# Shantytowns: Administering migrant populations through urban policies



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**ABSTRACT**

*Bidonvilles*, *baracche*, and *chabolas* have endured in collective memory as spaces that were home to internal, colonial, and foreign immigrants during the years of strong growth of the twentieth century. As sites of an impoverished and difficult life, they embodied the flip side of this period of widespread improvement in living conditions. Recent research in the history of these neighborhoods has revealed how the primarily immigrant origin of their population contributed to their identification and categorization as a new problem. The public action targeting them was also in keeping with administrative policies for immigrant populations, and in certain cases even with policies for managing migratory flows.

Une ceinture de bidonvilles entoure Paris :

A NANTERRE : « Nous n'osons plus sortir le soir », disent les habitants des pavillons

A ARGENTEUIL : Une cité de taudis dans les ruines du château de Mirabeau

*France Soir*, October 29, 1957, cited by Marie-Claude Blanc-Chaléard, *En finir*

*avec les bidonvilles. Immigration et politique du logement dans la France des Trente Glorieuses*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2016, p. 42.

The period of intense urbanization between the 1920s and 1960s was accompanied, especially in the cities of Southern Europe, with the development of poor peripheries that lacked facilities and services, and consisted of small fragile buildings built in violation of regulations. A new lexicon appeared everywhere to designate these materially and legally precarious neighborhoods: *bidonvilles* in France, *baracche* in Rome, *chabolas* (shacks) in Madrid, and *barracas* in Barcelona. They offered refuge, especially but not exclusively, to newcomers to the city, as well as to internal, foreign, and colonial migrants who had come to seek a better life. However, this characteristic of their population often contributed to how these new urban categories were defined. Public action intended for these neighborhoods was also in keeping with administrative policies for migrant populations, and in certain cases even with policies for the management of migratory flows. This identification of an urban form with a population type explains—in France in particular—why historians of immigration and later of colonial societies took an interest in the first shantytowns. The objective here is to provide an account of how the category of a shantytown as a space populated with immigrants was constructed.

## Shantytowns, a European history of the twentieth century

In Italy, *baracche* became a major public problem during the 1920s in the context of fascism and its urban planning for its capital of Rome. In Morocco and Algeria, the term "*bidonville*"—a Casablancan toponym that appeared in the 1920s—became a generic term in the 1930s, and was brought to the metropole in the 1950s by colonial civil servants. In Madrid, the use of the term "*chabola*" to designate such precarious housing became widespread in the 1950s. These categories were created between the 1920s and 1950s to refer to this reality, which was essentially disappearing in Europe by the 1970s and 1980s. They were characteristic of the years of strong urban growth in which migrant population flows toward major cities were the most intense.

However, this reality was not entirely new, for in certain respects it was no more than the extension of forms of urban expansion for working-class households dating back to the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, their importance increased considerably in the context of accelerating urban growth, as the gap widened between the ways of life that they were home to and the standards of modern life. The development of intervention by public authorities in urban planning during the twentieth century, especially beginning in the 1940s, is one factor that explains why these age-old realities were now perceived as a new problem. In societies whose structure, economic organization, and state's operating patterns did not enable the integration of all city-dwellers within the city as regulated in this manner—particularly in the large cities of Southern Europe—the planning and regulatory densification that accompanied this growth did not prevent the continuation of such forms of impoverished urbanization. They nevertheless relegated it to illegal activity, dooming their inhabitants to even greater precariousness. As the differentiation of construction standards applied to each area prompted the reclassification of real estate values, some owners chose to make depreciated plots (typically those on which no construction was allowed) more profitable through their illegal subdivision, thereby giving rise to precarious neighborhoods. This evolution was common to many large cities in Southern Europe, especially capitals, where it unfolded according to a globally convergent chronology. However, these neighborhoods differed on the local level, as the forms taken by housing varied—from wooden planks and corrugated iron in Nanterre to brick in Madrid—as did their forms of illegality, the degree of hardship of life in these spaces, and their gap in relation to local housing standards.

## Immigrant neighborhoods

Internal and foreign immigrant populations were generally highly overrepresented in such neighborhoods, although

the heterogeneity of administrative categories and the vagueness of their definition make it difficult to make comparisons. Areas of *chabolas* in Madrid were peopled by Andalusians, Extremadurans, and Manchegos fleeing the score-settling of the post-civil war period and the misery of the countryside. French *bidonvilles* were peopled by Spaniards, Portuguese, and North Africans from Algeria in particular, who represented the primary contingents of immigrants during the 1950s and 1960s. The policy from the 1950s onward of building social housing for French households of middle- and working-class employees—along with the segmentation of the labor market—explain why there were such few French in the *bidonvilles* of metropolitan France.

These spaces functioned as transitory neighborhoods. Contemporary anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers described the ways of life as well as the forms of socialization, solidarity, and community life that developed there, and that were characteristic of the first generations of immigrants.

## The construction of categories for the informal city by migration control policies

In the analyses and documentation produced on these spaces by public authorities, the press, and experts, the real or presumed social properties of their population—foreign to the city, poor, and even marginal—was always a constituent part of defining the problem.

In France, the censuses of *bidonvilles* generally categorized the population by its origin, mixing nationality (Spanish, Portuguese), colonial origin (North African or French Muslim from Algeria), and sometimes ethnic criteria (Blacks). At all levels of public administration, the question of *bidonvilles* was long entrusted to services connected to the administration of colonial populations. When ad hoc services or offices were created, they still included staff recognized for its colonial experience.

Policies targeting these neighborhoods aimed to check their growth, and later to demolish them. In doing so, they led to the control of populations, whose mobility was emphasized by public authorities. In Madrid, this control took the form of extensive registration of inhabitants from these working-class peripheries, with authorities regretting their inability to stay up-to-date given the highly mobile nature of this population. In colonial Algeria, public action targeting *bidonvilles* was notably motivated by the need to control indigenous “floating populations.”

In Spain, the category “*chabola*” appeared in a law on housing policy, with the dual objective of slowing migration to the capital and combatting the development of insalubrious peripheries. In 1957, a decree forbade individuals without housing from settling in Madrid, and defined the illegal aspects of Madrid’s *chabolas* (subdivision and construction without a permit, conducting business in *chabolas*, and residing there). It established punishments for offenders, and created an ad hoc police detachment to ensure its enforcement. It especially provided for returning the inhabitants of *chabolas* to the town where they had previously resided. These provisions adopted by the Francoist regime took up those implemented for Rome thirty years earlier by the fascist regime, which also regulated migration toward the capital, and thought to resolve the problem of *baracche* by repatriating their inhabitants. However, preparatory studies for operations aiming to reduce this population reveal that a considerable portion of these areas—over one-third in the 1927 census—was born in Rome. These numbers contradicting the assumptions of fascist policy were kept secret by the administration.

Urban policies for demolishing slums were also policies for regulating immigration to the capital, and ultimately policies for redistributing populations in space. Furthermore, these authoritarian repatriations of families migrating to Italian and Spanish capitals can be compared to the colonization programs implemented by the fascist and Francoist regimes, which were also policies of town and country planning via the displacement of populations.

Shantytowns and their local variants—pockets of poor, ill-equipped, and illegal dwellings—absorbed the strong demographic growth of cities in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The anxiety sparked by the out-of-town, colonial, or foreign origin of a considerable portion of their populations, along with its mobility, were no doubt

one of the elements that contributed to isolating this episode in the long history of urban extensions for the poor during the modern period. Acting on these neighborhoods amounted to acting on their population; the urban policies that targeted them were also meant to regulate migration toward large cities and to monitor their population.

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