

'Introducing Michael Gove to Loïc Wacquant': Why Social Work Needs Critical Sociology

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Abstract

In 2013, Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Education and Health in the UK coalition government, criticised social workers for laying insufficient emphasis on the 'agency' of individuals and for being too preoccupied with social and economic inequalities. Such a perspective, which is not unique to Gove, needs to be countered by reaffirming the significance of an expansively critical sociology for social work. In this context, the thematic concerns of the French theorist, Loïc Wacquant, illuminates key aspects of social work engagement with clients which Gove and his ideological associates appear intent on ignoring. The issues raised have significant political resonances given the pending UK General Election taking place in May 2015.

Keywords: Sociology, social work education, war of position, neo-liberalism

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Introduction

Since the summer of 2014, Michael Gove has been the Government Chief Whip in the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition administration in the UK. In November 2013, whilst the Secretary of State for Education and Health, he gave a highly significant keynote address on 'children in need' to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). A substantial part of his speech was an attack on the way many practitioners intervene in the lives of children and families. Social work

registrants with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), in order to attest their proficiency, are required to understand the ‘impact of injustice, social inequalities, policies and other issues which affect the demand for social work services’ (HCPC, 2012, p. 13). Elsewhere, it is emphasised, more proactively, that they must be able to ‘promote social justice, equality and inclusion’ (HCPC, 2012, p. 9). In contrast, Gove argued that practitioners laid insufficient emphasis on the ‘agency’ of ‘individuals and were constrained by far too great a focus on inequalities’. The discussion will begin by reporting on aspects of Gove’s intervention. It will also be suggested that, because of historical and contemporary tensions within the profession in the UK and beyond, there may well be an audience which is receptive to some of the core perceptions of Gove and his political allies.

Nevertheless, it will be argued that Gove’s interventions have to be countered. More specifically, there needs to be a reaffirmation of the relevance of more encompassing sociological explanations which seek to interpret what are defined as the ‘problems’ which practitioners become professionally embroiled in (HCPC, 2012; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2008). Although not arguing that one theorist alone is sufficient to counter Gove, it will be maintained that the critical sociology of Loïc Wacquant illuminates key aspects of social work engagement with clients which he seeks to obfuscate. In what follows the focal aim is not to cover Wacquant’s entire oeuvre: readers seeking a fuller and critical engagement with his work on neo-liberal penality will need to look elsewhere (Garrett, 2015a,b). Similarly, this article will not expand on the abundant criticisms of his work available in a number of themed issues of international journals and edited collections which have been exclusively devoted to Wacquant’s perspective on penality (see, e.g. Jones, 2010; Newburn, 2010).

Introducing Mr Gove (and some of his ideological associates)

Gove adumbrated and conflated a range of ideologically weighted difficulties faced by many families such as ‘the mental health issues, the substance abuse, the domestic violence, the emotional ties between different partners, the *alienation from the workplace*, the lack of parenting capacity’ (emphasis added; see also Hall *et al.*, 1978). The task of social workers is to

use their skills—and training—to get those families’ lives back on track. And that will often mean challenging habits of behaviour in adults which they are reluctant to abandon. It will mean emphasising the importance of delayed gratification, self-discipline, consideration for others and pride in achievement (Gove, 2013).

Given that only 6 per cent of those beginning social work training have studied at the elite ‘Russell Group’ of UK universities, the new Frontline initiative, which aims to recruit ‘high-flyers’, would help bolster the fragile

standing of the profession (see also [Bennett, 2014](#)). It will alter the class composition of the social work workforce by attracting ‘the *best people* into one of Britain’s toughest professions’ and creating ‘an elite route’ into social work ([MacAlister, 2012](#), p. 24, emphasis added). However, such innovations would amount to little, implied [Gove \(2013\)](#), unless significant ideological shifts take place within the sphere of social work education. His account warrants repeating at some length:

In too many cases, social work training involves idealistic students being told that the individuals with whom they will work have been disempowered by society. They will be encouraged to see these individuals as victims of social injustice whose fate is overwhelmingly decreed by the economic forces and inherent inequalities which scar our society.

