

THE RISE OF THE PENAL STATE

*Neo-Liberalization or New Political Culture?*WILLEM DE KOSTER*, JEROEN VAN DER WAAL, PETER ACHTERBERG and
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Imprisonment rates are presumed to have risen in the West, and it is argued by certain social scientists that this can be explained by a comprehensive process of economic neo-liberalization. In this paper, we develop an alternative explanation, focusing on the rise of a 'new political culture'. Longitudinal cross-national analyses are performed to test the tenability of these theories. First, it is demonstrated that some countries have been witnessing a trend of penalization, but that there is no overall trend. Second, economic explanations for variations in imprisonment rates prove to be untenable. Third, it is shown that a new-rightist demand for social order, which is not found to be inspired by economic neo-liberalization, provides a better explanation. This leads to the conclusion that high incarceration rates can be understood as being part of a right-authoritarian politico-cultural complex.

Imprisonment Rates on the Rise?

As more and more people seem to be imprisoned in North America, Western Europe and Australia nowadays, the topic of penalization is a hot issue in contemporary criminology. Among the most prominent scholars studying this topic is French sociologist Loïc Wacquant. In publications like *Prisons of Poverty* (2002 [1999]) and *Punishing the Poor* (2008),¹ he has developed a comprehensive materialist explanation for the ongoing trend of penalization he signals in countries on these continents.

While it is clear his theory concerns these Western countries—sometimes referred to as economically advanced societies—Wacquant is ambiguous about its exact scope. On the one hand, he states 'the signal fact of the end of the century is without doubt the tremendous inflation of prison populations in *all advanced societies*' (Wacquant 2001: 404, italics added). On the other hand, however, he suggests that the situation in Europe differs from that in the United States: '... in Europe, the dice is not yet cast, far from it. ... carceral inflation is not inevitable' (Wacquant 2001: 409, cf. 1999: 216). Recently, his reservation has faded, as Wacquant states that penalization is characteristic of the United States for the past 30 years and, of Western Europe, for the past 15 years (Wacquant 2006: 16). As it remains unclear in which countries a trend of penalization has occurred, our Hypothesis 1 concerns this issue and states that incarceration rates did rise in North America, Western Europe and Australia.

Of course, if imprisonment rates prove to vary in time, this calls for an explanation. The commonsense explanation focusing on rising crime rates does not hold, as the

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¹As this title is not available in English yet, we base our argument on the French edition, *Punir les Pauvres* (2006).

presumed rise in imprisonment has occurred in an age of stable or declining crime rates (Garland 2001: 106; Hudson 2002: 251; Wacquant 2006: 16), and there is no clear relation between crime and imprisonment rates (Wilkins and Pease 1987; Garland 2001: 208; Von Hofer 2003; cf. Cavadino and Dignan 2006: 447). Instead, Wacquant follows a neo-Marxist way of reasoning, which is expounded in ‘Penalization and neo-liberalization’. An alternative to this economic theory is an explanation focusing on the rise of the so-called ‘new political culture’, which is discussed in ‘Penalization and the new political culture’.

Explaining Penalization

Penalization and neo-liberalization

According to Wacquant’s theory, large numbers of people are incarcerated ‘due to the increasingly frequent, indeed routine, use of imprisonment as an instrument for managing social insecurity’ (Wacquant 2001: 404). This social insecurity has been brought about by economic developments related to the transformation of the ‘Keynesian’ into a ‘Darwinian’ state (Wacquant 2001; 2006). Whereas the former was based on the principle of *solidarity* and a prominent role for the state in economic redistribution, the latter is characterized by neo-liberal, or free-market measures such as state withdrawal from the economic sphere, and ‘makes a fetish of *competition* and celebrates individual responsibility (whose counterpart is collective irresponsibility)’ (Wacquant 2001: 405, italics in original; cf. 2006: 26).

Thus, a less generous and less comprehensive system of welfare benefits is considered to be an important factor explaining penalization (see also Wacquant 1999: 215). This line of thought, which is followed by other scholars as well (Hudson 2002; see, e.g. Beckett and Western 2001; Cavadino and Dignan 2006; Downes and Hansen 2006), is aptly summarized by Greenberg (2001: 81): ‘... locking people up or giving them money might be considered alternative ways of handling marginal, poor populations’.

