Hominès in Extremis: What Fighting Scholars Teach Us about Habitus

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Abstract
I use the collection of “carnal ethnographies” of martial arts and combat sports assembled by Raul Sanchez and Dale Spencer under the title Fighting Scholars to spotlight the fruitfulness of deploying habitus as both empirical object (explanandum) and method of inquiry (modus cognitionis). The incarnate study of incarnation supports five propositions that clear up tenacious misconceptions about habitus and bolster Bourdieu’s dispositional theory of action: (1) far from being a “black box,” habitus is fully amenable to empirical inquiry; (2) the distinction between primary (generic) and secondary (specific) habitus enables us to capture the malleability of dispositions; (3) habitus is composed of cognitive, conative and affective elements: categories, skills, and desires; (4) habitus allows us to turn carnality from problem to resource for the production of sociological knowledge; and (5) thus to realize that all social agents are, like martial artists, suffering beings collectively engaged in embodied activities staged inside circles of shared commitments.

Keywords
body, Bourdieu, carnal sociology, categories, combat sports, desire, habitus, martial arts, skills

The function of habitus is, precisely, to restore to the agent a generative and unifying power, a constructive and classifying potency, while at the same time reminding us that this capacity to construct social reality, itself socially constructed, is not that of a transcendental subject but that of a socialized body, which engages in practice organizing principles that

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are socially constructed and acquired in the course of a social experience at once situated and dated. (Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*)

In *Fighting Scholars*, Raul Sánchez and Dale Spencer (2013) gather a rich interdisciplinary and international suite of field studies of martial arts and combat sports by researchers who learned and practice the bodily craft they dissect. That unusual collection in design and focus – covering boxing, kung fu, tae kwon do, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, the South Indian craft of kalarippayattu, the African-American vernacular practice of 52 handblocks, aikido and muay thai boxing – was inspired by *Body and Soul*, my carnal ethnography of prizefighting in Chicago’s ghetto (Wacquant, 2004a). It is framed by a reprint of my essay on “Habitus as topic and tool” (Wacquant, 2011), which explicates how, by means of deep immersion leading to conversion during a three-year journey among practitioners of the Sweet science, I deployed and extended Bourdieu’s signal concept of habitus both empirically and methodologically.

Habitus is first the *topic* of my investigation: *Body and Soul* documents the manufacturing of the “schemata of perception, appreciation and action” (to recall Bourdieu’s [1990: 14] capsule definition) that make up the competent boxer in the crucible of the gym. But the distinctiveness of this project is that habitus is also the *tool* for investigation: the practical acquisition of those schemata by the analyst serves as technical vehicle for better penetrating their social production and assembly. The apprenticeship of the sociologist is a methodological template for and mirror of the apprenticeship undergone by the empirical subjects of the study; the former is mined to dig deeper into the latter and to excavate its inner logic and subterranean properties; and both in turn test the robustness of habitus as guide for probing the makeup of social conduct.

I am gratified that *Body and Soul* served as stimulus for the studies gathered in *Fighting Scholars* since it was always my intention to make a case for, and to attract others to, the incarnate study of incarnation by practical example – rather than by theoretical expostulation or methodological supplication, which would have contradicted that very case. I am doubly pleased that its contributors have extended the reach and refined the arguments of my book in manifold new directions, connecting them with theoretical perspectives and empirical agendas beyond the one I pursued in my study of the social springs and lived magnetism of pugilism as plebeian bodily trade. *Fighting*
Scholars gathers lush materials and precise analyses of interest not only to sociologists of practice and embodiment within the narrow province of sport but also to generalist students of discipline, violence, gender, religion, emotions, reflexivity, and field methodology and social epistemology insofar as inquiring into martial arts and combat sports via apprenticeship inevitably raises these issues. It also demonstrates the fruitfulness of deploying habitus as both empirical object (explanandum) and method of inquiry (modus cognitionis). In this article, I extract from the carnal study of bodily crafts five propositions supported by Fighting Scholars that, together, bolster and enrich Bourdieu’s dispositional theory of action by clearing up tenacious misconceptions about habitus.

