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Dominique Kalifa, *Vice, Crime, and Poverty: How the Western Imagination Invented the Underworld*. Translated by Susan Emanuel. Foreword by Sara Maza. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, xiv + 278 pp. Notes and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-231-18742-8; \$34.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-231-54726-0.

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As perhaps the foremost historian of crime and punishment in modern France, Dominique Kalifa's scholarship has long set the standard in the field. *Les Bas-fonds: Histoire d'un imaginaire*, now available in English, will serve to further expand Kalifa's already considerable international reputation.[1] Following a genealogical approach, the author traces the changing valences of the "lower depths"—or perhaps more precisely, the imagined denizens of the "lower depths"—from the early nineteenth century through the interwar period, along with a brief foray into the present day where he notes that the term has largely disappeared from the contemporary lexicon, subsumed by the imaginings of social conservatives who speak of a permanent "underclass" who have failed to adapt to the neoliberal "realities" of our post-industrial turn.

Since the nineteenth-century poor do not speak to us directly, what we know of them has always been mediated through the eyes of others, and those writings tell us less about their plight and more about bourgeois sensibilities and attitudes toward their existence. Unlike Louis Chevalier's classic work *Laboring Classes, Dangerous Classes* which endeavored, yet failed to find, a reflection between literary depictions of the poor and their lived reality,[2] Kalifa examines how representations of the *bas-fonds* were articulated, disseminated, and consumed in a Western world utterly transformed by the enormous social changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution and the advent of cultural modernity. This is not to imply that the author denies the widespread existence of abject poverty for large swaths of the urban proletariat, a point reiterated throughout the study, but he takes great pains to point out that the concomitant association of poverty with immorality was a cultural construction whose basic intention was "to stigmatize the intolerable, to remove responsibility from the elites, and to reaffirm the values that underlay the dominant identity" (p. 222).

At the heart of *Vice, Crime, and Poverty* lies Kalifa's conception of the "social imaginary," an anthropological heuristic which he has utilized in some of his other works, perhaps most notably in *L'Encre et le Sang* (1995) and more recently in *La Véritable Histoire de la Belle Époque* (2017) where he outlined the changing conceptualizations of the chrononym in a variety of media.[3] The *bas-fonds*, were, in effect, a palimpsest onto which bourgeois observers projected their own deep-seated fears and anxieties. Kalifa analyzes the "narrative or thematic codifications" (p. 199), which governed these imaginings, uncovering the recurrent "repertoire of collective figures and

identities which *produce* and *institute* the social more than they *reflect* it” (p. 7). Both descriptive and prescriptive, the normative power of these projections reified cultural boundaries and instantiated the marginalization and demonization of the poor in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

What sets this book apart from Kalifa’s larger body of work is its geographic capaciousness as he contextualizes the *bas-fonds* of Paris by comparison to depictions of the poor in other large, urban agglomerations such as New York, London, and Buenos Aires. Given this expansiveness the author’s task is considerable, which is evinced at the book’s outset: “...the description provided here is a place that does not actually exist anywhere; rather, it emerges from a multitude of inquiries, accounts, reporting, and from myriad fictions that endeavored for more than a century to depict the places of poverty and perdition. This is what I call the social imaginary, which I am trying to restore in letter and spirit...” (p. 11). That Kalifa largely succeeds in this undertaking is a testament to his considerable command of a vast array of works drawn from both “high” and “low” culture: novels, newspaper articles (particularly the *fait divers*), social reform literature, police memoirs, films, poetry, and social science treatises.

The book is divided into three, broad chronological sections which chart the changing meanings of the *bas-fonds*. The first section, entitled “The Advent of the Lower Depths,” examines how the boundary between place and population slowly blurred as the *bas-fonds* evolved from its origins as a topographical term denoting miasmatic swamps, sewers, and cesspools during the Middle Ages to a stigmatized site of urban and moral decay by the mid nineteenth century; a foreboding yet strangely alluring liminal space peopled by a motley assortment of individuals whose lives on society’s margins were marked by vice, crime, and poverty. Kalifa notes five archetypal occupants of this imagined realm: thieves, ranging from street urchins to “high flying swindlers;” prostitutes and courtesans who “sexualized” the *bas-fonds* and were “omnipresent” in representations thereof; detainees and convicts who, along with the insane, were relegated to their own Hellish, institutionalized underworlds; and finally gypsies who supposedly incarnated all the pathological traits of the lower depths and were therefore considered inherently alien and separate from legitimate society (pp. 27-30).

