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Territorial stigmatization and local belonging
A study of the Danish neighbourhood Aalborg East

Sune Qvotrup Jensen and Ann-Dorte Christensen

Loïc Wacquant has made a widely read and debated contribution to critical research on contemporary urban marginality. A central part of the theoretical framework is that residents of deprived areas internalize territorial stigmatization, which then has a range of negative effects. Based on empirical research this paper assesses Wacquant’s conception of territorial stigmatization and suggests some points where urban sociology might go beyond or adjust Wacquant. The empirical research focuses on Aalborg East, a deprived area in the northern part of Denmark. Through media analysis it is documented that Aalborg East is subject to territorial stigmatization, and it is suggested that cultural racism plays an important role. Qualitative interview data suggest, however, that the residents do not internalize or resign to the stigma. They become sad or angry when confronted with the stigma, but they have an either positive or ambivalent view of the area and most of them are content to live there. This finding is validated by survey data. Wacquant’s conception cannot be entirely rejected, though, as the construction of internal dividing lines in some interviews can be interpreted as a way of managing territorial stigmatization. Nevertheless, the data provide little support for a theory of clear-cut internalization of territorial stigmatization in the case of Aalborg East. This conclusion leads to three discussions: a confirmation of Wacquant’s claim that the role of the state matters; a discussion of the specific political culture of Scandinavian societies; and a problematization of Wacquant’s reliance on Bourdieu’s conception of symbolic violence.

Key words: deprived areas, territorial stigmatization, symbolic violence, cultural racism, autonomy, agency

In May 2009, we contacted potential interviewees for a research project about Aalborg East.

When we phoned Paul,1 a 74-year-old man who we later learned had lived in the area since 1969, he immediately responded with a somewhat grumpy: ‘Is it about how negative it is?’ Paul’s explicit scepticism illustrates awareness of the negative image of Aalborg East, and how this awareness influences what people like Paul think outsiders find relevant about the area. The interview, eventually, turned out well, as Paul spoke at great length about his everyday life in the area.

Negative images and their possible consequences can be analysed via the concept
territorial stigmatization, originally coined by Loïc J.D. Wacquant. In a long list of publications culminating in Urban Outcasts (2008b), Wacquant has made an important contribution to critical research on contemporary urban marginality. Wacquant often frames this contribution as a call for further empirical research, and this paper may be read as a response to this call.2

As a central part of his theoretical framework, Wacquant argues that urban marginality in France and the USA has territorial stigmatization in common (1996a). Central to Wacquant’s theoretical framework is the observation that residents internalize the stigma, which then causes a range of negative effects. Wacquant’s contribution has been widely discussed by sociologists and urban researchers. Among other things, it has been debated whether it applies only in the USA and France or whether it is applicable in other national contexts.

Based on empirical research, this paper assesses the range and scope of territorial stigmatization in Aalborg East, a deprived neighbourhood in Denmark, and discusses whether Wacquant’s theoretical understanding of territorial stigmatization applies in this context. Empirically, no clear-cut internalization of territorial stigma can be identified in our data, although some interviewees appear ambivalent towards their area of residence. This observation opens important discussions of Wacquant’s theory in general, and the concept of territorial stigmatization in particular.

The first part of the paper outlines Wacquant’s theoretical contribution as well as some central criticisms thereof. The next section contains information about Aalborg East and the empirical methods informing the analysis in the paper. This is followed by an empirical analysis of mass media coverage of the area and how the inhabitants manage territorial stigma. In the final section, we conclude and offer a discussion that acknowledges the value of Wacquant’s work but suggests some points where urban sociology might go beyond Wacquant.

### Theoretical debates

Wacquant’s conception of theoretical stigmatization is one of six elements (1996b)3 of an overall theory of advanced urban marginality in contemporary Western societies, developed through comparative work in Chicago’s black belt and a Parisian banlieue. Through this comparison, Wacquant argues that urban marginality is primarily grounded in race in the USA and in class in France (1996a). Besides territorial stigmatization, the other five elements are: (1) deregulation and degradation of wage labour; (2) functional disconnection from macro-economic trends, that is, jobless growth that does not allow marginalized groups to enter the labour market during economic booms; (3) territorial alienation and dissolution of place, that is, ‘the loss of a locale that marginalized urban populations identify with and feel secure in’ (Wacquant, 1996b, p. 126); (4) the loss of hinterland, that is, the loss of social networks in working-class neighbourhoods that contemporary jobless individuals can rely upon; (5) symbolic fragmentation implying the loss of a shared frame of reference and a shared language to address the collective problem of marginalization (Wacquant, 1996b). Territorial stigmatization, the focus here, is primarily driven by negative and stentotypical media representation and results in a ‘symbolic demonization’ of such areas (Wacquant, 2008a, p. 115). According to Wacquant, territorial stigmatization is internalized by inhabitants in such areas resulting in feelings of guilt and shame (2007, p. 68). This leads inhabitants to deny belonging, to distance themselves from the area and their neighbours, and to emphasize their own moral worth in contrast to other residents:

‘In response to spatial defamation, residents engage in strategies of mutual distancing and lateral denigration; they retreat into the private sphere of the family; and they exit from the neighbourhood (whenever they have the option).’ (Wacquant, 2008a, p. 116)

We can think of this as processes of disidentification (Skeggs, 1997; Savage et al., 2010), a
concept that denotes a marked distancing from identity categories associated with low symbolic value. Territorial stigmatization, according to Wacquant, makes residents dis-identify with their neighbourhood resulting in non-belonging. The result is internal div-

isions that ultimately hinder a sense of local solidarity and collective mobilization (Wac-

quant, 2007, p. 68). Territorial stigmatization is therefore disempowering. Deborah Warr has elaborated the analysis and emphasized that in the absence of positive narratives of place, residents may adopt a strategy of maintain-

ing ‘aloofness from the neighbourhood’ (2005b, p. 5), which undermines intra-area networks and prevents the building of social capital (2005a, 2005b). Likewise, Frank Was-

senberg has pointed out that stigma might accelerate or exacerbate existing problems in deprived areas, because it feeds into ongoing negative spirals, which may, for instance, accelerate turnover rates and lead to indifference and low involvement (2004).