Although a tightening welfare regime is a prominent feature, Wacquant discusses the advent of the Darwinian state as a more comprehensive process, including a polarizing labour market with increasing employment in services, leading to an increase in insecure flexible labour, individualized labour contracts and discontinued or fragmented careers (Wacquant 2006: 25–6). These economic developments, indicating ‘the generalization of precarious employment’ (Wacquant 1999: 215), are considered to cause increasing social insecurity as well. He argues these intertwined processes are justified by a neo-liberal discourse, whose main features are the ‘competition fetish’ and the emphasis on ‘collective irresponsibility’ characteristic of the Darwinian state. This discourse holds the individual fully responsible for its own fate and actions in an age of growing social insecurity (Wacquant 2006: 26–34).

According to Wacquant, this combination of declining welfare benefits, rising numbers of insecure flexible labour contracts and a neo-liberal discourse lead to ‘surplus labour’. Deprived of steady employment and income, this labour surplus is held responsible for ‘petty’ or ‘survival’ crime—crime committed to cope with precarious economic conditions—and subsequently gets criminalized. In this way, the Keynesian welfare state, which was based on solidarity with and inclusion of the economically

deprived, transforms into a Darwinian ‘penal state’—a competitive state in which marginal populations are routinely imprisoned. Social insecurity is thus managed by means of incarceration—a process indicated by Wacquant as ‘punishing the poor’ (Wacquant 2006) and ‘the penal management of poverty’ (Wacquant 1999; 2002 [1999]).

Wacquant has not put his propositions to a direct empirical test. Instead, he illustrates his theory by sketching inflation in incarceration in the United States in recent decades, and by showing that the subsequent rise in expenditure on imprisonment is accompanied by a decline in generosity when it comes to welfare benefits (Wacquant 2005; 2006). Others did perform empirical tests, but only of a part of Wacquant’s more comprehensive theory: they focused on the proposition that lower expenditures on welfare benefits lead to higher levels of incarceration. Although Cavadino and Dignan (2006) do not find support for this thesis when assessing this relationship for 12 OECD countries, Downes and Hansen (2006) do if 19 OECD countries are under assessment, just as Beckett and Western (2001) find partial support for this thesis in the United States.

Only the study of Downes and Hansen (2006) seems to provide a serious test, though, since only they use *longitudinal* data and subsequently show there is an impact of *declining* welfare expenditures on imprisonment in the West. Nevertheless, Downes and Hansen (2006) rightly argue that further research is needed, because they merely focus on a bivariate relationship and consider but two points in time. Besides, it is important to stress that Wacquant’s theory on the rise of the penal state includes more causes than declining welfare benefits: a rising number of insecure, flexible jobs and a neo-liberal discourse are considered to be relevant as well. Therefore, we aim to assess whether these economic changes and the spread of this discourse are really related to imprisonment rates in the West. To do so, we will test the following hypotheses: low welfare generosity and low expenditures on welfare benefits are positively related to imprisonment rates (Hypothesis 2), flexible labour is positively associated with imprisonment rates (Hypothesis 3), and support for neo-liberal policies is positively correlated with imprisonment rates (Hypothesis 4).

Penalization and the new political culture

It remains to be seen whether increased rates of incarceration actually result from a comprehensive process of economic neo-liberalization. An alternative explanation suggests that what may have been decisive instead is the emergence of a new political culture that revolves around cultural issues rather than issues of class and economic distribution—above all, the amplification of the quest for national unity and national identity.

