

## No Shame: The View from the Left Bank<sup>1</sup>

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Wacquant's essay is less a review of three ethnographies about the inner city than a throwback to the sectarian days when leftists who failed to toe the Party line were deemed objective enemies of the working class. In this instance, we are told that research by Duneier (1999), Anderson (1999), and Newman is exhibit A for the charge "that U.S. sociology is now tied and party to . . . the neoliberal state and its 'carceral-assistential complex' for the punitive management of the poor" (p. 1471). The three of us do not hew to Wacquant's politics, so we are indicted, along with the rest of American sociology, for a lockdown in the ghetto and the repression of the poor.

Wacquant's "review" is built upon a relentless distortion of the research and writing in these three books. Repeatedly, Wacquant tells *AJS* readers that an argument presented in them rests upon implausible assumptions when it does nothing of the kind. The position he puts in the writer's mouth is consistently the opposite of what appears on the page. Having created a series of straw men, Wacquant then razes them, often by parroting the arguments made by the authors as if they were his own. He buttresses his critique of these books using data provided in them, crediting the evidence itself, while ignoring the fact that Anderson, Duneier, and Newman collected and carefully presented that evidence on purpose. He claims that our observations undermine the core analyses in these books, when they simply highlight the absurdity of the caricatures he has created. In the end, there is almost no link between these three books and what Wacquant makes of them.

Long before its publication in *AJS*, Wacquant has been busy distributing his attack around the globe and across the profession. Inevitably many people who have received copies from Wacquant will not see this rebuttal, but we hope many others do. It is important for interested readers to form their own judgment, not only of the books discussed here, but

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also of Wacquant's accuracy and fairness. Readers who go through that exercise will likely emerge with a very different perspective on both counts.

#### BACKGROUND: THE UNDERCLASS THESIS

As many readers are aware, Wacquant has been a protégé and later a collaborator of William Julius Wilson and Pierre Bourdieu, and he contributed to the theory of the urban poor as a jobless "underclass" that dominated U.S. sociology through the 1990s. That theory argued that the ghetto "underclass" or subproletariat was a distinct social stratum that had become isolated from the rest of society (Wacquant and Wilson 1993). It particularly emphasized the view that the urban "underclass" was far removed from the world of work and from "mainstream" patterns of behavior. The approach also stressed the disappearance of "mainstream" role models that help keep alive the perception that education is meaningful, that steady employment is a viable alternative to welfare, and that family stability is the norm, not the exception" (Wilson 1987, p. 56).

The fundamental purpose of *No Shame in My Game* was to hold these conclusions up to the light of ethnographic research among low-wage workers and unemployed job seekers in Harlem. I looked to see whether the unemployed were so separated from workers; whether welfare mothers and their kin were as far removed from the world of work as this theory asserted; whether role models were really absent from the ghetto; whether ghetto dwellers appreciate the role of education in later mobility; and whether "mainstream" models of behavior had really disappeared with the exodus of more affluent families. The genesis then of *No Shame* was a confrontation with the central tenets of underclass theory. Without that backdrop, to which Wacquant was a contributor, it is impossible to understand the intellectual dispute the book engages.

Ethnographic work on the inner city has fixated on deviant behavior. However, a central contention of my book is that life in the African-American inner city is not predominantly focused on Wacquant's underclass end of the street. Sociologists have so emphasized the presence of gangs, drugs, and hustlers that they have forgotten that paid work has been and remains a central and defining activity for many African-American residents of the ghetto. Even in the most impoverished neighborhoods in the Urban Family Life Survey at the University of Chicago to which Wacquant contributed, more than one-third of the respondents in the poorest neighborhoods were working and over half were either in

the labor force or in school.<sup>2</sup> Where are the ghetto workers in the research and theory that emerged from the underclass tradition? They are barely mentioned.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of the working poor from most of the literature on the inner city is a fundamental flaw not only because we lose sight of how poor families actually do make ends meet. Their inclusion is critical because the workplace is one of the sites where the intersection between middle- and working-class people and the ghetto poor—alleged to have disappeared—actually takes place. Working, even at minimum wage jobs, encourages mainstream models of behavior, in part because the workplace creates a social space and friendships that buttress and intensify conventional aspirations and mores. In addition, the long hours and exhausting schedules of low-wage jobs draw low-wage workers away from “street” friends, partying, and hanging out. Being ridiculed by street acquaintances for working at a “chump change” job reinforces that distance.

The thousands of people from inner-city communities who take and then hold these jobs have a more positive perspective on work than is visible in the underclass literature, particularly when the alternative is welfare or unemployment. They are not, however, confused about whether these jobs are good ones; they know they are not. They are reminded daily of their low status and the small size of their paychecks; they must rely on other people’s subsidies to get by, reinforcing the fact that they are working for very little monetary reward. What Wacquant consistently ignores is their decision and its context: for many, low-wage jobs are the best option in a pond of lousy alternatives and the only one that holds even a hope—though a largely frustrated one—of getting anywhere. I ask the reader to keep in mind this condensation of my book and the previous

<sup>2</sup> See my first table (NSMG, p. 305, table 1), entitled “Neighborhood Poverty Concentration by Working Status” utilizing data from the Chicago Urban and Family Life Survey. Consistent with Wilson’s interpretation, the percentage employed declines sharply as neighborhoods increase in poverty. Yet in those that meet the definition he and Wacquant use of “the ghetto” (40% + below the poverty line), 32.5% of the respondents are working, 2.2% have jobs but were not working on the day of the survey, 7.8% are “looking for work,” and 9.7% are in school.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson clearly recognized that the underclass model presented in his earlier work (Wilson 1987) underplayed the role of the working poor. Hence in *When Work Disappears*, he points briefly to the importance of inner-city residents who remain connected to the formal economy “against all odds” in what is largely a “jobless ghetto.” (Wilson 1996, p. 53) He notes their uphill struggle to find and keep jobs despite weak networks and poor structural supports. This is an important evolution in Wilson’s thinking, though the problem of unemployment is so severe in the Chicago neighborhoods that he dwells at greater length on the lives of the jobless than the world of the working poor. When one combines *When Work Disappears* with *No Shame in My Game*, a fuller portrait of ghetto life emerges than when either book is read in isolation.

sociology of the underclass it was intended to debate, as I confront Wacquant's straw man caricature of *No Shame in My Game*.

