

## The Body, the Ghetto and the Penal State

Loïc Wacquant

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**Abstract** This article dissects the author's approach to ethnography, social theory, and the politics of knowledge through a dialogue retracing his intellectual trajectory and the analytic linkages between his inquiries into embodiment, comparative urban marginality and the penal state. It draws out the practical connections and epistemological rationale behind his main research projects, explicates the distinctive ways in which he deploys observational fieldwork in each of them, and examines the roles of intellectuals in advanced society in the era of hegemonic neoliberalism. Rejecting both Humean empiricism and neo-Kantian cognitivism, the author argues for the use of ethnography as an instrument of rupture and construction, the potency of carnal knowledge, the imperative of epistemic reflexivity, and the need to expand textual genres and styles so as to better capture the taste and ache of social action. In the public sphere, he proposes that social science can act as a solvent of doxa and a beacon casting light on latent properties and unnoticed trends in social transformations so as to disrupt and broaden civic debate.

**Keywords** ethnography · theory · epistemology · reflexivity · ghetto · marginality · penal state · intellectuals · politics of knowledge · neoliberalism

*This article is based on an interview conducted in Lisbon, Portugal, on the occasion of the third Ethnografeast, held at the Centro de Estudos de Antropologia Social (ISCTE) under the auspices of the journal Ethnography, on 20–23 June 2007 (with the support of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Luso-American Foundation and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation; for more on the conference, see <http://ceas.iscte.pt/ethnografeast>). During these meetings, I was able to sit down with Loïc Wacquant to discuss his approach to ethnography, social theory, and civic debate. Most of his publications (including over one*

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L. Wacquant (✉)  
Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA  
e-mail: loic@berkeley.edu

*hundred articles and a half-dozen books) have appeared first in the United States or in France, but they have quickly been translated, read and discussed across the social sciences on four continents. This dialogue retraces Wacquant's intellectual trajectory and offers a map to his broad-ranging investigations, centering on the triad of embodiment, comparative urban marginality and the penal state, and leading to a reflection on the politics of knowledge. It probes the epistemological and practical rationales behind his varied research projects, explicates the distinctive uses to which he puts fieldwork in each of them, and explores the role of intellectuals in advanced society in the age of neoliberal hegemony. (The bibliographic references direct the reader to key writings relevant to the point at hand; the original text in Portuguese is appearing simultaneously in Ethnografica.)*

*Susana Durão (ISCTE, Lisboa)*

Susana Durão: We would like to take the opportunity of your presence in Lisbon, at these stimulating meetings of the Ethnografeast III on “Ethnography and the Public Sphere” (which you organized with Manuela Ivone Cunha and Antónia Pedroso de Lima) to retrace briefly the history of this “feast” and also to invite you to draw a sketch of your highly unusual academic trajectory.

Loïc Wacquant: I am delighted that Portugal is hosting the third installment of the “Ethnografeast,” convened under the auspices of the journal *Ethnography*, following the meetings in Berkeley in 2002 and Paris in 2004. As its name indicates, and in keeping with the intellectual orientation of the journal, the Ethnografeast is a sort of collective celebration of ethnography for those who are devoted to the craft, whose purpose is at once playful, practical and scientific.<sup>1</sup> First of all, we want to create “collective effervescence,” as Emile Durkheim would have said, to renew our energies and our engagement with fieldwork and above all to encourage young researchers to invest in it—this is why the Lisbon meetings are dedicating an entire day to the work of doctoral students and the new generation of ethnographers.

Next, these meetings are an opportunity to activate a dialogue among the disciplines that practice ethnography (starting with sociology and anthropology but going well beyond them), and also among the different genres of ethnography, among the theoretical traditions that inform it, among the generations, and among continents and countries. In Lisbon, we have brought together field researchers from the United States, France, Italy, Britain, the Netherlands, Brazil, and South Africa, and of course Spain and Portugal. Some believe that ethnography is in crisis, others that it is in the midst of a boom; some see it as an essentially hermeneutic and literary practice, others as a tool for scientific proof or theory construction; and yet others construe it as a form of the collective consciousness of contemporary societies—in short, a very broad variety of styles and positions will be confronting each other. The idea is to open the scope of debates to the maximum, and in this regard, Manuela and Antónia, who deserve all the credit for this meeting, have done a magnificent job fulfilling our mandate. Lastly, the Ethnografeast has the goal of helping us collectively elaborate and clarify the parameters and missions of ethnography in the academic field as well as in civic and political debate. Indeed, that is the theme that sparks our encounters in Lisbon: “Ethnography and the Public Sphere.”

<sup>1</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Ethnografeast: A Progress Report on the Practice and Promise of Ethnography,” *Ethnography* 4, no. 1 (March 2003), pp. 1–10.

## From Southern France to the South Pacific

SD: Let's move on to your intellectual itinerary. You began as a student of Pierre Bourdieu, with whom you worked closely for nearly twenty years. Can you recount the personal and intellectual route that led to encountering him?

LW: I was born in the south of France, in a family from the intellectual middle class, and I studied at the public school of my village and later at the big high school of the neighboring city, Montpellier. Then I went up to Paris where, not knowing quite what cursus to take up, I first studied industrial economics. I made it into a *grande école* in management, Ecole des Hautes Études Commerciales (HEC), more by default than by vocation: I was not enough of a “math maven” to be attracted to the Ecole Polytechnique or “literary” enough to picture myself at the École Normale Supérieure, so I had chosen an examination whose profile fell midway between these two poles. I had in mind to study political economy, but I was quickly disheartened: HEC is a professional school that prepares you to be a manager in a top corporation, and this idea horrified me. So I was trying to take a turn and was considering going into social history (one of my favorite books at the time was Pierre Goubert's *Louis XIV and Fifteen Million French*, a classic study in the Annales School vein),<sup>2</sup> when one evening, a friend took me to a public lecture by Pierre Bourdieu on the theme, “Questions of Politics.” It was in November 1980, just after the publication of *Le Sens pratique* and before his appointment to the Collège de France.<sup>3</sup> For me this lecture was a true revelation: I did not understand three-quarters of what Bourdieu said, but I certainly grasped that something very important was being said and that I had to dig to the bottom of it.

SD: How old were you?

LW: I had just turned twenty. After the lecture we had a passionate discussion with Bourdieu in the student cafeteria until four in the morning. I had the exhilarating feeling, while listening to him answer our wide-ranging questions, that, in the manner of a surgeon, he was dissecting the body of French society to show us its entrails and its internal functioning in a way I never would have thought possible. When I got home after that lecture, in the wee hours of the morning, I said to myself, “If that's sociology, that's what I want to do!”

But if that lecture proved pivotal, it is no doubt because I was already inclined that way due to my family and personal trajectory. I had acquired a *proto-sociological eye* owing to the social mobility of my parents which had strongly stamped my early childhood, the class wranglings among kids in the village where I grew up, and my own geographic and regional mobility. For someone coming from the South of France, living near Paris was almost going to a foreign country! All told, I am indebted to my experience at HEC, even though I was terribly bored during my three years there, because it brought me into contact with a world, the world of business, that I discovered I did not want to enter and which I fled to join the universe of research. And my training on this campus raised for me a great many questions and indirectly pushed me towards sociology because of the frontal cultural shock I got from being immersed in the milieu of the children of the Parisian haute-

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV et vingt millions de français* (Paris: Hachette, 1967, new ed. 1997; tr. *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen*, New York: Pantheon, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique* (Paris: Minuit, 1980; tr. *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990); the type and style of public lectures that Bourdieu gave in those days is captured by the collection *Questions de sociologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1980; tr. *Sociology in Question*, London: Sage, 1994).

bourgeoisie and nobility—which I naively believed had been eliminated in 1789! My next-door neighbor in the residence hall was named Christian de Rivelrieux de Varax and in the evening he played the hunting horn on our shared balcony, to give you the flavor of the scene...

Stimulated by this encounter with Bourdieu, I took up sociology at the same time as I was pursuing my graduate studies in industrial economics. I got my Bachelors and Masters at the University of Paris in Nanterre—in those days still nicknamed “Red Nanterre” for being the fuse that ignited the May ’68 events. Partaking of these two universes simultaneously, a *grande école* devoted to the perpetuation of the Parisian business class and a public university that was the historic fountainhead of student subversion and social critique, was an excellent practical introduction to sociology. On the campus of HEC, I was a dissident pupil on several counts, political and pedagogical, rebellious to the crude indoctrination we were subjected to (I remember citing *Reproduction in Education* and even Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects* in a marketing course to provoke the professor).<sup>4</sup> We were a small group composed of the few students from working- and middle-class backgrounds and nearly all of the students from the provinces, who were generally left-wing, intellectual, and politically engaged. The others called us the “*bolchos*,” and we called the supporters of the established academic and social order the “*fachos*.” It was all in good fun, except during the elections of Spring 1981 when relations got very tense.

SD: How did you land in New Caledonia and later find your way to United States?

LW: Upon graduating from HEC, I won a doctoral fellowship to go to the US, where I spent a studious year in Chapel Hill, at the University of North Carolina, in 1982–83. That was where my conversion from economics to sociology was confirmed. I read voraciously (among my favorite books were those of Elliot Liebow, John Dollard, C. Vann Woodward and Erving Goffman) and I took courses in sociological theory and historical-comparative sociology in an excellent department where I formed intellectual bonds with Gerhard Lenski and Craig Calhoun, who encouraged my move from economics to sociology. Every Thursday during a whole semester, I had a “brown-bag lunch” in his office with Lenski (the author of the classic *Power and Privilege*) and we had wide-ranging informal conversations about social theory and history.<sup>5</sup> Then I left for two years in New Caledonia in 1983–1985 to fulfill my military service, but in a technical assistance corps. By an extraordinary stroke of luck, I was assigned to do a civilian service as a sociologist in a research center of ORSTOM, France’s former “office of colonial research.” This provided me with two years of practical training in sociological practice in a thorny context which made it especially instructive.