As is well known, the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s featured well educated middle-class youth protesting against a bureaucratized, technocratic, capitalist society (‘the system’) that was seen as suffocating individual liberty and, as such, perceived as a threat to the quest for individual self-attainment (cf. Roszak 1969; Zijderveld 1970). These morally individualist values have not disappeared since, but have only become more widespread according to Inglehart’s (1977) studies of a gradually unfolding ‘silent revolution’ or a process of ‘postmodernisation’ (Inglehart 1997), in which so-called post-materialist values like individual liberty and

self-expression gain momentum over materialist issues. Since post-materialism in the materialism/post-materialism index actually measures libertarianism, the rise of post-materialist values witnessed by Inglehart really means that a shift from authoritarian to libertarian values occurred in recent decades (Flanagan 1979; 1982; 1987; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Middendorp 1991; Houtman 2003). However, this does not undermine the central tenet of Inglehart's theory of the silent revolution: values pertaining to individual liberty have moved centre-stage since the 1960s and 1970s. What we have been witnessing since then is the emergence of a 'new political culture' around these values, and post-industrial cultural politics has accordingly increasingly replaced class politics as the principal focus of political conflict (Dalton *et al.* 1984; Rempel and Clark 1997; Clark 1998; 2001; Hechter 2004; Achterberg 2006a; Houtman *et al.* 2008).

Since the 1980s, however, a rightist branch of new cultural politics has emerged, basically driven by deeply felt dismay about left-libertarian cultural politics as the offshoot of the counterculture.² In the United States, the new Christian right gained momentum under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, and has remained voicefully present ever since, pathologizing the morally individualist and relativist values of the counterculture. In these new-rightist (i.e. culturally conservative) circles, as Thomas Frank observes, 'the counterculture' and 'the sixties' have become synonyms for 'a ten-year fall from grace, the loss of a golden age of consensus, the end of an edenic epoch of shared values and safe centrism' (Frank 1998: 1), while 'in the nation's politics, sixties- and hippie-bashing remains a trump card only slightly less effective than red-baiting was in earlier times' (Frank 1998: 3).

Most European countries have been witnessing the emergence of new-rightist movements and parties since the 1980s as well. Like new-leftist parties, these new-rightist parties emphasize cultural issues more than anything else—yet do so from a right-authoritarian rather than a left-libertarian angle. They have been electorally successful all over Europe since the 1980s.³ Mockingly referring to a 'silent counter-revolution', Ignazi (1992; 2003) has consequently rightly critiqued Inglehart for his reduction of new cultural politics to its left-libertarian branch only (see also Veugelers 2000). The importance of its right-authoritarian counterpart is underscored by the fact that the new-rightist parties all in all constitute no more than the tip of an iceberg of politico-cultural change: many mainstream rightist parties in Western countries have also moved in more authoritarian directions since the 1980s (Achterberg 2006a).

Besides striving for the strengthening of national unity and national identity, obstructing immigration, repressing non-national ethnic or cultural identities, and reaffirming traditional moral values, new-rightist parties political agenda's across Western countries all prominently feature crime fighting as a major vehicle to maintain order in the nation (Achterberg 2006b; Ignazi 1992; 2003; Veugelers 2000). This suggests that increased incarceration rates may not so much be caused by a shift to

²New-rightist protests against the counter culture surely existed even in the 1960s and 1970s, although most of these remained marginal and politically unorganized phenomena at the fringe of society back then (Ransford 1972; Lyons 1996; Klatch 1999).

³Examples are the FPÖ in Austria, the Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP) in Switzerland, the Progress Party (FrP) and the Danish People's Party (DF) in Denmark, the Progress Party (FrP) in Norway, the Vlaams Blok (renamed Vlaams Belang in 2004) in Flanders, Belgium, the Republikaner in Germany, Front National in France, and—much more recent than any of the foregoing—the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) and Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) in The Netherlands.

neo-liberal economic policies as suggested by Wacquant, but may instead be a vital element of the new-rightist politico-cultural backlash stressing authoritarian measures to re-establish order in the nation. Our Hypothesis 5, in short, is that highest incarceration rates will be found in those countries and those periods in which this backlash is strongest.

Although the historical materialist logic of Wacquant's theory (see Wacquant 2006: Chapter 1) implies this backlash is an economically driven phenomenon, the alternative theory suggests it is primarily a cultural phenomenon. In order to assess this cultural logic to explain the rise of the penal state, we will test our final hypothesis (Hypothesis 6): support for new-rightist policies cannot be explained by low welfare generosity, low expenditures on welfare benefits, flexibilization of labour, or by support for neo-liberal policies.