#### DEBUNKING STRAW MEN

*Straw man 1.*—Wacquant writes (p. 1521): “According to Newman, low-wage firms will save the nation from the scourge of urban poverty.”

This is the *opposite* of what the book argues. As its subtitle, *The Working Poor in the Inner City*, makes clear, low-wage work is *not* sufficient to raise people out of poverty. This point is repeatedly emphasized: “A focus on the working poor reminds us that employment alone will not solve the poverty problem if the wages are too low” (NSMG, p. 269).

*No Shame* is full of stories of the financial hardships that low-wage workers endure—the endless scramble to pay the bills, patch together child care and health care—and to the ways in which the pitfalls of jobless poverty among kin spill over into the lives of workers and derail their attempts to climb out of poverty. The structural conditions of low-wage service work, detailed at length in chapter 2, point very clearly to the macroeconomic forces that have bequeathed these hardships to the working poor.

*Straw man 2.*—Wacquant says that “[Newman] entrenches several misconceptions . . . including . . . the dualistic division between ‘people . . . outside of the labor market . . .’ and ‘the others, the hardworking people’” (p. 1503). He reiterates that I use “*false dichotomies between workers and nonworkers*” (p. 1511; his emphasis).

On the contrary, I argue that welfare mothers and low-wage workers, drug addicts and police, come from the *same families*. Detailed family trees discussed at length in the book point directly to the intermixing of nonworking and working poor. Ideological disputes and interpersonal frictions emerge out of these close relations, as workers denigrate those who rely on welfare and in turn the jobless “diss” the low-wage workers for displays of subservience. These bitter divides are described alongside the pointed truth that without the “nonworking poor” who do the child care or access the public housing, low-wage workers could not be on the job at all. And without the wages of workers—especially the teens and young adults in poor households—welfare recipients could not make it either. These interdependencies are far too pronounced for any kind of separation between these two states of poverty, and it is disingenuous of Wacquant to suggest that I argue otherwise.

*Straw man 3.*—“[According to Newman] *the more despotic the work regime and the more desperate the worker is to retain subpar employment, the better off she turns out to be*” (p. 1511; his emphasis). And “in

Newman's eyes, willing low-wage laborers . . . need only more servile work to snap the bridles of stigma and poverty" (p. 1520).

Wacquant's despotism claim must have completely escaped the Sidney Hillman Foundation, sponsored by the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) that awarded *No Shame* the Hillman Book Prize for the year 2000. Wacquant's characterization is so outlandish, it should give the reader pause. *No Shame* recounts the costs that low-wage jobs exact from their incumbents in the form of status degradation and, most especially, continued poverty. As for the question of snapping bridles, this book is one of the few that tracks what happens when minimum-wage workers seek better-paying jobs. During the 18 months I followed them, a period of high unemployment in New York City, few succeeded in climbing out of this end of the labor market. This was an enormous source of frustration for black and Latino workers; nonetheless, they held onto these poorly paid jobs because the alternatives Wacquant seems to believe they find more attractive—persistent unemployment, welfare, or crime—do not appeal to them at all. Wacquant's assertion that I believe these jobs, by themselves, solve the poverty problem or that increased despotism and desperation is somehow my aim, runs contrary to every line of *No Shame*.

Low-wage jobs *do* play a role in pulling people away from the world of illegal hustling and drug dealing that seems to be the only part of ghetto life Wacquant recognizes. The workplace is the venue, I argue, where the conventional mores utterly invisible in the underclass tradition surface: "The more workers withdraw from nonworking friends and neighbors, the more the influence of the workplace—its mores, customs, networks and expectations—shapes them. . . . What recedes from view is the more irregular, episodic culture of the neighborhood and the streets. Working people gradually leave those less ordered worlds for the more predictable, more demanding, and in the long run more rewarding life of a wage earner" (NSMG pp. 106, 108–9).

*Straw man* 4.—Wacquant writes: "It does not occur to Newman that the horrid working conditions, demeaning dress codes, high tension, insecure tenure, and starvation wages of such 'slave jobs' . . . are powerful incentives for young men in particular to shun the formal labor market altogether . . . by entering into gangs . . . they can at least salvage a sense of masculine honor, maintain self-respect" (pp. 1507–8).

Of course it occurred to me. I devoted nine pages of the book to a section titled "The Social Costs of Accepting Low-Wage Work." As the following passage, one among many from this section, makes clear, one of the book's central contributions is to describe the "status gauntlet" poor workers endure:

Ghetto youth are particularly sensitive to the status degradation entailed in stigmatized employment. . . . Hence jobs that routinely demand displays of deference force those who hold them to violate “macho” behavior codes that are central to the definition of teen culture. There are therefore considerable risks in seeking a fast food job in the first place. . . . It is hard to know the extent to which this stigma discourages young people in places like central Harlem from knocking on the door of a fast food restaurant. It is clear that the other choices are not much better and that necessity drives thousands, if not millions, of teens and older job-seekers to ignore the stigma or learn to live with it. But no one enters the central Harlem job market without having to face this gauntlet. (NSMG, p. 95).

Subsequent pages provide examples of the stigmatizing process, and the next section is titled “Breaking the Stigma.” As it happens, the workers I interviewed utterly reject Wacquant’s contention that the alternative of gang involvement rescues manly honor. That, they argue, is a fantasy, a one-way ticket to Wacquant’s carceral state, and they want none of it. They think people who go down that road are fools or worse. One of the reasons they are so clear on this point is that these workers are intimately familiar with “associates”—from family members to childhood friends—who have taken that route. They reject it because they know all too well where it leads. To read Wacquant’s critique—and the limited ethnographic work he has contributed to the literature so far—you would think that no one ever takes these low-wage jobs and that everyone, or at least every male, becomes a criminal or hustler instead.

*Straw man 5.*—Wacquant complains that “Newman expresses just as little concern for the fact that school and degraded wage work compete for scarce time, limited attention, and finite energy, despite her own evidence” (p. 1508).

