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# Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity

By Loïc Wacquant



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**Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity** By 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.

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#### Review

*"Punishing the Poor* is an incisive and unflinching indictment of neoliberal state restructuring and poverty (mis)management. It brilliantly exposes structural and symbolic consonances between 'workfare' and 'prisonfare,' and between emergent, transnational policy orthodoxies in social and penal policy. Loïc Wacquant delivers a trenchant, radical, and entirely compelling analysis."—**Jamie Peck**, author of *Workfare States*

"This masterful treatment of contemporary punishment policies relocates the entire field within the political sweep of the twentieth-century ascendancy of economic neoliberalism and the evisceration of the welfare state. Loïc Wacquant skillfully weds materialist and symbolic approaches in the best tradition of Marx and radical criminology, on the one hand, and Durkheim and Bourdieu, on the other. This provocative book is the counter-manifesto to neoliberal penalty, a must-read for all students of criminal justice and citizenship."—**Bernard E. Harcourt**, author of *Against Prediction: Profiling, Policing, and Punishing in an Actuarial Age*

"This powerful book shows that America's harsh penal policies are of a piece with our harsh social policies and that both can be understood as a symbolic and material apparatus to control the marginal populations created by neoliberal globalization. A tour de force!"—**Frances Fox Piven**, co-author of *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*

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