Data and Measurement

Since no complete dataset covering imprisonment rates, ideological measures and welfare state measures are available, we have constructed our own using information from various sources for as many countries as possible for an extended period.⁴ Since some data sources only cover a limited number of countries or a limited number of years, our analyses are restricted to 16 countries (see for an overview, see Table 1) in a ten-year period (1992–2001), which largely corresponds with the time-span discussed by Wacquant: in his most recent work, he explicitly states that his theory covers developments in Europe for the last 15 years—a period in which those in the United States are assumed to continue (Wacquant 2006: 16). Below, we elaborate on the data sources and measures

TABLE 1 *Trends in imprisonment 1992-2001 (Pearson's r)*

Country	Mean	Trend	N
Australia	102.00	0.99***	4
Austria	83.75	0.09	4
Belgium	78.00	0.99***	4
Canada	124.00	-0.54	4
Denmark	63.75	-0.90*	4
Finland	58.25	-0.56	4
France	84.25	-0.58	4
Germany	86.50	0.97*	4
Great Britain	110.00	0.95*	4
Ireland	63.00	0.69*	3
Italy	87.00	0.27	4
Netherlands	73.75	0.99***	4
Norway	57.25	0.38	4
Sweden	64.00	0.38	4
Switzerland	78.75	-0.42	4
United States	614.75	0.96**	4
Total	115.13	0.01 [#]	63

* $p < 0.10$;

** $p < 0.05$;

*** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed test for significance).

[#] Controlled for differences in country means, this relationship is identically strong and non-significant.

⁴ All data from online sources were retrieved in March 2007.

used to test our hypotheses. Descriptive statistics of all independent variables can be found in Appendix 1.

Imprisonment is measured for each country as the number of people in prison per 100,000 inhabitants.⁵ These statistics are available from the International Centre for Prison Studies' website (www.prisonstudies.org) for the years 1992, 1995, 1998 and 2001.⁶

Expenditures on welfare benefits are measured as the percentage of the gross domestic product spent on welfare benefits in a country. These statistics are available from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) website (www.OECD.org).

Welfare generosity is measured using the so-called generosity index developed by Scruggs (2004), which is often used in comparative welfare state research (see, e.g. Brooks and Manza 2006). The index is based on individual rights to social security. Higher scores on this index indicate a larger compensation for lost income due to unemployment, disability and old age.

Flexible labour is measured as the incidence of temporary employment expressed as a percentage of total employment. These statistics are available from the OECD website as well.

Support for neo-liberal policies is measured using political party manifesto data coded by Budge *et al.* (2001), who quantified all post-war party manifestos of major parties in the 16 countries under observation. Each sentence and quasi-sentence in the party manifestos has been coded into one of 56 policy priorities. All sentences covering a policy priority are summed and expressed as a percentage of the total number of sentences in the document. A score on a policy priority thus reflects the space this priority occupies in the party manifesto.

Using these party-manifesto data, a scale was created by subtracting the attention for four policy priorities expressing support for traditional leftist policies of welfare state expansion and market intervention ('Controlled economy', 'Economic planning', 'Nationalization' and 'Welfare state expansion') from four policy priorities expressing support for neo-liberal economic policies of welfare state limitation and *laissez-faire* policies ('Free enterprise', 'Economic incentives', 'Economic orthodoxy' and 'Welfare state limitation').

In order to create an indicator for the general level of support for neo-liberal policies for each country in each election year, the mean of all political parties was calculated. Doing so, we weighted for their share of the vote to account for their relative importance (cf. Achterberg 2006a). Higher scores on this scale stand for more support for neo-liberal policies in a given country and year.

Support for new-rightist policies is measured in a similar vein as support for neo-liberal policies. The attention for three policy priorities expressing support for left-wing rejection of moral traditionalism and approval of cultural diversity ('National way of life negative', 'Traditional morality negative' and 'Underprivileged minority groups') was subtracted from two policy priorities expressing support for right-wing policies of restoration of the moral order ('National way of life positive' and 'Traditional morality

⁵We have centred the scores on this variable and all others around the mean.

⁶These statistics are available for 2004 as well, but, because the other data sources do not cover this year, our analyses only cover the period 1992–2001.

positive').⁷ In order to construct an indicator for the general support for new-rightist policies for each country in each election year, the weighted mean of all political parties was calculated (cf. Achterberg 2006a).

