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From the present to the past and back again: Wacquant's challenge for sociology

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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 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 stigmatized and excluded outsiders (Lever and Milbourne, 2015).

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