In a 12-page section of the book titled “Never Enough Time,” the experiences of time binds among the working poor are discussed at length. I hate to try the reader’s patience with direct quotes from the book, but even a brief sample of this material should suffice to show how completely wrong Wacquant’s assessment is:

He is likely to experience a sudden shortage of time. Hours that might once have been spent hanging out with friends, relaxing at home, doing school-work, or just nothing at all suddenly evaporate. . . . For older workers, especially those with families, the bind is even more extreme. . . . Whatever time and energy they have left over after the workday is over has to go into taking care of their own children and getting as much rest as they can steal (which is never enough.) . . . These days, parties are history. The work is too tiring. (NSMG, p. 105)

*No Shame* contains a whole chapter (chap. 5) on links between school and work and discusses how exhausting it is to tack back and forth.

Indeed, I show that because family poverty is so pressing, the only way that young people can stay in school is to provide for themselves financially, particularly in a climate where the only entry portal to college—the City University of New York—has been ratcheting up tuition (NSMG, pp. 58–59). Why would someone who “had little concern” bother to document how hard it is to manage these twin demands or argue how misguided it is to put even junior college out of their financial reach?

*Straw man 6.*—“When speaking of minority fast-food owners and managers, Newman resorts to the exalted language of the religious apostolate: these are people with ‘a special spark’ who ‘often possess a missionary impulse’ that took them to the heart of the ghetto” (p. 1515).<sup>4</sup>

Wacquant’s political stance is too suffocating and monochromatic to acknowledge that minority entrepreneurs often pay the minimum wage but also act to help their employees get ahead in school and in the world. They could locate their businesses outside of the inner city or cut and run as many other firms have already done. Their motives are clearly profit oriented, but there are additional reasons why black and Latino business owners choose to seek those profits in Harlem or Washington Heights. In his economic-reductionist mode, Wacquant reduces these managerial behaviors to a simple material interest in controlling the workforce. The complex mindset and the mix of material and ideal interests that is operating among upwardly mobile black managers in Harlem totally escapes Wacquant’s purview.

Managers are punitive toward workers who assert a “street” attitude and supportive of workers who buckle to the demands of the workplace. Wacquant does not like this disciplinary orientation and neither do many workers, but the book is not attempting to pass judgment on the political correctness of managerial practice. It is trying to show what the consequences of its operation are for workers’ trajectories and identities.

Wacquant may hate it, but that “self-improvement” ideology is quite widespread among middle-class and upwardly mobile African-Americans and Latinos. The low-wage workplace is the arena in which interaction between them and their poorer brethren takes place. Underclass theory posits that there is no such intercourse; I show otherwise.

Minority managers and ghetto business people often pay inadequate wages, but they also urge their workers to stay in school, and some read their employees’ report cards, sometimes pay for textbooks, occasionally

<sup>4</sup> I assume that what Wacquant meant by “apostolate” was in fact a religious apostle or zealot or something of that kind. While I think this putdown is wide of the mark, I would argue that minority business owners who stick it out in high-crime, low-income neighborhoods are a resource for the community that has not been studied in recent years. Wacquant seems to see these people as enemies of the people by definition. I disagree.

buy eye glasses, and instruct their employees in managing bureaucracies from banks to the Division of Motor Vehicles. There is nothing in the employment contract that requires them to do so.<sup>5</sup> Wacquant may not approve of their posture, their politics, their aspirations for their employees, or the jobs they have on offer, but that hardly matters. My account is intended to close a gap in our understanding of what inner-city employers actually do in the workplace.

*Straw man 7.*—Wacquant portrays *No Shame* as relentlessly “cheerful,” oblivious to the hardship or the demeaning nature of fast-food jobs or the dead end they represent in the labor market.

Au contraire, *No Shame* is quite clear about the shortcomings of these jobs—from their wages to the working conditions that put workers in the line of fire as customers attempt to take them down a few notches. I focus as well on class and racial biases that result in a much smaller proportion of black job applicants than immigrant applicants getting hired. Wacquant portentously raises these observations against me, even though they are my own findings and arguments.

He does not want to hear that in the face of ridicule, workers and managers form a cultural defense of their own that trades on quite conventional beliefs about the honor of being a worker of any kind as against the permanently unemployed or welfare reliant poor. This defensive culture—from whence the main title of the book derives—forms behind the counter and trades not on subcultural symbols, but on middle-class ideologies of work and responsibility. Mainstream conceptions of this kind are all the more important to recognize given the competing reality of total disrespect for these particular jobs (as opposed to the dignified status of having any job).

Wacquant’s suggestion that I am ignorant of the limited prospects for mobility based on fast-food jobs is a serious misrepresentation of the book, as the following passage from *No Shame* makes clear: “With upward mobility circumscribed and wages held low . . . the typical Burger Barn worker can expect to come and go from the firm without seeing much advancement at all. The jobs are built for churning, a pattern that is acceptable for teenagers looking for summer jobs but distressingly limited for adults who are trying to make a real go of it” (NSMG, p. 185).

What I do point out is that those few workers who did move up the

<sup>5</sup> Wacquant makes much of the role of franchise agreements in mandating this “paternalistic behavior.” First, there is nothing in the franchise agreement that mandates any of the social work services described above. Franchisees are expected to make civic contributions and they do so by inviting groups of school children to tour the back area of the restaurants or by speaking to community groups. Personally, I do not see it as a cardinal sin that the parent firm expects its franchisees to be civic minded, but then I do not see evil at every turn among inner-city employers.

occupational hierarchy were able to do so because somebody else in their families was able to support them so that they could use their wages to fund more training or schooling. These people were rare, however. Most workers needed every dime to support their living expenses and the needs of their families, and despite clear recognition that their futures would be enhanced by more education or training, they were unable to pay for it and therefore largely stuck. At least, so it appeared based on the 18 months of fieldwork that went into *No Shame*.

Readers interested in these mobility questions will learn more about this issue in my next book. Based on two follow-up waves of field interviews and an additional stint of participant observation in 2002, this volume will focus on the consequences of tight and lax labor markets for the mobility of low-wage entrants to the labor market. Having followed these workers and job seekers for eight years now, it has become clear that declining unemployment has made a significant difference for about one-third of my sample. Hence a “dead-end job” may become a stepping-stone under certain conditions and remains a ticket to nowhere under others (Newman 2000; Gottschalk, Connolly, and Newman 2002).

