

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, 408 pp. \$US 24.95 paper (978-0-8223-4422-3), \$US 89.95 hardcover (978-0-8223-4404-9)

With *Punishing the Poor*, Loïc Wacquant makes an important and timely contribution in bringing attention to prisons as a core political institution of neoliberal states. Amid the paradigmatic dominance of Foucauldian governmentality approaches in the critical criminological/sociological literature, he argues for an analytical return to the state and combines the materialism of Marx and Engels with the symbolic perspectives of Bourdieu and Durkheim. Focusing on the US as a “living laboratory” of the emergence of neoliberalism, Wacquant argues that at the core of the US experiment is an expansion of the penal sector. Against dominant assumptions, he demonstrates that this is not a response to rising crime but rather to the social insecurities of neoliberalism, particularly the pervasiveness of precarious labour. Drawing on Bourdieu, Wacquant argues that the expansion of the penal apparatus as part of the market-oriented “Right hand” of the state fills the void left by the post-Fordist withdrawal of the “Left hand’s” social programs. The penal apparatus is key to the normalization of precarious labour by compelling peoples’ acceptance of precarious work under the threat of increasingly punitive consequences for those who leave, reject or are excluded from this labour market. This occurs through exclusion from social assistance programs (workfare) and incorporation into the expanding carceral apparatus (prisonfare). This “double regulation” of poverty primarily targets black women and men, materially and symbolically. Wacquant describes the neoliberal US state as a “centaur state” in which this authoritarian paternalistic “body” targeted at the (sub)proletariat symbiotically coexists with a liberal “head” turned to the middle and upper classes. Rather than a withdrawal of the state, he argues that there has been a re-assertion of state power through “law and order pornography” that sensationalizes crime and insecurity in order to dramatize the state’s capacity and commitment to control it.

In Part I, Wacquant traces the ebbing of the social security apparatus and the emergence of the carceral state to a common discourse of moral individualism integral to crafting a neoliberal state. Detailed analysis of

the 1996 *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act* identifies it as a key mechanism in creating a “new state apparatus joining workfare and prisonfare into a single institutional mesh entrusted with the double regulation of poverty on the work and crime fronts” (p. 108). Part II focuses on the expansion of the penal apparatus since the mid-1970s, despite stable or declining crime rates. With mass incarceration, rehabilitation ideals have been replaced by managerialism, privatization, and largely symbolic measures such as cost recovery from inmates and worsened prison living conditions. In this “centaur state” penal expansion has intensified the targeting of historically stigmatized and excluded populations: the African-American (sub)proletariat and sex offenders. This targeting is taken up in Part III. Wacquant describes the prison as a possible fourth “peculiar institution” — following black ghettos, Jim Crow segregation, and slavery — as devices of ethno-racial exclusion and exploitation of the African American (sub)proletariat. Wacquant then describes penal expansion’s application to those convicted of sexual offences, especially pedophilia. He argues that the demonization and surveillance of the “stranger pedophile” works to re-enshrine the traditional nuclear family amidst neoliberal contradictions and the gains made by the feminist movement that have strained it. This interesting argument underscores the symbolic functions of the penal apparatus, but it seems detached from the rest of the book. The final part compares the US and France, which Wacquant argues is also on a trajectory towards mass imprisonment. It is fuelled in part by the importation of US academic and expert knowledge about “crime control,” which has transnational hegemonic status. The promise of a comparative analysis falls short as much of the final chapter refers to the US experience.

In the “Theoretical Coda” that concludes the book, Wacquant provides a clear outline of his theoretical framework and conceptualization of the neoliberal state. First, he argues that there must be a rejection of the assumption that penal policies are a direct response to rising crime. Second, welfare and penal policies must be joined in analysis because they are two sides of governance that draw on “behaviorist philosophy” to enforce moral individualism through “deterrence, surveillance, stigma, [and] graduated sanction” against the same population. The aim of this double regulation is to “normalize, supervise and/or neutralize the destitute and disruptive fractions of the post-industrial proletariat” (p. 288). The third and broadest pillar of Wacquant’s theoretical framework is to bridge materialist and symbolic approaches for a “fully sociological” analysis of the penal apparatus. He ends by comparing his approach to the theoretical contributions of Bourdieu, Piven and Cloward, Foucault, Garland and Harvey.

Wacquant makes a coherent and important argument in *Punishing the Poor*, but there are some weak points. First, his assessment of Foucault's contribution relies solely on Foucault's theorizing of sovereign power in *Discipline and Punish*, ignoring later work where the triangular relationship of sovereign power, discipline and governmentality is not inconsistent with Wacquant's own approach. Second, despite adopting Bourdieu's concept of "bureaucratic field" that rejects a view of "the state" as a singular entity, he admits in the prologue to treating the state as "monolithic" and his analysis sometimes verges on reifying "the state" as an entity (re)crafting itself. Consequently, his conception of an "assistential-carceral mesh" does not seem so different from the concept of "prison-industrial complex" that he explicitly rejects and criticizes as an "activist myth" throughout the book. He justifies this by the imperative of raising awareness about what is currently happening, but this rationale is weakened by his criticism of activists' use of the "bogeyman of the prison-industrial complex." Finally, Wacquant's discussion of possibilities for resistance to the emergence of the penal state is welcome, but it appears limited to academics and professionals. Resistance and organizing "from below" is dismissed as having been "variegated if remarkably ineffectual in the United States" (p. xix).

By bringing the state back into the picture and by focusing on the disproportionate targeting of punitive measures against racialized and economically marginalized groups, *Punishing the Poor* is an important addition and counter-balance to existing literature addressing neoliberal penal and social policy. The hold of punitive law-and-order discourse across the political spectrum makes Wacquant's core arguments highly relevant to Canada. The Canadian state is in the midst of neoliberal carceral expansion and Wacquant's framework in *Punishing the Poor* can provide important insights for academic — and activist — interventions.

York University

Tia Dafnos

Tia Dafnos is a Phd candidate in the Department of Sociology at York University.

tdafnos@yorku.ca