Territorial stigmatization in theory and practice, and its implications for community development: an introduction to the themed section

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Abstract

This article introduces and outlines the rationale for a ‘Themed Section on Territorial Stigmatization’. It explains how ‘territorial stigmatization’ is conceptualised and understood, within the wider academic scholarship, and within the four articles that follow in this section. This introductory article outlines some key lines of academic debate and inquiry about the stigmas that adhere to communities of place and it acknowledges the pioneering theoretical contribution of Wacquant in particular. The article also discusses how the articles in this themed section of the CDJ can contribute to our ability to recognise and respond to territorial stigma as an ongoing challenge for community development theory and practice.

Introduction

CDJ 56(2) includes a ‘Themed Section’ that seeks to interrogate the scope and form of ‘territorial stigmatization’ locally, nationally, and internationally, and we hope that the four featured articles (Birk and Fallow, 2021; Butler-Warke, 2021; Power et al., 2021; Souza, 2021) will prompt further critical reflections on its implications for community development. Within these pages ‘territorial stigmatization’ is recognized as a phenomenon that both expresses and normalizes the othering and the negative construction,*

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representation, and government of certain geographical communities and places. The Community Development Journal has published many articles on issues related to urban redevelopment, regeneration, and gentrification (see Dillon and Fanning, 2019; Fursova, 2018; Jha, 2020; Kim and Cho, 2019; Kinahan, 2019; Kwon, 2018 for some recent examples) but ‘territorial stigmatization’ as both a concept and a practice has not been given either extensive or committed attention in the Journal to date. Therefore, we see this Themed Section as the beginnings of a longer and more expansive conversation about the kinds of meanings that are circulated about communities of place, and how those meanings can legitimize and sustain structural antagonisms and micro-aggressions, eliciting varying practices of intervention or neglect.

In effect, territorial stigmatization can be understood as a form of ‘symbolic violence’ in the Bourdieusian sense. As Pierre Bourdieu (1979, p. 80) explains:

it is as structured and structuring instruments of communication and knowledge that ‘symbolic systems’ fulfil their political function as instruments of domination (or, more precisely, of legitimation of domination); they help to ensure the domination of one class over another (symbolic violence).

As the articles in this Themed Section demonstrate, symbolic violence is not only felt or experienced ‘symbolically’ or at the level of consciousness and affect; its impacts may be, and are, physical, material, economic, and ontological. ‘Territorial stigmatization’, as a form of symbolic violence commonly overlaps with class conflict and economic inequality—even if/when those fissures are not explicitly acknowledged—but it also dovetails with and reinforces the spatialization of racism, sectarianism, colonialism, and environmental hazard. Consequently, there are reasons to be concerned that the interests, ideologies and assumptions that are the very stuff of such ‘stigma’ may profoundly shape the ways through which communities are rendered the subjects for, in, and of community development. As Birk and Fallov’s (2021) contribution to this section reveals, this, in turn, has implications for the integrity of community work as a practice that is embedded in the policy sphere and for the everyday interactions through which workers cultivate relationships with communities.

Wacquant and the concept of territorial stigma

The Sociologist Loïc Wacquant is widely recognized for his pioneering and influential scholarship on territorial stigma, particularly its manifestations in cities in the USA and France (Wacquant, 2007, 2007a, 2008; see also Butler-Warke, 2021; Power et al., 2021), and contributors to this Themed
Section critically explore key strengths and possible limits of his distinctive applications of the concept. The internationalism of such stigmatizing tendencies is acknowledged by Wacquant (2007, p. 68) as he lists a number of ‘tainted’ places that may already appear to be ‘known’ to readers in Europe and the USA because of their negative connotations in national imaginaries or because they are those selfsame areas that are targeted for community development:

Les Minguettes and La Courneuve or the Mirail housing complex in Toulouse for France; South Central Los Angeles, the Bronx and the project of Cabrini Green in Chicago for the United States; Duisberg-Marxloh and Berlin-Neukölln for Germany; the districts of Toxteth in Liverpool, Saint Paul in Bristol, or Meadow Well in Newcastle for England; and Bijlmer and Westelijke Tuinsteden in Amsterdam for Holland. Even the societies that have best resisted the rise of advanced marginality, like the Scandinavian countries, are affected by this phenomenon of territorial stigmatization...

