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Misery of Position and the Crisis of Possibility. New Forms of Poverty in Contemporary Democracies

ANNA MARIA PAOLA TOTI

Sapienza University of Rome, Italy
E-mail: ampaola.toti@uniroma1.it

Abstract. Marginality emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced solely to deprivations linked to the redistributive sphere, but is instead intertwined with a dense network of social issues, including processes of social disintegration, vulnerability, relational exclusion, and the erosion of solidarity. It is within this context that the concept of new urban poverty takes shape. The weakening of collective protection dispositifs, the restructuring of labour markets, and the growing individualization of risk have contributed to the formation of an intermediate social space, situated between inclusion and exclusion, in which heterogeneous forms of economic, social, and relational fragility accumulate. These configurations constitute the structural outcome of transformations induced by neoliberal capitalism. This contribution is situated within an operational theoretical framework that integrates the analysis of positional and relational poverty with the study of institutional processes involved in the production of marginality. Its aim is to analyze the expansion and complexity of new forms of poverty through a critical and conceptual re-reading of selected categories and models useful for interpreting these dynamics.

Keywords: democratic crisis, right to the city, urban marginality, positional poverty, grey zones of poverty.

Les espérances tendent universellement à s'accorder à peu près aux chances objectives (Bourdieu 1997: 253)

1. COORDINATES, ARTICULATIONS, AND MICRO- TEXTURES. A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The economic, geopolitical, migratory, pandemic, cultural, and social transformations that traverse contemporary democracies have profoundly redefined the modalities of social participation and inclusion, producing unprecedented configurations of precarity and insecurity. The weakening of collective protection mechanisms, the restructuring of labour markets, and the growing individualization of risk have contributed to the formation of an

intermediate social space, positioned between inclusion and exclusion, in which heterogeneous forms of economic, social, and relational fragility accumulate. This context is thus marked by increasing social disparities and by the continuous transformation of social conditions.

The marginality¹ takes shape as an intrinsically multidimensional phenomenon, which cannot be reduced exclusively to deprivations linked to the redistributive sphere, but must be understood as the outcome of the interaction between processes of social disintegration, the weakening of social relations (Mela 1993), and the erosion of solidarity. It is within this scenario that the concept of urban poverty, or new urban poverty (Pieretti 1992; Silver 1993), takes form, understood not as a mere quantitative extension of traditional, pre-industrial poverty, but as a qualitative transformation of its configurations in the post-industrial context. The so-called grey poverties, or grey zones of diffuse hardship (Dovis and Saraceno 2011; Iori and Rampazi 2008), refer to situations of latent, intermittent, or apparently reversible impoverishment, affecting individuals and social groups previously located in positions of relative security. The phenomenon of new poverty displays elements of novelty that can be traced, at least in part, to the factors responsible for the emergence and diffusion of so-called social vulnerability, understood as an existential condition in which individuals' autonomy and capacity for self-determination are constantly exposed to risk, due to unstable

integration into the main systems of social inclusion and resource allocation (Ranci 2002).

Poverty thus tends to lose its character as a traumatic event and to assume the form of a possibility structurally inscribed within the ordinary transitions of life courses – occupational, familial, and housing-related – thereby revealing the systemic nature of inequalities and the growing instability of living conditions in advanced societies. During the Covid-19 pandemic, these conditions became particularly evident. The sudden suspension of economic activities, the restriction of mobility, and the disruption of informal support networks caused fragile and temporary equilibria to collapse – equilibria that, under ordinary circumstances, had allowed individuals located in the grey zones to maintain an apparent stability, making previously invisible latent vulnerabilities visible. The pandemic emergency brought to light once again the complexity of the human world, the interdependence among economic, health, and social dimensions, and the profound fractures within the process of secularization of our seemingly unstoppable model of civilization: «the emergency is experienced in a dramatic way also because it is global. [...]. The virus is a threat to people's lives, but also to the stability of institutions, the soundness of finance, interpersonal relations, democracy, the maintenance of jobs, international links and many other things» (Esposito 2020: 5).

