7. Keeping Out the Poor: Banishment as an Urban Renewal Strategy

Guy Baeten and Carina Listerborn

Introduction

Over the past decades, we have witnessed increasingly repressive policies towards all sorts of urban outcasts, alongside ongoing efforts to attract population segments deemed more favourable. While at some point attempts to keep the poor away from city centres were confined to the poorest and most visible segments, such as the homeless and rough sleepers (see e.g. Mitchell, 1997), removal efforts have gradually expanded and now include much larger groups of unwanted people. In the wake of New Orleans’ urban renewal policies after Hurricane Catrina, Lees et al. (2008) discerned a ‘fourth wave of gentrification’ wherein systematic state-led social cleansing has come to play a fundamental role in gentrification processes. The ‘literal and figurative effacing of the proletariat in the city’ (Wacquant, 2009: 199) can take many forms – varying from legal bans from parks and other places (Beckett and Herbert, 2009, 2010, 2017), systematic racialized evictions (Roy, 2017), or one-way tickets for homeless families (Bosman, 2009). Since 2006, the so-called Rotterdam Wet (Van Gent et al., 2017) allows Dutch cities to refuse a residence permit in certain neighbourhoods for people who have lived in the metropolitan region for less than six years and who have no income from work, pensions, or student loans. In Denmark, the Ghetto Plan seeks to stop municipalities from moving people on benefits into public housing in areas officially designated as ‘ghettos’ (Simonsen, K.B., 2016; Milne, 2018).

In recent years, the city of Landskrona, a small town in the south of Sweden, has implemented a housing policy that is mainly aimed at preventing poor people from migrating to (or within) the city. The pressure on Landskrona’s housing market is low compared to nearby larger cities and university towns, where housing prices and rent levels result in an increasingly excluding housing market. In the absence of these ‘market forces’, Landskrona’s city authorities have embarked on a set of excluding policy measures. We argue that these measures herald a new era of urban population management and urban renewal in Sweden. These measures also imply that our conventional conceptual apparatus to capture social change in the city – in particular, the management of poor population segments – does not lend itself very well to understand contemporary population and renewal policies in the city of Landskrona. We are not witnessing processes of gentrification, there are no legal bans addressing poor people, there is no outright displacement, and poor people are not evicted from their homes. The new policies are not even directly aimed at restricting the freedom of movement of poor population segments like in the examples above; rather, they are aimed at restricting the freedom of private landlords and, in that way, indirectly overseeing the movement of poor people. We find the term ‘banishment’ (Roy, 2017) particularly useful to grasp the new urban renewal tactics that are unfolding in Landskrona.

Based on an empirical study of Landskrona’s rental policies, this chapter aims to develop banishment as a concept to capture a certain variation of displacement that is currently difficult to place in the available conceptual apparatus.

City-wide rental restrictions as banishment

In the aftermath of the shipyard closure in 1980, the city of Landskrona initially tried to compensate for the inner-city White flight and resulting housing vacancy by welcoming, assisting, and housing newly arrived refugees from Lebanon, Eastern Europe, and the Balkan countries. This changed the social demography of the city significantly, triggered a range of
issues regarding income and education levels, and racialized crime and safety perceptions. These problems were originally met with a series of social programmes and a range of ‘soft’ measures to help people get into employment or improve educational achievement (Baeten and Listerborn, 2015). The subsequent electoral successes of the extreme right-wing party, Sweden Democrats, together with growing discontent amongst shopkeepers and business leaders alike, triggered an entirely new approach to the city’s problems.

The game-changing Crossroads Plan of 2012 (Landskrona stad, 2012) no longer prioritized social answers to social problems. Instead, it considered high levels of affordable rental housing – for decades the cornerstone of social-democratic housing policies and the cornerstone of the nationalist socialist folkhem ideology – as the single root cause of all problems. The problem of poverty was now redefined as a problem of poor peoples’ presence in the city, enabled by specific housing market features. Changing those features would ban poor people from the city. In order achieve this goal, the city authorities successfully disseminated a storyline wherein ‘unserious landlords’ rent out to ‘benefit-dependent’ tenants, a process that is regarded to cause crime, low education levels, unemployment, benefit dependency, unsafety, and a weak tax base.

