

## Following Loïc Wacquant into the Field

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It is unusual for an ethnographer to engage in sustained theoretical work and for a social theorist to carry out intensive fieldwork. Loïc Wacquant is that rare scholar who has joined these two practices and successfully straddled the divide between the often-indifferent and sometimes mutually scornful tribes who defend them. This is attested, for instance, by his co-founding and editing of the interdisciplinary journal *Ethnography* for the past 8 years and being awarded the 2008 Lewis Coser Prize for “theoretical agenda-setting work” by the Theory Section of the American Sociological Association. This ability to wed abstract theory and the concrete detail and drama of fieldwork, and to do so across disciplinary boundaries, is what makes him one of the most original and stimulating sociologists writing today.<sup>1</sup>

From his early studies in industrial economics, through his training and close collaboration with Pierre Bourdieu in France and his experiences in colonial New Caledonia, to his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Chicago under the direction of William Julius Wilson, Wacquant’s intellectual trajectory has been informed by sociological traditions rooted on both sides of the Atlantic (the French more theoretical and the American more empirical). He is internationally renowned for his joint work with Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 1999) and for his path-breaking “carnal sociology” of boxing in the black American ghetto (Wacquant 2004a,b,c), but the corpus of his work spans a gamut of issues, from comparative urban inequality and racial domination to carceral institutions to the politics of knowledge and role of the intellectual in the public sphere in the age of hegemonic neoliberalism. The following dialogue “The Body, the Ghetto and the Penal State” (held on the occasion of the third

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<sup>1</sup>Wacquant’s work has engaged and been engaged by scholars across the range of disciplines, from sociology, anthropology, and law to urban planning, cultural studies, ethnic studies, criminology, political science, public policy, geography, and philosophy. See, to give but one example, the three symposia on his book *Urban Outcasts* in the journals *City* (December 2007, March and June 2008), *Urban Geography* (In Press), and *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (forthcoming), and the Author Meets Critics sessions on the book at the 2008 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association.

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“Ethnografeast” in Lisbon, Portugal, in June 2007) retraces Wacquant’s intellectual formation and explores the role of ethnography in his numerous intellectual projects. The focus of this commentary is to illuminate some of the key themes of his work that make it so compelling and provide avenues for propelling qualitative sociology forward both theoretically and methodologically.

### The mission of ethnography

Wacquant argues that the distinctive mission of ethnography is not simply to report on the inner workings of social worlds based on close-up observation but also to help us break with intellectual and political hegemonies—that is, with preconstructions of the sociological object that obscure the underlying mechanisms of social domination and stratification. In sharp contrast with the Chicago School tradition in sociology and the interpretivist current led by Geertz in anthropology, he also considers ethnography a tool for theoretical construction in its own right.

In his studies on urban marginality, on both Chicago’s South Side Black Belt in the US and the working-class exurbs (“*banlieues*”) of Paris, France, Wacquant utilizes (Wacquant 2008a) ethnography both to cut through the exotic discourses of violence and deviance (dominant in the media, public debate, and the scientific imagination) and to interrogate the makeup of social structure and experience in those stigmatized territories (“spaces of relegation”). In *Urban Outcasts*, he calls attention to the devaluation felt by people who occupy tainted social spaces and the manner in which they adopt similar strategies of managing this territorial stigma. In analyzing the de-industrialization and social involution of these spaces, he spotlights the state (with its constantly changing forms and functions) as the major determining force generating urban marginality. Wacquant argues that the “implosion” of America’s dark ghetto and its replacement by a new constellation of racial and class domination he calls the “hyperghetto” was produced by a historical sequence of practices and policies. First, the embedded liberal state created housing projects following schema of racialized exclusion; next, the neo-liberal state enabled and promoted de-industrialization while social services were reduced or eliminated. The shrinking of the welfare state was matched by the growth of the penal state and the elaboration of new forms of social control to contain brewing social disorder at the bottom of the class and caste hierarchy (Wacquant 2009). As a result, Wacquant points out that official policies often paradoxically reinforce the very dynamics of marginalization they claim to be combating.