This analysis is, sadly, as widespread as it is pernicious. It robs individuals of the power of agency and breaks the link between an individual’s actions and the consequences. It risks explaining away substance abuse, domestic violence and personal irresponsibility, rather than doing away with them.

Social workers overly influenced by this analysis not only rob families of a proper sense of responsibility, they also abdicate their own. They see their job as securing the family’s access to services provided by others, rather than helping them to change their own approach to life. Instead of working with individuals to get them to recognise harmful patterns of behaviour, and improve their own lives, some social workers acquiesce in or make excuses for these wrong choices ([Gove, 2013](#)).

In contrast, the ‘best social workers in England today don’t just reject this approach instinctively—they have taken it apart intellectually’ ([Gove, 2013](#)). Here, social workers in the London Borough of Hackney furnish his example. Informed by the contribution of [Goodman and Trowler \(2011\)](#), and the heterogeneous ‘Reclaiming Social Work’ (RSW) rebranding, the ‘most innovative social workers’ were now rejecting ‘the idea of their families as passive and powerless victims of circumstance or social workers as dispensers of other agencies’ services’ ([Gove, 2013](#)). Social workers driven by the RSW approach were, he confided, ‘trained in the use of the therapies proven to improve behaviour’.

Gove’s intervention, manifestly bereft of any evidence to support his case, could be dismissed as merely another building block in the coalition’s endeavours to shore up a neo-liberal hegemonic ‘narrative’ during this long period of economic crisis. In this sense, it can be interpreted as reflective of a more encompassing ‘war of position’ which his government is engaged in ([Forgacs, 1988](#)). However, the ideological ambition, underpinning the speech should not be underestimated as it is important in at least two ways. First, it is not a diatribe aimed at social work *per se*. Even in the period leading up to the 2010 election, the [Conservative Party \(2007\)](#) was intent on seeking to win over elements within the profession. Such a strategy was apparent at its 2013 annual conference with Cameron’s invitation to representatives to

applaud the work of social workers. The key issue for the Conservative-led administration pivots on the aspiration to create a *particular type of social work*: one in which are situated ‘professionals’ with dispositions, perceptions and affiliations which do not run ideologically counter to, or seek to destabilise, dominant neo-liberal orientations and the class interests of Gove and his coalition colleagues. Hence, he sets up a clear binary opposition: the ‘best social workers’ including those to emerge from the Frontline and RSW advocates intent on fostering ‘autonomy’ and extinguishing dependency in their clients; versus ‘idealistic students’ and those practitioners foolishly led astray by ‘pernicious’ critical social theory who might seek to implement counter hegemonic practices in their work (Gove, 2013).

Second, Gove’s intervention is likely to be welcomed by some elements associated with the profession because his views may chime with the arguments of those seeking to reduce the scope of social work. In some respects, Gove’s construction of a favoured social work harks back to, and recalibrates, Martin Davies’s (1981, pp. 137–42) notion that social workers are merely ‘maintenance mechanics’ intent on ‘maintaining members in society by exercising control, by allocating resources, and by the provision of a wide range of supportive strategies designed to maximize self-respect and develop the abilities of individuals to survive and thrive under their own steam’. For Davies, the ‘road’ is the key metaphor and image; for Gove—as we have seen—the ‘track’ is the circuit which the self-activated, agile, flexible, responsibilised individual will cover. However, both share a similar ideological perspective on the role and function of a social worker within a functioning, well-ordered wider society. Whatever the nuances, the role assigned to social workers is, in short, to enable and perhaps even enforce normativity. Such a perception is also historically embedded in social work and is discernible even the profession’s early days (see, e.g. Richmond, 1917).

Within the social work academy, Webster (2013) has sketched a similarly truncated role. ‘Let us face it,’ he confidently confides, ‘certainly in social democratic, bourgeois capitalist societies at least . . . standard day-to-day social work amounts to little more than the routine humdrum application of social welfare legislation, policy and procedures’ (Webster, 2013, pp. 567–8). Hence, ‘our characteristic hardcore business’ is to concentrate on the ‘unsafe household, crossing the lintels of the impoverished, dispossessed and marginalised in search of its secrets’. The social role, he floridly maintains, centres on the ‘rescue of the unlucky and unattended, abused, neglected and mistreated . . . management of the feckless, dysfunctional and dangerous’ (Webster, 2013, p. 568). Indeed, ‘social work’s historic mandate has never been to challenge economic infrastructural inequality’ (Webster, 2013, p. 569).

