

## **Wacquant's take on the role of the State**

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## Wacquant's take on the role of the State

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As a political geographer, for me the pivotal moment of the one-day conference *Rethinking urban inequality in contemporary times* came at the start of Loïc Wacquant's late afternoon comments on what he had heard from the other speakers. Having variously enjoyed and endured presentations of varying focus and quality, I had been struck by the generally limited way in which they had conceptualised and hence sought to integrate the role of the state into their analyses. For me the approaches were at best instrumentalist, and at worst conspiratorial, albeit with very similar reductive tendencies. I wanted to shout out 'have you not heard of the work of political scientists and geographers on this subject over the past 30 years?' Surely the notion that the capitalist state is a set of social relations, embedded in a wider social and economic formation, should be tailor-made for incorporation into sociological research on inequality and marginalisation? Thankfully setting the record straight on this score was the first point that Wacquant made, in typically trenchant terms, in his response. Suddenly my flagging attention was recaptured, and the light streaming through the clerestory windows of the Cutlers' Hall seemed a lot brighter.

Now I have to admit that my previous exposure to Wacquant's work had mainly involved second-hand summaries by research students and informal discussion with colleagues, in which his conceptualisation appeared to amount to little more than reference to dramatic but monolithic-sounding categories such as the 'penal' or the 'centaur' state. Even Wacquant's initial conference presentation had not cast much further light on his take on the matter, with the state explicitly sitting at the apex of his conceptual triangle, but for me still remaining something of a 'black box'. Thus I was intrigued by the more nuanced understanding advocated in his later comments, and decided that I needed to undertake some follow-up familiarisation with his writings on the subject.

Very quickly I discovered the theoretical coda on the neoliberal state that forms the final section of his book *Punishing the Poor* (Wacquant, 2009: 287-314). Here he starts from Bourdieu's interpretation of the state as "a splintered space of forces vying over the definition and distribution of public goods", otherwise known as the 'bureaucratic field' (Bourdieu, 1994). Within this field there are continuing struggles between different branches of the state, for example between those at higher levels promoting the 'marketisation' of public services and those at the sharp end concerned to ensure their quality and consistency. More fundamentally, Wacquant highlights the existence of the 'left hand' (or feminine) side of the state concerned with social functions such as education, health, housing and welfare; and the 'right hand' (or masculine) side, focused on economic (and other forms of) discipline, efficiency and effectiveness. It is the increasing intermeshing of these binary categories in policies aimed simultaneously at controlling and supporting the poor and disadvantaged in

society that underpins his work on the subject (e.g., the emergence of the 'carceral-assistential net').

Helpful though it is, his approach is not without its inconsistencies. Perhaps because of its roots in empirical reality in the USA, the harshness of the neoliberal regime takes on rather an immutable aspect (though he does note, but does not explain, the very different situation in the Nordic countries). Indeed, he does hint at what is likely to be the main seed that may ultimately undermine the punitive approach - high and escalating public expenditure costs - whilst at the same time dismissing Fox Piven and Cloward's (1993) idea that successive 'policy cycles' of welfare expansion and retrenchment will continue in the neoliberal era. Wacquant's bleak overall depiction of current circumstances may well reflect the predominant situation, yet even in the USA it underplays the spatial and institutional fragmentation of power, and the consequent scope to exploit these interstices of the state to mount countervailing approaches. A prime example is the recent decision by the ultra-conservative state of Texas to reduce both its prison population and the number of penitentiaries - and hence the strain they place on its exchequer - by means of a large-scale rehabilitation programme. Similarly, increasing opposition to prevailing austerity policies in the devolved territories of the UK (especially Scotland and Northern Ireland) and efforts to ameliorate their effects on poor people suggest that the grip of neoliberalism might not be as tight as some commentators claim. Whether such examples are straws in the wind or harbingers of a cyclical shift remains to be seen. What they do illustrate, however, is that presenting the state as having just two Janus faces does not do justice to its variegated complexity, and still less meets Bourdieu's definition of it as a 'many splintered thing'. Perhaps Wacquant needs to update his analogy of 'feminine' and 'masculine' facets in line with more recent thinking of gender as constituting a spectrum rather than an either/or identifier.

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