Wacquant. L. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2009. 408 pages. \$24.95 Paperback (US).

Somewhere between the collapsing American dream of social mobility and the crumbling European promise of social stability, *Punishing the Poor* breathes a transatlantic atmosphere of the relationship between punishment and poverty under neoliberalism. The promises of the “era of leniency,” typified for Wacquant in the US by both Civil Rights and the Great Society, are largely exhausted, replaced by “workfare” schemes and the rise of “prisonfare” that has seen an almost 500% increase in US prison populations since 1980. Much of Europe, in Wacquant’s estimation, may not be far behind.

Wacquant begins his book by detailing the US historical shift from welfare to “workfare,” which he defines as the rise of “new punitive organization of welfare programs,” oriented less on providing opportunities for the poor than on pushing recipients “into the subpoverty jobs that have proliferated after the discarding of the Fordist-Keynesian compromise” (p43). Culminating in the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, for Wacquant workfare is the primary means through which women, particularly minority women, are taught their place in the new economy. Disciplined for their dependency (itself a product of this era of leniency) through the proffering of part-time and poverty wage labour in lieu of welfare benefits, workfare becomes less a means of social mobility than a means of social control for poor women and children.

“Prisonfare,” the second part of Wacquant’s work, is aimed at (primarily minority) men, now incarcerated in the US at rates surpassing those under apartheid. For Wacquant, this primary means of social control represents less a contradiction than a compliment to workfare – a compliment that more frequently warehouses these men as superfluous even

to prison labour. Left out almost entirely from the promises of neoliberalism, these men nevertheless remain useful both to the degree that they have become the fodder for a growing corrections industry (now the third largest employer in the US), as well as to the degree that they reinforce the terrible proposition that the only way to contain this problem of “social insecurity” is through more of the same.

For Wacquant, workfare and prisonfare signify distinct gendered and racialized strategies of control and punishment, respectively rooted in social and penal policy, but functioning “in tandem at the bottom of classes and places” (13). In this sense, Wacquant’s work eschews those (beginning with Rusche and Kirchheimer) who have tended to view punishment as corresponding to changes in productive relationships (i.e. rates of punishment as a condition of labour markets or labour surplus). For Wacquant, neither punishment nor carceralism are dependent variables. Rather, they are as central to the creation of criminal insecurity as social welfare cuts have been to the regeneration of poverty and social insecurity, with punishment actively constituting what Michel Foucault saw as relationships that are “productive” unto and of themselves.

Pace Foucault, however, today’s carceralism is hardly ubiquitous. Rather, the panopticon has both a gendered and racialized eye, and its relationship to the centrality of the prison as a means of “corrections” in the 21st century is perhaps closer to Bentham’s initial vision than Foucault’s belief that panopticism would eventually leave the walls of the prison itself. “America’s urban (sub-) proletariat lives in a punitive society, but its middle and upper classes certainly do not,” notes Wacquant (297). The poor are not “left out” of the vicissitudes of neoliberalism. Rather, they are pushed out the rapidly closing front door

of opportunity, ushered in through the back doors of poverty and prison, and reconstituted as criminals or dependents.

The book thus becomes an extended re-characterisation of the neoliberal state and its domains in terms of a core cleavage in its structure, epitomized by the US model but increasingly adopted in many other western industrialized states in various forms. This cleavage is embodied in Wacquant's state label: "liberal paternalist" (8); liberal and permissive at the top in regard to corporations and the upper classes, and paternalist and authoritarian at the bottom toward those caught between either the restructuring of employment and the ebbing of social protection or its transformation into an instrument of surveillance and brute punishment.

Instead of a social security safety net, for those in the lower tier we find today a "carceral/assitential" (12) arrangement, wherein the "iron fist of the penal state . . . grows and redeploys in order to stem the disorders generated by the diffusion of insecurity" resulting from the triumph of invisible hand policy (6). All of this has a pronounced theatrical dimension, a staging in which conspicuous delinquency now becomes "the living and threatening incarnation of generalized 'social insecurity' produced by the erosion of stable and homogenous wage work" (4). In reaction, "the fight against street delinquency now serves as a screen and counterpart to the new social question, namely, the generalisation of insecure wage work and its impact on the territories and life strategies of the urban proletariat" (13).

Thus the analysis plays on structural contradictions: indeed it remains predominantly (post)structuralist in argument, leaving interesting questions of class agency perhaps under-theorized. Wacquant's explanatory argument is that the situation has emerged "because

the poverty of the social state against the background of deregulation elicits and necessitates the grandeur of the social state" (19). But we might further consider, for example, the use of fear as an elite media strategy, emerging out a ratings-driven and ideologically directed media; the un-enlightened reaction of "threatened" middle classes, hollowed out, yet still wanting to imagine a clean level playing field free from conspicuous alterity; the agency of lower classes looking for security, turning in on themselves, or more likely on those slightly below them, in the displacement aggression of blue collar conservatism; or the long established working class assertion of liberties through unruliness and ribaldry, which now bring them into more acute relation with a potent penal surveillance regime.

Encompassing wide swaths of sociology, criminology, political science, and culture studies, it will not be difficult for readers embedded in disciplines to find problems in this work. One immediate shortcoming is the lag in timely data; much of the empirical work is at least ten years old. Moreover, this work demands significant prior familiarity to the histories of both social welfare and penal policy. Yet despite these shortcomings, this book deserves the widest possible readership.

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