Through its subsidiary Landskrona Stadsutveckling AB, a public-private partnership of municipal authorities and (major) private landlords, the city not only issued a warning for aspiring immigrants on social benefits or low income, but it also issued a city-wide rental policy in 2013 (renewed in 2015) that would apply to both private and public landlords alike. This policy prevents landlords from renting out to persons on social benefits and to persons who would spend more than one third of their income on rent (alongside some other restrictions). These restrictions proved to have potentially far-reaching effects. First, the policy deters persons on social benefits or low income from moving to Landskrona from nearby municipalities. The policy was accompanied by verbal violence from city officials and politicians. In a local newspaper interview in 2012, the Mayor declared ‘My message to all welfare benefit recipients is, do not move to Landskrona. If you have a problem, then please ask elsewhere where you are more likely to get attention’ (Lönnaeus, 2012). In the same interview, he stated that ‘we have a city centre characterized by social benefit dependency’. One of the architects of the Crossroads Plan stated in a newspaper interview in 2011 that the city has allowed in ‘a category of people we do not want’ and that these unserious tenants should be ‘returned to the municipalities where they come from’ (Brant, 2011).

Second, the policy deters landlords from renting out to poor population segments. Twenty-three landlords have now officially subscribed to the city’s rental policy, covering seventy-five per cent of the total rental housing stock (Landskrona Stadsutveckling, 2017), leading to a reduction in both the volume of housing stock available to the poor and the number of ‘unserious landlords’. The policy is supported by real and verbal intimidation. The CEO of Landskrona Stadsutveckling AB declared in an interview,

There are some property owners who are not interested. We try to identify those who do not care, and we will mobilize the authorities [such as environmental inspection and fire safety control]. If you only want a property as a cash-cow, then that should cost; that should not be fun. We will use all means possible to force property owners to jump on the development bandwagon. (Petterson, 2013)

In other words, all landlords who do not comply with the rental policy are deemed ‘unserious’, and the city will use its powers to guard fire safety and environmental standards to threaten ‘unserious’ landlords with potential compulsory purchase orders if they do not respect the city’s rental policy restrictions. ‘Unserious’ is of course a very vague category and therefore renders
significant power to the city authorities, who can both decide which landlord is not serious and take the necessary measures accordingly. Thus, the city designs the policy, acts as a judge, and implements repressive measures if needed, all through its newly established public-private company Stadsutveckling AB. The public-private nature of the implementing body keeps these actions outside the ‘normal’ democratic procedures of accountability to and control by the peoples’ representatives in the City Council.

**Limited effects**

Five years after the policy was implemented, the city tax base has not improved. If the Swedish average tax base equals 100, then Landskrona’s tax base was 84 in 2011 and 83 in 2018 (SCB, 2019). The amount of persons (aged 18–64 years) on social benefits has decreased by 14.5 per cent between 2010 and 2017, but so has the national figure (8.8 per cent) (Socialstyrelsen, 2018). The 2017 Annual Report of Landskrona Stadsutveckling announced that the total amount of social benefit expenditures has decreased by 27 per cent between 2013 (the beginning of the new policy) and 2017, in contrast with the upward trend between 2007 and 2012. This insinuates that the policy has thus far been effective. However, decreasing expenditures reveal nothing about the amount of poor people in the city or the number of people on social benefits: it can simply be the result of austerity policies or stricter admission policies. In fact, the share of inhabitants on low income – the main group potentially in need of social benefits – has remained stable over the past few years (from 14.3 per cent in 2014 to 14.4 per cent in 2016) (Socialstyrelsen, 2018). Statistical evidence points at minor migratory movements of benefit-dependent people: Before the rental policy, ten to fifteen people on social benefits would move into Landskrona per month; after the policy, zero to six would move (Petterson, 2013). Thus, the policy has had some ‘success’, but the sheer numbers of ‘problem immigrants’ (before and after the policy implementation) renders the ‘benefit-dependent’ as a major source of Landskrona’s problems a misleading myth. A recent upswing in organized crime (between December 2018 and August 2019, eight bombs detonated in the inner city) has dented the fragile image of restored peacefulness in the inner city.

