

SELECTED AMONG THE TEN MAJOR THEORY BOOKS SINCE 2000 —*Contemporary Sociology*

"[R]eveals a remarkable ethnographic and theatrical eye . . . a model account of a personal, embodied sociology." —*American Journal of Sociology*

"[A] sociological *tour de force*." —*Qualitative Sociology*

"A fresh and authoritative statement." —*The Ring: The Bible of Boxing*

"*Body & Soul* will pull you into the deep rhythms of boxing and should certainly earn a place in the canon of literature in the ring." —*Los Angeles Times*

"A stunning lesson in carnal sociology." —Jerome Bruner, author of *Making Stories*

"A dazzling renewal of the endangered craft of narrative, participant sociology."
—Orlando Patterson, author of *Rituals of Blood*

"A gem destined for the life of classics." —Zygmunt Bauman, author of *Liquid Modernity*

"A truly exceptional, even historic, piece of research."
—Jack Katz, author of *Seductions of Crime*

"A sociological imagination inspired by Bourdieu and writing that is electric."
—Lila Abu-Lughod, author of *Veiled Sentiments*

When French sociologist Loïc Wacquant signed up at a boxing gym in a black neighborhood of Chicago's South Side, he had never contemplated getting close to a ring, let alone climbing into it. Yet for three years, he immersed himself among local fighters, amateur and professional, and learned the Sweet science of bruising, all the way to fighting in the Golden Gloves tournament. In this experimental ethnography of incandescent intensity, the scholar-turned-boxer fleshes out Pierre Bourdieu's signal concept of *habitus*, deepening our theoretical grasp of human practice. And he supplies a model for a "carnal sociology" capable of capturing "the taste and ache of action."

This expanded anniversary edition features a new preface and extended postface that reveal the "making of" this classic ethnography. Wacquant reflects on his path to, and use of, fieldwork based on apprenticeship. He traces the genealogy of *habitus* and explicates how he deployed it as method of inquiry. The postface retraces the trials and tribulations of his gym mates in and out of the gym over the past thirty years and reflects on what they disclose about the economics of prizefighting, masculinity, and the passion that binds boxers to their craft.

LOÏC WACQUANT is Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Researcher at the Centre de sociologie européenne, Paris. His books include *The Invention of the "Underclass," Urban Outcasts, and Punishing the Poor.*

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

www.oup.com

Cover Design: Brady McNamara
Cover image: © Loïc Wacquant

ISBN 978-0-19-046569-8



9 780190 465698

WACQUANT

BODY & SOUL

NOTEBOOKS OF AN APPRENTICE BOXER

BODY & SOUL



EXPANDED ANNIVERSARY EDITION

LOÏC WACQUANT

OXFORD

Contents

When Social Science Meets the Sweet Science

Preface to the Expanded Anniversary Edition ix

The Taste and Ache of Action

Preface to the U.S. Edition xiii

Prologue 3

The Street and the Ring 13

An Island of Order and Virtue 17

“The Boys Who Beat the Street” 41

A Scientifically Savage Practice 58

The Social Logic of Sparring 77

An Implicit and Collective Pedagogy 99

Managing Bodily Capital 127

Fight Night at Studio 104 151

“You Scared I Might Mess Up ‘Cause You Done Messed Up” 152

Weigh-in at the Illinois State Building 158

An Anxious Afternoon 171

Welcome to Studio 104 180

Pitiful Preliminaries 192

TKO in the Fourth 208

Make Way for the Exotic Dancers 220

“You Stop Two More Guys and I’ll Stop Drinkin’” 226

“Busy” Louie at the Golden Gloves 235

POSTFACE 2021

Forging the Pugilistic Habitus

Reflections on Becoming A Prizefighter 257

Pathway to the Ethnographic Craft 258

Habitus Comes to the Gym 270

For Epistemic Reflexivity: From Flesh to Text 281

A Concise Genealogy and Anatomy of Habitus 291

The Afterlives of Chicago Prizefighting

Across Three Decades 305

What They Became after the Woodlawn Gym Closed 306

On the Social and Symbolic Structures of Prizefighting 344

Boxing Life on the Internet and Death in a Chicago Ring 361

Post Scriptum: On Pugilistic Piety 370

List of Illustrations 375

A Note on Acknowledgements and Transcription 383

Index 387

When Social Science Meets the Sweet Science

Preface to the Expanded Anniversary Edition

It is good for the ethnographer sometimes to put aside camera, note book and pencil, and to join in himself in what is going on. He can take part in the natives' games, he can follow them on their visits and walks, sit down and listen and share in their conversations. I am not certain if this is equally easy for everyone . . . but though the degree of success varies, the attempt is possible for everyone. Out of such plunges into the life of the natives . . . I have carried away a distinct feeling that their behavior, their manner of being, in all sorts of tribal transactions, became more transparent and easily understandable than it had been before.

—Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, 1922

This expanded anniversary edition of *Body and Soul* marks the twentieth year since the publication of the original French edition and the thirtieth year since I climbed into the ring to fight in the Chicago Golden Gloves tournament under the colors of the Woodlawn Boys Club, buoyed by the ardent shouts of my gym mates and emboldened by the calm voice and sage advice of coach DeeDee in my corner. In the new postface that follows the narrative of the epiphanic stretch of my pugilistic journey, culminating in that fateful encounter in the squared circle, I draw out the inspiration, design, and implications of my sociological vivisection of prizefighting. I retrace the entwined biographical and intellectual pathways that led me to apprentice in the trade. I expound on the analytic framework and theoretical agenda that animate my account of the forging of the boxer in the black American ghetto. I also offer a concise genealogy and anatomy of *habitus*, the key concept of Pierre Bourdieu's that is both the object and the tool of my analysis, and I explicate how it helps us capture the practical logic that guides human action.¹ I amplify this extended analytic revisit by retracing how the regulars of the Woodlawn Boys Club have fared on the pugilistic circuit and the social front in the decades since the gym closed, and what their

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens pratique* (Paris: Minuit, 1980, trans. *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

trajectories in and out of the ring teach us about the social and symbolic structures of prizefighting. In this brief preface, I would like to consider the following seemingly simple, but in truth intricate, question: *What happens when social science meets the Sweet science?*² There are two parts to the answer. The first is what sociology teaches us about boxing, the second is what boxing teaches us about sociology.

What does social inquiry into the workaday world of pugilists disclose about their trade that we would not otherwise know from the profusion of artistic and journalistic accounts? Probing beyond prefabricated images of the heroic champion stepping into the limelight, *Body and Soul* focuses on ordinary boxers in their quotidian environment of the gym, with its drab and smelly ambiance.³ It captures the dualities that organize the prizefighter's existence: material interest and sensuous desire, individualism and solidarity, affection and exploitation, the routine and the charismatic, the masculine and the feminine, abstinence and jouissance, the sacred and the profane. It paints the portrait of devoted artisans of the virile body who patiently hone an honorific craft, share a protected and protective sociability, and seek recognition and redemption within the closed brotherhood of the ring. Entering into what Harold Garfinkel calls "the demotics of social action" reveals that the subject of boxing is not the lone individual waltzing near-naked between the ropes but the dense web of social, moral, and symbolic relations constitutive of the gym as a place of worship of the skilled masculine body. The gym functions at once as a sanctuary against the dangers of the street, a scaffolding for the silent pedagogy of expert organisms in motion, and a school of discipline in which occupational ethic is literally inscribed onto the flesh.

So much to say that forging boxers is a fundamentally collective and spiritual enterprise, rather than an individual and strictly material endeavor, and that it is driven, not by distant monetary incentives ("club

2. The expression "Sweet science" was coined in the early nineteenth century by the British popular journalist and sportswriter Pierce Egan (in his learned and exquisitely illustrated multivolume study *Boxiana, or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism* [1813–1829]). It purported to stress the skill and knowledge of fighters, at a time when boxing matches were both illegal and wildly popular; see David Snowdon, *Writing the Prizefight: Pierce Egan's Boxiana World* (London: Peter Lang, 2013). It fell into a long spell of disuse before being revived by A. J. Liebling in his classic 1956 collection, *The Sweet Science*; see A. J. Liebling: *The Sweet Science and Other Writings*, ed. Pete Hamill (New York: Library of America, 2008).

