From the present to the past and back again: Wacquant’s challenge for sociology: Loïc Wacquant Commentaries

Original Citation


This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/29112/

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/
From the present to the past and back again: Wacquant’s challenge for sociology

John Lever*
University of Huddersfield

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

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

This in turn raises the intriguing issue of the appropriate level of involvement for sociologists working on and engaging with the contemporary issues raised by Wacquant's work. While older sociologists often have a tendency to be more detached, younger sociologists increasingly have a tendency to be more involved, both thus missing the opportunity to make relevant sociological insights (Lever and Powell, forthcoming). What makes Loïc Wacquant such an important sociologist, in my opinion, is that he allows us to the view the present by focussing on the past through a long-term sociological perspective that combines conceptual and empirical rigour to overcome the superficial temptations of ‘presentism’ evident in much contemporary sociology (Savage, 2014). As Wacquant illustrated in his public lecture, in a discussion spanning four centuries - from the 16th century Jewish ghetto in Venice to the 20th century black ghetto in the US - the ghetto is a vertical and horizontal space.
constructed for trade, which at once protects and stigmatises its inhabitants. Much the same could be said of the European Union. European citizens are free to move from country to country in search of work, yet at the same time they often become stigmatised and excluded outsiders (Lever and Milbourne, 2015).

* Correspondence address: Dr John Lever, CSRC, University of Huddersfield Business School, Queensgate, West Yorkshire, HD1 3DH. Email: j.b.lever@hud.ac.uk

References


