

BOOK REVIEW SECTION

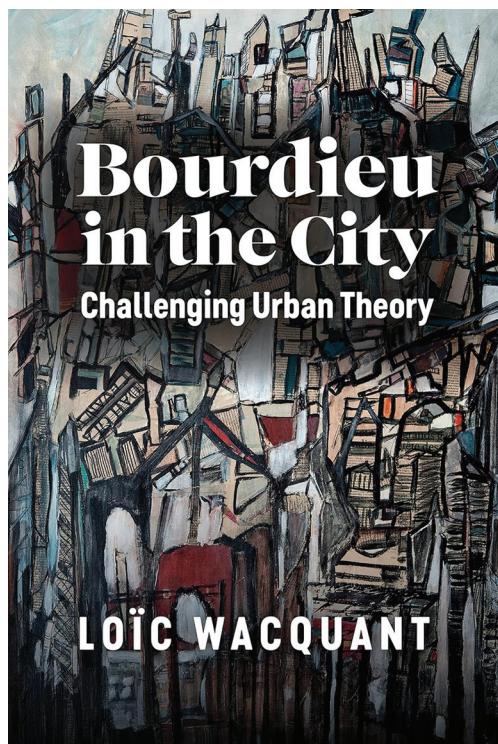
Wacquant, L.: **Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory**. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2023. 230 p.

This review pursues a dual purpose. On the one hand, in a rather conventional manner, it introduces the structure and central arguments of Loïc WACQUANT's book, as well as its strengths and shortcomings. On the other hand, however, it also ventures somewhat beyond the usual remit of book reviews by illustrating the conceptual apparatus of the volume with examples drawn from a specific urban realm: the world of *urban subcultures*. These examples are intended to assist the reader in grasping WACQUANT's concepts and arguments – and, more broadly, the contours of his entire neo-Bourdiesian programme.

To begin with, "*Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory*" offers nothing less than a Bourdieu-inspired refoundation of the whole field of urban theory. To that end, the author presents a compelling reinterpretation of Pierre BOURDIEU's sociological

concepts, positioning them as vital tools for understanding the complexities of urban life. It is argued that although Bourdieu did not *explicitly* focus on urban studies, his theories still offer profound insights into the dynamics of contemporary cities. WACQUANT undertakes the ambitious task of pivoting urban theory away from siloed approaches, for instance from "urban science"/big-data universalism or various "culture-only" or "economics-only" lenses. Instead of these, as the core analytic compass for studying cities, he proposes a *trialectic of spaces*. In order to show how cities are made and remade through struggles over classification, capital, and territory, he aims to braid together (1) *symbolic space* (classifications and categories), (2) *social space* (distribution of various capitals), and (3) *physical space* (the built environment). If the reviewer may be permitted a truly personal remark at this point, he is himself an avowed admirer of Henri LEFEBVRE and Edward SOJA – and, thus, found it an intellectually particularly challenging task to come to terms with the fact that the trialectic discussed in this volume is *not the same* as the well-known trialectic elaborated by LEFEBVRE (and subsequently by Soja). That said, it proved highly valuable for the reviewer to set aside, at least temporarily, *one kind* of trialectical thinking in which he has long found himself almost ensnared (having employed in a number of earlier works [BERKI, M. 2012, 2015, 2017]), and – through deliberate intellectual effort – to inhabit *another kind* of trialectical reasoning. It is always stimulating to approach the same problems and research questions from different vantage points and within alternative conceptual frames – as the reviewer sought to do while engaging with WACQUANT's book.

Regarding the structure of the volume, the *Prologue* maps the previously mentioned "siloed" (fragmented) state of current urban studies, and argues that Bourdieu's relational, multi-scalar sociology can coherently link macro-structures (state, markets), meso-level institutions (policy, academia, journalism, etc.), and micro-level interactions, practices in the city (embodied dispositions/habitus). Chapter 1 reconstructs "*Bourdieu in the city*", i.e. his engagement with urban questions, showing how his early work (e.g. in Algeria) and later concepts (field, habitus, capital, symbolic power) yield a city-sensitive sociology that treats urban space as a generative arena where power is produced, con-



