

## Poverty Politics and Crime Control in Europe and America

BRUCE WESTERN

Harvard University

western@wjh.harvard.edu

The growth of prisons and jails over the last thirty years transformed the social experience of American poverty. Penal confinement became commonplace for poor men of working age. Incarceration added to the unstable home life of poor children and their mothers, whose own imprisonment rates had also grown rapidly.

Loïc Wacquant's *Prisons of Poverty* (in part, first published in French in 1999) can be read as a forerunner to the author's trilogy, *Urban Outcasts* (2007), *Punishing the Poor* (2009), and *Deadly Symbiosis* (2009). Together, these works describe a new urban poverty embedded in the institutions of criminal punishment. In the main thesis of *Prisons of Poverty*, punitive crime policy joined with a stingy welfare state to propel neoliberal political projects in the United States and Europe. Though regularly trafficking in free market rhetoric, the neoliberal state assumed a muscular role in the lives of the inner-city poor through the agency of the police and penal institutions.

In Wacquant's account, the punitive management of urban poverty was set in motion in the late 1960s. Richard Nixon, in the presidential campaign of 1968, touted a law-and-order message that resonated with white voters discomfited by urban riots and Civil Rights protest. As the problem of urban disorder was thrust into the political spotlight, penal policy experts—and their commitment to rehabilitation—were marginalized. The political and cultural backlash to the tumultuous 1960s ran headlong into the economic collapse of the ghetto. In describing how the jobless ghetto contributed to mass incarceration, Wacquant (pp. 155–56) writes that,

*the penal system has partly supplanted and partly supplemented the ghetto as a mechanism of racial control, after the latter revealed itself unsuited to keeping the black urban (sub)proletariat consigned to the place assigned to it in the new*

*Prisons of Poverty*, by Loïc Wacquant. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. \$20.00 paper. 217pp. ISBN: 9780816639014.

American social space emerging from the upheavals of the 1960s and the accelerating restructuring of the metropolitan economy.

A populist politics of law and order perpetrated on a surplus population of chronically idle young men greatly enlarged not just the prison population but also the numbers under parole and probation supervision. State budgets were consumed by correctional spending. The conditions of penal confinement became harsher and, says Wacquant, the penal population became darker. These trends, he writes, comprise nothing less than the criminalization of poverty. Punishment escalated not to solve the problem of crime ("criminal insecurity") but to solve the problem of *social* insecurity produced by a newly-precarious economy devoid of a supportive welfare state. This is perhaps the most radical thesis of the book: that the scale and contours of the punishment regime are unrelated to crime. Indeed, "the discourses that seek to connect crime and punishment in America have no validity other than ideological" (p. 159).

Wacquant sees the rise of the penal state as a turning point for American race relations and urban poverty, but its greatest effects may lie in the future and abroad. In the most novel discussion—for American readers, at least—the author describes how the posture and language of U.S. crime policy were adopted abroad by political leaders on the left and right. Here, the book focuses not on the prisons of its title but on police and the zero-tolerance tactics of the New York Police Department of the early 1990s. The language of zero tolerance was seized

most notably by politicians on the European left who announced their no-nonsense intentions for delinquent youth and criminal offenders. Even more clearly than in the United States, where there was little welfare state to retrench, tough crime policy in Europe was embraced as a response to the social problems created by welfare cuts at the end of the 1990s. American-style crime control was readily exported by conservative think tanks which advocated the NYPD's brand of broken-windows law enforcement.

As much a collection of political interventions as sociological essays, the book brims with moral outrage. "The neoliberal utopia," writes Wacquant, "brings in its wake, for the most dispossessed... not an enhancement of freedom... but its abridgment, nay its suppression, as result of a regression toward a repressive paternalism of another age, that of savage capitalism, but augmented by an omniscient and omnipresent punitive state" (p. 130).

Wacquant goes on to provide a glimpse of the good society implied by his critique of neoliberalism. America is a lost cause, but,

Europe stands at the crossroads, faced with a historic alternative between on the one side... the mass confinement of the poor and intensified police surveillance and penal control of the populations destabilized by the revolution in wage work and the weakening of social protections it mandates, and, on the other side, starting today, the creation of new citizens' rights—such as guaranteed minimum income independent of work performance, lifetime education and job training, effective access to housing for all, and universal medical coverage... leading to the creation of a European social state worthy of the name (pp. 130–31).

Wacquant's unremittingly critical perspective is his strength and his weakness. The key insight that punishment intensified in tandem with welfare state retrenchment has profound implications for poverty research, urban sociology, and race and ethnic studies. If Wacquant is to be taken seriously, researchers in all these fields must

expand their scope to consider the novel and far-reaching role of penal institutions in contemporary America. Indeed, poverty researchers are increasingly weighing the effects of incarceration on the well-being of poor mothers and their children (Wildeman 2009). Research on racial inequality has studied discrimination in the newly-punitive policy context (Pager 2006; Schram et al. 2009). Several excellent ethnographies have examined how the criminal justice system now structures daily life and the life course of poor men in the inner-city (Black 2009; Goffman 2009). Originally writing in 1999, Wacquant anticipated by a decade some of the most interesting research on American inequality.

