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Government of Social Insecurity*, by Loïc Wacquant

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Book Reviews

Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity. By Loïc Wacquant. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. Pp. 408. \$89.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

Loïc Wacquant is probably the most theoretically provocative commentator writing on urban marginality today. *Punishing the Poor* further solidifies that reputation. The second in a trilogy that examines the nexus of contemporary class restructuring, racial division, and statecraft, *Punishing the Poor* is built from essays that stretch back over the past 10 years and more. It focuses specifically on the changing nature of U.S. poverty governance, detailing that change in a magisterial narrative that raises profoundly disturbing questions. The book's main thesis is that there has been a fundamental shift in recent decades away from liberal social policies of the 1960s to a more punitive approach to managing the poverty population, an approach facilitated by the racialization of the issue and the inculcation of what became the country's *idée fixe*: that those other people are not playing by the rules of white, middle-class society and are, therefore, not deserving of assistance (82). Wacquant calls the emerging regime a new "government of social insecurity." The new regime integrates welfare and criminal justice policies to address the advanced forms of marginality associated with deindustrialization and the implosion of manual labor markets. This shift attempts to address the accelerated isolation, poverty, and social insecurity endemic to inner-city, nonwhite neighborhoods. The new approach to managing urban marginality pushes society beyond the Keynesian state, which was focused on social distribution, to a neoliberal-paternalist regime of poverty governance that emphasizes punishing the misbehavior of the dispossessed concentrated in those marginalized neighborhoods.

Punishing the Poor is divided into four parts. First, it examines the decline of social assistance to the poor and the turn to a more punitive approach that is dramatically illustrated by the 1990s welfare reforms. Second, the book details the growth of increasingly strict law enforcement policies and the massive rise in incarceration, arguing that these increases were not the result of an upsurge in crime as much as they were fueled by a racialized backlash against the social advances of the 1960s, which were seen as rewarding the poor for bad behavior.

Third, the book considers how the punitive turn operates at a symbolic level to communicate that subordinate populations in general must practice personal responsibility and become market-compliant actors. Wacquant emphasizes that although incarceration removes people from the workforce, massive increases

in the rates of incarceration serve as a mighty source of symbolic messaging; they tell others in the targeted subordinate populations what their fate will be should they fail to toe the line and assume positions as compliant worker-citizens, despite the dwindling opportunities for social and economic advancement. The book includes a chapter on the symbolic politics associated with new policies for sex offenders and another chapter on the myths that mystify the symbolic dimensions of various law enforcement strategies. Last, the analysis points to how Western Europe (with France as a key example) is furtively beginning to follow the United States in taking a more punitive approach to the management of poverty. This shift is especially noteworthy in light of growing immigration by nonwhites to European countries. The result is a sweeping analysis suggesting the misguided basis for a transformation of the welfare state that is taking place on a global scale.

In this analysis, Wacquant draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "bureaucratic field" (xvii) to reconceptualize the state. Bourdieu portrays the state as a splintered entity that is given to acting in competing and contradictory ways, depending on who initiates what actions on behalf of the state. This reconceptualization enables Wacquant to build further on Bourdieu's distinction between the "left hand" and the "right hand" of the state (6); in this distinction, the left hand represents feminine, socially supportive policies and practices; the right hand represents the masculine and punitive side, which is given to behavioral regulation. Wacquant argues that, with the onset of advanced marginality in impoverished, inner-city, black neighborhoods, the state employs a "double regulation of the poor" (15). This regulation integrates the state's social welfare and penal poles in a coordinated effort that is focused on punishing subordinate populations for their failure to comply with social norms regarding personal responsibility. In the process of laying out this thesis, Wacquant details declines in welfare support, restrictions on access to aid, decreases in the number of people receiving assistance, and reductions in the amounts of aid dispensed. He shows the simultaneous increases in penal practices, including increased penalties for committing crimes, the stunning upsurge in incarceration, and the associated increases in spending for prisons. He convincingly demonstrates that the double regulation of the poor is tied to the racialization of the problems of poverty and that nonwhites are targeted for the most draconian effects of these policies.