tested, and reproduced. Here, cities are understood as sites where varied capitals accumulate and collide, and where symbolic power (naming, ranking, stigmatising, etc.) reorganises social and physical space. Chapter 2 then synthesises WACQUANT's longstanding programme on territorial stigmatisation, showing how stigma is fabricated, disseminated, and enacted across symbolic, social, and physical space (as illustrated through cases like the reinforcing cycles of poverty in Paris's Red Belt). This chapter also presents a topology of "territorial taint" – demonstrating how the marking of places as "tainted" travels through media, policy, policing, and everyday categorisation to produce material consequences across the city, not just within the targeted neighbourhoods. Following that, Chapter 3 braids class, ethnicity, and penalty into a single analytic triad, arguing that the late-20th–early-21st century metropolis must be read through their intricate interlinkages (e.g. the ghetto/banlieue and the carceral state *together*). Here, WACQUANT recasts his own prior work, showing how marginality and neoliberal governance (including the "penal state") crystallise in urban space. Finally, the Epilogue pushes a redefinition of "the urban" itself – according to the author, all urban boundaries are porous and historically contingent, and the city is a strategic stake and a site of struggle where habitus and capital are continuously composed, contested, and converted. Across the entire book, WACQUANT advances a methodological ethos, too (often tagged to his "carnal sociology"): a reflexive, comparative, and multi-temporal practice that is able to range along levels of abstraction without losing empirical grip. Ultimately, his programmatic vision is a Bourdieusian, relational topology that is not just an addition to the existing urban canon but a real challenge to it, intended to reorient how we build and test urban theory.

Given the ambition of Loïc WACQUANT's book (and his programme in general), it is hardly surprising that several scholars have already recognised "*Bourdieu in the City* (...)" as a significant contribution to urban theory (see d'ASSENZA-DAVID, H. 2023; IVANOVA, A. 2024; KIRMIZI, M. 2024; RICHARDSON, A. 2024; WRIGHT, J.T. 2024). While it is mostly praised for its innovative application of Bourdieu's theories to urban contexts and for providing a comprehensive framework that bridges macro-level structures with micro-level interactions, certain reviews also draw attention to some of its shortcomings. The perceived weaknesses are centred around four major nodes: (1) a selective engagement with urban theory, (2) a high barrier to entry for non-Bourdieu specialists, (3) a rather limited empirical case material, and (4) potential redundancy with WACQUANT's earlier works. These criticisms may be summarised as follows. (1) While the author makes a compelling case for the urban pertinence of Bourdieu's sociology, he tends to

selectively engage with the broader canon of urban theory. The book positions Bourdieu's framework *in opposition* to paradigms like assemblage theory, planetary urbanism, or actor-network theory, and often critiques these in a somewhat strawman fashion, without always giving them their due complexity or acknowledging areas of complementarity. For some readers, this may slightly weaken the book's claim to being a "challenge to the canon" rather than a valuable *addition to it*. (2) Furthermore, the book assumes substantial familiarity with Bourdieu's prior work, potentially posing challenges for newcomers to his theories. Even key Bourdieusian concepts (such as habitus, field, symbolic power, capital forms) are not always explained accessibly for readers completely new to these ideas. According to the reviewer, this makes it less pedagogically effective for a general urban studies audience or especially graduate students approaching Bourdieu for the very first time. (3) Additionally, although WACQUANT discusses a range of urban milieux (e.g. the American ghetto, French banlieues, or Latin American urban margins), "*Bourdieu in the City*" remains overwhelmingly a theoretical and epistemological treatise. Some readers might expect richer, more varied empirical vignettes to demonstrate how the trialectic operates in diverse urban settings, which limits the book's immediate applicability for empirical urban researchers looking for methodological guidance. (4) Finally, as another observation, much of the theoretical groundwork and key concepts (territorial stigmatisation, advanced marginality, carceral urbanism, etc.) were already developed in WACQUANT's earlier works (including "*Urban Outcasts*", "*Punishing the Poor*", and "*Deadly Symbiosis*"). As such, parts of this volume risk retreading ground already familiar to WACQUANT readers.