Wacquant’s theory of territorial stigmatiza-

tion, as well as the overall theoretical con-

tribution it is part of, has been subject to thorough discussion (e.g. review symposiums in City 11(3), International Journal of Urban and Regional Research 33(3) and Urban Geography 31(2)). Due to space limitations, we will here limit our treatment of the debate to four themes that are relevant to the subject of this paper: the importance of race in France, the role of the welfare state, the agency of the urban poor and the applica-

bility in other national contexts.

Sylvie Tissot (2007) argues that Wacquant underemphasizes how French banlieues are being constructed as ‘Muslim enclaves’, ren-
dering ethnicity relevant to urban marginality in France. In somewhat overlapping cri-
tiques, Melissa Nobles (2010) and Mary Pat-
tillo (2009) argue that race and ethnicity play a large role in France, although in a different and perhaps more subtle way than in the USA.

Sweden, Ove Sernhede speaks of territorial stigmatization as

‘... social and media discourses which demonize the terms of living in a way that causes fear and insecurity both internally and outside of these areas. The territorial stigmatization penetrates the area like a combat gas and poisons every corner of the suburb—schools, the social security office, clubs and associations, relations between people as well as the inner self-images of the individuals.’ (2009, p. 7, our translation)

While Sernhede’s combat gas metaphor might seem dramatic, it should be emphasized that Wacquant does argue that the theoretical framework, in particular the concept of territorial stigmatization, is applicable in Scandinavia (2007, p. 68) specifically in Sweden (2008b, p. 1).

Wacquant’s theory of urban marginality builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological understanding of the city as a field of struggle and domination in which social and geographical spaces are structured homologically (Bourdieu, 1999; Savage, 2011). Consequently, Wacquant describes the underlying theoretical understanding employed in Urban Outcasts as being preoccupied with ‘the deployment of space as a product and medium of power’ (2010, p. 165). More specifically, Wacquant’s concept of territorial stigmatization relies upon Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence, although the terminology would imply primary inspiration from Erving Goffman’s interactionist conception of stigma. Although Wacquant mentions both sources of inspiration (2007, 2008a, 2008b), the influence from Bourdieu is clear when Wacquant cites Bourdieu’s argument that:

‘... the stigmatized neighbourhood symbolically degrades those who live in it and they degrade it symbolically in return, since, being deprived of all the assets necessary to participate in the various social games, their common lot consists only of their common excommunication’. (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 129, as cited in Wacquant, 2007, p. 69)

We argue that by employing and operationalizing Bourdieu in the field of urban research, Wacquant inscribes himself in a sociology that has a strong emphasis on power, inequality and social structures. This Bourdieuan sociological tradition is quite different from Goffman’s interactionism and has different political implications. These traditions also entail quite different understandings of the scope and force of social degradation as expressed in the Bourdieuan conception of symbolic violence on the one hand and the interactionist conception of stigma on the other.

Symbolic violence is related to Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, which argues that dominated groups resign to and incorporate their social degradation, and eventually come to see themselves as being of less worth. This takes place through processes by which social structures, including criteria of social value, are embodied as mental structures, for example, women incorporating the degrading gaze of patriarchy (Bourdieu, 2001), and the ‘popular classes’ accepting that their aesthetic is worth less than that of the dominant classes (Bourdieu, 1996). 6

An interactionist understanding of stigma on the other hand implies internalization, not of worthlessness per se, but of awareness that others see one as being less worth. As a result, the stigmatized person comes to see him- or herself in an ambivalent way: he or she is aware of the way others look at him or her, but does not necessarily fully internalize the degrading gaze. On the contrary, stigmatized persons will sometimes feel that they do not have the negative characteristics they are ascribed (Goffman, 1963, p. 17). However, they cannot ignore that others devalue them, and in that sense, their social identity is spoiled. In other words, Goffman’s concept of stigma does not entail unambiguous internalization of the degrading gaze (1963).

Bringing this theoretical distinction back to the field of urban marginality, one question is to what extent residents in deprived areas internalize the stigma. Here we argue
that the way Wacquant employs territorial stigmatization is in fact closer to a Bourdieuan conception of symbolic violence than to an interactionist conception of stigma. The question to what extent the inhabitants in such areas tend to take over the degrading view of powerful outsiders is of course not the only difference between a Bourdieuan and an interactionist theoretical frame. Bourdieu offers theoretical tools well suited for understanding power relations on a structural scale, whereas social interactionism by and large tends to understand structures as the result of interactions. This difference also has political implications as Bourdieu’s work can be read as a radical critique of social structures and of the unequal distribution of social privileges, and ultimately as a call for social changes (1998). We consider the emphasis on social structures and the political implications, which the inspiration from Bourdieu facilitates, an important merit of Wacquant’s contribution.

