

Lecture Note on Loic Wacquant's criticism of Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Streets*
Prof. Glenn C. Loury, EC 137, February 25, 2010

- 1) Wacquant's Indictment of Anderson's argument in *Code*...
 - a) EA reifies the cultural orientations that he observes among inner-city residents
 - i) What are folk notions become fixed and mutually exclusive populations
 - ii) EA assumes morality, not structure, is basis of difference. (LW asks, are they *destitute* 'cause they're morally *dissolute*, or might it be the other way around)
 - iii) LW accuses EA of taking sides, not analyzing interplay between decent/street.
 - b) EA guilty of conceptual equivocation about his key notion of "the code"
 - i) Just what is a "code?" Where does it come from? How does it work?
 - ii) Is it a set of informal rules? Etiquette? Or, a value orientation? Which is it?
 - iii) What about intervening public policy factors: easy guns; prison/street nexus?
 - iv) Public policies – managing poverty with prisons – are implicated.
 - v) LW concludes: Code useful as *depictive device*, but not as *analytical tool*
 - c) Persistent disconnect between data and theory – unfinished work.
 - d) LW complains about EA's model of mentorship (decent daddy/grandmother)
 - i) "Decent" dads seen to celebrate retrograde gender relations; EA papers over longstanding rift between the sexes among blacks
 - ii) EA attacks "bad heads" (gangster rappers), longing for bygone era "when men were men." But those days are long gone.
 - iii) If grandmothers so "decent" why weren't they better mothers!
 - iv) Isn't bankruptcy of public institutions in inner city the real culprit here?
 - v) There is nothing noble about *kinship servitude*.
 - e) Why is it so hard to get out? (John Turner's sad end, despite EA's best try)
 - i) Neither lack of jobs or racism can explain JT's backsliding.
 - ii) Need to link macrostructures to a person's micro-setting.
 - iii) Key: the discord between social position (external structures) and mental disposition (internal structures of perception/evaluation.)
 - iv) According to LW, evolving dialectic between a person's social position and his/her disposition governs the *double-sided production of urban marginality*.
 - v) "Decency" vs. "street" reflect two relations to the future anchored in adjacent but distinct social trajectories.
 - f) EA moves between normative theory of social action and moral theory of social order. He lacks a well-articulated materialist conception of social structure.
 - i) Are "street" types agents of own moral dereliction, clinging to "bad" code?
 - ii) Or, are they hapless victims of structural change. Which one? EA can't decide.
- 2) Anderson's Rebuttal
 - a) LW's ideologically driven critique distorts and misunderstands EA's work.
 - b) LW fails to engage main point: Absent civil order one gets a wild west solution.
 - c) "Code" emerges from particular conditions – lack of civil law.
 - d) LW has wrong view of the role of theory in ethnographic work. (LW's a Marxist). According to EA, ethnographer are "vessel" conveying subjects' authentic views.
 - e) EA claims he's telling it like he heard it, unvarnished; not *his* views, but *theirs*.
 - f) LW endorses "street" as political position; and thinks "decent" deserve their fate.
 - g) LW blind to what people are living with day to day in inner city (!)
 - h) Code not only *instrumental*; also *expressive*; provides "honor" for its adherents.