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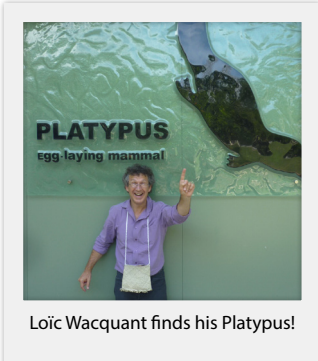
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Constructing neoliberalism: Opening Salvo

LOÏC WACQUANT

An excerpt from Loïc Wacquant, 'Desperately Seeking Neoliberalism: A Sociological Catch' (plenary address to The Australian Sociological Association Annual Conference, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 26 November 2012). The full text is forthcoming in the Journal of Sociology.

This kind of plenary address provides an opportunity to tackle the 'big picture' and venture beyond the boundaries of established knowledge. This is what I propose to do before you, under the title 'Desperately seeking neoliberalism – a sociological catch': I'm going to try to construct a *specifically sociological concept* of that woolly, shifty, difficult-to-catch entity called neoliberalism. This is a notion that is presently used mostly as a rhetorical device or a term of polemic, being that it is uneasily suspended between political dispute and scientific debate, partaking at once of the idiom of radical activism – especially anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation mobilisation – and of the technical language of the social sciences. I want to turn it into a *robust analytic construct* that can be deployed to characterise and probe the epochal sociohistorical transformation that we are both undergoing and witnessing. Essentially, I will argue that neoliberalism is not the coming of King Market, as the *ideology* of neoliberalism would have us believe, but the building of a particular kind of state. Following Max Weber, neoliberalism is best defined not by its end but by its means. For it is not primarily an economic venture, as classical liberalism was: it is a political project of *market-conforming state-crafting*.



It takes a bit of daring, or not caring, to attempt this kind of broad sociological canvassing – not caring about one's scholarly reputation in particular. (Deans do not much like what can seem to pertain to free-floating speculation; they feel reassured by the falsely rigorous positivist research reports with technically impeccable methodology that set the professional standards of normal science everywhere.) As a rule, it is done by older scholars who feel they have nothing to lose because they are either well-established with a solid body of work behind them, moving beyond the strictly academic realm of debate, or already retired. This kind of diagnosis is offered, for instance, by Anthony Gid-

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dens in *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Ulrich Beck in *The Risk Society*, Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Modernity*, or Manuel Castells in *The Network Society*. Typically, it takes the form of a self-contained exercise of pure theorising, after the author has left the research enterprise behind.

By contrast, I'm going to engage in this big-picture theorising from the ground up, firmly embedded in a string of empirical projects on the structure, experience, and political treatment of



Photo courtesy of Deb Dempsey (Swinburne University)

urban marginality in advanced society, conducted over the past two decades and summed up in a trilogy I've just completed. The first book, *Urban Outcasts* (2008), compares the sudden implosion of the black American ghetto with the slow dissolution of the workers' territories of Western Europe to reveal their supersession by a new regime of urban poverty that

I call 'advanced marginality', fed by the fragmentation of wage labour and territorial stigmatisation. The second book, *Punishing the Poor* (2009), charts how the state has reacted to the emergence of this novel marginality through a double punitive shift, from protective welfare to disciplinary workfare on the social front and by growing and glorifying the police, the courts, and the prison on the penal front. The third book, coming out in 2013, is *Deadly Symbiosis: Race and the Rise of Penal State*; it probes the two-way connection between ethnoracial division and the stunning return of the prison to the institutional forefront

“...we need to forge a sociological concept that moves us beyond the polar opposition between the two rival models of neoliberalism”.

of advanced societies; and it takes a model of penalty as state-sponsored dishonour and negative sociodicy from the US to Western Europe to Brazil to deepen our grasp of the mutual imbrication of punishment and marginality. Because I anchor my characterisation of neoliberalism in these empirical projects, I will first retrace briefly how I became an odd sort of political sociologist by plodding my way, inadvertently and reluctantly, from the micro-ethnography of the everyday life of the precariat at the heart of Chicago's hyperghetto and in the working-class estates of outer Paris up to the macro-historical

sociology of neoliberalism as perhaps the biggest social constellation looming over us all.