It is clear that the attempts to change the housing market structure through targeting ‘unserious landlords’ while keeping the ‘benefit-dependent’ at bay have thus far had very little aggregate effect. Nevertheless, they have had drastic consequences for all those who were left with no place to go after the rental restrictions had expelled them effectively from reasonable access to housing, or those who are now under pressure from insecurity, anxiety, and temporality. There is evidence that inhabitants who cannot live up to the income restriction are told by city officials to leave the city of Landskrona, which can be regarded as de facto banishment (Whrethov, 2013). We have argued elsewhere (Baeten and Listerborn, 2015; Listerborn and Baeten, 2016) that the reluctance of municipalities to accept citizens on low income may lead to the emergence of ‘city-less citizens’ who have nowhere left to go since no municipality is prepared to enrol them. Recently, the National Board of Housing (2014) has lauded the Landskrona model as an example for other municipalities. Perhaps it is not the current (lack of) results of Landskrona’s housing policy but its potential to institutionalize and systematize housing precariousness through state policies that primarily deserves the attention of urban scholars.

While ultimately aimed at keeping poor population segments at bay, the city-wide rental policy does not install measures directly targeting that population. There is no straightforward displacement and no evictions or legal restriction bans imposed on the poor. Neither are there immediate signs of gentrification hinting at the replacement of poorer population segments with

---

1 See, for example, the article series in the local newspaper, *Helsingborgs Dagbladet*: Whrethov, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Petterson, 2013.
more wealthy ones as we have witnessed in many other places over the past decades. We would like to propose this as a new type of displacement that clearly resonates with Marcuses’s (1985) concepts of exclusionary displacement and displacement pressure but that is perhaps best captured by the term (racial) ‘banishment’ (Roy, 2017). We would like to carefully put forward the claim that the Landskrona case is but one of several similar examples of contemporary urban development policies that do not explicitly aim to attract wealth but, rather, to banish want. This would entail a shift from a focus on ‘positive’ urban renewal policies (attracting the well-off) towards a focus on ‘negative’ urban renewal policies: removing and keeping low-income groups at a distance – namely, banishment.

**Banishment as practice**

Banishment is a practice that goes back to ancient times (Armstrong, 1963) and has, over the centuries, taken on many shapes and forms across the globe. Banishment tactics, legally or informally, have typically been used to deal with persons deemed criminal, as with the deportation of petty criminals to North America, and later Australia, in the days of the British Empire. Throughout history, banishment has most commonly been deployed to remove the poor, in all their manifestations, from (inner) cities. In fact, most ‘criminals’ banished to the colonies under British rule were primarily starving urban citizens forced into theft (Coldham, 1992; Vaver, 2011). Struggles over urban presence in and occupation of inner-city properties and public spaces may always have been there, but according to Blomley (2004), they have reached a new intensity in contemporary times as cities strive to attract tourists, wealthier inhabitants, and inward investment: ‘Development-driven displacements …are sustained by an increasingly “revanchist” approach to marginalized urban populations, as well as “commonsense” assumptions about property, such as the “naturalness” of displacement, or the beneficial effects of middle-class ownership in poor neighbourhoods’ (Blomley, 2004: xviii). Gutshe (2015) argues, the contemporary obsession with urban boosterism is more than just the promotion of ‘good news’ about certain places in order to attract ‘the right people’. It equally holds ‘restrictive and divisive purposes, which in these cases allowed “positive news” to perform its own type of banishment by restricting particular voices and perspectives from socio-spatial rhetoric’. Urban boosterism always implies the telling of shadow stories, namely those of spatial stigma (Wacquant, 2009) and regulation that restricts particular social groups from participating in inner-city spaces (be they public or private). Every boosterist story about what is wanted in the inner-city by definition implies a complementary (untold) story of what is not wanted. Banishment, then, is the flipside of boosterism, and socio-demographic change in the inner-city is the result of the dialectical interplay of boosterism and banishment, or of stories about the wanted (to be attracted) and the unwanted (to be banished). Gutsche (2015) goes as far as to speak of boosterism as banishment.