Results

First, we test the hypothesis that incarceration rates have risen in North America, Western Europe and Australia (Hypothesis 1). Since it is unclear for which countries this presumed trend holds, we have analysed trends for separate countries as well as the general trend.⁸

⁷The exact issues used in the scales and a short description of the items can be found below (copied from Budge *et al.* 2001).

Item	Item nr.	Description
Controlled economy	per412	General need for direct government control of economy; control over prices, wages, rents, etc; state intervention into the economic system
Economic planning	per404	Favourable mentions of long-standing economic planning of a consultative or indicative nature, need for government to create such a plan
Nationalisation	per413	Favourable mentions of government ownership, partial or complete including government ownership of land
Welfare state expansion	per504	Favourable mentions of need to introduce, maintain or expand any social service or social security scheme; support for social services such as health service or social housing
Free enterprise	per401	Favourable mentions of free enterprise capitalism; superiority of individual enterprise over state and control systems; favourable mentions of private property rights, personal enterprise and initiative; need for unhampered individual enterprise
Economic incentives	per402	Need for wage and tax policies to induce enterprise; encouragement to start enterprises; need for financial and other incentives such as subsidies
Economic orthodoxy	per414	Need for traditional economic orthodoxy, e.g. reduction of budget deficits, retrenchment in crisis, thrift and savings; support for traditional economic institutions such as stock market and banking system; support for strong currency
Welfare state limitation	per505	Limiting expenditure on social services or social security; otherwise as 'welfare state expansion', but negative
National way of life positive	per601	Appeals to patriotism and/or nationalism; suspension of some freedoms in order to protect the state against subversion; support for established national ideas
Traditional morality positive	per603	Favourable mentions of traditional moral values; prohibition censorship and suppression of immorality and unseemly behaviour; maintenance and stability of family; religion
National way of life negative	per602	Against patriotism and/or nationalism; opposition to the existing national state; otherwise as 'national way of life positive', but negative
Traditional morality negative	per604	Opposition to traditional moral values; support for divorce, abortion, etc.; otherwise as 'traditional morality positive', but negative
Under-privileged minority groups	per705	Favourable mentions to underprivileged minorities who are defined neither in economic nor in demographic terms, e.g. the handicapped, disabled, homosexuals, immigrants, refugees etc.

⁸In order to investigate trends in time, we calculated the zero-order correlation between year and imprisonment rates. As indicated by numerous studies monitoring over-time changes, for instance investigating trends in inequality (Marks and McMillan 2003), happiness (Veenhoven 2005; Veenhoven and Hagerty 2006), secularization (Crockett and Voas 2006), opinion polarization (Evans and Bryson 2001; Mouw and Sobel 2001), class voting (Nieuwbeerta 1996), assortative mating (Katrnák *et al.* 2006, Tomá *et al.* 2006) or BMI (Katzmarzyk and Davis 2001; Leit *et al.* 2000; Garner *et al.* 1980), the use of the Pearson's product moment correlation—widely known as Pearson's r —is a standard way of assessing temporal changes.

As Table 1 indicates, temporal changes in imprisonment rates vary from country to country. Strikingly, no general trend seems to exist: the phenomenon of penalization is not characteristic for the West as a whole in the ten-year period under observation. Nevertheless, imprisonment rates have only significantly declined in Denmark, and have risen in various countries: not only in the often discussed case of the United States, but also in Australia and in European countries such as Germany and The Netherlands. Thus, Wacquant seems partially right. Although no universal development can be discerned, incarceration has been on the rise in various Western societies indeed.

The above indicates that imprisonment rates do change over time. The question is whether this temporal variation can be explained by Wacquant's theory of economic neo-liberalization. To assess the tenability of this theory, we test the hypotheses derived from it by means of multi-level analyses so we can separate the variance in imprisonment rates at year level from the variance at country level (see Table 2 for details). This is useful, since Wacquant's theory concerns a temporal process: its tenability obviously depends on its ability to explain variance at year level.

