

RECENZII

Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor. The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009, 384 p.

Loïc Wacquant is one of the most important scholars who studied advanced urban marginality, the impoverishment of African-American population living in big cities, the restructuring of relationships between different social classes, and one of the most charismatic leftist thinkers in state anthropology. *Punishing the Poor. The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* is the second part of a trilogy on urban marginality published by Wacquant. The work is the result of 10 years of research, and comes with an ambitious thesis, which claims that there is a connection between social and penal policies in the (neoliberal) age of economic globalization – by weakening the power of the labor unions and labor flexibilization – and of growing social insecurity. For Wacquant, the neoliberal boom of the 1970s - 1980s also gave birth to a new way of governing the poor through the transition from the Keynesian-type of state, focused on redistributive social policies, to the neoliberal-penal state, focused on active social policies (workfare) and on punishing the indocile population (prisonfare) failing to adapt to the rules of free market and social insecurity, a transition which affected primarily

the urban African-American proletariat living in the marginal neighbourhoods, as a result of de-industrialization and of the implosion of manual labour markets. In this context, the penal approach of governing poverty attempts to address accelerated poverty, isolation and social insecurity endemic to the peripheral neighbourhoods, following the above-mentioned processes.

The book is divided into four parts, in which Wacquant demonstrates the thesis enunciated in the beginning. The first part examines the decline of social welfare, the reduction of social security expenditures, the restricted access to social assistance, the decrease in the number of people receiving assistance, illustrated by the 1990s welfare reforms and the rise of a more punitive approach of poverty governance. The welfare state transformed itself into a charitable one, in which the government programs assisting the poor are fragmented and directed towards those outside the market mechanism system and having no networks of family or community support (45). The reason for these public interventions is not to reinforce social cohesion, social solidarity or to reduce inequities, but to demonstrate the society's moral sympathy for the deprived ones (42).

The rolling back of the welfare state – the transition from redistributive to active social policies – and the expansion of the penal apparatus are the two sides of the same coin, a process which Wacquant defines as the neoliberal governance of

social insecurity. In the French sociologist's opinion, the neoliberal state is a "centaur state" which, in spite of the fact that it rolls back in certain areas, it becomes more and more present when it comes to poverty governance. The neoliberal state protects the financial elite through tax benefits, removing the barriers to capital mobility, labour contracts flexibilization, but it also involves a strong dose of paternalist punishment for those at the bottom of the social order, making them, as is the case with unemployed people receiving social aid, accept any job or activity, regardless of the wage and working conditions, so as to earn their right to social assistance, even though these programs provide very few opportunities to actually getting hired (58-59).

In the second part of his book, Wacquant makes an analysis of the relationship between the expansion of carceral and penal apparatus linked to racialization and criminalization of deviant behavior in the context of ever increasing social insecurity, labour contract flexibilization, surge of unemployment rate and the rolling back of welfare state. Wacquant argues that the massive rise in incarceration and arrests at the beginning of 1970s was not necessarily the result of an upsurge in crime, but was rather fuelled by the penal apparatus punishing deviant behaviour of the poor population living in marginal neighbourhoods (mainly African-American or Hispanics). The extension of the penal apparatus and the increases in the rates of incarceration operates primarily (but not exclusively) at a symbolic level, to communicate that subordinate populations must practice personal responsibility and become market-compliant actors, despite weak opportunities of socio-economic mobility. Chapter 5 – "The coming of Big Carceral Government" – shows how the decrease in the number of people receiving assistance and the reduction of social security expenditures led to an increase in the

number of crimes committed by the ethnic groups living in marginal neighbourhoods and punished by the law enforcement apparatus. These people had to find ways to get the resources they need which were barely legal or even crossed the boundaries between legal and illegal (drug consumption and dealing), in order to survive the decline of formal economy. The implementation of the neoliberal model of reducing social security expenditures and state bureaucracy based on the principle of small government did not apply to the penal apparatus; on the contrary, this sector saw an expansion of the local and federal bureaucracy, as well as an increase of the expenditures in this field.

The third part brings up the subject of transformations which took place in the process of monitoring the social categories deemed dangerous, taking sex offenders and pedophiles for example. The *Panopticon* surveillance of which Foucault talks about (1997) – where the individual is isolated and incarcerated – is replaced by a permanent surveillance using the new cyberspace communication technologies: internet, computerized data bases, CDs/DVDs. In Wacquant's opinion, the generalization of mechanisms and programs for the registration of offenders and the identification of sex offenders and pedophiles in the communities in which they live did not produce the estimated results, i.e. to protect the citizen's safety, but rather led to the intensification of conflicts between the community and the above mentioned offenders, the exclusion of whom, corroborated with the job losses, making the transition from prison to the outside world difficult (229).