Of course, most numerous were the poor, who—aided by Reformation doctrines of predestination and the valorization of labor—were dichotomized into those “deserving” of charity and those who were not (i.e. the ostensibly lazy who “chose” a life of poverty rather than work). Thus, we see the appearance in the social imaginary of the “undeserving poor” who were typically described as “ugly, dirty, infirm, nasty, ragged, contemptible and rootless” (p. 41). As vice and poverty became inextricably intertwined “stigmatization gave way to the desire for detention” via the creation of institutions such as the Bridewell house of correction in London and the *Hôpital General* in Paris, which arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively. While ventures such as these were, in the eyes of Michel Foucault, an expression of monarchical normative power, Kalifa notes that the desire to consign those on society’s margins to such institutions was rarely put into effect due to financial exigencies and conflicts with local administrative officials.[4]

The intense “social fear” of “le peuple,” catalyzed by the French Revolution—revived again and again via the various revolutionary events of the nineteenth century—hardened with the deployment of colonial and racial tropes which depicted the impoverished as a separate “race” in possession of an innate propensity toward rebellion. The most prominent proponent of this

leitmotif was the novelist Eugène Sue whose *Mystères de Paris* became an international bestseller and was arguably the most widely imitated novel of the nineteenth century. Sue equated France's "menacing proletarians" with American Indians--this was a period in which the work of the novelist James Fennimore Cooper was in vogue in France--both of whom he characterized as "savage" races, "far removed from civilization" (p.70). By the fin-de-siècle, the street urchins of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* had been replaced by the "Apaches," violent youth gangs whose frightful sobriquets and customs were supposedly indicative of the Native American tribe.

Advanced by the likes of Benedict Morel, Paul Broca and Cesare Lombroso, nascent medical and anthropological conceptualizations of degeneration played upon such tropes and firmly instantiated the imagined link between race and crime in what might be termed the "scientific imaginary" during roughly the same period of time. "What if the criminal," Kalifa writes, "far from being an indigent person pushed to transgress by poverty or vice--was in fact a degenerate being who was structurally predisposed to do evil?" (p. 171). In other words, crime did not arise from the "social swamp" of the *bas-fonds* but from an innate biological disposition. In this framing, criminals were seen as belonging "to a closed world [and]...almost naturally fated to do evil," which revived older, Gothic figures such as the "monster" in social-scientific discourse by the turn of the twentieth century (p. 172).

The second section of the book, entitled "Scenarios of Society's Underside," examines the ways in which the denizens of the *bas-fonds* were inventoried and catalogued in a variety of texts. While the impulse to list and enumerate had been central to the production of knowledge since the Middle Ages, Kalifa outlines how this inclination to taxonomize was extended to the poor in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The former criminal turned criminalist Eugène François Vidocq boasted of having adopted "the Linnaean method" to classify a wide array of villains in his various written works which were widely copied and served as the basis of modern criminology. The memoirs of policemen, perhaps most notably that of the former Parisian police superintendent Gustave Macé, adopted Vidocq's approach and nomenclature, "extending interminable lists in every direction: the typologies of revelers and prostitutes, of dives and gambling dens, and the hangouts of cutthroats, of prisons and penal colonies" (pp. 86-87). What Kalifa terms the "empire of lists" gave way to voyeuristic evocations of the *bas-fonds* as numerous writers, philanthropists and journalists made their way into the slums to see for themselves the decadence and squalor of the demimonde. While there was a reformist impulse to some of this literature, perhaps most notably in the works of Hugo and Charles Dickens, interest was generally spurred by a prurient "fascination with the lower depths that arose from a thirst for escape and social exoticism" (p. 6) that also provided a convenient means of moralizing for elites. This sort of "slumming" would soon extend beyond the literati and gradually became part and parcel of the standard tourist experience by the interwar period as visitors would make their way to Montparnasse out of a nostalgic impulse, in search of the dangerous and alluring world that existed only in their imaginations.