At Nanterre, I had specialized in the “sociology of culture and education” and written a MA thesis mixing history and ethnography based on my experiences at HEC, entitled “Academic Production and Social Reproduction,” so naturally I had read and used the works of Pierre Bourdieu. During my last year in Paris, I skipped my classes at HEC to attend his lecture course at the Collège de France. After each session, Bourdieu and I talked as we walked to his home—for me it was like an accelerated independent study course! And when I left for New Caledonia we started a steady correspondence; then, after my return, I became affiliated with the Center for European Sociology as an “expatriate member.”

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *La Reproduction. Eléments pour une théorie du système d’enseignement* (Paris: Minuit, 1970; tr. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, London: Sage, 1990; Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des Objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968; tr. *The System of Objects*, New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984, orig. 1968).

I spent two years in New Caledonia, in a small research team—there were only three of us—at the time of the Kanak uprising of November 1984. So I lived and worked in a very brutal and archaic colonial society, because New Caledonia in the 1980s was a colony of the nineteenth-century type that had survived virtually intact to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was an extraordinary social experience for an apprentice-sociologist to conduct research on the school system, urbanization, and social change in the context of an insurrection, under a state of emergency, and to observe in real time the struggles between the colonials and the independence forces, and to have to reflect in a concrete way about the civic role of social science. I was privileged to participate in a closed congress of the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front in Canala, and I also traveled all the way around the “*Grande Terre*” (the main island) and made several sojourns in Lifou island at the home of friends who were long-time Kanak militants at a time when practically no one was moving about in the territory.



*Elders from the Unë clan, tribe of Luecilla, Lifou Island, New Caledonia (December 1983)*

It was then that I read the classics of ethnology, Mauss, Mead, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Bateson, etc. (especially works on the South Pacific: the Trobriand Islands were just nearby) and that I penned my first field notebooks (the very first was scribbled among the tribe of Luecilla, in the Bay of Wé, at Christmas of 1983). And I published my first works—not even works of youth but of childhood, as it were.<sup>6</sup> At the close of my Caledonian sojourn, I received a four-year fellowship to go do my doctorate at the University of Chicago, the cradle of US sociology.

<sup>6</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “La question scolaire en Nouvelle-Calédonie: idéologies et sociologie,” *Les Temps modernes* 464 (March 1985), pp. 1654–85; “Jeunesse, ordre coutumier et identité canaque en Nouvelle-Calédonie” (with J.M. Kohler and P. Pillon), *Cahiers ORSTOM-Série sciences humaines* 21, no. 2/3 (1985), pp. 203–228; “Communautés canaques et société coloniale: notes complémentaires sur la ‘question canaque,’” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 61 (March 1986), pp. 56–64; “The Dark Side of the Classroom in New Caledonia: Ethnic and Class Segregation in Nouméa’s Primary School System,” *Comparative Education Review* 33, no. 2 (May 1989), pp. 194–212.

When I arrived in Upton Sinclair's town, my intention was to work on a historical anthropology of colonial domination in New Caledonia, but then I got sidetracked and detoured into America.

### The ghetto, the gym and the *banlieue*

SD: So that is how a young French researcher came to rub against the black American ghetto...

LW: In fact, two unforeseen events came together to derail my initial plans. On the one side, the New Caledonian gates were abruptly shut: in Nouméa, the mediocre bureaucrat who had been my supervisor abused his authority to put his name against my will as a co-author on a monograph about the school system that I had carried out by myself—sadly, this was a common practice at ORSTOM.<sup>7</sup> I filed a complaint against this intellectual embezzlement with the directors of the Institute in Paris, who hastened to cover up for the cheater. The result was that I was banned from that agency and consequently from the island. On the other side, I found myself confronted day-to-day with the gruesome reality of Chicago's ghetto. I lived at the edge of the poor black neighborhood of Woodlawn, and it was a constant tremor to have under my window this quasi-lunar urban landscape, with its unbelievable decay, misery, and violence, backed by a totally hermetic separation between the white, prosperous and privileged world of the university and the abandoned African-American neighborhoods all around it. (The Hyde Park campus is bordered on three sides by the South Side ghetto and on the fourth by Lake Michigan.) This queried me profoundly on a quotidian level. It is at this point that the second decisive encounter of my intellectual life took place, the one with William Julius Wilson.



*Urban desolation on 63<sup>rd</sup> Street, South Side of Chicago (July 1989)*

<sup>7</sup> Loïc Wacquant, *L'École inégale. Éléments pour une sociologie de l'enseignement en Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Nouméa et Paris: Editions de l'ORSTOM and Institut Culturel Mélanésien, 1985).

Wilson is one of the preeminent American sociologist of the second half of the twentieth century and the foremost expert on the nexus of race and class in the United States. He invited me to work with him on the big research project on urban poverty he had just started (roughly, the agenda marked out by his book *The Truly Disadvantaged*) and I quickly became his close collaborator and co-author.<sup>8</sup> So I had the opportunity to get straight to the core of the subject and also to get a close-up look at how this scientific and policy debate operated at the highest level, especially in the philanthropic foundations and think tanks that shaped the resurgence of the problematic. That's how I started my investigations, first with Wilson and then by myself, on the transformation of the dark ghetto after the riots of the 1960s, by striving to break with the pathologizing vision that pervaded and distorted research on the question.<sup>9</sup> I owe a huge debt to Bill Wilson, who was a mentor at once demanding and generous: he stimulated and supported me, but also gave me the freedom to diverge from his analyses, and at times to go in a direction diametrically opposed to his.

Ethnography played a pivotal role at that juncture, on two counts. On the one hand, I took more anthropology than sociology courses because the sociology department at the University of Chicago was quite dull intellectually and because I was viscerally committed to a unitary conception of social science inherited from my French training. The works and encouragements of John and Jean Comaroff, Marshall Sahlins, Bernard Cohn and Raymond Smith pushed me towards fieldwork. On the other hand, I wanted to quickly find a direct observation post inside the ghetto because the existing literature on the topic was the product of a “gaze from afar” that seemed to me fundamentally biased if not blind. That literature was dominated by the statistical approach, deployed from on high, by researchers who most often had no firsthand or even second-hand knowledge of what makes the ordinary reality of the dispossessed neighborhoods of the Black Belt, and who fill this gap with stereotypes drawn from common sense, journalistic or academic. I wanted to reconstruct the question of the ghetto from the ground up, based on a precise observation of the everyday activities and relations of the residents of that *terra non grata* and for this very reason *incognita*.<sup>10</sup>

SD: So it is this sociology at “ground level” that led you to hang around boxing rings?

LW: I deemed it epistemologically and morally impossible to do research on the ghetto without gaining serious first-hand knowledge of it, because it was right there, literally at my doorstep (in the summertime, you could hear gunfire going off at night on the other side of the street) and because the established works seemed to me to be full of implausible or pernicious academic notions, such as the scholarly myth of the “underclass” which was a veritable intellectual cottage industry in those years.<sup>11</sup> After

<sup>8</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), a book that extended the analyses presented in *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the American Ghetto,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 21, no. 2 (June 1997), “Events and Debate,” pp. 341–353.

<sup>10</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “‘The Zone’: Le métier de ‘hustler’ dans le ghetto noir américain,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 93 (June 1992), pp. 38–58 (tr. “Inside the Zone: The Social Art of the Hustler in the Black American Ghetto,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 15, no. 2 [May 1998], pp. 1–36).

<sup>11</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “L’‘underclass’ urbaine dans l’imaginaire social et scientifique américain,” in Serge Paugam (ed.), *L’Exclusion. L’état des savoirs* (Paris: La Découverte, 1996), pp. 248–262.

a few aborted attempts, by accident I found a boxing gym in Woodlawn, three blocks from my apartment, and I signed up saying that I wanted to learn how to box, quite simply because there was nothing else to do in this context. In fact, I had absolutely no curiosity about or interest in the pugilistic world in itself (but I did want to get good exercise). The gym was to be just a platform for observation in the ghetto, a place to meet potential informants.

But, very quickly, the gym turned out to be, not only a wonderful window into the daily life of young men in the neighborhood, but also a complex microcosm with a history, a culture, and a very intense and rich social, aesthetic, emotional and moral life of its own. I formed a very strong, carnal, bond with the regulars of the club and with the old coach, DeeDee Armour, who became a sort of adoptive father to me.<sup>12</sup> Gradually I found myself attracted by the magnetism of the “Sweet Science” to the point where I spent most of my time in and around the gym. After about a year, the idea grew on me to dig into a second research subject, namely, the social logic of a bodily craft. What is it that thrills boxers? Why do they commit themselves to this harshest and most destructive of trades? How do they acquire the desire and the skills necessary to last in it? What is the role of the gym, the street, the surrounding violence and racial contempt, of self-interest and pleasure, and of the collective belief in personal transcendence in all this? How does one create a social competency that is an embodied competency, transmitted through a silent pedagogy of organisms in action? In short, how is the *pugilistic habitus* fabricated and deployed?<sup>13</sup>

That is how I found myself working on two connected projects simultaneously—two projects ostensibly very different from each other but in fact tightly linked: a carnal microsociology of the apprenticeship of boxing as sub-proletarian bodily craft *in the ghetto*, which offers a particular “slice” of this universe from below and from inside; and a historical and theoretical macrosociology *of the ghetto* as instrument of racial closure and social domination, providing a generalizing perspective from above and from the outside.

SD: And just when you were conducting fieldwork on Chicago’s South Side, the panic discourse about the “ghettoization” of the lower-class *banlieues* exploded in France.

LW: Precisely! In 1990, after the riots of Vaux-en-Velin (a poor industrial suburb of Lyon), a “moral panic” began to crystallize in France—and later in other European countries—about the districts of the urban periphery destabilized by deindustrialization and mass

<sup>12</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “*Chicago Fade*: remettre le corps du chercheur en scène,” *Quasimodo* 7 (Spring 2002), pp. 171–179 (tr. “Chicago Fade: Putting the Researcher’s Body Back into Play,” *City*, Fall 2008, in press).