Nonetheless, if the book is read more like a *synthesis* (rather than as an original advance), then its genuinely synthetic power (i.e. its conceptual clarity, integrative approach, and multi-scalar sensibility) must certainly be acknowledged. The trialectic of symbolic–social–physical space gives researchers a portable but rigorous way to connect multi-scalar processes (from state and markets to everyday practices) without lapsing into either abstract systemism or micro-only accounts. Furthermore, by situating his earlier studies within a single "analytic cartography", WACQUANT models the reflexive research posture he advocates and offers readers an actionable research agenda rather than a purely exegetical tour of Bourdieu. Additionally, his reconceptualising of "the urban", i.e. the reframing of the city as a fluid, contested site and stake – rather than a fixed container – has strong heuristic value for empirical projects that must cross administrative or morphological boundaries. Finally, the author's programmatic ambition is coupled with methodological guidance as well: he does not only "add Bourdieu to the canon" but also shows how to use Bourdieu for ur-

ban research (fields, capital, habitus, symbolic power) and why a topological, relational lens matters for case comparison and theory cumulation. Given all these merits, *"Bourdieu in the City: Challenging Urban Theory"* is strongly recommended to scholars across all disciplines engaged in the study of cities – including, of course, *geographers*. Additionally, although the book does not engage with Central and Eastern Europe (or other post-socialist contexts) at all, it nonetheless carries particular relevance for scholars working in/on CEE settings too, including Hungary. In the wake of the post-1989 politico-economic transformations, cities of this region have experienced intensifying uneven development, often accompanied by marginalisation and territorial stigmatisation, making them apt testing grounds for the Bourdieusian trialectic that WACQUANT advances. Hence, the volume is highly recommended for *Central and Eastern European* urban scholars as well.

As it was indicated at the outset, in the second part of this review the book's main arguments are considered through the lens of *urban subcultures*, with its key concepts illustrated by examples drawn from these realms – so that a more nuanced understanding of the work of WACQUANT (and, more broadly, of Bourdieu) may hopefully be facilitated.

Although these topics are not discussed in the book, *"Bourdieu in the City (...)"* offers an excellent conceptual apparatus for theorising urban subcultures. To start with, WACQUANT's *trialectic of spaces* provides a promising framework for analysing how subcultural appropriations of space both reflect and contest broader urban power relations and symbolic hierarchies. (1) Speaking of *symbolic space*, urban subcultures construct alternative cognitive and aesthetic categories (of what is cool, valuable, sacred, or deviant, criminal, etc.) that challenge mainstream symbolic structures. (2) Regarding *social space*, subcultures represent distinctive positions within the broader social space of the city, often emerging from marginalised or intermediary positions in terms of economic, cultural, and social capital. (3) At the same time, in *physical space*, subcultures also appropriate, mark, and contest actual urban loci (such as squats, skate parks, underpasses, clubs, record shops, graffiti walls, or underground venues), often transforming the meaning of marginal or disused spaces. As examples, graffiti crews, hardcore/punk scenes, or underground techno acts not only use space but also re-symbolise it – as a result of which, an abandoned warehouse becomes a venue, a bare wall a canvas, and a street corner a meeting point of cultural capital. An actual location, e.g. a hardcore/punk squat is therefore at once a physical site (a space reclaimed), a social space (organised through networks of trust, DIY capital, and activist links), and a symbolic space (often stigmatised by authorities as deviant, while celebrated by scenesters as authentic).

In addition to the trialectic of spaces, the *question of capitals* is also highly relevant for the study of urban subcultures – let it be the accumulation/contest of different kinds of capitals; the conversion of capitals within subcultures; or the identification of a specifically subcultural capital (THORNTON, S. 1995). Building on Bourdieu's concepts, WACQUANT repositions the city as a site for the accumulation, diversification, and contestation of capitals. In a subcultural sense, knowing riffs, graffiti styles or the local slang can be understood as *cultural capital*; networks of promoters, zinesters or bandmates as *social capital*; whereas credibility or authenticity as *symbolic capital*. These can also convert into each other, e.g. when symbolic "cred" helps an underground band get shows, resulting in limited economic capital as well, which is in turn invested into social activism by the band members. Furthermore, urban subcultures also constitute prime examples of groups contesting the legitimacy of dominant capitals (economic capital, conventional [institutional] cultural capital), and instead of those, valorising alternative forms (such as street cred, reputation, authenticity – i.e. subcultural capital). In Sarah THORNTON's classic *"Club Cultures"* (1995), subcultural capital determines *status* within rave scenes – a form of capital that is unrecognised in mainstream fields but pivotal within subcultural fields. The same can be observed across virtually all urban subcultures, whether it is the knowledge of rare records in hip-hop DJ culture or the pursuit of authenticity in punk.

