

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LOÏC WACQUANT, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, xii + 342 p., index.

For the uninitiated, and even some weathered scholars, I suggest placing an unabridged dictionary somewhere close at hand, and then putting on some soulful music, something like James Cotton's *Deep in the Blues*, before settling in for a read-through of Loïc Wacquant's latest tome. Brace yourself for a journey into poverty that drops you to the bottom of a pit of despair, and then snatches you back up again through the hope provided in a simple policy recommendation that he argues could be implemented in any advanced nation state with the political will to attempt it. This latest work by Wacquant is in no way an effortless read, partly because of the remarkable breadth of its lexical composition, but also due to the dark, emotive quality of the content. He writes with informed passion and an acerbic criticism, not with a sentimental view of his subject.

In his analyses of two stigmatized neighbourhoods in decline, the Black Belt in Chicago and the Red Belt in the Parisian suburbs, he first historicizes the Black American ghetto from its early communal form to the contemporary hyperghetto, and then goes on to describe the somewhat better situation in the banlieue, the lower-class districts on the outskirts of French cities. Wacquant's (2008) contention is that there are distinct structural differences in the poverty found in the American hyperghetto (a term coined in his earlier works) and the French cités (public housing projects), areas that have been victimized in varying ways by deep-seated changes in state policies that have pandered to market capitalism. Originating from a collection of published papers and conference presentations spanning 1989-1999, this book cannot have been unproblematic to research or to write, one of several reasons why it took many years for its appearance in print.

*Urban Outcasts* is a comparative study of a hyperghetto located in Chicago's South Side neighbourhoods, and the French cité of Quatre Mille in La Courneuve, an older working-class district in the northern inner suburbs of Paris, and part of the "Red Belt" ("Red" denoting its political control by the Communist Party after World War II) that suffered the negative effects of deindustrialization. Data collection for the Chicago module was based on statistical surveys, face-to-face interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted for the Urban Family Life Project at the University of Chicago from 1987-1990, and Wacquant's three-year ethnography of a boxing gym located in Woodlawn near the University of

Chicago where he gained entrée to the Black ghetto. Nicknamed “Busy Louie” because of his constant motion in the boxing ring, he lost the Chicago Golden Gloves Tournament by a hair in 1990, and his obsession with the sport almost sidelined his career in sociology. But for a white sociologist his experience there gave him an unequaled conversance with the Black ghetto. The data for Quatre Mille in La Courneuve was collected by field observation in the fall of 1990 and spring 1991, and draws from other studies of the French Red Belt areas. For both Paris and Chicago, his studies are triangulated through quantitative and qualitative data, as well as government sources. Most of the supporting literature is contemporary to his fieldwork, and the reader is directed to a plethora of supplementary works through footnotes on the materials used to support his line of reasoning. To a great extent the value of this work, along with its comparative method, comes from this generous approach.

The central argument of *Urban Outcasts* lies in the theory that the forms of poverty reminiscent of the Fordist-Keynesian era could be ameliorated without much difficulty through the creation of more waged employment. Wacquant (2008) claims that this is no longer the case, that the restructuring of the North American and European labour markets, and the dismantling of their welfare states, was accomplished so thoroughly during the Thatcher, Reagan, Bush and Clinton administrations that the expansion of waged labour is no longer an effective solution to systemic destitution. Deindustrialization has produced a “new” poverty (by no means a recent idea), unequivocally more intransigent than its previous manifestations. Moreover, when advanced economies are experiencing a boom, it no longer has any restorative effect on conditions in the Black hyperghettos, but during an economic downturn, they degenerate even more.

Wacquant draws several important distinctions between the forms of violence and poverty in the American hyperghetto, and those of the French banlieue. He argues that although the banlieue may be a deprived area, it does not qualify as a ghetto. Throughout its history, American society has been divided on the basis of “race,” and the hyperghetto reflects this fundamental separation through an inflexible housing policy based on segregation. Unlike the hyperghetto, the French banlieue retains its connection to government; and its institutions, though diminished, remain intact. French natives and new immigrants form friendly relationships, especially among youths. But in areas like Chicago’s South Side and West Side, local institutions have collapsed, neighbourhoods have been abandoned by the federal government, and a culture of fear based on gun violence discourages the fostering of bonds among the ghetto residents. Briefly, Wacquant’s (2008) policy solution to the new poverty of the hyperghetto is to loosen the current workfare obligations for social welfare, create a smaller workforce, and implement a guaranteed minimum income, in other words, ensure the right to life.

Well known for his biting criticism and taking fellow sociologists to task, Wacquant lives up to this reputation in *Urban Outcasts*. First, he finds fault with the French media and their creation of a moral panic, citing numerous

examples of articles in the popular press representing the cités as undergoing a process of Americanization. He lashes out once more against the use of the concept “underclass” that gained its greatest currency in the 1990s to explain the Black ghetto experience. In particular, he attacks the collection, *The Urban Underclass*, edited by Christopher Jencks and Paul Peterson (1991), stating that only one of the twenty-seven contributors, Elijah Anderson, author of *Streetwise: Race, Class and Change in an Urban Community* (1990), had conducted meaningful, long term fieldwork within Black ghettos in Philadelphia and Chicago. Even his mentor, William Julius Wilson, the lead researcher on the Urban Family Life Project, is not exempt. Wilson authored classics like *The Declining Significance of Race* (1980), and *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). Wacquant jabs at him for his lack of attention to the history of U.S. policy shifts in urban support programs in *When Work Disappears* (1996).

Paradoxically, one of the primary criticisms that can be leveled against *Urban Outcasts* is the lack of attention to policy solutions to the new poverty, which is given only the briefest of explanations, and focuses on the American hyperghetto. His suggestions for the French cités are less clear, in that France already has a system in place for a guaranteed minimum income, *Revenu Minimum Garanti* (RMG). Another glaring question regarding Wacquant’s work can be found in the fieldwork, which in some cases is two decades old, but he seems to be sensitive toward this, arguing that research is not meant to keep up the same frenetic pace as journalism. As the book is drawn from papers written over the course of a decade, he has tried, in some cases unsuccessfully, to eliminate repetitions in description and analysis. And finally, Wacquant has avoided confrontation with other present-day heavyweights in social theory like Zygmunt Bauman, who put forward similar themes of marginality in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2004). Like many academics, he indulges in a kind of citation cronyism. Otherwise this book makes a central contribution to contemporary social theory, social inequality, urban sociology, cultural studies, the history of the African-American ghetto, and economic sociology.

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