

From one Out-In to another: What's missing in Wacquant's structural analysis

Orlando Patterson

Harvard University, USA

Urban Studies

1–6

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DOI: 10.1177/0042098015614438

usj.sagepub.com



Abstract

Loic Wacquant's trenchant and much needed structural analysis owes its originality, in part, to the fact that he is an intellectual Out-In. That is, someone who observes and analyses from the perspective of both the outsider (a Frenchman who has studied ethnoracial dynamics in his native land) and an insider (a Franco-American who has studied and lived long enough in America to be able to claim true insider status). I too am an Out-In (a Jamaican who can claim equal intellectual engagement in Jamaican and American academic and social life), which is perhaps why I can better appreciate the strengths of his analysis and what is missing.

Keywords

cultural heritage, culture, history, 'Out-In', sociology

Received May 2014; accepted September 2015

I need not spend much time on the strengths of Wacquant's analysis, since they speak vigorously for themselves. It all makes perfect sense to me, not least because as an Out-In of colour I can see equally clearly the intellectual risks faced by sociologists of marginality that Wacquant mentioned: that of getting 'drawn into the classification struggles over districts of urban predation'. I discussed some of these dangers in the *Ordeal of Integration* (Patterson, 1997).

However, there is something oddly missing in Wacquant's analysis: history and its handmaiden, culture. I say 'oddly' because Wacquant explicitly invokes historicity in his analysis, and is the co-author and interpreter of Bourdieu, the greatest cultural sociologist of the past century. There can be

no understanding of ethnoracial dynamics in post-industrial America, however, without a clear vision of the thoroughgoing ways in which culture has been intertwined in the process throughout American history. I suspect that Wacquant, in spite of his outsider understanding of the blindspots of the insider, may have become too much of the insider in his reluctance to engage with the cultural dynamics of American capitalism. For the truth of the matter is that sociology in America has tied itself up in knots on the

Corresponding author:

Orlando Patterson, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 520 William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA, 02138, USA.

Email: opatters@fas.harvard.edu

question of ethno-race and culture, as I attempted to show recently (Patterson, 2014: 2; Patterson and Fosse, 2015: 1–8).

From the beginning of their agonistic embrace of each other in America, Euro- and African-Americans have grappled with each other with the symbolic weapons of culture. At its most superficial this entailed the effort to strip blacks of their African cultural heritage and impose a servile version of European culture, most notably in religion. That effort failed. Blacks responded by appropriating those domains of Euro-American culture they found most to their liking and transforming them through a process of syncretic creolisation with the surviving remnants of the African past into a distinctive vernacular secular and religious tradition of their own. White Americans soon found that there was much to like in what black folks had created and promptly proceeded to re-appropriate their subaltern productions. From the early 19th century the dominant popular cultural performances of emerging industrial America, especially among the burgeoning white working classes, was the minstrel show, which we now know (Lhamon, 2000) was in fact thoroughly African American in content, so much so that it had to be disguised by the blackface mockery of its creators. But the process of mutual appropriation did not end there. In a cultural class war with layers of irony few other civilizations have known, black Americans nimbly defanged and re-appropriated the minstrel appropriation of their creations, in the process grabbing whatever of value whites had added to it. Minstrelsy, in fact, can stand as the perfect metaphor of race and culture in America, right up to this day.

There is no understanding of ethno-racial relations in the pre-civil rights era without a complete immersion in the theology and symbolic workings of that most complex of cultural configurations, Christianity, in both

its white and black versions. Itself the product of one of history's most amazing acts of cultural appropriation – the anguished Pauline refashioning of the apocalyptic pronouncements of the radical proletarian Jew from Palestine – black Americans, like their subaltern counterparts in the middle ages and early modern Europe, after fighting off the servile religion of the plantation that the master class had attempted to impose upon them, quickly embraced the vision of liberation inherent in the Christian doctrine of freedom. It is the black church and the vernacular culture it inspired that allowed blacks to survive the era of Jim Crow which, it cannot be said enough, was as much a reign of cultural, psychological and physical terror as it was a system of economic exploitation. A debased, militant Christianity in which ordained clergymen presided over the ritual human sacrifice of black men under a burning cross lit from the flames of their flesh – for this was the cultural meaning of the more than 4700 communal lynchings of the era (on which see Patterson, 1998: Chapter 2) – was resisted culturally with the African-American version of that same Christianity, rooted in Paul's letter to the Galatians and in a vision of the cross as a symbol of divine suffering and dishonour, of man's inexhaustible inhumanity to man and God and of the promise of redemption. What the terrorised mass of blacks, forced to stare up at the burnt body, the strange fruit, of the sacrificed black victim saw, was the holy body of Christ. This was a symbolic war like no other in the West, religion in the raw, culture at its most primitive and over-determining, the sacred in the profane as only Durkheim and Mauss could have understood it. Bourgeois American sociology knows nothing of this.