I. Habitus is Fully Amenable to Empirical Inquiry

Fighting Scholars convincingly rebuts the oft-repeated but seldom elaborated criticism that habitus is a “black box” that muddles the analysis of social conduct, erases history, and freezes practice in the endless replication of structure. This complaint has been recited now over three decades (see, for a sample, Connell 1983: 151; Elster 1983: 106; Bourdon 1998: 176; King 2000; Liechty 2002: 22; Boltanski 2003; Mouzelis 2004: 109; Harris 2007: 237; Akram 2013: 57-59) in rote fashion by scholars who seem not to have noticed three stubbornly contrary facts.

First, Bourdieu introduced habitus in his youthful cross-Mediterranean ethnographies of honor, kinship and power in Algeria and Béarn in order to account for cultural disjuncture and social transformation, not cultural congruence and social reproduction (Wacquant, 2004b). Second, habitus alone never spawns a definite practice: it takes the conjunction of disposition and position, subjective capacity and objective possibility, habitus and social space (or field) to produce a given conduct or expression. And this meeting between skilled agent and pregnant world spans the gamut from felicitous to strained, smooth to rough, fertile to futile. Third and relatedly, because they are acquired over time in diverse circumstances that can entail extended and abrupt travel across social space, and because they encounter a cosmos that may itself undergo swift and sweeping change as well as subject them to heterogeneous pressures and possibilities (as did the colonial society wracked by a nationalist war of liberation in which Bourdieu incubated his model of action),
the dispositions of agents display varying degrees of internal integration. This is why Bourdieu (2000 [1997]: 160, 162) insists that “habitus is neither necessarily adapted [to the situation], nor necessarily coherent”; it can be “riven by internal contradiction and division”; and “it can have its failings, critical moments of perplexity and discordance” when it produces unforeseen and nonconforming practices. All of which implies that it must be studied in its actual formation and extant manifestations, and not stipulated by analytic fiat.

Indeed, far from being a “theoretical deus ex machina” (DiMaggio, 1979: 1464) that keeps us locked in conceptual obscurity, habitus is a standing invitation to investigate the social constitution of the agent. It is not an answer to the conundrum of action – lately rephrased by invoking the equally enigmatic category of “agency” – but a question or, better yet, an empirical prompt: an arrow pointing to the need to methodically historicize the concrete agent embedded in a concrete situation by reconstituting the set of durable and transposable dispositions that sculpt and steer her thoughts, feelings, and conduct.

There are three ways to detect the architecture of the stratified system of schemata that compose habitus. The first, synchronic and inductive, is to trace out connections between patterns of preferences, expressions, and social strategies within and across realms of activity so as to infer their shared matrix. This is the approach followed by Bourdieu, for instance, in his early study of “the sentiment of honor” among the Kabyles (Bourdieu, 1966) and in his mature inquiry into the internal makeup of the French ruling class in *The State Nobility* (Bourdieu, 1996 [1989]). The second, diachronic and deductive, is to map out the social trajectories of agents so as to reconstitute the sequencing and sedimentation of layers of dispositions across time, for which the paradigmatic case is the sociography of the petty bourgeoisie offered in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 318–71). The third, experimental, is taken up in *Body and Soul* and by the contributors to *Fighting Scholars*: it consists of studying the dedicated institutions and focused pedagogical programs that forge a specific habitus by submitting to them in the first person.

2. Primary and Secondary Habitus
The “fighting scholars” clear up another common misconception about habitus: that it is rigid, frozen, unchanging and unchangeable.
By deliberately acquiring specialized dispositions they did not have, dispositions that are constitutive of a bodily trade and philosophy, they spotlight the *malleability* of habitus, in keeping with Bourdieu’s (2000 [1997]: 161) late specification of the concept:

Habitus change constantly as a function of new experiences. Dispositions are subject to a sort of permanent revision, but one that is never radical, given that it operates on the basis of premises instituted in the previous state. They are characterized by a combination of constancy and variation that fluctuates according to the individual and her degree of rigidity or flexibility.

