

Punishing the Poor:
The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity
by Loïc Wacquant
Durham: Duke University Press (2009), 408 pp.
Reviewed by Patrick Derby

The punitive turn in penal policy experienced in the United States is not the result of increased “criminal insecurity” argues Loïc Wacquant in *Punishing the Poor*. Rather, it is a government response to the “social insecurity” accompanying the ascendancy of neoliberalism. Wacquant posits that the wave of penalization serves to curtail (urban) disorder, spawned by economic deregulation and the desocialization of wage labour, while at the same time imposing precarious employment upon those at the lower rungs of the class and ethnoracial hierarchy.

Punishing the Poor is organized into four parts, allowing Wacquant to build his argument in a clear and compelling manner, which he does by meticulously detailing American developments in both the realm of welfare and criminal justice at the turn of the new millennium. The first two parts of the monograph – “Poverty of the Social State” and “Grandeur of the “Penal State” – explore the relationship between the rise of precarious and poverty-wage employment, the unraveling of social protections and the criminalization of poverty, and the expansion and extension of the punitive apparatus. The application of disciplinary programs to segments of the population on some form of public assistance (workfare), which serve to push them into the marginal sectors of the employment market conjoins with the extended carceral net (prisonfare), targeted at dispossessed urban districts, to create “a single apparatus for the management of poverty that aims at effecting the authoritarian rectification of the behaviors of population recalcitrant to the emerging economic and symbolic order” (p. 14).

In the third part – “Privileged Targets” – Wacquant turns his attention to two categories that are discriminately ensnared in the carceral net: the unemployed ‘street thug’ of the black ghetto and the sex offender, especially the roving and unattached pedophile. Wacquant explains that casting these figures to panoptic and penal apparatuses serves the expressive function of reinforcing the demarcation between the ‘law-abiding’ and the ‘criminal’. Those demonstrating characteristics deemed negative by the dominant economic, social and racial order (i.e. poverty, immorality, blackness) are subjected to supervision and regulation, corrective discipline, and/or segregation.

Dissecting the U.S. penal state is not Wacquant's end goal; rather, it is conducted to explore the "invention of neoliberalism in action", in an effort to discover the probable contours of the future penal apparatuses of European and Latin American countries that have embarked on a neoliberal path. The book's final section – "European Declinations" – examines the transposition of American-style governance of social insecurity to contemporary Europe, drawing on the law-and-order developments within France as an empirical referent. Wacquant argues that at the opening of the twenty-first century France is taken by American law-and-order policies, seduced by many of its exported myths. Identifying numerous American penal policies that France has assimilated, Wacquant is also careful to point out that the alignment or convergence of penal policy never entails perfect replication, due to legal, national, cultural differences, among others. In France, the deeper roots of the social state and a weaker hold of individualist ideology has meant the fusion of social and punitive regulation, while the increased penalization of poverty is effected primarily through the police rather than the prison, as in the United States.

Punishing the Poor contributes to socio-legal literatures on the governance of poverty and crime, demonstrating that new insights emerge when brining the developments in welfare and criminal justice policy together under a common analytical frame that is sensitive to both their material and symbolic effects. This book is a must read for academics, students, and activists engaged with, or interested in, the socio-politics of race, poverty, and incarceration.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Patrick Derby is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at Queen's University (Kingston, Ontario). He is a member of the Surveillance Studies Centre and a founding member of the Surveillance Cameras Awareness Network (SCAN). Patrick's research interests include the political economy of punishment and crime control, as well as the new technologies of surveillance and control. His doctoral dissertation critically explores the politics of automated license plate recognition (ALPR) as an emerging law enforcement technology.