This event represents the emblem of a globalized society which, in its global spread, forcefully brings inequalities back to the fore: the virus can affect anyone, but it has a preferential and disproportionate impact on the poor and on the most vulnerable. The health crisis further intensified the spatial and housing-related dimension of vulnerability, transforming the domestic space into a total site of work, care, and isolation, while at the same time highlighting how intermittent and structurally unstable poverty was not an exceptional phenomenon, but rather a systemic condition that the pandemic suddenly rendered visible, laying bare the fragility of social protection mechanisms and the structurally uncertain character of life transitions in advanced urban societies.

In large metropolises, conditions of social hardship generate spaces of precarity, invisibility, ghettoization, fragmentation, and inequality. For this very reason, the city – as a research laboratory – once again becomes a “lens” through which to observe ongoing metamorphoses and their corresponding spatial reconfigurations.

The various crises or shocks that may occur over the life course – such as job loss, the onset of illness, marital separation, stigma associated with certain personal experiences, or conditions of housing precarity – can produce fractures in individual trajectories, giving rise to

¹ The concept of marginality constitutes one of the most effective analytical tools for understanding the processes of modernization in societies characterized by late and uneven development. Within Gino Germani's sociological reflection, the definition of marginality as “exclusion from rights” still retains its full heuristic value today. The originality of Germani's contribution lies in his ability to overcome individualistic or culturalist interpretations of social exclusion by situating marginality within a historical and structural perspective. Moreover, already in the 1950s, he was able to grasp the radical transformations of society and of the market. Marginality is not a residual condition of the past destined to disappear, but rather an intrinsic product of the dynamics of social transformation. Marginal groups are deprived not only of economic resources, but also of recognized cultural and social capital, and they encounter difficulties in accessing legitimate languages, institutional codes, and the competencies required by modern society. They participate intermittently in the labour market, often in informal or precarious forms, and remain weakly integrated into systems of welfare, education, and political representation. Marginality thus takes shape as a structural condition of partial integration, rather than as a deviation or a social pathology. From this perspective, the phenomenon can be interpreted as a structurally disadvantaged position within social space, in which material exclusion intertwines with processes of stigmatization and symbolic delegitimation. This reading makes it possible to bring the Germanian paradigm closer to Bourdieusian analyses of the reproduction of inequalities, while maintaining a strong focus on the historical and macrosocial dimension of exclusionary processes: «sono gli “anelli” più deboli dei Paesi industrializzati quelli che si trovano in maggior pericolo [...], e che possono mettere a dura prova non solo la propria democrazia ma anche l'equilibrio mondiale» (1985: 26).

forms of marginalization, loneliness, social isolation, and fragility. Understanding these processes requires a sociological approach that takes into account both economic-political structures and the cultural and spatial dimensions of exclusion.

Pierre Bourdieu analyzes these dynamics within *La misère du monde* (1993), conducted together with his collaborators² and focused on the analysis of the forms of so-called small positional misery. The work conveys the image of a misery of position that is essentially relational and comparative, a condition undergoing rapid expansion that poses a radical challenge to contemporary democracies and brings into particularly sharp focus the very difficulty of existing – or, more precisely, of resisting – within current social structures.

La misère du monde designates the set of social effects arising from the tension between the universalistic promises of liberal democracies – in terms of equality, mobility, and recognition – and the concrete mechanisms through which social institutions operate, mechanisms that tend to re-produce and legitimize persistent inequalities. Within the Bourdieusian theoretical framework, the production of social suffering is inseparable from the processes through which power structures are reproduced and from the unequal distribution of capital. The central institutions of modern society, particularly the educational system and the labour market, function as privileged sites for the exercise of symbolic violence, contributing to the transformation of structural inequalities into differences perceived as natural or meritocratic. *La misère du monde* cannot be interpreted as a residual or pathological condition, but rather as an ordinary effect of a social order that systematically produces exclusion and frustration while maintaining a rhetoric of formal inclusion. The suffering that results from this tends to be internalized by individuals, who incorporate schemes of perception and evaluation that lead them to interpret their social position as the outcome of individual failure.

A distinctive element of the approach developed within the work is its attention to the lived dimension of suffering, understood as an everyday and often invisible experience. Through the use of qualitative methods, such as interviews, Bourdieu and his collaborators show how symbolic violence manifests itself in the micro-processes of social interaction, producing feelings of inadequacy, disorientation, and loss of meaning. Misery thus assumes a properly existential dimension, one that affects the very possibility of constructing a coherent *narratum* of one's biographical trajectory. From this per-

spective, the difficulty of existing within contemporary social structures can be read as the outcome of a growing misalignment between socially produced expectations and the resources actually available to individuals.