Indeed, there is much academic evidence to suggest that the routinized discrediting of specified places and spaces, and those who live within them, is a more generalized, even global phenomenon (Smets and Kusenbach, 2020; Kimari, 2018; Lees et al., 2016; Butler-Warke, 2021; Birk and Fallov, 2021). Researchers have highlighted its various expressions, forms, and consequences in contexts ranging from Nairobi (Kimari, 2018) to Rio de Janeiro (Broudehoux and Carvalhaes dos Santos Monteiro, 2017), from Dhaka (Fat-tah and Walters, 2020) to Adelaide (Arthurson et al., 2014). And while readers of the CDJ may have varying levels of familiarity with the extant academic literature on territorial stigmatization, we are likely to be all too aware of everyday examples. How easily can we call to mind, irrespective of our geographical locations or professional roles, those places, neighbourhoods, or communities that are the butt of jokes and stereotypes, that are subjected to a repeated ‘punching down’ because of their associations with the presumed sins and failings of poverty?

In his work on this topic, Wacquant (2007, 2008) acknowledges and builds upon Erving Goffman’s earlier theoretical oeuvre. Notably, Goffman’s (1963) book Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identities outlines a triumvirate of discernible ‘types of stigma’; what he terms the ‘abominations of the body’, the ‘blemishes of individual character’ and ‘tribal stigma’, all of which in their varying ways contribute to the exclusion or withdrawal of those so burdened from full participation in society (Goffman, 1963/1986, p. 4). 

1 Tyler and Slater (2018) have written a very thoughtful, accessible, and grounded overview of the sociology of stigma, which highlights a range of types beyond the territorial variant. In it, they also consider stigma’s centrality to neoliberal projects of government. Whelan (2020) reflects on ongoing debates about
To these three types, Wacquant (2007, p. 67) adds a fourth, ‘the blemish of place’ and he argues that while this form of stigma may overlay and intersect with class-based discrimination, racism, and ethnic chauvinism, it must not be reduced to them: it should be regarded as having distinctive logics and dynamics of its own. In other words, spatial arrangements really matter, and the material and symbolic constructions of places are meaningful in terms of how groups of people and individuals are viewed, the conditions under which they become viewable, and how we/they relate to each other.

Wacquant’s (2008) research locates the damages wrought by territorial stigmatization to the wider processes of advanced marginality, which is a ‘regime of poverty ascendant in the postindustrial cities’, one that is characterized by ‘resurging class inequality, welfare state retrenchment, penal state expansion, and spatial polarization’ (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1272, fn. 3; see also Tyler and Slater, 2018). Other notable aspects include the demonization of public housing estates, ‘get tough’ posturing on an increasingly wide spectrum of matters ‘criminal’, and the imposition of new forms of conditionality within welfare systems. This links advanced marginality to the continuing rollout of neoliberalism internationally and its ideological commitments to leaner and meaner societies/economies. In her contribution to the Themed Section, however, Alice Butler-Warke (2020) ruminates on the putative newness of territorial stigmatization as both a practice and lived experience, and she points to the likelihood that it has a lengthier and more extensive history. Certainly, the denigration of places and the people residing within them has long provided ideological ballast to imperial violence, cultural genocide and to various forms of settler colonialism. As Achille Mbembe (2016, p. 79) reminds us ‘Colonial occupation itself consisted in seizing, delimiting and asserting control over a geographical area – of writing a new set of social relations on the ground’. Historically colonialism has worked on territories, how they are configured materially, and on the consciousness of those within and without. Not every form or expression of territorial stigmatization is so inherently catastrophic in its consequences and so brutal in its dehumanisations but all forms will and do sustain oppressions of a very real kind.

