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Wacquant and the Decline of Public Institutions: The Need for a More Contingent Analysis?

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During his wide ranging Q&A session in Sheffield (8 June 2016), *Marginality, Penalty, Carnality*, Loïc Wacquant offered a *tour de force* extemporisation of several of the key themes of several decades of his work. I was struck by the confidence with which Wacquant unfurled before us the empirical tapestry that supported his arguments; arguments which, despite resting on a fusion of somewhat disparate ideas drawn from urban sociology, institutional economics and moral philosophy; had, together, their own impressive logical coherence. Wacquant's writings on marginality have, of course, become a *go to* reference for any researcher wishing to understand the idea of the precariat. Here was a scholar of theory with the confidence that comes from a clear mastery of his own empirical data.

One thing that I found particularly interesting was the emphasis that Wacquant placed on an institutional analysis. One of the key tenets of his marginalisation thesis, it appears, is the idea of the decline of public institutions, both as corollary of broader structural changes associated with state-political projects of reform, and more locally as part of an actively *punitive* strategy imbued with spatial symbolism and enmeshed in the tactics of land economics. As he says from the outset in *Urban Outcasts*, 'it is the collapse of public institutions ... that emerges as the most potent and most distinctive cause of entrenched marginality in the American metropolis' (Wacquant, 2008: 4, emphasis original). This, he contends both in that book and again in his 2016 paper in *Urban Studies*, leads to what he terms the economic under-determination and political over-determination of 'hyperghettoisation'. As he explains, rather than simply ascribing marginality to economic change and its impacts on worklessness, it is, rather, 'government policies of urban abandonment pursued across the gamut of employment, welfare, education, housing and health and multiple scales... that have accompanied the downfall of the communal ghetto' (Wacquant, 2016: 1079, emphasis original).

While Wacquant offers more concrete empirical data than most, I found it curious that the concept of the institution and its temporal persistence wasn't put under more scrutiny. This was especially the case since it seems that much of what he writes about in his use of Bourdieu – habitus, a theory of action, the role of structure and agency in creating and implanting symbols – finds a natural corollary in the sociological idea of the institution. As Douglass North (1991) defines them, institutions are "*humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction*" (p.97). He goes on: "*They consist of both informal constraints ..., and formal rules*" (*ibid.*, p.97, emphasis added). The implication is that institutions are fluid, changeable, and subject to the contingencies of time and space.

For us to accept without doubt that urban outcasts – both in terms of places and their residents – are a product of an active political strategy begs the questions of what institutions are and what their intersectionalities are with. In his talk, Wacquant appeared to restrict himself to talking about the rather tangible and formal products of the 20th Century Fordist-Keynsian regime and its associated social contracts – welfare institutions, public services, banks, schools, the penal system, and models of full and stable employment – rather than the *ideas* of the codes, customs and expectations that are implicit in the specific manifestations of those concrete institutions at particular points in time and space. This led me to wonder about the highly time-place contingent nature of his prescription. The kinds of problems he talks of – the withdrawal of formal institutions; the erosion of stable, well-paid employment, for example – seem actually to be the change or denigration not of longstanding institutions but of comparatively fleeting moments in human history. Wacquant (2008) says: “...wage work has turned from fount of homogeneity, solidarity and security into a source of social fragmentation and precariousness for those confined to the border zones of the employment sphere” (p.234). But such an analysis by itself ignores those almost constant processes of fragmentation, recombination and change in urban life generally. Trying to stop their disappearance is to suggest that they are and have been, as institutions, permanent fixtures in our lives. Yet they are not and have not been. If we recognise their contingency, we can better understand how to develop them further as part of an ongoing project of progressive policymaking, building on their best elements and fitting them within an idea of what makes sense now, to current generations. Seeing institutions in a more nuanced way, incorporating ideas of their day, that gain cultural resonance for their generations, avoids us falling into the idea that what the world was like as part of the post-war settlement is universally worth preserving in aspic. And this helps us better understand better the problem of true marginalisation and precarity: concerned less with those denied the institutions to which they have become accustomed, and more with those who are denied the capacity to cope with change and the resources to institute their own positive responses to it.

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