The report by the former chief executive of Barnardo’s, Sir Martin Narey (2014), is also important in the context of the ‘war of position’ presently being waged. Gove (2013) advised his NSPCC audience that Narey was undertaking a ‘thorough review of social work training’ to ensure that students were being equipped with the relevant skills and knowledge. Unsurprisingly,

despite being lazily assembled and startlingly lacking in detail, the Narey document seeks to affirm the prejudices of Gove. Hence, the QAA and the HCPC are criticised for stressing the need for practitioners and social work educators to be attentive to structural questions and inequalities: ‘one Director of Children’s Services’ seemingly told [Narey \(2014, p. 30\)](#) that ‘Universities have been allowed to provide too much theory, too much sociology’. To combat this state of affairs, it is necessary to tilt ‘the balance of influence about the content of the curriculum, very much a university prerogative, in favour of the employer’ ([Narey, 2014, p. 30](#)). Here, projects such as Step Up, an employment-based course launched in 2010, can, for Narey, provide a useful model. Likewise, although the ‘rationale for its introduction can sometimes appear a little thin’, Frontline is likely to be a significant development ([Narey, 2014, p. 33](#)). Aligning himself entirely with the politics of ‘austerity’ and moves to cheapen and fragment public services, Narey also calls for the introduction of ‘social work assistants’ ([Narey, 2014, p. 40](#)).

Reflecting the international dimension to this essentially *political and ideological* contestation on social work’s future, [Folgheraiter and Raineri \(2012, pp. 477–8\)](#) assert that the profession is ‘circumstantial and particularistic, and it aims to achieve changes brought about from below by responsible, motivated individuals’. Like Narey, seeking to redefine the aims and aspirations of the profession, they maintain an ‘important traditional feature of social work’ is the more limited ‘pragmatic tendency to address problems directly and seek to “solve” them, rather than lingering on their understanding and explanation’ ([Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2012, p. 478](#)).

Introducing Professor Wacquant

Wacquant was a student and close associate of the late Pierre Bourdieu, whose contributions have, in recent years, begun to enter into the academic literature of social work ([Wacquant, 2012](#); see also [Houston, 2002](#); [Emirbayer and Williams, 2005](#); [Garrett, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2013](#), Chapter 7). Five of his preoccupations will be highlighted here because they may assist us, intellectually and practically, in responding to the views of Gove and his ideological bedfellows: the need for critical thinking; opposition to neo-liberalism; wariness about the role which the USA plays in propagating key ideas on ‘law and order’ and ‘welfare’; why the ‘social state’ needs to be defended; the related concepts of ‘advanced marginality’ and ‘territorial stigmatisation’.

First and foremost, Wacquant is a thinker who locates himself within the tradition of a critical theory which is disruptive of the dominant ways of thinking, seeing and acting propagated by Gove *et al.* ([Wacquant, 2009a](#)). In terms of his conception of intellectual endeavours, Wacquant acknowledges that he is positioned at the confluence of two quite different traditions resulting in an ‘existential and occupational tension that is not always easy to handle’ ([Wacquant, 2009b, p. 124](#)). One tradition is European and finds its ‘clearest

form in France' with a 'lineage', running 'from Zola to Sartre, and then from Foucault to Bourdieu and others' (Wacquant, 2009b, pp. 123–124). Vital to this tradition is the conceptualisation of the socially engaged and committed 'intellectual' whose 'duty' is to re-inject the 'fruit' of their 'reflections and observations into the civic and public sphere' (Wacquant, 2004a, p. 124). The second tradition Wacquant is consistently exposed to emanates from USA. Here, the focus is on 'methodological precision' and the 'ideal' is the 'professional, in the sense used to refer to a lawyer or doctor, that is, the bearer of a technical competency and expert knowledge which is a neutral knowledge, to be assessed only by peers, and who for that reason must keep out of public debate' (Wacquant, 2009b, p. 124). Although, in the USA, the term 'academic' is favoured over that of 'intellectual', for Wacquant, the former connotes a 'one-dimensional' perspective 'turned exclusively towards the microcosm of the university' whilst the latter aims to combine the roles of 'scholar and active citizen' (Wacquant, 2009b, p. 124). As he avows, when

you remain cloistered in your university circles, you allow yourself to get caught up in the games and stakes of the microcosm, and in the end you lose your civic energy, your capacity for astonishment at the world, and the perspicacity needed for deciphering it (Wacquant, 2009b, p. 125).