But Wacquant's critical ardor is also a flaw: controversy is sometimes presented as fact, the analysis can veer to functionalism, the autonomy of punishment from crime is overstated and, from an American viewpoint, the politics are fatalistic. Wacquant's critical perspective often yields a broad-brush analysis in which the empirical world is bent to fit the theory. This arises in the comparative discussions that present the rightward shift of labor and socialist parties in Europe as toes dipped in the pool of American social policy. The United Kingdom is held out as the most American of the European welfare states and a key case of Americanization. The prison population did grow under Tony Blair's New Labour government and Blair famously vowed to get tough on crime, as well as its causes. At the same time, however, Blair launched a significant anti-poverty initiative that expanded early childhood education and introduced new cash benefits for low-income parents. The child poverty rate fell significantly as a result (Waldfogel 2010). An unvarnished criminalization of poverty is difficult to sustain in this case.

From an American perspective it is striking that European crime policy has become more punitive in some respects while a comparatively strong anti-poverty commitment remains institutionalized in the welfare state. In short, the large differences between Europe and the United States overshadow modest similarities in policy trend. The stylized presentation of fact sometimes opens

the door to functionalism. Thus, prisons flourished because the ghetto had failed in its key function of racial domination. Mass unemployment undermined the ghetto's capacity for social control. A new—penal—institution emerged to ensure the subjugation of African Americans. As Wacquant (2009) has written elsewhere, the prison succeeded the ghetto, which in turn had succeeded Jim Crow and slavery before that. For this analysis, racial domination is not contingently constructed in the face of resistance and reform. Instead it seems that white supremacy is irreversibly engraved on American race relations. Different institutions have arisen at different times to guarantee this imperative.

The critique over-reaches too by asserting a “crime-incarceration disconnect” that over-estimates the autonomy of punishment. The relationship between crime and incarceration is complex and deserves more detailed treatment than Wacquant provides. It is true that year-to-year variation in crime rates does not consistently track year-to-year variation in incarceration. Still, it does not follow that the level of crime and the scale of punishment are unrelated. Wacquant himself acknowledges that the distribution of punishment across the population at a point in time partly reflects differences in criminal activity. The key example is the murder rate among black men and the high rate of African American incarceration for murder. What is more, the emergence of mass incarceration by the end of the 1990s was foreshadowed by a real and substantial rise in crime rates unfolding over two decades from the early 1960s. Incarceration does not rise and fall in lockstep with the crime rate, but broad trends in crime are an important part of the social context in which crime policy, and incarceration rates, are ultimately produced.

The indirect links between crime and incarceration affect our understanding of the political process. Elected officials were certainly race-baiting and vigorously pitching government authority as Wacquant claims, but they were also addressing voters' anxieties about criminal victimization. Indeed, new histories of American politics of the period have shown that conservative politicians of the 1960s were more attuned

to fears about public safety than liberals who remained, at least for a while, more focused on the root causes of criminal behavior than protection from victimization (Flamm 2007; Perlstein 2001).

Which brings us, finally, to politics. Speaking to a Continental audience, Wacquant's preference for a “social state” over punitive crime policy offers a rousing endorsement of Euro-socialism but says little to the American political scene where over-incarceration is most acute. U.S. welfare politics are saturated with moral judgment, and voters and political leaders have little appetite for uplifting criminal offenders. Any American constituency for welfare over punishment will be more motivated by crime control than improving economic opportunity. Indeed the language of personal responsibility, public safety, and state paternalism that Wacquant derides may all have useful roles in promoting efforts to build programs for young men involved in street crime.

But what policies would be effective? Wacquant's perfunctory welfare wish-list provides little guidance. If we frankly acknowledge the criminal involvement of poor and idle young men, alongside their acute social disadvantage and tough treatment by the authorities, employment emerges as a central goal for policy. As a large research literature shows, a steady job is important not only for its improvements in material well-being, but also for the structure and predictability it lends to daily life. For a population that averages only ten years of schooling and reads at an eighth grade level, education too would seem critical. Employment and education are not only important on the egalitarian grounds that Wacquant emphasizes, but because such policies yield a sustainable and socially integrative public safety.

Whatever the flaws of *Prisons of Poverty*, they are by-products of its brisk polemic. Like all fine polemics, the book should be read as a provocation, a provocation to policy and research. Wacquant's bold account of a punitive neoliberalism offers a rich source of hypotheses for careful empirical work, and a challenge to those who would discount the threat to social justice posed by the growth of America's prisons. His research program tinged with its European

perspective makes an important contribution to a political understanding of the contemporary sources of American social inequality and the historically novel role the prison now plays in the lives of America's poor.

## References

- Black, Timothy. 2009. *When a Heart Turns Rock Solid: The Lives of Three Puerto Rican Brothers On and Off the Streets*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Flamm, Michael. 2005. *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Goffman, Alice. 2009. "On the Run: Wanted Men in a Philadelphia Ghetto" *American Sociological Review* 74:339–357.
- Pager, Devah. 2007. *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Perlstein, Rick. 2001. *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.
- Schram, Sanford E., Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Linda Houser. 2009. "Deciding to Discipline: Race, Choice, and Punishment at the Frontlines of Welfare Reform." *American Sociological Review* 74:398–422.
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2007. *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- . 2009. *Deadly Symbiosis: Race and the Rise of the Penal State*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- . 2009. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Waldfogel, Jane. 2010. *Britain's War on Poverty*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Wildeman, Chris. 2009. "Parental Imprisonments, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage." *Demography* 46:265–280.