


Please cite the Published Version

Flint, John, Atkinson, Rowland, Ferrari, Ed, Gore, Tony and Lever, John  (2016) Loic Wacquant Commentaries. People, Place and Policy Online, 10 (2). pp. 174-184.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3351/ppp.0010.0002.0004>

Publisher: Sheffield Hallam University

Version: Published Version

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Loïc Wacquant Commentaries

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Re-thinking Urban Inequality with Loïc Wacquant

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My first reflection on the two days of events in Sheffield comprising rethinking urban inequality with Loïc Wacquant was a sense of excitement about the breadth and depth of work currently being conducted in this field and the real opportunities to forge new linkages across this research. During the conference on the first day, the papers by Emma Jackson and Kirsteen Paton emphasised not just the remaining centrality of class, but how it is manifested through the importance, and specifics, of places. This emphasis on space was retained in papers examining ethnicity and discourses of threat, risk, citizenship and belonging, including the cases of Muslims in France (Fabien Truong), Roma camps in Italy (Isabella Clough Marinaro) and advanced marginality in contemporary housing processes in England (David Robinson) as well as Loïc Wacquant's own public lecture on the two faces of the ghetto. Adam Elliott Cooper, Justus Uitermark and Matt Clement advanced our understanding of how contemporary advanced marginality is governed, through for example, policing and urban and housing renewal programmes, and the new socio-spatial manifestations of resistance that arise from this. The pressing need to connect these to the micro-practices of advanced urban marginality was reaffirmed in the research presented by Emily Ball and Larissa Povey on the second day. They, like other contributors and Wacquant himself, emphasised the requirement to locate our work in the voices of the marginalised themselves and those most directly interacting with them.

Reflecting on the two days, a number of themes emerged, primarily from the many contributions of Loïc Wacquant himself, but also through the insights of many participants at each of the events. Firstly, there is a need for both historical and geographical depth; drawing on work in many urban contexts and situating our analysis in a stronger historical understanding. In doing so, we need to avoid some of the dangers of overly stating generalised 'neo-liberal' developments and assuming that these are playing out uniformly in different urban and national arenas. Similarly, we should be wary of a focus on a narrow contemporary temporal period and prematurely making claims for the importance and significance of particular emerging phenomena and processes. Secondly, there is the need for conceptual clarity and rigour and for this to be complemented by robust and extensive empirical investigation, exemplified by Wacquant's work on the ghetto. Thirdly, I took from the events an encouragement that Wacquant's work was being engaged with by a very wide range of scholars and practitioners, all bringing particular new insights. Finally, I was inspired by the level of scholarly ambition, the restless quest for new knowledge and understanding and also a

need to challenge orthodoxies (academic, political and policy), recognising the value of subjecting one's own work and assumptions to continuous reflection and critique: the 're-thinking' that these events sought to stimulate.

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Poverty, place and scale

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It appears to have become one of Wacquant's key missions to explain that the idea of the ghetto is increasingly redundant, despite spending a quarter of a century analysing and expounding on this very subject. As he put it, the Chicago phase of his work is more or less over. Exuberant, verbose and as enthusiastic as ever he argued that it is to new geographies of poverty and spatial exclusion that challenge the validity and use of the idea of heavily racialized concentrations of urban poverty that we should now look. Yet it still matters that Loïc Wacquant came to Sheffield to speak about his work on ghettos. One of his core messages, that analysis of social immiseration must acknowledge the structural conditions that produce such outcomes is in fact dear to the heart of the city's numerous urbanist academics, activists and those working in local government and voluntary organisations. Indeed these themes are central to the lives of many others in cities across the UK and Europe who are often aware that however hard they try to turn around the local fortunes of places and the poor, they face not only the reality of those conditions but also the undermining actions of central government. To address these conditions much needs to be done to staunch what can be described as an assault on the lives and livelihoods of those excluded by our political economy.