Despite his obvious allegiances, Wacquant concedes that 'each of these traditions has its own virtues and vices' (Wacquant, 2009b, p. 124). For example, he recognises that a willingness to engage in the civic and public sphere need not result in an abandonment of a scholarly and ethical commitment to methodological rigour. The style of Wacquant's engagement with sociology is also noteworthy. Having trained to become a boxer, when completing his ethnography of the profession in Chicago (Wacquant, 2004a), Wacquant is a highly combative sociologist who is apt to depart from tepid 'academic decorum' (Wacquant, 2009b, p. 122) to engage in polemics and intellectual pugilism with his opponents (see, e.g. an aggrieved Duneier, 2002).

His work is informed by Marxism, but he is not a Marxist. Nevertheless, in describing his approach to intellectual activity, Wacquant refers to the famous letter to Arnold Ruge where Marx asserts that Communism and Communist intellectuals in particular, should strive towards a 'new world' through a '*ruthless criticism of everything existing*', ruthless in two senses: the criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be' (Marx, in Tucker, 1978, p. 13, original emphasis). For Wacquant (2004a), this programme is 'timelier than ever' and he argues that the 'primary historical mission of critical thought' is to

perpetually question the obviousness and the very frames of civic debate so as to give ourselves a chance to think the world, rather than being *thought by* it, to take apart and understand its mechanisms, and thus to reappropriate it intellectually and materially (Wacquant, 2004b, p. 101, original emphasis).

However, this ‘mission’ of critical thought is impeded because of the ‘competition’ of ‘false critical thought’. Frequently, this type of thinking beguiles because of its use of ‘apparently progressive tropes’ such as ‘identity’, ‘multiculturalism’, ‘diversity’ and ‘globalization’. Nevertheless, such discourses ultimately invite ‘us to submit to the prevailing forces of the world, and in particular to market forces’ ([Wacquant, 2004b](#)). Within social work, a not dissimilar perspective has been articulated by [Webb \(2009\)](#).

A further impediment to critical thought, particularly in the USA asserts Wacquant, is the focus on ‘policy research’. More broadly, this might be associated with how academics, in applied disciplines such as social work, are incessantly encouraged to apply for research grants which might aid governments seeking to ‘fix’ a particular ‘social problem’. Hence, this type of research endeavour is often focused on ‘public policy’ and the applied benefits which are said to accrue from particular, ‘objectively’ defined ‘evidenced-based’ research projects. Within this evolving framework, ‘autonomous researchers’ risk being ‘supplanted’ by more compliant researchers able to ‘deliver to government the answers that officials wish for and who, above all, accept the questions posed by politicians’ ([Wacquant, 2009b](#), p. 24). Perhaps mindful of the role which Anthony Giddens fulfilled during the period of New Labour governments (1997–2010) in the UK, Wacquant calls for ‘collective reflection’ on the ‘changing nexus between research, the media, money, and politics’ ([Wacquant, 2009b](#), p. 124). Convinced that an opportunistic and narrowly functional approach to scholarly endeavour is an obstacle to independent and conceptually radical research, he sarcastically maintains that over the entrance gates of public policy schools in the USA is written in ‘invisible letters’: ‘thou shallt not ask thy own questions’ ([Wacquant, 2004b](#), p. 99). A similar endeavour to constrain and censor intellectual inquiry is, of course, apparent in Gove’s intervention.

A second characteristic of Wacquant’s sociology is that he is intent on delineating the contours of, and opposing, neo-liberalism. The social sciences have the potential, he argues, to act as ‘solvent of the new neoliberal common sense that “naturalizes” the current state of affairs . . . through the methodical critique of the categories and topics which weave the fabric of the dominant discourse’ ([Wacquant, 2009b](#), p. 129). This is no easy task because of the power and reach of a *‘neoliberal international’* anchored by a network of think tanks in the USA and ‘relayed by the great international institutions, the World Bank, the European Commission, the OECD, the WTO, etc.’ ([Wacquant, 2004b](#), p. 100, original emphasis). In the UK, the Centre for Social Justice, heavily influenced by US discourses, has embarked on the strategic task of denuding ‘social justice’ of any politically progressive aspect by harnessing the phrase to coalition endeavours to lever people into work (see also [Duncan Smith, 2011](#)).