<sup>13</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Corps et âme: notes ethnographiques d’un apprenti-boxeur,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 80 (November 1989), pp. 33–67; “Protection, discipline et honneur: une salle de boxe dans le ghetto américain,” *Sociologie et sociétés* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1995), pp. 75–89; “The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel About Their Trade,” *Theory & Society* 24, no. 4 (August 1995), pp. 489–535; “Pugs at Work: Bodily Capital and Bodily Labor Among Professional Boxers,” *Body & Society* 1, no. 1 (March 1995), pp. 65–94; “The Prizefighter’s Three Bodies,” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 63, no. 3 (November 1998), pp. 325–352; “A Fleshpeddler at work: Power, Pain, and Profit in the Prizefighting Economy,” *Theory & Society* 27, no. 1 (February 1998), pp. 1–42.

unemployment. They were said to have suddenly metamorphosed into American-style ghettos, with immigrants in the role of blacks, as it were. Now, there I was in Chicago, immersed in my inquiry at the heart of the South Side, and this media legend, soon shared by politicians across the spectrum and even by some scholars (not always the best informed of them) seemed to me to border on the surreal. Here again the debate was awash in stereotypes and clichés based on a double ignorance: ignorance of the prosaic realities of the French working-class *banlieues* in the post-Fordist era and ignorance of the black American ghetto. The product of these two reinforcing ignorances was a discourse completely disconnected from reality, but which exerted a powerful effect of “self-fulfilling prophecy” because it was rehashed by everyone everywhere and it quickly came to guide public policy, in particular the so-called “city policy” of the French state after 1990, with the periodic announcement of “anti-ghetto” laws as hypocritical as they were ineffectual.

I deemed that I had a duty, at once scientific and civic, to intervene in this (false) debate in order to revoke its terms through the methodical study of the transformation of neighborhoods of relegation, those stigmatized spaces into which the populations marginalized both materially and in terms of honor are pushed on both sides of the Atlantic. So I undertook a point-by-point comparison of the evolution of the black American ghetto after the upheavals of the 1960s and trends in the working-class *banlieues* of France after the mid-1970s, in the phase of de-industrialization, a comparison that first spawned a series of articles primarily oriented towards the European debate.<sup>14</sup> To compare the South Side of Chicago with the Parisian “outer city,” I carried out fieldwork in 1989–91 in the Quatre Mille housing project, in the industrial town of La Coumeuve, north-east of the capital, as well as in the corridors of the government agencies in charge of implementing the new state urban policy. At its completion, this work yields a three-fold clarification, empirical, theoretical, and political: I trace how the “communal ghetto” of mid-twentieth century mutated into the “hyperghetto” on the US side; how the working-class territories of the European urban periphery underwent a process of gradual decomposition, but one that, contrary to the dominant discourse, moved them away from the pattern of the ghetto, to the point where one can characterize them as *anti-ghettos*. And I demonstrate that, on both continents, it is the state that is the major determinant of the intensity and forms assumed by urban marginality.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, I show that what urban sociologists present as “neighborhood effects” turn out to be *effects of the state* inscribed in space, through the historical mediation of struggles over the definition, distribution, and appropriation of public goods. And this is true not only in the United States and Western Europe, but in the districts of

<sup>14</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Banlieues françaises et ghetto noir américain: de l’amalgame à la comparaison,” *French Politics and Society* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1992), pp. 81–103; “Pour en finir avec le mythe des ‘cités-ghettos’: les différences entre la France et les États-Unis,” *Annales de la recherche urbaine* 52 (September 1992), pp. 20–30; “Décivilisation et démonisation: la mutation du ghetto noir américain,” in Christine Fauré and Tom Bishop (eds.), *L’Amérique des français* (Paris: Editions François Bourin 1992), pp. 103–125 (revised and expanded as “Decivilizing and Demonizing: The Remaking of the Black American Ghetto,” in Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley, eds., *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 95–121); “Urban Outcasts: Stigma and Division in the Black American Ghetto and the French Urban Periphery,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 17, no. 3 (September 1993), pp. 366–383.

<sup>15</sup> Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); “Ghetto, banlieues, État: réaffirmer la primauté du politique,” *Nouveaux regards* 33 (April–June 2006), pp. 62–66, and “Ghetos and Anti-Ghetos: An Anatomy of the New Urban Poverty,” *Thesis Eleven* 94 (August 2008), pp. 6–11.

dispossession of the cities of the Second World, whether they be the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, the townships of Cape Town, or the *varoş* of Istanbul.



*In the favela of Santa Marta, Rio de Janeiro (April 2001)*

While I was carrying out my investigations on boxing and on the ghetto, I was in permanent contact with Pierre Bourdieu, who constantly encouraged me. He came to Chicago several times, visited the gym, and met DeeDee and my boxer friends. During one of these visits, we hatched the project of a book that would explicate the theoretical core of his work, aimed at the Anglo-American readership, since it was on this front that there were the strongest distortions and obstacles to a fruitful grasp of his models. We devoted three years to writing this book, entitled *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*,<sup>16</sup> which we drafted directly in English and which was swiftly translated into French and then a score of languages. The sociology of the ghetto, the carnal ethnography of the skilled body, transatlantic comparison, and theoretical work with Bourdieu: all of these strands were elaborated together and at the same time, and they are all woven together.

### **The rock of the penal state**

SD: But, then, how did the prison enter into this research agenda?

LW: Here again, as with the anthropology of pugilism, it was totally unexpected: it is the logic of research and the surprises of fieldwork that forced me to “go to prison”—analytically, that is. As I was collecting life histories from my boxer friends at the Woodlawn gym, I noticed that nearly all of them had spent time behind bars. I came to realize that the prison is both a

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992).

central and a banal institution on the horizon of organizations with which ghetto youths tangle and which make them trip—like a big rock in their personal backyard which cannot be removed or circumvented, and one that changes everything in the social landscape.

For example, my friend and sparring partner O-Jay had served six years in the penitentiary at the close of his teenage years; in point of fact, he learned to box behind bars. When he came out of prison, he found refuge in the gym, which protected him from the street, and he pursued a career as a boxer. Then, when his career in the ring went awry and the gym closed, he fell back into the illegal economy and again found himself locked up several times. I got him out of jail time and again by paying his bail and his lawyer.... To see your best friend thrown into prison at the end of a trial where he faced six to thirty years of prison, that shakes you up existentially and intellectually! This experience led me to conduct a pilot field study in US jails in 1998–99 in Los Angeles, and then Chicago and New York (with incursions in Brazil), so as to understand what had happened to him.<sup>17</sup> The purpose, here again, was to acquire the means to pierce the screen of dominant discourse about the prison and the distant and mechanical analyses of criminology which neglect the texture of day-to-day carceral relationships: imprisonment is first and foremost about restraining bodies, and everything that is thereby stamped onto them in terms of categories, desires, the sense of self, and ties with others.

Indeed, one cannot understand the trajectory of the black American subproletariat after the riots that rocked the metropolis in the 1960s without bringing into one's analytical sights the stupendous expansion of the penal state in the last three decades of the century. Between 1975 and 2000, the United States increased the population behind bars fivefold to become the world leader in incarceration with over 2 million inmates—something that I overlooked at the time and did not recount analytically, like all the sociologists working on race and class in America (the first scholar to address the issue head on is the jurist Michael Tonry, in *Malign Neglect*, a key book published in 1995 which had attracted my notice because I had intended to use that title for one of my books).<sup>18</sup> How are we to explain this carceral hyper-inflation? The first response, given by dominant ideology and official research, is to assert that it is linked to criminality. But the trend-line of crime had stayed flat from 1973 to 1993 before falling sharply, just when imprisonment was skyrocketing. And there is a second mystery: whereas the proportion of African Americans in each “cohort” of criminals decreased steadily over these two decades, their share of the carceral population increased rapidly and continually. To resolve these two enigmas, one must get out of the “crime and punishment” schema and *rethink the prison as a political institution*, a central component of the state. And then you discover that the surge of the penal state is the result of a policy of penalization of poverty that responds to the rise of social insecurity and the collapse of the ghetto as a mechanism of control of a population doubly marginalized on the material and symbolic planes.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” *Ethnography* 3, no. 4 (Winter 2002), Special issue on “In and Out of the Belly of the Beast,” pp. 371–397.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Tonry, *Malign Neglect: Race and Punishment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Crime et Châtiment en Amérique de Nixon à Clinton,” *Archives de politique criminelle* 20 (Spring 1998), pp. 123–138 (revised and expanded as “The Great Penal Leap Backward: Incarceration in America from Nixon to Clinton,” in John Pratt et al. (eds.), *The New Punitiveness: Trends, Theories, Perspectives*, London: Willan, 2005, pp. 3–26); “The New ‘Peculiar Institution’: On the Prison as Surrogate Ghetto,” *Theoretical Criminology* 4, no. 3 (2000), Special issue on “New Social Studies of the Prison,” pp. 377–389; “Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2001, Special issue of “Mass Incarceration in the United States: Social Causes and Consequences”), pp. 95–133.

SD: And, as you showed in *Prisons of Poverty* (1999), the expansion of the penal state in the United States is itself tied to the atrophy of the social state.<sup>20</sup>

LW: Just as I was delving deep into carceral statistics to decipher the stupefying growth of the penal state in America, Clinton was endorsing the “welfare reform” of 1996 concocted by the most reactionary faction of the Republican Party. The abolition of the right to public aid for poor women with children and its replacement by the obligation of low-pay wage work (baptized “workfare”) is a historical scandal, the most regressive measure taken by a supposedly progressive president during the entire twentieth century. Out of political outrage, I wrote an essay on it for *Le Monde Diplomatique* and then a more probing article for a journal of political geography, *Hérodote*.<sup>21</sup> By analyzing the implications of this reform, I realized that the organized atrophy of the social wing and the sudden hypertrophy of the penal wing of the US state were not only concomitant and complementary, but that they targeted the same stigmatized population at the margins of wage labor. It was becoming clear that the “invisible hand” of the deregulated market called for and necessitated the “iron fist” of criminal justice at the bottom of the class structure.

That is what I tried to show in *Prisons of Poverty*, by tracking the international diffusion of the policy of “zero-tolerance” policing which is the spearhead for the penal treatment of poverty. This book was quickly translated into three, six, sixteen languages because this policy of *punitive containment* of the precarious fractions of the new urban proletariat has spread across the entire globe in the wake of economic neoliberalism. So I turned away from the ghetto for a while, pushed by political urgency and almost against my wishes, to analyze further the transformation of penal policies in relation to social policies.