Turning to his work on embodiment, specifically *Body and Soul: Ethnographic Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, Wacquant (2004a) explicates his radicalization of Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus.”<sup>2</sup> He insists that while ethnography must be theoretically driven, it also must prioritize the elucidation of the practical knowledge of agents, which can be grasped by deploying the embodied capacities of the analyst. Carnal sociology, premised on deep immersion utilizing the body as a vector of knowledge, is a methodological and theoretical tool to analyze the hidden material and symbolic dimensions that define a particular social world and the mutual penetration of agent and world. In this case, acquiring a

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu defines “habitus” as a system of schemata of perception, tacit knowledges, and abilities, born of patterned social influences and sedimented in the body. Habitus, Bourdieu argues, operates below the level of consciousness and reflexivity to guide our cognition and conduct. (See Bourdieu 1990, pp. 53, 56; see also Wacquant’s (2004c) compact recapitulation of the genealogy and functions of this oft-misunderstood concept.)

practical mastery of the craft of boxing, which Wacquant did over a period of three years, provides one of the methodological vehicles for uncovering the cognitive categories, technical dispositions, and desires that define pugilism as practice. Here, the theory of habitus and the method of apprenticeship work reciprocally to illuminate the social universe under analysis.

Wacquant clearly differentiates his ethnographic approach from the ex-post-facto reflexivity of postmodern anthropology and the subjectivism of auto-ethnography. Instead, he advocates a constant reflexivity inscribed in the research process, which allows the ethnographer to remain objective to the fieldsite, the informants, and the methodological and theoretical frameworks at the very moment of their deployment. This conception of “epistemic reflexivity,” central to Bourdieu’s sociological epistemology, informs all of Wacquant’s work. It is well illustrated by his essay “Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography” (Wacquant 2002a), in which he probes several major pitfalls into which all ethnographers may fall (himself included). His primary critique is that the lack of reflexivity that permeates the practice of ethnography in mainstream US urban sociology creates an array of systematic errors in the scientific process. Three particularly salient dangers are lapsing into the commonsense categories of thought of the actors under scrutiny, infusing analysis with moralizing narratives, and succumbing to hegemonic frames as well as to the strictures of academic decorum.<sup>3</sup>

For Wacquant, the premier imperative of theoretically driven reflexive ethnography is to break from the commonsense categories that dominate everyday life. This is a methodological implication of the epistemological school of “historical rationalism” as articulated by Gaston Bachelard, a tradition that Bourdieu adapted to sociology in *The Craft of Sociology* (Bourdieu et al. 1990). Instead of parroting the common sense of agents by objectifying one’s experience in the field (as well as one’s sociological tools), the ethnographer must construct analytic categories for parsing the phenomena in question. This requires a constant dialectical analysis of all categories of thought throughout the process of fieldwork and beyond. Wacquant argues that folk categories are inadequate for sociological analysis; instead, we need to construct analytic concepts, not simply adopt lay notions. However, because lay notions are part and parcel of the world, we must pay attention to them; they enter into our sociological purview as objects of analysis, data to be explained and not frames through which we explain. Wacquant deploys a fruitful technique for getting at them by engaging in the practices *in situ* (i.e., in real time, places, and people) and in the first person, to learn with his body the categories, sensitivities, and abilities specific to the milieu in question. Then this practical grasp must be reconverted into analytical language. Only in this way can the ethnographer “go native” and return from the field as a sociologist.

Wacquant, unlike most practitioners of fieldwork, attributes a distinct theoretical mission to ethnography: that of helping us construct theory, but in a way that differs from both the inductive approach of “grounded theory” of the symbolic interactionists (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and the deductive approach of the “extended case method” (Burawoy 1998). As outlined in *Urban Outcasts*, ethnographic research must begin by placing the spaces/places in question within the *diachronic flow of historical transformations* (i.e., to understand their political constructions over time). It must also embed field observations in comparative institutional analysis showing the structural conditions that make certain experiences and

<sup>3</sup> What uninformed readers miss is the analytical distinction between the pitfalls of ethnography (e.g., romanticism, sanitization, underdeveloped theory, and the linkage of micro-situations to larger structural trends) and the execution of Wacquant’s own work in relation to those challenges. See Wacquant (2002a,b).

practices possible and plausible. In doing so, Wacquant demonstrates how theory is indispensable in capturing the underlying macrostructural determinants that simultaneously govern the lived relations and meanings of everyday reality for the marginalized city dweller.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, theory, fieldwork, and institutional analysis are mutually intertwined so that there is a constant blending of reflection and observation in the process of knowledge production.