Related to these comments, a third characteristic of Wacquant’s work is his acute sensitivity to the role which the world’s hegemon, the USA, plays in orchestrating a dominant and dominating perspective on economy and society.

Since the ‘mid-1970s, [the USA] has been the theoretical and practical motor for the elaboration and planetary dissemination of a political project that aims to subordinate all human activities to the tutelage of the market’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 20). A similar dynamic can be identified in terms of how ideas on ‘law’ and ‘order’ are often propelled by the ‘worldwide diffusion of the new “made-in-the-USA” ideologies and policies’ (Wacquant, 2001, p. 405). For example, in recent years, this has impacted on the evolution of policies combating ‘anti-social behaviour’ in the UK and Ireland (Garrett, 2007a).

A fourth element which characterises Wacquant’s approach is his reaffirmation and development of Bourdieu’s interpretation of the state (Wacquant, 2001, 2009a). For Bourdieu, the state’s ‘left hand’ is composed of social workers, youth leaders, secondary and primary school teachers in other words, ‘the set of agents of the so-called spending ministries which are the trace within the state of the struggles of the past’ (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 2). Conversely, the right hand is made up of Treasury and bank technocrats who, ‘obsessed by the question of financial equilibrium, knows nothing of the problems of the left hand, confronted with the often very costly social consequences of “budgetary restrictions”’ (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 5).

Wacquant maintains that it is vital to ‘defend the autonomy and dignity’ of the occupations, such as social work, making up the left hand of the state. Such a stance involves a refusal to ‘be roped into assuming degraded versions of social and health functions’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 285). He asserts, however, that his analysis ‘fills in a gap in Bourdieu’s model by inserting the police, the courts, and the *prison as core constituents of the “Right hand” of the state*, alongside the ministries of the economy and the budget’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 289, original emphasis). Thus, whilst the ‘left hand’ ‘nourishes and sustains, protects the dispossessed from the threats of life and reduces inequalities’, the ‘right hand’ is ‘charged with the enforcement of order, moral and economic’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 285). Wacquant also departs from Bourdieu in introducing a gendered dimension to this dichotomising of the state, positing the notion that the ‘left hand’ is the ‘feminine side’ providing ‘protection and succour to the social categories shorn of economic and cultural capital’: the ‘right hand’ is the ‘masculine side’ charged ‘with enforcing the new economic discipline via budget cuts, fiscal incentives, and economic deregulation’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 289). Stretching this analogy a little further, Wacquant asserts that we are witnessing, partly in response to the gains of the women’s movement, a ‘remasculinization of the state’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 290), hence the ‘transition’ which is occurring from the ‘kindly “nanny state” of the Fordist-Keynesian era to the strict “daddy state” of neoliberalism’ (Wacquant, 2009a, p. 290).

A fifth thematic component of Wacquant’s overall perspective focuses on processes of ‘advanced marginality’ and the connected production of ‘territorial stigmatization’ (see, e.g. Wacquant 2007, 2008, Chapter 8; 2009b). ‘Advanced marginality’ refers, in broad terms, to an emerging ‘yet distinctive

regime of urban poverty' which can be associated with 'new forms of exclusionary closure translating into the expulsion to the margins and crevices of social and physical space' (Wacquant, 2008, p. 232). A core element of this process is the 'symbolic splintering' of the working class (Wacquant, 2008, Chapter 8). This is connected to the fragmentation and symbolic denunciation of particular fractions of the working class which are constructed as social detritus. More specifically, it is reflected in the 'alleged discovery of "underclass areas" in the United States ... the invention of the "*quartier sensible*" in France, the "sink estate" in the United Kingdom, the "*proble-mquartier*" in Germany, the "*krottenwijk*" in the Netherlands, etc' (Wacquant, 2008, p. 24). Thus, rather than

being disseminated throughout working-class areas, advanced marginality tends to concentrate in isolated and bounded territories increasingly perceived by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous badlands at the heart of the postindustrial metropolis where only the refuse of society would accept to dwell.