3. For a visual account of this peculiar atmosphere, see the documentary by Frederick Wiseman, *Boxing Gym* (2010).

fighters” compete infrequently and earn paltry purses), as by the more tangible promise of *ontological transcendence*, the day-by-day gradual machining of a new social being out of the old so as to escape the common determinations that otherwise consign the gym’s recruits to public insignificance. Prizefighting allows its practitioners to live, for a time, in a state of *social suspension*, where it seems that they are not condemned to remaining what they are, that a world of opportunities remains open to them, that they can escape banality and anonymity. To sum up, I could borrow the words that Émile Durkheim uses to characterize religion, and say that pugilism is a system of material and moral “forces *sui generis*, which elevate the individual above himself, which transport him into another world from that in which his profane existence is passed, affording him a life that is very different, more exalted and more intense.”⁴

Now the converse question: What does boxing teach us about sociology? Pugilism throws a stiff challenge to the conventional models of social science, which depict the agent either as a maximizing computing machine (as with variants of rational choice theory descended from Jeremy Bentham) or a symbolic animal spinning webs of meaning (found in phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches influenced by Immanuel Kant). Both models share this flaw that they *disincarnate action*, scotomizing the inconvenient but stubborn fact that humans are sensory and suffering creatures, fated to die, and that they know it. The rational actor and his symbolic cousin are equally mutilated and mutilating on account of excluding desire, sensual infatuation, and visceral attraction as driving forces of social existence. In short, normal social science typically gives us “an excellent skeleton” of social life, as Malinowski put it a century ago, “but it lacks flesh and blood.”⁵

Pugilism forces us to confront this flaw and points at once to the need for, and the possibility of, a *sociology of passion* as a modality of our relationship to the social world. A passion is a powerful and compelling emotion or feeling (such as love or hate), an ardent sexual yearning, or a fondness and enthusiasm that one finds difficult to contain. The

4. Émile Durkheim, “Le problème religieux et la dualité de la nature humaine” (1913), reprinted in *Textes*, 2, *Religion, morale, anomie* (Paris: Minuit, 1975), 23–59.

5. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (New York: Routledge, [1922] 2002), 7. For an elaboration of this position, see Loïc Wacquant, “For a Sociology of Flesh and Blood,” *Qualitative Sociology* 38, no. 1 (2015): 1–11.

medieval Latin *passio* originally denoted sinful desire, physical suffering, and martyrdom. What more appropriate term to designate the pre-reflexive, visceral affection that moves the boxer to give himself over to his craft body and soul (*religiosissime*), in spite of his better judgment about its potentially destructive consequences? Prizefighters are well aware of the physical toll and risks they take, and, to express their sense of exploitation, they compare themselves to prostitutes, slaves, and stallions. Yet they do not enter and persevere in their gruesome avocation because they are constrained to (“Can’t nobody put a gun to your head and make you fight, Louie”); they box because they love the game. But—and this is the catch and the enigma that the present book strives to resolve—theirs is not a free and self-governed predilection. Rather, it is a coerced, captive, perhaps even malicious affection, born of pervasive material necessity and severe social limitation.

Boxers choose to box because they love it, but they do not choose to love to box. Their craving to invest their time, energy, and proficient organism into the fistic trade, the *libido pugilistica* that propels them in the gym and into the ring, is itself the product, *embodied*, of domination, and it binds them to the very structures of class inequality, caste exclusion, and plebeian masculinity from which they are striving to escape. And, somewhere, somehow, the fighter knows this: “I got kinda *tricked* into the sport and I kinda fell in love with it,” quips one lowly pug to explain why he put on the gloves as a youngster and then went on to “turn pro.” Thus, his love is profoundly ambivalent, bittersweet, and strained. It is a passion in the etymological sense of the term.

Recall now these sagacious words of Blaise Pascal’s: “Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he feels his nothingness, his abandon, his inadequacy, his dependency, his helplessness, his emptiness.”⁶ By embracing the fistic cosmos, and being embraced by it in return, the boxer begets his passion. And he escapes nothingness, helplessness, and emptiness. He makes a world in which what he does makes a difference, where he is known and acknowledged—in short, where he exists. His passion is his making and his unmaking, but no matter the outcome, he is right *at the point of production*. Come to think of it, there is a little bit of the boxer in all of us, and a lot of us in the boxer.

Paris and Berkeley, December 2020

6. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010 [1670]), parag. 622, “Boredom.”