

Loïc Wacquant

Key urban writings

Wacquant, L. (2002) 'Scrutinizing the street: poverty, morality and the pitfalls of urban ethnography', *American Journal of Sociology* 107 (6): 1468-1532.

Wacquant, L. (2004) *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wacquant, L. (2008) *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wacquant, L. (2009) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Wacquant, L. (2016) *The Two Faces of the Ghetto*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Introduction

The prolific student of two giants of social science, Pierre Bourdieu and William Julius Wilson, Loïc Wacquant is an interdisciplinary sociologist who has made varied and original contributions to urban studies, although his influence extends well beyond cities. His foundational writings on carnal sociology, the penal state, ethnoracial domination, and social theory have been translated into two dozen languages and have triggered debates in multiple disciplines. He is best known among urbanists for his comparative analyses and conceptualization of advanced marginality and territorial stigmatization. He is also widely read for his thesis on the penalization of poverty, and his rethinking of the vexed question of the ghetto. His work is rooted in his insistence upon intensive fieldwork as an instrument of epistemological rupture and theoretical construction. Wacquant's emphasis on the role of the state as producer of marginality, the weight of symbolic structures in the production of dispossession in cities, and the need to fuse theory, ethnography and comparison has proven especially instructive and provocative.

Wacquant is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley and a Researcher at the Centre de européen de sociologie et de science politique in Paris.

Academic biography and research focus

Wacquant was born and raised in the south of France and moved to Paris in 1979 to study at France's top management school, the École des Hautes Études Commerciales. In January of 1981 his intellectual trajectory was altered by an exhilarating public lecture given by Pierre Bourdieu, who soon became his mentor and intellectual inspiration as Wacquant switched from economics to sociology at the University of Paris in Nanterre, and then at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. In 1985 Wacquant then moved to the University of Chicago to pursue a doctorate in sociology. There, he worked with the celebrated sociologist William Julius Wilson, author of *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) a seminal study of racial segregation in American cities (see Wacquant and Wilson, 1989). Wacquant was troubled by the lack of reflexivity and the gaze from afar that dominated scholarship on the ghetto, and especially by the presumption of social disorganization and what he characterized as the scholarly myth of the urban underclass.

Departing from Wilson's approach, Wacquant brought Bourdieu's approach to theory and social research into the American ghetto. He joined a boxing gym and began conducting an ethnography, interpreting the post-1960s transformation of the historic 'Black Metropolis' depicted by Drake and Cayton (1945). He subsequently expanded his research focus to a transatlantic comparison of urban marginality in response to the moral panic that swept through France and much of Western Europe in the 1990s about the alleged 'ghettoisation' of peripheral urban districts undermined by deindustrialisation.

The comparison between Chicago and Paris, mixing fieldwork, survey data and institutional comparison, yielded two urban monographs: a carnal ethnography of boxing *in* the ghetto seen from inside and below, *Body and Soul* (2004), and a macroanalytic dissection of the ghetto seen from above, *Urban Outcasts* (2008). Wacquant has also produced a raft of influential articles that shed light on the revamping of symbolic, social, and physical space in the city, and entailed conceptual innovation regarding the ghetto, territorial stigmatization, the precariat, ethnographic methodology, the tangled nexus of social and penal policy in the city, and neoliberal statecraft (see Wacquant 2002, 2009, 2012, 2014).

Key ideas

Often read as a strictly Bourdieuan sociologist, numerous influences melt in Wacquant's writings on cities. Bourdieu's teachings do provide the epistemological underpinnings and analytic frame, but in order to map and diagnose the fate of the urban 'precariat' (the precarious fractions of the postindustrial working class destabilized by the fragmentation of wage labour and the spread of a dishonour of place) Wacquant draws on wide range of intellectual sources, notably Engels, Durkheim, Weber, Mauss, Wittgenstein, Elias, and Goffman. Frustrated by the depoliticised portraits of poverty and place crafted by scholars from the Chicago School of Sociology and by the economic determinism of research spawned by Marxist or Weberian variants of political economy, Wacquant's approach is characterised by: (1) an insistence on the role of state structure and policy in determining the forms, distribution, and intensity of urban marginality; (2) the importance of symbolic systems—of which cities are major centres of production and diffusion—that do not simply mirror social relations but help constitute them; (3) the effort to track down the mutual conversion and mapping of symbolic, social and physical space at multiple scales and to spotlight the role of space in social domination. This triple focus is characterised by a combination of abstract theory and concrete ethnography, and has advanced conceptual formulations around the nexus of marginality, ethnicity and penalty (Wacquant 2014). In particular, two key ideas stand out for the further inquiries they have spawned across national and disciplinary boundaries.

