

Shadowboxing with Ethnographic Ghosts: A Rejoinder

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Why would *Symbolic Interaction* devote three full reviews to a modest monograph on the marginal topic of boxing, and furthermore, reviews assured to be largely redundant with one another since the three scholars solicited to write them occupy closely neighboring positions in analytic and academic space? The answer is in the message inviting me to respond to this curious symposium, in which book review editor Angus Vail puts its not-so-hidden agenda squarely on the table: “Given your exchange with Eli Anderson, Mitch Duneier, and Kathy Newman in *AJS* two years ago, I and others in the American ethnographic community have looked forward to the publication of *Body & Soul* for quite a while now.” He then warned me that the reviews were “all mixed” but that “they have treated you fairly and held you to the standard you set for ethnography in your essay in *AJS*. Frankly, each of them has found *Body & Soul* lacking in this last criterion.”¹

Caveat lector: this symposium is not really about *Body & Soul* but, rather, about my controversial essay in the *American Journal of Sociology*, “Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography” (Wacquant 2002a). I welcome a full and frank discussion of the issues I raised in that article, a discussion that has been as lively and fruitful overseas as it has been stunted and barren in the United States, owing to the continual interference in this country of professional with analytical concerns. Given their still-fervent interest in it, I can only regret that Patricia and Peter Adler, Reuben Buford May, and Clinton Sanders did not join that debate by writing to the *American Journal of Sociology* then. For the prejudicial position of principled hostility from which they start now, readily detectable in the Adlers’ (2005: 433) derisive presentation of me as “a protégé of Bourdieu” with an “impressive pedigree” (a portrayal void of intellectual content), in Sanders’ (2005:437) opening tirade on “the controversy surrounding [my] career” (note the Freudian slip: not about the works I discussed in *AJS* or about my own work, but about my *career*), and in May’s (2005:431) mournful conclusion that “it is difficult to dismiss summarily *Body & Soul*” (as he had clearly hoped to do), lead them to commit two serious errors.

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The first is a classic category mistake: my critics want to “spar” with the author of “Scrutinizing the Street” so badly that they literally overlook *Body & Soul* and the distinctive agenda that animates it. The second is that, in their caricatural rendition of “Scrutinizing” and their attendant misconstrual of the boxing project, they unwittingly corroborate my AJS argument by exhibiting several of the traits that I maintain impair the dominant strand of U.S. urban field studies: its blissful parochialism, its unabashed empiricism, its suffusive moralism, and its utter lack of epistemic reflexivity.

Thus to assert that *Body & Soul* is “an ethnography written within the context of Wacquant’s previous inflammatory critique leveled against some American urban ethnography,” as May (2005:429) does, is a provincial falsification of the intellectual landscape in which the book is rooted. *Body & Soul* incubated over a decade prior to that controversy in the context of writing *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992); it was drafted and in print two years before the AJS article. It is not a “public ethnography,” as the Adlers call it—I do not know what they mean by that term, which I have never used except recently to deconstruct it at a thematic American Sociological Association session on “Producing Public Ethnographies.” Unlike the three books dissected in “Scrutinizing the Street,” my monograph does not address a salient social issue, a particular policy audience, or a problematic preconstructed by journalistic or political debate. It is an attempt to carefully “display and demonstrate” the “social and sensual logic that informs boxing as a bodily craft in the contemporary black American ghetto” (Wacquant 2004:7). It seeks to translate the “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) of boxing in its disclosive immediacy and direct fullness into a thematized experience (*Erfahrung*) liable to be interpreted and explained.² And, in so doing, to offer an empirical radicalization and conceptual elaboration of Bourdieu’s theory of practice—as I took pains to indicate to the American public both in the book’s preface and in an essay entitled “Taking Bourdieu into the Field” that appeared a year before the U.S. release of the book (Wacquant 2002b). Put in phenomenological language, this study asks, How is pugilistic intentionality, the “aboutness” of that particular form of skilled social action, practically constituted; what social ingredients enter into its manufacture; through what pedagogical techniques is it transmitted and validated; and what can its social genesis, inculcation, and unfolding “teach us about the logic of any practice,” and thereby about the vexed nexus of body, mind, and society (Wacquant 2004a:16, 58–71, 95–99, 111–14, 123–28, 148–49)?