Model 0 indicates a multi-level structure exists in the data: 62 per cent of the variance is located at the country level, while 38 per cent is located at the year level.⁹

In Model 1, we added the concrete aspects of economic neo-liberalization discussed by Wacquant—indicators for expenditures on welfare benefits, welfare generosity and flexible labour—in order to test Hypotheses 2 and 3. According to Hypothesis 2, low welfare generosity and low expenditures on welfare benefits are positively related to imprisonment rates, whereas Hypothesis 3 predicts a positive association between flexible labour and imprisonment rates. None of these three indicators of economic neo-liberalization has a significant effect on imprisonment rates, and there is no explained variance at year level at all. This means that a *tightening* of the welfare state and *rising* temporary employment are not related to imprisonment rates. Hence, both hypotheses are refuted.

TABLE 2 *Explaining imprisonment in 16 countries (1992–2001), ML multilevel analyses*

Independents	Model 0 [#]	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	0.03	−0.01	0.03	−0.01
Expenditures on welfare benefits	−	−0.05	−0.10	−0.10
Welfare generosity	−	0.01	−0.01	−0.04
Flexible labour	−	−0.05	0.00	0.00
Support for neo-liberal policies	−	−	0.06	0.08
Support for neo-rightist policies	−	−	−	0.10*
R^2 country level	0	0.02	0.08	0.18
R^2 year level	0	0	0	0.33
−2ll	33.25	32.54	30.75	24.01
Δdf	0	3	1	1
N	63	63	63	63

* $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed test for significance).

[#]Variance country-level 0.74 variance year level 0.46.

⁹The total variance is $0.74 + 0.46 = 1.20$. The percentage at country level is 62 ($100 \times 0.74/1.20$), and 38 ($100 \times 0.46/1.20$) at year level.

In Model 2, we added the indicator for support for the neo-liberal discourse that, according to Wacquant, underlies the process of penalization. According to Wacquant's theory, support for neo-liberal policies is positively correlated with imprisonment rates (Hypothesis 4). Since this variable neither has a significant effect on incarceration rates nor leads to any explained variance at year level, this last hypothesis pertaining to economic neo-liberalization is rejected as well. All indicators for neo-liberalization fail to significantly explain temporal variation in imprisonment rates, suggesting that Wacquant's materialist explanation is empirically untenable.

What is striking is that none of the indicators of economic neo-liberalization show a significant positive trend for the ten-year period under scrutiny. In this period, the expenditures on welfare benefits did not decline (Pearson's $r=-0.08$, $p=0.54$, $N=63$), and welfare benefits did not get less generous (Pearson's $r=-0.06$, $p=0.64$, $N=63$). Neither did a process of flexibilization of labour occur (Pearson's $r=0.09$, $p=0.48$, $N=63$), nor did levels of support for neo-liberal economic policies rise (Pearson's $r=0.21$, $p=0.10$, $N=63$). These findings (see Appendix 1 for details) are at odds with accounts of scholars who argue that a process of neo-liberalization has taken place (e.g. Korpi 2003), but resonate with the work of Pierson (1991: 171) and Van Oorschot (2006), who found that social expenditures in various Western countries have, to date, not declined at all or have even risen slightly (cf. Brooks and Manza 2006). In short, economic neo-liberalization most likely fails to explain any temporal variation in imprisonment rates because such a process did not occur in the period under observation. Contrarily, support for new-rightist policies did rise significantly in this period (Pearson's $r=0.29$, $p=0.02$, $N=63$), and might therefore provide a better explanation.

To assess the validity of the alternative explanation relating to the rise of a right-wing political culture, we added the indicator for support for new-rightist politics in Model 3. Contrary to Models 1 and 2, this model proved to be a significant improvement at the 5 per cent level.¹⁰ As predicted by Hypothesis 5, this variable has a positive effect on imprisonment rates: the highest incarceration rates are found in those countries and those periods in which new-rightist politics are most prominent. Note that primarily temporal variation is accounted for: the explained variance at year level is 33 per cent, whilst that at country level is 18 per cent. Put differently, the *rise* in new-rightist politics explains *rising* incarceration rates.