The phrase "double regulation of the poor" is used to frame *Punishing the Poor* as an update of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's landmark book, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1971). In recent years, the best books on this topic seem to employ a very common practice: each attempts to portray itself as either building on or going beyond *Regulating the Poor* (see my review of Ellen Reese's *Backlash against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present*, in *Social Service Review* 80, no. 1 [March 2006]: 201–5). *Punishing the Poor* does a good job of summarizing Piven and Cloward's argument that, in market-centered societies, such as (and particularly) the United States, welfare serves political and economic functions. Welfare policies promote political stability and willingness to take low-wage work, but they swing cyclically in emphasizing one functional purpose over the other, and the emphasis at any particular moment depends on circumstances. Wacquant also does a good job of making the case that the United States has developed what amounts to a combined

approach that thoroughly integrates welfare and penal policies as part of broad project to take an increasingly punitive approach to poverty management. In the era of deindustrialization, as low-wage labor markets implode and the associated advanced marginality develops in poor, inner-city neighborhoods, the need arises for the integration of welfare and penal policy, not just to enforce work but to manage the general behavior of the poor.

The critique of Piven and Cloward reflects Wacquant's tendency to focus on his differences with analysts with whom he largely agrees and who helped to create the theoretical context for his work. For instance, Wacquant is at pains to suggest that his analysis highlights deficiencies in Michel Foucault's theorizing on the movement toward a "disciplinary society" (304). Wacquant emphasizes how the integration of welfare and penal policy has made welfare more punitive but not more disciplinary. The emphasis in the new regime is on punishment, which is strictly punitive. Discipline implies a concerted effort to use both penalties and rewards to get people to internalize standards for right conduct. Wacquant actually says many different things on this issue, but his main point is that penal policy is less interested today in the disciplinary designs associated with such goals as rehabilitating convicts and changing their behavior but, instead, more interested with the punitive practices related to locking up the poor, warehousing them, confining them in isolated neighborhoods, making them generally invisible, and diminishing the likelihood that they will pose a problem for the rest of society.

Yet, I prefer to see the current integration of welfare and penal policies as very much tied together by Foucault's concept of discipline. Several things make me say this. First, at the conceptual level, Wacquant himself emphasizes that the shift from the social supportive approach of the Keynesian welfare state to the behavior management approach of the new regime involves a shift from "people processing" to "people changing" (292). The new regime is not about simply quarantining the poor but most fundamentally about actively working to get the poor to change how they think and act. Welfare today is not just about limiting the conditions under which the poor receive assistance. It also is about conditioning that aid on the recipient's demonstration in making progress in changing outlook and behavior. Welfare offices are now sites of instruction in how to be a good citizen-worker; they did not have such functions in the past.

Second, on the penal side and at the empirical level, Wacquant's analysis again helps greatly to show that the warehousing of those convicted of crimes is no longer the main activity of the massive criminal justice system that has developed in recent decades. Over half of those in the criminal justice system today are not in prison but on probation or parole. They are under surveillance and constantly monitored to ensure that they are acting responsibly. When they do not, they are sent back to prison, as is often the case (see 134). And the symbolic messages that Wacquant sees being disseminated to subordinate populations generally suggest that the disciplinary regime works at a level beyond the criminalized and welfare-dependent populations. Most of those in the subordinated class absorb those symbolic messages to toe the line, even as they remain poor. Although the disciplinary system for changing people's behavior may not create personally responsible citizens who are self-sufficient economic actors, it does seem to be working hard to impose discipline, even as it fails.

Wacquant asserts that the new regime variously possesses neoliberal and pa-

ternalist qualities. Turning once again to differences with those in his camp, he does an excellent job of critiquing definitions of neoliberalism by David Harvey and others. Relying on research by Jamie Peck, Wacquant convincingly shows that neoliberalism in practice is not so much about rolling back the Keynesian welfare state as about rolling out a transformed regime that is geared to disciplining subordinate populations, so that the privileged can participate easily in the globalizing economy. For Wacquant, neoliberalism may involve a *laissez-faire* attitude for those on the top, but it also involves a strong dose of paternalist punishment for those who do not meet the threshold requirements for participation in the low-wage labor markets of the globalizing economy.