SD: But the analysis of the role of the prison led you right back to “neighborhoods of relegation” since these districts are the prime target of the deployment of the penal state.

LW: In fact, without having planned it, I wrote a sort of trilogy on the relationship among poverty/ethnicity, the social state and the penal state in the era of triumphant neoliberalism, but one that was published in mixed-up order. The first volume is *Urban Outcasts*, in which, having refuted the thesis of transatlantic convergence of forms of marginality in the city, I formulate the diagnosis of the emergence of a new regime of urban poverty, distinct from the “Fordist-Keynesian” regime that had prevailed until the 1970s.<sup>22</sup> I call it *advanced marginality* because it is neither residual nor cyclical, but lies ahead of us: it is inscribed in the future of advanced societies subjected to the strains of capitalist deregulation.<sup>23</sup> To sum

<sup>20</sup> Loïc Wacquant, *Les Prisons de la Misère* (Paris: Raisons d’agir Editions, 1999; tr. *Prisons of Poverty*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Les pauvres en pâture: la nouvelle politique de la misère en Amérique,” *Hérodote* 85 (Spring 1997), pp. 21–33; “De l’Etat charitable à l’Etat pénal: notes sur le traitement politique de la misère en Amérique,” *Regards sociologiques* 11 (1996), pp. 30–38; see also the issue of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* (no. 124, September 1998) devoted to the shift “From Social State to Penal State,” with contributions from David Garland, Katherine Beckett and Bruce Western, Dario Melossi and Loïc Wacquant.

<sup>22</sup> Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Les banlieues populaires à l’heure de la marginalité avancée,” *Sciences humaines* 4 (Fall 1996): 30–33.

up quickly, advanced marginality is superseding the ghetto on the American side and the traditional working-class territory on the European side. It is the product of the fragmentation of the wage labor, the functional disconnection between neighborhoods of relegation and the national and global economy, territorial stigmatization and the retraction of the protections traditionally afforded by the social state.

How will the state respond to the rise of this marginality and how will it manage the string of “social problems” it brings in its wake: joblessness, homelessness, criminality, drugs, idle and enraged youths, school exclusion, familial and social breakdown, etc.? How to contain these reverberating effects and at the same time induce the precarious strata of the new urban proletariat—what one can call the *precariat*—to accept the unstable and underpaid jobs of the deregulated service economy? The answer is offered in my second volume: *Punishing the Poor* dissects the invention of a “new government of social insecurity” which weds the discipline of workfare and the constraint wielded by a hypertrophic and hyperactive police and penal apparatus.<sup>24</sup> In 1971, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward published an audacious book, which has since become a social science classic, entitled *Regulating the Poor*.<sup>25</sup> In it, they showed that social policies, and especially poor relief, evolve in cyclical manner, by contraction and expansion, so as to push the dispossessed onto the labor market during phases of economic expansion and to prevent them from revolting during times of economic dearth. My thesis is that, thirty years later, “regulating the poor” no longer operates through the welfare system alone but involves an institutional linkage connecting the assistential and penitential sectors of the state. This means that, if we want to understand the policies designed to manage problem populations at the bottom of the structure of classes and places, we must study together what Bourdieu calls “the Right hand” and the “Left hand” of the state. Social policy and penal policy have converged and fused: the same behaviorist philosophy, the same notions of contract and personal responsibility, the same mechanisms of surveillance and record-keeping, the same techniques of supervision and “rituals of degradation” (in Garfinkel’s sense),<sup>26</sup> and the same sanction for deviation of conduct inform the action of the social assistance bureaucracy, transformed into a springboard into precarious employment, and the activities of the police, the criminal courts, and the prison, which are asked to curb marginalized populations.

The third volume, which was published first for reasons of political urgency, entitled *Prisons of Poverty*, discloses the causes and dismantles the mechanisms of the internationalization of the penalization of urban marginality, through the planetary diffusion of the policing strategy of “zero tolerance” alongside the spread of neoliberal economic policies.<sup>27</sup> Then comes a fourth volume, *Deadly Symbiosis*, which shows how ethnoracial division lubricates the expansion of the penal state and accelerates the transition from the social welfare to the punitive management of poverty; and how, in turn, the carceral institution redefines and redeploys ethnoracial or ethnonational stigma through its own

<sup>24</sup> Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971; expanded edition 1994).

<sup>26</sup> Harold Garfinkel, “Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies,” *American Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 2 (September 1956), pp. 240–244.

<sup>27</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “The Penalisation of Poverty and the Rise of Neoliberalism,” *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 9, no. 4 (Winter 2001), pp. 401–412; “Towards a Dictatorship over the Poor? Notes on the Penalization of Poverty in Brazil,” *Punishment & Society* 5, no. 2 (April 2003), pp. 197–205.

material and symbolic operations.<sup>28</sup> This book mixes ethnography, social history, sociological theory, and legal philosophy, and it tests the model of the structural and functional fusion of neighborhoods of relegation with the carceral system, constructed to analyze the case of the United States, by transposing it across the Atlantic to explain the overincarceration of postcolonial migrants in the European Union and to Brazil to account for the “militarization” of urban cleavages in the dualizing metropolis.<sup>29</sup>

SD: So there is an existential connecting thread here as well as a theoretical seam which tethers together these very different thematics.

LW: These are empirical objects of study which appear to be dispersed and are traditionally treated by distinct sectors of research that do not communicate with each other: the anthropology of the body, the sociology of poverty and racial domination, and criminology. People who work on the body, the culture of everyday life, the production of desire, are generally not much interested in the state; those who dissect justice policies are typically not concerned with urban marginality or social policy; and penologists accord no attention to the body or to state policies that do not officially figure in the fight against crime. My argument is that one cannot separate the body, the social and penal state, and urban marginality: they have to be grasped and explained together, in their mutual imbrications. And the theoretical launching pad for this three-headed analytic missile is the *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, which contains all the key concepts and methodological principles put to work in the other books.

### **Ethnography as an instrument of rupture and construction**

SD: The central place of ethnography in your intellectual trajectory is now clear, but I would like you to be more precise about the different roles it plays in the various research projects you have carried out, because one does not commonly associate the name of Pierre Bourdieu with ethnography.

LW: That is definitely a mistake born of ignorance because, as I showed in the article that opens the special issue of *Ethnography* on “Pierre Bourdieu in the Field,” Bourdieu was one of the most original practitioners of this approach and, what is more, ethnography was decisive in the gestation of his overall scientific project.<sup>30</sup> He not only wrote texts that are touchstones of the ethnographic craft—such as “The Sense of Honor” (1965) and “The Kabyle House or the World Reversed” (1971). Field observation also played a

<sup>28</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Race as Civic Felony,” *International Social Science Journal* 181 (Spring 2005), pp. 127–142; and *Deadly Symbiosis: Race and the Rise of the Penal State* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Penalization, Depoliticization, and Racialization: On the Overincarceration of Immigrants in the European Union,” in Sarah Armstrong and Lesley McAra (eds.), *Contexts of Control: New Perspectives on Punishment and Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 83–100; “The Militarization of Urban Marginality: Lessons from the Brazilian Metropolis,” *International Political Sociology* 1, no. 2 (Winter 2008), pp. 56–74.

<sup>30</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Following Pierre Bourdieu into the Field,” *Ethnography* 5, no. 4 (December 2004), pp. 387–414, and the six articles by Bourdieu in the same issue.

pivotal role in all his major books, from *The Inheritors* to *The Rules of Art* by way of *Distinction*.<sup>31</sup>

To consider only the works of youth, Bourdieu gave us an extraordinary comparative ethnography, carried out on both sides of the Mediterranean, of the cataclysmic transformation of the social and mental structures of peasant societies, in Kabylia under the press of French colonial penetration and the war of national liberation, and in his childhood village of Béarn as a result of the generalization of schooling, the opening of rural space to market exchanges, and the influence of urban culture through the agency of the mass media.<sup>32</sup> Those who persist in miscasting him as a “reproduction theorist” would be well-advised to re-read these studies.... Bourdieu was doing comparative ethnography, conducted simultaneously in several locations and combined with statistical analysis, thirty years before the coming of the fashion of “multi-sited” ethnography—which is often a flimsy cover for a practice more akin to cultural tourism than to fieldwork worthy of the name. And, far from yielding to exoticism and empiricism, Bourdieu’s ethnography was firmly guided by a theoretical project which was in turn enhanced by ethnography: most of his key concepts, starting with habitus, have their origin in empirical puzzles encountered in the field. Moreover, there has always been in Bourdieu’s wake, at the Center for European Sociology and beyond, first-rate practitioners of ethnography: I am thinking especially of Abdelmalek Sayad, Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, Yvette Delsaut and Monique and Michel Pinçon.<sup>33</sup>

So much to say that I would not have lacked for role models to follow if I had wanted to become an ethnographer through a sort of deliberate decision. But the question of whether or not to do fieldwork never presented itself to me in terms of a methodological avocation. Rather, it is the method that came to me as the best suited for resolving the concrete research problem I confronted which, in Chicago, was not just to “get closer” to the ghetto to acquire a practical and lived knowledge of it from within, but also to gain an *instrument for the deconstruction of the categories* through which America’s Black Belt was then perceived and portrayed in the scholarly and policy debate. My initial intention was to rely on an ethnography of the urban scene of the South Side to pierce through the double screen formed, first, by the prefabricated discourse on the ghetto as a site of *social disorganization*—a space of violence, deviance, and void, characterized by absence and lack—flowing from the externalist and exoticizing point of view adopted by conventional sociology, and, second, by the academic tale of the “underclass,” that fearsome and loathsome category that crystallized in the 1980s in the social and scientific imaginary of America to explain in perfectly

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Le sens de l’honneur” (1965) and “La maison kabyle, ou le monde renversé” (1971), in *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique. Précédée de trois études d’ethnologie kabyle* (Geneva: Editions Droz, 1972; republished: Paris, Seuil/Points, 2000); both texts appear in English translation in *Algeria 1960: Economic Structures and Temporal Structures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (with A. Darbel, J.-P. Rivet, C. Seibel), *Travail et travailleurs en Algérie* (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1963); Pierre Bourdieu and Abdelmalek Sayad, *Le Déracinement. La crise de l’agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie* (Paris: Minuit, 1964); Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Bal des célibataires. Crise de la société paysanne en Béarn* (Paris: Seuil, [1963, 1972, 1989] 2002; tr. *The Bachelors’ Ball*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Abdelmalek Sayad, *Un Nanterre algérien, terre de bidonvilles* (Paris: Autrement, 1995); Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière. Enquête aux usines Peugeot de Sochaux-Montbéliard* (Paris: Fayard, 1999); Yvette Delsaut, *La Place du maître. Une chronique des écoles normales d’instituteurs* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1992); Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot, *Voyage en grande bourgeoisie. Journal d’enquête* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).

tautological fashion the breakdown of the black ghetto by the “anti-social behavior” of its residents.<sup>34</sup>

Ethnographic observation enabled me to effect a *double rupture*, with the dominant journalistic-cum-political representation as well as with the current scholarly common sense, itself heavily contaminated by the national doxa. The same move applies on the French side, where the confrontation between what I saw and heard in the agencies of the Ministry of Urban Affairs and in the public housing project of the Quatre Mille in La Courneuve enabled me to shatter the bureaucratic and semi-scholarly preconceptions that are so many obstacles to the sociological construction of the object of the “*banlieues*.”