Banishment, like more conventional concepts such as ‘displacement’ and ‘eviction’, sends out a clear message about the unwedness of individuals or groups in certain places. Unlike actual displacement and eviction, it is not only a physical act of removal but it can also be mobilized as a threatening discursive instrument that may, or may not, have material consequences, depending on the reactions of the unwanted population to the ban. It highlights the ‘displaceability’ of certain urban populations, whether actually displaced or evicted or not. Banishment underscores the ability of the state to displace, regardless of implementation. Displacement means that ‘forces outside the household make living there impossible, hazardous, or unaffordable’ (Hartman et al., 1982: 3), while eviction is primarily an act of legal enforcement. Banishment does not possess the same forcefulness or enforceability. Those who are banished are supposed to internalize the notion that they are no longer welcome in certain places, and they will have to comply with it, but they possess a certain freedom not to do so, or
not yet. For example, research in Seattle (Beckett and Herbert, 2009, 2010, 2017) shows how people subjected to a legal ban from parks or drug dealing places often ignore the ban at a certain risk because they need to be in those places to have access to food, precarious employment, social networks, and basic services.

Banishment may not have the same forceful effect, but the very pressure of the ban of course has lasting consequences for the banned, in pretty similar ways to what Marcuse (1985) has called ‘displacement pressure’. People who are banned but still in place do not suffer from actual displacement but from the anxieties, uncertainties, insecurities, and temporalities that arise from possible displacement in the near future. Banishment can also be regarded as a variant of Marcuse’s (1985) ‘exclusionary displacement’ or the impossibility of certain groups to move into a place or a neighbourhood due to rent levels or other circumstances — like bans. Unlike displacement and eviction, banishment has the advantage of capturing both the process of removing the poor and of preventing them from coming back. Banishment may not have immediate tangible effects, but it forces the banned to consider whether they are worthy of being in a place and whether it is worth fighting for it. In other words, it leaves the subject of the ban in a permanent state of spatial precariousness. As Roy (2017) formulates it, banishment ‘is predicated on the permanently insecure possession of property and personhood’.

Banishment, as opposed to the term ‘exclusion’ for example, underlines the coercive power of the state to impose spatial segregation. Exclusion often refers to informal power practices that make people unwelcome or unwanted in certain places (Beckett and Herbert, 2009). Unlike the concepts of ‘displacement pressure’ and ‘exclusionary displacement’, banishment underscores the coercive power of the state to impose spatial segregation. In Landskrona, banishment is a proactive state policy to alter the socio-demographic fabric of the city (people who want to spend more than a third of their disposable income on rent are not allowed in). Displacement pressure and exclusionary displacement are not imposed policy measures but the indirect outcome of rising housing prices or rent levels.