First, Wacquant's comparative investigations reconceptualize the ghetto as an 'instrument of ethnoracial closure' based on the 'double reciprocal assignation' of a stigmatized category and a reserved territory (Wacquant, 2016). Based on a comparison of three canonical cases—the sociospatial seclusion of Jews in Renaissance Europe, black Americans in the Fordist industrial metropolis, and Burakumin in Tokugawa-era Japan—Wacquant argues that the ghetto is an institutional form, a social-organisational device that employs space to fulfil the two conflictive functions of economic extraction and social ostracization. He shows that the ghetto was created by city rulers to maximize the material value extracted out of a disparaged ethnic category, while minimizing intimate contact with its members. As a consequence, a ghetto exhibits distinctive sociological properties, chief among them the development of a set of parallel institutions (places of worship, press, schools, medical clinics, businesses, civic associations) that duplicate those of the city from which its residents are banished. Those institutions act as at once a sword, effecting

closure to the benefit of the dominant, and a shield, offering a protected space wherein the dominated can experience reciprocity and dignity, hence Wacquant's characterization of the ghetto as Janus-faced. Contra portrayals of the ghetto as a space of material destitution and social disintegration—which are hegemonic in journalism, politics, and large segments of urban research—Wacquant shows that ghettoization typically translates into the economic improvement, social strengthening and symbolic unification of the target population. Wacquant (2016) uses this articulation of the second face of the ghetto to advocate for what he calls 'a diagonal sociology' capable of capturing the dynamic meshing of verticality (exploitation and inequality) and horizontality (reciprocity and equality) in urban life and in institutions more generally. It was the elaboration of the historical meaning and sociological contents of the ghetto that allowed Wacquant to account for the collapse of the communal ghetto in the United States and its mutation into a hyperghetto (devoid of economic function due to macroeconomic transformation and state retrenchment). It anchored his critique of the loose or opportunistic use of the term ghetto to describe working-class territories or immigrant districts in the European urban periphery, which in fact sport considerable ethnic diversity, fail to produce a shared identity, and are deeply penetrated by the state (leading Wacquant to call these zones 'anti-ghettos' as they move away from the pattern of the ghetto as conceptualised above).

Second, Wacquant developed the concept of territorial stigmatization after analysing the crystallisation of what he termed a 'blemish of place' (2007: 67): the profound sense of neighbourhood taint emerging on both sides of the Atlantic. Having heard French urban policy officials speak of lower-class districts with disgust in their voices, and then hearing residents of La Courneuve outside of Paris (and Woodlawn inside of Chicago) internalising and/or reassigning onto their neighbours those degraded images, Wacquant set about conceptualising spatial disgrace and its effects by drawing on the theories of Goffman and Bourdieu. He combines Goffman's relational view of stigma at the micro level, whereby an individual is assigned 'an undesired differentness' from 'normals' (1963: 18), with Bourdieu's (1991) more macro theory of symbolic power: the performative capacity to make reality (by making representations of reality stick and come true). Bourdieu was centrally interested in symbolic struggles between different classes, and particularly the ways that authoritative agents and institutions strive to impose a definition of the social world suited to their interests (cf. **Teresa Caldeira**). Wacquant extends this insight to struggles over and in space as a marker of identity. This blend of theory helps him diagnose territorial stigma as 'arguably the single most protrusive feature of the lived experience of those trapped in these sulphurous zones' (Wacquant 2008: 169). This is a distinctive feature of advanced marginality in the 21st century due the autonomization of spatial taint from other bases of stigmatization. Wacquant highlights how certain areas of disrepute in advanced societies become renowned across class levels, racialized, and portrayed as emblems and vectors of disintegration, unlike the disreputable wards of the metropolis in the industrial era which were perceived as an organized counter-society. He maps out how spatial stigma impacts social strategy and identity at multiple scales in ways that entrench marginality (Wacquant, 2014). He also warns that scholars who deploy the trope of the ghetto for rhetorical dramatization in hopes of inciting progressive policy intervention actually contribute to the further symbolic degradation of dispossessed districts, and thus to the very phenomenon they should be dissecting.