To separate the year-level variance from the country-level variance in imprisonment, we have used multilevel analyses. However, the analyses presented are based on somewhat atypical data—the number of years per country is rather low. Therefore, we replicated the analyses using OLS multiple regression to test the robustness of our findings. As Table 3 clearly shows, this yields the same results. The assumption of uncorrelated observations underlying OLS multiple regression is violated in this analysis, but, since the multilevel analyses yield similar results, our findings seem to be robust.

Penalization can be explained by a new-rightist political culture, whereas none of our indicators for economic neo-liberalization has any impact. However, it remains to be seen whether these cultural developments can be explained by the economic processes discussed by Wacquant (Hypothesis 6). Does a linkage exist between support

¹⁰The decline of -2ll is $30.75 - 24.01 = 6.74$, which is enough, since the critical value in the χ^2 -distribution is 3.8.

TABLE 3 *Explaining imprisonment in 16 countries (1992–2001), OLS multiple regression analysis*

Independents	β
Constant	–
Expenditures on welfare benefits	–0.23
Welfare generosity	–0.16
Flexible labour	0.09
Support for neo-liberal policies	0.08
Support for new-rightist policies	0.44*** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed test for significance)
R^2 (adjusted)	0.43
N	63

*** $p < 0.001$.TABLE 4 *The relationships between support for neo-rightist policies and indicators of economic neo-liberalization (Pearson's r and OLS multiple regression analysis; $N = 63$)*

	Zero-order correlations	β
Flexible labour	–0.30**	–0.24*
Welfare generosity	–0.22	0.01
Support for neo-liberal policies	0.16	0.09
Expenditures on welfare benefits	–0.19	–0.12
R^2 (adjusted)		0.05
N	63	63

* $p < 0.10$;** $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed test for significance).

for new-rightist policies and welfare generosity, expenditures on welfare benefits, flexible labour and support for economic neo-liberal policies? Table 4 sheds light on these matters by presenting bivariate relationships as well as standardized multiple regression coefficients. Even in the bivariate analysis, which provides the most lenient test, Wacquant's materialist logic does not hold. No significant relationship is found between new-rightist policy preferences and the indicators for welfare generosity, expenditures on welfare benefits or neo-liberal discourse, while, surprisingly, flexible labour is *negatively* related to the former, whereas a materialist theory such as Wacquant's would predict a positive association.

All in all, these findings suggest that we are indeed witnessing an independent politico-cultural backlash that explains penalization. Naturally, economic neo-liberal policies can go hand in hand with new-rightist cultural ones, as the case of Reaganism illustrates. However, our findings indicate that these can be disentangled analytically as well as empirically.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our findings indicate that there is no general trend of penalization in the West. However, incarceration rates have risen since the early 1990s in various countries. Two theories to account for this temporal variation in imprisonment rates are put forward in this paper: on the one hand, Wacquant's materialist theory, focusing on a process of economic neo-liberalization, and, on the other hand, a theory drawing on the rise of a new political culture.

None of our indicators of economic neo-liberalization has any effect on imprisonment rates. Even in our broad analyses, which are better suited to test Wacquant's comprehensive theory than research merely focusing on welfare expenditures (see Beckett and Western 2001; Cavadino and Dignan 2006; Downes and Hansen 2006), no empirical support for a materialist explanation was found. Moreover, no evidence was found for the presumed process of economic neo-liberalization that lies at the core of Wacquant's theory: in a ten-year period, expenditures on welfare benefits did not decline and the welfare state did not get less generous. Neither did a process of flexibilization of labour take place, nor did levels of support for neo-liberal economic policies increase. In short, all of our findings put Wacquant's theory seriously in doubt—at least for the period that most closely resembles the time-span indicated in his recent work (Wacquant 2006: 16).

Contrarily, the alternative theory focusing on the rise of a new political culture centred on cultural issues was empirically corroborated. The rise of a new-rightist political culture provides an explanation for penalization, while economic neo-liberalization does not: penalization seems to be part of a broader new-rightist current emphasizing social order in the nation. In the light of Wacquant's materialist line of reasoning, it is important to note that support for new-rightist politics is not caused by economic neo-liberalization. While indicators of the latter show no temporal trend at all, the former has risen significantly in recent decades (cf. Achterberg 2006a). That previous research indicates that this new-rightist rise is most severe in countries where support for new-leftist politics was strong in the 1960s and 1970s (Van der Waal and Achterberg 2006) underpins that penalization can be understood as being part of a right-authoritarian politico-cultural backlash aimed at restoring order in the nation.