Within the context of the socio-economic transformations of recent decades, these dynamics appear further intensified. Processes of labour precarization, career flexibilization, and the individualization of social risks have contributed to redefining the conditions of social integration, rendering them increasingly unstable and reversible. Within this framework, social existence can no longer be understood as a relatively guaranteed condition, but rather as a position constantly exposed to processes of devaluation. It is in this sense that the category of resistance acquires analytical relevance: it refers to practices, often fragmented and non-institutionalized, through which individuals seek to maintain a minimal form of identity continuity and social recognition. However, such practices remain largely individualized and depoliticized, thereby limiting their capacity to translate into forms of collective action. *La misère du monde* thus raises an eminently political question by interrogating the conditions of possibility of democracy in contemporary societies. The systematic production of social suffering and subjective powerlessness calls into question the very idea of active citizenship and of effective participation in social and political life. The growing distance between institutions and subjects, together with the weakening of mechanisms of representation and mediation, contributes to a crisis of legitimacy affecting advanced democratic orders. In this sense, misery does not constitute merely a social problem to be managed, but rather a critical indicator of the internal contradictions of contemporary democratic regimes. In light of these considerations, *la misère du monde* can be taken as a fundamental analytical category for a critical sociology of the present. It makes it possible to articulate the analysis of objective structures with that of processes of subjectivation, restoring sociological intelligibility to forms of suffering that tend to be depoliticized and privatized.

In *Méditations pascaliennes* (1997), Bourdieu undertakes – from a strictly theoretical standpoint – an in-depth analysis of subjective hopes and expectations and of objectively available opportunities: «on est toujours surpris de voir à quel point les volontés s'ajustent aux possibilités, les désirs au pouvoir de les satisfaire, et de découvrir que, à l'encontre de toutes les idées reçues, la pleonexia, le désir d'avoir toujours plus [...] est l'exception» (253-254). The author emphasizes that the gap between hopes and opportunities becomes increasingly frequent, insofar as social agents possess powers – defined by the volume and structure of their capital –

² Among his collaborators were: Abdelmalek Sayad, Rosine Christin, Michel Pialoux, Patrick Champagne, Gabrielle Balazs, Philippe Bourgois, Loïc Wacquant.

that are profoundly unequal. Their hopes and aspirations themselves are likewise unevenly distributed. Indeed, far from conceiving desire as an autonomous and unlimited force, Bourdieu shows that individuals' aspirations tend to be structurally adjusted to the real possibilities of their realization. It is therefore not surprising that the scholar observes with a certain degree of surprise how frequently wills are shaped by conditions of possibility and desires by the effective power to satisfy them. From this perspective, *pleonexia* – namely, the impulse to always want more, often regarded as a universal trait of human action – appears not as the rule, but rather as an exception to the ordinary functioning of social practices.

Such an adjustment between hopes and opportunities is not, however, the result of a conscious choice or a rational calculation, but rather the outcome of a process through which social structures are incorporated. When the gap between what one hopes for and what is objectively accessible tends to widen, it is not distributed uniformly; on the contrary, it becomes all the more frequent and pronounced the more unequal the powers of social agents are. These powers, determined by the volume and composition of the capital possessed – economic, cultural, social, and symbolic – define not only the horizon of concrete possibilities, but also the field of what is thinkable and desirable.

Consequently, hopes and aspirations cannot be regarded as purely subjective or individual dimensions: they are themselves socially structured and unevenly distributed. Agents tend to desire what it is “reasonable” for them to desire, that is, what appears compatible with their position within the social field. In this sense, the experience of time – understood as the relationship between present and future, between expectations and possibilities – becomes a powerful indicator of social inequalities, revealing that the future is not equally open to all, either at the objective level or at that of subjective dispositions.

Bourdieu's theoretical legacy thus proves particularly fruitful for interrogating the social conditions of existence and resistance, and for reopening a space for critical reflection on the ways in which democratic societies produce, govern, and legitimize inequalities.