As we will see later, the discourses of 'vilification [which] proliferate and agglomerate' about such territories are generated 'from below', in the 'ordinary interactions of daily life', as well as 'from above', by journalistic, political and bureaucratic fields (Wacquant, 2007, p. 67).

Discussion

Wacquant's work encourages us to think more deeply about a range of issues relating to social work which Gove and his associates seeks to extinguish. In order to explore this dimension, in more detail, we will return to five of the thematic areas explored above.

First, Wacquant's aspiration to act as an oppositional thinker active in the public sphere gels with the assertion, castigated by Gove and Narey, that social workers need to be sociologically informed (HCPC, 2012). Turning to social work research, Wacquant's insights illuminate the pitfalls of scholarly and practice-based endeavours becoming too compliant and harnessed to the politics of the neo-liberal state. In this context, Winslow and Hall (2013, p. 9) have criticised the 'degenerative research programmes of neo-liberal governance and charitable trusts ... aided and abetted by ... academia's elite research institutions'. The overarching

problem in the field of social research is that the desire of funders to discover basic 'empirical facts', which are always restrictively themed and often pre-empted in the main objectives of the research programmes themselves, influences the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the social research that produces those facts (Winslow and Hall, 2013, p. 9).

This is often reflected in the assertion—rhetorically non-ideological, in truth deeply ideological—that social work practice must be unambiguously and simplistically 'evidenced-based'. Recently, in the UK, there have also been

overt political attempts to steer research themes in the direction of the policy imperatives of the coalition government. In 2011, for example, a row erupted when it was announced that the Arts and Humanities Research Council was to encourage and support research on the so-called ‘big society’—a rather shallow construct entirely associated with the aspiration of Gove and his government colleagues to produce and sustain a hegemonic ‘big idea’ (Ladyman, 2011; see also Jordan, 2011).

Second, Wacquant’s analysis of neo-liberalism might intellectually enhance the profession’s attempts to understand and organise against the politics promoted by Gove and the UK coalition government in the run-up to the 2015 General Election. At present, dramatic shifts in the distribution of income and wealth, and associated immiseration for many, is impacting on a range of social work concerns, including those referred to by the former Secretary of State. Research data is available attesting to the adverse impact of the economic crisis on what Gove blandly terms ‘mental health issues’ (Kentikelenis *et al.*, 2011). Many countries worst hit by the crisis, are experiencing a health emergency. In Greece, suicides

rose by 17% in 2009 from 2007 and unofficial 2010 data quoted in parliament mention a 25% rise compared with 2009. The Minister of Health reported a 40% rise in the first half of 2011 compared with the same period in 2010.... Violence has also risen, and homicide and theft rates nearly doubled between 2007 and 2009 (Kentikelenis *et al.*, 2011, p. 1).

In the same piece, in *The Lancet*, it is observed that the overall ‘the picture of health in Greece is concerning. It reminds us that, in an effort to finance debts, ordinary people are paying the ultimate price’ (Kentikelenis *et al.*, 2011, p. 2). What is more, the hardships being endured are avoidable. Findings are not dissimilar in other EU countries where the social state is being subjected to the most severe attacks (see Mental Health Commission, 2011, p. 10).

Third, Wacquant’s wariness about the role of the USA in seeking to promote one-size-fits all and transferable ‘common sense’ view of the world might also be heeded. He echoes the concerns of Bourdieu that the ghettos of the USA are becoming ‘abandoned sites that are fundamentally defined by an absence—basically that of the state and of everything that comes with it, police, schools, health care institutions, associations, etc.’ (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu *et al.*, 2002, p. 123). In some US cities, ‘public authority has turned into a war machine against the poor’ with social workers only able to see ‘clients’ in their offices (Wacquant, in Bourdieu *et al.*, 2002, pp. 137–8). This is not to suggest that there should be a foolish anti-Americanism within the profession in Europe; indeed, there is a need to recognise—historically and in contemporary terms—endeavours to counter capitalist excesses by social workers and social work educators in the USA (Reisch and Andrews, 2002). The key point is that the USA hardly serves as an appropriate ‘model’ of a ‘just society’ (Garrett, 2002). Michael Reisch (2013, p. 71) observes that nearly ‘50 million people in the US, approximately

16% of the population, are now officially poor, the largest number of people living in poverty since the US began to measure poverty and the highest poverty rate in over a generation'. Widespread hunger is now also a prevalent problem for many children and families and this is likely to be reflected in terms of the 'caseloads' of many social workers.