One of WACQUANT's strongest concepts is *territorial stigmatisation*, convincingly demonstrating how entire districts get marked as "dangerous" or even "degenerate". Over time, however, the negative symbolic capital acquired by these deprived neighbourhoods, red-light districts, industrial peripheries, etc. might generate alternative habitus as well, in order to cope with, or even invert, their stigma. And this is why many urban subcultures were born in precisely these kinds of milieux: in South Bronx, the Lower East Side, Kreuzberg, or Belleville, MI, a western suburb of Detroit – creatively reworking these territorial meanings and turning stigmatised spaces into cultural resources. Youth scenes and their places that are labelled by the authorities, the media, etc. as a "druggy punk area" or a "gangsta rap block" might be considered by the members of the respective subcultures as "underground", "real", or "resistant" hoods. According to WACQUANT, the city can be understood as a crucible of *habitus proliferation* (see also in WACQUANT, L. 2022). He argues that the metropolis is especially distinctive because it fosters both the multiplication of diverse habitus and the collision of incongruent dispositions. For subcultures, this is key: hardcore/punk, rap, graffiti, parkour, etc., can all be read as specific microcosms born from this urban "ferment", where heterogeneous social backgrounds meet and generate

new doxai (local logics, values, etc.). Subcultures truly thrive in this crucible, as they are the products of both disjunction (youth disaffection, migration, inequality, etc.) and creative responses (new practices, aesthetics, solidarities, etc.). Therefore, urban subcultures should also be studied as “distinct doxai” (i.e. pluralised truth regimes, micro-worldviews) that emerge out of urban diversity and inequality, in several instances in deeply stigmatised neighbourhoods. Here, territorial stigmatisation not only constrains possibilities (through policing or public vilification) but also fuels the symbolic capital of “authenticity”.

Stakes and struggles over *classification* is another central node of “*Bourdieu in the City* (...).” WACQUANT stresses the symbolic power to classify: in our case, who defines what counts as “music”, “visual arts”, “performative arts”, etc.? Urban subcultures are paradigmatic arenas of these classification struggles. Police officers may classify an illegal rave or an open-air rap battle as “public nuisance,” while participants frame it as cultural expression – likewise, while authorities initially considered graffiti as mere “vandalism” (and, thus, criminalised it), certain art institutions later re-classified it as “street art,” completely shifting its social and economic value. This resonates with the author’s insistence that urban research must track how categories themselves reshape the city. Additionally, just to make it even more complex, WACQUANT’s long-standing interest in classification also involves *sociological classification*. With a decent level of reflexivity and the so-called “double move”, he insists that urban sociology must both demarcate (build objective maps of positions) and repatriate (bring back the agents’ own categories and perceptions). When applying this to urban subcultures, researchers should not only map the subcultural actors’ positions in social space (e.g. marginal youth with low economic capital but high cultural capital) but also take seriously their own categories of self-description (such as DIY, underground, “real”, etc.). Keeping both in mind might bridge the gap between structural analysis and phenomenology – exactly what subcultural studies are often struggling with. And finally, the *multi-scalar perspective* propagated in the book is also more than relevant for the study of urban subcultures, since they are never purely local – on the very contrary, via international DIY circuits, record labels, streaming platforms, etc., they connect across geographical scales.

To sum up, it can be argued that WACQUANT’s neo-Bourdieuian programme can be fruitfully extended to explore the hidden realm of urban subcultures. The reviewer strongly hopes that these subcultural examples have demonstrated the portability of WACQUANT’s framework – and encourage readers to reflect on their own research topics and questions through the lens of Loïc WACQUANT’s “urbanised Bourdieusian” agenda.

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