However, the way structural and social domination is said to impact the conceptions of self among the dominated is not quite unproblematic in Bourdieu’s sociology. In other words, Wacquant’s reliance on Bourdieu is central to the issues discussed in this paper because Bourdieu has been criticized for underestimating agency among the underprivileged and overestimating the degree to which underprivileged groups conform to dominance (e.g. Hall, 1992; Savage et al., 2000; Prieur et al., 2008). Wacquant’s reliance on Bourdieu therefore calls for empirical scrutiny of whether residents in deprived areas internalize the degrading gaze of the dominant, or whether perhaps their perceptions of their neighbourhood can be more ambivalent.

**Context and method**

The data used in this paper were generated during The INTERLOC Project—Gender, Class and Ethnicity—Intersectionality and Local Citizenship. The project examines the interplay between the overall structures, discourses and policies in contemporary Danish society on the one hand, and belonging and local citizenship in relation to gender, class and ethnicity on the other (see http://www.interloc.aau.dk for a detailed description).

The empirical focus is Aalborg East, a deprived residential section of Aalborg. Aalborg is a medium-sized Danish city with approximately 120,000 inhabitants situated in the northern part of Denmark. Aalborg East, with 10,000 inhabitants, is the most multicultural area in Aalborg. The proportion of immigrants and descendants of immigrants is 18% (Skjøtt-Larsen, 2008) with considerable variation between sub-areas. The area’s minority population is made up of people with Somali, Palestinian, Turkish, Kurdish as well as a broad range of other ethnic backgrounds.

Aalborg East was built in a rural area east of Aalborg city during the late 1960s and 1970s. The area has a diverse environment with single-family houses, terraced housing and housing estates consisting of blocks of flats, and it is mixed in terms of owner-occupied and rented housing. The average economic income ranges third lowest among Aalborg’s 23 boroughs, and the rate of unemployment is above average for the entire Aalborg area. Compared to the rest of Aalborg, the population is quite young (Skjøtt-Larsen, 2008).

The area has been the centre of extensive neighbourhood renewal programmes since 1989. It has relatively few institutions and facilities, especially shops, and local workplaces are scarce. Relations between ethnic groups are peaceful, but there is little interaction between the different ethnic groups.

Survey data about the area’s social and symbolic profile show that Aalborg East is by far the most unpopular area in Aalborg: 37.9% of the city’s inhabitants who do not live there mention it as one of two places where they would not like to live (only 14% mention the second most unpopular area—the city centre) (Skjøtt-Larsen, 2008). However, measurements of the popularity of the area of actual residence shows that 65.1% of the people who do live in Aalborg...
East mention it as one of the two places they would like to live, which is higher than for the city centre (62.2%) and many other areas (Faber \textit{et al.}, 2008). Statistical measurements external to the INTERLOC project confirm this pattern. For instance, a 2010 survey found that 73% of the adults living in the housing estates were either ‘very happy’ or ‘happy’ to live in the area (Naboskabet.dk, 2010, p. 18). In short, various survey data indicate that Aalborg East is regarded as the least attractive area in Aalborg by outsiders, while most of its residents view it positively.

The INTERLOC project employed several empirical methods: the total material consists of 27 semi-structured qualitative interviews, ethnographic data from 37 meetings in two local organizations (one primarily for migrant women and one for all residents), analyses of 385 texts from local and national mass media, as well as the quantitative survey data referred to above ($n = 1174$).

The interviewees for the qualitative interviews were sampled through a combination of personal contacts, random sampling and snowballing. Snowballing was carried out from different starting points, for instance, social workers’ networks in ethnic minority groups. In total, the sample is quite diverse: 12 out of 27 interviewees had ethnic minority background (Somali, Palestinian, Kurdish, Turkish, Lebanese, Romanian and Nigerian); age varied from 22 to 74 years; 15 of the interviewees were women; educational status varied from no formal education to Master of Engineering. The interviews were conducted individually, except interviews of two married couples. Interviewees were asked about a wide range of themes related to belonging to the neighbourhood, such as moving to Aalborg East, everyday life in the area, feeling at home in the area, institutions and facilities, the quality of accommodation, community and networks and similarities with and differences from other areas.
Our sample of media texts stems from local as well as national written mass media from 1 January 2007 to 1 April 2009. The texts were sampled from the Danish national archive of mass media texts, Infomedia, using the words ‘Aalborg East’ as the only criterion for inclusion.

Aalborg East in the media

In order to examine whether Aalborg East is subject to territorial stigmatization, we analysed our sample of media texts about the area.

Looking at how the area is constructed in media texts with no concrete relation to the area is informative about the way Aalborg East is commonly perceived in the social geography of Aalborg: in October 2007 a homicide involving a random victim was committed in a western part of Aalborg commonly referred to as Vestbyen. The main local newspaper, Nordjyske, ran an article about the residents’ reactions. One was quoted for the following remark: ‘It’s scary that stuff like that happens in Vestbyen. I thought stuff like that only happened in Aalborg East’ (Nordjyske, ‘Brutalt mord ryster Aalborg Vestby’, 28 October 2007).

The appearance of Aalborg East in articles without actual relation to the area illustrates the use of Aalborg East as a negative point of reference in the social geography of Aalborg. The negative image was also clear in media texts related directly to the area. While some stories are neutral or positive, two types of media coverage draw attention.