Yet, once again, Wacquant's narrative veers in multiple directions, providing different understandings of the shape of the neoliberal-paternalist regime. At times, he suggests that the new regime is largely a national affair by which the state deregulates the market and then relies on punitive practices to mop up the human detritus created by a deregulated economy in an era of globalization. In this formulation, the state's neoliberal retrenchment is followed by a paternalist crackdown on the marginalized population left behind in a changing economy. At other times, Wacquant uses the term "rollout" to imply that, from the beginning, the neoliberal-paternalist regime has involved a paternalist assertion of state power to take a punitive approach to managing the problems of poverty, even as it sought to impose a neoliberal ethic that structured state actions to be consonant with the dictates of the market. In both formulations, Wacquant sometimes talks about levels: in the top tier are the privileged minority who get to participate in the globalizing economy, and the bottom tier represents those who do not meet the threshold requirements for participation in that emerging economic order. Yet, he fails to give sustained attention to how the rollback of the state is often initiated at the national level to enhance the growth of a deregulated economy, while the rollout of punitive policies and programs for managing poverty are devolved to the states and localities.

Further, the book could benefit from detailed consideration of what is happening on the ground at the front lines of poverty management today. Such an analysis would reinforce the need to consider that the state is not just taking a punitive approach to mop up the fallout of a transformed political economy but is also seeking to discipline subordinate populations so that they will become compliant actors on the bottom of the transformed socioeconomic order wrought by globalization. In addition, such an analysis could provide greater consideration of how the state itself is being marketized under neoliberalism so that it uses discipline to inculcate market logic among the subordinate populations. Examination of the actual implementation of poverty governance today could highlight the elaborate network of public-private partnerships that helps to create a shadow welfare state focused on behavior management of the poor. This network is its own nexus of discipline. Research into policy implementation for managing the marginalized populations increasingly details that the neoliberal-paternalist regime involves the disciplining of private providers so that, in turn, they will be more efficient in imposing discipline on the subordinate populations they have agreed to manage. From top to bottom, the neoliberal-paternalist regime of poverty governance creates a structure dedicated to inculcating market discipline on all involved in the system. The failure of those disciplinary practices to reduce the problems of poverty today is, in all likelihood,

to be expected and should not be seen as evidence that the disciplinary regime is not pursuing these practices; it can be marked down as the most dramatic example of what various commentators have come to call neoliberal failure. In the end, Wacquant fails to give sufficient attention to the marketized implementation of contemporary, neoliberal-paternalist poverty management. Instead, he mistakenly makes its failure to discipline the poor as compliant worker-citizens a sign of its alleged lack of interest in doing so.

In sum, *Punishing the Poor* provides a sweeping (if at times too sweeping) narrative on the rollout of the punitive side of a neoliberal-paternalist regime of poverty governance. To be sure, *Punishing the Poor* is an important book. It should be read—and debated.

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Reshaping Theory in Contemporary Social Work: Toward a Critical Pluralism in Clinical Practice. Edited by William Borden. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. Pp. 304. \$89.50 (cloth); \$45.00 (paper).

This volume is an ambitious endeavor, undertaken by some of social work's leading intellectuals. The editor, William Borden, has been a linchpin in interpreting and extending contemporary psychoanalytic theory to the practice of clinical social work. Borden assembles an impressive collection of thinkers to wrestle with and come to some understanding of where the profession stands in regard to theories of clinical practice. Of greater import are the critical analyses of how disparate theories can be extended to address dilemmas that currently are of significance to social work practice. This book embraces complexity, which, I am sad to say, is sorely lacking within recent social work theory and treatment approaches. Although the chapters are for the most part dense and not easy reads, they make clear and cogent arguments that any serious thinker or advanced practitioner should consider.

The book is divided into three sections: Theory and Practice: Orienting Perspectives; Inner Experience and Outer Realities; and Theory, Practice, and the Social Work Tradition: Critical Questions, Issues, and Prospects. It is difficult for an edited volume to maintain a consistent focus, but the editor does a fine job of doing so.

Beginning this volume is Borden's chapter on taking multiplicity seriously. He advocates for a critical pluralism in which disparate approaches engage in a critical dialogue about concrete clinical issues. Borden sees this as a way for scholars and practitioners of various practice schools to enrich and extend these approaches. To this end, he summarizes and critiques the main frameworks for practice integration: technical integration, a common factors perspective, and theoretical integration. Borden argues that, given the complexity and essential ambiguity of clinical practice, no single approach to understanding clinical phenomena or clinical practice is adequate.

I would quibble with some of Borden's assertions, such as that research, particularly meta-analyses, "show[s] that all treatments are approximately equally