

THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

Punishing Policies

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[Christian Parenti's *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons In The Age of Crisis*](#)

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Over the past 20 years, the United States has carried out an experiment in punitive policing that has no precedent in a democracy. The prison population has increased fourfold, to nearly two million. Though these figures are familiar, the logic behind them is not. What has compelled the United States to lock up more of its citizens than any country outside the former Soviet Union? Some blame an increase in crime; others blame politicians who push for a "war on drugs" and tougher sentencing. The more conspiratorially minded note the growth of private prisons and convict labor, and suspect the profit motives of the "prison-industrial complex."

The real story, argues Christian Parenti in *Lockdown America*, is more complicated. To tell it requires 30 years of history and a tour of the lower depths of the criminal justice system—the anti-republic that, as Tocqueville noted, “offers the spectacle of the most complete despotism” in contrast to the “extended liberty” enjoyed on the outside.

The account of today's prison system itself occupies only the last third of *Lockdown America*, which is a pity since it's here that the most incendiary material is concentrated. Focusing on the California prison system and drawing largely on court findings and testimony of former inmates and guards, Parenti paints a harrowing portrait of prisons as “hate factories,” “landlocked slave ships on the middle passage to nowhere.” Violence and especially rape are universal—nationwide, 200,000 inmates are raped each year, by Parenti's estimate. One Massachusetts Department of Correction official acknowledged that for young prisoners, rape within the first 48 hours is “almost standard.” And while rape is an inmate-on-inmate affair (at least in men's prisons), there is no lack of sadism on the part of the guards. Former guard Roscoe Poindexter, for instance, described the “Deep Six,” in which he would strangle a prisoner while other guards “crushed and yanked the victim's testicles.”

Shocking as it is, this kind of violence isn't irrational, argues Parenti. The conversion of men into feminized “punks” is central to prison life—just ask the correction officials who respond to accusations of rape with a bland “Well, that's prison.” And warring prison gangs are “the indispensable enemy,” whose tacit cooperation is vital if discipline is to be maintained.

Similarly, the chapters on police and their work argue that "ritualized displays of terror are built into American policing." What seem like unmotivated excesses of zeal are essential, Parenti argues, to the real function of the criminal justice system, which is not (or not just) to control crime, but to keep those at the bottom of an increasingly polarized society from getting out of line. This, he suggests, is the real meaning of "zero tolerance" policing and the ratcheting-up of penalties for even minor crimes. The point isn't to punish people because they are criminals, but to criminalize them through punishment. It's a view that finds support not only in Michel Foucault's classic *Discipline and Punish* but in the reflections of some police officers: "'People say that [zero tolerance] doesn't work because in New York or Baltimore 80 percent of the quality of life tickets are never paid and an enormous number of misdemeanor court dates are no-shows,' says zero tolerance apostle Lt. McLhenny of the Baltimore P.D. 'But hey, that doesn't matter. . . . What counts is that we've got them into the system! We're building a database.'" Intriguingly, Parenti links the growth in quality-of-life policing to the urban gentrification of the 1980s and 1990s, which has brought upper-middle-class city dwellers and the businesses catering to them into close proximity with the urban poor.

The connection between reviving down towns and the demand for more stringent policing is one of the more original variations on the book's larger argument that "the criminal justice crackdown has become, intentionally or otherwise, a way to manage rising inequality and surplus populations." The idea that the criminal justice system functions as a tool of labor discipline and a disposal mechanism for "surplus" people has been a staple of radical criminology for at least 30 years. Parenti's book offers this line of argument at its strongest. His case is helped by consistently superb reporting, as in his chapter on the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which, he demonstrates, not only keeps immigrants' wages and capacity for organization down, but does so in active and explicit cooperation with employers.

Parenti allows much of the evidence to come from the mouths of law-and-order conservatives. No need for the author to connect the dots of riots and labor unrest at home, the expansion of prisons and police, and "the crisis of capitalism" when he has the likes of Darryl Gates, Ed Meese, and Lt. McLhenny to connect them for him. He also grants that, whatever the calculations of those who launched it, the prison boom now has a momentum of its own.

Parenti's debunking of alternative explanations for the rise in incarceration is forceful and compelling. But will those who don't open the book already in sympathy accept his provocative thesis-that the criminal justice system is a prop to the economic order? In the end, that view, however well- documented or hedged with caveats, is up against complacency, fear of crime, and a general belief that prisoners get what they deserve. Parenti's book at least combats the strong societal tendency to avert our eyes from what the American criminal justice system has become.

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