So *Body & Soul* is not about sport but about a *bodily craft* and its practical logics. It is not concerned with documenting an occupational or ethnic “subculture” (a notion I do not invoke once in 288 pages) in the mold of Everett C. Hughes so much as with elucidating the social fabrication of a particular *habitus*, the set of cognitive, emotive, and conative schemata that define the proficient participant in the pugilistic microcosm, and thereby pointing a way beyond the body-mind dualism that traditionally debilitates the sociology of action.³ It is a theoretically driven if narratively organized inquiry into the transmutation of violence and the making of prize-

fighters as bearers of a culture-turned-body, a competency that operates beneath consciousness and discourse, and, in that regard, a contribution to the explication of “Situation, Corporeality, Sociality” that Hans Joas has called “the fundamentals of a theory of the creativity of action” (1996: chapter 3).

As committed practitioners of the sort of Chicago-style moral empiricism I questioned in AJS, it is not surprising that the three reviewers *chosen for that very reason* would not much like *Body & Soul*. What is surprising is that they appear to have no clue about the theoretical lineage in which the book explicitly situates itself, despite the profusion of signposts pointing to it: *Body & Soul* opens with an epigraph by Spinoza, remarks on the sensualist philosophical anthropology of the young Marx, and a long quotation from Bourdieu’s key chapter in *Pascalian Meditations* ([1997] 2000) on “Bodily Knowledge,” and it is sprinkled with references to Bourdieu, Durkheim, Mauss, and Wittgenstein.⁴ My critics deem the book nearly atheoretical only because they are unaware of the meaning and long philosophical genealogy of habitus, a concept that originates in the thought of Aristotle and the medieval Scholastics and that was used by Weber, Durkheim, and Mauss before being retrieved by Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Elias, and later thoroughly reworked by Bourdieu ([1972] 1977, [1980] 1990, [1997] 2000) to forge a dispositional theory of action suited to reintroducing the inventive capacity of agents within structuralist anthropology, without for that falling back into the Cartesian intellectualism that hampers subjectivist approaches to social life, from behaviorism to rational choice theory to symbolic interactionism (Wacquant 2005).

This ignorance of the core concept organizing the project of a sociology of pugilism is illustrative of the troubled relationship that many practitioners of Chicago-style ethnography entertain with social theory.⁵ This trouble is further evidenced by the confusion that the reviewers make between the frugal use of theoretical tools and their gaudy display in self-identified theoreticist discourse. If *Body & Soul* contains “few explicit discussions of sociological theory as it relates to boxing,” as correctly reported by May (2005:430), it is not only because the book is not really about boxing per se, but also because it engages a conception of theory that is not logocentric but praxeological. In this conception, theory is not a “text” separate from the empirical object at hand but the set of principles that guide the very construction of that object at every step (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:30–31, 161–62, 220–21).

A different theory of action mandates a different methodological posture. Because they fail to detect the social theory embedded in *Body & Soul*, none of the authors of the three review essays notice that it is not based on run-of-the-mill “participant observation” but on long-term *apprenticeship* leading to “moral and sensual conversion to the cosmos under investigation” (Wacquant 2004:vii). This experimental design, whereby the inquirer becomes part and parcel of the phenomenon in order to parse it, is of a piece with the dispositional philosophy of action that propels the book. On the theoretical side, *Body & Soul* advances the theory of habitus by practically probing the visceral quality of this “ontological complicity” that binds agent and world and by displaying the sensual, moral, and even aesthetic

dimension of the forging of the schemata that make up the fighter (see, e.g., Wacquant 2004, pp. 64–71 on sensuous intoxication as an engine for resocialization, and pp. 95–99 on incarnate intelligence). On the methodological front, the book reverses the usual polarity of participation and observation and shows how initiation can serve as a powerful vehicle for penetrating a social world. *Body & Soul* thus supplies a brief for a “carnal sociology,” a sociology “not only of the body but also from the body” (Wacquant 2004, p. viii) that recognizes that, like the social agents she studies, the ethnographer is a being of flesh and blood endowed with embodied skills and visceral knowledges that are a resource for, and not a hindrance to, social analysis.

