

## Powers of Misrecognition

### Bourdieu and Wacquant on Race in Brazil

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In the polemical essay “On the Cunning of Imperialist Reason,” the late Pierre Bourdieu and fellow sociologist Loïc Wacquant (1999) forcefully revive the idea of cultural imperialism. Looking beyond the “easy to spot” ideological content of grand theories and policy prescriptions, they draw attention to the “insidious” work of the small bundles of “isolated and apparently technical” concepts remaking the global intellectual landscape. From “employability” (labor flexibility) to “multiculturalism,” the authors argue, many of the building blocks of the “great new global vulgate” are in fact little more than the impoverished distillation of U.S. experience into normative theoretical concepts (42).

This trenchant critique of “neoliberal newspeak” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001) is a welcome corrective to more triumphalist visions of the shifting geopolitics of knowledge. After summarily treating several key examples, Bourdieu and Wacquant center their analysis on two recent trends they take to be exemplary: scholarly debates about the “underclass” in Europe and about “race” in Brazil. They present the latter as a particularly telling mapping of U.S. simplifications onto a far more complex local reality. Recent scholarship on Brazil, they maintain, is “undoubtedly one of the most striking proofs of the symbolic dominion and influence exercised by the USA over every kind of scholarly and, especially, semi-scholarly production” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, 44).

Yet imperialist reason is so cunning that one may well succumb to it even when denouncing it. Bourdieu and Wacquant are right to draw attention to the “symbolic dominion” of U.S. models, but their Manichean rhetoric offers limited means of understanding and overcoming that

dominion. Their discussion of Brazil reveals a careless ignorance of the intellectual context whose particularity they are supposedly defending.

By ignoring this context, moreover, they fail to bring to bear the rich Brazilian (and Latin American) theoretical production on heterogeneity and mixture, of races and of ideas. Focused on how “misplaced ideas” have proven quite productive to colonial and postcolonial domination, the more critical strands of this work would have been especially useful in thinking through the specter that haunts the entire argument of Bourdieu and Wacquant: translation (see especially Schwarz 1992 and Santiago 2001). The failure to engage this work weakens the authors’ analysis and tacitly contributes to maintaining the “specificity” of Brazilian reflections in contrast to the “universality” of Bourdieu and Wacquant’s own theories.

More important, they also fail to grasp the extent to which Brazilians themselves, as well as several U.S. scholars, have addressed the problems they point out. These scholars have reframed the debate, developed new conceptual tools, and advanced toward the kind of “true internationalization” Bourdieu and Wacquant defend. This is not an occasion for exaggerated optimism, since those advances are only weakly reflected as yet in the global intellectual field. But they come from precisely the groups Bourdieu and Wacquant portray as most dominated by imperialist reason, and from the “carriers” in ideas they most ferociously denounce. By ignoring such work, and even suggesting its impossibility, Bourdieu and Wacquant are enacting the symbolic domination they set out to oppose.

While sympathetic to their overall aims, then, I suggest here a more careful consideration of how to achieve those goals. In this essay I use the recent scholarship on race in Brazil to “think with Bourdieu against Bourdieu” (Brubaker 1993, 226) in developing a broader sense of the pitfalls and possibilities of scholarship on identity in the shadow of “identity politics” on the U.S. model.

### **Critique**

The embedded power and reflected glory of empire, Bourdieu and Wacquant suggest, make the allure of metropolitan “theory” difficult to resist, resulting in the systematic misrecognition of global realities. Spread across the world by local “carriers,” these newly universal bases of reasoning make “transnational relations of power appear as neutral necessities” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, 48, 42). More than a partisan project of the Right, this global extension of imperial reason is a broad tendency encompassing and implicating many would-be dissenters. “Indeed,” Bourdieu and Wacquant

argue, “cultural imperialism (American or otherwise) never imposes itself better than when it is served by progressive intellectuals (or by ‘intellectuals of color’ in the case of racial inequality) who would appear to be above suspicion of promoting the hegemonic interests of a country against which they wield the weapons of social criticism” (50–51). Even as they subvert dominant forms of imperial insight, Bourdieu and Wacquant argue, such intellectuals serve the deeper purpose of realigning debate across the world along lines derived from the experience of the imperial power.