Finally, Wacquant discusses the role of writing ethnography and the manner in which he draws upon sociological, ethnographic, and literary styles, to craft a mode of expression intended to convey the vibrancy of social life and take the reader across the multiple layers of the world in question: the sociological voice provides the conceptual tools to explain the structures and mechanisms that organize the world in question; the ethnographic voice captures ways of thinking, feeling, and acting within that world; the literary voice speaks to the experience of the subject, who in this case is also the analyst. Interweaving these modes of writing conveys the systematic coherence between the theory of habitus, the methodological use of apprenticeship as research technique, and the use of the body as vector of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of his fieldwork on urban marginalization and boxing as body craft, Wacquant discovered the pivotal place of the prison in the lives of young black men in the hyperghetto. This led him to concentrate on the penal state as a central political force in three distinct senses: the penal system has become central to the functioning of the state at ground level; it is the product of new public policies that are regulating the poor through punitive measures; and it is reshaping public culture and citizenship in the United States at the start of the new century.<sup>6</sup> In *Punishing the Poor*, Wacquant (2009) analyzes how the public policies of “workfare” (which tears the safety net of social services and subjects the lower class to the “invisible hand” of the de-regulated labor market) mesh with the expansion of the penal dragnet (the “iron fist” of the state) to constitute a two-pronged mechanism to regulate marginality in the post-Fordist city.

By bringing together the ghetto, the body, and the state in both its social and penal components, this dialogue retraces Wacquant’s intellectual trajectory and brings to light the conceptual and empirical linkages that organize his research agenda. The overlapping biographical, theoretical, and political relations between these seemingly disconnected lines of investigations become visible, and with them the intellectual gains obtained by tackling these questions jointly. This triadic linkage through the same epistemological and methodological tenets enables Wacquant to probe the micro-, meso-, and macro-textures of everyday life at the bottom of the class and racial structure of the city.

### Intellectuals, academics, and politics

As a social scientist trained on both sides of the Atlantic, in Paris and Chicago, Wacquant is well placed to discuss the different intellectual traditions and roles for which each milieu

<sup>4</sup> See Wacquant (2008a), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Wacquant (2005a) also discusses this strategy of combining writing styles in his “Carnal Connections,” his response to the special issue of *Qualitative Sociology* devoted to critiques of his book *Body & Soul* (vol. 28, no. 2, July 2005). Specifically, see pages 467–472. Nina Eliasoph (2005) discusses the contribution that *Body & Soul* makes to the question of writing, duly repressed in sociology, in her piece “Theorizing from the Neck Down: Why Social Research Must Understand Bodies Acting in Real Space and Time.”

<sup>6</sup> See, among other writings, Wacquant (1999, 2005b, 2008b, 2009).

calls. The French context is defined by the notion that intellectuals are (or must seek to be) both autonomous cultural producers and engaged actors in public debates. (This constitutive activism manifests itself by the injection of their research results into the civic and political spheres.) Within the American context, stamped by the professional structure of the university, the role of the scholar is to produce politically neutral knowledge evaluated by peers.

Wacquant calls upon aspects of each tradition; he seeks to combine their distinctive virtues and jettisons their trappings. He joins the French tradition of civic engagement and the American emphasis of methodological rigor. Such synthesis can be achieved, he argues, only through a collective reflection on the nature and social organization of scientific work and its relation to the ever-changing social forces of economics, the media, and politics.

Wacquant aspires to achieve this goal by communicating with professionals, activists, and political agents operating within the domains of his inquiry. He argues that this communication can be mutually beneficial. It provides intellectuals direct contact with the people at the epicenter of sociological inquiry; in return, the scientific knowledge gained can aid those people in seeing their own practices and predicaments from new angles.

Wacquant wishes to advance a reflexive social science that identifies points of intervention into political issues for individual and collective action. He argues that sociology is well positioned to make a twofold civic contribution. First, it can act as a “solvent of doxa” by challenging the dominant discourses and frames of public debate that tend to present the order of things as a natural, necessary, ineluctable affair.<sup>7</sup> Next, sociology can serve as a “beacon” that casts a light on the causes and consequences of social transformations and points to paths and possibilities for change.