2. URBAN HETEROTOPIAS, DISAFFILIATION, AND SOCIAL CONTROL

To analyze the city means to interrogate the ways in which power is inscribed in space, distributing the taxonomies of visibility/invisibility, proximity/distance, and legitimacy/stigmatization. Within the framework of the

overcoming of the modernist paradigm of urban planning, the critique of its presumed neutrality assumes particular relevance when read in relation to processes of marginality production. Planning cannot be understood as an apolitical practice, insofar as it actively contributes to defining which subjects, spaces, and needs are recognized as legitimate within the urban order and which, instead, are relegated to the margins (Sandercock 1998). From a Foucauldian perspective, planning can be interpreted as a power/knowledge dispositif (Foucault 1980) operating through specific discursive regimes. Such discourses – grounded in technical, statistical, and normative categories – do not merely describe the city, but rather produce a particular intelligibility of urban space, establishing boundaries between normality and deviance, inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, marginality is not a pre-existing condition that planning simply manages, but rather an effect of governmental practices that select, classify, and hierarchize populations and territories.

Modernist planning, as a technology of government that can be inscribed within the rationality of governmentality³ (Foucault 2004), informal neighborhoods, precarious populations, or non-conforming spatial practices are thus represented as anomalies with respect to a normative urban model, thereby justifying interventions of normalization, disciplining, or removal. The claim to the neutrality of planning contributes to obscuring the political dimension of such interventions, presenting them instead as necessary and rational solutions.

The overcoming of the modernist paradigm therefore entails, in line with Leonie Sandercock (1997), a reconceptualization of planning as a field of conflict and as a situated discursive practice – a way of knowing and constructing the city beyond dominant mental frameworks. The scholar dismantles the pillars of modernist urban planning and, in their place, advances a new post-modern planning, one that is attentive to community, the environment, and cultural diversity.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this requires attention to the processes through which marginality is produced and governed, as well as recognition of counter-discourses and forms of subaltern knowledge that challenge dominant regimes of truth. Planning thus becomes a potentially transformative space, in which marginality is not merely an object of intervention, but a site of resistance and of the renegotiation of power.

Within this perspective, the theoretical contribution of Michel Foucault (1972) offers a fundamental interpretive key for understanding the dialectical relationship

³ According to Michel Foucault, we live in the era of governmentality. By this concept, he refers to the ensemble of institutions, procedures, analyses, and tactical reflections that make the exercise of power possible.

between space and marginality. Poverty and madness are progressively removed from a moral or charitable reading and reconfigured within spatial dispositifs of confinement that enable their control. The founding decree of the Hôpital général in Paris in 1656 – at the behest of Louis XIV – represents a decisive moment in this transformation: while presenting itself as an assistential institution intended to receive, feed, and house the poor, it simultaneously operates as a mechanism of disciplining, surveillance, and normalization. Within this space, cure is structurally intertwined with control, and assistance becomes an instrument for isolating, rendering visible, and correcting behaviors deemed deviant or dangerous to the urban order. The creation of order consists in continually drawing new boundary lines. The confinement of the poor, beggars, and the mad – often within the same institutions – does not merely produce a physical separation from the rest of the city, but establishes a symbolic boundary between what is considered normal, rational, and productive and what must be governed as excess. Foucault interprets such practices as expressions of a biopolitical rationality, a “disciplining of life,” through which modern power takes charge of the life of the population as a whole, transforming poverty into an object of government rather than simply of assistance (Foucault 1975; 2004).

The Foucauldian contribution makes it possible to read these dynamics as the outcome of specific rationalities of government, in which poverty is not so much eliminated as administered. Contemporary welfare state dispositifs, increasingly oriented toward logics of activation, conditionality, and individual responsabilization, produce vulnerable subjects who are called upon to constantly demonstrate their deservingness. Precarity is normalized as an ordinary condition of existence, while the risk of impoverishment is internalized as the result of individual choices rather than as the product of structural constraints. The grey zone of hardship thus takes shape as a governable space, in which uncertainty is regulated, monitored, and rendered compatible with the existing social order.

The concept of heterotopia elaborated by Michel Foucault (1984) makes it possible to read social space not as a neutral or merely physical dimension, but as a historical and political product, traversed by power relations and practices of exclusion. Heterotopias are “other spaces,” real and locatable, situated at the margins of the dominant order while at once reflecting and overturning its logics. They function as sites of separation, accumulation, or confinement of that which appears deviant, excessive, or difficult to integrate into the ordinary circuits of social life.