It is important to acknowledge how US economic and social 'models', have influenced developments elsewhere. For example, in the 1990s, Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA) in the UK, played a pivotal role in sponsoring visits by, and publishing the work of figures such as Charles Murray (1990, 1994), best known for his ideas on the dangers posed by the 'underclass'. The IEA also endeavoured to tilt social policy on adoption and wider child welfare discourses in the direction favoured by the US New Right ([Morgan, 1998, 1999](#)). More recently, the public debate around 'social security' has transmogrified into one pivoting on a more stigmatised 'welfare'. Partly influenced by US developments, Gove's vaunted Frontline social work initiative is also related to similar programmes initially established within the teaching profession there ([MacAlister, 2012](#)).

Fourth, Wacquant's conceptualisation of the state is deeply problematic: social work is, of course, an activity mostly undertaken by female workers, but his gendered depiction of what he also terms the state's 'left' and 'right' hands is not convincing. However, his focus on the changes taking place in terms of the function of the state and the battles taking place within it might remind social workers of the need to defend its most benign elements during a period of intensive neo-liberalisation. As Ferguson and Lavalette argue, for

all its well-documented limitations—its familialist assumptions, its limited conceptions of citizenships, its bureaucratic ethos and the ways it embedded class inequalities—the welfare state in Britain, like welfare states that emerged in most advanced capitalist countries in the post-war period, provided its citizens with some degree of security and freedom from fear ([Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013](#), p. 95).

Significantly, whilst criticising social work educators and practitioners, a substantial part of Gove's speech was given over to his speculating on the advantages of privatising welfare states services for children and families.

Finally, Wacquant's 'advanced marginality' and 'territorial stigmatisation' concepts are especially useful for social workers seeking to sociologically interpret why some localities are belittled and degraded in political, public and professional discourses. His theorisation illuminates how particular geographical spaces are constructed as symbolic locations and deployed as signifiers for crime and assorted threats and troubles (see also [Campbell, 1993](#)). In England, particularly during the period of the Thatcher administrations in the 1980s, Liverpool often fulfilled this role ([Lane, 1987](#)). Across the Irish Sea, Limerick has served a similar function ([Hourigan, 2011](#); see also [Keenan, 2013](#)). Within each of these urban locations, specific impoverished

neighbourhoods are constructed as pariah zones within the wider city: for example, in Liverpool, this has been Toxteth; in Limerick, it has been the localities of Moyross and Southill ([Garrett, 2015c](#)).

More generally, council estates, where many of Gove's families are implicitly located, are now depicted in elite discourses as 'holding pens for the undeserving poor' ([McKenzie, 2012](#), p. 129). The stigmatisation of local authority housing estates and their residents has 'long been identified as widespread and pervasive, and not just in different parts of the UK' ([Hancock and Mooney, 2013](#), p. 51). Dominant discourses have tended, in fact, to dwell on the notion that tenants 'constitute a socially excluded, economically inactive and politically apathetic "underclass"' ([Watt, 2008](#), p. 347). For New Labour, the council estate (or, drawing on prevalent US vocabulary, the so-called 'sink estate') appeared to be the theatre in which the performance and regulation of 'anti-social behaviour' were to be enacted. For even vaguely leftist commentators, such as Will [Hutton \(2007\)](#) in *The Observer*, council housing was a 'living tomb'.

After the 'riots' in England in August 2011, Gove's cabinet colleagues made a series of high-profile speeches in which 'broken society and welfare ghetto narratives ... imbued with class hostility and antagonism' dominated ([Hancock and Mooney, 2013](#), p. 48). This was exemplified by key speeches by the prime minister. In his first statement on the riots on 10 August 2011, [Cameron \(2011a\)](#) argued that 'there are pockets of our society that are not just broken but, frankly, sick'. He continued:

... when I say parts of Britain are sick, the one word I would use to sum that up is irresponsibility ... a complete lack of responsibility, a lack of proper parenting, a lack of proper upbringing, a lack of proper ethics, a lack of proper morals.