SD: This intention is explicated in the methodological prologue of *Urban Outcasts*, in which you mention the distinctive contribution of ethnography among five principles guiding the comparative sociology of urban marginality.

LW: *Urban Outcasts* is not an ethnographic monograph in the classic sense since the analysis articulates the micro-level of the neighborhood, the meso-level of the city and local political institutions, and the macro-level of the national economy and state, and inasmuch as it combines direct observation, statistical data, and historical perspective.<sup>35</sup> But ethnography nonetheless plays a major role in two analytic registers: as instrument of rupture with the political and intellectual doxa, as I just indicated, and as *tool for theoretical construction*.

The observations I recorded daily inside the black ghetto of Chicago in the company of my mates of the boxing gym on their relationships with employers, social service agencies, the police, street gangs, the school, and so on, enabled me to elaborate the ideal-typical notions I deploy to decipher the social practices and lived experience of poverty in the segregated core of the American metropolis. Thus the concept of *hyperghetto* captures the flattening of the space of possibles and the climate of social and racial clausturation that permeated the South Side in the 1990s, of which you can have no idea unless you have spent time there with your boots on the ground. The schema of *advanced marginality*, developed in the third part of the book, characterizing the new regime of poverty which emerges in the post-Keynesian, post-Fordist era, is backed up by direct knowledge of the life strategies of the residents of the black American ghetto and the declining French *banlieues*, of the extant forms of collective consciousness that orient their actions and aspirations, as well as the concrete obstacles against which they bump—such as the absence of a shared idiom, which redoubles the objective dispersion of the “precariat” at the symbolic level.

The concept of *territorial stigmatization* as a distinctive modality of the collective discredit bearing upon the residents of neighborhoods of relegation in the age of desocialized wage labor originates in the field study conducted face-to-face with the administrative managers of urban policy in France.<sup>36</sup> The high-level civil servants whom I

<sup>34</sup> Wacquant, “Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the American Ghetto,” *art. cit.*, and the responses by Michael Katz, Janet Abu-Lughod, Herbert Gans, Javier Auyero, Kenneth L. Kusmer, Paul Jargowski, Ceri Peach, and Sharon Zukin in subsequent issues of the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (1997 and 1998); Wacquant, “L’‘underclass’ urbaine dans l’imaginaire social et scientifique américain,” *art. cit.*; “Decivilizing and Demonizing: The Remaking of the Black American Ghetto,” *art. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts*, *op. cit.*; “French ‘Banlieues’ and Black American Ghetto: From Conflation to Comparison,” *Qui Parle* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2006), pp. 5–38.

<sup>36</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Territorial Stigmatization in the Age of Advanced Marginality,” *Thesis Eleven* 91 (November 2007), pp. 66–77.

interviewed all spoke of the deteriorating working-class districts of the urban periphery with a tremolo of anguish and disgust in their voices. Everything in their tone, their vocabulary, their postures and gestures expressed regret at being in charge of a mission and a population degraded and therefore degrading. Then I found the same feeling of disgust and indignity at the very bottom of the urban ladder, among the residents of the Quatre Mille housing project in the Parisian industrial periphery and among black Americans trapped in Chicago's hyperghetto. Without fieldwork conducted in parallel on both sides of the Atlantic, I could never have developed this notion—which, with hindsight, is for me one of the most conclusive results of this research.

SD: How does territorial stigmatization differ from ethnic stigmatization, and in what ways does it matter in your view?

LW: Working-class neighborhoods, dispossessed districts or immigrant enclaves have never enjoyed a good reputation, and the city has always had its unseemly zones, vice districts, skid rows, and shady areas enshrouded in a sulfurous aura. But a new phenomenon has arisen over the past two decades: in all the advanced countries, a small number of neighborhoods or localities have become publicly known, indeed renowned, as pits of social and moral perdition. The huge social housing complex of Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, Bobigny in the eastern periphery of Paris, the district of Moss Side in Manchester, Tensta at the edge of Stockholm, São Joao de Deus to the north of Porto: these names are so many national eponyms for “urban horror.” They inspire dread and vilification throughout the society. A blemish of place has crystallized, which is superimposed on the dishonor of class and ethnicity that already strikes their inhabitants, and exerts its own effects, distinct from the tribal, moral and corporeal “marks” previously analyzed by Erving Goffman,<sup>37</sup> which contribute powerfully to the spiral of social disintegration and symbolic defamation.

When I asked the residents of Chicago's ghetto and La Courneuve's projects, two zones of relegation four thousand miles apart, “What do people in this neighborhood do day-to-day to survive when they're on the outs?” they immediately responded in nearly identical terms: “Hey, me, people in the neighborhood, I don't know them. I live here, but I don't belong here.” In other words, I am not “like them.” They demarcated themselves from their neighbors and reassigned onto them the degraded image that public discourse gives them. On both sides of the Atlantic, residents of districts perceived and lived as urban purgatories hide their address from employers and public agencies, avoid asking friends to visit them in their homes, and deny being part of the local micro-society. Only fieldwork could reveal the pervasiveness of this feeling of indignity in the two locations and recourse to the same strategies for managing territorial stigma, including mutual distancing and lateral denigration, retreat into the private sphere, and flight into the outer world as soon as one acquires the means to move. These strategies tend to undermine yet a little more the already weakened collectives of the impoverished urban zones and to produce the very “disorganization” which dominant discourse claims characterizes these zones in the first place. Territorial stigma also encourages the state to adopt special policies, in violation of conventional procedures and national norms, which more often than not reinforce the dynamic of marginalization that they claim to combat, to the detriment of the residents.

<sup>37</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

## Flesh and text

SD: In terms of method, scale and object of study, your ethnography of the craft of boxing in Woodlawn is very different from your other, more macroanalytic work. How did you carry it out?

LW: The boxing project is an ethnography in a very classic mold in terms of its parameters, a sort of village study like the ones British anthropologists conducted in the 1940s, except that my village is the boxing gym and its extensions, and my tribe the fighters and their entourage.<sup>38</sup> I retained this structural and functional unity because it encloses the boxers and carves a specific temporal, relational, mental, emotional and aesthetic horizon which sets the pugilist apart and raises him above his ordinary environs. I wanted, first of all, to dissect the cloven relation of “symbiotic opposition” between the ghetto and the gym, the street and the ring. Next, I wanted to show how the social and symbolic structure of the gym governs the transmission of the techniques of the Manly art and the production of collective belief in the pugilistic *illusio*. And, finally, I wished to penetrate the practical logic of a corporeal practice that operates at the very limit of practice by means of a long-term apprenticeship in “the first person.” For three years, I melted into the local landscape and got caught up in the game. I learned how to box and participated in all phases of the preparation of the pugilist, all the way to fighting in the big amateur tournament of the Golden Gloves. I followed my gym buddies in their personal and professional peregrinations. And I dealt on a routine basis with trainers, managers, promoters, etc., who make the planet of boxing turn. In so doing, I was sucked into the sensuous and moral coils of pugilism, to the point where I seriously envisaged interrupting my academic trajectory to turn professional.

This is to say that the object and method of this inquiry were not of the classic mold. *Body and Soul* offers an *empirical and methodological radicalization of Bourdieu’s theory of habitus*.<sup>39</sup> On the one hand, I open the “black box” of the pugilistic habitus by disclosing the production and assembly of the cognitive categories, bodily skills and desires which together define the competence and appetite specific to the boxer. On the other hand, I deploy habitus as a methodological device, that is, I place myself in the local vortex of action in order to acquire through practice, in real time, the dispositions of the boxer with the aim of elucidating the magnetism proper to the pugilistic cosmos. The method thus tests the theory of action which informs the analysis according to a recursive and reflexive research design.

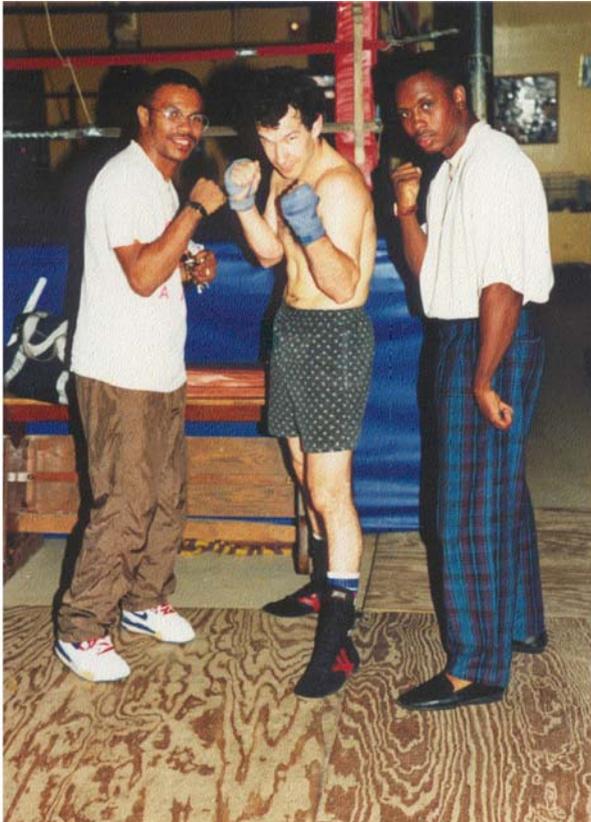
The idea that guided me here was to push the logic of participant observation to the point where it becomes reversed and turns into *observant participation*. In the Anglo-American tradition, when anthropology students first go into the field, they are cautioned, “Don’t go native.” In the French tradition, radical immersion is admissible—think of Jeanne Favret-Saada’s *Les Mots, la mort, les sorts*<sup>40</sup>—but only on condition that it be coupled with a

<sup>38</sup> Loïc Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2000] 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Taking Bourdieu into the Field,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 46 (2002), pp. 180–186, and “Habitus,” in Jens Beckert and Milan Zafirovski (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Economic Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 315–319.