Wacquant is so convinced of the utter worthlessness of minimum-wage jobs that he cannot imagine there are any positive consequences whatever of holding them. He is not alone in this regard. Most treatises on “McJobs” are not based on ethnographic accounts at all; they proceed from prior ideological convictions that are, to be fair, very widely shared. There are important questions to be asked about whether there are any positive consequences to taking a low-paying job, particularly with respect to skills that matter in the labor market. The prevailing view, encouraged by most of modern economics, is that these workers do not go anywhere in the labor market because they have no skills to put on the table. My exploration of just what kind of skill is embodied in these “no-skill” jobs was an effort to show that such a simplistic understanding is incorrect. Memory skills, organizational cooperation, people management, equipment repair, cash register operation—these are the things a close observer can see if she tries to do the jobs in situ. Wacquant belittles these skills because he is sure, at the outset, that they amount to nothing. I disagree with him on this point and offer the fieldwork my research team did for four months behind the counter as evidence for an alternative reading.

If there *are* skills in these jobs, then there has to be another explanation for why these workers cannot depend on them to advance their pathway in the labor market. I turn to the ways that high levels of unemployment, racial barriers in hiring, the segregation of networks, and the negative attitudes of other employers trap these workers even as they expend a lot of effort to get better jobs. An entire chapter of *No Shame* focuses on unsuccessful job seekers and demonstrates convincingly that (1) a labor

surplus economy forces adult, experienced workers down into what is supposed to be a “youth job” and knocks young job seekers out of the ring; (2) immigrants are selected ahead of African-Americans even in neighborhoods where the latter are by far the majority population because immigrants are believed to be more accommodating; and (3) even in a low-wage job market, you need to have connections or you will not get past the front door. Note that this is not about skill. It is about race, about the paucity of jobs and the surplus of job seekers, and about connections.

*Straw man 8.*—*No Shame* romanticizes low-wage workers, focusing on their virtues and ignoring their faults.

Wacquant accuses all three authors of failing to acknowledge or foreground the “dark side” of their informants’ lives. Yet these three books also report the self-destructive things that ghetto dwellers do and say. There are accounts of child abuse, drug abuse, and family abandonment in *No Shame*. These are multifaceted people with complex lives and an ethnographer is responsible for describing all sides of them. How we get from a rich, descriptive account in these ethnographies to snide characterizations of our subjects as “paragons of morality” is hard to see.

All three of the books reviewed here complement the negative aspects with evidence that many ghetto dwellers are not criminals, are not selling or taking drugs, have complex moral visions, and are often striving for a much more “mainstream” life. We reject dualisms of ghetto dwellers as good or bad, and we show how people—sometimes the same people—behave in constructive, self-defeating, and sometimes predatory ways. Ghetto dwellers are neither the passive victims of nor heroic resisters against capitalist or racist exploitation. They are people with considerable insights into the savage inequities of race and class that plague them, but many of them argue that even given these profound disadvantages, they have some latitude for choice, and it is their intention to make a life and get ahead as best they can.

Wacquant ridicules these efforts to provide a nuanced, accurate, and complete portrait of these people because his allegiance to the caricature of ghetto residents as lumpenproletariat is overwhelming. He will not acknowledge that we portray the ghetto as an intermixing and contestation between deviance and conformity, work and unemployment, a multisided conflict that takes place between and within individuals, inside a structural context of insufficient jobs and underpaid employment. So he warps our theses, twisting them into caricatures of mindless optimism, paragons of virtue, or a celebration of ghetto normalcy. Having obscured what we said, he can claim parts of our position for his own. This is not insightful or responsible reviewing.

Since he sees no honor in ghetto workers and points to their problems and failures as relentlessly as the most hostile of conservatives, he finds

it hard to imagine that there are people in the ghetto who eschew the street life he focuses on in his own published work. Yet there are thousands of working people like those described in *No Shame*; they deserve some respect for their efforts. In this regard, I plead guilty to admiring the fortitude of people like Jamal, who gets up at 5:00 A.M. to board a bus that crosses the city, to a job that pays him next to nothing. Maybe I should hold him in contempt, but I do not. I think the man deserves a medal. He also deserves a better job, and in focusing on how hard he has tried to find one, I hope to bust down the stereotype that says he just does not try hard enough.

Maybe Jamal would be better off on the barricades, but he does not think so. Wacquant wants to sit on a superior perch and call that false consciousness or explode the contribution *No Shame* makes with a condescending dismissal on the grounds that it is too respectful of people like Jamal. I prefer to think Jamal understands something Wacquant does not, which is that until there are better possibilities in the offing, he is going to do his damned best to make a go of it. Since there are virtually no intrinsic rewards in what Jamal does, and his pay is abysmal, I think it takes an unbelievable attachment to the work ethic (which Americans do genuinely value, even if Wacquant thinks such a belief is retrograde) to keep at it.

Yes, I do hope readers will admire people like Jamal. But I will actually settle for getting them to recognize that he exists. Believe it or not, that is an uphill struggle because most ethnographies and journalistic accounts that characterize the ghetto completely ignore working African-Americans like him.

*Straw man 9.*—Wacquant is particularly allergic to my discussions of values among the poor, and especially the work ethic, saying, “Newman’s depiction . . . results from the methodological *inversion of material compulsion into moral impulsion*” (p. 1504; his emphasis).

On the contrary, *No Shame* makes it very clear that people work in these jobs because they have to: “Necessity drives thousands, if not millions, of teens and older job-seekers [into these stigmatized jobs]” (NSMG, p. 95). But the poor also have agency: moral impulsion (from values and aspirations) and material need are complementary, not incompatible, sources of action. Wacquant prefers a political position in which the poor have to be compelled into low-wage work, and so he attacks the possibility that they might have values and motives that draw them to work, even when it pays poverty wages.

