

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

LOÏC WACQUANT, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Insecurity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009, xxiii + 384 p., index.

The English translation of *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Insecurity* marks Loïc Wacquant's second publication in a thematic series of three monographs. This commendable trilogy theorizes the complexities of poverty arising from the neoliberal political experiment of the last three decades in Britain, Europe and the United States. The first volume, published last year, was *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (2008); and a third, *Deadly Symbiosis: Race and the Rise of Neoliberal Penalty* became available in September 2009. *Punishing the Poor* contains two primary foci. First, Wacquant historicizes the collapse of the American charitable state, where unemployment, housing, occupational disability, health and education legislation were steadily razed long before the Clinton administration changed welfare forever by passing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in 1996. Secondly, *Punishing the Poor* deliberates on the concurrent "rolling out" of the American carceral system, where Wacquant effectively makes the case that prisons have replaced welfare as the key poverty management strategy under neoliberalism. Through a policy of hyperincarceration, the neoliberal mantra of "small government" malformed into the supreme hypocrisy, since the federal, state and municipal prison systems have, in the last two decades, become the third largest employer in America. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in Wacquant's disturbing ethnography of the state-of-the-art Twin Towers Correctional Facility in Los Angeles, designed and constructed on Jeremy Bentham's principle of the panopticon outlined in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

Although the methodology in *Punishing the Poor* retreats from the brilliance of *Urban Outcasts* – his comparative approach there produced its principal strength – this present work represents a perceptible advance in contemporary theories of poverty under neoliberalism, through a dual analysis of the reduction of the welfare state and the rise of the American prison system. The theoretical innovation in *Punishing the Poor* becomes apparent in Wacquant's atypical juxtaposition of Friedrich Engels (materialist), Émile Durkheim (symbolic), and Pierre Bourdieu (the bureaucratic field); and his insistence that prisons are not the exclusive realm of the genre of criminology, but should be reclaimed for sociology in general. Furthermore, he argues that this twofold transformation was as racialized as it was gendered: the prison has replaced the inner city ghetto as the method for controlling poor blacks; and as welfare reform has taken on a feminine dimension, incarceration became its masculine counterpart. In *Punishing the Poor*, Wacquant achieves a maddeningly stolid argument in its almost unremitting use of statistical analysis, but one which produces an

engaging, transformative and systematically credible theory of twenty-first century poverty. Wacquant is, of course, a masterful writing talent, capable of expressing the same line of reasoning in a dozen nuanced renderings, and making use of a dazzling lexicon that never loses its intensity. Repetitiveness appropriately drives home the merit of his claims.

It is the uncomfortable, controversial insertion of the figure of the “roving, unattached pedophile” as a moral category, along with welfare mothers and black street criminals, which make up the marginalized populations that Wacquant claims account for the explosive growth of the American prison system in the last twenty years. In the chapter “Moralism and Punitive Panopticism: Hunting Down Sex Offenders,” Wacquant’s use of the “stranger pedophile” is sticky to say the least, and for the first several pages the reader is left wondering whether he is framing the sex offender as a victim. He saves himself by including a “methodological warning” several pages into the chapter, but misplaced a caveat that should have been positioned right at the beginning. In this cautionary section, Wacquant states that his purpose is one of avoiding the stereotypical representations of an abhorrent figure commonly portrayed in the mass media, adopting a “rigorously analytical attitude” to the subject. Wacquant successfully argues that the moral panic created by politicians and the media around sex offenders has contributed to the growth of the prison system, but the direct relation of the category of sex offender to poverty under neoliberalism is less well defined. Though the “welfare mother” and the “black street criminal” have a clear relation to class, the classification “sex offender” does not. On the other hand, he quite rightly argues that Oprah Winfrey, through her iconic position in the media, has created a nationwide moral panic around the sexual abuse of children, transforming it into one of the most disturbing and sensitive issues of our age.

Wacquant’s *Punishing the Poor* makes a convincing case for the failure of the American penal system, which has seen staggering expansion despite a reduction in crime rates. This book will be of great interest to Canadian sociologists, criminologists and policy makers in light of the recent moves of the Harper government to reform the prison system in Canada along the lines of the American model. There has been much dismay among Canadian critics of our prison system that the recent “get-tough-on-crime” discourse being promoted by the Harper administration would be a waste of the taxpayer dollar given the failure of this approach in the United States. For example, the Correctional Service of Canada’s Independent Review Panel now recommends a system of earned parole, which will add to an already over-crowded population in Canadian prisons. Further, there is much concern expressed by the general public, prisoner-advocates and the John Howard Society about the proposed closing of six prison farms in Canada by 2011. *Punishing the Poor* would also be well received by scholars interested in poverty and inequality, welfare reform, prison reform, political sociology and contemporary theory.

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