This collaborative analysis draws its analytical vocabulary from Bourdieu and its empirical examples from Wacquant.<sup>1</sup> Many points familiar from Bourdieu’s larger work are raised here: the structural production of misrecognition, the “false rupture” of philosophical discourse, and the pervasive power of symbolic violence. The contention that dissident metropolitan intellectuals occupy a dominant position relative to the cultural fields of dominated nations precisely because they occupy a dominated position within the cultural field of imperial power (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, 50) bears a strong family resemblance to Bourdieu’s more general argument about cultural capital vis-à-vis other forms of capital. It represents, moreover, a significant attempt to broaden to a transnational frame the insights honed in national studies.

However, it is worth stressing that the analytical framework here remains fundamentally national. Bourdieu and Wacquant focus their argument on the systematically overlooked structures that shape how ideas are produced in one nation, the imperial power, and are disseminated to other nations, the dominated powers. They particularly criticize “those in charge of conceptual ‘import-export,’ those mystified mystifiers who can transport unknowingly the hidden—and often accursed—portion of the cultural products which they put into circulation” (47). What interests Bourdieu and Wacquant is not how ideas circulate, but rather where they originate. Leaving aside specific analysis of the mechanisms of circulation, therefore, they argue for the structurally concealed primacy of national conditions of production.

A critical reckoning with origins, say Bourdieu and Wacquant, is the only way to overcome “false universalization” (51–52). One place to begin is by unmasking the ways contemporary “theory” has furthered—or at least failed to confront—imperialist reason. This approach draws on the guiding practice of “epistemic reflexivity” in Bourdieu’s work, which Wacquant (1993, 236) has described as “his insistence that social analysts turn the instruments of their science back on themselves in a continual

effort to uncover everything that their point of view on social reality owes to their place in it.”

Overall, this forceful argument offers a useful rebuke to an age entranced with global flows. The authors' critique of the ahistorical and decontextualized character of much contemporary “theory” seems on target, as does their frontal attack on the sloppiness of much of what passes for critical debate on globalization. Their critical dissection of the trajectory of U.S. ideas in Europe, from “political correctness” to identity politics, is a bracing corrective to much superficial work, and their account of the uses of the “underclass” concept is especially devastating. Even their criticism of cultural studies, although overly vehement and weakly documented, pushes a field enthralled with the new into a useful confrontation with its own historical conditions of production (43–44, 46–51).

At the same time, Bourdieu and Wacquant's polemic is marked by several striking omissions. Most important, they do not advance any theory of how ideas are translated, consumed, or appropriated in local contexts. This is especially notable given the large segment of Bourdieu's work often read as stressing that consumption rather than production determines the structural meanings of ideas, practices, and goods (e.g., Bourdieu 1984). Furthermore, Bourdieu (1990, 1) himself has explicitly observed that “the meaning and function of a foreign work is determined as much by the field of destination as by the field of origin,” an insight suggesting a line of analysis wholly absent here. Wacquant (1993) has even developed this point in an analysis of the fragmentary reception and appropriation of Bourdieu's work in the United States. This polemic does not draw on any of these precedents, instead presenting a model where the meaning of ideas is determined by the context of production.<sup>2</sup>

What is lacking is a serious consideration of what is gained and lost in the translation of ideas. There is a sharp aside about the distortions implied in the importation and reexportation of French “theory” by U.S. academics but, despite the call to reflexivity, little further consideration of the authors' own positions. Until his death early last year, Bourdieu was one of the most internationally influential living intellectuals; Wacquant has been a leading disciple of Bourdieu in the United States and of his other advisor, William Julius Wilson, in France (Newman 2002). Bourdieu concentrated his research entirely on France and Algeria and has been translated into dozens of languages; Wacquant has worked on France, the United States, and more recently Brazil; as his Web site dutifully documents (<http://sociology.berkeley.edu/faculty/wacquant>), he has had his

research translated into languages from Finnish to Chinese. Given this vibrant participation in the international circulation of ideas, the flatness of their account of this circuit is striking—and their venomous dismissal of the “carriers” who traffic in ideas is remarkable.

