

The Ideologically Driven Critique¹

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It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data.
Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead
of theories to suit facts.—*Sherlock Holmes*

It is clear from the outset that Wacquant has a particular “theoretical” ax to grind—one with an ideological blade—and that in doing so he seriously misreads *Code of the Street*, distorting its findings to fit his polemical purposes. At best, he seriously misunderstands my work; at worst, he willfully misrepresents it in his review. Regardless, Wacquant fails to engage the main thrust of the book: As a result of the breakdown or weaknesses of civil law in the most distressed inner-city communities, a survival strategy with implications for local public order has emerged—a “code of the street” that relies on “street justice,” whose transactions involve a currency of reputation, respect, retribution, and retaliation. Because civil law has been so compromised and eroded locally, people often rely on themselves and their reputations for protection, a situation that leads to high rates of urban violence. A legacy of institutionalized racism, joblessness, and alienation suffuses distressed inner-city neighborhoods and exacerbates these conditions.

In some of Philadelphia’s most distressed ghetto areas, the community divides itself into two opposing status groups—“decent” and “street”—each with its own value orientation. “Decency” is most often associated with the wider, conventional society, whereas “street”—or its own descriptive analogue, “ghetto”—is often used as an epithet (especially by those identifying themselves as decent) and strongly associated with the most troublesome aspects of ghetto life. In the name of “keeping it real,”

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some residents, particularly the young and most alienated, embrace the term “street,” and work to redefine it and its related conduct as positive.

While these orientations help to establish one’s place in the world, they also provide the foundation for the community’s social organization. Most people identify themselves as “decent,” but in the interest of deterrence, especially when danger and uncertainty loom, it often becomes important for individuals “to know what time it is,” and to be perceived as more “street” than “decent” and to act accordingly; a premium is placed on being able to read public situations and then to “code switch” when appropriate. Hence, public behavior in the inner-city ghetto is quite fluid and depends largely on how people interpret and define public situations in the interest of effectively managing them. After twisting this focus to serve his own purposes, Wacquant then charges me with not having written the book he might have wanted to write.

SOCIAL THEORY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK

Wacquant’s distortions derive in part from his peculiar view of the role of social theory in ethnographic work. His view demands that the ethnographer begin with a rigid commitment to a theory. The ethnographer must then subordinate the cultural complexity he or she finds in the field to that theory—whether it derives from Durkheim, Weber, or, for the sake of this discussion, Marx à la Bourdieu. Should the subjects and their behavior fail to correspond to the suppositions made by that theory, the subjects are dismissed as hapless “victims of false consciousness,” and a “true” consciousness is inserted for them in the analysis. An ethnographic work that fails to reflect this conception is judged deficient. Thus one proceeds from preconceptions to demonstrate the correctness of the theory in order to fit the subjects to its orthodoxy. Only this approach will do.

In Bourdieu’s scheme, there is no real conception of an autonomous, situational, microsociological level of analysis. Everything is interpreted as part of an overall class structure, including individual actions, which are understood always to be derived from that structure. Every individual has a “habitus”—a habitual way of acting and thinking—that emanates from or expresses his or her position in the overall “field of power.” In other words, individual acts expose the underlying class structure. Within this structure, the economic and cultural sectors reflect and reinforce each other. “Cultural capital” reproduces “economic capital” and vice versa. Bourdieu conceives of the dominant culture—education, styles of clothing, tastes in music, and so on—as a form of “symbolic violence.” Hence, individuals who manifest the dominant culture are practicing “symbolic

violence” on those who possess “less” of that culture and whose putative interests are not served by it.

But Wacquant is no Bourdieu. And this is readily shown when he applies Bourdieu’s ideas in dogmatic and ill-suited fashion to the Philadelphia ghetto. Through this simplistic application, Wacquant expresses hostility both to the existence of “decent” culture in the inner city and to an ethnography that represents people who to some degree acquire and display the outward signs of education and respectability, since he understands such people to be inflicting “symbolic violence” on those who are “unrespectable”—those who in local status contests of personal attribution are most often judged to be “street.” Wacquant fervently embraces elements that symbolically or practically reject local cultures of civility and decency; a stance that, ironically, serves as its own form of symbolic violence, one that targets the “decent folk.” In his scenario, the “decent” people, who are often on the receiving end of real violence, would seem to deserve this treatment as retribution for their own “symbolic” violence. From Wacquant’s perspective, the street-oriented residents are the only worthy people in the inner city because they are the only ones truly “rebellious” against the system.

