Ghetto

The very definition of the word ghetto is fraught with ambiguities, since it covers several meanings that have evolved separately in rather uncontrolled manner:
-there is the meaning associated with the history of the relegation of the Jews in 16th century by the Venice the Serenissima;
-a geographical meaning, that of a closed quarter;
-a sociological definition aiming to reflect the marginalisation of a social group;
-a political meaning linked to ostracism decreed by the dominant power towards one category of the population;
-and finally a symbolic meaning relating to the stigma attached to a given territory and its inhabitants. By way of series of widenings of meaning, the word ghetto has come to refer to a conceptual category liable to be applied not only to any enclave, but also to any population that tends to withdraw into itself and live according to its own rules.

Clearly, the concept is not really operational in application, but remains very intuitive in its intentions. When the word is used, it is generally to provoke or shock. By playing on affects, the word encloses the object concerned in dangerous representations, on account of its imprecise, but pejorative connotations. Any staging of the word is a dramatisation, it creates a smoke-screen, in particular in relation to "sensitive" suburban zones, where it colours judgements formed by outsiders.

Several surveys conducted among upper secondary school pupils and students in France underline the fact that the concept is first of all associated with images of divide and destruction, in particular the Warsaw ghetto destroyed by the Nazis in 1943, and the black ghettoes in the USA in the 1960s.

In fact, the application of the word ghetto to popular urban quarters in France means that the variety of modes of appropriation of space and the multiform lifestyles and modes of adaptation that have developed there are in fact masked. The word not only reflects prejudice in public opinion, it also contributes to reinforcing these prejudices, in particular because it is a word that is frequently used in the media and in politics. As a social indicator, discourse on the ghetto applied to French «suburbs» in fact reflects a more far-reaching crisis, affecting urban management, and the ethics of solidarity.

The word ghetto (thought to be derived from the Venitian getto meaning "foundry", after the site of the first ghetto) appeared in 1516, although various forms of residential separation had existed well before then, in Medieval cities and in Antiquity. At the time it referred to the ghetto vecchio (old ghetto), originally the public foundries of Venice before their abandonment. It was in a context of fear fanned by fanatical preachers, and in a context of threat from both the Turks and the Germanic hordes that the Council of Venice on March 29th 1516 published the decree that was to enclose the ghetto: "the Jews will live grouped together in housing situated in the ghetto near San Girolamo; and so that they shall not go abroad at night, it is decreed that near the old getto shall be placed two gates which will be opened at dawn and closed at midnight by four guards appointed to this task by the Jews themselves, for a sum that our assembly considers acceptable".

The Jews viewed this relegation with mixed feelings. On the one hand they were constrained and discriminated. On the other, is constituted a response to one of their claims, that of having a protected quarter. This ghetto in Venice, already an enclave, appeared to many as a refuge within a refuge. It was in fact itself an enclave with extra-territorial status, and considerable internal autonomy.

To simplify the issue, five criteria can be used to define the historical ghetto: territorial enclave, constraint, religious specificity, micro-society, and stigmatisation. These particular features are often wrongly applied to "sensitive" areas, over-hastily transposing the constraints of the past to the realities of the present day. These contemporary quarters are not ghettoes. They are more typified by dependency than by autonomy, by the wide range of origins of the households present rather than by homogeneity, and by the weak social stratification rather than by a dynamic professional hierarchy.

There are still two coexisting views of the ghetto: that of a mere specialised urban quarter adhered to because of its protecting role – this was widely described by the Chicago school at the start of the 20th century – and that of a paroxystic territory of social exclusion, the result of a strategy akin to that which ostracised the insane, and later the poor, in the 17th and 18th centuries.

When segregation process are measured accurately, what is actually observed is not so much that economically precarious

households seek to aggregate, but rather that the other households deploy strategies of escape or flight. There is no choice to congregate on the part of the poorest individuals, merely situations that are endured passively, as a mechanical result of decisions by those that are in a better position to choose. It is of course the children of the most underprivileged families, attending schools in their geographical sectors, that bear the brunt of the damage.

Thus the most radical "ghettoisation" occurs neither on the fringes, nor at the bottom of the social hierarchy: it first of all mobilises the wealthiest sectors of society, in particular managerial categories in the private sector, whose main objectives are to protect their children and strengthen their financial position.

In fact the concentration of poverty, sometimes merging with the concentration of populations of foreign origin, occurs by default. It is not the results of a desire to congregate. Contextual inequalities and by-pass strategies are central issues. This being so, it is hardly surprising that urban policy aiming to remove the most visible Â«segregationÂ» has failed to produce the intended results. These policies, centred on territory and underprivileged households, miss the hidden effects that are the most decisive in driving exclusion.

The aim of achieving a social mix, given prominence in France since the 1991 urban orientation law (known as the anti-ghetto law), taken up again by the SRU (SolidaritÃ© et Renouvellement Urbain) of December 2000, and the urban renovation plan of August 2003, does not really work because these measures are based on the hypothesis that interactions at neighbourhood level are the main factors determining social ties and the rehabilitation of those urban neighbourhoods. This is a crucial and largely sterile debate, which nonetheless occupies a central position in measures aiming to rehabilitate the city and foster social cohesion.

Bibliographie