

INSIDE PUBLISHING

The Pugilistic Professor

**BOXING HAS LONG MESMERIZED INTELLECTUALS.** From Martin Heidegger to Jean-Paul Sartre (who was known to don the gloves on occasion) to the Dadaist poet and professional boxer Arthur Cravan, writers and philosophers have analyzed—and often romanticized—the sweet science. In this country, one need look no further than Norman Mailer, who has characterized boxing as "existential" and described Muhammad Ali as "the swiftest embodiment of human intelligence."

The French-born sociologist Loïc Wacquant might seem to belong to this intellectual tradition. A UC-Berkeley professor and disciple of the social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, Wacquant is known to some as "the boxing sociologist." Having already published several articles on the sport, he has finally published a book in France on his life as a boxer in training at a Chicago gym. *Corps et âme: Carnets ethnographiques d'un apprenti boxeur* (Body and soul: Ethnographic notebooks of an apprentice boxer) is currently being considered for American publication by the University of Chicago, University of California, and Harvard University Presses.

Wacquant's story, like his understanding of boxing, is unique. In 1988, he began working out at a gym in the impoverished Chicago neighborhood of Woodlawn. At the time, he had no intention of becoming a serious boxer; the gym, he thought, would simply offer a "window on the ghetto," an ideal vantage point from which to observe the "social strategies" of the local youth. It would, in short, be a good place to research the dissertation—on the roles of race, class, and the state in the remaking of the ghetto—that he was writing under the supervision of the sociologist William Julius Wilson, then at the University of Chicago.

At first, Wacquant was uneasy in the ring, and his apprehension was only compounded by the fact that he was a white, moderately athletic Frenchman knocking heads with experienced locals. (Sparring with a towering pugilist named Butch, Wacquant had to resist the impulse to mutter "sorry" through his plastic mouthpiece after landing a straight right square in his partner's face.) But Wacquant's initial anxieties did not dissuade him from pursuing his burgeoning interest. Training three to six times a week for three years, he shadowboxed and sparred by day and typed up his notes by night. Attending some thirty tournaments, he went on the road to observe fighters up close. He also witnessed the routines of their daily lives, their struggles to find jobs and homes, and their occasional visits to the welfare office or the local police precinct. In 1990, Wacquant even fought in the Chicago Golden Gloves, the largest amateur boxing tournament in the Midwest. (He lost his three-round fight by decision.)

After Bourdieu visited Wacquant at the Woodlawn gym and bestowed his blessings on

his pupil's avocation, Wacquant began serious work on a sociology of boxing. *Corps et âme* is surprisingly short on the kind of rhapsodic effusions that are typically found in highbrow boxing analysis. Wacquant explains that he purposely avoided the "prefabricated exoticism" so common to depictions of the sport. Indeed, part of his intention is to discredit what he calls the "boxing myth." Contrary to Mailer and company, he contends that boxing is better understood as a craft or a job than as an art form. In Wacquant's eyes, the gym is essentially a factory or workshop where the boxer undergoes a highly repetitive training routine that fashions his body into a kind of tool. "I have to do my homework," "I have to do my job": These are the sorts of phrases that boxers use, he notes, when talking about their training.

Wacquant also downplays the "rags to riches" stories that one associates with boxers like Mike Tyson, who escaped the ghetto to achieve wealth and fame. He emphasizes that the Woodlawn boxers generally come from working-class backgrounds rather than from the more destitute sectors of the ghetto. (Many of his fellow trainees had at least some community college education.) Wacquant even speculates that there may be a positive correlation between a boxer's social status and his performance in the ring. At the same time, he notes that the rewards of a successful boxing career are easily exaggerated. (The boxers in his gym assumed that their local hero Alphonzo Ratliff had been paid somewhere in the range of a million dollars a fight, when in fact the figure was at most thirty thousand dollars.)

Though Wacquant is reluctant to employ the nostalgic devices of the memoir, *Corps et âme* does recount and draw on his own training, with blow-by-blow accounts of his sparring bouts and a moving description of how he earned his affectionate nicknames, "The French Hammer" and "Busy Louie." He even confides that he came to embrace the legendary local trainer DeeDee Armour as his "second father."

With its mixture of sociological analysis, ethnographic observation, and literary evocation, Wacquant's book combines scrupulous attention to physical details with an ambitious theoretical framework in a manner that would make his mentor Bourdieu proud. (In fact, Bourdieu has asked Wacquant to send a copy of his book to every professor at the Collège de France, the prestigious research institution where Bourdieu holds the chair of sociology.) Above all, Wacquant hopes to shape a "carnal sociology" that pays close attention to the physical experiences of its subjects. "It was an analytical and sensual challenge," he says. "I wanted to give an explanation of the social world that would not drown out its sound and fury. Instead of practicing a form of sociology that would flatten everything out, I wanted to show that boxers are linked to that world with every fiber of their body and that sociology could take that into account."

For further elaboration of what exactly carnal sociology is, readers will have to wait for Wacquant's next boxing opus, "La passion du pugiliste," on which he is currently hard at work. Wacquant is developing ideas about the interplay of desire, gender, and the sacred in the ring. Boxing, he points out, is in some respects a monastic routine: The boxer imposes on himself strict dietary restrictions, a tight schedule that includes early bedtimes and fixed hours of practice, and—for several weeks before a fight—sexual abstinence.

Reactions to *Corps et âme* in France have been positive. The French press has largely focused on the depiction of Chicago's black underclass and on the novelty of "Busy Louie" himself. Former boxers have written Wacquant to praise the book's true-to-life feel and its acute observations about the workings of the boxing world. After one of Wacquant's readings in Paris, a woman in the audience said that his uncanny depiction of the pugilist's psyche had finally made clear to her why she and her former boxer boyfriend had never hit it off. "I should open a couples therapy workshop for boxers," Wacquant says jokingly.

Perhaps the most unusual reaction to Wacquant's writing came after the book's most colorfully written section, "Busy Louie aux Golden Gloves," was published in a French literary magazine. This "sociological short story," as Wacquant calls it, tells the tale of his participation in the Chicago Golden Gloves. The piece prompted a phone call to Wacquant from the French publishing house Editions du Seuil. It was dying to print his "novel."

**Elisabeth Franck**