In the context of the contemporary city, such spaces emerge with increasing visibility as the outcome of processes of advanced modernization, economic restructuring, and the rationalization of urban policies. The fragmentation of urban space is not only the result of material transformations, but reflects a deeper social disarticulation, producing territorial inequalities and a growing polarization of life experiences. Within this scenario, heterotopias take shape as residual spaces – marginal neighborhoods, degraded areas, spaces of reception or confinement – in which socially vulnerable populations are concentrated.

Such spaces can be read as containers of “wasted lives” (Bauman 2003), that is, of those individuals whom the mechanisms of liquid modernity tend to expel or treat as superfluous.

Within the Baumanian perspective, the production of waste does not concern objects, spaces, or symbolic categories alone, but directly affects the human and political dimension of modernity. The residues generated by processes of classification and ordering increasingly take the form of individuals and social groups that come to be considered as excess in relation to the requirements of the system.

The spaces of marginality – degraded urban peripheries, refugee camps, administrative detention centers, zones of informal confinement – can be interpreted as spatial dispositifs for managing these surplus lives (Douglas 1966). They function as containers of the ambivalence produced by modernity, places in which what cannot be fully included is temporarily segregated and neutralized. In this sense, marginality does not represent an anomaly of the modern system, but rather one of its structural components: the production of wasted lives is the necessary correlate of the construction of order.

It is precisely in relation to these surplus figures that recourse to security policies intensifies. Whereas classical modernity aspired to eliminate ambivalence through forced integration or assimilation, liquid modernity instead seeks to manage it through practices of control, containment, and surveillance. Wasted lives, insofar as they are not fully classifiable and not immediately functional, are progressively reinterpreted through a securitarian lens: not so much as subjects to be included, but as risks to be prevented or threats to be neutralized.

Security no longer operates as a collective guarantee of protection, but as a technique for governing uncertainty. Securitarian policies increasingly focus less on the structural causes of exclusion and more on the management of its visible consequences. Fear of ambivalence – embodied in figures such as the foreigner, the migrant, the urban poor, or the deviant – is translated into nor-

mative, administrative, and spatial dispositifs aimed at making such subjects predictable, controllable, or physically separated from the “legitimate” social body (Bauman 2000).

Wasted lives thus become the privileged targets of a selective and asymmetrical security, one that is not applied uniformly to the population but concentrates on those who embody the insecurity produced by liquid modernity itself. In this sense, security policies do not merely address social insecurity; they actively contribute to reproducing it, reinforcing the distinction between lives worthy of protection and lives deemed disposable. Security therefore asserts itself as a technology of exclusion, functional to the preservation of order and cleanliness, rather than as an instrument of emancipation. Order signifies regularity; it implies a distribution of the probability of events that is not random, but hierarchical and calculable.

The link between wasted lives and security policies ultimately reveals a profound transformation of the modern project. If solid modernity pursued order through the elimination of ambivalence, liquid modernity acknowledges the impossibility of this aim and instead comes to rely on the permanent management of excess. As Bauman argues, postmodernity does not mark the end of modernity, but rather its reflexive adaptation to a structural failure: the renunciation of the illusion of total order gives way to a regime of security that does not resolve ambivalence, but administers it, confining it within the lives and spaces of waste.

Spatial exclusion thus becomes a concrete modality through which power relations materialize: not only by separating, but by rendering conditions of marginality invisible and normalizing them. Urban heterotopias therefore assume an ambivalent function: on the one hand, they protect the dominant social order by isolating its contradictions; on the other, they make visible the structural fractures produced by the economic, political, and symbolic processes that govern the city. From this perspective, heterotopia does not only represent a spatial “elsewhere,” but a dispositif through which society manages its own waste, organizing marginality within defined boundaries and thereby contributing to the reproduction of social inequalities.

These dynamics generate profound asynchronies across different urban domains, intensifying fractures within the city’s social and spatial structure.

The concept of vulnerability can be understood as an intermediate condition of instability, referable to a social space marked by uncertainty:

La zone de vulnérabilité, en particulier, occupe une position stratégique. C’est un espace social d’instabilité, de tur-

bulences, peuplé d’individus précaires dans leur rapport au travail et fragiles dans leur insertion relationnelle. D’où le risque de basculement dans la dernière zone, qui apparaît ainsi comme une fin de parcours. C’est la vulnérabilité qui alimente la grande marginalité, ou la désaffiliation (Castel 1994).

