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How should we study social suffering?

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This commentary argues that intellectual fragmentation is not only bad for the study of poverty, prejudice and penalty; it is bad for the problems themselves. Considering new objects of analysis for research on inequality – that is, critically reconsidering what it is that we should be studying in the first place – is proposed as a viable preventative to academic parochialism and overspecialization.

Keywords: poverty; social suffering; racial inequality; punishment; philosophy of science; overspecialization

Loïc Wacquant's essay summarizes the motivation for and arc of an argument developed over three books – *Urban Outcasts*, *Punishing the Poor* and *Deadly Symbiosis* – each of which is global in scope, ambitious in aim and provocative in delivery. Together, the trilogy calls for a more synthetic analytics of urban marginality across topics and disciplines. (The word 'nexus' appears several times throughout the essay.) Wacquant hopes for the remarriage of economic sociology and urban poverty, more dialogue between (conservative) criminology and (liberal) social work, and the conjoining of anthropology with political science, disciplines currently accelerating in opposite directions. But this is no mere call for increased interdisciplinary strivings. This is something much less innocent, which is fitting, since intellectual fragmentation is itself far from innocent.

The isolation of class analysis, race studies and criminology from one another blunts our thinking and shrinks our vision, yes – but even more troubling is the fact that the isolation itself can contribute to the very problems each area purports to address. In class analysis, increased specialization promoted intellectual capture that blinded scholars in the early 2000s to the coming economic meltdown, muzzled the few dissenters that there were, and to this day impedes financial regulation (Helleiner 2011). When economist Nouriel Roubini warned in 2006 that a

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housing crash was imminent, the magazine *New York* accurately labelled his an 'extreme view' (Robledo 2006).

Race scholars who relegate themselves to the study of a single racial group (or of certain classed or gendered groups within racial groups) can reify artificial divisions, acting as 'ethnopolitical entrepreneurs … unwittingly *doubling* or *reinforcing* the reification of ethnic groups in ethnopolitical practice with a reification of such groups in social analysis' (Brubaker 2003, 554; see also Emirbayer and Desmond 2012). Would it not be more difficult for a book like *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray 1994) to be written – or for that matter the creation and fortification of what one recent editorial advocating for cooperation between biological and social sciences called sociology's 'nurture fortress' (*Nature* 2012) – in an intellectual environment that incentivized scholars of different disciplines and political persuasions to gather at the same table and have at it?

And in criminology, political elites did not act alone in pushing for harsher law-and-order policies that drove the prison boom. They drew on the work of criminologists and legal scholars, many of whom at the dawn of the boom coalesced around the idea that 'nothing works' in corrections (Cullen and Gendreau 2001) and, later, promoted James Q. Wilson's theory of 'broken windows'. The former mayor of New York, Rudolph Guliani (2003), once said:

> I very much subscribe to the "Broken Windows" theory, a theory that was developed by Professors Wilson and Kelling, 25 years ago maybe. The idea of it is that you had to pay attention to small things… the street-level drug-dealing; the prostitution; the graffiti.

Paying attention to the small things – which is another way of saying arresting and convicting mostly poor minority citizens for non-violent crimes – is a big reason why the American prison population has more than quadrupled since 1980.

Intellectual parochialism and overspecialization are old problems – 'Of one subject we make a thousand,' Michel de Montaigne complained ([1588] 2003, 995) over 400 years ago – but they have brought about new consequences that reverberate far beyond the gates of the university. Working against intellectual fragmentation is not a panacea, but it is a good start, for such fragmentation is not only bad for the study of poverty, prejudice and penalty; it is bad for the problems themselves. The implication is that Wacquant's call for a new social science of the modern city and its troubles – totally irreverent when it comes to academic dogma or disciplinary boundaries – is not only intellectually exciting but morally urgent.

But how, exactly, is this research programme to be carried out? Wacquant provides a model. He develops a theoretical blueprint based

around 'the nexus of state, market, and citizenship'. Each book in the trilogy then takes up, not the state, market and citizenship in isolation, but 'one side of the "class-race-state" triangle'. *Urban Outcasts* analyzes the class-race axis; *Punishing the Poor* the class-state axis; and *Deadly Symbiosis* the state-ethnicity axis.