This suggests the need to return to, and elaborate, Bourdieu’s distinction between *primary* and *secondary* habitus, introduced in his work on education and underlying his analysis of the nexus of class and taste in *Distinction*. The primary habitus is the set of dispositions one acquires in early childhood, slowly and imperceptibly, through familial osmosis and familiar immersion; it is fashioned by tacit and diffuse “pedagogical labor with no precedent”; it constitutes our baseline social personality as well as “the basis for the ulterior constitution of any other habitus” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977 [1970]: 42–6). The secondary habitus is any system of transposable schemata that becomes grafted subsequently, through specialized pedagogical labor that is typically shortened in duration, accelerated in pace, and explicit in organization. This distinction echoes the contrast established by Bourdieu between “the two modes of acquisition of culture,” the familial and the academic, the experiential and the didactic, which indelibly stamp one’s relation to culture and the character of one’s cultural capital, of which habitus is the embodied form (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]: 65–8): the first spawns the ease and insouciance that define excellence; the second bears the mark of effort and tension born of ascesis.

Every agent has a primary (generic) habitus, which is both springboard and matrix for the subsequent acquisition of a multiplicity of (specific) habitus. In the case of the “fighting scholars,” their martial or sporting habitus is a *tertiary formation*, grounded in their primary (gender, national, class, etc.) habitus and mediated by their scholastic habitus – which constitutes both a motivative resource and a built-in hindrance to gaining the practical mastery of a corporeal craft, insofar as it inclines the apprentice to a reflexive attitude. The casting of
a secondary (tertiary, quaternary, quinary, etc.) habitus will thus be inflected by the distance separating it from the systems of dispositions that serve as scaffolding for its construction because they precede it. The greater that distance, the more difficult the traineeship, and the greater the gaps and frictions between the successive layers of schemata, the less integrated the resulting dispositional formation is likely to be. We can discern this prismatic and compositional logic at work in the differential manner in which the various authors of Fighting Scholars respond, depending on their class and academic inclinations, to the challenges of mastering a combative craft and in the degree to which they feel “at home” in it, in the existential sense of being one with the social and symbolic microcosm it anchors (Jackson, 1995).

3. The Cognitive, Conative, and Affective Components of Habitus

By digging deep across types of martial and fighting arts, the field studies gathered in that book suggest that one may analytically differentiate and empirically document three “components” to habitus. The first is cognitive: it consists in the categories of perception through which agents cut up the world, make out its constituents, and give them pattern and meaning. As the boxing gym adage goes, you will not become a prizefighter if you cannot “tell a fish hook from a left hook,” that is, without mastering the classificatory system that both separates and relates things, persons, and activities into a distinctive semantic tapestry.

But habitus is not constituted merely of “cognitive structures,” as Bourdieu’s own language sometimes seems to imply. A second, crucial, module spotlighted by the initiatory study of corporeal crafts is conative: it consists of proprioceptive capacities, sensorimotor skills, and kinesthetic dexterities that are honed in and for purposeful action. Because they are propelled by the first-person learning of the practical competencies that constitute boxing, tae kwon do, capoeira, aikido, etc. in the real time and spaces where these are cultivated, the accounts composing Fighting Scholars illumine the pivotal role of the “habitual body” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004 [1948]) as seat of trained proficiencies and spring of intentional conduct in the world.