In particular, Wacquant wants to endorse the “street” code as a political position. Thus, he is baffled, perhaps even infuriated, by a central point of *Code*, that the “street” code embraced by “rebels” is often a protective front for many, if not most people of the inner city, that it is not always a sincere commitment, but a necessary self-presentation in a dangerous public environment, one that may be balanced by “code switching” to civil behavior when safety is not at issue. But this complex and pragmatic use of the code of decency is misunderstood and belittled by Wacquant.

This misreading of *Code* follows from a top-down, structural theory of the “field of power” that Wacquant takes from Bourdieu. Such a theory spawns the notion that when events play out in local situations they tap into the same wellspring of principles that feeds the global “field of power.” There are no independent microsociological principles at work, just reflections of the larger field in the smaller field—the “homology among fields.” In his writing, Bourdieu talks about what he calls “practice”—his way of recognizing that people do work things out in their lives on a day-to-day basis. But he holds that they work things out according to the overall logic of the “macro” system, which is the same everywhere and is merely reflected in local conditions. The overarching logic, applied crudely by Wacquant, is simply that people who have more economic and cultural capital use it to dominate those with less. Even individuals who rebel against their positions use the weapons the system provides them, and so they end up validating and ultimately strengthening the system rather than changing it.

In his book *Outline of a Theory of Practice*—based on an ethnography of the Kabyle people in the mountains of Algeria—Bourdieu ([1972] 1977) criticized the anthropological theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who seemed to suggest that cultural codes or rules automatically implement themselves. Bourdieu argued instead that the struggles of everyday life—which can sometimes, as in the case of the Kabyle, lead to vendetta killings—end up reaffirming the rules of the system. Wacquant invokes the same argument when criticizing *Code*. This is absurd, because the position put forth in *Code* asserts a cultural typology with informal rules and codes that derive from symbolic interactionism, which is even farther away from Lévi-Straussian structuralism than Bourdieu's position. Ironically, it is Wacquant, interpreting Bourdieu rather literally, who adheres to a structural determinism, although it is one more influenced by Marxist thought than by Lévi-Strauss; that is, in Wacquant's view, local "practice" reproduces the same basic relationships every time, reinforcing the overall system of the field of power.

Specifically, Wacquant's application of the structuralist theory of fields is particularly impoverished when it comes to making sense of African-American cultural codes. Wacquant's own ethnographic efforts to date appear limited and unimpressive (Wacquant 1998). With such limited ethnographic experience in the black community, Wacquant substitutes his own notions about "culture" to explain the workings of the inner-city universe. Hence, he takes the "code of the street" literally as simply a reflection of the field of power, so anyone using a purely "cultural analysis" is a victim of "muddled" thinking.

My own conception of ethnographic work is more inductive (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; Becker 1970, 1998; Anderson 2001) and is, I believe, more nuanced and interactionally complex. For me, it is important to be familiar with and edified by the various sociological theories at hand, including those of Simmel, Du Bois ([1899] 1996), Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Mead (1934), Blumer ([1969] 1986), Goffman (1959), and Becker ([1963] 1973), among others. Their concepts, not taken too literally, enhance one's explanatory and interpretive powers. Moreover, the ethnographer should enter the field armed with a certain sociological sophistication, even a theoretical perspective that, as the fieldwork proceeds, helps to formulate questions concerning the social organization of the subjects and their settings. The orienting questions should emerge from the local knowledge the researcher gains from the field setting, not just from his or her intellectual preconceptions. By strongly embracing such preconceptions—as Wacquant seems to do—the ethnographer too often simply forces the collected "data" to fit his or her theory. In fact, the most penetrating ethnographic questions often result from a fusion of concerns that reflect

both the ethnographer's engagement of the social setting as well as his or her own sociological orientation.

Urban ethnographers typically embed themselves in a local setting or community with the express purpose of learning about the people residing there. Of particular interest is how residents meet the exigencies of life, how they group themselves socially, and how they arrive at their shared understandings of the local system of rules of everyday life—the codes they live by, a methodology effectively demonstrated in *Code of the Street*. The subjects' responses to meaningful questions about the immediate problems of living reveal much about the social order, or what Clifford Geertz (1983) labels a community's "local knowledge." Moreover, direct observation of key events and people's reactions to them can alert the ethnographer to the subtle expectations and norms of the subjects—and thus, to their culture.

