

When Bourdieu Meets the City: Approaching Trialectics of (Urban) Space

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Abstract:

In *Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory*, Loïc Wacquant synthesizes Pierre Bourdieu's topological sociology with the fundamental inquiries of urban studies, elucidating the potential synergies between the two domains. Progressing from a foundational exposition of Bourdieu's theoretical framework to its applicability within the specific contexts of contemporary cities, Wacquant develops the neo-Bourdiesian approach within urban sociology. The book offers an innovative application of a classical theory, rendering it a valuable resource for urban research.

Wenn Bourdieu auf die Stadt trifft: Annäherung an die Trialektik des (städtischen) Raums

German Abstract:

In *Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory* verbindet Loïc Wacquant die topologische Soziologie Pierre Bourdieus mit den grundlegenden Untersuchungen der Urbanistik und verdeutlicht die potenziellen Synergien zwischen den beiden Bereichen. Ausgehend von einer grundlegenden Darstellung des theoretischen Rahmens von Bourdieu bis hin zu seiner Anwendbarkeit in den spezifischen Kontexten zeitgenössischer Städte entwickelt Wacquant den neo-bourdieschen Ansatz innerhalb der Stadtsoziologie. Das Buch bietet eine innovative Anwendung einer klassischen Theorie, was es zu einer wertvollen Quelle für Städteforschung macht.

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Pierre Bourdieu's name is undoubtedly one of the first to come up in any discussion of the classics of modern sociology. Invoking such a persona entails the potential hazard of reiterating ideas that have been articulated on numerous occasions, whereas finding previously unnoticed theoretical and practical possibilities of classical theory proves the relevance of Bourdieu's developments for today. It is the latter that Loïc Wacquant attempts to do in his 2023 book *Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory*, and definitely succeeds in this task.

Wacquant, a distinguished sociologist specializing in urban research, holds a unique position as both a former student and close collaborator of Bourdieu, having encountered him at the École Polytechnique in the 1980s. This connection establishes a logical (and even pragmatic) foundation for amalgamating his expertise in urban theory with an intimate understanding of Bourdieu's theoretical constructs.

Bourdieu in the City functions as a bridge connecting Bourdieu's theoretical legacy with Wacquant's own contributions, notably his trilogy comprising *Urban Outcasts* (Cambridge 2008), *Punishing the Poor* (Durham and London 2009), and *Deadly Symbiosis: Race and the Rise of the Penal State* (forthcoming). Simultaneously, the book occupies a distinct niche within contemporary urban studies at the confluence of high theory and institutionalist analysis, and is informed by a *longue durée* perspective as the author accurately defines the position of his work in the prologue section. The primary objective of the publication is to showcase the applicability of Bourdieu's topological sociology to urban studies, employing the trialectics of symbolic, social, and physical spaces. Wacquant skillfully unveils the paradoxical *absent presence* of the city in Bourdieu's theoretical *oeuvre*, illustrating the potential mutual enrichment that arises when urban research and the Bourdieusian approach are synthesized.

Comprising three chapters supplemented by a prologue and epilogue, Wacquant's book initially establishes the foundational framework of the neo-Bourdieuian approach to the social science of the city. Subsequently, the text combines Bourdieu's conceptualization of *symbolic power* with Erving Goffman's perspective on *stigma*, thereby developing the notion of *territorial stigmatization*, a pivotal element in Wacquant's exploration of urban marginality. Then the book elucidates the procedural transformation of Bourdieu's theoretical underpinnings into a structured program for empirical research, delineating specific research questions and incorporating concrete analytical steps. Concluding with an epilogue, *Bourdieu in the City* directs attention towards the limits and advantages inherent in augmenting urban research with Bourdieu's theoretical framework. The general narrative unfolds in a deductive manner, progressing from the overarching theoretical constructs to their practical implication in empirical research, thereby underscoring the practice-oriented character of Bourdieu's theoretical formulations.