<sup>40</sup> Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Les Mots, la mort, les sorts* (Paris: Gallimard/Poche, 1978, new ed. 1985; tr. *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

subjectivist epistemology which gets us lost in the inner depths of the anthropologist-subject. My position, on the contrary, is to say, “go native” but “*go native armed*,” that is, equipped with your theoretical and methodological tools, with the full store of problematics inherited from your discipline, with your capacity for reflexivity and analysis, and guided by a constant effort, once you have passed the ordeal of initiation, to *objectivize this experience and construct the object*—instead of allowing yourself to be naively embraced and constructed by it. Go ahead, go native, but come back a sociologist!



**“Busy” Louie in training, flanked by gymmates Curtis and Tony (May 1990)**

SD: That initiation guided by theory is what makes *Body and Soul* so original, to judge by the many reactions stirred up by the book (which is translated into nine languages and was extensively reviewed beyond the confines of sociology).

LW: I am not so sure about those reactions! I think, much to my regret since the major goal of the inquiry was to *de-exoticize* the Sweet science of bruising, that the book owes much of its impact to the “sensationalistic” side of the fieldwork: to go get your nose broken to understand what it means to become a boxer is not commonplace, especially if it is a little white Frenchie doing so in the black American ghetto... Some of my critics, mistaking my work for an extension of the “study of occupations” in the style of the second Chicago

School, did not even notice the double role which the concept of habitus plays in the inquiry and even complained about the absence of theory in the book!<sup>41</sup>

In fact, theory and method are joined to the point of fusion in the very empirical object whose elaboration they make possible. *Body and Soul* is an *experimental ethnography* in the originary meaning of the term, in that the researcher is one of the socialized bodies thrown into the sociomoral and sensuous alembic of the boxing gym, one of bodies-in-action whose transmutation will be traced to penetrate the alchemy by which boxers are fabricated. Apprenticeship is here the means of acquiring a practical mastery, a visceral knowledge of the universe under scrutiny, a way of elucidating the praxeology of the agents under examination—and not the means of entering into the subjectivity of the researcher. It is absolutely not a fall into the bottomless well of subjectivism into which “auto-ethnography” joyfully throws itself, quite the opposite: it relies on the most intimate experience, that of the desiring and suffering body, to grasp *in vivo* the collective manufacturing of the schemata of pugilistic perception, appreciation, and action that are shared, to varying degrees, by all boxers, whatever their origins, their trajectory, and their standing in the sporting hierarchy.<sup>42</sup> The central character of the story is neither “Busy” Louie, nor this or that boxer, and not even Dee Dee the old coach, in spite of his position as conductor: it is the gym as a social and moral forge. The intellectual model here is not Carlos Castañeda and his Yaqui sorcerers but the Gaston Bachelard of *Applied Rationalism* and of the materialist poetics of space, time, and fire.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, I think that, with this project, I did in an explicit, methodical, and above all *extreme* manner that which every good ethnographer does, namely, to give herself a practical, tactile, sensorial grasp of the prosaic reality she studies in order to shed light on the categories and relations that organize the ordinary conduct and sentiments of her subjects. Except that, usually, this is done without talking about it or without thematizing the role of “co-presence” with the phenomenon being studied, or by making (herself and others) believe that this is a mental process, and not a bodily and sensual apprenticeship which proceeds beneath the level of consciousness before it becomes mediated by language. *Body and Soul* offers a demonstration in action of the distinctive possibilities and virtues of a *carnal sociology*<sup>44</sup> which fully recounts the fact that the social agent is a suffering animal, a being of flesh and blood, nerves and viscera, inhabited by passions and endowed with embodied knowledges and skills—in opposition to the *animal symbolicum* of the neo-Kantian tradition, refurbished by Clifford Geertz and the followers of interpretive anthropology, on the one hand, and by Herbert Blumer and the symbolic interactionists, on the other<sup>45</sup>—and that *this is just as true of the sociologist*. This implies that we must bring the body of the sociologist back into play and treat her intelligent

<sup>41</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Shadowboxing with Ethnographic Ghosts: A Rejoinder,” *Symbolic Interaction* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2005), pp. 441–447 (response to the symposium on *Body and Soul*).

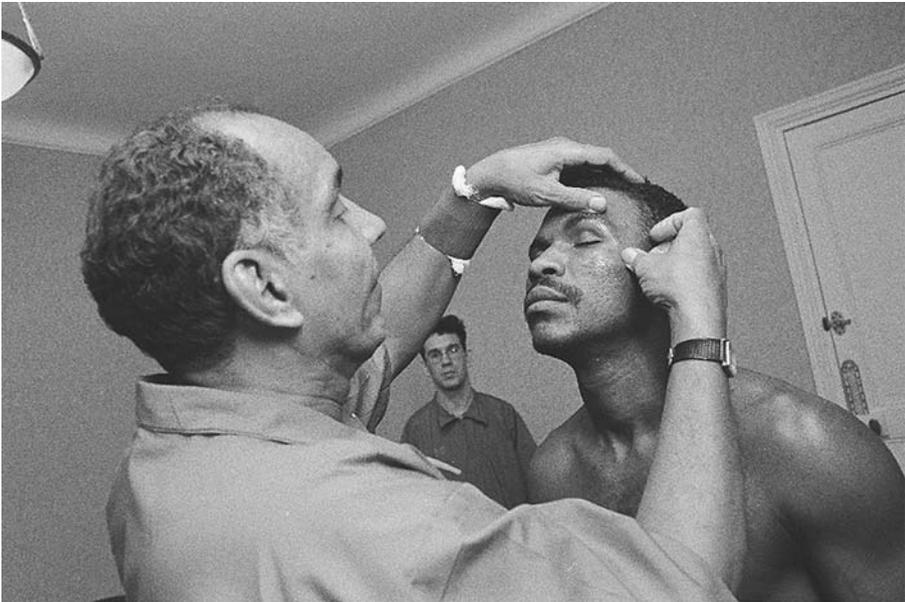
<sup>42</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Membership and Apprenticeship,” *Qualitative Sociology* 28, no. 4 (Winter 2005), pp. 445–471 (response to the special issue on *Body and Soul*, 28, no. 3, Fall 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Le Rationalisme appliqué* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949); *La Psychanalyse du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938; tr. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957).

<sup>44</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Une expérience de sociologie charnelle,” *Solidarités* 29 (June 2003), pp. 18–20.

<sup>45</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interaction* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

organism, not as an obstacle to understanding, as the intellectualism drilled into our folk conception of intellectual practice would have it, but as a vector of knowledge of the social world.



***Tasting the tension before the fight, as cornerman for Illinois superlightweight champion Curtis Strong (November 1990)***

SD: But, then, if *Body and Soul* is not centered on the person of “Busy” Louie, the boxer-apprentice sociologist, does that mean that it is not a book of reflexive anthropology?

LW: Not in the sense intended by what is called “poststructuralist” or “postmodern” anthropology, for which the return of the analytic gaze is directed either onto the knowing subject in her personal intimacy or onto the text that she delivers to her peers and the circuits of power-knowledge in which it travels. Those forms of reflexivity, narcissistic and discursive, are very superficial; they certainly constitute a useful moment in a research undertaking by helping to curb the play of the crudest biases (rooted in one’s identity and trajectory, affects, rhetorical effects, etc.). But they stop the movement of self-criticism at the very point where it should start, through the constant questioning of the categories and techniques of sociological analysis and of the relationship to the world they presuppose. It is this return onto the *instruments of construction of the object*, as opposed to the subject of objectivation, which is the hallmark of what one may call *epistemic reflexivity*.<sup>46</sup> And here is another difference with the “egological” or textual reflexivity of the subjectivist anthropologists: epistemic reflexivity is deployed, not at the end of the project, *ex post*,

<sup>46</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 36–46, and Pierre Bourdieu, “Participant Objectivation: The Huxley Medal Lecture,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9, no. 2 (February 2002), pp. 281–294.

when it comes to drafting the final research report, but *durante*, at every stage in the investigation. It targets the totality of the most routine research operations, from the selection of the site and the recruitment of informants to the choice of questions to pose or to avoid, as well as the engagement of theoretic schemata, methodological tools and display techniques, at the moment when they are implemented.

So *Body and Soul* is a reflexive book in the sense that the very design of the inquiry forced me to constantly reflect on the suitability of the means of investigation to its ends, on the difference between the practical mastery and the theoretical mastery of a practice, on the gap between sensorial infatuation and analytic comprehension, on the hiatus between the visceral and the mental, the *ethos* and the *logos* of pugilism as well as of sociology. Likewise, *Urban Outcasts* is a work of reflexive urban sociology because it ceaselessly interrogates the very categories it puts into question and into play—“underclass,” “inner city,” “*banlieues*,” hyperghetto, relegation, precariat—to think the novel configurations of marginality in the city. And because it rests on a clearcut demarcation between folk categories and analytic categories, which is for me the plinth of reflexivity.