Banishment is an old phenomenon, but what is new according to Roy (2017) is the renewal of banishment at the urban scale. We witness the (re-)introduction of all sorts of spatial bans in American cities, from park exclusion orders to civil gang injunctions. Based on case studies in Los Angeles and Chicago, Roy (2017) insists that the eviction wave following the foreclosure crisis in the United States should best be interpreted as ‘racial banishment’ rather than a narrow, legal event — thereby widening the narrow interpretation of eviction as a legal removal act. Roy (2017) insists that the systematic eviction of African Americans from central locations in American cities cannot simply be explained through the sanitized notion of ‘displacement’, since that leaves open the possibility to interpret the systematic disappearance of African-Americans from city centres as the unfortunate outcome of the – otherwise normal – workings of the housing market. Likewise, ‘gentrification’ insufficiently underlines the workings of the ‘racial state’ (Wyly et al., 2012; see also Goldberg, 2001) in the production of a new ‘racial-demographic fabric’ in inner cities, over and above possible socio-economic transformations in urban neighbourhoods. In the Landskrona case, the racial nature of the banishment tactics is impossible to judge since no statistical evidence is available, while mainstream media in Sweden conventionally do not mention peoples’ ethnic or national backgrounds. However, anecdotal evidence (see footnote 1) suggests that even in Landskrona those exclusionary housing policies have a clear ethnic dimension.

Roy (2017) takes her cue from Willie Fleming from the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign. In an interview with the UCLA Institute on Inequality and Democracy, Fleming (cited in Vera,
explains why he prefers the term ‘banishment’ rather than ‘displacement’ to understand the outcome of the foreclosure crisis in poor Black neighbourhoods:

Displacement is when the public housing is uprooted and people are moved downtown. … Banishment is when there is no place for you to go. Places for you to go are jails or death. That’s banishment. When you look at the affordable housing rates. When you look at affordability on the lowest ends and you see it’s not existent. When you look at the bulldozers that are coming in. When you look at the pressures on public housing. You quickly realize that there is nowhere else for you to be.

This quote clearly resonates with the notion of ‘city-less citizen’ mentioned earlier: under the current banishment regime, poor population segments find it increasingly difficult to be somewhere or go somewhere – they become citizens without a city.

In short, banishment as a concept has the advantage of capturing the discursive exclusion of population segments from certain places, with or without physical consequences; it is better suited to function as the dialectical opposite of boosterism; it captures better the spatial precariousness people may find themselves in; it stresses the proactive role of the state in installing spatial segregation; it allows to highlight the anxieties and temporalities people are exposed to when banned from certain places; and it highlights how the lack or absence of affordable housing ‘casts a net’ over the city that makes it difficult or impossible for poor population segments to reside in the city. They are banned, even if no such legal order has been issued and even if no authority has told them to move. Rather than an enforceable legal measure, banishment imposes a permanent ‘condition’ of insecurity and temporality for poor residents that has consequences or one day may have consequences.

The uses of banishment
Through banning poor people, poverty is de facto banned from the city; it does not matter whether or where it continues to exist as long as it does not (re)enter the city. In the process, the social problem of urban poverty is being reduced to a spatial problem – this is what Smith (1993) has labelled ‘spatial fetishism’. The use of banishment is so effective because it simply removes poverty from the political agenda: if it is not present, it does not need to be fought. The regulation of space through bans becomes a very powerful tool to set the political agenda. Bans, then, are a very elegant and effective spatial tool to depoliticize a wide range of social problems such as poverty, addiction, mental health, homelessness, begging, sleeping rough, and petty crime, amongst other issues. Even worse, bans lay the blame for socio-economic conditions with the victims: it is the very presence of the poor themselves that is the cause of (inner-city) poverty, and thus, they must be kept out.

Banishment ultimately does nothing to fight the actual problem, implement change in the neighbourhood, take care of the affected, or create awareness around an urban issue. Moreover, it not only fails to address poverty and its associated social problems, it also diverts political attention away from the actual problem: the political problem is not poverty but poor people entering the city. Consequently, it legitimizes a reductionist political agenda that, however superficial, can easily be mobilized in an electoral context, for example. Most crucially, by reducing the problem of poverty to the whereabouts of the poor, the precarious situation of the poor will of course only worsen, since their problems are not addressed properly, or at all.