Many, but not all, ghetto residents share the ideology of the larger society that says that there is dignity in work and in the independence from heavy-handed public assistance that work confers. They view work, even low-wage work, as morally superior to criminal activity or to un-

employment. They want good jobs, not bad ones. But in the face of constricted choices, many ghetto residents take on bad jobs instead of unemployment. They gain a sense of moral satisfaction out of working, even for low pay. I made these arguments not to take a methodological position about agency versus structure, nor as an idiotic optimist, but because in interviews and ethnographic observation low-wage African-American and Hispanic workers repeatedly underline their commitment to identities as workers. This would be a thoroughly unremarkable observation if underclass isolation theory, and a decade of right-wing stereotyping of the poor as shiftless, had not thrown this into question.

*Straw man* 10.—“She overlooks the contested nature of ‘values’ and their dynamic shaping in and through (inter)action” (p. 1514).

This accusation is nonsense. My whole point is to show that there are conflicting perspectives, values, and orientations toward the low-wage labor market that are brought into full view on the street, in the restaurants, and behind the closed doors of home. Since only one stance—the one that rejects low-wage work as demeaning—is popularly recognized, *No Shame* focuses on the workers’ side of the fence and on the contested terrain between them. “But there is a war for the soul of the ghetto, and it has two sides. . . . Who is winning the cultural war? What are the dominant values of inner city residents? The sociological emphasis on separated subcultures in the inner city has ignored the power of mainstream models and institutions like schools, the influence of the media, the convictions of poor parents and the power of negative examples to shape the moral world of the ghetto poor” (NSMG, p. 168).

The move into low-wage work does not work for everyone, and in order to show multiple sides of the phenomenon, *No Shame* looks at people who do not buy this view.<sup>6</sup> They happen to be a minority among those in the labor force in Harlem, but it does not matter. I discuss their perspective—which harshly condemns both the jobs and the people who take them—because it is part of a contentious dispute among ghetto residents over the right course of action when faced with three unappetizing alternatives: unemployment, crime, or low-wage work. Some people try these jobs on for size and develop such a visceral response to the subservience they are required to show that they explode and quit. This contest is the object of contention between workers and customers, and it drives the former to seek some support from managers, more senior workers, and from one another.

*No Shame* questions the long-standing sociological romance with “role models” by suggesting that young people are as likely to reject the models

<sup>6</sup> See especially my discussion of workers who complain they are “below notice” and “overworked and underpaid” (NSMG, pp. 112, 116).

standing before them (e.g., mothers on welfare), as they are to embrace them. The institutional context in which they find themselves, including the low-wage workplace, is part of this competition for their souls. The longer they remain in low-wage jobs, the more likely workers are to embrace conventional, defensive constructs that place workers—even poor workers—above nonworkers in the status hierarchy. At the same time, they are well aware that they are the most disrespected of the nation's workers, and that cuts pretty deeply.

Wacquant wishes that low-wage workers would embrace a radical agenda rather than inhabit the “rebuttal culture” described in *No Shame*, but I found no evidence of a revolutionary disposition and not much support for nationalist impulses either. That he may want low-wage workers to embrace a different vision is neither here nor there. The ethnographer's job, as I see it, is not to impose her politics on the community in question but to understand and interrogate the perspectives at play.

*Straw man 11.*—My interest in and substantive contributions to policy that might make a difference for the working poor comes under heavy fire in Wacquant's review. “Newman is so wedded to a business-first and ‘small government’ vision that she does not so much as consider such obvious possible measures as increasing the minimum wage [and] mandating medical insurance” (p. 1517).

There are approximately 15 pages in *No Shame* where the minimum wage is discussed, particularly the hammering it has taken against inflation: “Congress recently raised the minimum wage, providing the first real boost to the standard of living of these low-wage workers in many years. Yet we have a long way to go to correct the slide in the value of the minimum wage, which fell steadily for many years before this latest rise” (NSMG, p. 42). And, summarizing a section where the need for government health insurance programs is emphasized, I report, “For working poor and low-income families, health care is a critical priority. . . . The Clinton administration has done a great deal to expand medical insurance for poor children. We must do the same for their parents” (NSMG, p. 276). Likewise, “William Julius Wilson has argued . . . that without creating a Marshall Plan for the nation's ghettos, complete with a substantial public employment creation program . . . we will see little improvement in the lives of inner city residents. . . . He is surely right. Yet political support for federal job creation is weak to say the least. Until that tide changes, it would be worthwhile to consider alternatives” (NSMG, p. 273). The book then addresses those alternatives, ranging from improvements in the Earned Income Tax Credit to creating job ladders that link low-wage work to higher-wage jobs.

Sociologists who went before *No Shame*, most notably my colleague and Wacquant's collaborator, William Julius Wilson, called for a dramatic

increase in public-sector employment. As I said in the book, I second the motion. But it did not appear to me then and does not appear to me now, that this call was heard. The public-sector job expansion Wilson advocated just did not happen. So, we can renew the call for it and watch nothing happen again. The people in my book are still waiting for decent work. My thoughts on how the private sector might play a role, particularly if there were organized efforts to overcome the patterns of segregation that make it hard for workers to move up to decent jobs, need to be understood in that context. I will be the first to applaud the day a huge public works program is passed in Congress. Meanwhile, the folks I got to know Harlem would like a decent job in this lifetime. It is irresponsible to leave the private sector out of that discussion: it is a *huge* part of the American economy. Wacquant paints this as an overture to oppression. I would reverse the charges: to ignore these policy debates is sit on the comfortable sidelines in a left pose. America's poor—particularly the workers among them—are markedly worse off than their counterparts in other developed capitalist countries. I take that as an indication that reformist struggles over government policies within capitalist states can change the fate of the poor for the better. In any case, given the extensive discussion of policies from the minimum wage to health care to child care to the tuition barriers to higher education, this book is loaded with discussion of the policy options that Wacquant says I “*do not so much as consider.*”

*Straw man 12.*—According to Wacquant, *No Shame* casts the lives of its subjects in moral terms designed to grant the ghetto poor an allegiance to middle-class values that they do not in fact possess.

