UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Urban Spaces and Social Polarization

2526-1-F8805N007

Learning objectives

The course aims to:

- Develop analytical skills to recognise and interpret territorial inequalities and social polarisation;
- Explore everyday urban contexts and mechanisms that challenge and counteract social polarisation;
- Provide tools for the critical analysis of territorial policies and interventions;
- Foster argumentation skills, critical thinking, and the ability to engage in constructive dialogue and debate.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Knowledge and understanding

- Demonstrate in-depth knowledge of key theories on territorial segregation, social polarisation, and urban stigmatisation;
  -Understand the complexity of social and spatial processes related to urban marginalisation and the dynamics between city centres and peripheral areas.

2. Applying knowledge and understanding

- Apply theoretical models to the analysis of real-world cases, with particular attention to spatial concentration and the stigmatisation of minority groups.

3. Making judgements

- Critically evaluate public policies and media discourses concerning urban peripheries and marginalised populations;
- Assess how spatial, economic, social, and cultural factors interact in processes of exclusion.

4. Communication skills

- Clearly and effectively articulate complex concepts and arguments, using appropriate disciplinary language.

5. Learning skills

- Develop independent learning and research capabilities;
- Integrate theoretical, empirical, and policy-related dimensions in the analysis of urban segregation and marginality.

Contents

The course examines the concepts of concentration, polarisation, and territorial segregation, with particular attention to spatial inequalities in contemporary urban settings. It explores theoretical models and definitions of the ghetto, hyperghetto, and anti-ghetto, as well as the multiple scales at which segregation occurs. Structural factors—such as housing, labour markets, and welfare systems—are analysed alongside racialisation processes. Special focus is given to mechanisms of territorial stigmatisation and to forms of symbolic and cultural resistance, including trap music and the construction of Islamic identity. The course also critically addresses urban policies targeting peripheral areas. All theoretical content will be linked to the analysis of concrete case studies.

Detailed program

The course provides students with analytical tools and conceptual frameworks for an in-depth understanding of social and territorial polarisation processes. It focuses on the interplay between political and socio-economic dimensions that underpin spatial inequalities and segregation dynamics. Through theoretical discussion and empirical case studies, students will learn to critically assess how territorial exclusion and stigmatisation take shape in contemporary urban contexts.

Key topics addressed include:

- Definitions of concentration, polarisation, and territorial segregation;
- Concepts of ghetto, hyper-ghetto, and anti-ghetto;
- The different spatial scales of territorial polarisation;
- The significance and evolving nature of the centre–periphery axis;
- Residential concentration and spatial violence;
- Comparative models of segregation: North American, Northern European, and Southern European;
- Main drivers of (de)segregation: housing (e.g. housing policies, informal occupations), labour (e.g. agricultural ghettos), welfare (e.g. healthcare, education), and racialisation processes;
- The relationship between segregation and migrant background;
- Territorial stigmatisation: origins, symbolic agencies, and main socio-political effects;
- Structural violence and cultural responses: forms of resistance, opposition, and radicalisation (e.g. trap music, the ‘bad guy’ persona, Islamic identity);
- Public space and social exclusion: urban struggles, the rhetoric of decorum, and penal populism;
- Urban policies for marginalised areas: social mix, urban regeneration, and politique de la ville—with a focus on the limitations of sectoral interventions and the need for multidimensional, integrated approaches.

Theoretical concepts will be critically applied through the analysis of real-world case studies involving the spatial concentration and stigmatisation of minority communities.

Prerequisites

A good capacity for independent learning and critical analysis, along with a strong interest in urban dynamics and social inequalities.

Teaching methods

The course (total: 56 hours) combines:

- Lectures (33.5 hours): supported by slides, empirical case studies, and theoretical references;
- Workshops and interactive activities (22.5 hours): including dialogic discussions, small-group exercises, guest speaker presentations, and guided debates.

Specifically, the course will be structured as follows:

- 3 sessions of 3 hours, 1 session of 2 hours, and 15 sessions of 1.5 hours delivered as traditional lectures (total: 33.5 hours);
- 15 workshop/interactive sessions of 1.5 hours each (total: 22.5 hours).

Assessment methods

The final assessment will consist of an oral examination based on the study materials presented and made available on the course platform. Positive evaluation will be given to students who demonstrate strong critical analysis skills, an in-depth understanding of the topics, the ability to make connections between the main themes of the course, a solid command of the technical and conceptual vocabulary of the discipline, and the capacity to provide concrete and relevant examples related to the issues discussed.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

The professor will collect all the materials covered in the course into a handout that will be made available to students.

Sustainable Development Goals

NO POVERTY | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES