



# **Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity**

*Loïc Wacquant*

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## **Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity** Loïc Wacquant

The punitive turn of penal policy in the United States after the acme of the Civil Rights movement responds not to rising *criminal* insecurity but to the *social* insecurity spawned by the fragmentation of wage labor and the shakeup of the ethnoracial hierarchy. It partakes of a broader reconstruction of the state wedding restrictive “workfare” and expansive “prisonfare” under a philosophy of moral behaviorism. This paternalist program of penalization of poverty aims to curb the urban disorders wrought by economic deregulation and to impose precarious employment on the postindustrial proletariat. It also erects a garish theater of civic morality on whose stage political elites can orchestrate the public vituperation of deviant figures—the teenage “welfare mother,” the ghetto “street thug,” and the roaming “sex predator”—and close the legitimacy deficit they suffer when they discard the established government mission of social and economic protection. By bringing developments in welfare and criminal justice into a single analytic framework attentive to both the instrumental and communicative moments of public policy, *Punishing the Poor* shows that the prison is not a mere technical implement for law enforcement but a core political institution. And it reveals that the capitalist revolution from above called neoliberalism entails not the advent of “small government” but the building of an overgrown and intrusive penal state deeply injurious to the ideals of democratic citizenship. Visit the author’s website.

## **Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity Details**

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### UChicagoLaw says

Wacquant's book is a wide-ranging treatment of our contemporary punishment practices that relocates the entire field within the broader historical and political context of the twentieth century ascendance of neoliberalism and the transformation and gradual evisceration of the welfare state. After reading his book, it seems no longer possible to think about the punishment field without addressing what Pierre Bourdieu famously referred to as "the Left hand of the state" or what Wacquant so eloquently describes as "the invisible hand of the deregulated labor market." - Bernard Harcourt

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### Simon Wood says

#### POVERTY AND PUNISHMENT

Loic Wacquants dense and detailed book "Punishing the Poor" charts the changes in Public Welfare and Penal policies during the Neo-Liberal era. His critique is compelling: States have retreated from their responsibilities to the majority of the population in the economic sphere, turned welfare into machine for forcing workers into the ever growing precarious sector of the labour market, and dealt with those areas, classes and ethnicities who have suffered the most at the hands of the lack of stable employment opportunities and adequate social security with relentless and intrusive policing followed up with grotesque levels of incarceration.

The focus is primarily on the experience of the United States. Part 1 - "The Poverty of the Social State" details the welfare reforms of the post-civil rights era that culminated in the Clinton era "Workfare" act of 1996. With respect to the black population, as well as latinos, a strong case is made for regarding the changes to the labour market and welfare entitlements as functioning as a further stage of repression following slavery and the post-reconstruction "Jim Crow" era following the gains of the civil rights movements of the 1960's.

Part 2 - "Grandeur of the Penal State" charts the inexorable rise of incarceration during the Neoliberal era, the class and "race" dimensions of this immense (2,000,000+) penal obsession. Wacquant regards "workfare and prisonfare" as two sides of the same coin: workfare attacking the welfare of women to encourage them en masse to participate in a precarious labour market where they are no better off, and prisonfare as being the response to the troublesome lower class casualties of a Neoliberal economy that is not able, nor meant to, offer them employment or other prospects.

Part 3 - "Privileged Targets" is divided into two distinct case studies, the first being "The Prison as Surrogate Ghetto" deals in further detail with black experience of the penal system; and "Moralism and Punitive Panopticism" engages with the subject of prison and sexual offenders in a refreshingly objective manner, charting the moral posturing of politicians and the media against a punitive regime that may well increase rates of recidivism, and arguing for a dispassionate, rigorously scientific re-look at the whole question of sexual offenders with a view to reducing rates of re-offending and providing the most effective protection of the public.

The final part "European Declinations" charts the growing European tendency to follow the example of the United States. It begins with a comprehensive debunking of zero-tolerance policing in particular that of New

Yorks Mayor Rudy Giuliani, before moving on to general European turn to a workfare and prisonfare state, with particular focus on the experience of Wacquants native France.

The biggest, but far from fatal, shortcoming of the book is the occasional descent into what might be regarded as academic jargon. The introduction is particularly guilty of this, but I would encourage readers to work their way through this as they will be rewarded with a fascinating and holistic account of the Neoliberal State and its relations (Penal and Welfare/Workfare) with those who have lost most during its seemingly inexorable rise. Well recommended.

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## Alexander says

America's love of prisons is, by now, old news. With an incarcerated population of 2.3 million people (0.7% of the population) and government expenditures of nearly USD \$80 billion a year to keep them there (as of 2017), the numbers alone are pretty terrifying. Yet, as set out in this harrowing sociological study of American prisonfare, these figures only barely begin to tell the story of the colossal social and political shifts that truly underlie their magnitude. And the story, set out simply, is this: having gutted - to the point of near terminal decline - the 'social functions' of the state (think welfare, public housing, health, education, and labor law), neoliberal statecraft has turned to the prison as an alternative strategy to instead simply warehouse and neutralise the very destitute populations it has largely abandoned.

In other words, why take care of your poor when you can simply... put them away? Such, at any rate, is the logic of the state traced here in this brutal social and political retelling, which, in charting the almost perfectly inverse relationship between welfare and prisonfare, aims to decisively explain the delirious expansion of American carceral field from the 1970s onward. To be clear then, while it's the prison that remains front and centre as the subject of the book, it's true object is nonetheless the rise of the 'neoliberal state of insecurity', and the specific and axial role of the prison in enabling that rise. Hence the book's central thesis - pitched here as a update of Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's seminal *Regulating the Poor* - regarding the necessity of thinking the recent policy dynamics of both the prison and the welfare state as inseparably entwined, on pain of rendering them simply incomprehensible when treated in isolation.

As a sideways study of the neoliberal state, *Punishing the Poor* thus also deftly shows how for all it's rhetoric of laissez-faire, the call for 'small government' - when examined in practice - only really applies to those at the top of the societal ladder; as for those dwelling at the bottom, never has the Leviathan flexed itself in so expansive and heavy-handed a manner. As Wacquant puts it, never has the 'grandeur of the penal state' shown itself more ostentatiously than it has in recent times, with the drive to regulate, discipline, and punish making itself felt all across the estate of the marginalised classes, in ever more intense and chillingly creative ways (as an aside, Wacquant is keen to distance himself from the work of Michel Foucault on this point, who, in his forecast of the decline of the prison as an institution of societal control, foresaw neither the explosive *growth* of penal practices, nor their being put to use for the sheer neutralisation of bodies as opposed to their function as a mechanism of discipline).

While I've so far focused on the many 'qualitative' stakes of Wacquant's book, it's worth emphasising that in truth, *Punishing the Poor* doubles a veritable handbook of statistics and numbers, thrown at the reader with almost overwhelming force; coupled too with the many vignettes of 'localised' case studies littered throughout each chapter, one is hard pressed to come away with anything but sheer agreement with the book's many conclusions (most of which are couched in a palpable pathos of glowing fury). And while it's also the case that much of the data here is, by now, somewhat dated (the book having been published in 2009), Wacquant's observation that the US has been - and remains - a 'living laboratory of the neoliberal revolution' means that the work here is nonetheless indispensable for understanding not just the world as it

has been, but the world in its becoming. Depressing, but essential reading.

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### **Du Vaughn says**

Just read the prologue; should the book read as well as the prologue, I cannot imagine disliking this text. There is nothing funny about the carceral state, but Wacquant is wry and his writing lyrical. Excited to finish this one.

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### **gabrielle says**

i can not focus on this book...at all...wah

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### **acid says**

Eine staubtrockene lange detaillierte Schilderung wie es vom Welfare zum Workfare kam. Nicht der leichteste Stoff aber lohnt!

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### **Nola Rankin says**

Although not exactly a comfortable bedtime read, this is an interesting book which raises some excellent points. Why does society blame/punish people for being poor?

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### **Jorge Caballero says**

In this book, Wacquant depicts the state as a diminished entity that has no real influence in the economic front and has been utterly subjugated by neoliberalism, he then depicts the penal system as one of the states' core political institutions that, in tandem with welfare, imposes a double regulation of the poor in order to control the marginal populations generated by the rising inequality, and social insecurity promoted (in the authors' view) by neoliberalism.

In this portrait prison serves three purposes:

- (1)Disciplining the working class (into acceptance of precarious, unskilled sub-employment and poverty as their lot);
- (2)Nullifying and warehousing its most troublesome exponents;
- (3)Reaffirm the states' authority within its new restricted domain.

He advocates for a more welfare leaning state and makes some strong and valid arguments for it, but... his analysis seems biased: He resorts to hyperbolae repeatedly and renders an exaggerated and oversimplified interpretation of neoliberalism's flaws and unintended consequences; uses statistics in disparate ways, sometimes citing comparable data, some others comparing absolute numbers from USA to those of places with much smaller populations; going back and forth using "current dollars" or "19xx dollars", etc.

To me, this lack of objectivity makes me question the validity of some of his data and conclusions and detracts from his otherwise notable study into this very essential sociological subject.

PS. The book could greatly benefit from a serious editing and synthesizing effort.

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