I have already noted the moral posture of Wacquant's model, which bequeathed to us a decidedly different portrait of “ghetto morality,” one that emphasizes joblessness, family instability, and sexual predation. That theory fuses perspectives as old as the English poor laws with a more structural quasi-Marxist argument: the ghetto poor got that way because of racial segregation, deindustrialization, the disappearance of jobs, and an exodus of working- and middle-class residents. This view was a politically fateful and empirically lopsided combination.

The notion of a socially isolated subproletariat utterly unrecognizable in terms of values or behavior to the rest of the country has been used to demonize the poor in America far more than any research in the “neo-liberal” mode that Wacquant deplores in his review. From the journalists who write about crack whores and welfare queens to the researchers like Wacquant who give us portraits of street hustlers, a lot of material has been generated for conservatives to choose from in mounting an all-out attack on what little the state provides the poor.

It would be sheer folly to suggest that any sociological treatise on the

ghetto brought about welfare reform, stripped immigrants of food stamps, or delivered a subminimum wage. I do not make that claim. But by the same token, it is politically native in the extreme to pretend that discussions of deviance, values, and motives play no role in the policies that do get enacted, policies that make a huge difference in the lives of America's poor. Where do politicians and citizens get their information about who is "deserving" of redistribution, investment in employment, or equity in schools? For better or for worse, ethnographers, survey researchers, and journalists feed into the debates over who is worthy and who is not, who gets the goods and who gets the crumbs. A relentless stream of work has appeared that has focused on what the public clearly understood as morally dubious characters: street hustlers, unwed teenage mothers, criminals, addicts, dealers, and those with no "attachment to the labor force," meaning no interest in work. Wacquant can rail that moral judgment has no place in sociology, or that books like mine should not address the moral portraits that exist about the poor, but that is just head-in-the-sand thinking.

*No Shame in My Game* entered this arena in deliberate debate with the underclass notion, and the crude reduction of it that *has* entered American politics. Wacquant's review subtracts that context entirely from his critique and renders the book something that only a bizarre reading could yield: a defense of "brute capitalism." It is nothing of the kind. *No Shame* points to workers in the inner city because sociologists have pointed away from them. It points to the work ethic because numerous writers before it have suggested there is no such thing. It points to links between the ghetto and the larger world of employment because the ghetto has been conceptually reduced to Wacquant's socially isolated exotic subproletarians who, he informs us, suffer from a "broken habitus" (p. 1499).

*Straw man* 13.—Wacquant thinks that discussions of "family values" are hopelessly retrograde and therefore have no place in an ethnographic study.

The chapter "Family Values" appears in *No Shame* because the vast majority of the work out there essentially posits there is no such thing in the inner city. The book never, ever claims that ghetto family lives are just like those of the middle class in form. Ghetto dwellers are very much like the middle class in their *desires*. The working poor in Harlem really would like to own a home, or have a job with adequate pay and benefits, or raise their kids in peace, or find a good man who will help them to live a decent life. These desires are seldom fulfilled, and *No Shame* aims to show why. The answer does not lie in a culture of poverty model. It lies in a broken opportunity structure that many struggling families cannot surmount.

INTELLECTUAL HYPOCRISY

Let us consider for a moment whether Wacquant himself offers a superior or even different theory of the black ghetto to that advanced in these three books. In his essay "Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the Ghetto" Wacquant (1997) offers a precursor of his current review, castigating other poverty researchers for their misdeeds. In that article, the first object of Wacquant's animus was research that operationalizes the idea of a ghetto by denoting census tracts with 40% poverty or higher. He excoriates Jargowsky and Bane (1991) in particular for this pernicious error. Using a 40% poverty cut off, Wacquant complains, is "arbitrary," "asociological . . . deracialized" and (again the political slur) compatible with "the lay notions held by municipal and state elites." He conveniently forgets that he, Wacquant, writing with Wilson (1993, p. 33) followed the identical procedure by comparing low-poverty to higher poverty tracts using that same 40% poverty census tract cut-off. He gave a perfectly sensible reason for doing so: "Extreme poverty neighborhoods comprise tracts with at least 40 percent of their residents in poverty in 1980. These tracts make up the historic heart of Chicago's black ghetto. . . . Thus when we counterpose extreme-poverty areas with low-poverty areas, we are in effect comparing ghetto neighborhoods with other black areas."

When Wacquant himself used a 40% poverty figure in census tracts to identify ghetto neighborhoods, he did not for one moment forget he was studying the ghetto as an institution or that its inhabitants were black; nor did he believe his research methods allied him with state elites. Nor, of course, did the scholars of poverty whom he lambasted when they utilized the same method. When Wacquant's primary concern is political polemic, he has no qualms about mischaracterizing the intentions of his sociological colleagues or criticizing others for doing what he himself has done. Yet he ignores, completely, the purposes and findings of Jargowsky and Bane's research. Having tarred their method as "arbitrary," "asociological," and "deracialized" he has silenced whatever they had to say.

Another of the "pernicious premises" that Wacquant (1997, p. 348) identifies in others' research is "exoticism": "Following this logic, the most destitute, threatening, and disreputable residents of the ghetto . . . are taken to reflect upon and impugn the black community in toto. . . . The end result is the continual reproduction of stereotypical, cardboard-type folk images of urban blacks. . . . Analysts . . . devoted an inordinate amount of attention . . . to those behaviors that so-called middle-class society considers abnormal, offensive, or unduly costly."

Well, all I can say is *amen to that*. That is why *No Shame* focuses on the working poor and not gangs. But why, given this theoretical commitment, does Wacquant (1998) jump feet first into exoticism himself,

offering one year later an essay on “The Social World of the Hustler?” He informs us (1998, p. 4): “The world of hustling stands in structural opposition to that of wage labor” and introduces us to a hustler, thief, and sometime pimp, a “social predator” named Rickey. Wacquant regales us with page after page of transcripts from a single three-hour interview with this young man who, in Wacquant’s terminology, oscillates between “disillusioned realism and fatalistic oneirism” (a dream-like state of consciousness) (Wacquant 1998, p. 12).