Clearly, a carnal conception of social action and inquiry calls for a different way of writing ethnography. Sanders (2005:439) complains that “the formatting” of *Body & Soul* “is equally peculiar” and that “it would appear as if Wacquant is not terribly familiar with the conventional structure or format of mainstream sociological ethnography—or has chosen to ignore those conventions.” I proudly plead guilty to the latter charge, for to convey what I call “the taste and ache of action” requires to experiment with ways of communicating the results of one’s initiation that deviate from the linear, univocal, monological, and monochromatic texts produced by standard sociological ethnography.⁶ This is why *Body & Soul* mixes three genres—analytic sociology, depictive ethnography, short story—in gradually reversing proportions and weaves a multilayered tapestry composed of five rhetorical strands: a core text containing concepts and analyses; closely edited fieldnote excerpts documenting key structures, passages, and processes; portraits of actors located at strategic points in pugilistic space; and dialogues and interview quotes interjected to bring in counterpoints and qualifications to the main story line. Not to forget the meticulous deployment of field photographs fitted in placement, size, and framing to serve not as decorative devices but as *synthetic* devices enabling the reader to grasp *uno intuitu* the concrete imbrication of the various elements and forces that sociological analysis necessarily separates. All of these are plaited together to try and make the reader simultaneously feel and understand how boxers are “gripped” by their craft and viscerally tied to it, because internal attraction and not external compulsion explains how and why people become boxers.

Failure to properly grasp the intellectual agenda of the book and the tight linkage of social theory, method, and writing that it demands, leads the reviewers to commit a series of interconnected and mutually supportive misinterpretations. Among them, (1) they miss the book’s obstinate effort to “*de-exoticize*” boxing by portraying its practitioners as ordinary men at work, artisans of the skilled and violent masculine body whose motivative springs are not unlike those that move, say, painters, priests, or professors—that is, other participants in passionate pursuits—with the effect of exploding the main public myths about boxing and overturning the seductive stereotype of the prizefighter as defiant outcast yearning to rise in society (as in the celluloid farce of Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky* movies that the Adlers bizarrely cite as a reliable source of “closer and better accounts of gyms”; 2005:433).⁷

(2) They miscast my own experience as the anchor of the book when it is *only one of its manifold methodological vehicles*: if the narrative of my fight at the Chicago Golden Gloves comes last in a compressed twenty pages, it is because I uncovered earlier, in the 136 pages of “The Street and the Ring,” through direct observation as well as in-depth interviews and documentary analysis, that powerful invariants organize the process of production of fighters, invariants that can be recaptured through actual experimentation. (The question of variations, by ethnicity, class, and stage in the boxing career, will be tackled in detail in the next book.) (3) Adler and Adler (2005:434) assert that “we learn little that can be used trans-situationally or cross-culturally to shed light on more generic processes” when the results of *Body & Soul* have already been used extensively in just this fashion in two books on the craft and culture of ballet in Sweden and in France (Wulff 1998; Faure 2000), to give just one example of transfer due to space limitations. And its theoretical and methodological principles are now being tested and refined by carnal inquiries into the social production of the habitus of day laborers, army cadets, firefighters, “prep school” teachers, state politicians, and Lindy Hop dancers in the United States.

Distracted by the professional hullabaloo caused by “Scrutinizing the Street” and yet strangely blind to its substantive warnings, the reviewers of *Body & Soul* fail to comprehend the theory of action and structure embedded in it. Accordingly, they do not realize that the low visibility of that theory is by design and not by default, and that it entails a conception of theoretical work, methodological practice, and ethnographic reporting at variance with the standards of conventional U.S. field studies by which the reviewers insist to measure it. And so they let pass an opportunity to reflect on the challenges that the notion of habitus illustrated in this study of the making of its pugilistic variant poses for the overly mentalist and occasionalist conception of sociality propounded by symbolic interactionism. By shadowboxing with ethnographic ghosts emerging out of their aggrieved imaginations, they end up landing nothing but phantom punches while shirking the one intellectual fight effectively put before them.

But is this pugilistic metaphor apposite here? Let me remark in closing on the peculiar conception of debate that my three critics invest in this symposium, as it speaks to the issue of reflexivity that is epicentral to “Scrutinizing the Street.” Conflating the eristical rules of *professional* competition with the dialogic of *scientific* discussion, they portray intellectual commerce as a series of one-on-one clashes that one researcher must win and the others must lose (at the cost of losing face among peers). Thus, speaking of this author, the Adlers (2005:435) openly rejoice that “he has set the bar high, made the leap, but doesn’t clear the hurdle”; Reuben Buford May (2005:429) bluntly asserts at the outset that “shadowboxing with his own critique of urban ethnography” is “a bout he does not win”; and Sanders (2005:439) gleefully quotes Katherine Newman’s assessment in the AJS symposium that one searches in vain for “an empirical contribution of any significance” in his work. It does not occur to them that scientific debate is a *joint endeavor*, albeit an agonistic one, and that the real agent of sociological production is not this or that individual

researcher but the scientific field as a whole.⁸ They seem oblivious to the fact that the validity of my critique of the foibles of contemporary ethnographic practice in “Scrutinizing the Street” does not hinge on the quality of my own ethnographic work, that is, on my personal ability (or the ability of any one given scholar, for that matter) to match or exceed the standards immanent in that critique, for there simply is no logical linkage between the two.