Vulnerability highlights how the risk of falling into poverty does not derive solely from situations of social exclusion – that is, from circumstances that formally or de facto hinder access to fundamental rights and resources– but may also emerge within so-called normal conditions. From this perspective, alongside the poverty of the excluded, which can be traced back to exceptional or marginal situations, there also exists a poverty that concerns the included, those who formally belong to the social system yet nevertheless find themselves in conditions of vulnerability (Negri 2002).

Forms of urban marginality are not the result of exceptional, accidental, or contingent dynamics, nor do they constitute a “deviation” from the norm of urban life. On the contrary, they represent the systemic and structural outcome of dispositifs governing space and bodies that operate within the social stratification of the contemporary city. The analysis of these phenomena makes it possible to decipher the ways in which certain individuals are seen and perceived as others/outsideers while being fully internal to the urban body: despite physical proximity, life trajectories appear increasingly heterogeneous and divergent (Magatti 2007). The systemic transformations of the new world of production further accentuate existing divisions and disproportionately penalize lower social strata and minorities.

In particular, the new forms of territorial and social inequality that have emerged from processes of globalization produce an expansion of the margins and a new geography of centrality and marginality (Sassen 1991). According to Sassen, the complexity of contemporary societies gives rise to new forms of brutality that manifest themselves through dynamics of expulsion. Capacities and instruments originally intended to strengthen social cohesion, expand collective well-being, and preserve the equilibria of the biosphere are in fact reconverted into mechanisms that generate extreme inequalities and dismember the social structure. In this process, the promises of stability and social mobility advanced by liberal democracy toward the middle class are progressively hollowed out, while entire populations are expelled from their territories, from work, and from housing; in parallel, portions of the biosphere are likewise subjected to processes of expulsion, losing the minimal conditions necessary for the reproduction of their vital space (Sassen 2014).

The contemporary global capitalist economy is grounded in mechanisms of integration and in their selective counterpart, expulsion. Sassen argues that the present configuration represents a form of primitive accumulation, based on the logistics of “outsourcing” and on financial algorithms. The accelerations of the past three decades mark a new phase that threatens both individuals and the biosphere, while bringing to the surface renewed forms of poverty and brutalization. The scholar seeks to conceptualize and make visible the space of the expelled, which should not be understood as a “black hole” or an absence, but rather as a “tangible presence.” Sassen defines the systemic margin as the site in which the dynamics of expulsion from different systems – ranging from the economic to the social – are concretized.

These are conceptually submerged domains that need to be brought to the surface, insofar as they represent potential sites of action capable of generating new forms of global economy, alternative narratives, and novel modes of belonging. The fractures between West and East, North and South now manifest themselves within the same city, in a condition of topographical contiguity that intensifies the violence of the conflict between those who possess economic capital – and thus the means and instruments to access technologies – and those who are excluded from them. In this way, the dichotomies urban/rural, Global North/Global South, East/West are reproduced.

In light of these theoretical perspectives, territorial stigma cannot be reduced to a merely individual or psychological label – as in the classical perspective developed by Erving Goffman (1963) – but must instead be understood as a spatial, material, and political dispositif that segments the city into zones characterized by differing degrees of existential legitimacy. Following the interpretation developed by Loïc Wacquant in *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (2008), stigma operates as a mechanism of symbolic and physical confinement that marks the territories of exclusion, transforming urban spaces into veritable territories of relegation or “domains of non-citizenship”:

the elements of a sociological sketch of advanced marginality, i.e., the novel regime of sociospatial relegation and exclusionary closure (in Max Weber's sense) that has crystallized in the post-Fordist city as a result of the uneven development of the capitalist economies and the recoiling of welfare states, according to modalities that vary with the ways in which these two forces bear upon the segments of the working class and the ethnoracial categories dwelling in the nether regions of social and physical space (2-3).

By mobilizing Goffman's concept of stigma and Bourdieu's theory of groups (1982/1991), Wacquant emphasizes: «it stresses the distinctive weight and effects of territorial stigmatization as well as the insuperable political dilemmas posed by the material dispersion and symbolic splintering of the new urban poor» (7).