Yet, to grow into a full-fledged member of a given microcosm, it still does not suffice to be able to interpret it and to act in it in
conforming fashion; one must also aspire to be in it and of it; one must be motivated or moved by it over time. The third component of habitus is affective or, to speak more generally, cathectic (in the idiom of Talcott Parsons) or libidinal (in the vocabulary of Sigmund Freud). It entails the vesting of one’s life energies into the objects, undertakings, and agents that populate the world under consideration. In other words, to make an adept pugilist (pianist, politician or professor) takes acquiring in practice the distinctive cognitive constructs and the skilled moves as well as developing the proper appetite for the stakes of the corresponding social game. By documenting this lustful dimension of habitus formation, *Fighting Scholars* brings out the inescapable fact, highlighted by Marx (1988 [1927]) in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* but studiously suppressed by social science ever since, that the incarnate social agent is a suffering and desiring animal.

4. Carnality is Not a Problem but a Resource for Sociological Inquiry

That proposition applies to the social analyst, who engages in her research sociological categories, skills, and desires – in short, her sociological habitus as a secondary (specific) system of dispositions mounted on her primary (generic) habitus. Like every human being, she is a feeling and desiring animal who knows the world by body in practice, which practice encompasses but is not limited to the deliberate discursive deployment of instruments of objectivation in accordance with the standards of her discipline. This means that she can deepen and broaden her anthropological grasp by attending to her own fleshly understanding and sentient comprehension, and sifting them through her analytic filters, instead of ignoring them or denying their fecundity. Better yet, the sociologist can use initiatory immersion and practical entanglement in the world under study, in conjunction with the classical tools of the social scientific method, to convert her intelligent organism into a fleet vehicle for social detection and analysis.

This is what the “fighting scholars” accomplish as they go about acquiring and dissecting the practical mastery that fighters gain of their art so as to transform themselves and actualize the potentialities it harbors. They do so in a spiraling and self-propelling movement:
acquiring to dissect, dissecting to acquire, and so on. In the process, they demonstrate in action, and not just on paper, the methodological viability, theoretical fruitfulness, and empirical productivity of *carnal sociology* as a distinctive mode of inquiry. Put briefly, this approach takes seriously the embarrassing fact that social agents are motile, sensuous, and suffering creatures of flesh, blood, nerves and sinews doomed to death, who know it and make their world through and with their enskilled and exposed “mindful bodies” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987). And it insists that this proposition applies to the sociologist no less than to the people she studies, be they muay thai boxers, lathe operators, school teachers or corporate lawyers.

Carnal sociology is based on a bet (or a dare): that we can *turn carnality from problem to resource* for the production of sociological knowledge. It asks that we revoke the dominant dualistic paradigm of embodiment, canonized by Descartes at the start of the rationalist revolution and percolating through multiple lineages to permeate most strands of social thought, from utilitarianism and structuralism to critical theory and hermeneutics, which share in the “dogma of the ghost in the machine” (Ryle, 2000 [1949]). Doing a Bourdieu on Bourdieu, it proposes that we use habitus as a methodological pathway, through the technique of apprenticeship, to pry into the forging and functioning of habitus as spring of social action. The aim here is to fashion a sociology *from* the body that does justice to the *active side of embodiment* and captures adept and sensual organisms, not just as socially construct-*ed*, but as socially construct-*ing*. This is emphatically not a call to hurl ourselves into the abyss of subjectivity (as the slippery genre of “auto-ethnography” does) but, on the contrary, a demand that we deepen objectivity by acknowledging that embodied knowledge and competence are productive constituents of objective reality. For carnal sociology, gaining a visceral grasp of the *vis viva* of the social world is not a distraction from, or a rejection of, the Durkheimian agenda of sociological reason but an indispensable means for its realization (Wacquant, 2009: 121–2).

5. We Are All Martial Artists

We now come to the most critical yet most prickly of all questions: does any of this matter beyond the martial arts and combat sports, symbolically rich but socially marginal activities after all? Beyond
the restricted perimeter of athletic avocations or performance crafts, including among them not only music, theater, and dance, but also preaching and politics? The greatest challenge that the “fighting scholars” leave untackled in their collective book is that of extending the teachings of their carnal investigations of corporeal trades to practice in general. Is such an extension warranted and, if so, is it possible? The title of this article is intended to indicate that it is both possible and warranted – indeed, needed – if we are to produce full-color accounts of social life conveying the “taste and ache of action” instead of erasing them as conventional social science routinely does (Wacquant, 2004a: vi–xii): sociologists and anthropologists hard at work learning an agonistic bodily art in order to disclose its inner workings are social beings, plural, collectively engaged (homines) in embodied activities staged inside circles of shared commitments that make them but extreme instances (in extremis) of what every social agent is and does as she navigates the world.