The first type we call paradoxical stories. They are often positive in their overall approach, but entail an implicit negative description of the area; for example, stories about positive things happening in Aalborg East as an exception (implying that the reader is assumed not to expect positive things to happen there). They can also take the form of problem-solving stories, constructing Aalborg East as an essentially problematic area. A typical problem-solving story is about a local social project pairing up young men in conflict with the law with housing estate caretakers as a combined social initiative and after-school job. When addressing one of these young men, we are informed that:

‘He has also got a kind of counsellor. Someone who can show him how to behave on the labour market, which so many living in Aalborg East are excluded from.’ (Nordjyske, ‘AALBORG ØST: PROJEKT: Hverdagens helte i 9220 Skoledrenge i lømmelalderen jobtræner hos garvede viceværter’, 16 November 2008)

The positive problem-solving story contains a negative construction of the area as a residence of the misbehaving unemployed. The media coverage of the current neighbourhood renewal project, Project 9220 Aalborg East, also constructs the area as problematic. At the outset of the project, the small local newspaper, Vejgaard Avis, ran an article with the telling headline ‘Aalborg East Needs to Improve its Image’. A picture accompanying the text said:

‘Maybe there is light at the end of the tunnel for Aalborg East. A new plan for the area has as its vision that the neighbourhood should be perceived and described as a good place to live and that its residents are well-integrated into the Danish society.’ (Vejgaard Avis, 27 February 2008)

According to the text, the residents are not integrated into Danish society and, to stay in the metaphorical language of the article, at the moment Aalborg East is in deep darkness. The media coverage of Project 9220 Aalborg East generally consists of positive stories about social problems now being handled. However, to produce a story about problem solving, it is also necessary to focus on problems, thereby reproducing the negative image. Some of our informants are well aware of this. As Almas, a 30-year-old student born in Turkey, explains:

‘As soon as they start projects about Aalborg East, the rumours start. Because “why is it,
when Aalborg is that big, that such projects are only ever carried out in Aalborg East?” (Interview, March 2009)

These apparently positive stories reproduce an image of Aalborg East as an essentially problematic area. They illustrate Wacquant’s point that social projects can, paradoxically, be stigmatizing in themselves (1996a, 2008b).

The second type of stories addressed here is unambiguously negative, and greatly outnumbers the paradoxical stories. The most significant stories are about dysfunctional schools, eviction of ‘criminal’ tenants, and about Aalborg East as an insecure area dominated by crime and trouble. One cluster of negative articles in the local media addresses the local schools. In 2008, there is particular focus on a specific school, described as a rough institution where teachers are routinely harassed by pupils with transgressive behaviour. Another cluster of negative articles is about eviction of ‘criminal tenants’. One of the local housing associations went to court to have a number of families described as strongly anti-social evicted. After the trial, which the housing association won, the national newspaper Politiken wrote:

‘Against all odds, the housing association Himmerland succeeded in having eight criminal families evicted from their apartments in Aalborg East. The members of the families have terrorised their neighbours and the area with burglaries, muggings and arson for years.’ (Politiken, ‘Otte kriminelle familier smidt ud’, 3 February 2008)

The national tabloid Ekstra Bladet covered the case under the heading ‘Horror Families Thrown Out’ (3 February 2008).

A third cluster of negative articles directly addresses crime and violence in the form of a robbery against the café in the local cultural centre ‘Trekanten, ticket fraud, drug-related crime and arson. One typical article is about ‘young Somali men’, who are supposedly the perpetrators of several robberies. This article is an example of the way the area is portrayed as the home of ‘criminal immigrant young men’. The motif is especially prevalent in a number of articles covering the conflict between a group of ethnic minority young men and the regulars of the area’s only pub. Here the young men often appear as an ethnified category. An illustrative example of this is an article with the headline ‘Young People are Ravaging Aalborg East’ in the local newspaper Nordjyske (‘AALBORG: Unge hærger Aalborg Øst, Chikane: Unge fra 12 år og opefter hærger lige nu Aalborg Øst med chikane mod borgere samt hærværk’, 9 September 2008). While the headline contains no hint of ethnicity, the content of the article does: the owner of the pub is quoted as saying that he overheard several of the young men say: ‘The stupid Danes. They are asking for it. They can just stop drinking.’ The article then goes on to suggest that the owner is ‘powerless against the ravaging of the young men’.

The article furthermore informs the reader that ‘Molotov cocktails’ were thrown against the pub, and that people as young as 12 are ravaging the area every evening. It continues:

‘The regulars are afraid. If they can throw Molotov cocktails at the door as they did on Saturday, what will be next?—is the common concern among the regulars.’

The perceived aggressiveness of the young ethnic minority men is here constructed in opposition to the powerlessness of the frightened ethnic majority person, through a discourse equating a specific intersection of age, gender and ethnicity with aggression and violence. This article illustrates how these young men constitute an important focus in discourses that racialize the area.

In such articles, discourses related to ethnicity, age, gender and crime intersect. The categories at play, each a potential sign of trouble, intersect into a complex sign whose symbolic weight is more than the sum of its parts. As Claire Alexander, who has analysed the relation between public representations and the formation of criminalized youth groups in a British context, has pointed out, such discourses draw upon
‘... three interwoven strands: ethnicity, masculinity and youth. Each of these facets is posited in and of itself as constituting a problem—the coalescence of all three leads to prophesies of social doom.’ (Alexander, 2000, p. 12)

Rikke Andreassen (2005) has analysed media communication in Danish television and newspapers and found that young ethnic minority men are often depicted as threatening, aggressive, violent and out of pedagogical reach. The process of territorial stigmatization of Aalborg East draws much of its power from the intersectional working of age, gender and ethnicity, in the sense that it relies on discourses about the stereotypical criminal, young, black, ethnic minority man.

The racialization of the area is also clear in its nickname ‘Bangladesh’, which some of our interviewees are occasionally confronted with. To Danes who only encounter ‘Bangladesh’ in superficial media reports about natural disasters, underdeveloped countries and Third World poverty, the term will probably also discursively be tied to images of chaos and overpopulation, constructing a metaphorical connection to disorganization, in contrast to the Danish welfare state. It may also have underlying class connotations, but it is most explicitly and obviously related to ethnicity.