Epistemic reflexivity is all the more urgently needed by ethnographers as everything conspires to invite them to submit to the preconstructions of common sense. By methodological duty, they must be attentive to the agents they study and take seriously their “point of view.” If they do their job well, they also find themselves bound to these agents by affective ties that encourage identification and transference. Finally, the public image of ethnography (including in the eyes of other social scientists, unfortunately) likens it to story-telling, diary-writing, if not to epic. So much to say that the anthropologist or sociologist who relies on fieldwork must *double the dose of reflexivity*. This is what I tried to demonstrate in “Scrutinizing the Street” about recent trends and foibles in US urban ethnography.<sup>47</sup> The considered target of my critique is not the three books I subject to a meticulous analytic dissection (and still less their authors, who are here simply points in academic space, or their political positions, to which I am completely indifferent), but 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. This posture is the fount of serious scientific errors, as these errors are systematic and have both ordinary and scholarly common sense on their side.

SD: *Body and Soul* also innovates in its form, by its narrative writing of a quasi-theatrical cast which invites the reader to experience the thrills of the apprentice-boxer and makes palpable both the logic of the fieldwork and its end-product.

LW: How to go from the guts to the intellect, from the comprehension of the flesh to the knowledge of the text? Here is a real problem of concrete epistemology about which we have not sufficiently reflected, and which for a long time seemed to me irresolvable. To reconstitute the carnal dimension of ordinary existence and the bodily anchoring of the practical knowledge constitutive of pugilism—but also of every practice, even the least “bodily” in appearance—requires indeed a complete overhaul of our way of writing social science. In the case at hand, I had to find a style breaking with the monological,

<sup>47</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Scrutinizing the Street: Poverty, Morality, and the Pitfalls of Urban Ethnography,” *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 6 (May 2002), pp. 1468–1532.

monochromatic, linear writing of the classic research account from which the ethnographer has withdrawn and elaborate a multifaceted writing mixing styles and genres, so as to capture and convey “the taste and ache of action” to the reader.<sup>48</sup>

*Body and Soul* is written against subjectivism, against the narcissism and irrationalism that undergird so-called “postmodern” literary theory, but that does not mean that we should for this reason deprive ourselves of the literary techniques and instruments of dramatic exposition that this tradition gives us. That is why the book mixes three types of writing, intertwined with each other, but each given priority in one of the three parts, so that the reader slides smoothly from concept to percept, from analysis to experience. The first part anchors a classic sociological style in an analytic mold that identifies at the outset structures and mechanisms so as to give the reader the tools necessary for explaining and understanding what is going on. The tone of the second part is set by ethnographic writing in the strict sense, that is, a thick depiction of the ways of being, thinking, feeling and acting proper to the milieu under consideration, where one encounters again these mechanisms but in action, through the effects they produce. The experiential moment comes in the third part, in the form of “sociological novella” that delivers felt action, the lived experience of a subject who also happens to be the analyst.

The weighed combination of these three modalities of writing—the sociological, the ethnographic, and the literary—according to proportions that become gradually inverted as the book progresses, aims to enable the reader to feel emotionally and grasp rationally the springs and turns of pugilistic action. For this, the text weaves together an analytic lattice, stretches of closely edited fieldnotes, counterpoints composed by portraits of key protagonists and excerpts from interviews, as well as photographs whose role is to foster a synthetic grasp of the dynamic interplay of the factors and forms inventoried in the analysis, to give the reader a chance to “touch with her own eyes” the beating pulse of pugilism. Here again, everything hangs together: the theory of habitus, the use of apprenticeship as technique of investigation, the place accorded to the sentient body as vector of knowledge, and formal innovation in writing. There is no point in carrying out a carnal sociology backed by practical initiation if what it reveals about the sensorimotor magnetism of the universe in question ends up disappearing later in the writing, on the pretext that one must abide by the textual canons dictated by Humean positivism or neo-Kantian cognitivism.

### **Bobsledding across the Atlantic**

SD: We now come to your position as a European sociologist working in the United States, which is an opportunity to reflect on the conception of the intellectual current on the two sides of the Atlantic

LW: I am at the hinge, or caught in the crevice, between two traditions, two conceptions of the research enterprise. There is, on the one side, a European tradition, incarnated in its clearest form by France, which invented the sociohistorical category of the intellectual around the Dreyfus

<sup>48</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “The Taste and Ache of Action,” in *Body and Soul*, *op. cit.*, vii-xii; see also “Whores, Slaves, and Stallions: Languages of Exploitation and Accommodation Among Professional Fighters,” *Body & Society* 7, nos. 2–3 (June–September 2001): 181–194.

Affair, as Christophe Charle showed in his magnificent book, *Birth of the “Intellectuals.”* For this lineage, which runs roughly from Zola to Sartre, and then from Foucault to Bourdieu and others, the intellectual is a cultural producer who by definition engages his specific competency in public debate.<sup>49</sup> The intellectual is of necessity, by constitution, implicated in the City; it is his duty to reinject the fruit of his reflections and observations into the civic and political sphere. I am a product of that tradition. But it so happens that I conduct my work mostly on the other side of the Atlantic, where a different tradition reigns, more concerned with methodological precision, for which the regulative ideal of the researcher is incarnated, not by the intellectual (which is a pejorative word in the United States), but by the *professional*, in the sense used to refer to a lawyer or doctor, that is, the bearer of a technical competency and expert knowledge which is a neutral knowledge, to be assessed only by peers, and who for that reason must keep out of public debate. The intellectual is two-dimensional, at once scholar and active citizen; the *academic* is one-dimensional, turned exclusively towards the microcosm of the university—under threat of being discredited but at the cost of being irrelevant. For me, this duality is an existential and occupational tension that is not always easy to handle.

Of course, each of these traditions has its own virtues and vices. Rather than confining ourselves to the ritual celebration of one conception of the researcher’s calling and the systematic denigration of the other, we should strive to cumulate their distinctive qualities. The potency of the American pattern lies in the technical rigor it prescribes and the brakes it puts on amateurism. The perversion of the French pattern is the obverse: the great tolerance it accords to intellectual dilettantism and essayism animated by philosophical pretension—personalized to the point of caricature by what Louis Pinto aptly calls the “media intellectual,” who exists only for and through journalism.<sup>50</sup> So many of our great Parisian “philosophers,” omnipresent in the cultural magazines and on TV shows, have never published the slightest work in a reputable journal of philosophy or social science. But so long as their Parisian journalist friends marvel at their deep thoughts, they exist as such... On both sides of the Atlantic, autonomous researchers are also increasingly supplanted by bureaucratic experts, those shadowy scholars who deliver to government the answers that officials wish for and who, above all, accept the questions posed by politicians. In point of fact, in both countries, there is a huge deficit of collective reflection on the collective organization of scientific work and on the changing nexus between research, the media, money, and politics. This deficit fosters scientific heteronomy and, through it, the diffusion of the monopoly of neoliberal “one-way thinking” which has truncated and paralyzed public debate for the past decade.<sup>51</sup>

SD: You split your time between the United States and Europe, but what does Loïc Wacquant’s daily life look like concretely?

LW: We are better off not trying to describe it! It is a bit frenetic, a little like bobsledding, where you are stretched out flat at ground level on a bolide hurtling down the mountain at

<sup>49</sup> Christophe Charle, *Naissance des “intellectuels” (1880–1900)* (Paris: Minuit, 1990).

<sup>50</sup> Louis Pinto, *La Vocation et le métier de philosophe. Pour une sociologie de la philosophie dans la France contemporaine* (Paris: Seuil, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, “The Cunning of Imperialist Reason,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 16, no. 1 ([1998] February 1999), pp. 41–57.

vertiginous speed. Here is the daily life of Loïc Wacquant: it is like intellectual bobsledding, but without the ice [laughter].... Let me share this confidence with you: I rarely go to bed early and I do not go to the movies often.

My everyday life much is like that of every researcher. When I am in the United States, for my teaching and fieldwork, I live in the manner of a hermit, where I am rather sealed in, isolated in the academic world, which is itself totally isolated from the surrounding society and structurally disconnected from the political field. So I concentrate on my research, my courses, the supervision of doctoral students, editing *Ethnography*, etc. That accounts for 95% of my time and energy, and it is the foundation of everything I do: without serious scientific work, without measured and tested knowledge, I would have nothing to say. It is when I am in Europe or in South America that my other side reemerges—the “engaged intellectual,” as my American colleagues would say. Once I have crossed the Atlantic, I give lectures and participate in scientific colloquia, but I also partake in extra-academic events, in public debates which are so many occasions to intervene on the subjects on which I have some competency. It is fortunate that this possibility of getting out of the academic fishbowl exists in Europe and Latin America; otherwise, I think by now I would be completely desiccated, humanly and intellectually. When you remain cloistered in your university circles, you allow yourself to get caught up in the games and stakes of the microcosm, and in the end you lose your civic energy, your capacity for astonishment at the world, and the perspicacity needed for deciphering it.

At times, I have the sensation of living as a double or multiple self with moments of tension among the different research topics I delve into, between the scientific and the political registers, between academic and activist audiences, between the United States and Europe where, as I previously indicated, different conceptions of intellectual activity prevail and therefore somewhat different images of and expectations about my work. Sometimes these two dimensions clash, and that makes things difficult, even painful; but when they enter in synergy, I feel like I am pursuing my mission to the full. For example, last February, just as the presidential campaign was getting under way in France, I took part in a public debate about *Urban Outcasts*, organized by Utopia, a group of “cross-current” activists of the Left, at which the book’s discussant was the former Minister of the Interior of the Jospin government, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, whom I had ripped in my previous book, *Prisons of Poverty*. We had a discussion just as serious as the one I had just had the week before with British colleagues in sociology and urban planning at Cambridge, but more open and more adventurous. It was very stimulating to confront our views of the marginalization of the lower-class *banlieues* and of the remedies that the state could provide to check it, and to reflect out loud on how my sociological analysis could be extended into practical measures, without losing any theoretical and empirical rigor.<sup>52</sup>

In France and Portugal, in Argentina, Mexico, Italy or Belgium, when I give lectures, the audience is often a motley assembly of academics, political militants, unionists, human rights activists, people from an assortment of educated occupations such as teachers and social workers, and ordinary citizens with an interest in the topic at hand. That creates the possibility of a broader and more open dialogue, in which the scholarly gaze and language are themselves questioned and which raises very concretely the problem of translating the results of research from a scientific frame into civic and practical terms.

<sup>52</sup> The debate is available online in video at <http://utopiaconf.free.fr/video.htm>.