Hence, in penetrating such local cultures, the ethnographer not only engages in intensive fieldwork, cultivating subjects and experiencing their social world, but also keeps copious field notes—a journal of the lived experience. To understand the community requires learning the subjects' concerns, their ways of thinking and acting and even their prejudices. It is important to pay close attention to the language they employ, because their vocabularies help one to grasp what the local world means to them. Of particular concern are what Wacquant cavalierly dismisses as "folk concepts." The ethnographer dismisses such concepts at his or her own peril, because they are critical to understanding—and for providing insight into—the social world at hand.

In developing questions and hypotheses about the local setting, ethnographers must also deal with their own worldviews—their "own story" or set of working conceptions about their own world as well as the world of their subjects. Depending on how the ethnographer relates to them, such presuppositions can be a problem or an advantage. The subjectivity inherent in the process of fieldwork is often considered to be a strength, for with it can come profound insight into the core concerns of the people being studied.

In this connection, a useful distinction—perhaps best treated as a continuum—may be drawn between the "participant-observer" and the "observing participant" (see Lidz 1991). The former, as he or she tries to establish a relationship with the group under study, may be in an early, tentative stage of negotiation with that group, and may be satisfied with this position. The latter, on the other hand, has become close to the subjects, empathizes with them, and is able to articulate their points of view. Both positions have drawbacks and strengths, and their interplay requires the ethnographer constantly to remember the primary goal: to provide a truthful representation and analysis of the social and cultural world of

the subjects. In this respect, some of the most effective questions involve a fusion of these two roles: they emerge, on the one hand, from attention to the ordinary “troubles” confronted by the subjects in their everyday lives and, on the other, from the sociological “problem”—the answers to which would presumably advance the field conceptually.

The ethnographer’s response to such questions, once formulated, can be considered a hypothesis, which in turn may serve as a tentative organizing principle for the ethnographic representation and analysis to follow. Here the critical task is to advance the hypothesis toward a tenable proposition, or a plausible argument. The ethnographer’s accumulated field notes will likely include either positive or negative cases, and a consideration of these cases leads to an ongoing revision of hypotheses as each case, in turn, is taken into account. The goal of this style of analytic induction is always to fashion a more accurate account of the world of the subjects, while at times knowingly generating ever more penetrating questions. Such questions, by provocation and stimulation, trial and error, help move the ethnographer’s hypotheses to surer ground. In this sense, the questions can be and often prove to be more important than the “answers.” What emerges from this process—a fusion of observation and theory—is an ethnographic study that creates a fresh understanding of the setting at hand. In the case of the fieldwork done in preparation for *Code*, this setting is the African-American ghetto street.

In the effort to apprehend, understand, and ultimately represent the social setting, the ethnographer becomes in effect a kind of vessel, a virtual agent of the subjects themselves by interpreting their world and serving as a communication link to the uninformed. But such a task is not accomplished simply. Not only does it require empathy for the subjects but also a strong desire, at times with a degree of courage, to represent their world accurately for the readers—other social scientists and the public—who may have such strong preconceptions that no amount of ethnographic evidence to the contrary will be convincing. This is one of the inherent difficulties and challenges of doing and presenting worthwhile ethnographic work, particularly in socially, racially, or politically charged environments—as Wacquant’s reaction to *Code of the Street* illustrates.

WACQUANT’S COMPLAINTS

Wacquant’s specific complaints about *Code* follow directly from the limits of his top-down perspective and from his lack of appreciation for the ethnographic method. In what follows I list and respond to his complaints.

1. *I make too much of the roles that racism and deindustrialization*

have played in the present day distress besetting the inner-city black community.

Neither racism nor deindustrialization is the main point of my argument, but both are certainly part of the background. However, even an elementary grasp of urban sociology reveals that the legacy of slavery, legal segregation, and black second-class citizenship have helped create the residential segregation from which the contemporary ghetto has evolved (see Wilson 1978; Massey and Denton 1993). In the 21st century the legacy of centuries of institutional racism is attitudinal racism. The black person in this society faces profound racial prejudice, both subtle and manifest: race easily distorts the most ordinary human relationships, often in completely mysterious ways. But it is the historical combination of prejudice and active discrimination that has led to the current situation, in which many critical jobs are still predominantly not open to ghetto-dwelling blacks. In Philadelphia, for instance, jobs in many of the building trades, including carpentry, plumbing, and electrical work, are to this day almost totally the province of white and ethnic workers. Very few blacks enjoy the fruits of such work, which can lead to upward mobility (to the middle class) and to professional positions. Numerous black people, including many of those of the newly emerging middle class, become demoralized, alienated, and embittered by this peculiarly African-American experience.