I bring up this proposition because it drove me to study boxers in the first place: I was not motivated to spend three years in a boxing gym just to plumb the idiosyncratic features of the Manly Art. Aside from the sheer pleasure of being enwrapped in a gripping sensual and moral universe, I ploughed ahead in my journey among pugs because I held – and I still hold – that the ring offers an especially propitious experimental setting to show how social competence is fabricated and membership bestowed (Wacquant, 2005). I am keenly aware of the objection that practices vary in their “physicality,” or in their reliance on discursive reason, such that a prizefighter would seem to differ radically on that count from, say, a philosophy professor. For this objection was raised forcefully and rather intimidatingly by none other than John Searle after I presented the theoretical implications of Body and Soul to his Workshop on Social Ontology at Berkeley in April 2010. While Searle agrees that some notion much like habitus, which he calls “the Background,” is needed to account for social action,9 he considers that there is a “dramatic difference” (his words) between an athletic and an intellectual craft, one that renders transferring knowledge gained about the one to the other too risky if not invalid. He would advise studying “intermediate cases,” such as that of the soldier (in his response to my argument, he drew on the experiences of his son as a tank officer in a US army battalion stationed in Germany).10
I am not convinced. I take the difference between pugilists and philosophers to be one of degree and not one of kind. The existential situation of the generic, run-of-the-mill agent is not ontologically different from that of the fighter and of the “fighting scholar”: like them, she is a sentient being of flesh and blood, bound to a particular point in physical space and tied to a given moment in time by virtue of her incarnation in a fragile organism. This porous, mortal organism exposes her to the world and thus to the risk of pain (emotional as well as physical) and injury (symbolic as well as material); but it also propels her onto the stage of social life, where she evolves in practice the visceral know-how and prediscursive skills that form the bedrock of social competency. Though carnal sociology is particularly apt for studying social extremes, its principles and techniques apply across all social institutions, for carnality is not a specific domain of practices but a fundamental constituent of the human condition and thus a necessary ingredient of all action. For this reason, and until this methodological strategy is practically invalidated, I would urge social analysts to start from the assumption that, pace Searle, we are all martial artists of one sort or another.

Notes
1. This article is an extended version of the concluding chapter of Sanchez and Spencer (2013). It is also forthcoming in Portuguese translation in Estudos de sociologia (Recife; spring 2013); Danish translation in Praktiske Grunde (Copenhagen; winter 2013); Spanish translation in Astrolabio, nueva época (Cordoba; 10, spring 2013); Italian translation: “Homines in extremis. Che cosa gli studiosi lottatori ci insegnano sull’habitus,” Etnografia se ricerca qualitativa (summer 2013); French translation in Matthieu Quidu and Brice Favier-Ambrosini (eds) Le Corps du savant dans la recherche scientifique: approches épistémologiques (Paris, Editions ENS, 2013).
2. Elsewhere, I characterize this approach thus:

A carnal sociology that seeks to situate itself not outside or above practice but at its “point of production” requires that we immerse ourselves as deeply and as durably as possible into the cosmos under examination; that we submit ourselves to its specific temporality and
contingencies; that we acquire the embodied dispositions it demands and nurtures, so that we may grasp it via the prethetic understanding that defines the native relation to that world—not as one world among many but as “home”. (Wacquant, 2005: 466)

3. Proof is that the same roster of themes is tackled, frontally or sideways, by the more discursivist collection of Farrer and Whalen-Bridge (2012) on *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge* and by the articles gathered in the thematic issue of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* on *Martial Practices and Combat Sports* (no. 179, September 2009), on the commercialization of cage fighting, the adaptation of Brazilian *vale tudo* in Bolivia, the codification of duel sports across Asia, the gender effects of the entry of women into boxing, and the social uses of *pencak silat* in the Indonesian military.