### Brazil

The destination of nearly half of the Africans brought to the Americas in slavery, Brazil remains the country with the largest number of people of African descent outside of the African continent. The birthplace of the sugar plantation complex, Brazil was the last society in the New World to abolish slavery, in 1888. Despite this bitter primacy, Brazil has occupied a relatively marginal place in studies of the African diaspora. For much of the twentieth century, Brazil entered international discussions of race through a comparative framework. From the end of slavery until well after the Second World War, Brazil was represented as a far more flexible and open social order, a “racial paradise” that offered a bold counterexample to the brutality of Jim Crow in the United States (see Hellwig 1992). Even here, however, Brazil was a lesser variant on the normative North American model, a counterpoint for international scholarship rather than a point of analytical departure.

Within Brazil, however, this contrast did provide a point of departure. Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1933 [1905], 25) began his pioneering study, *Os africanos no Brasil*, with the statement that “the condition of the Black Race in Latin America is completely different from the situation of the Black Race in the United States.” A generation later, this assertion would be fashioned into a nationalist account of Brazilian distinctiveness by Gilberto Freyre (1946 [1933]). His vision of Brazil as a “racial democracy” would prove enormously influential, refashioning scholarly and popular understandings for decades. It is his scholarly codification of “common sense” that recent scholarship and activism has sought to dispute.

“Most of the recent research on ethnoracial inequality in Brazil,” Bourdieu and Wacquant argue, “strives to prove that, contrary to the image that Brazilians have of their own nation, the country of the ‘three sad races’ . . . is no less racist than others and that Brazilian ‘whites’ have nothing to envy their North American cousins on this score.” Rather than “dissecting the constitution of the Brazilian racial order according to its own logic,” Bourdieu and Wacquant claim, these studies impose North American models, making “the particular history of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement into the universal standard for the struggle of all groups oppressed on

grounds of colour (or caste).” The authors argue for a more systematically comparative approach to ethnoracial domination, and skewer U.S. scholars (and their Latin American disciples) for mapping their own “thinly *conceptualized transfigurations*” onto Brazilian reality. For Bourdieu and Wacquant, this research, “carried out by Americans and by Latin Americans trained in the United States,” has reduced a complex Brazilian reality to simplistic U.S. categories, and then represented that complexity as a sign of the perverse strength of racial domination in Brazil (44).

This characterization is false and superficial, based more on the authors’ projections than on any serious analysis. This is already suggested by the fact that they present only one book to back up their claims, *Orpheus and Power* (1994) by Michael Hanchard, and do not offer a single direct quote from that work. Instead, they rehash a mélange of studies published more than three decades ago, which they call “classics” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999, 44–45). They do not recognize any of the major contemporary debates. Surprisingly, they do not even cite any of the quantitative studies made in the 1980s attempting to reduce racial categories to three (white, brown, black) or even two (white, nonwhite)—precisely the kinds of conceptual simplifications they revile (Silva 1985).

One could certainly find works that exemplify what Bourdieu and Wacquant critique, especially in the United States. The purportedly comparative work of Howard Winant (1992), for instance, sees the United States and Brazil in terms of convergence, one whose ultimate terms, needless to say, are set by the United States. More generally, Brazil continues to occupy a marginal position within much U.S. scholarship on race and the African diaspora. But concentrating on these admittedly thin theories misses both the enormous dynamism of scholarly production on race in Brazil, by both insiders and outsiders, and the complex relationship of that scholarship with U.S. theories and examples.