*A public debate with political journalist Daniel Mermet at the Fête de l'Humanité (September 2003)*

SD: And that is not possible in the US?

LW: That space of collective “translation” is extremely compressed due to the locking of the political field and the self-enclosure of the academic professions. For example, in Europe and Latin America, I have been interviewed dozens of times on the issue of imprisonment, on national radio and television, and in the major dailies, and I have consulted with high-level policy makers from Holland to Brazil. By contrast, in the United I have never given a single lecture on prisons outside of the academic perimeter, where the audience is composed nearly exclusively of students and professors, sociologists, criminologists or jurists. And that is not a personal failing: it is true of practically all the leading researchers, like my eminent Berkeley colleague, the legal scholar Franklin Zimring, who produced a ground-breaking study of “Three Strikes and You’re Out” in California, showing the juridical and criminological absurdity of this law mandating life imprisonment for third-time offenders.<sup>53</sup> Not a single

<sup>53</sup> Franklin E. Zimring, Gordon Hawkins and Sam Kamin, *Punishment and Democracy: Three Strikes and You’re Out in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

political leader or state manager bothered to consult him on this subject. Meanwhile, California spends 8 billion dollars each year to lock up 170,000 convicts, three times the carceral stock of France with one-half the population...

There is practically no place for civic discussion and no organizational vehicles for conveying scientific work into the public sphere and giving it weight in it. Granted, there is a nebula of “community organizations” but they occupy a marginal position in the bureaucratic field—in my view, they are even an instrument of domestication of political protest since they largely depend on tolerance by the local political machine. Another roadblock on the road to the civic valorization of scientific research is formed by the public policy schools and private think tanks which serve as intellectual glacies or “shield” that protects political decision-makers from critical thought by producing pre-formatted pseudo-knowledge conforming perfectly to the interests of the dominant.<sup>54</sup>

The political and journalistic fields in the United States are largely controlled by moneyed interests, the big corporations, professional associations, and the huge fortunes that keep the twin parties under their thumb, parties that are themselves little more than labels to facilitate the raising of funds to pay for the electoral campaigns which require purchasing access to the media (uniquely among Western democracies). Put in this blunt way, it may seem caricatural, but the caricature is in reality: think that two-thirds of US senators are millionaires and that the 2008 presidential campaign is going to cost some 5 billion dollars! In fact, it is the overall organization of the public sphere in the United States that acts to severely restrict the involvement of scholars in the life of the City, alongside the professional ethics of the researchers who see themselves as *academics* rather than as intellectuals (who smell of gunpowder and strike fear into the hearts of deans).

That is why I enjoy having work and personal ties on both sides of the Atlantic, so I can return regularly to Europe where I spend about four months every year. That boosts my energy and replenishes my desire to keep working during periods of doubt or exhaustion. There is so much to learn by getting out of “the academy” and keeping in contact with the people directly implicated, on a daily basis, as professionals, activists or political decision-makers, at the heart of the phenomena we study. In return, researchers can help them see their own practice from a new angle and sometimes target their actions better.

### Social science as beacon and solvent

SD: Can your research help guide the action of activists?

LW: That is for them to say or to discover. But activism is beset by snares and decoys which lead to a phenomenal squandering of collective energies. When that happens, one must have the honesty to say “Stop, that is not the right issue, you are wasting your time.” That can be the role of the researcher.

Take a specific example: in the United States, militants for criminal justice are strongly mobilized against the privatization of prisons and what the thesis of the “prison-industrial complex” portrays as the exploitation of the captive labor force of prisoners. In reality, carceral employment by private firms involves barely 0.3% of inmates: it is an absolutely miniscule phenomenon. To battle to abolish “slave labor” in prison is to fight a chimera. Even if for-profit prisons were closed down overnight in the United States, the confined population would remain unchanged: the authorities would simply stow it with 6% fewer

<sup>54</sup> Loïc Wacquant “Critical Thought as Solvent of Doxa,” *Constellations* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2004), pp. 97–101.

cells. By focusing obsessively on privatization, you miss the core of the problem: it is not the search for capitalist profit that drives the stupendous expansion of the population behind bars in the US but the *construction of a liberal-paternalist state*, that is, a political project which requires that we bring economic deregulation, the restriction of social assistance and the expansion of the penal sector into a single framework for analysis and action.<sup>55</sup> The same reasoning applies to what some left-wing militants in France and neighboring countries naively call “*le programme sécuritaire*” (“the law-and-order agenda”). Criminal insecurity is only a decoy which diverts the collective gaze away from the real stake, which is the redrawing of the perimeter and missions of the state as it faces the Moloch of the market.

A similar caveat applies across Western Europe to the moral panic about the “ghettoization” of declining lower-class districts: here again, the activists who battle to “break open the ghettos” have chosen the wrong target. The marginalized neighborhoods of the European urban periphery are poles apart from the ghetto and they are evolving away from it. Their populations are ethnically mixed and increasingly heterogeneous; their capacity for collective organization is diminishing; their frontiers are porous and routinely crossed by residents who rise in the class structure; and they have proven incapable of producing a collective identity, other than territorial and negative. These areas are *anti-ghettos* that suffer above all from pauperization, stigmatization, and the generalized retrenchment of the social state. Instead of worrying about the “second generation of immigration,” we should confront head on the third generation of mass unemployment and rampant work insecurity, which makes discrimination more salient as the labor market shrinks and fragments.<sup>56</sup>

SD: Your analyses sometimes give one the somber impression that the social world is very closed and permeated by an implacable causality. So, for our last question, what would be your message of optimism for the future of the social sciences?

LW: Sociologists are not in the business of being either optimists or pessimists: they have to look social reality in the eye, with lucidity and with the help of all the instruments that their science gives them. We have simply to be rigorous and fearless in our analysis in order to construct true models that enable us to identify points of intervention and indicate the possible levers for individual and collective action—but that is simpler said than done!<sup>57</sup> If my analyses often seem somber and cold, it is because we live in somber and cold times. It is not a character trait of the analyst, but a characteristic of historical reality. Now, I will grant you that, if you look at the world through the eyes of the dominant, the social landscape does look a lot rosier and inspires more enthusiasm!

<sup>55</sup> Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009); “Ordering Insecurity: Social Polarization and the Punitive Upsurge,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2008), pp. 9–27; and “The Place of the Prison in the New Government of Poverty,” in Marie-Louise Frampton, Ián Haney Lopez and Jonathan Simon (eds.), *After the War on Crime* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), pp. 23–36.

<sup>56</sup> Loïc Wacquant, “Ghettos and Anti-Ghettos: An Anatomy of the New Urban Poverty,” *Thesis Eleven* 94 (August 2008), pp. 113–118.

<sup>57</sup> On the penal front, see Loïc Wacquant, “The Advent of the Penal State is not a Destiny,” *Social Justice* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2001), pp. 81–87; “Socialiser, médicaliser, pénaliser: un choix politique,” *Combats face au sida. Santé, drogues, société* 27 (March 2002), pp. 4–9; “Comment sortir du piège sécuritaire,” *Contradictions* (Bruxelles) 22 (December 2004): 120–133 (abridged as “How to Escape the Law and Order Snare,” *Criminal Justice Matters* (London), Special Issue on Politics, Economy and Crime, Winter 2007). On the urban front, read Loïc Wacquant, “Ghetto, banlieues, État: réaffirmer la primauté du politique,” *Nouveaux regards* 33 (April–June 2006), pp. 62–66.

Having said this, the social sciences of today can make a civic contribution of the first order by playing the *double role of solvent and beacon*. They can act as solvent of the new neoliberal common sense that “naturalizes” the current state of affairs and its immanent tendencies, through the methodical critique of the categories and topics which weave the fabric of the dominant discourse.<sup>58</sup> On this front, it is a matter of giving the greatest possible number of citizens the tools for reflection needed to take back their own thought about the social world, so that they are not thought by the media, invaded by the prefabricated ideas that the latter diffuse in a steady stream, so that citizens may question the very schemata that frame political debate—and be in a position to challenge, not only the proposed solutions, but the very diagnosis of the problems that society faces. Social science can also function in the manner of a *beacon* that casts light on contemporary transformations, making latent properties or unnoticed trends emerge from the shadows (a simple example: the speed of the rise of the Gini index which measures income inequality), and especially reveals possible alternative paths, points of bifurcation in the road of history.

Against the mythology of “globalization”—that gentle moniker that the neoliberal revolution gave itself—the social sciences can and must breathe back into public debate the notion that there are very significant sociological variations among contemporary societies, which are misleadingly portrayed as uniformized and forced to align themselves with the model of the “society of advanced insecurity” incarnated by the United States or its practical and ideological subsidiary which England has become. These variations are the cumulative result of political choices which we must make, not by groping in the dark, but in the full light of the sciences of society, based on a reasoned understanding of causes and consequences.

*Transcription and revision by Elisabeth Coutant*

*Bibliographical research by Susana Durão*

*English translation by Roberta Garner, with Loïc Wacquant*

**Loïc Wacquant** is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Researcher at the Centre de sociologie européenne, Paris. His interests span incarnation, ethnoracial domination, urban inequality, penalization, and social theory. His recent books include *Body and Soul: Notebooks of An Apprentice Boxer* (2004), *The Mystery of Ministry: Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics* (2005), *Das Janusgesicht des Ghettos* (2006), *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (2008), and *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (2009). He is a co-founder and editor of the interdisciplinary journal *Ethnography* and was a regular contributor to *Le Monde Diplomatique* from 1994 to 2004.

**Susana Durão** received her doctorate in anthropology from the Institute for Research on Labor (ISCTE) in Lisbon in 2006, with a thesis entitled “Proximity Patrols: An Ethnography of Police in Lisbon.” Her areas of interest include the anthropology of organizations, work, and the professions; urban violence and policing; and critical theories of security. She is the author of *Oficinas e Tipógrafos. Culturas e Quotidianos do Trabalho* (2003) and of numerous articles in the anthropology of work and firms. She is currently researching public policies to contain urban violence at the Museu Nacional of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and at the Centre d’Études Africaines of the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris.

<sup>58</sup> “Critical Thought as Solvent of Doxa,” *art. cit.*