The nickname, in combination with the media focus on dangerous, ethnic minority young men, points towards the importance of cultural racism (Blaut, 1992; Wren, 2001) for understanding the territorial stigmatization of Aalborg East. While we do not wish to romanticize the actual social problems of the area, they are not on a level that would rationally explain the area’s image. As Skjøtt-Larsen notes, on most ‘objective’ social indicators, the area is ‘placed below average, but not lower than many other and more anonymous areas [of the municipality]’ (2008, p. 26). It therefore needs to be explained why Aalborg East is perceived as a bad area. Although the stigma cannot be
reduced to an effect of race or ethnicity, cultural racism goes a long way towards explaining the stigmatization of Aalborg East. Hence, we comply with the authors mentioned above who suggest that Wacquant underemphasizes the role played by race in the French/European context (Tissot, 2007; Pattillo, 2009; Nobles, 2010).

Cultural racism is well documented in Denmark (Horst, 1991; Hervik, 1999; Yilmaz, 1999; Røgilds, 2002). Carl-Ulrik Schierup (1993) has characterized Danish discourses about ‘immigrants’ as an example of ‘new racism’ based on a ‘logic of cultural difference’; Karen Wren (2001) has argued that cultural racism has found fertile ground in Denmark, resulting in a widespread popular discourse constructing especially Muslims as not belonging. In such discourses, being Danish is often equated with Christianitv and therefore incompatible with Islam; likewise Peter Hervik (2004) has described the popular discourses of many Danes as a ‘Cultural World of Unbridgeable Differences’ in which the assumed culture of so-called ‘foreigners’ is constructed as radically different from and inferior to Danish culture; and Rikke Andreassen (2005) has analysed Danish media coverage of ethnic minorities as preoccupied with crime, oppression of women, aggression and an assumed lack of integration. Such discourses are likely to feed into common understandings of the relation between ethnicity and urban space (Røgilds, 1994; Diken, 1998).

The paradox is that Aalborg East is constructed as an ‘immigrant’ area, in spite of the fact that ethnic Danes make up 82% of the population (Skjøtt-Larsen, 2008). This suggests that it is not the actual proportion of ‘immigrants’ that is decisive, but rather their very presence and the relational and relative fact that there are more of them here than in other parts of Aalborg. In Denmark, visible ethnic minority presence in urban space, however small it might be, seems enough to evoke the stigmatizing popular myth of the dark, dangerous, immigrant ghetto.

**Voices from within**

With the negative mass media coverage documented in the section above, we might assume that the interviewees would internalize the negative gaze of the dominant, if territorial stigmatization works as symbolic violence. However, following one of Wacquant’s earlier programmatic prescriptions, it is necessary to scrutinize whether ‘the loss of a sense of place in territories of urban exile [is] an artefact of distant observation or [...] a deeply felt reality’ (1996b, p. 129). After all, as Wassenberg has pointed out, internal and external images of such areas can be very different (2004, p. 227). Our interviews contain rich information on the interviewees’ perception of and belonging to the neighbourhood.

When asked whether she is happy to live in Aalborg East, Jasmina, a 26-year-old teacher with Somali background, answers:

‘I am, actually. I don’t feel it, I hear a lot about Aalborg East, sure, but I don’t feel any of it. I like to live here and I don’t think it’s … here’s peace and quiet. I like it that I meet children in the street in the summer for instance …’

(Interview, January 2009)

Another interviewee, Jannie, a 33-year-old ethnic Danish student who lived in Aalborg East as a child and has recently moved back, is asked whether she feels at home in the area. She confirms that she does, and then goes on to elaborate that she likes the area because she knows a lot of people and they greet each other in the streets. She also explains that a lot of young people move back to Aalborg East when they reach adulthood because:

‘You have an area here, which is pretty special, right? You have all the green areas and the pathways. And still it’s no more than 20 minutes to the city centre.’ (Interview, August 2009)

Hanne, a 70-year-old ethnic Danish retired skilled worker and active Social Democrat,
is also asked whether she feels at home in the area:

Interviewer: ‘Would you say that you feel at home in Aalborg East?’
Hanne: ‘Yes, I do.’
Interviewer: ‘Could you imagine moving?’
Hanne: ‘No!’
Interviewer: ‘Never?’
Hanne: ‘I could do without Humlebakken when I’m biking. But otherwise, I would like to stay in Aalborg East [laughs]. We’ve talked about it sometimes. But I’m not going to move to the centre of the city and I don’t want to move to the centre of the city either.’ (Interview, June 2009)

Araz, a 61-year-old ethnic Kurdish man who came to Denmark as a migrant worker in the 1970s, feels at home both in Denmark and in Aalborg East:

Interviewer: ‘Would you say that you feel at home here?’
Araz: ‘I’ve lived in Denmark for a lot of years.’
Interviewer: ‘But here on …’
Araz: ‘[name of road], I feel at home here too. I think it’s a really good place to live.’ (Interview, October 2009)

Jesper, a 35-year-old ethnic Danish Master of Engineering, is also asked if he is content with the place he lives:

Interviewer: ‘Are you happy to live where you live?’
Jesper: ‘Yes, otherwise I wouldn’t have stayed there for 10 years, would I? Actually I haven’t … I mean, I haven’t had any problems with living where I live. It fulfills all my needs. I don’t have any inconveniences from living out here. And I’ve enjoyed seeing it again every day when I return [from work on the north side of Aalborg].’ (Interview, September 2009)