4. “Dispositions do not lead in a determinate manner to a determinate action: they reveal and accomplish themselves only in appropriate circumstances and in relation to a situation.” They may “remain always in the state of virtualities” or “manifest themselves in different, and even opposite, practices depending on the situation.” For the “principle of action” resides “neither in a subject . . . nor in a ‘milieu’” but “in the ontological complicity between two states of the social, history made body and history made thing” (Bourdieu, 2000 [1997]: 149).

5. See Desmond (2007) on wildland firefighters and Mears (2011) on runway models, for two methodologically germane studies of the production of the stereotypic forms of masculine and feminine bodily capital, respectively (namely, physical prowess and sexualized parading). Two further variants of the observational approach are to study habitus-forming pedagogies in action through close-up interviews, as in Herzfeld’s (2003) account of small-town artisans in Crete, and through archival documentation, as Charles Suau (1978) does in his historical reconstitution of the production of the sacerdotal habitus in rural Brittany.

6. I regret having left this distinction implicit in *Body and Soul*, as I did most theoretical arguments, in keeping with a stylistic design geared to conveying the aesthesis of pugilism. Clarifying it would have bolstered the thesis that *pugilistic desire* intervenes as a crucial mediation between the structures of class marginality, racial
subordination and masculine hubris and the extant practices of boxers in and out of the ring.

7. In *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu (2000 [1997]: 164) proposes that producing the dispositions required by a particular field (in the sense of *champ*) entails a “work of specific socialization [which] tends to foster the transformation of the originary libido, that is, the socialized affects constituted in the domestic sphere,” through “the transference of this libido onto the agents and institutions belonging to that field.” In his acid critique of Sartre’s projection of his intellectual unconscious onto his famous phenomenological vignette on the café waiter, Bourdieu (2000 [1997]: 153–5) reiterates that one “enters into the persona of the waiter not as an actor playing a role but, rather, like a child identifying with his father.” He suggests that the conversion of generic ( narcissistic, sexual) libido into specific *libidines* operates via the redirection of desire toward, and the quest for recognition from, cathected persons beyond the familial circle.

8. Cartesian dualism presents itself as the inescapable corollary of the application of rationalism in social inquiry. But this claim is refuted by the emergence, out of the same intellectual movement spanning the 17th century, of the monism of Spinoza and the pluralism of Leibniz (Phemister, 2006). Indeed, both Spinoza and Leibniz are, along with Ernst Cassirer, major sources of Bourdieu’s philosophical anthropology and social epistemology (more so, I would contend, than Pascal, in spite of Bourdieu’s own self-professed affiliation).

9. “The thesis of the Background is simply this: intentional phenomena such as meanings, understandings, interpretations, beliefs, desires, and experiences only function within a set of Background capacities that are not themselves intentional” (Searle, 1992: 175). A few pages later, Searle (1992: 177) notes that the Background is “closely related” to Bourdieu’s habitus.

10. This points to a deeper difference in philosophical anthropology: for Searle (2009), humans are, first and foremost, “language-speaking animals” and language is the grand creator of social institutions and glue of human civilizations across history. I see humans as visceral creatures impelled by socialized drives and desires for which language provides a second-order means of social construction.
11. Academics live under the comforting illusion that “physicality” is a property of a restricted class of practices that does not concern them because the specificity of scholarly embodiment resides in the radical effacement of the body proper from the phenomenological foreground: the scholastic condition as withdrawal from practical urgency intensifies the modal experience of “bodily absence” (Leder, 1990). But the most “mental” of actors, such as the mathematician or the philosopher, are incarnate beings; and thinking itself is a deeply corporeal activity, as the “embodied cognition” movement is now showing from within cognitive science (Shapiro, 2011).

References


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