And in due course, it was this same religion that inspired America's most radical movement. The Civil Rights revolution, contrary to what movement sociologists with

their endless talk of resource mobilisation may imagine, was first and foremost a religious revolution, inspired and led in all its major moments by black preachers and their flock.

When King was killed, the bottom-up movement died with him and two things followed. One was the utter cultural and psychological despair that fell upon the residents of the classic ghettos, which brings me to my first main departure from Wacquant: No, it was not post-industrial capitalism that initiated the destruction of the classic ghetto. It was initially destroyed from within in one of those moments of catastrophic self-destruction that people sometimes go through in which they temporarily lose their bearings and simply vent their despair on the only places they know, their own neighbourhood. What uncontrollable rage began, the post-industrial system completed, not in the outsourcing of jobs but, as Roger Waldinger (1996) has shown, in the insourcing of Third World immigrants eager to please, to overwork at reservation wages with which the black poor could not compete and eventually to form job queues from which the native sons were routinely excluded.

The second development that followed King's assassination was the turn toward the black bourgeoisie. Ethnoracial progress now became a top-down movement. A substantial new middle class emerged, employed by the state and with the assistance of affirmative action, which received its first real implementation, significantly, from the Machiavellian Richard Nixon, for whom it was the major weapon in the wedge politics and Southern strategy that led to a radical realignment of American politics (Skrentny, 1996). The price that was paid for the rise of the black bourgeoisie was the massive shift of the South and of much of the white male working class from the Democratic to the Republican party. The mass of the black

poor got nothing for it. Nonetheless, the rise of the black bourgeoisie was real and marked a profound change in American society. They are a major force in the Democratic Party and they have real power in the public sphere. Obama's election was merely the culmination of this process of genuine change in the elite public sphere.

But a strange paradox lies behind this remarkable ethnoracial transformation. While thoroughly integrated in America's public sphere, the black bourgeoisie remains isolated from the private sphere of white Americans. In fact, contrary to what Wacquant claims, the classic ghettos have re-emerged: they are the black bourgeois communities of America; these black picket fences, thoroughly documented by Mary Pattillo (2000), are the closest thing to the classic 'good ghettos', as Wacquant calls them, similar to the bourgeois Jewish ghettos of Europe and of pre-World War II America, but with the distinctive American twist of a segregated group with real power in the public sphere and also, sadly, exposure to the deleterious cultural vapours from neighbouring street cultures.

And what of the black poor left behind in the hyperghettos? Here we come upon another paradox, and it is as much cultural as structural. Like the black bourgeoisie, the mass of the black working class and poor are socially isolated, but culturally isolated they are not, and this is the major piece missing from Wacquant's analysis. Not only is the black working and lumpen proletariat culturally involved, they have come to dominate or play major roles in the dominant mainstream popular culture.

In the hyperghettos of America there are at least four cultural configurations (i.e. ensembles of cultural knowledge and practices defined by the common interests of groups of varying size and duration, on which see Patterson 2015: 45–135). There is, first, the adapted mainstream cultural

configuration of middle class blacks who still live in, or straddle, these spaces, in surprising numbers (Sharkey, 2012). Second there is the persisting vernacular configuration of the working class, including the precarious working poor, still focused on the black church, battered and threatened from above by post-industrial forces, and laterally by the cultural nihilism of the third major group: the disconnected youth and their fearsome, self-destructive street culture. A great deal of attention was once paid to the cultural configuration of this group, then called the underclass, but a disturbing series of academic and policy moves and realignments led to their sudden fall from attention. Explaining how and why this happened would involve an excursus in the sociology of modern bourgeois sociology. Call them what you may – and I for one was never taken with the term – between 20 and 30 percent of the hyperghetto populations belong to this group, the currently fashionable term for which is the disconnected. They are the purveyors of a distinctive, destructive cultural configuration that celebrates hypermasculinity, violence, territorial gang warfare, sexual predation and a generally misogynistic contempt for women, extreme materialism, and livelihood from an underground economy that ranges between the hustle and the criminal, the cultural focus of the entirety being the defense of a primal honour schema unapologetically and accurately self-described as black thug culture. While he has played this down in the article (Wacquant, 2015) published here, Wacquant did not neglect the realities of this configuration in *Urban Outcasts*, noting that ‘the most significant brute fact of every daily life in the fin-de-siecle ghetto is without contest the extraordinary prevalence of physical danger and the acute sense of insecurity that pervades the streets’ (Wacquant, 2008: 54, emphasis in original). With this I wholly agree. However, he adds the following:

What is more, such internecine violence ‘from below’ must be analysed not as an expression of the senseless ‘pathology’ of residents of the hyperghetto but as a function of the degree of penetration and mode of regulation of this territory by the state. It is a reasoned response (in the double sense of echo and retort) to various kinds of violence ‘from above’ and an intelligible by-product of the policy of abandonment of the urban core. (Wacquant, 2008: 54)