One point that flows from playing-down the use of the ghetto as a vocabulary of contemporary urban life is to move away from introspective debates about what does, or does not, fit with such concepts. Instead we need to acknowledge the kind of, in Wacquant's words, pauperised and stigmatised urban areas that now exist across urban Western Europe which, in combination with repressive housing and welfare systems, deny human flourishing and social participation. Rather than look to a restrictive notion of ghettoization we should instead be attendant to the social thinning of poverty and exclusion across space. Yet it is not in acknowledgment of this complexity that the UK government has abandoned area-based urban policies that targeted the poorest areas. Neither is it in recognition of new forms of flexible labour, the burden of social care within families and complex modes of exclusion that the government has sought to reduce the cost of caring for many citizens. Similarly, the move to destroy 'ghettoised' public housing in hot property markets like London's, to produce new areas of social mix, is by no means a sign of the impact of social research that sought to understand area-based stigma and improve housing conditions. To the findings of social researchers on these matters is presented an unwavering toughness policy programmes that ostensibly work to improve conditions while, in reality, furthering the wealth of developers and owners while scattering and re-coagulating poverty into new spatial formations.

In the face of disinterest and disinvestment in the deprived the role of social researchers becomes further problematized. Despite setting incentives to 'impact' on policy, the economy and society the translation of critical housing and urban research into these domains is hindered by a lack of raw and transformative money resources and the absence of political interest. In this context it seems to me that the work of Wacquant and other urbanists is best utilised by promoting and disseminating that work to affect the social conversations that might bring weight to bear on incentivising political actors to produce positive national priorities and rework the background assumptions of what constitutes a fair society. Could we mobilise to see a joint university-led programme akin to the Community Development Programme of the 1960s and a new audit of society, poverty and space? Might this go some way to addressing concerns about what exclusion and ghettos mean for cities today and what systemic and local actions could be engaged to reduce these problems in the near future?

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Wacquant and the Decline of Public Institutions: The Need for a More Contingent Analysis?

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During his wide ranging Q&A session in Sheffield (8 June 2016), *Marginality, Penalty, Carnality*, Loïc Wacquant offered a *tour de force* extemporisation of several of the key themes of several decades of his work. I was struck by the confidence with which Wacquant unfurled before us the empirical tapestry that supported his arguments; arguments which, despite resting on a fusion of somewhat disparate ideas drawn from urban sociology, institutional economics and moral philosophy; had, together, their own impressive logical coherence. Wacquant's writings on marginality have, of course, become a *go to* reference for any researcher wishing to understand the idea of the precariat. Here was a scholar of theory with the confidence that comes from a clear mastery of his own empirical data.

One thing that I found particularly interesting was the emphasis that Wacquant placed on an institutional analysis. One of the key tenets of his marginalisation thesis, it appears, is the idea of the decline of public institutions, both as corollary of broader structural changes associated with state-political projects of reform, and more locally as part of an actively *punitive* strategy imbued with spatial symbolism and enmeshed in the tactics of land economics. As he says from the outset in *Urban Outcasts*, 'it is *the collapse of public institutions ... that emerges as the most potent and most distinctive cause of entrenched marginality in the American metropolis*' (Wacquant, 2008: 4, emphasis original). This, he contends both in that book and again in his 2016 paper in *Urban Studies*, leads to what he terms the economic under-determination and political over-determination of 'hyperghettoisation'. As he explains, rather than simply ascribing marginality to economic change and its impacts on worklessness, it is, rather, 'government *policies of urban abandonment* pursued across the gamut of employment, welfare, education, housing and health and multiple scales... that have accompanied the downfall of the communal ghetto' (Wacquant, 2016: 1079, emphasis original).

While Wacquant offers more concrete empirical data than most, I found it curious that the concept of the institution and its temporal persistence wasn't put under more scrutiny. This was especially the case since it seems that much of what he writes about in his use of Bourdieu- habitus, a theory of action, the role of structure and agency in creating and implanting symbols - finds a natural corollary in the sociological idea of the institution. As Douglass North (1991) defines them, institutions are "*humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction*" (p.97). He goes on: "*They consist of both informal constraints ..., and formal rules*" (*ibid.*, p.97, emphasis added). The implication is that institutions are fluid, changeable, and subject to the contingencies of time and space.