The dynamics of stigma for place-based communities

Territorial stigmatization is given expression through the discourses and contents of state policy, social service delivery, policing, and political programmes. It is embedded in certain forms of advocacy by NGOs, Think
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Tanks, and civil society (see Jha, 2020; Slater, 2018), as well as being reflected in the flight or absence of market-based services. Additionally, it is evoked through a myriad everyday or even prosaic cultural practices, whereby places are dismissed as ‘slums’, ‘problem neighbourhoods’, ‘sink estates’ and ‘shitholes’ in popular or media discourses (Butler et al., 2018; Kimari, 2018; Jha, 2020; Pinkster et al., 2020; Power et al., 2021; Slater, 2018; Wacquant, 2008). Through their accounts of stigmatization and enforced peripherality as they pertain in the Santa Cruz area of Rio de Janeiro, Toxteth in Liverpool, the Northside of Limerick, and in unnamed parts of Denmark, the articles in this Themed Section interrogate complex dynamics of structure and agency, of micro and macro relations as they bear upon contemporary urban neighbourhoods.

Given community development’s concern with the nurturance of bonds of solidarity and sociability within and beyond communities, the potentially corrosive consequences of this type of stigma demand our attention (Kimari, 2018; Jha, 2020; Pinkster et al., 2020; Wacquant, 2008). This is a key focus of the article by Martin Power et al. (2021) as they highlight its damaging impacts for Limerick in Ireland—and on specific communities within that city—while being ever mindful of the potential for the stigma to be resisted and subverted. They show how, paradoxically, communities may oscillate between being overexposed in national media and public discourse and rendered invisible in decision-making circles because of the negative reputations of where they live. At its most insidious territorial stigmatization generates individual and collective humiliations and experiences of shame that circumscribe the bearer’s well-being and encounters with education, criminal justice systems, social services, or employment. It has implications for the physical state of places, in terms of how they look, how they are policed, and whether they are economically valued. Local environments are variously neglected, actively run-down, or ritualistically rehabilitated, as their potential for integration into the wider urban economy is calculated and recalibrated. Indeed Souza’s (2021) article in this volume powerfully documents how the stigma and peripheralisation to which certain places are subjected means they are polluted and abused as ‘sacrifice zones’ in order to facilitate the productivity demands of global and national Capital.

Place-based denigration thus serves to simultaneously reproduce and be reproduced by capitalist economic relations and inequalities and, of course, it may bolster other systems of unaccountable power, as Wangui Kimari (2018, p. 4) has illustrated with respect to oppressive policing of stigmatized ‘slums’ in Nairobi:
What this double negation means for poor Nairobi dwellers is that they are hypervisibilized in the gunspeak of police, while remaining invisible in the empathic continuum which creates value in the larger city.

While territorial stigma can appear to have an ‘eternalising’ aspect, whereby we might regard it as almost inescapable, evidently stigma does not adhere to all communities in identical ways and it is more fixed in some places than in others. The temporality of stigmatization is critically analysed in Alice Butler-Warke’s (2021) article where she assesses the contrasting fortunes of Toxteth in Liverpool and Chapeltown in Leeds—both cities in the UK—in terms of the durability over time of their negative public images. In so doing, she differentiates ‘core’ and ‘event’ stigma, drawing on literature from the field of organizational studies to identify how and why that might be the case. Her research indicates that depending on its form, stigma may adapt and diffuse over time, and her discussion is potentially valuable for community development or activist groups that are seeking to both comprehend the scale of the challenges they face and to mobilize against them. The differential burdens of ‘core’ and ‘event’ stigma may have implications for the kinds of media, advocacy, and resistance strategies to be adopted by communities, and how they collectively act upon the structures that circulate or embed stigmatizing representations.