As these five excerpts illustrate, the interviews show no clear-cut internalization of the degrading gaze. On the contrary, all but one interviewee in the qualitative interviews...
express a positive view of Aalborg East. This one exception is Grethe, a 63-year-old ethnic Danish retired shop assistant, who expresses fear of moving about in the neighbourhood, thus confirming Wacquant’s point that territorial stigmatization can cause inhabitants to mutually distrust each other (2008a, 2008b, p. 20). However, the remaining interviewees consider the area a good place to live, although they are clearly aware that the area is being looked down on. Importantly, as the excerpts above illustrate, this is true for ethnic Danish as well as for ethnic minority informants. It is even true for Peter, a 22-year-old ethnic Dane training to become an electrician, who moved to the area out of necessity and had a negative impression of the area before moving there:

Interviewer: ‘Would you say that you feel at home out here, or …?’
Peter: ‘Yes, I do.’
Interviewer: ‘You are never afraid or anything?’
Peter: ‘No. It took some time before I felt properly at home out here. At the beginning, it was just a flat where you went to sleep. But now I feel totally at home and I like living here. I have no problems living here. My perception has changed really much by living here. Before I moved out here, I had a lot of prejudices about the area, because of all the problems and stuff that’s out here, and they steal. There are a lot of immigrants and I had a lot of prejudices about that. But they have disappeared.’ (Interview, April 2009)

However, the interviewees are not unaffected by the territorial stigma. They sometimes encounter it in their everyday life. In mixed contacts (Goffman, 1963) with outsiders, residents of Aalborg East are frequently made aware that they are looked down on. Paul, who was mentioned in the introduction, talks about how the stigma used to be related to discrimination.11 He explains that in the past residents of Aalborg East had problems getting credit when shopping in the city centre.

Some interviewees manage the stigma in a somewhat indifferent, instrumental way. For instance, Jesper, who was introduced above, when asked if he plans to move:

‘Yes, I surely would. That’s because when I’m going to move, I’ll want to buy a house or something. And then I’m going to move away from the area to protect my investment in that house. It is pure speculation, in terms of where I think real estate prices will stay high. In some parts of Aalborg, Aalborg East has a bad reputation and that can affect house prices.’ (Interview, September 2009)

As shown above, Jesper is happy to live in the area but on a strategic and instrumental level, he is aware that the area is stigmatized and he does take it into account. We consider this a form of ambivalence. Other interviewees are more emotionally affected by the stigma, for example, Tonny, a 43-year-old ethnic Danish skilled worker:

Interviewer: ‘When one reads the media coverage of Aalborg East, it’s often negative publicity [. . .]. What do you think about that?’
Tonny: ‘That makes me very sad. That really gets to me. It pisses me off when some of my colleagues [. . .] make snide remarks about Aalborg East [. . .] That really makes me angry.’
Interviewer: ‘Try to explain what they say.’
Tonny: ‘Like, if there’s been some violence or something. Then it’s “typical Aalborg East”. Or if there are problems with immigrants, “Typical Aalborg East” people say [. . .]’
(Interview, October 2009)

Tonny is saddened and ‘pissed off’ when he is confronted with the negative image of Aalborg East in his everyday life. He is therefore not unaffected by it; however, there is no sign of resignation or internalization of the negative image of the neighbourhood. On the contrary, he becomes angry and defiant. This defiance might be one element in understanding why Tonny and his wife choose to stay in the area when planning to move to a house when their children grow older. In fact, Tonny seems quite empowered, as he is an active citizen involved in the local football club and a local neighbourhood council.
Other informants experience being held accountable for living in Aalborg East. Almas, who was introduced above, explains that she has not experienced anything negative in the area, but finds that the negative media coverage is ‘actually bad for us, because when we’re at work, or some other place, and we say that we’re from Aalborg East, the first thing we’re asked is “But how can you? Aren’t you afraid to live in Aalborg East?”’ When asked for examples, she explains:

‘Well, [they] have heard that there’s a lot of trouble and that there’s a lot of crime in Aalborg East. That’s the only thing they are afraid of. They can’t understand why I would want to live in Aalborg East when I have a child. And “There’s so much crime in Aalborg East.” Then I’ve said: I’ve lived here for 16 years, and I’ve never experienced any crime. Well, actually once our dish receiver was stolen from the garden, but apart from that I’ve never experienced anything.’ (Interview, March 2009)

In her everyday life, Almas is confronted with the discursive construction of Aalborg East as an area characterized by crime and trouble. For Almas, this construction has an extra dimension as it is questioned whether it is responsible of her to live in the area with a child. The discursive construction of the dangerous area challenges Almas’ gendered position as a mother able to take care of a child in an appropriate way. She does, however, not internalize the negative image of the area; in fact, she explains that she has tried living in the city centre, but she did not like it. She prefers Aalborg East where it is ‘nice and quiet’. There are, however, also traces of ambivalences in Almas’ interview accounts. Although she prefers living in Aalborg East, she sends her son to a school in the city centre and prefers him not to bring the neighbourhood playmates into her home. She considers them trouble-makers. This way of relating to other inhabitants lends some support to Wacquant’s claim that territorial stigmatization can cause distance and internal dividing lines (2007, 2008a).

**Figure 4** Skallerupvej, a road near Almas’ home
(Photo: Mark Juul Nielsen)
Many interviewees and residents we met during fieldwork hold a critical view of the media, which they feel misrepresent the area. For instance, Hanne, who was introduced above, answers as follows when asked how she feels about the way the media are treating the neighbourhood:

‘I think they are treating the area really badly, and I think they always did. Maybe it’s not as bad as it used to be. But for a number of years, it was like, if something drastic happened in [nearby part of Aalborg], then it was Aalborg East. That wasn’t much fun to have to put up with. It has gotten better but I don’t know. If something [bad] happens out here, I’m sure they will be here. But if something good happens, they’ll probably not show up.’ (Interview, June 2009)

In the excerpt, Hanne articulates a critique of the media representation of the area. Such critiques, expressed by many of our interviewees, represent an embryonic form of opposition. At the same time, this is an articulation of relative autonomy in the sense that Hanne does not accept or resign to the dominant’s negative view of the area; on the contrary, she questions those who produce this image. We will return to this autonomy in the discussion below.