Within Brazil, this attempt at “outing” blacks and denying differences between Brazil and the United States was common in some parts of the Movimento Negro early on. Any sustained examination of works on race in Brazil would reveal the enormous political usefulness of even those simplistic studies in opening up long closed-off debate. But it would also confirm that Movimento Negro activists quickly came to terms with the limited appeal and insights of this kind of discourse. The instrumental vision of race some of these studies advanced is very far from being accepted by “the majority of recent studies.” Indeed, recent work has been far more

critical; ironically, one of the key works in opening up this debate, unnoted and unmentioned by the authors, was a brilliant application of Bourdieu's approach to the uses of African legacies in Brazil (Dantas 1988).

The argument Bourdieu and Wacquant make turns on an opposition between categories imposed from the outside and "the image that Brazilians have of their own nation." This opposition is spurious and false. Over the past two decades, polling data—with all the required reservations—has consistently demonstrated that an overwhelming and increasing majority of Brazilians believe their country to be racist. The catch—and the key point for analysis—is that most also exempt themselves personally, *and their communities*, from this judgment. Both a generic U.S.-based model of "racism" and an ideal of "racial democracy" are evidently false in the minds and everyday experience of Brazilians, but both also speak to some element of that experience. The challenge for the last decade of studies has been to recognize both the reality of racial domination and the reality of the discourse of racial democracy, not as false consciousness but as the ambiguous material to use in critiquing and subverting racial domination (see Sheriff 2001 and Burdick 1999).

In this sense, Bourdieu and Wacquant's criticism of Hanchard seems especially misguided, since he takes as a problem what they accuse him of assuming as a premise, the universality of the category of "race." In fact, the complexity of Hanchard's treatment is evident from the book's opening anecdote about his visit to a pharmacy shortly after arriving in Brazil. At first, the pharmacy clerks regarded him with suspicion and hostility, refusing to pay him attention. When Hanchard asked a question in broken Portuguese, however, they turned suddenly solicitous. When misrecognized as a Brazilian, Hanchard was treated with disdain, but once recognized as a North American, he was addressed with respect. By opening his book with this account, Hanchard draws attention to the differences in black subjectivity across the Americas. He also presents those different subjectivities in subversive ways, underscoring both the domination black Brazilians are subject to and the prestige black North Americans can enjoy.

Rather than wishing away these complexities and imposing U.S. categories, scholars and activists have devoted enormous effort to devising alternative strategies to confront them. Indeed, it is precisely this question of strategy that is at the center of Hanchard's book. It is true that Hanchard does accord a certain primacy, in the final instance, to race as an organizing category. But this primacy has sparked considerable debate within Brazil,

and recent scholarly discussions of conceptual strategy have stressed a far more pluralist understanding as crucial to antiracist work (see French 2000 and French's essay in this issue of *Nepantla*). Other recent studies by U.S. scholars have shown a subtlety and suppleness that is at odds with the caricatured summary Bourdieu and Wacquant present (Burdick 1999; Butler 1998; Sheriff 2001).

What is ultimately troubling about Bourdieu and Wacquant's argument here is that it implies that attempts to give primacy to "race" as an analytical category are necessarily an imposition of U.S. categories. This is problematic on several levels.

Most obviously, Bourdieu and Wacquant fail to recognize how deeply the U.S. comparison has constituted racial discourse in Brazil. On the one hand, this leads them to unconsciously echo those who a century ago accused Nina Rodrigues (1933 [1905], 10) of a "servile spirit of imitation" for his "imaginary discovery of an ethnic problem that did not exist in Brazil" and his attempt "to reproduce in full force the paradigm of the United States." On the other, this leads them to defend as uniquely Brazilian an argument for dramatic distinctiveness that one-time Baptist convert Gilberto Freyre only came to after undergraduate education in Texas and graduate education in New York.