Banishment may have been (and still is) a flawed tactic to tackle urban poverty, but according to Coy (2008), the banishment of outcasts fulfils deeper functions than merely the removal of bodies. It seeks to regulate and remake society by displaying the limits of acceptable behaviour
and asserting civic norms and communal mores, such as work morale. It effectively demonstrates both the power of city authorities and the boundary between inclusion and exclusion in the urban community. Seen this way, banishment is an instrument not just to exclude the poor but also to install social discipline and assert morality over the remaining society. Therefore, the performance of acts of banishment are just as much demonstrations of inclusion as of exclusion.

Banishment is particularly hard to fight since bans tend to be characterized by a considerable dose of hybridity (Beckett and Herbert, 2010). They remain largely invisible to the public, they do not necessitate the use of force, and they are difficult to prove ineffective. Because of their elusive nature, these ‘social control mechanisms provide minimal avenues for contestation, thereby diminishing the rights-bearing capacity of their targets’ (Beckett and Herbert, 2010: 4). Further, due to the relatively low enforceability of bans, people may not feel the need to organize themselves and fight the ban, if they could, since they can somehow be bypassed or simply ignored at a certain risk.

Further, a ban can be imposed on the poor, but it can also be imposed on landlords who rent out to poor people. This is obviously the case in Landskrona, but it has historical antecedents. There is no space for an overview here, but it suffices to point to at least one historical example with clear analogies with our empirical case. In the second half of the 1500s, a time of warfare and economic hardship in large parts of Europe, many cities were facing increasing immigration from the countryside. The reaction of many city authorities was to drive these unemployed strangers, most often without (serious) criminal record, out of town through banishment. Not that banishment was a particularly effective method to deal with poverty: the penniless poor would often make it back into town – the only place to find food and work. For example, city authorities in the German city of Ulm, failing to staunch the flow of vagrants into the city, issued a new edict in 1586. It not only prohibited the idle from residing inside the city walls but also forbade any citizen to provide housing or charity to any ‘discharged soldiers, vagrants, sturdy beggars, and all other dissolute, loose, and good-for-nothing riff-raff ’ on penalty of a two Gulden fine (Coy, 2008).

In short, banishment is a crude but effective tool because it removes the responsibility of the city authorities for the well-being of poor people, it preserves the status quo for society while making things worse for those affected by the ban, it reminds the rest of society of whom qualifies as a ‘worthy citizen’, and it is very difficult to resist or mobilize against.

**Conclusion**

Landskrona is the first Swedish city to implement city-wide policies that prohibit private landlords from renting out to low-income groups. It is not uncommon that landlords implement income requirements, but as a city-wide policy measure imposed upon every landlord, private or public, it is new. This outspoken strategy of the city of Landskrona since 2012 to target people on social benefits or low income in Landskrona illustrates the city’s will to change its social fabric not through attracting wealth but banishing want. By halting potential newcomers on benefits or low income and ‘unserious’ landlords prepared to rent out to them, the city has installed a two-sided process of banishment. On the one hand, banishment is a top-down, city-wide urban renewal strategy that ‘casts a net’ over the city that closes in on property and personhood, on the right to reside somewhere, without necessary physical displacement or eviction or other immediate action. On the other hand, it is a bottom-up approach that ‘pulls the mat’ from underneath the feet of the poor, who have nowhere left to reside in the city, by closing
in on their housing opportunities and possibilities. The poor effectively become ‘citizens without a city’. In either case, the concept highlights the proactive role of the state in establishing a banishment regime in the city that not only removes people but also prevents them from moving in.

Accordingly, banishment can be regarded as a ‘bundle of tactics’ that can be mobilized at will and imposed in hard or soft ways to curb citizens’ residential freedom and landlords’ discretionary powers. It can basically take any form, from discursive stigmatization to outright displacement. Whatever the effective outcome, banishment imposes a permanent state of anxiety, insecurity, and temporality on poor residents that may linger for a long time. This has major methodological consequences. In order to capture the full effect of banishment (and its transformation in time, perhaps into new forms of displacement), we need longitudinal research to fully understand its long-term effects for citizens – and for landlords for that matter – and the shifting social-demography of the city.

References