I wish to connect my argument to the theme of the TASA meeting, 'Emerging and Enduring Inequalities', in two ways. First, if I had to essay a rough characterisation of our era in one sentence, I'd say we are living in a society of *ram-pant social insecurity*: objective social insecurity at the bottom, for the post-industrial working class faced with the destabilising combination of high joblessness and spreading job precarity, and subjective social insecurity in the middle, taking the form of the fear of downward mobility and of failing to transmit one's status to one's children among the educated middle classes – in sharp contrast with the stupendous expansion of material abundance, institutional buffering, and self-seclusion for the upper class. Second, the effects of social insecurity are amplified by *sharpening inequality*, manifested by the onset and spread of advanced marginality and abetted, precisely, by the building of the neoliberal state.

To understand the building of the neoliberal Leviathan, we must first break with the two views of the state that dominate contemporary social science: what I call the 'ambulance' conception and the 'service counter' conception of the state. Both portray government as a reactive outfit that tackles 'social problems' such as poverty after they have taken root, by rolling out welfare programs or distributing goodies by way of compensation. Instead, drawing on Esping-Andersen and Bourdieu, I will urge you to construe the state as a stratifying and classifying agency, the paramount institution that sets the basic coordinates of social space and produces inequality and marginality upstream, before it manages them downstream.

Next, we must specify what we mean by 'neoliberal'. Most analysts invoke this qualifier to refer to a set of policies (sometimes dubbed the 'Washington consensus') entailing the retrenchment and reduction, if not dismantling, of the state in favour of the market, as if these two entities were locked in a life-and-death battle for supremacy or a zero-sum game: market wins, state loses. I contend that this is the ideology of neoliberalism, not its sociology. 'Actually existing neoliberalism' entails everywhere the *reengineering of the state*, indeed the construction of a strong state capable of effectively countering social recalcitrance to commodification and of culturally shaping subjectivities conforming to it.

To realise this, we need to forge a sociological concept that moves us beyond the polar opposition between the two rival models of neoliberalism. On the one side, we have the hegemonic *eco-*

conomic model of *market rule*, inspired indifferently by Adam Smith or Karl Marx, canonised by Hayek and Friedmann, and exemplified by the work of David Harvey and assorted political economists. On the other side, we have the insurgent *biopolitical* model of neoliberalism as *governmentality*, derived from the lectures of Michel Foucault (with or without a touch of Deleuze), and particularly popular among philosophers, geographers and anthropologists like Dardot and Laval, Larner, and Ong. I will critique both approaches for being at once too narrow and too broad and for failing to identify the distinctive institutional machinery that actualises the neoliberal blueprint. Then I will bring into the mix Bourdieu's theory of the state, as encapsulated by his flexible and power-

ful notion of *bureaucratic field*, to carve a middle path between these two poles of 'market rule' and 'governmentality' that captures what is 'neo' about neoliberalism: namely, the erection of a Centaur-state that acts very differently at the two ends of the class structure and puts its considerable disciplinary capacity on the social, penal and cultural front at the service of commodification. This state practices *laissez-faire* at the top, at the level of the circulation of capital and the production of inequality, but it turns interventionist and intrusive when it comes to managing the consequences of inequality at the bottom, for the life spaces and life chances of the precarious fractions of the postindustrial working class.

2012 TASA Sociology Honours Award Recipients

Curtin University of Technology

Deakin University

James Cook University

La Trobe University

Monash University

Swinburne University of Technology

University of New South Wales

University of Queensland

University of Tasmania

University of Technology of Sydney

JONI LARIAT

ELIZABETH NORMAND

ALEXANDER PAGE

RACHEL LONEY-HOWES

FABIAN CANNIZZO &

LEVAN WEE

LAILA SAKINI

HOLI BIRMAN

STEPHANIE RAYMOND

KESHERIE GURUNG

KATERINA PAVLIDIS &

KATRINA FERRER

Please contact the TASA Office if your university had a candidate in 2012 that is not listed above.