The construction of distance between a “we” – integrated and visible – and a “they” perceived as dysfunctional, dangerous, or out of place does not therefore occur in an abstract or ideological manner, but becomes embodied in practices of spatial governance, in urban planning, in the selective distribution of services, and in everyday surveillance and repression. Territory thus becomes an active vector of stigmatization, and urban space takes shape as a field of forces in which relations of power, inclusion, and exclusion are played out:

urban marginality is not everywhere woven of the same cloth, and, all things considered, there is nothing surprising in that. The generic mechanisms that produce it, like the specific forms it assumes, become fully intelligible once one takes caution to embed them in the historical matrix of class, state and space characteristic of each society at a given epoch. It follows that we must work to develop more complex and more differentiated pictures of the 'wretched of the city' if we wish accurately to capture their social predicament and elucidate their collective fate in different national contexts (1-2).

It is within this context that marginality not only reproduces itself, but becomes normalized, taking the form of an invisible yet deeply regulated presence. Interrogating territorial stigma from this perspective therefore means recognizing that the contemporary city is not a neutral space, but an active dispositif of selection, separation, and hierarchization of urban life. The universe of this social misery is expanding at an accelerated pace, fostered by the precarization of life and the disintegration of traditional bonds of solidarity. Within this context, marginality is not merely tolerated, but produced and reproduced as an integral part of the contemporary urban organization.

In continuity with Robert Castel's analysis, these processes can be read as expressions of a profound restructuring of social insecurity, which no longer manifests itself predominantly through radical exclusion, but rather through a progressive erosion of the material and symbolic foundations of integration. The precarization of work, the intermittency of income, and the weakening of social ties place a growing number of individuals in a condition of permanent vulnerability, close to disaffiliation yet not entirely external to the circuits of social citizenship. In this sense, vulnerability does not represent a

residual or transitory condition, but a structural dimension of contemporary biographical trajectories, inscribed within ordinary life courses and no longer reducible to exceptional or deviant events (Ranci 2002).

Saskia Sassen's reflections on new forms of expulsion make it possible to further radicalize this analysis by shifting the focus from the margins to the processes operating within formally inclusive societies. According to the author, the dynamics of advanced global capitalism generate expulsions that do not necessarily take the visible form of total exclusion, but instead manifest themselves through a progressive loss of rights, resources, and possibilities. These slow and cumulative expulsions affect individuals and groups who remain formally included within political and legal systems, yet are substantively deprived of the material and symbolic conditions that make full social participation possible. From this perspective, new forms of poverty can be read as the outcome of such processes of expulsion from within, which traverse the social body without immediately producing recognizable figures of marginality.

The difficulty of existing that characterizes these conditions does not concern the economic dimension alone, but permeates the entire subjective experience, affecting the possibility of constructing biographical continuities and horizons of meaning. Permanent uncertainty, the instability of social ties, and the fragility of resources erode the capacity to plan for the future and to exercise control over one's life trajectories, producing diffuse forms of social suffering that often remain invisible or lack social legitimation. In this sense, new forms of poverty constitute a privileged observatory for understanding the transformations of contemporary democracies, revealing the tensions between formal inclusion and substantive exclusion, between proclaimed rights and effective possibilities of life.

Intertwined with these dimensions are the concepts of structural misery and poverty of possibilities. Structural misery does not necessarily manifest itself through absolute deprivation, but rather as a lasting compression of possibilities of choice and projectuality, produced and reproduced by economic, political, and institutional arrangements that restrict access to meaningful life opportunities. Poverty of possibilities concerns the temporal and existential dimension of vulnerability: not only what individuals possess in the present, but what they can reasonably expect from the future. Permanent uncertainty and the narrowing of horizons of choice erode the capacity to project oneself into the long term, limiting both the construction of biographical continuities and the ability to exercise agency over one's life trajectories.

Urban regeneration policies, the financialization of space, and processes of gentrification generate new expulsions and redefine the boundaries of urban belonging, rendering marginality a condition that is structurally functional to the logics of economic valorization. Within this scenario, *le droit à la ville* – one of the key concepts developed by Henri Lefebvre, which also gives its title to his seminal essay – is progressively expropriated, while urban space is transformed into a commodity and dwelling into a function subordinated to the market. Lefebvre reflects on the right to the city by problematizing the segregative dynamics produced by the urban consequences of Fordist capitalism, and arrives at an emancipatory theory articulated in *Le droit à la ville* (1968), which encompasses those social subjects who inhabit the proliferation of precarious ways of living and dwelling at the margins of the market and consumption.