With this I can only half agree. That the neglect and controlling power of the state has a role in the violence of the street culture, there can be no doubt. But this is better seen as an externality that reinforces a cultural process that has been long in the making. We find the street culture in full, destructive bloom in the streets of Philadelphia from as early as the 1830s (Lane, 1989); we find it fully documented in the urban ethnography of WEB DuBois (1899) near the end of the 19th century; it is there in the fine-grained ethnography of Hortense Powdermaker (1939) in the first third of the 20th century; we find it during the 1940s in the urban sociologies of Franklin Frazier and of Drake and Cayton; in the thoroughly researched ethnographies from the 1960s of Ulf Hannerz (1969) and of Lee Rainwater (1970); and we find it in almost every novel ever published on black working class life. This is a thoroughly institutionalised cultural configuration. To be sure, it originated in the structural violence and systematic dehumanisation of slavery and racist post-reconstruction society, both fully legitimised by the state, and in this sense I fully agree with Wacquant that the state is thoroughly implicated in its origin and persistence. But to recognise the role of structure both as originator and reinforcer is not to deny the forces of cultural persistence. I have never been able to understand this blind spot in the thinking of American sociologists of urban and African-American life. Cultural and structural forces are inextricably linked.

Sometimes a pattern of behaviour is largely a structural imperative, its removal merely a matter of alleviating the structural constraint: prostitution, for example, is usually the result of economic insecurity; a so-called 'poor work ethic' often the result of chronic unemployment or wage offers below what it takes to survive. But there are cases where a cultural configuration, however it might have originated, has become institutionalised and no amount of structural alleviation will undo it. The schemata and practices of the street culture of a minority of urban African Americans, like the Mafioso configuration of some urban Italian Americans, are cases in point, and it is tiresome to have to endlessly defend the obvious.

There is a fourth cultural configuration that emerged from the environment of the hyperghetto: Hip Hop, which also is immersed in a paradoxical way with the mainstream culture of post-industrial capitalism. Having emerged in the hyperghetto of the South Bronx during the late 1970s from the overlapping networks of Jamaican immigrant and disconnected black American youth, it has now come to occupy a major place in the popular culture of mainstream white and black Americans, indeed is now a global force in the popular cultures of the world. What began as a powerful subaltern medium of expression of alienation and outrage over the conditions of the ghetto has been largely transformed into the hypermasculine misogyny and nihilism of gangsta rap (there are alternate sub-genres), under the instigation and insistence of the corporate system that controls the music industry, a development that has alarmed even strong early advocates of the movement such as Tricia Rose (2008). Advanced finance capitalism, in other words, has appropriated and distorted the very voice of the subaltern for its own profitable ends in what has become a US\$10 billion dollar a year industry, coopting in the process some of the

movement's most able stars such as Jay-Z, a former gang member and dope peddler who has seamlessly moved into the ranks and boardrooms of the superrich moguls.

What is this all about? In my work 'The social and cultural matrix of black youth' (Patterson, 2015), I have argued that it is the culmination of a cultural movement first brilliantly analysed by Daniel Bell (1978) in his classic study, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. Hip Hop has become the Dionysian counterweight to the Apollonian demands of American post-industrial capitalist culture. There is a Nietzschean tenor in the lyrics of the movement's major stars, so startlingly similar to passages from *The Birth of Tragedy* that some of them read like literal translations (see Patterson, 2015: 98–99; 133–134). There is also a reflexive cynicism and contemptuous mockery of their audience as they play their Dionysian role, most notably in Kanye West, currently the movement's most brilliant lyricist. Listen to him taunting his adoring white female fans: 'Champagne wishes, 30 white bitches/ I mean this shit is fucking ridiculous. ... By the way, what a way to act with me/ We the black dynasty/ These the days of our lives/ Hating from the sidelines/ Giving you the guidelines'. In my 2015 work I have argued that what works with Nietzschean efficiency to resolve the cultural contradictions of the post-industrial middle and upper classes – white and black – achieves just the opposite for the deprived and disconnected youth of the toxic hyperghettos. Scrubbed of any semblance of its earlier radical consciousness, gangsta rap now simply reinforces the anger, misogyny and violence, the destructive side of the Dionysian impulse that knows only disfigurement and chaos. I concluded my analysis as follows:

To contain the chaos, to protect the orderly majority of working and middle class blacks who live in the inner cities, and to prevent any

chance of their violence spilling out from the confines of the ghettos, there exists the vast network of profit-making gulags that is America's prison-industrial complex. (Patterson, 2015)

So here, in the end, I join hands again with my fellow Out-In. But only after a necessary detour that reclaims the centrality of cultural processes in this structurally co-determined catastrophe.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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