More broadly, their insistence on the determining force of national intellectual fields leads them to discount the importance of transnational connections and communalities. Across the diaspora in the Americas, one finds wide variations in black subjectivities that cannot be reduced to either a single transnational model or a series of parallel national ones (and much less to variations on the U.S. model).

Finally, even if U.S. categories misrecognize Brazilian realities, this does not mean that they cannot inspire different local strategies of analysis and activism. It is impossible to understand the boom in Afro-Brazilian studies over the last twenty years without some attention to the power of U.S. precedents. But to portray the thousands of works of nuanced and sophisticated scholarship produced in Brazil in terms of imposition is an equally imperial and impoverished argument (see Barcelos, Gomes da Cunha, and Nascimento Araujo 1991; and Gaspar, Pordeus, and da Silva 1994).

A superb example of the dynamics Bourdieu and Wacquant analyze is the launching nearly a decade ago of *Raça Brasil*, a magazine "para os negros do Brasil" designed on the model of U.S. magazines for blacks like *Ebony* or *Jet* (Koefy 1996). The editor was an Afro-Brazilian who had

lived six years in the United States and returned to Brazil determined to produce a magazine that both raised consciousness and reached what he thought was an untapped market of Afro-Brazilians. The confluence of market considerations and ethnoracial uplift, of course, is vintage U.S., as were the articles, which based their argument for black pride on concepts, such as spirituality, corporality, and musicality, that are more of an inversion than an overcoming of segregationist habits of thought. Indeed, as Bourdieu and Wacquant would have us expect, and several critics pointed out, the magazine's defense of blackness was often quite divorced from the historical experience of Afro-Brazilians, especially in Bahia, long a center and symbol of "African" identity in Brazil. This disjuncture is suggested by the magazine's widespread use of the word *black*—in English—to describe the identity and the aesthetics it wished to promote.

But as Bourdieu (1977, 170) suggested decades ago, "private experiences undergo nothing less than a change of state when they recognize themselves in the public objectivity of an already constituted discourse." The meaning of this magazine, and of current struggles over race and ethnicity, is not reducible to the misrecognitions of its authors and editors. Even without an advertising campaign, the magazine sold out almost immediately, including in cities where the Afro-Brazilian community was small. In a panel organized after the first three issues, the editor recognized both that he had been inspired by a U.S. model and that he had been surprised by the enormous Brazilian response. Commentators offered complex interpretations of the racial explanations offered by newstand owners for their new customers, and of the enormous symbolic power of this magazine in a field of others. In a way, this story is not new; it is a furthering of the dynamic reappropriation of funk, soul, and rap that has been going on in Brazil since the 1970s (McCann 2002). But it suggests the unexpected and unforeseeable power of "misrecognitions" in popular culture and academic practice.

To understand this power, we must undertake the task of rehistoricizing and recontextualizing theory that Bourdieu and Wacquant have outlined. Only in this way can we understand the peculiarities of U.S. racial thinking, and what its partial appeal might be outside the United States. But in unraveling the imperial power of U.S. "folk" theories, we must not lose sight of the underlying parallels and resemblances, faint or strong, that also give these theories their appeal, and that must be at the heart of a comparative social science.

### Notes

An earlier version of this article was published as “‘Disseram que voltei americanizada’: Bourdieu y Wacquant sobre raza en Brasil.” *Apuntes de investigación del CECyP* 5 (2000): 95–102.

1. As I will discuss, Wacquant has done empirical research on American ghettos (and therefore on the “underclass”) and on race in Brazil. He also appears to have contributed some of the essay’s polemical edge, as suggested by other debates in which he has recently participated (Wacquant 2002; Anderson 2002; Duneier 2002; Newman 2002).
2. For a powerful work that draws on Bourdieu and Wacquant’s approach but does look closely at the conditions of production, circulation, and reception of ideas, see Dezalay and Garth 2002.

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