When other researchers study black hustlers, they commit the error of exoticism; but when Wacquant (1998, p. 11) studies a street hustler, he assures us that it would “be a mistake to see Rickey as a marginal curiosa, an exotic character belonging to a demimonde” for Rickey the hustler is “*a generic figure that occupies a central position in the social and symbolic space of the black American ghetto*” (his emphasis). Here once again, Wacquant wants it both ways: he excoriates other scholars for following the same research strategy he himself undertakes.

The third pernicious premise that Wacquant (1997, p. 345) identifies in the sociology of poverty is the idea of social disorganization in the ghetto, complaining, that “the ghetto is characteristically presented as a place of *disorder and lack*” (1997, p. 345; his emphasis). He excoriates Jencks and Peterson’s volume *The Urban Underclass* for this sin.<sup>7</sup> But in what is now a recognizable modus operandi, his critique makes no attempt whatsoever to engage with the ideas or findings of that volume. I happen to disagree with many of the points that book makes, but at least I engage the debate. Instead Wacquant dismisses the whole body of work by attaching the pejorative label of “disorganization” theory to it, while attacking its use of survey research as “measurements effected from a distance by survey bureaucracies utterly unfit to probe and scrutinize the life of marginalized populations” (Wacquant 1997, p. 346).

Again, the polemic is redolent with intellectual hypocrisy and opportunism. Wacquant himself has certainly used survey and demographic data to characterize the black ghetto. And he has not been averse to characterizing the ghetto as *disorganized*. Wacquant and Wilson (1993, pp. 32–33) wrote: “If the ‘organized,’ or institutional ghetto of forty years ago . . . imposed an enormous cost on blacks collectively, the ‘disorganized’ ghetto or hyperghetto, of today carries an even larger price. . . . having lost the economic underpinnings and much of the fine texture of organizations and patterned activities that allowed previous generations of ur-

<sup>7</sup> Wacquant (1997, p. 346) notes that my own contribution to the conference—a critique of the idea of the urban underclass, pointing to the working poor—was excluded from the volume. I was not very happy with that outcome either, but it did move me to write the book that he now reviles.

ban blacks to sustain family, community and collectivity." Is this not a story of increasing disorganization, loss, and lack? Evidently, it is not a pernicious premise when Wacquant uses it.

Elsewhere, Wacquant dismisses ghetto social disorganization in one breath and reconstructs it in the next: "One must . . . posit that the ghetto does not suffer from 'social disorganization' but constitutes a dependent universe, finely differentiated and hierarchized, organized according to distinct principles generative of *a regular form of social entropy*" (Wacquant 1998, p. 12; his emphasis). Since entropy signifies "chaos, disorganization, randomness," Wacquant's statement parses as follows: The ghetto is not socially disorganized, it is organized according to principles that generate a regular form of social disorganization. This does not sound like theoretical progress to me.

Wacquant's list of principles that generate social entropy (do not call it disorganization) in the ghetto include Hobbes's war of all against all, the "unrelenting press of economic necessity and widespread material deprivation," "virulent racial antipathy," "bureaucratic apathy," stigmatization, and so on (Wacquant 1997, p. 346.) The way that Wacquant's polemic counterpoises these notions to existing scholarship would lead an uninformed reader to assume that these factors were completely anathema to the sociologists he attacks. But in reality, he is preaching to the choir, attacking sociologists who would find nothing objectionable (or new) in this list of the structural forces affecting the ghetto. Moreover, Wacquant's replacement of social disorganization with "social entropy," broken values with "broken habitus," does not escape the conceptual problems of notions such as disorder, pathology, lack, and "broken." If he is really interested in breaking out of that tired paradigm, he might consider joining me in fieldwork on the working poor. Or for that matter, Wacquant might actually write about the structure of the modern ghetto rather than just list the forces that impinge upon it.

Instead, we get a rather watered-down attempt in Wacquant's paper on Rickey, the street hustler. Based on a single interview, Wacquant informs us that Rickey "is the *product of the exacerbation of a logic of economic and racial exclusion that imposes itself ever more stringently on all residents of the ghetto*" (1998, p. 11; his emphasis). He elaborates with rhetorical questions: "What good would it do to take the 'legit route' when the resulting rewards are so meager and almost as uncertain as those offered by the street economy?" "How could such underpaid and degrading jobs . . . compete with the drug economy?" (Wacquant 1998, p. 14). Good questions. But he offers no research to answer them. Instead, we get rhetoric designed to show that there is really only one plausible, or actual, outcome for the Rickets of this world. The problem with this kind of post hoc deterministic linking of a ghetto life to a social structural

logic is that *not all* young black men in the ghetto go that hustler route. Some take those underpaid jobs, others enter the army, some go to college, and large numbers head for prison. If there is *a single* logic of economic and racial exclusion, then what explains the different routes that black ghetto residents take? I have looked at part, only part, of that equation by looking carefully at the Harlem residents who are in the labor market.

Duneier's work looks at another, what we might call entrepreneurial, irregular career in the underground trades. Wacquant rails against Duneier's detailed examination of the social organization of street vendors as if such a study had no place in our understanding of the economy of the inner city. Yet only a few years earlier, Wacquant points to the importance of exactly this kind of economic activity in Chicago's poorest neighborhoods. He briefly noted that declining opportunities in the legal economy had led Chicago's ghetto dwellers to take up "the odds jobs and marginal trades" that he calls "the mainstay of subsistence" (Wacquant 1994, p. 247) "Occasional street peddlers and vendors" feature in his own list of irregular occupations that, as Duneier also observes, are often interwoven with various forms of criminal enterprise. Duneier's nuanced examination of this trade is unforgivable in the eyes of an author who only a few years earlier touches on the same topic. Go figure.

In various ways, all three of these books address the variety of responses to economic deprivation and blocked opportunity evident among the ghetto poor. Unlike Wacquant, none of us believe that the diverse behaviors of ghetto dwellers can be explained solely by a unitary logic of oppression or exclusion. That is why our books move beyond a listing of macrosociological forces impinging on the ghetto. Political-economic forces create the structure within which the ghetto exists, as we duly note, but ghetto dwellers are not simply bearers of social relations or victims of social structure. Understanding life in the ghetto requires granting its residents far more agency than Wacquant allows and being prepared to accept an understanding of causation more varied and less deterministic than a single uniform logic of racial exclusion that sweeps all in its path.