Together the articles in this Themed Section alert us to the profound risks that ‘territorial stigmatization’ may generate for life in communities. Souza (2021) also prompts us to question whether the concept is capacious and forceful enough to capture the sheer horror of the segregation, harms, and exploitation that are licenced in the name of economic growth, particularly in ‘the capitalist (semi) periphery, be it in Latin America, Africa or Asia’ (Souza, 2021, p. 220). In his account of ‘sacrifice zones’, he highlights the state’s and capital’s active processes of ‘sacrificing’ and ‘zoning’, whereby the consequences of a discriminatory social production of space—shortened life-spans, broken health, limited access to basic facilities, increased exposure to toxicity and waste, etc.—become recast as evidence of the inherent inferiority of residents. In a vicious circle of rationalization and legitimation, the ‘sacrifice zone’ becomes ‘implicitly and moralistically seen as a “purgatory” (if not as a well-deserved “hell”)’ (Souza, 2021). The article integrates conceptions of biopower as utilized by Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe, of ‘bare life’ by Giorgio Agamben and ‘disposable lives’ as considered by Zygmunt Bauman, to analyse the rationalities and ideological imperatives behind the ‘banality’ of capitalist evil. Aside from presenting a compelling case-study of a sacrifice zone in Brazil, it also offers vital theoretical insights into the political and moral significance of such global forms of segregation and territorialized oppression.
Resisting, reinforcing, governing: community development and territorial stigma

Although, not focused on community development per se, Wacquant’s scholarship raises concerns that will be of interest to and resonate with the readers of this Journal. He notes that territorial stigmatization encourages amongst residents sociofugal strategies of mutual avoidance and distancing which exacerbate processes of social fission, feed interpersonal mistrust, and undermine the sense of collectivity necessary to engage in community building and collective action. (Wacquant, 2008, p.30).

At the risk of misrepresenting Wacquant’s proposition, it appears that he expects that the constant experience of being denigrated as people in place, displaces the ethos of self-help, mutual aid, and commitment to better futures on which community development is contingent. However, the actual implications for activism and praxis may be more complex and contradictory than is suggested in the above quotation. There are at least two reasons for adopting this view.

Firstly, borrowing a usage that has become popularized through posthumous readings of Michel Foucault’s lectures at the Collège De France (e.g. Foucault, 2007), it is fruitful to regard community development as being imbricated with various ‘governmental’ projects and practices through which multiple societal actors seek to mobilize citizens towards desired forms of conduct (Meade, 2018). As readers already appreciate, in different contexts and at different times, community development is variously constituted as an expression of popular will, as a professional practice, as an outcrop of social movement commitments and organizing; as a hybridized product of relations between non-governmental, state and even private-sector agencies. Whatever its origins and backers, community development represents efforts to conduct the conduct of groups of people—perhaps ourselves, perhaps others—to incite or entreat us/them to act in given ways: this is what Foucault (2007) calls to govern. Like all forms of government, community development is underpinned by certain ‘mentalities of government’ (governmentalities), ones that problematise the existing circumstances of communities and that call for particular versions of community mobilization and change by way of response. It thus becomes essential to analyse the rationalities, judgements, and forms of knowledge that legitimize the arts of governing as practised by, through, with, and on community development (Meade, 2018). For example, in his recent CDJ article, Gary Fraser interrogated the prominence of neoliberal rationalities of government or governmentalities within community work in Scotland’s local government sector, profiling how ‘a new form of professionalism
shaped by the market has been “produced” and the broad consequences for practitioner identity’ (Fraser, 2020, p. 438). Similarly, it is appropriate to assess the extent to which the attribution of stigma, the performance of disgust, and the consequent will to rehabilitate or regenerate might inform the governmentalities of contemporary community development. Indeed rather than dissipating the desire for community development, and the concern with organizing populations accordingly, territorial stigmatization might instead be understood as a problematisation of communities of place that in turn rationalizes, legitimizes, and constitutes distinctive versions of community development as government.

