

*Loïc Wacquant (2023).*

*Bourdieu in the City. Challenging Urban Theory*

di *Eleonora Clerici\**

In an online seminar at the Universität Wien, Loïc Wacquant encapsulated his book *Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory* by stating «If I had to summarize the book in two sentences I would say it's what Bourdieu tells us about the city, on the one side, and what the city tells us about Bourdieu, on the other side. It is what we can learn from the two-sided encounter»<sup>1</sup> (Wacquant, 2023: online presentation minutes: 6.40-7.07).

Indeed, the volume aspires to offer a fresh interpretation and conceptualization of Pierre Bourdieu's work as a framework for understanding urban phenomena. Further, it delves into “epistemological elucidation, conceptual elaboration, and analytical extension based on abstract argumentation” (Wacquant, 2023: xii).

Hence, aimed at scholars and students passionate about and interested in urban and social theories, *Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory* seeks to expand Bourdieu's theories by integrating them into urban studies, proposing what he terms a '(neo) Bourdieusan' perspective.

The core invitation of the book is to challenge the canon of urban studies through what Wacquant christens «the Bourdieusian trialectic of symbolic space, social space, and physical space» (Wacquant, 2023: 6). Symbolic space (Bourdieu, 1991) refers to the mental categories or grids through which we perceive and organize the world. These cognitive constructions are constitutive of habitus and, consequently, carry out our individual and collective history. Social space (Bourdieu, 1979) describes the multidimensional distribution of capitals in different forms. Physical space (Bourdieu, 1993, 2000; Bourdieu, Sayad, 1964) designates the built environment where agents and institutions act. Within this framework,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K5U2HEEGAE&t=2667s&pp=ygUIId2FjcXVhbnQ%3D>. On 14.06.2023.

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Wacquant states that Bourdieu «invites us to think relationally or, better, topologically by tracing the layered connections between the different elements constitutive of mental, social and geographical structure» (Wacquant, 2023: 9). Hence, rooted in the Bourdieu's perspective of the city as «the unseen and unthought backdrop of actions and institutions» (Wacquant, 2023: 172), he proposes to conceptualize the urban as the locus of the accumulation, diversification, and contestation of capitals – plural – and the ground for the commingling and collision of variegated habitus.

Further, Wacquant employs his neo-Bourdieuian approach to critically engage with his research trajectory. On the one hand, by reflecting on his past inquiries and addressing previous criticisms, he seeks to refine and expand his theoretical framework. On the other, he organizes his work (Wacquant, 2008, 2009, forthcoming) in «a trilogy that probes the triangle of urban transformations with class, ethnicity, and state as its vertices and paves the way for a properly sociological (re)conceptualization of neoliberalism» (Wacquant, 2023: 115).

Structurally, the book is divided into three sections. The first chapter explores the hidden urban sociology in Bourdieu's approach, highlighting the relationship between mental, social, and spatial spaces. It introduces and frames the conceptualization of the neo-Bourdieuian approach and his trialectic. The second section focuses on territorial stigmatization, a concept Wacquant has explored previously (Wacquant, 2008; Wacquant et al., 2014). However, here, he stresses how symbolic power is a central concept to legitimizing urban inequality, highlighting the state's role in producing and sanctifying this sticky negative symbolic capital. Additionally, he attempts to capture the reactions to territorial stigmatization, underlining its asymmetry and the challenges in overcoming it and calling for state programs of urban destigmatization. Lastly, in the third chapter, Wacquant disentangles the triangular nexus of class fragmentation, ethnic division, and state-crafting in the polarized metropolis by employing Bourdieu's conceptualization and analytical framework. In doing so, he identifies the state as a classifying and stratifying agency and the jail and penal system as the core urban institution.

Conclusively, I would raise three considerations. Firstly, while the book may not introduce entirely new information about Bourdieu, it adds significant value by presenting and interpreting his work through a fresh lens, emphasizing its multiple virtues and applicability. Secondly, as noted in previous reviews (d'Assenza-David, 2023; Smithsimon, 2024), Wacquant does not fully explore how to broaden urban sociology into a topological sociology. Indeed, while he argued that «Bourdieu invites us to merge urban studies into a broader topological science of the dynamic relations between

symbolic, social, and physical space» (Wacquant, 2023: 167), a more thorough analysis and comparison with earlier urban studies could have been beneficial. Although the meticulous examination of urban dynamics through a Bourdieusian lens offers a compelling framework for understanding the complexities of contemporary cities, a discussion on specific engagements with critical urban frameworks would have enhanced the book. A last consideration regards the benefits of this new Bourdieusian approach to re-read and re-interpret Wacquant's work. It provides a valuable schematization and critique, enabling a deeper analysis of his studies, addressing previous criticisms, and organizing his research into a coherent trilogy.

Overall, *Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory* represents an excellent starting point for understanding Bourdieu's work within urban studies and a remarkable interpretation of the power relations presented in the cities. Further, it offers a deeper and more comprehensive panoramic of Wacquant's perspective on urban inequalities and their drivers.

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