Every chapter in the book is thematically anchored in the author's lectures delivered in prior years. This initially interactive structure affords Wacquant the opportunity, on the one hand, to engage directly with critiques levied during the oral presentation, thereby facilitating a nuanced exploration of the subject matter in the published material. On the other hand, this format enables a detailed acknowledgment of the distinct contributions made by other scholars to the evolution of Wacquant's framework. Notably, such a comprehensive recognition of scholarly contributions within academic writing represents a noteworthy rarity, suggesting a potential point of reference in terms of structuring analogous publications. Another notable attribute of each chapter lies in its meticulous treatment of categories, each being assigned precise definitions and theoretical embeddedness. This rigorous approach serves the dual purpose of not only revitalizing the reader's familiarity with Bourdieu's sociological concepts but also establishing a shared foundational understanding between the reader and the author within the discussion of a contemporary city.

Nevertheless, the book elicits both commendation and critique. The author consistently articulates his intention to formulate a universal theory applicable to analyses of urban environments beyond the Western hemisphere. These assertions permeate the prologue and each subsequent chapter, with a dedicated response to criticisms presented in chapter 3. However, as a scholar engaged in the examination of cities that defy clear categorization within

the conventional Global North/South dichotomy, particularly those within the post-Soviet space, I concur that while the theoretical conceptualization of space as a trialectic may possess universality, its potential practical application, as posited by Wacquant, appears less tenable. For instance, the overt manifestation of racialization, marginalization, and penalization is not readily discernible, and these attributes do not unequivocally characterize a modern, albeit neoliberal, post-Soviet city.

The rejection of Western-centric perspectives in Wacquant's theory, coupled with a pronounced focus on borders and marginalization, is contrasted against a grandiloquent writer's style that itself functions as a discernible boundary preventing easy access to the content. This impediment is not solely attributable to the employment of a sophisticated lexicon, imparting an impression of the author's language as rather highbrow, but also extends to the syntactic structure of sentences. Frequently spanning seven to ten lines and loaded with multiple subordinate clauses, the composition style proves formidable in its density. This mode of expression significantly challenges scholars seeking access to substantive and valuable material for urban sociological inquiry, imminently imposing an elitist quality upon academic literature—a characterization seemingly incongruent with the author's intentions.

Upon perusal, there is no doubt about the applicability of Bourdieu's theory to the analysis of the city. However, while Wacquant acknowledges the significance of material considerations and introduces the concept of trialectic interactions, the preponderance of emphasis is notably directed towards symbolic power. Therefore, an intriguing avenue for exploration pertains to the author's evaluation of the viability of amalgamating Bourdieu's theoretical framework with other social theories of space (for instance, the Actor-Network-Theory, which could potentially empower the understanding of the material aspect of space). It remains a pertinent question whether such integrations are deemed feasible and, if so, which theories could potentially engage in fruitful synthesis with Bourdieu and, conversely, those with whom such endeavors might prove less congruent.

To sum up, Loïc Wacquant has authored a commendable work that revisits Pierre Bourdieu's topological sociology and proffers a methodology for its application in scrutinizing the neoliberal city, a central concept for understanding modernity. The author demonstrates a profound comprehension of Bourdieu's theoretical *oeuvre*, coupled with a meticulous

familiarity with his own research objects – namely, the (Western) European and American urban life. However, the implicit anticapitalist tenor embedded within Wacquant’s theoretical framework stands in juxtaposition with the narrative’s somewhat elitist linguistic expression regarding the neoliberal city. This language preference renders the discussion less accessible, potentially alienating a significant portion of readers, particularly those located outside of the Global North – an audience that, according to the author, could benefit from the theory presented in the book. Nevertheless, this volume is anticipated to be of substantial utility to students and scholars across disciplines engaged in the exploration of city and space (for a cursory examination, one can check the overview article: Loïc Wacquant: “Rethinking the City with Bourdieu’s Trialectic.” *City*, 26, no. 5–6 (2022): 820–830).