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# François Bonnet, *The Upper Limit: How Low-Wage Work Defines Punishment and Welfare* (Oakland: University of California Press 2019)

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wellies, waving his flag,” both of which helped impress journalists as “one of the most glamorous picket lines they’d ever seen.” (111) However, as scholars such as Ryan Murphy, Kathleen Barry and myself have established, including such diversity into a union is a two-way street. It requires not only that women and LGBTQ workers find class solidarity, but it also necessitates that unions accept women’s rights and LGBTQ rights as essential workers’ rights. A fuller account from Taylor and Moore of how BASSA struggled through the years to ultimately support gender-based and sexuality-based workplace needs – and how they continue to struggle to iterate such demands today – would greatly enhance this book’s efforts to educate union organizers seeking to adapt to the neo-liberal moment.

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**François Bonnet, *The Upper Limit: How Low-Wage Work Defines Punishment and Welfare* (Oakland: University of California Press 2019)**

*THE UPPER LIMIT* offers a new perspective on an old problem. Namely, how to account for the “amazing variation in how different countries arrange welfare and punishment.” (1) Or, to borrow an example from this book, why there are violent riots in Brazilian prisons and saunas in their Finnish equivalents. Some scholars have sought to account for this kind of variation by exploring the events, decisions, and actors thought to be responsible for such exceptional outcomes. And others have pointed to broad social, political, and cultural shifts in late-modern societies that predispose nations towards penal and social policy convergence. Against these two assumptions, François Bonnet offers a structural explanation of

how and why punishment and welfare vary across nations and over time.

In particular, this book develops a theory of punishment and welfare that is grounded in the Victorian concept of *less eligibility* wherein “the living standards of the lowest class of workers determine the maximum generosity of the welfare state, and punishment is to make a life of crime less attractive than a life of collecting welfare benefits, if they exist.” (119) The conditions of the lowest paid working class, then, structurally determine the upper limit of welfare’s generosity and punishment’s humanity. So, in countries like Finland where minimum wages are quite high there is room for a more generous approach to welfare and a humane approach to punishment. Whereas in places like Brazil, where the poorest survive through the informal economy and are under constant threat of violence, the upper limit is too low to allow for anything but sparse relief and harsh punishment. That said, the theory of less eligibility says nothing of where the upper limit should be, but rather seeks to illustrate the structural coherence between the living conditions of the lowest paid workers and a given country’s mix of social and penal policies.

Irrespective of the particulars of time, place, and context, all societies are suggested to be ordered by the principles of less eligibility because they must all grapple with “what to do about poverty and crime and how to balance compassion for the poor with the interests of capitalists.” (26) Positioned in this way, this book indeed offers “a theory of unusual range.” (4) To put this theory to the test, Bonnet seeks to explain the United States’ peculiar mix of punishment and welfare since the 1960s and, in particular, the rise of mass incarceration that has long captured the attention of criminologists and sociologists alike. Mobilizing equal

parts historical interpretation and ethnographic observation, this book balances a sweeping analysis of postwar American history with what these transformations have meant for ordinary people in one neighbourhood in Brooklyn, NYC.

Bonnet's argument unfolds as follows. The first chapter does the big picture conceptual work of explaining less eligibility by tracing its logic through medieval Europe, the English Poor Laws, the creation of modern welfare states, and their cousin "workfare." The second chapter turns to the United States' particular mix of punishment and welfare since the 1960s, explaining mass incarceration and welfare reform as punitive adjustments to the declining situation of low wage workers. The latter half of the book draws out the implications of these changes in one urban, poor, and predominantly African American neighborhood in NYC where the author conducted field research. Chapter three introduces readers to the field site of East New York. Here, Bonnet positions neighborhood change, and in particular the role of declining crime rates beginning in the 1990s, as a "window of observation" (46) into the wider structural transformations described in the second chapter. Across the final chapters, Bonnet explores the local consequences of America's punitive adjustment as manifestations of less eligibility. He challenges readers to see the structural commonalities between police violence against African Americans, exclusionary public housing policies, non-profit delivery of social services, and poor shelter conditions by illuminating their shared relationship to less eligibility's upper limit. Though the empirical details of each of these chapters will be of great interest to scholars of these particular subfields and specialties in their own right, for the generalist reader the power of these examples lies in how they work

together to support the book's core theoretical argument. In short: "less eligibility rules." (88)