Taken together, these theoretical contributions make it possible to read the city as a field of forces in which dispositifs of confinement, processes of space production, the governance of life, and capitalist accumulation intersect. From this perspective, urban marginality does not appear as an anomaly, but rather as a structural outcome of the political and economic rationalities that shape the contemporary urban condition. The right to the city thus takes the form of a claim, a social and political demand that, in the absence of a radical critique of the capitalist system, cannot find concrete realization. Its transformative potential comes into conflict with the predatory logic of the economic and political dynamics of capitalism.

3. HORIZONS AND OPENINGS

The future challenge of reducing inequalities in access to resources, services, and knowledge is inseparable from the challenge of complexity.

Reflection on miseries of position and crises of possibility in contemporary democracies offers a crucial analytical lens for understanding the new forms of poverty emerging in today's social, economic, and political contexts. These phenomena do not only represent material deprivation, but rather take shape as a complex and multi-dimensional condition rooted in the erosion of collective structures of protection and in the transformation of the social contract.

Misery of position is no longer simply a matter of immediate economic deprivation, but rather of occupying a position of vulnerability in relation to social change and the structure of the labour market. In an increasingly globalized and polarized world, limited

access to stable and dignified employment opportunities, economic uncertainty, and labour precarization push large segments of the population toward conditions of social exclusion nourished by structural inequalities and insecurity. The issue is no longer only who has less, but who lacks access even to a future capable of ensuring meaningful social mobility.

At the same time, the crisis of possibility represents the inability, for broad segments of the population, to see those fundamental aspirations once associated with democratic and active participation in society as realizable. Economic crises, growing inequalities, and the dismantling of the welfare state have pushed millions of individuals toward the margins – those systemic margins identified by Sassen – not so much because of absolute poverty, but because of the denial of opportunities that make active and fulfilling inclusion in a democratic society possible. The “crisis of possibility” is therefore a condition deeper than material poverty: it is a crisis of hope, a loss of trust in institutions and in the capacity to mobilize for the improvement of one’s living conditions.

In this scenario, new forms of poverty are increasingly linked to conditions of relational and social fragility. Poverty is no longer solely a matter of lacking goods or resources, but is configured as the inability to participate fully in social, economic, and political life, with a growing fracture between those who are inside and those who are outside systems of protection and opportunity. The growth of inequalities, uncertainty about the future, and the progressive erosion of possibilities for personal and collective realization generate a spiral of exclusion that impoverishes not only materially, but above all humanly.

The interconnection and overlap of global crises – economic, health-related, climatic, and political – further intensify and multiply the effects of this “polycrisis” (Morin and Kern 1993), creating fertile ground for the diffusion of new forms of poverty that no longer appear as isolated events, but as structurally interrelated dynamics. Social fragility spreads across multiple dimensions, from labour precariousness to cultural marginalization and psychosocial vulnerability, pushing individuals to live within a context of growing disillusionment.

Within this framework, responses to new forms of poverty can no longer be limited to material intervention alone. A paradigm shift is required – one capable of recognizing the challenges of complexity and placing at the center of public policies not only material well-being, but also the promotion of real possibilities for participation and inclusion. Only by rethinking forms of collective protection and *promoting* authentic and sustainable inclusion will it be possible to address new forms of pov-

erty effectively, restoring to individuals not only a right to work and income, but also a horizon of hope and possibility. According to Sassen, the expelled claim recognition – the right to be, to exist. From this starting point, sociological theory can critically and constructively orient our understanding of social life, confronting the major challenges of social complexity through a radical paradigm shift and a rethinking of conceptual frameworks.

As Pierre Bourdieu famously argued, sociology is “a combat sport”:⁴ a tool of struggle capable of exposing mechanisms of domination and making visible the power structures that traverse social reality.

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⁴ The expression is drawn from the documentary film *La sociologie est un sport de combat* (France, 2001), directed by Pierre Carles and focused on the life and work of Pierre Bourdieu. The film conveys an understanding of sociology as a critical practice and an intervention within social conflict, portraying Bourdieu as engaged not only in theoretical research, but also in the public sphere, the media, and collective mobilizations against forms of symbolic domination and the inequalities produced by neoliberalism.

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