In the last part of the book, Wacquant outlines a theoretical model of the neoliberal state. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "bureaucratic field" (Bourdieu, 1994) Wacquant portrays the state as a splintered entity acting in competing, and even contradictory ways in the dispute for

the distribution of public goods. Based on the (re)conceptualization used by Bourdieu (1994, 1999), Wacquant makes a distinction between the “left hand of the state, the feminine one, that which supports individuals through labour laws, education, health, social assistance and public housing, and protects the social categories deprived of the cultural and economic capital necessary for acting on the market – and the “right hand of the state, the masculine one”, supporting a new economic, neoliberal discipline through budget cuts, economic deregulation and incentives (289), to which Wacquant adds the punitive apparatus – police, prisons, courts. The government of social insecurity involves the transition from the left, social wing of the state, to the penal one (by reassigning amounts in the state budget used for social security expenditures to the penal wing; increase of personnel in this second field).

Loïc Wacquant sets himself apart from other leftist scholars writing on neoliberalism, which he defines not as an economic project, a war of global financial elites seeking to gain profit through liberalization of borders, privatization of public services and flexibilization of labour contracts (Harvey, 2007), but rather as a political project having as goal the reorientation of state and not its dismantlement. With the onset of advanced marginality, the decline of wages in impoverished ethnic neighbourhoods, the state employs a “double regulation of the poor” (Wacquant, 2009). This regulation integrates the state’s social welfare (workfare) and penal (prisonfare) poles in a coordinated effort that is focused on punishing subordinate populations for their failure to comply with social norms regarding personal responsibility, the importance of labour ethics and the acceptance of underpaid work in a global economy.

Moreover, unlike Michel Foucault’s work analysing the transition to a “disciplinary society” in the 17th-18th centuries, a society of isolation and incarceration of

individuals, oriented towards their re-education and reintegration into society (Foucault, 1997), Wacquant proposes a new approach. The penal policies in the age of “neoliberal ascent” are not focused on disciplining and rehabilitating law abiding citizens, but mostly on the implementation of punitive practices – incarceration of the poor, their isolation in marginal neighbourhoods, thus diminishing the likelihood that they will pose a problem for the rest of the society.

Thus, Wacquant’s analysis proposes a new perspective on the role of the state in the global (globalized) economy. The state creates the necessary regulations ensuring capital mobility, deregulation of markets and labor contracts, and, in the name of economic growth and streamlining, imposes new poverty management technologies, by means of the penal apparatus, punishing those who cannot adapt to the free market rules and active social policies disciplining the individual, conditioning the social aid on the recipient’s demonstration in making progress in changing behaviour, towards accepting precarious, low-wage, volatile jobs.

However, Wacquant fails to provide details regarding the marketization and disciplinary process underwent by the state itself in the age of neoliberal globalization. With the rolling back of the state, the externalization of services to private stakeholders or the provision thereof in a mixed public-private system, the social tasks have been de-statized and taken over by non-state agents. Western donors, local and international NGOs, philanthropic foundations, Catholic Church in partnership with, or independent of the state, form a shadow welfare state focused on managing the poor people behaviour (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002). The disciplinary regime Wacquant mentions also applies to private stakeholders seeking the most efficient solutions to discipline the poor population they want to manage. Both state institutions providing

social aid and private actors are subject to the same disciplinary regime based on the functioning logic of an enterprise (fiscal discipline, audit culture, streamlining).

In conclusion, I think that *Punishing the Poor. The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* has a significant contribution to the understanding of social insecurity governance in the neoliberal age. Probably the book's best contribution is the conceptualization of the "centaur state", which promotes a *laissez-faire* attitude for those on top, offering free capital mobility, liberalization of borders, labour flexibilization, many opportunities for economic and cultural capital owners, but is also paternalist (*Leviathan* even, a frequently used word in the book), interventionist for those

at the bottom of the socio-economic order, by means of the penal apparatus punishing those who cannot adapt to the free market rules and active, disciplinary social policies, conditioning social assistance on the recipient's participation to a flexible labour involving behavioural change: participation to re-qualification courses, training sessions, accepting low wages. Building on the ethnographic research on marginal neighbourhoods inhabited by the African-American population and state practices used to govern social insecurity, Wacquant depicts the "actually existing neoliberalism" (Wacquant, 2012).

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