The third and final section of the book ("Ebbing of an Imaginary") examines how conceptions of the *bas-fonds* and its denizens "gradually came undone around the middle of the twentieth century" (p. 162). It is not coincidental that with the birth and expansion of the modern welfare state--social security schemes, economic stabilization programs, unemployment and accident insurance, income redistribution to families, public housing and rent subsidies, and community and neighborhood development plans, all intended to reduce economic instability and vulnerability--one sees a reconceptualization of the poor as victims of socioeconomic inequities

that were structural in nature, rather than the result of individual moral failings. While such programs helped ameliorate poverty in the post-war period, the economic and social crises of the mid-1970s, Kalifa argues, effectively “reactivated the figures of the bad poor and of those who profited from and exploited poverty” (p. 188). Thus arose the specter of the “welfare queen” in the United States and the “chômeurs canapés” in France both of whom were seen as bilking the system. The deployment of such crude tropes allowed social conservatives to castigate the modern welfare state by claiming that such efforts had effectively created a permanent “underclass” entirely dependent upon government assistance.

The breadth of insights contained in *Vice, Crime and Poverty* is breathtaking and at times overwhelming. Indeed, the work is a taxonomy of taxonomies, but it is nonetheless engaging, methodologically sophisticated, and thought provoking. The study is also quite timely in the way in which it foregrounds the current fixation and demonization of a new “Other” (i.e., immigrants, particularly those emanating from the Middle East). Jurists, politicians, sociologists and members of law enforcement in France often blame crime on a cultural poverty unique to suburban neighborhoods and housing projects. This shift in the explanation of crime from socioeconomics and/or psychosocial maladjustment to the “aberrant” cultural norms supposedly present in immigrant communities has been accompanied by a method of policing, which—as exemplified in the riots which broke out in Clichy-sous-Bois in 2005—constitutes a “territorialized approach to urban crime in state-classified or locally identified ‘bad’ areas with high concentrations of immigrant and foreign populations.”<sup>[5]</sup> When, some fourteen years ago, then Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy declared, following the shooting death of an eleven-year-old boy in the Parisian suburb of La Courneuve: “We shall clean the ‘cité des 4000’ (name of the housing project where the shooting took place) with a Kärcher,”<sup>[6]</sup> he was reprimanded by President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin. Now, in the age of Trump and the daily deployment of such racist dog whistles as “bad hombres,” Sarkozy’s discourse seems almost quaint by comparison. As Kalifa’s brilliant work so clearly demonstrates, such representations are not new, as we are seemingly unable to extricate ourselves from longstanding forms of representation. Thus, the specter of the “dangerous classes” remains very much with us, but it has, like the nineteenth and early twentieth-century images of “barbarians, savages and redskins” (p. 222), been “repurposed and superimposed” on a new group that generates fear and anxiety in the Western imaginary.

## NOTES

[1] Dominique Kalifa, *Les bas-fonds. Histoire d’un imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

[2] Louis Chevalier, *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, trans., Frank Jellinek (New York: Howard Fertig, 1973).

[3] Dominique Kalifa, *L’encre et le sang: Récits de crimes et société à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Broché, 1995); Dominique Kalifa, *La véritable histoire de la Belle Époque* (Paris: Fayard, 2017).

[4] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 1964).

[5] Susan Terrio, “Criminalizing ‘Immigrant’ Youth in France,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2009), 93.

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[6] *Libération* (23 June 2005). “Kärcher” is a German brand of a high-pressure power-washer commonly used by shopkeepers to remove refuse and fecal matter left by dogs or pigeons from doorways and sidewalks. The use of the product’s name in this context—as to “clean” or “flush” out (“nettoyer au Kärcher”)—was offensive to many.

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