Viewed through Wacquant's urban sociological lenses, the state is not a bureaucratic monolith delivering uniform goods, nor an ambulance that comes to the rescue in response to 'market failure', but rather a potent 'stratifying and classifying agency' (2014: 1699) that continually moulds social and physical space, and particularly the shape, recruitment, structure and texture of lower class districts. The marginal spaces of the metropolis are construed as a product of the material and symbolic powers of the state as they percolate down through the class and spatial

structure. Advanced marginality is characterized by Wacquant (2008) as an ascendant poverty regime in postindustrial cities typified by the fragmentation of wage labour, the recoiling of the social state, and the buckling of the social economy of reciprocity based on kinship and place that was a feature of working-class districts in the Fordist-Keynesian era.

Contributions to urban studies

Wacquant lectures regularly around the world, and his work circulates widely beyond academic circles to inform and influence public debate in Europe and Latin America in particular. His writings have proved especially useful to scholars studying the impact of neoliberal restructuring at the bottom of the urban order, and his characterisation of neoliberalism as ‘market-conforming state-crafting’ (via the organisational triad of economic deregulation, ‘restrictive workfare’, and ‘expansive prisonfare’) (2012: 71) has influenced urban research across several disciplines from sociology and anthropology to criminology and planning, to geography, law and social work. By emphasising the value of ethnography as an ‘instrument of rupture’ to pierce the screen of common sense and policy categories, Wacquant’s work has stimulated scholars conducting fieldwork to uncover views of the fractured neoliberal city from below. His theoretically-guided ethnography—as opposed to an inductive ‘get-your-ideas-in-the-field’ approach favoured by practitioners of the Chicago School (see **Elijah Anderson**)—has sparked vigorous debate. In ‘Scrutinizing the Street’, Wacquant (2002) anatomizes three canonical ethnographies of race and poverty in the contemporary U.S. as exemplars of ‘a certain epistemological posture of unreflective surrender to folk apperceptions, to ordinary moralism, to the seductions of official thought and to the rules of academic decorum’ (2009, p.122). For Wacquant, this posture causes scientific errors and policy misdiagnoses of urban problems, and fosters the subordination of scholarship to the categories and concerns of state elites smitten with neoliberal nostrums. Unsurprisingly, this epistemic critique was not welcomed by broad factions of the American sociological establishment who dismissed it a polemic. Another recurrent criticism of Wacquant’s work has been his insistence that class, not ethnicity or religion, is the primary principle of division of urban space and determinant of life chances in the lower-class districts of the French and European metropolis. Schneider (2014) argues that he does not pay sufficient attention to the concentration of black and Arab youth in these districts, and asks what leads them to set their neighbourhoods aflame if they live in a society devoid of racial discrimination, racial profiling and police violence. Wacquant’s (2015b) response is that the primacy of class is an empirical fact shown by the rise of a small but spatially mobile postcolonial petty-bourgeoisie and by the growing similarity in the demographic profile of foreign and national populations everywhere.

Wacquant’s most important contribution to urban studies is his demonstration that ignorance of the role of symbolic structures in the production of marginality in the city means that neighbourhoods are made into the *cause* of poverty rather than the expression of underlying problems to be addressed. The vast literature on neighbourhood effects, sustained by the postulate that where one lives affects one’s life chances, ignores the mechanisms and consequences of the stigmatization of place. Indeed, in many instances this literature contributes to that very stigmatization via a disparaging gaze trained upon marginalized neighbourhoods. Wacquant’s work demonstrates that social science has a role to play in casting free of that gaze and ‘break[ing] through the screen of often absurd, sometimes odious projections, that mask the malaise or suffering as much as they express it’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 629).

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Tom Slater, University of Edinburgh