During the industrialization of Du Bois's (1996) day, and through the following decades, blacks were underrepresented and often excluded altogether from manufacturing jobs. They were very often the last hired and the first fired. Furthermore, just as the Civil Rights movement was beginning to provide blacks inroads into industrial jobs, the jobs themselves began to disappear as a result of deindustrialization (Bissinger 1997; Hershberg et al. 1981; Sugrue 1996; Wilson 1978, 1987). The loss of more than 200,000 jobs in Philadelphia over the last 15 years has hit the black community very hard. These were jobs that had sustained, even if only marginally, many ghetto areas around the city, and provided some hope for the future.

Residents of Philadelphia's black community, many of them children of important players of the Fordist or manufacturing economy, have not been able to take full advantage of the new service and high-tech jobs because more often than not, employment sites have appeared in the suburbs, away from ghetto communities, or "off shore," in effect, causing the inner-city poor to compete with the poor of developing nations. These transformations have contributed to the large concentrations of racialized structural poverty that are presently so much a part of Philadelphia's urban landscape. Clearly, deindustrialization and racism do not directly cause violence, teen pregnancy, or any other social behavior. But they do

create distress in inner-city communities that had come to rely on a fair number of manufacturing jobs; and poverty and distress, coupled with the alienation that people feel, are associated rather strongly with high rates of violence, teen pregnancy, and other indicators of social distress (see Anderson 1990, 1999).

In getting to know John Turner and numerous other individuals through my long years of fieldwork in the inner city, I have become familiar with the notion of “the plan,” a conspiracy theory involving the schemes of the wider white society to “take care of” or even to annihilate the black community. The plan, believed in by the most desperate and alienated, involves the persecution of African-Americans through the spreading of drugs and AIDS in the ghetto; the practices of gentrification, racial profiling, and employment discrimination; the expansion of the “prison-industrial complex”; the lack of action to remedy substandard inner-city schools; the restricting of welfare; and the ascendancy of the Korean grocer. The profound alienation, present among those who are both “decent” and “street,” is only exacerbated by persistent urban poverty and the legacy of American attitudinal racism that exists to this day.

2. *I reify “decency,” thus playing down the importance of the “street” and making use of “folk concepts.” I “celebrate the fundamental goodness—honesty, decency, frugality—of America’s urban poor”* (p. 1469).

Here Wacquant accuses me of identifying too closely with the “decent” people, even celebrating them, to the exclusion of the “street” element. He would probably rather I not use such terms, or that I place them in quotes each time I use them. In *Code*, the terms are introduced in quotes but used without them for most of the text. This was a deliberate editorial decision. The words and concepts subjects actually use are important methodological aids for coming to an understanding of the world they inhabit. Anyone who spends time in the inner city today, observing its basic institutions, will hear talk of decency and the street, and these words have clear moral connotations for the people using them. The dichotomy between decent and street, signifying good and bad, is not my invention. Like it or not, it is an integral part of the cultural orientation of the community, the cultural background against which people in the inner city live out their lives. In *Code*, the local cultural significance of the drug-dealer’s funeral, the “stickup,” the “decent daddy,” the “campaign for respect,” the school, teenage fatherhood, and the “street” itself cannot be denied; also important is the profound social tension between the folk concepts of “decent” and “street” on the ghetto streets. My goal as an ethnographic researcher is to try to understand that world and to articulate its social and personal consequences.

Most people in the inner-city neighborhoods I have studied identify themselves as decent, and to the best of their ability they align themselves

with mainstream institutions, creating their own versions of conventionality. This is what they mean by decency, and their very choice of vocabulary attests to how admirable they deem the conventional to be. Wacquant dismisses this perspective and romanticizes the street as composed of people who “rebel” and make life difficult for “decent” people by “redistributing resources” through illicit activity. But most people in the ghetto are not revolutionaries who want to overturn the system—they are people *who want to get in on the system*. The circumstances of their lives are often grim, yet they continue to seek the fruits promised to those who behave “decently.” For Wacquant to fault me for a cultural or political orientation of which he disapproves is to confuse the messenger with the message.

When inner-city residents go job hunting, when they go to a restaurant, when they approach the police for help, or when they enter public buildings—liberties most ordinary white Americans take for granted—they are too often stopped, questioned, frisked, refused, or held suspect on the basis of their color. This is because of what that color has come to mean and to symbolize to the gatekeepers. The stress of being assaulted in these ways on a daily basis has a profound impact on people’s psyche and on their ability to cope with the task of everyday functioning. The people I have studied deal with the effects of racism daily, but they have often made their peace with their status as “second-class citizens,” and many struggle to carry on, at times overcompensating by trying to be even more decent than others of “the race”; they tend to draw invidious distinctions between themselves and these others and hope that the ability to make such distinctions and to live them will somehow lead to social and economic salvation for themselves and for their loved ones.