Notice how different this approach is. Most analysts, when they set out to study social suffering, take as their object of analysis disadvantaged people (the working poor, single mothers, gang leaders), the places they live (trailer parks, ethnic enclaves, distressed neighbourhoods), or a key condition or driver of inequality (joblessness, fragile families, housing). Wacquant breaks with convention by turning down all three options and choosing instead to study *the space between* critical institutions implicated in the reproduction of urban poverty and racial inequality. In this move, we see most clearly the influence of the Durkheim of *The Rules of Sociological Method* ([1895] 1982) and the Bourdieu of *The Craft of Sociology* (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron [1968] 1991), each of whom stressed the fundamental importance of constructing a sound scientific object. In *Craft*, Bourdieu and colleagues wrote:

> The task of constructing the object cannot be avoided without abandoning research to preconstructed objects – social facts demarcated, perceived, and named by spontaneous sociology, or "social problems," whose claims to exist as sociological problems rises with the degree of social reality they have for the sociological community. (34).

Wacquant's approach to the study of social problems is arguably the most novel and far-reaching contribution of his research programme. But here he underplays his hand, articulating neither the motivations for nor the advantages (and limitations) of such an approach. So what are the pay-offs? One is that this approach requires the kind of intellectual cosmopolitanism promoted above. If the very thing that you are trying to understand is the 'relationship between class transformation and state re-engineering', it becomes almost impossible to engage only with a select group of specialists. If you want an expansive approach, build it into the scientific object itself.

Another pay-off is that Wacquant's objects of analyses are fundamentally relational. They are not about a thing (the state) but dynamic processes (the relationship between the state and racial classification) (Emirbayer 1997). A relational approach is particularly important to the study of economic deprivation because it forces the analyst to focus on tied fates: actors and agencies bound together in a state of mutual dependence and struggle (Desmond forthcoming). Instead of viewing, say, inner-city neighbourhoods as unfortunate accidents of deindustrialization and segregation, you begin to see them as intentional projects of state-making and landed capital, the outcome of actions and reactions among residents, landlords and city

planners. A relational approach is equally important to the study of racial inequality, as it enables you to avoid the problem of 'analytical groupism', which involves taking 'sharply bounded, putatively homogenous groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis' (Brubaker 2003, 553).

A third and more specific pay-off is Wacquant's placing the state or 'bureaucratic field' at the centre of the analysis. In much poverty research, the state is given minor play. Some researchers recognize the importance of the state in years past (e.g. redlining, legalized segregation), but for some reason not in the present. Others view the state as primarily a series of policy decisions (welfare reform) or government agents (social workers, police). Wacquant's perspective on the state is much broader. But it is also rather curious.

To me, the most striking aspect of Wacquant's characterization of political elites has to do with their intentionality. He writes:

> [State] rulers use the "War on crime"… as a bureaucratic theatre geared to reaffirming their authority and to *staging the* "*sovereignty*"*of the state* at the very moment when this sovereignty is being breached by the unbridled mobility of capital and by juridical-economic integration into the supranational political ensembles.

Neo-liberalism, then, is the result of 'a veritable "revolution from above"' with political elites as key actors in this drama. I am far more hesitant than Wacquant to credit political elites with such deliberateness and cunning. I am more reluctant, too, to view state actors as a solid block unified in purpose. The prison boom has not spread evenly across the USA, and a big reason for that has to do with political differences between government leaders. There is more variation in incarceration rates between the fifty states than across the USA and Europe: (red) southern states – Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas – boast of the highest rates; many (blue) northern states have comparatively small penal populations (Western 2006, 66). Incarceration rates, Western finds, grew faster under Republican governors.

I also admit to not fully understanding why Wacquant views the prison boom as political theatre meant to re-establish the sovereignty of the state. Hannah Arendt (1968) believed that state sovereignty is nowhere more absolute than in matters of expulsion. She was speaking about the work of shoring up national borders and excommunicating elements of the body politic deemed unworthy of citizenship. These seem to me matters directly related to sovereignty. But how does the advancement of capitalism or globalization breach state sovereignty, as suggested in the above quote? And how does increased police supervision in inner-city neighbourhoods and mandatory minimums repair the breach? Does over-policing in poor minority communities not delegitimize the state in the eyes of their

residents, sowing the seeds of legal cynicism (Sampson and Bartusch 1998)? And what American politician today seems remotely interested in promoting state sovereignty? Most are much more committed to precisely the opposite impulse: to hiding or 'submerging' the state in everyday life to such a degree that when you benefit from the government – through your earned income tax credit or your mortgage tax reduction, say – it hardly feels that way (Mettler 2011).

The most important thing is that Wacquant has advanced a new urban sociology for a city facing new problems. His arguments should make us rethink *how* we go about studying social suffering (e.g. the intellectual company that we keep) and fundamentally *what* it is that we should be studying in the first place (e.g. our objects of analysis). He has developed concepts – hyper-incarceration, advanced marginality – to promote analytical precision. And he has approached complex problems of urban poverty, racial disparities and advanced punishment from above and from below. Now it is time for us to continue the work of forging into territory not fully explored here – family, religion, gender, China, housing – and applying, challenging, debating and extending his ideas.

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