

## BOOK REVIEW

**The invention of the “underclass”: a study in the politics of knowledge**, by Loïc Wacquant, Cambridge, Polity, 2022, 256 pp., US\$22.95 (Paperback), ISBN 978-1509552184, \$64.95 (Hardback), ISBN 9781509552177, \$18.00 (ebook), ISBN 9781509552191

Social science has real-world effects when it provides the categories by which matters of concern are known, discussed, and acted on. It can transform perceptions in productive and liberating ways. But it can also work with powerful actors outside of the field to bestow scientific respectability on categories that are overwhelmingly products of state logics of control. With this book, Loïc Wacquant shows how, with the concept of the “underclass” academics actively joined dominant institutions in the worlds of media, politics, and philanthropy to provide a category that was useless in understanding the historic and social causes of the economic and racial marginalization, but useful in the punitive management of the marginalized.

Wacquant’s critique of the underclass concept is two-pronged, consisting of a scientific refutation and a social critique. He points out the term’s utter lack of analytic power. The constellation of dire economic conditions and behaviours denoted by the concept cannot be productively mapped onto any real population. The self-conscious project of defining a social group in terms of its putative behaviour of its members and its supposed detachment from middle-class norms, was also a project of applied agnotology, obscuring the historically-unfolded social conditions that produced a hyper-deprived stratum in the wake of deindustrialization.

Initially coined by the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, the term “underclass” was intended to denote an emergent structural location, particularly in the U.S., persistently disconnected from labour markets and social mobility. Myrdal’s underclass referred to a particular mode of integration into the increasingly post-industrial society, not a group defined by its exteriority.

But when the term re-emerges in 1980s poverty discourse, the structural position has dropped out, and the underclass comes to be defined in terms of behaviours that shock middle-class norms. A spectrum of policy think-tanks, from the center-liberal Brookings Institution to the right-wing Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute, reinforced the belief in a urban population, defined by race, problematic behaviour, and imperviousness to welfare-state policies. New repositories of data, particularly large panel studies of income and poverty, provided raw material for giving a poorly-defined term the appearance of a measurable object of positivistic inquiry. A third, and more sophisticated usage of the underclass is found in neo-ecological studies of the formation of the urban ghetto socio-spatial configuration, associated with William Julius

Wilson, Douglas Massey, Nancy Denton, and others. While this third “face” of the underclass provides a historical and social structural analysis of the formation of concentrated deprivation in U.S. cities, Wacquant sees its use of the underclass concept as a concession to the dominant discourse of social pathologies, which blunts the analysis of the structural production of urban poverty.

Wacquant draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of fields to map the convergence of actors and motivations that produce the circle of validation for the underclass concept. The concept crystallized at the intersection of journalistic, academic, and a somewhat ill-defined field consisting of the world of politics-policy-philanthropy. The latter is more likely a concatenation of at least two fields with distinct logics. The transformation of the political field and the dissolution of the coalition that supported the growth of income-support and services for the poor is clearly distinct from changes in the field of philanthropy and think tanks. But the field concept allows Wacquant to show how the “underclass” emerged in the 1980s from the linkages between these fields. In the political-policy field, and its intersection with mass media, politicians capitalized on a fear of the informal economy spilling over into white middle-class neighbourhoods and property. Ultimately, the underclass concept is an amalgam of middle-class anxiety, amplified by the media, appropriated by academics and reflected back into public discourse as a scientific concept. Wacquant shows us how the concept drew validation by confirming the common-sense of the public discourse on poverty, race, and welfare, rather than by holding up to social-scientific scrutiny.


But Wacquant’s analysis does not take us into these fields. He proposes an analysis of the production of the underclass category as driven by strategic position-takings of actors in specific locations in their respective fields. But he does not carry out that analysis. As a result, we see the protagonists as representatives of their fields – academic, policy-philanthropic-political, and journalistic – as undifferentiated spaces, without asking, or explaining, how their discursive projects are oriented to the social struggles internal to their fields. He thus takes a pass on the most incisive features of Bourdieu’s approach.

This is an important omission, because the book is intended to be an intervention in academic politics. Wacquant calls on the readers to collectively identify and neutralize efforts to smuggle public common sense into social-scientific discourse. And he provides some tools for mounting that defense of intellectual autonomy. An analysis of the positions and habitus of the academics who joined the underclass bandwagon would be immensely useful to that end.

Readers will periodically have the sense that Wacquant is beating, and beating, a dead horse. For he documents the precipitous demise of the concept of the underclass circa 1995, with this book appearing nearly 30 years after it had lost its academic and popular currency. But the value of this study extends beyond disqualifying this one concept that has done its share of damage. It is a contribution to the stock of symbolic resources that will better equip us to spot and resist the misappropriation of social-scientific authority.

Daniel Breslau

*Department of Science, Technology, and Society, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA*

 dbreslau@vt.edu

© 2023 Daniel Breslau

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2151930>