From this perspective, concerns about decency have a special relevance. Could it be that people who identify so completely with a system that constantly calls into question their very existence, and who wish to escape such assaults, overcompensate by staking a claim to decency? On the other hand, the street—and all that it symbolizes—is inescapable; the same decent people must be able to “go that way” when the situation demands it. This is an important lesson of *Code*, but it is one that Wacquant does not mention in his assessment of the book.

3. *Along with “the reification of cultural orientations into groups,” I engage in “conceptual equivocation about the notion of ‘code,’ and a persistent disconnect between data and theory . . . that ultimately raises more questions than it settles”* (p. 1487).

As I have said, for an ethnographic study to raise more questions than it settles may well be considered a compliment. The most meaningful work raises increasingly important questions that zero in on what must be explored if there is to be a penetrating understanding of the people

and the setting being studied. Identifying the next area to investigate is an important contribution to knowledge.

The charge of conceptual equivocation arises because Wacquant misses or ignores the meaning of my discussion on the emergence of the street code in a political and social context. Before there were modern states, most means of violence were local, and people found themselves in circumstances in which codes not unlike the street code were useful. (Consider the culture of the duel, in which men defended their honor or reputation with pistols or foils.) As the state gradually monopolized violence for military and civil purposes, it penetrated much of society (see Mann 1986, 1993; Gorski 1993), but Mann shows that this penetration was fairly limited until the 20th century (see Collins 1999, 2000). One of the important implications of *Code* is that American state institutions still do not penetrate everywhere.

In the inner city, people cannot always rely on the civil authorities for services ordinary citizens take for granted, including trash pick up, police response to a crisis, or a “fair” trial. Civil law may have little impact except when the resident is going before the criminal justice system or is being incarcerated; that is, it may govern the individual’s relationship with authority, but it contributes little to the safety and security of persons and property within the neighborhood. Many local people have limited faith in civil law: they do not trust it to serve and to protect them, but they know it will punish them—and not necessarily justly. The “code of the street” fills this vacuum and enables members of the community to deal with infractions or violations of respect. The code, for the purposes of this work, is a sense of shared understandings of the system of rules that emerge as people deal with the prospect of public violence in dangerous neighborhoods.

Such themes are wasted on Wacquant because he has a blindness to what people are living with on a day-to-day basis in inner-city communities. For instance, he fails to see any structural similarity between unpoliced inner-city areas and the premodern state. He seems to think that I am arguing that the culture of dueling has simply morphed into the street code. He fails to grasp the parallel between political environments in which similar ways of dealing with violent threats arise—an interactional style that involves the transmission of messages that emphasize toughness and willingness to physically defend one’s honor. The political situation sets up the problem, and the street code (and its historical analogues) is the solution people work out in order to live. It is important to understand that the code is not simply instrumental but also expressive in operation. Not only does it keep people alive, but it also enables them to live with honor, infusing public social situations with meaning.

Again, it is important to understand, as Wacquant clearly does not,

that the terms “decent” and “street” are quite fluid in their operation, for residents routinely engage in code switching. As I have indicated, most people aspire to “pass” as decent. If this were not so, the streets would be unlivable. But open displays of decency, at times taken as a sign of weakness, do not generally get one much on the street. This notion may be difficult for a middle-class person to grasp, for one might expect decency to be a value that is cherished in and of itself. But in the toughest areas of the inner city, the street image, particularly among young people, at times becomes a script, a presentation, a front for gaining deference and respect. No matter how decent one tries to be, in the interest of deterrence it may become important to let the next person you meet know that you are able to handle yourself in public and to be able to “get ignorant” or “get in someone’s face” (resort to violence or confrontation) if necessary.