For us to accept without doubt that urban outcasts – both in terms of places and their residents – are a product of an active political strategy begs the questions of what institutions are and what their intersectionalities are with. In his talk, Wacquant appeared to restrict himself to talking about the rather tangible and formal products of the 20th Century Fordist-Keynsian regime and its associated social contracts – welfare institutions, public services, banks, schools, the penal system, and models of full and stable employment – rather than the *ideas* of the codes, customs and expectations that are implicit in the specific manifestations of those concrete institutions at particular points in time and space. This led me to wonder about the highly time-place contingent nature of his prescription. The kinds of problems he talks of – the withdrawal of formal institutions; the erosion of stable, well-paid employment, for example – seem actually to be the change or denigration not of longstanding institutions but of comparatively fleeting moments in human history. Wacquant (2008) says: “...wage work has turned from fount of homogeneity, solidarity and security into a source of social fragmentation and precariousness for those confined to the border zones of the employment sphere” (p.234). But such an analysis by itself ignores those almost constant processes of fragmentation, recombination and change in urban life generally. Trying to stop their disappearance is to suggest that they are and have been, as institutions, permanent fixtures in our lives. Yet they are not and have not been. If we recognise their contingency, we can better understand how to develop them further as part of an ongoing project of progressive policymaking, building on their best elements and fitting them within an idea of what makes sense now, to current generations. Seeing institutions in a more nuanced way, incorporating ideas of their day, that gain cultural resonance for their generations, avoids us falling into the idea that what the world was like as part of the post-war settlement is universally worth preserving in aspic. And this helps us better understand better the problem of true marginalisation and precarity: concerned less with those denied the institutions to which they have become accustomed, and more with those who are denied the capacity to cope with change and the resources to institute their own positive responses to it.

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Wacquant's take on the role of the State

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As a political geographer, for me the pivotal moment of the one-day conference *Rethinking urban inequality in contemporary times* came at the start of Loïc Wacquant's late afternoon comments on what he had heard from the other speakers. Having variously enjoyed and endured presentations of varying focus and quality, I had been struck by the generally limited way in which they had conceptualised and hence sought to integrate the role of the state into their analyses. For me the approaches were at best instrumentalist, and at worst conspiratorial, albeit with very similar reductive tendencies. I wanted to shout out 'have you not heard of the work of political scientists and geographers on this subject over the past 30 years?' Surely the notion that the capitalist state is a set of social relations, embedded in a wider social and economic formation, should be tailor-made for incorporation into sociological research on inequality and marginalisation? Thankfully setting the record straight on this score was the first point that Wacquant made, in typically trenchant terms, in his response. Suddenly my flagging attention was recaptured, and the light streaming through the clerestory windows of the Cutlers' Hall seemed a lot brighter.

Now I have to admit that my previous exposure to Wacquant's work had mainly involved second-hand summaries by research students and informal discussion with colleagues, in which his conceptualisation appeared to amount to little more than reference to dramatic but monolithic-sounding categories such as the 'penal' or the 'centaur' state. Even Wacquant's initial conference presentation had not cast much further light on his take on the matter, with the state explicitly sitting at the apex of his conceptual triangle, but for me still remaining something of a 'black box'. Thus I was intrigued by the more nuanced understanding advocated in his later comments, and decided that I needed to undertake some follow-up familiarisation with his writings on the subject.

Very quickly I discovered the theoretical coda on the neoliberal state that forms the final section of his book *Punishing the Poor* (Wacquant, 2009: 287-314). Here he starts from Bourdieu's interpretation of the state as "a splintered space of forces vying over the definition and distribution of public goods", otherwise known as the 'bureaucratic field' (Bourdieu, 1994). Within this field there are continuing struggles between different branches of the state, for example between those at higher levels promoting the 'marketisation' of public services and those at the sharp end concerned to ensure their quality and consistency. More fundamentally, Wacquant highlights the existence of the 'left hand' (or feminine) side of the state concerned with social functions such as education, health, housing and welfare; and the 'right hand' (or masculine) side, focused on economic (and other forms of) discipline, efficiency and effectiveness. It is the increasing intermeshing of these binary categories in policies aimed simultaneously at controlling and supporting the poor and disadvantaged in

society that underpins his work on the subject (e.g., the emergence of the 'carceral-assistential net').

