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La ségrégation dans les villes de l'Europe méditerranéenne

Comptes rendus

## A. Lambert, « *Tous propriétaires !* ». *L'envers du décor pavillonnaire*

2015, Paris, Le Seuil, 278 p.

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p. 122-123

### **Bibliographical reference**

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### ***Full text***

- 1 A common complaint is made in urban studies, especially gentrification research, with regards to the “other side” of the coin, in other words, the patterns of counter urbanization, suburbanization and flight from the centres of cities. This complaint goes something like this: we have plenty of data, analysis and reflections on the social, spatial and class transformation of the central city but very little attention is paid to the people who cannot afford to take advantage of the new livable and pleasant urban life and therefore move out to the suburbs. While this is only partially true –because a vibrant literature on global processes of suburbanization has long existed– Anne Lambert’s monograph provides a vital and rich counter argument. In this detailed work on the irresistible growth of homeownership in France she sets herself a precise task: to bring into conversation the “back-to-the-city movement” of the upper middle classes

with the out-flight of the lower middle classes and the higher echelons of the working classes towards the newly built suburbs in former rural areas. It is a story of ambiguous social mobility, where different changes are at stake. First and foremost, it is possible to discern a tentative upward social mobility among those households of a migrant background that flee the deteriorating social housing system of the Lyon area and therefore acquire the new status of homeowners in the suburbs. The racialized background of this new class is used as a control mechanism by a second group of neighbors, who are whiter, younger and richer. They are not rich enough to remain in the central city but are able to negotiate better living conditions in the suburbs, from more favorable mortgage arrangements to the higher quality of their built environment, which results in these households occupying the more advantageous social and spatial positions in the same villages compared with the former group. The study is based on intense ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2012 in which Lambert immersed herself into the gendered world of the housing units, witnessing how individuals, generations and households gathered and separated into social groups on the basis of class, ethnicity and out-group. Drawing on the classic work on Winston Parva by Elias and Scotson and on the growing French literature on suburban lives, Lambert adopts a dual approach combining structural analysis and a micro-social perspective in which people are not seen as simply class-driven or cultural dopes but rather as socially competent actors who make their living in the face of major and often visible constraints.

- 2 The financialization of households, a somewhat widespread, structural phenomenon (as demonstrated by Manuel Aalbers' book reviewed in this special issue), defines the structural landscape that families have to rely on in order to survive in the contemporary world. It is a landscape that increasingly bears upon all kinds of households, regardless of their social origin, however in Lambert's study it is clear that classes re-emerge as a crucial factor in defining who is able to buy what, where and under what conditions.
- 3 Despite the availability of state aid supporting access to homeownership, such as the *Pass foncier*, families face different conditions in terms of negotiating and repaying mortgages; with weaker families having to deal with technicalities, taxes and plans that are far more complex compared with those of higher-income families. Lambert's study clearly shows how educational attainments, social background and the structure of inequalities reflect specific class-based paths towards integration, and how the cost of the acquisition of the status of homeownership is rather uneven. Lower-income families therefore learn the hidden costs of autonomy, such as that of managing a single-family unit in terms of heating. They are subsequently trapped within a false dichotomy: between living in deteriorating state-funded social housing or acquiring autonomy by becoming owners. In both cases the social conditions of raising a family within a solid and safe environment are downgrading in comparison with the past, with financial insecurity seemingly substituting social and environmental insecurity.
- 4 The issue of social mixing therefore appears to be a particularly ambiguous basis upon which these households compare themselves, and once again the well-known work on spatial proximity and social distance by Chamboredon and Lemaire provides a germane, albeit sad, analysis of the state of local integration. On the one hand, huge spatial differences exist between households, with the better-off possessing bigger and qualitatively superior housing with more in-between space, while weaker families are more likely to find themselves swindled by developers; for instance, moving into homes built as little as 15 cm from neighboring houses. Thus the suburban dream of having enough space to display respectability and independence is undermined spatially, while

at a social level, families observe each other (and each others' children) across moral boundaries structured around categories of culture, ethnicity and gender.

- 5 Overall, Lambert's study offers us a rather depressing picture. Nonetheless, the meticulous nature of the writing and the effective relation between data and description provide for a forceful account that calls for further investigation, especially across different geographical contexts. Indeed, both the major strength and major weakness of the book lie herein: on the one hand it is a convincing case study, one that stimulates further research of a similar standard; on the other, the lack of any comparative analysis undermines its potential theoretical and analytical force. Regarding this last comment, the book almost completely ignores the widespread European literature on homeownership, class and social inequalities, while the author prefers to read the question of new French suburbanization with reference to North American literature, as if France were to better benefit from comparison with the US. I personally disagree, in the sense that the current patterns in French urbanization are also visible, of course with notable variations, across the whole of European society and especially in those countries with rising rates of homeownership.
- 6 In conclusion, Lambert's book probably represents one of the future cornerstones of French urban sociology: it is convincing, interesting and solid. It remains idiosyncratically French, which for me is both a quality and a weakness, since most of the social phenomena examined in this book is not restricted to *l'Hexagone*. Europeanizing French urban sociology is one of the most compelling intellectual tasks for the new generation of French and European scholars.

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