4. *Wacquant claims that “had [I] started from a systematic map of social differentiation inside the ghetto, [I] would have found that what [I] depict as the ‘coexistence’ of two ‘codes’ . . . is in fact a low-grade cultural war and social antagonism . . . between two fractions [sic] of the black urban proletariat” (p. 1500; his emphasis).*

In fact, *Code* points out the fact that a certain tension exists between those who claim “decency” and those the “decent” people socially place in the “street” status, designations that are emergent during interaction:

Almost everyone residing in poor inner-city neighborhoods is struggling financially and therefore feels a certain distance from the rest of America, but there are degrees of alienation, captured by the terms “decent” and “street” or “ghetto” . . . that suggest social types. The decent family and the street family in a real sense represent two poles of value orientation, two contrasting conceptual categories. The labels “decent” and “street,” which the residents themselves use, amount to evaluative judgments that confer status on local residents. The labeling is often the result of a social contest among individuals and families of the neighborhood. Individuals of either orientation may coexist in the same extended family. Moreover, decent residents may judge themselves to be so while judging others to be of the street, and street individuals often present themselves as decent, while drawing distinctions between themselves and still other people. There is also quite a bit of circumstantial behavior—that is, one person may at different times exhibit both decent and street orientations, depending on the circumstances. Although these designations result from much social jockeying, there do exist concrete features that define each conceptual category, forming a social typology. (*Code*, p. 35)

I did not start with a map because there *is* no map and none is required. I found what I found by doing fieldwork and involving myself in the lives of people living the reality of the inner city every day. As the book points out, people behave in accordance with how they define and interpret situations in which they find themselves, and through these processes they

divide themselves into status groups, employing their own terms: "decent" and "street." Because of his preconceptions, Wacquant dismisses this crucial point, devaluing the importance of "folk concepts." "Street" and "decent" represent value orientations, and people with certain reputations that approximate one or the other orientation beget labels, labels that result from the interpretation and definition of everyday events by those involved in the social setting. These labels, I repeat, are not categorical, but fluid, involving dynamic tension as they operate during social interaction.

Although it is true that identification with decency may be associated with greater access to resources, such factors in social relations can be influential if not determinative. One may lobby to be seen as having one or the other orientation, but the resulting assessments and social definitions are ultimately a function of the collective actions of those concerned (see Anderson 1978). There are those at either extreme about whom actors may agree, but there are numerous people occupying a middle ground whose designation may be open to debate. For there is a good deal of play involved in this labeling process, which results from competition between and among people who have a limited hold on the resources and so must jockey for position by presenting themselves as more worthy than certain others.

There is also the practical aspect to this dichotomy that speaks to how residents navigate the streets and other public spaces. In potentially dangerous situations, for self-protection, it can become important for the person to be perceived as more "street" than "decent," underscoring the need to code switch, depending on the situation.

5. *The book is animated by a thesis that proximate mentoring could make a difference in the fate of ghetto residents, and this point is glaringly disconnected from the actual findings the book presents.*

This is simply another misreading of the findings presented in *Code*. The root causes of the problems faced by inner-city residents are not so much individual as structural. The confluence of deindustrialization and the history of American race relations has resulted in racialized structural poverty. Mentoring is clearly only a small part of the solution to a problem that is deeply rooted in American history and that also involves a massive loss of jobs due largely to global economic processes. Therefore, any real solution must be structural as well, including large and persistent investments in financial and human capital in impoverished urban areas, the kind of efforts that might change the circumstances of ghetto life for the better as well as give its disenfranchised residents hope for the future.

I point out that many of the old heads of the community no longer see themselves as the positive force they once were. In their working conception of the inner-city problem, issues tend to be posed in individualistic

terms rather than as consequences of the broad structural changes in the economy. Imbued with a strong work ethic themselves, many such “decent” people are bewildered by the social distress they witness all about them. And relying on “how things were back in the day,” they are readily prepared to “blame the victim” for being unable to provide for self and family. Because they are not social scientists, they are not inclined to fathom “structural transformation” as the cause of the problems besetting their community. Indeed, they bring the “macro” down to the “micro,” at times even blaming themselves, lamenting their own limited ability to get young people to accept their moral authority and “behave themselves.”

In fact, their authority has been gravely weakened by a number of societal factors. A primary one is that they can no longer consistently show the way to a financially secure life or protect their community from the onslaught of social distress besetting it. More and more, they feel they have been abandoned by the politicians and social authorities and are left largely on their own.

The experiences of mentoring that I include in *Code* grow out of my long-term involvement in the field. I present them to help give depth to my analysis and representation of the community. In spending many years on an ethnographic project, I have been able to involve myself in people’s social networks. Through such involvement, I learn firsthand about their social world, and relationships naturally evolve, sometimes including mentoring or more concrete forms of aid, such as job contacts and other favors. Sometimes such aid makes a real difference in a person’s life, sometimes it does not. I do not claim that mentoring is the answer to the problems I depict, but it is a way to give something back when I can.