We should all be concerned with properly relating data and theory; with knowing where our concepts come from; with not overloading our analyses with extraneous moral baggage; and with the perils of projecting our social unconscious onto our object. These are the core issues I broached in “Scrutinizing the Street.” They are not the individual whims and worries of any singular investigator, but challenges that all social inquirers face and must resolve one way or another, whatever their method, professional stature, or country of provenance.

Unlike my critics in this symposium or in its AJS predecessor to which they have chosen to link it, I do not view social science as an individual sport, a contest to decide “winners and losers,” but as a collective enterprise, a craft involving contentious collaboration through honest and thoroughgoing critique instituting a “system of cross-checks” that forces all of us to heighten our “epistemological vigilance,” sharpen our investigative tools, and eventually put out better products (Bachelard [1938] 1965:126). As the history of science abundantly demonstrates, in intellectual ventures we all move forward together or we all regress in unison—as in this bizarre backward *pas de trois* orchestrated by *Symbolic Interaction*.

NOTES

1. E-mail from A. Vail to L. Wacquant, 9 May 2004. Note that *Body & Soul* was originally published in French in 2000, in Brazilian and Italian in 2002, and in Spanish and German in 2003.
2. This distinction, which baffles Sanders (“lived experience” is one of his “favorite redundancies”), is a staple of post-Hegelian German philosophy and is elaborated in the work of Edmund Husserl and thence in existentialism. The semantic twists and theoretical complexities of the notion of “experience” are recognized and mapped out by Martin Jay (2004).
3. That I am not “largely unaware of the spate of American social science research” on sport and occupations (as alleged by the Adlers, p. 435) is demonstrated by the abundance of references to that literature in the half-dozen papers previously published in *English* in journals such as *Theory & Society* (1995, 1998), *Ethnos* (1998), *Body & Society* (1995, 2000), *Masculinities* (1996), and the *Sociology of Sport Journal* (1993), many of which are also in the book. I see no purpose in repeating all these references in every publication (other than demonstrating proper professional piety), especially when they are not active ingredients in the inquiry at hand.
4. Consider the incoherence of the theoretical assessment of the three reviews: Sanders (2005:438) sees my analysis as “based on a rather quaint combination of functionalism and the culture of poverty perspective,” but finds it also “encumbered” by “soft-boiled Euro-theory” and yet “noticeably light on theory”; the Adlers (2005:434) are “underwhelmed with [sic] Wacquant’s theoretical acuity” and ironically bemoan the absence of “a powerful exposition of French intellectualism”; having conveniently pushed aside its core concept of habitus, May (2005:430) assimilates *Body & Soul* to the “kinds of under-theorized urban ethnography that Wacquant himself depicted as ‘sociological colored “human interest” story-telling’.”
5. It is interesting to note that reviewers of the book in France, Brazil, and Germany discerned

- quite well its theoretical orientation and contribution to the dispositional theory of action. Early U.S. reviewers in the general media (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *L.A. Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, CNBC, ESPN, etc.), on the other hand, have generally lamented the book's heavy-handed theoretical agenda while praising its literary qualities.
6. Such formal innovation is not uncommon in anthropological ethnography. Why Sanders assumes that *Body & Soul* belongs to the genre of U.S. *sociological* ethnography and should be bound to its standards, or thinks this distinction relevant, is unclear. Could it be a mark of the disciplinary provincialism of that tradition?
 7. As my editor at Oxford University Press will attest, I exercised punctilious control at every level to snuff out any attempt to “sexify” *Body & Soul*, down to vetoing promotional copy and imposing a cover featuring a drab gym scene of three faceless boxers working on the bags under the watchful eye of a trainer with his back toward the reader, a mundane and unspectacular image at loggerheads with the heroic fight photograph that Oxford University Press had initially selected (and that every reader already has dormant in his or her mind).
 8. Put differently, sociology resembles synchronized swimming (or ballet, with its hierarchy of principals, soloists, and corps) more than it does high-jumping or boxing—although *Body & Soul* shows that boxing, too, is a quintessentially collective enterprise, even as it presents itself as centered on individual dueling, something which none of its three reviewers detected.

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