As our findings indicate that this process is not driven by economic insecurity, it is likely that an explanation could be provided by rising levels of cultural insecurity. In a cultural transformation that can be labelled as 'reflexive modernization' (Giddens 1994), 'postmodernization' (Bauman 1995) or 'detraditionalization' (Heelas et al. 1996), moral authorities such as the church have lost their once taken-for-granted legitimacy for many in the West. The cultural insecurity brought about by this decline in clear-cut guidelines for thinking, feeling and acting has most likely formed the breeding ground for an authoritarian outcry for social order (see, e.g. Srole 1956; McDill 1961; Lutterman and Middleton 1970; Middendorp 1991; Achterberg and Houtman 2009, who all demonstrate a clear relationship between cultural insecurity and authoritarianism).

Given the theoretical implications of our findings that there is no relationship between penalization and economic neo-liberalization, we argue they merit further scrutiny. For instance, studies could focus on welfare state retrenchment and imprisonment within countries. One could, for example, study whether, in a strongly neo-liberalizing context such as The Netherlands (Sainsbury 1996; Korpi 2003; Van Oorschot 2006), the economic insecure formerly dependent on welfare benefits, but now less or not entitled, have greater chances of being imprisoned. This would provide further insight into the tenability of the materialist theories put forward by Wacquant and others.

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APPENDIX 1 Means and trends of the independent variables in 16 countries (1992–2001; Pearson's R)

Country	Support for new-rightist policies		Support for neo-liberal policies		Welfare generosity		Expenditures on welfare benefits		Flexible labour	
	Mean	Trend	Mean	Trend	Mean	Trend	Mean	Trend	Mean	Trend
Australia	33.75	0.83	70.58	-0.37	19.95	-0.97**	16.93	0.88	4.25	0.86
Austria	12.00	0.34	79.20	0.62	28.65	0.40	25.48	0.23	6.43	0.81
Belgium	6.80	-0.89	-29.20	-0.88	32.78	-0.04	26.03	-0.39	4.79	0.97**
Canada	-13.18	0.67	55.15	0.63	25.05	-0.29	19.00	-0.97**	11.07	0.97**
Denmark	18.98	0.37	31.58	0.07	36.00	-0.89	27.28	-0.36	9.46	-0.81
Finland	11.78	0.03	-123.50	0.93*	32.75	-0.99***	26.40	-0.97**	14.74	-0.97**
France	21.83	0.64	37.03	-0.98**	29.20	-0.98**	27.78	0.43	11.79	0.97**
Germany	17.85	0.89	-13.75	0.74	28.28	-0.97**	26.23	0.51	11.06	0.88
Great Britain	19.28	0.94*	-2.68	-0.72	21.18	0.51	20.03	-0.44	15.60	0.67
Ireland	9.10	0.87	-29.50	0.87	23.47	0.92	15.60	-0.95	7.07	0.22
Italy	15.75	0.73	60.45	0.77	24.40	0.77	21.70	0.83	6.97	0.92*
Netherlands	-17.93	0.82	2.58	-0.04	32.60	0.84	21.95	-0.99***	9.35	0.99***
Norway	19.70	0.91*	-27.03	0.95**	41.00	0.71	23.90	-0.52	8.71	-0.99***
Sweden	13.78	0.27	8.84	0.62	35.18	-0.53	31.83	-0.99***	12.22	0.75
Switzerland	11.78	-0.77	4.75	-0.04	23.63	-0.91*	17.80	0.91*	12.19	-0.99***
United States	55.80	0.48	33.70	-0.94	18.98	-0.80	15.13	-0.16	4.52	-0.99***
Total [#]	14.91	0.29**	15.57	0.21	28.39	-0.06	22.80	-0.08	8.79	0.09

* $p < 0.10$;** $p < 0.05$;***, $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed test for significance).[#] Controlled for differences in country means, this relationship is identically strong and non-significant.