6. *I suffer from a nostalgia for an earlier age when men dominated the household in black and white homes in the United States.*

To be sure, such a characterization applies to many of the subjects of my ethnographic work, not to me; but Wacquant, in an effort to discredit, attributes such attitudes to me. An ethnography is a close study of local culture with a set of findings, not an editorial. The observations and representations made in *Code* are made not because I prefer them; they are made despite what I might prefer. Wacquant seems to find the conventional, socially conservative nature of these values repugnant, and he attacks me for pointing to them. In an effort to discredit my work, he wants to confuse the observer with the finding. To put it another way, if my subjects are represented as socially conservative, I must be so myself. This kind of willful confusion injects ideology into social science to an extreme degree. He continues this line with his criticism that, in order to support “neoliberal” politics, I am moralizing about my subjects through the use of the decent/street dichotomy. This is almost laughable. I am not advocating for one group or the other but rendering as well as possible

my subjects' attitudes, values, and behavior toward themselves and toward one another. My primary purpose is to reveal the forces that perpetuate the oppressive situation of dire poverty and entrenched violence in the inner city, and real social relations are the channels through which these forces are enacted.

The essence of my arguments and representations might seem to Wacquant to warrant his complaints, but I believe they say more about his preconceptions and political ideology than they do about the people I have described on the streets of the Philadelphia ghetto. Much of his diatribe involves social and political judgments about what people who live in the Philadelphia ghetto (which he has never studied) should be thinking and would think if only they were as smart as he is. I stand by my representation. Given his misreading and the distortions of his critique, in what follows, I present the essence of my argument and its background.

ARGUMENT OF *CODE OF THE STREET*

Code grows from urban ethnographic work in inner-city communities that I have been engaged in over the course of my career, first in Chicago in the 1970s and then in Philadelphia in the 1980s and 1990s. Each work (Anderson 1978, 1990) has built on the ones preceding it, making for a certain amount of overlap between and among them, particularly with regard to research questions. Hence, some of the same issues that were explored on the street corners of Chicago were taken up again when I went out into the streets of the Philadelphia ghetto. Indeed, many of the same questions that concerned me in the early days of my career, including those relating to persistent urban poverty, social welfare, race relations, social identity and status, and social organization, concern me to this day.

In *Streetwise* (1990), I took up the issue of how two urban communities—one black and impoverished, the other racially mixed and middle to upper class—managed to coexist in the same general area and to negotiate the same public spaces. In *Code* (1999), I took up more directly the theme of interpersonal violence, particularly among inner-city youths. While youth violence has become a problem of national scope, involving young people of various classes and races, here I am concerned with why so many inner-city young people are inclined to commit acts of aggression and violence against one another. This question has led me to focus on the nature of public life on ghetto streets, and specifically on the public social organization of the ghetto. To address this question, I conducted field research over four years, not only in ghetto areas but also in some of the well-to-do parts of Philadelphia.

My argument is as follows: In some of the most economically distressed

and drug- and crime-ridden pockets of the city, the rules of civil law have been severely weakened, and in their stead a “code of the street” often holds sway. At the heart of this code is a set of informal rules of behavior that reflect a desperate search for respect. Respect governs public social interactions, especially violent ones, among many residents, particularly young men and women. Possession of respect—and the credible threat of retribution—is highly valued because such respect shields the ordinary person from the violence of the street.

In this social context of persistent poverty and deprivation, alienation from the broader society’s institutions is widespread. The code of the street emerges where the influence of the police ends and personal responsibility for one’s safety is felt to begin, resulting in a kind of “people’s law” based on street justice. This code involves a form of social exchange that holds would-be perpetrators accountable by promising “eye for an eye” payback for transgressions. In service to this ethic, repeated displays of “nerve” and “heart” reinforce an individual’s credible reputation for vengeance. In turn, this reputation works to deter acts of aggression and “disrespect,” sources of great anxiety on the inner-city street.

In delineating these intricate issues, the book details not only a sociology of interpersonal public behavior (with implications that lead to an understanding of violence and teen pregnancy) but also the changing roles of the inner-city grandmother and the “decent daddy,” the interplay of decent and street families in the neighborhood, and the tragedy of the drug culture. The story of John Turner brings many of these themes together. The “conversion of a role model” concludes the book by further illustrating the intricacies of the code and its impact on everyday life.