Days later, he returned to associated themes:

I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home.

Perhaps they come from one of the neighbourhoods where it's standard for children to have a mum and not a dad ... where it's normal for young men to grow up without a male role model, looking to the streets for their father figures, filled up with rage and anger ([Cameron, 2011b](#)).

The following month, Cameron's colleague, Iain Duncan Smith, confided:

For years now, too many people have remained unaware of the true nature of life on some of our estates. This was because we had ghettoised many of these problems, keeping them out of sight of the middle-class majority ... But last month the inner city finally came to call, and the country was shocked by what it saw ([Duncan Smith, 2011](#)).

Each of these contributions by Gove's colleagues situates particular territories—the 'neighbourhoods' and 'estates' which are 'ghettoised'—as zones inhabited by a feral 'underclass' who are beyond the vision and the rules of civility shared by the rest of the community. Such constructions also 'chime with the new

conditionality regimes and reductions in benefits for tenants' (Hancock and Mooney, 2013, p. 55). That is to say, the intervention of primary definers—such as Cameron, Duncan Smith and a host of likeminded commentators and media pundits – is performing ideological work. As Hancock and Mooney (2013, p. 53) maintain 'construction of place through territorial stigmatization obfuscates fundamental structural and functional differences underlying the uneven spatial distribution of poverty and disadvantage, and displaces questions of culpability away from the state and private sectors'. In the UK, recent changes to benefit entitlement, with the introduction of the so-called 'housing benefit cap' by Gove's government, will witness large reductions in rental support for many families and will also socially engineer a higher degree of social class and income segregation between wealthy and poorer localities. This will especially be the case in London (Hammett, 2010) and will further entrench the 'territorial stigmatisation' which perturbs Wacquant.

Importantly, areas subjected to 'territorial stigmatisation' are also where practitioners go about their work on a daily basis. Such an understanding of social work is entirely absent in Gove's NSPCC speech. What is more, some of the research literature highlights the role of 'external actors', such as social workers, in actually producing and amplifying stigma. Hastings has referred to how

the policies and practices of local authority workers such as housing officers and social workers, as well as the police force, can perpetuate myths about particular places as well as contribute to their material deprivation by failing to see them as deserving of their share of public resource (Hastings, 2004, p. 240).

In this context, a professional attentiveness to anti-discriminatory practice, called for by the profession's regulatory bodies, might begin to incorporate *places*, as well as *people*, given the dialectical interplay which binds them (see also HCPC, 2012). Perhaps there also needs to be greater recognition of the collective tenacity and resistance displayed by stigmatised communities unwilling to bend in the face of economic adversity (see, e.g. Slater and Anderson, 2011). Recognition of neighbourhood-based 'strengths' and patterns of resistance seem especially important given, as we have seen, the tone of contemporary political rhetoric and policy relating to social work with children and families.

Conclusion

As Gray and Webb argue, in an important edited collection, a 'renewed critical social work' may be taking shape in a number of countries. This re-energised form of theory and practice

begins with grappling with ideas about what a 'just society' might look like and how injustice manifests itself in everyday relationships and institutional structures. This critical project confronts, unsettles and agitates, and seeks to transform capitalist relations of domination, marginalisation, exclusion

and oppression that lead to injustice (Gray and Webb, 2013; see also Jones *et al.*, 2004).

Starkly opposed to Gove's analysis, the argument in this discussion is aligned with that of Gray and Webb in stating that it is now more vital than ever to try to augment the critical theoretical resources available to social work. More fundamentally, it is important for those involved in the profession – either as practitioners, students, service users or educators – to counter Gove and his associates attempts to dilute, may be even to eradicate, a willingness to combat the harm and degradation created by the politics of neo-liberalism. Wacquant does not provide mechanistic 'applications' or 'solutions' to such questions, but his diverse contributions might potentially aid our ability to take part in the 'war of position' now being deepened by the forces of reaction within and on the periphery of the profession.

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