Generally, our interviewees become sad, frustrated or angry when confronted with the territorial stigma. They do not resign to or internalize the negative description of the area, but some express ambivalence, as Almas and Jesper above. However, that does not mean that Wacquant’s description of the consequences of territorial stigmatization can be entirely rejected, as the construction of internal dividing lines present in some interviews can be interpreted as an effect of the stigmatization (2007, 2008a). While all interviewees have a positive view of their immediate neighbourhood, some have a negative view of other sub-areas of Aalborg East. One example is Samira, a 40-year-old woman born in an Arab country and studying to become a pedagogue:

Interviewer: ‘One thing I would like to ask you about is that sometimes the newspapers write a lot of bad things about Aalborg East.’

Samira: ‘Yes, I’ve read that a lot of times. It’s because of that area [name of road] […] and [name of different road], where there are young immigrants. Isn’t it? There’s always stories about them [in the newspaper]. I don’t know whether to say yes or no, but that’s the truth. Because those parents don’t look after their children in a decent way. Maybe they haven’t got time for them …’ (Interview, May 2009)

Samira’s account can be interpreted as a way to manage territorial stigma; as a pre-reflexive strategy in Bourdieu’s definition of that term (2005), which projects the stigma onto someone else, thereby symbolically cleansing oneself. As Wacquant points out, one reaction to stigmatization can be to thrust ‘the stigma onto a faceless, demonized other’ (2007, p. 68). This way on attenuating the stigma can be interpreted as an attempt to symbolically clean off the stigma and emphasize one’s own moral worth in contrast to ‘the immigrant family dwelling in an adjacent building’ or the ‘youths from across the street’ (Wacquant, 2007, p. 68). In other words, this finding supports one aspect of Wacquant’s theory. The reaction to stigmatization most clearly present in our interviews is then the construction of internal dividing lines within Aalborg East. At the same time, it should be noted how Samira constructs respectability through discourses about parenting. In Samira’s account, the stigma is at first glance ascribed to young immigrants, but improper parenting—and parents—is ultimately to blame. In a sense, Samira’s strategy is gendered, as it is closely linked to her identity as mother as a position of dignity and respectability (cf. Skeggs, 1997). Samira’s account also entails a class distinction in the Bourdieuan sense of that concept (1996). In the internal geography of Aalborg East, a large road, Humlebakken, cutting the area into two plays a large role: people on the north side are often considered ‘trash’ by those on the south side, while north siders often consider south siders ‘posh’. Samira lives on the privileged south side and the roads she mentions are on the north side.
She therefore draws a class distinction, which is also a geographical distinction, within the area. Finally, it can be argued that Samira also addresses the popular myth of Aalborg East as a problematic immigrant area: having ethnic minority status herself, she produces a distinction between good and bad ethnic minority persons, thereby distancing herself from the stereotypical Aalborg East immigrant.

**Conclusion and discussion**

As John Law (2004) points out, our messy social world rarely allows for clear-cut social research conclusions. That is also the case here. We have documented territorial stigmatization of Aalborg East in the media, and we have suggested that ethnicity and race play a significant role for such processes, also in Denmark. However, with the exception of the construction of internal dividing lines, which can be interpreted as a way of managing territorial stigma and which are present in only a few of our interviews, our analysis provides little support for a theory of clear-cut internalization of territorial stigma in the case of Aalborg East. Our interviewees do not resign to the gaze of the dominant and they do not appear to be ‘deprived of a language, a repertoire of shared images and signs’ (Wacquant, 2008b, p. 245). On the contrary, they have a positive view of the area and consider it a good place to live. Ethnic Danes as well as ethnic minorities generally express positive belonging to the area. Survey data likewise indicate that whereas the area has a low status among outsiders, the residents are generally content to live in Aalborg East. However, our informants are well aware that they are being looked down on. This makes them angry or sad, and sometimes they develop a critical view of the media. In some cases, defiance may even lead to local empowerment up against territorial stigmatization. What is internalized, then, is not the discrediting itself, but rather awareness of being discredited. This awareness sometimes results in inhabitants having ambivalent experiences of the area, in the sense that they have to live with and take into account that outsiders perceive the place they live negatively. However, a theory of territorial stigmatization, working as symbolic dominance, has limited applicability in our case. Instead, we find a relative autonomy in the sense that although the residents of Aalborg East cannot ignore the stigma, they do not come to see their place of residence as a bad place. This finding is paralleled by research in similar areas in Denmark (Gitz-Johansen, 2000; Mazanti, 2002; Jørgensen and Molholt, 2007; Hansen et al., 2010; Jørgensen, 2010; Koefoed and Simonsen, 2010).

While we acknowledge the value of Wacquant’s work, our conclusion suggests some points where critical urban sociology may need to go beyond or adjust Wacquant. Firstly, the conclusion paradoxically confirms Wacquant’s overall argument that the role of the state matters for the dynamics of urban marginality (2008b): for a number of years Aalborg East has been the centre of neighbourhood renewal programmes, and while such programmes are not unproblematic, and may, as Wacquant suggests, contribute to stigmatization, they also solve concrete problems. Importantly, since the early 1990s social projects in Aalborg East have focused on supporting pride and dignity of place among the residents. It is also a fact that local state agencies, such as social workers and the local police, actively campaign against the negative image of the area. The relative absence of internalized territorial stigma suggests that supportive local welfare state policies might strengthen local autonomy. However, the persistence of the negative image among outsiders may also indicate that image-building programmes have a larger effect internally than externally.13 Furthermore, it should be mentioned that pointing to the potential of local political action is not an argument against the necessity of larger scale social and structural change.