My primary aim in this work, on the basis of years of fieldwork, was to paint an ethnographic picture of the social and cultural dynamics of the interpersonal violence that is currently undermining the quality of life of too many urban neighborhoods. In this effort, I addressed such questions as the following: How do people in this setting perceive their situation? What assumptions do they bring to their decision making? What behavioral patterns result from these assumptions? What are the social implications and consequences of this behavior? To answer these questions, I engaged in participant-observation, including direct observation, and conducted in-depth interviews. Impressionistic materials were drawn from various social settings around the city, from some of the wealthiest to some of the most economically depressed, including carryouts, “stop and go” establishments, coin laundries, taverns, playgrounds, public schools, the central city indoor mall known as the Gallery, jails, and public street corners. In these settings, I encountered and got to know a wide array of people—adolescent boys and young women (some who had been incarcerated, some who had not), older men, teenage mothers, grand-

mothers, male and female schoolteachers, black and white people, drug dealers, and common criminals.

Code thus offers an ethnographic rendering of the code of the street and its relationship to violence in a trying socioeconomic context, one in which family-sustaining jobs have become ever more scarce, public assistance has increasingly disappeared, racial discrimination is a fact of daily life, wider institutions have declining legitimacy, legal codes are often ignored or mistrusted, and frustration has been powerfully building for many residents.

In conclusion, a major strength of the ethnographer's work is the subjective aspect, an aspect that may cause such work to be questioned in an academic context (in which linear thinking is emphasized) even as it is praised and selectively applied as a value in and of itself in other contexts. It is true that ethnography can easily be faulted. It is open to criticism not only for its informal nature, but also because of its necessary incompleteness: it is virtually impossible to tell the whole story. Moreover, the ethnographer's account is always a suggestive story that continues to evolve after the telling. Hence, the ethnographic researcher can always be charged with having "left something out," and this is a "failing" that can always be seized upon by anyone who wants to criticize.

In the hands of a constructive critic, such "weaknesses" of ethnographic studies can be explored with obvious benefit, for questions can be raised that may not have been possible before the appearance of the study. The story, as it were, is always unfolding, not simply because the ethnographer is in a process of growth during his or her work, but also because the awareness of his or her audience is "growing" with the consumption of that work. In short, the process in which the ethnographer is engaged constantly yields new questions and poses new demands on the work. In this sense, the labors of ethnographers are perhaps best described as constant "works in progress" that can always lead to greater understanding—and beyond that, to additional mysteries that demand new searches, in an unending cascade of discovery. Unfortunately, one can easily see what this can lead to in the hands of an ideologically driven critic.

Far from trying to appeal to public pieties, I speak candidly about matters of sex in the black community, violence in the black community, child rearing in the black community, and schooling in the black community, especially the ways in which these matters are viewed and talked about by community members.

For those unfamiliar with the inner-city settings I research and candidly write about, my ethnographic accounts may seem provocative, challenging, embarrassing, or even politically incorrect. Such is the nature of the work I do, which seeks mainly to render accurately the everyday existence of people meeting the exigencies of life in Philadelphia ghetto commu-

nities. Wacquant is incredulous about many of the representations in my work, but he finds it especially difficult to appreciate that peculiarly “American values”—as expressed in the concept of decency—are widespread in the inner-city ghetto; a research finding that has consistently appeared in my ethnographic work since *A Place on the Corner*. His top-down ideological approach to the black ghetto is so strong that it blinds him, resulting in a warped interpretation of my work. In this context, when my subjects fail to correspond to his political preconceptions, to him they seem like “cardboard cutouts.” I find it disturbing that Wacquant seeks to influence the field through essays such as the one printed here that so harshly criticizes the work of others. When he charges fellow ethnographers with being “pawns of the neoliberal state,” it is grossly unfair.

In his path-breaking work *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), William Julius Wilson observed that those who study urban poverty, particularly ethnographers, are at special risk; by the nature of their work, they open themselves up to the kinds of self-serving ideological attacks that Wacquant has staged. If he succeeds in persuading others to share his ideologically driven conception of ethnography we will learn very little about the actual everyday lived experience of the inner city. Already, many serious scholars who worked in this area earlier have quit studying the poor and disenfranchised, leaving a vacuum to be filled by ideologues of the left and the right, which serves neither the interest of worthwhile ethnographic work nor the well-being of the persons whose lives ethnographers attempt to bring to the attention of others. I try to write about the ghetto poor in a way that is *faithful to their understanding of themselves*. I know full well that this is impossible to achieve completely, but it is a worthy goal toward which to strive and one that I have tried hard to accomplish. I regard this effort essential to the ethnographic enterprise and to the broader interests of an effectual social science. As the late David Riesman said, “good ethnography is a conversation between classes,” but as Wacquant’s essay has demonstrated, it is a conversation that is not universally appreciated.

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