Helpful though it is, his approach is not without its inconsistencies. Perhaps because of its roots in empirical reality in the USA, the harshness of the neoliberal regime takes on rather an immutable aspect (though he does note, but does not explain, the very different situation in the Nordic countries). Indeed, he does hint at what is likely to be the main seed that may ultimately undermine the punitive approach - high and escalating public expenditure costs - whilst at the same time dismissing Fox Piven and Cloward's (1993) idea that successive 'policy cycles' of welfare expansion and retrenchment will continue in the neoliberal era. Wacquant's bleak overall depiction of current circumstances may well reflect the predominant situation, yet even in the USA it underplays the spatial and institutional fragmentation of power, and the consequent scope to exploit these interstices of the state to mount countervailing approaches. A prime example is the recent decision by the ultra-conservative state of Texas to reduce both its prison population and the number of penitentiaries - and hence the strain they place on its exchequer - by means of a large-scale rehabilitation programme. Similarly, increasing opposition to prevailing austerity policies in the devolved territories of the UK (especially Scotland and Northern Ireland) and efforts to ameliorate their effects on poor people suggest that the grip of neoliberalism might not be as tight as some commentators claim. Whether such examples are straws in the wind or harbingers of a cyclical shift remains to be seen. What they do illustrate, however, is that presenting the state as having just two Janus faces does not do justice to its variegated complexity, and still less meets Bourdieu's definition of it as a 'many splintered thing'. Perhaps Wacquant needs to update his analogy of 'feminine' and 'masculine' facets in line with more recent thinking of gender as constituting a spectrum rather than an either/or identifier.

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From the present to the past and back again: Wacquant's challenge for sociology

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I first witnessed Wacquant speak as a PhD student 10 years ago in Bristol, where he set about unraveling the policy assumptions of those working in urban policy at the height on New Labour's foray into urban regeneration. At the 'Rethinking urban inequality' event in Sheffield, Wacquant was equally impressive: an intense, charismatic speaker of voluminous intellect and sociological passion, Wacquant is larger than life and in full flow an experience to behold.

For me personally, the event illustrated all that is good and bad about sociology. In his feedback to presenters at the end of the day, Loïc took issue, controversially for some, with the final two presenters, perhaps, or so it seemed to me, because of their 'overly involved' and 'polemic' styles. In response to Adam Elliott-Cooper's intriguing talk on *'The Struggle That Cannot be Named: Violence, Space and Black Resistance in Post-Duggan Britain'*, he suggested that by focusing on single issues activists often miss the chance for wider engagement. Similarly, in response to Matt Clement's talk, and his criticism of Elliot's suggestion that many young people today have no idea what a trade union is, Wacquant argued that the recent unrest in France linked to trade union activity is not as important as Clement claimed. To some extent, this illustrated the changing nature of sociology and sociological knowledge. As Kilminster (2004) has argued, the development of sociological theory can be seen as part of a changing set of attitudes towards different forms of knowledge – as evident in the rise of more involved forms of identity politics, for example – and to the evolution of the knowledge process more generally. These changes can in turn be linked to increasing levels of functional democratization and with the need for individuals to be more reflexive and sophisticated within more complex networks of social and political interdependence (Elias, 2012).

This in turn raises the intriguing issue of the appropriate level of involvement for sociologists working on and engaging with the contemporary issues raised by Wacquant's work. While older sociologists often have a tendency to be more detached, younger sociologists increasingly have a tendency to be more involved, both thus missing the opportunity to make relevant sociological insights (Lever and Powell, forthcoming). What makes Loïc Wacquant such an important sociologist, in my opinion, is that he allows us to view the present by focussing on the past through a long-term sociological perspective that combines conceptual and empirical rigour to overcome the superficial temptations of *'presentism'* evident in much contemporary sociology (Savage, 2014). As Wacquant illustrated in his public lecture, in a discussion spanning four centuries - from the 16th century Jewish ghetto in Venice to the 20th century black ghetto in the US - the ghetto is a vertical and horizontal space

constructed for trade, which at once protects and stigmatises its inhabitants. Much the same could be said of the European Union. European citizens are free to move from country to country in search of work, yet at the same time they often become stigmatized and excluded outsiders (Lever and Milbourne, 2015).

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