Though the social problems this book approaches are vast and complex, their solution, according to the author, is disarmingly simple: raise the living conditions of the lowest paid workers. As such, he recommends that "societies move toward aggressively redistributive efforts to implement the highest possible living standards at minimum wages so as to dispense with social problems originating in the concentration of both wealth and poverty." (121) Bonnet's argument is a sobering, but convincing one. I did, however, wish for a more robust engagement with these recommendations in the book's concluding chapter. By this I mean a greater acknowledgment of the actionable steps this process of change would entail, the challenges that may be faced in its implementation, and its likelihood of success. Similarly, some discussion of the consequences of committing to this particular route of change would enhance the book's final pages. For as Marie Gottschalk explains in her book *Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), "if we designate structural problems the centerpiece of any plan to dismantle the carceral state, we are essentially accepting that the extensive US penal system is here to stay for a very long time to come." (259) So, what would channeling human and capital resources to change America's less eligibility structure mean for its poor and imprisoned in the days, months, and (presumably) years they must await a more humane social order?

*The Upper Limit* will be of wide interest to sociologists and criminologists concerned with social order, inequality, and punishment. It makes important theoretical contributions to research on

social policy and penal transformation. At the empirical level, I see great potential for applications in the subfields of comparative criminology and criminal justice non-profits – there are undoubtedly others, but these are the two literatures with which I am most familiar.

In a contemporary moment defined by the human and economic devastation of the global COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing violence, racism, and political turmoil in the US, this book lays out what it would take to move the American social order towards greater equality and humanity. Crucially, that we will not get there by leaving the poorest of us behind.

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**Michael Goldfield, *The Southern Key: Class, Race and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press 2020)**

“WHAT IS IMPORTANT in American politics today was largely shaped by the successes and failures of the labor movements of the 1930s and 1940s, and most notably the failures of southern labor organizing during this period.” (vii) This is the theme of *The Southern Key*. Michael Goldfield uses extensive research to make a compelling case that the most significant labour movement advances were marked by militant working-class struggle, solidarity between Black and white workers, and connections with broader social movements that challenged the hegemony of capital. The thread that tied these factors together was left-wing leadership, most importantly by the Communist Party. Goldfield’s book documents the ultimate defeat of labour organizing in the Southern US because these principles were abandoned and the left was defeated, partly due to its own failings. The failure to organize the South

has had profound and lasting results, because “class-based racial issues that had the potential to unite white and Black workers never got off the ground.” (380)

*The Southern Key* is anchored in detailed case studies of four industries that were important to the Southern US economy in the 1930s and 1940s – coal, steel, wood and textiles. Goldfield characterizes coalminers as the vanguard of industrial unionism. They were militant, open to radical political views, and had enormous structural power. They were also one of the few AFL unions with a commitment to racial equality. Goldfield shows coal miners succeeded in organizing due to their own efforts and strengths, refuting those who emphasize legal frameworks, like the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA).

Goldfield also presents a nuanced analysis of UMWA President John L. Lewis. Despite earlier battles with left-wing unionists, by the mid-1930s Lewis cooperated with them in the United Mine Workers Union and the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). Later, Lewis’ determination to centralize control, his vacillations on politics, his personal corruption, and his exclusion of the left undermined the effectiveness of both the UMWA and the Steelworkers – especially in the South.

Goldfield’s chapter on steel notes that Lewis initially hired some 60 organizers with CP affiliations. The Communists were well-rooted in many workplaces as a result of decades of courageous work, described vividly by Goldfield. The CP also had influence with Black workers because of their principled anti-racist practice and they had great strength among ethnic organizations, which proved vital to organizing the large immigrant workforce in steel.

There was an explosion of organizing in the major steel companies once a critical mass was reached. But Philip Murray, head of the SWOC, was even quicker than