasingly marginalized poor women (Desmond 2012; Desmond and Velez 2013). The interaction of these two gendered vectors of inequality has, in turn, devastated the institution of the family not simply for poor minorities, but increasingly among working and middle classes whites as well, further contributing to the social and economic impoverishment of men and women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (see McLanahan 2004; Furstenberg 2009).

Moreover, with respect to race, Wacquant's essay focuses mainly on the long-standing subjugation of African Americans in the United States; but a major turn in the past three decades has been the profound racialization of Latinos, built largely around the trope of illegality (Massey 2014). The population of unauthorized immigrants currently stands at more than 11 million persons, overwhelmingly Latino and predominantly Mexican (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2013). Although undocumented migrants constitute only about 3.5% of the U.S. population, they represent 60% of Mexican immigrants and two-thirds of those from Central America (Massey and Pren 2012a). Among all U.S. residents of Mexican origin today, more than a fifth are unauthorized. Not since the days of slavery have so many residents of the United States lacked social, economic, or civic rights (Massey 2013).

Since the mid-1980s the U.S. immigration control system has joined the penal system to become a central race-making institution in the United States (Douglas and Saenz 2013). U.S. immigration and border policies together are responsible for the rapid growth in the size of the undocumented population and its geographic distribution throughout the United States and for the systematic marginalization not just of those without documents, but of all Latinos regardless of legal status or birthplace (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Massey and Sánchez 2010).

Prior to 1965 there were no numerical limits on immigration from Latin America to the United States and Mexico, in particular, enjoyed access to an expansive guest worker program. In the late 1950s, around 500,000 Mexicans were entering the country each year—450,000 using temporary work visas and 50,000 on permanent resident visas. In 1965, however, the U.S. Congress abandoned this worker program and imposed the first-ever numerical limits on immigration from the Western Hemisphere, which were progressively ratcheted downward until by 1976 Mexican immigration was capped at 20,000 persons per year. These actions were taken without considering what would happen to the well-

established and largely circular flow of Mexicans into the United States once opportunities for legal entry were curtailed (Massey and Pren 2012a).

Since demand for Mexican workers persisted and migrants by 1965 could draw on well-developed networks connecting them to jobs and housing in the United States, the flows quickly reestablished themselves under undocumented auspices. The rise of “illegal” migration, however, created new opportunities for the mobilization of resources and constituencies by bureaucrats and politicians (Massey and Pren 2012a). Although the number of Mexicans entering the United States had not really increased, because they were illegal they were easily labeled as “lawbreakers” and “criminals” and framed as a grave threat to the nation (Chavez 2001). Over time, a Latino threat narrative became increasingly prominent in public discourse and the media and unauthorized migration came to be seen as an “alien invasion,” initially using Cold War rhetoric that conflated migrants with communist guerillas and later drawing upon metaphors from the “War on Terror” (Santa Ana 2002; Chavez 2008)

The rising prominence of the Latino Threat Narrative provided political support for ever more restrictive immigration and border policies, which generated more apprehensions along the Mexico-U.S. border. Rising apprehensions were then employed as evidence to confirm the ongoing “invasion,” thereby justifying still more resources and personnel for border enforcement, which generated more apprehensions and still more enforcement resources in a self-feeding cycle that resulted in the unprecedented militarization of the border (Andreas 2009; Massey and Pren 2012a). The expanded enforcement efforts were initially targeted to the busiest border sector in San Diego, which deflected flows away from California and into the harsh desert of the Sonora-Arizona border, driving up the costs and risks of border crossing. In response to the rising costs and risks, migrants quite reasonably minimized border crossing—not by staying in Mexico but by remaining in the United States once they had achieved entry (Massey 2014b). After being diverted away from traditional destinations in California, the migrants continued on to a host of new destinations throughout the United States (Massey 2008).

As a result of the foregoing chain reaction of events, Mexican immigration shifted during the 1990s from being a circular flow of male workers going to three states increasingly to become a settled population of families living in 50 states as the population rose from 2 million to 12 million persons (Massey and Pren 2012a). Legislation passed in 1996 stripped all non-citizens of rights to due process under the law and declared any person who had ever committed a crime to be instantly deportable, applying this principle retroactively. From levels in the tens of thousands in the late 1980s the number of deportations rose to current annual totals of around 400,000. The size of the immigration detention system increased fivefold over the 1990s and 2000s and became the most rapidly growing portion of the U.S. criminal justice complex (Douglas and Saenz 2013).

The Great Recession of 2008 brought about an end to the growth of the undocumented population but not much in the way of return migration among those already present. Although the number of unauthorized migrants fell from 12 to 11 million between 2008 and 2009, since then it has stabilized and no further declines have occurred. With the steady

demonization of undocumented migrants as invaders, lawbreakers, criminals, and terrorists, the perception of Latinos in general and Mexicans in particular has shifted to view them as a despised outgroup lacking humanity in American social cognition (Lee and Fiske 2006). With Latino poverty rates up, wages down, and deportations at record levels Latinos have increasingly joined African Americans in the underclass at the bottom of the U.S. socioeconomic hierarchy (Massey 2007).

With 11 million persons lacking legal status and millions more connected to undocumented migrants by blood, friendship, or marriage, Latinos have in many ways become the most vulnerable and exploitable population in the United States today and the fastest growing component of the new urban underclass (Massey and Pren 2012b). To Wacquant's tale of marginality in the neoliberal city, I would therefore add the increasingly precarious position of women and Latinos in the United States, the former owing to progressive cutbacks in social spending on welfare, housing, and health and the latter due to the creation of a large undocumented population, the curtailment of non-citizens' civic and social rights, and the application of increasingly repressive policies towards immigrants of all kinds. Although the marginalization of women and immigrants may not be as far advanced or well institutionalized in other developed nations, the direction of the trends is similar.

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