Secondly, the conclusion taps into the debate about the applicability of Wacquant’s
framework outside the national contexts where it was developed. It is a paradox that the work of an author who emphasizes the importance of national contexts (2008b; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999) is now in the process of being universalized. While we do not wish to romanticize Danish or Scandinavian political culture, it has been argued to be more egalitarian than both American and French political culture because it has historically been influenced by organization from below, thus ascribing positive value to the culture of the less privileged classes (DanielSEN, 1998; Skarpeness, 2007). The relatively high degree of collective organization among underprivileged classes may, in interplay with a supportive state, facilitate cultural autonomy. Hence, Aalborg East has a history of collective mobilization, and the housing movement with ties to the Social Democratic Party is relatively strong here. It is possible that this can explain the positive perception of the area articulated by some interviewees, who may understand the area through a lens of working-class pride. This explanation, however, is complicated by the presence of cultural racism. In reality, the anti-elitist working-class culture of such neighbourhoods, including Aalborg East, is implicitly white and Danish. It therefore fails to explain why ethnic minorities view the area positively. However, our data suggest that Aalborg East is experienced as an area where it is not uncommon to have ethnic minority background, and where ethnic minorities therefore find that they can blend in and are not constructed as strangers (Christensen and Jensen, 2011; Koefoed and SimonSEN, 2010).

Thirdly, the empirical conclusions reported in this paper might lead to a reconsideration of the potentials and pitfalls of applying a theory of symbolic violence to the research field of urban marginality. In our point of view, drawing upon a Bourdieuan sociological tradition that takes power and social structures seriously is one of the merits of Wacquant’s contribution to urban sociology.

Figure 5 This tunnel is one of only two points that allow pedestrians and cyclists to cross Humlebakken (Photo: Mark Juul Nielsen)
However, the conception of symbolic violence, which we have argued is at the core of Wacquant’s concept of territorial stigmatization, might sometimes be problematic. While we have no reason to question Wacquant’s empirical findings, we find it necessary to challenge the assumption that underprivileged people as a general principle internalize or incorporate the degrading gaze of the dominant. Reflecting back on the criticisms of Wacquant raised by Caldeira (2009), Pattillo (2009) and Gilbert (2010), the question is whether such a theory is able to grasp the often ambivalent experience residents of deprived areas have of their neighbourhoods, and whether the understanding of the force and scope of power inscribed in this concept risks theoretically erasing the agency of the urban poor.

Finally, let us emphasize that our conclusions should not be confused with relativism. Social structures and power relations condition the life of many inhabitants of Aalborg East negatively, even if territorial stigmatization does not have the force and scope suggested by Wacquant. Territorial stigma may have negative consequences without being internalized by the underprivileged. In terms of regulating life chances through discrimination, it is enough that outsiders consider an area problematic (Warr, 2005a; cf. Dangschat, 2009, p. 838). Nevertheless, the relative absence of internalization observed in our study does provide some hope of collective solidarity or local empowerment.

Notes

1. All names in the text are pseudonyms.
2. Interestingly, Wacquant raises the theme of internalization as an empirical question in early writings (1996b), whereas later writings seem to argue from an assumption of internalization.
3. Alternatively, Wacquant sometimes speaks of four structural logics producing advanced urban marginality: a macrosocial dynamic of occupational dualization and resurgence of inequality; an economic dynamic of desocialization of wage labour; a political dynamic of the recoiling of the welfare state; and a spatial dynamic of concentration and defamation (2008b, pp. 262ff.).
4. See also Goffman on the related concept of disidentifiers (1963, pp. 60ff.).
5. See Christensen (2009) for an overview of the concepts of belonging and nonbelonging.
6. See also Wacquant’s discussion of the homology between social and mental structures (2008b, p. 197).
7. See also Musterd (2008, pp. 112ff.) on the pitfalls of neighbourhood targeting.
8. See also Hastings (2004), who warns against pathological discourses that explain stigma with the assumed moral and social pathologies of the urban poor.
9. Jannie is referring to the well-developed system of paths that makes it easy for pedestrians and cyclists to move around Aalborg East.
10. Humlebakken is a road leading to the centre of the city and characterized by heavy traffic. Hanne is referring to the fact Humlebakken lacks cycle lanes, which are otherwise standard to main roads in Danish cities.
11. Link and Phelan (2001) argue for more analytical attention to discrimination as a consequence of stigmatization.
12. Samira is a single mother of three children.
13. Explanations for this may exist on several levels. One very concrete reason may be that the means the neighbourhood renewal programmes use to support local belonging, for instance, photo or poster competitions emphasizing the positive sides of Aalborg East, rely on micromedia that are distributed in the area from door to door and are unlikely to reach outsiders. On a more abstract level, it can be argued that small- or medium-scale neighbourhood renewal programmes rarely have the power to counter widespread negative images that draw upon powerful perceptions of the dangerous ‘immigrant’ and/or underclass other.
14. Contrary to our expectations, we found that ethnic minorities experienced little or no everyday racism in the area, although they often felt excluded by the cultural racist discourses on an overall national level. As a consequence, most articulate a high degree of belonging on the local level, and a low degree of belonging on the national level (Christensen and Jensen, 2011).

References


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