In its most punitive variants, territorial stigmatization risks legitimizing interventions that claim to reform ‘degenerate’ residents who must be cleaned up or cleared out. More generally, it is likely to shape how ‘street-level bureaucracies’ engage with communities, while also infusing ‘the beliefs, views, and decisions of state officials and, through them, the gamut of public policies that, combining with the market and other forces, determine and distribute marginality and its burdens’ (Wacquant et al., 2014, p. 1275). Community workers may find themselves at the frontline of such policy rollout and delivery, charged with navigating interpersonal and relational dynamics that are heteronomously seeded through funding regimes and programme requirements. Focusing on what is called in Danish ‘boligsocialt arbejde’ or neighbourhood centred community work, Birk and Fallov (2021) draw on participant observation studies that they conducted with six local projects in Denmark to show that stigmatizing policy may not always and inevitably translate into stigmatizing practice. They explain that, in recent years, the social policies overarching community work practice have tended to assume that the poverty and exclusion experienced by certain geographical communities is a function of the failings of those communities themselves rather than being a consequence of structural inequalities and oppressions. Compellingly they utilize the concept of ‘interstitality’ to evoke the complexities of community work practice, and how workers may translate their own inbetweenness in creative and progressive ways. The tactics adopted by community workers include an active dissociation from state bureaucracies or authorities, the assertion of a ‘freedom of method’ in terms of the interpretation and application of programme objectives, and at other times the mobilization of their interstitial status as community workers to advocate upwards on behalf of local people (Birk and Fallov, 2021). While Birk and Fallov (2021) do not claim that such everyday tactics can erase the harms done by territorial stigmatization, or its reproduction in and through policy documents, they illustrate how workers can marshal their own agency in order to benefit and support the communities with which they work.
A second reason, we might trouble Wacquant’s linking of territorial stigmatization with quietism, passivity, or even self-abnegation by communities, relates to the abiding potential for residents to collectively speak out against the demeaning representations of their neighbourhoods and to contest the tangible effects of despoilation and neglect. In each of the four articles that make up this Themed Section, this prospect of ‘resistance’ is recognized and acknowledged. For example, Souza (2021) reflects on factors that might render resistance (somewhat) successful and highlights the necessity for communities to build alliances with external supporters, such as committed researchers and NGOs, if they are to mount viable challenges to the power of the (often global) industries that pollute the places where they live and work. There is, however, no guarantee of success and this may be especially true in contexts of extreme economic and social polarization. While Power et al. (2021) are also careful to avoid romanticizing either the prospect or efficacy of resistance, they usefully elaborate on its likely forms by drawing on relevant academic theorisations and their own research on Limerick. It is evident that resistance ranges from the individual to the collective, and across both intimate and public spheres. The authors identify the three elements of ‘resistance, resilience and reworking’ (Power et al., 2021) in the ways that community groups in Limerick have mobilized the arts or cultural practices, how they have held state authorities and regeneration bodies to account, built and celebrated their pride in place, and developed alternative media and other channels for communicating on their own terms. Significantly, their article also observes the propensity for economic and political elites to rebrand stigmatized territories in the name of inward investment and market advantage. However, in many such instances of rebranding, egalitarian, and democratic commitments are rendered almost invisible, as indeed are the voices of those working-class communities that have been the historical objects of stigma.

Conclusion

This Themed Section is designed to present readers with a sense of ‘the state of the art’ with respect to the academic study of territorial stigmatization and its salience internationally. Together the four articles detail, its consequences as a form of symbolic violence, in terms of its material effects, its potential to either corrode or, more hopefully, instil collective identity; and its reproduction of and through economic inequality and

2 It should be noted that in his more recent collaborative work (e.g. Wacquant et al., 2014), Wacquant has acknowledged resistance as possible response to stigma, a point that is also considered by Power et al. (2021) in this Themed Section.
oppression. The authors illustrate how individuals, communities, and the places where they live are interpellated as losers and failures: typically that interpellation is tinged with class-hatred, racism, sectarianism, and with other ideologies of exclusion. Territorial stigmatization is anchored in the everyday realities of community life through everything from economic and social policies to journalistic conventions to the kinds of ‘banter’ that allow us to imagine we have an inside track on places that we have never been.

As noted in the introduction, this is merely the beginning of a longer conversation about territorial stigmatization, especially its implications for the discourses and practices of community development. The contributions to this Themed Section caution us that community development organizations and workers can accept, further embed, mitigate, or actively resist the forces of stigma. In the future, we hope to read more about how communities seek to move beyond endurance, how they strategize around resistance, and if and how they can make their places more democratically, and in the images of their own choosing.

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