As a final issue, Wacquant says that "intense pressure on academics" (p. 1524) caused us to tailor the ideas in our books to the needs of commercially oriented publishers, dropping theory and politics along the way. Putting this in simpler language, he implies we have sold out. This is as ludicrous as suggesting that Wacquant's publications are tainted by his three years at the Harvard Society of Fellows, a year at the Russell Sage Foundation, and a five-year MacArthur award. (If, as he claims, U.S. sociology had really cast its reactionary lot with the carceral punitive state, one wonders why its most elite institutional allies would have showered so many resources on as implacable a foe as Wacquant and why he does not find it abhorrent to accept these sources of support.) Given

Wacquant's intellectual lability, I have no doubt that he will quickly jettison his distaste for "university presses [that] have turned into clones of trade presses" (p. 1524) and their interest in "sexy topics," and sign up his forthcoming book on boxing and the body (Wacquant 2004), without the slightest qualm that his publisher will taint his theoretical agenda.

#### WHAT SOCIOLOGY IS FOR

In the end, I think what bothers Wacquant the most about my book is that it discusses reform rather than waiting for the revolution. He believes that I should avoid altogether any discussion of initiatives—private, public, or a blend of the two—that would increase the prospects of the working poor for occupational mobility.

Guilty as charged. I am concerned with mobility because I have some thoughts on what might make a difference in this domain and do not think I have a lot to contribute on how to bring about a revolution. *No Shame* is about the consequences of inequality and not the origins of it in a systemic sense; it is about solutions within the existing organization of the labor market more than a blueprint for a different system altogether. Were a more dramatic transformation ever to come about, it would doubtless make a bigger difference in the life chances of Harlem residents. But it looks a long way off to me, and, in the meantime, I know a lot of people in those neighborhoods who want a better life in near future, rather than a utopian vision that may never come to pass.

If any of the reformist policies advocated in *No Shame* make a difference in providing even a partial downpayment on what these folks want—better jobs, safer neighborhoods, decent schools—that will be a step forward. If employers with better jobs to offer come to have more respect for the skills and experience these workers bring to the table, that would make a difference. If any of the ideas in *No Shame* contribute even a little to linking low-wage workers to better jobs and the networks that control them, I will consider that a small victory too.

These modest goals are way too small for Wacquant. He has larger ambitions and apparently believes that an ethnography of boxing and the body will somehow help to get us there. We will wait and see whether this comes to pass. Meanwhile, I am quite comfortable, even somewhat proud, that *No Shame in My Game* has changed the way a lot of readers think about poverty and the blockages in the low-wage labor market, about the aspirations of inner-city residents who are not hustlers in the zone, but workers in the system. Since nobody else seems to know they are there, I think this focus is particularly newsworthy and more important than yet another ethnography from Wacquant's end of the street.

CONCLUSION

What then are we to make of Wacquant as a critic, an ethnographic observer, and a theorist, given what he has delivered to the profession in this piece? On the first count, I submit that he is so doctrinaire that he cannot help himself when the urge strikes to distort the work of those who do not share his ideology. It is completely within the “rules of the game” to have a different view, to challenge an author’s findings, even to disagree with the entire enterprise at hand. It is not acceptable to twist meanings by quoting selectively or by ignoring issues presented while proclaiming shrilly that the author “does not so much as consider” them or that she “does not care about” them. And it should give readers pause when they learn that Wacquant has made ample use of concepts, data, and analyses that he routinely excoriates others for employing.

Wacquant’s credentials as an ethnographer have yet to be tested in the world of English-language monographs. Though his dissertation on boxing was completed a decade ago, it has only recently been published in France and is not yet out in the United States. It will be some time before scholarly assessments are forthcoming. As for the work at hand, Wacquant’s jeremiad sustains the illusion that his own work is vastly different from that which he critiques. Yet after combing through the reams of polemic, aimed mainly at denouncing other scholars,<sup>8</sup> one searches high and low for an empirical contribution of any significance. There is very little to chew on and what there is is quite conventional. There is nothing in his brief account of street vendors that is incompatible with Duneier’s more detailed treatment, and his article on the hustler is entirely consistent with Anderson’s far more extensive oeuvre on street life.

Finally, as a theorist, Wacquant offers a view of the ghetto whose basic contours have been advanced by many scholars, including those who have written extensively on trends in incarceration, institutions of welfare, and the history of black subjugation. Few sociologists would dispute the notion that the transformation of the American economy away from high-wage manufacturing toward low-wage service jobs, with the accompanying displacement of millions of workers, has had a disastrous impact on the

<sup>8</sup> Coming in for particularly withering treatment are scholars in “Cultural Studies, Minority Studies, Gay Studies or Women’s Studies [who] take on . . . the allure of messages of liberation” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, p. 51). They go on to single out “progressive intellectuals (or . . . ‘intellectuals of color’ in the case of racial inequality) who would appear to be above suspicion of promoting the hegemonic interest of a country” who, in fact turn out to be carriers of “imperialist reason.” This is the tone of much of the work Wacquant carries on now by himself, but it reached an apogee in this piece done jointly with Bourdieu. Criticizing the work of others would appear to be Wacquant’s main occupation in the world of sociology and, as far as I can tell, this preoccupation makes virtually no contribution to advancing the discipline.

African-American population. The idea that the drug trade has become a substitution for the jobs that evaporated in poor Chicago neighborhoods is also well known. High and increasing rates of incarceration have been noted widely by others. Inequality, deindustrialization, racial segregation, and the degradation of public services, taken together, form a powerful architecture within which ethnographers maneuver to figure out how real people, on the street, in the workplace, in prison, and at home in Harlem, keep their heads above water or sink below the waves.

Wacquant's perspective is distinctive mainly to the degree that he draws topdown, deterministic conclusions. Here I would argue that sociologists and urban anthropologists have come some distance from theory that leaves no room for agency, for messy contradictions, for internal moral debates, or for self-determination. Most especially, the ethnographic craft contributes critical perspectives on complex subjective realities that matter if our understanding of poverty is going to do anything more than recount the structural forces that impose from without. Surely sociology is big enough to embrace all of these missions.

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