### Concrete coda

The principles that Wacquant lays out concretize “Pierre Bourdieu in the field” (Wacquant 2002b) and have in turn had a practical influence upon the ways I have designed and carried out my own research on race/body/culture. My work examines the revival in Chicago of the Lindy Hop, the original Swing dance that emerged out of the ballrooms of Harlem in the late 1920s and then underwent a renaissance in the late 1990s, becoming a popular white American sensation.<sup>8</sup> This research also examines the contemporary African–American social dance world of Steppin’, done in the predominantly black South Side of Chicago. What emerged are two dances, two outgrowths of the same original Lindy Hop; they are danced in worlds completely separated by race (one exclusively white and the other exclusively black). One is the hypervisible world of the Lindy Hop, accompanied by a media spectacle marketing Gap khaki pants and Coca-Cola, while the other is an almost completely invisible world. While mainstream America celebrated the revival of the Lindy Hop on the North Side of Chicago, across town thrived the world of Steppin’, where the African–American tradition of social-partner dancing continued mostly under the radar of white America, unseen due to the hyperghettoized nature of social life on the South Side of the city. Interrogating these cultural forms at their deepest levels reveals a fundamental contradiction in American society: African–American culture continues to be symbolically central in American culture even as African Americans remain economically and politically marginalized.

<sup>7</sup> See Wacquant (2004a, b, c).

<sup>8</sup> For a historical study of the Lindy Hop in the early years see Stowe (1994). For a study of the Lindy Hop in contemporary society see Vale (1998) and Hancock (2008).

This work is based on a seven-year carnal sociology of dancing venues, during which I became a professional teacher and performer of the Lindy Hop as well as grew proficient in the art of Steppin'. This embodied and practice-based approach enabled me to illuminate the Lindy Hop and Steppin' not as autonomous spheres of cultural activity, but as cultural forms situated within a contested field of racial politics that is never arbitrary or neutral. In my article "Steppin' Out of Whiteness," Wacquant's methodology provides a way of demythologizing dance as a natural expression or innate knowledge of the body, instead understood as the product of arduous bodily labor and inculcation.<sup>9</sup> Through this first-hand exposure, we can understand not just the interconnection among culture, practice, and the body specific to this form of social dance, but more generally the social production and deployment of the corporeal intelligence entailed in any embodied practice—indeed in any practice. By mastering the practices under analysis, I also was able to explore how social actors use cultural practices to uphold or undermine structures of racial domination. By examining how race is enacted through cultural practices, we see how racial stereotypes are perpetuated and reproduced in people's everyday activities, as well as how they are broken down and contested.

In my article "Learning How to Make Life Swing," I mesh the carnal approach with Wacquant's (1997) "analytic of racial domination" to form a framework through which we can break with lay assumptions about racial inequality. This analytic reveals how societies structured in racial dominance must be explained. Using the Lindy Hop as a case study, this analysis forces us to move past prejudice and discrimination as the sole explanations for racial domination. Instead, we realize how the most apparently innocuous of cultural practices operate to reinforce the racial inequality at the basis of American society—in particular how the racial imagination cultivated in both whites and blacks serves as a mechanism by which all actors are complicit in reproducing structures of racial separation.<sup>10</sup>

Using the Lindy Hop revival as an empirical object and analytic vehicle (as Wacquant does with boxing), I examine how culture is mediated through the "racialized habitus" and how this cross-cultural engagement generates three mechanisms of racial domination: Minstrelsy, Whitewashing, and Commodification. Tying these mechanisms together reveals how apparently innocuous expressive cultural forms (such as dance) can be a lynchpin to secure racial hegemony in contemporary American society. Following Wacquant into the field and utilizing his distinct ethnographic approach predicated on theoretical construction and provides linking the lived body, popular culture, and racial inequality. It offers to navigate across the micro-, meso-, and macro-orders while "putting the color" back into the sociology of the American metropolis.

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<sup>9</sup> See Hancock (2005, 2007) for elaborations. For recent inquiries taking up the carnal challenge of practical initiation as a means of ethnographic inquiry, see Auyero and Swistun (2007), Buchholtz (2006), Crossley (2004), Desmond (2007), Lande (2007), McRoberts (2004), Purser (2008), Scheffer (2008), Thiel (2007).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of how the racial imagination manifests itself in everyday discourses, see Hancock (2008).



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