

BOOK REVIEW

***Coal, Cages, Crisis: The Rise of the Prison Economy in Central Appalachia.* By Judah Schept. New York: NYU Press. 2022.**

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Judah Schept's *Coal, Cages, Crisis: The Rise of the Prison Economy in Central Appalachia* is a welcome addition to the literature on prisons and imprisonment in the United States. Taking a sophisticated transdisciplinary approach, Schept (along with collaborators photographer Jill Frank and scholar Sylvia Ryerson) helps us understand an obvious but often-overlooked facet of mass incarceration, namely, that the rise in the number of prisoners since the 1970s has been accompanied by an increase in the number of prisons. And though the expanded prison population has been drawn disproportionately from urban communities of color, the prisons in which they are held have been located disproportionately in rural areas. Indeed, the last two decades of the 20th century saw the construction of more than 350 new prisons in rural counties. Central Appalachia, which includes parts of Kentucky, West Virginia, Virginia, and Tennessee, is currently home to fifteen prisons. Twelve of these (80%) have been built in the last three decades. Eight are in Eastern Kentucky alone.

How did this come to be? According to Schept, the answer lies in capitalism. He draws from an intellectual tradition that views capitalism as a system given to perpetual crisis. These crises need a fix. But these fixes never last. Over time they even become crises in their own right. This makes processes of capitalist social reproduction inherently unstable. Schept is also drawing from the literature on racial capitalism, which views processes of racialization and capital accumulation as mutually constituting insofar as both work to naturalize the social hierarchies each needs to survive. From this perspective, racism is “a constitutive feature of capitalism” implicated “in the process [of] producing a racialized and unequal social order” (18).

These dynamics have given rise to the prison economy in Central Appalachia. As the coal economy has declined, it has created a crisis for those dependent upon it. This includes everyone from the individual miner out of work to municipal governments seeking resources. The prison economy offers the promise of a fix, with some prisons built literally on top of old mines. But as Schept shows, prisons rarely live up to expectations. The work of building and staffing prisons does not always go to local residents. And despite the claim that prisons are “recession proof,” some communities are left with empty facilities that they must nevertheless continue to maintain.

The book unfolds in three parts. The first section, “Extraction and Disposal,” situates the rise of the prison economy within the longer history of exploitation in the region. Schept discusses the coal economy and the impact of federal programs such as the War on Poverty. He goes on to show how this history has shaped the landscape in quite literal ways. In one community, a new federal prison sits on top of both an old underground mine and a mountain top removal site. Next to it are remnants of the old coal economy (waste sites, infrastructure) and the new waste management economy including an illegal coal ash dumpsite and a trash incinerator.

The second section, “Profit and Order,” explores the role of prisons in producing profits and social order. Interestingly, it tells the story of two prisons no longer in operation. One chapter centers on a prison built in the late 19th century where those incarcerated were forced to mine coal for the state. This was in direct response to efforts by miners to contest the convict leasing system. Today, the site is no longer a functioning prison. Private investors have sought to capitalize on its history and turn it into a tourist destination and distillery (one of the developers tells Schept, “No offense, but academics tend to make things more complicated than need be as opposed to those of us who are involved in making money and creating jobs. It’s not that complex.” [115]). Another chapter tells the story of a private prison built in the late 20th century. The prison was built in a former “company town,” where the coal company ran all aspects of community life (even paying workers with their own “scrip” that could only be used at the company store). Schept resists the temptation to see the new private prison as the second coming of the company town, positing rather that it is part of a more complicated process of “carceral social reproduction” in which state capacities play a central role.

The third section, “Carceral Social Reproduction,” develops this concept further. It presents a case study of efforts to build a new federal prison in Letcher County, Kentucky. Supporters saw in the proposed prison a lifeline for their community: stable federal jobs, money for infrastructure and services, and opportunities for economic development. Those in opposition saw something else: an ominous and undesirable future involving environmental destruction, exploitation, and dependence on the prison economy. Remarkably, those who opposed the prison succeeded in killing the project. Schept’s detailed account of how this was achieved points to a new “abolitionist geography” where those who imagine a future disconnected from incarceration are drawing from the work of past social movements to chart a new way forward. A final chapter situates the project within the crises of 2020, including the onset of Covid and the death of George Floyd.

As a reader, I found the ethnographic moments of the text the most compelling. For instance, in chapter 1, Schept tells a riveting story of travelling with his collaborator Jill Frank and two local activists to tour the local waste disposal economy. When they stopped to take pictures of a trash incinerator, a white car suddenly appeared. They jumped back in their blue Prius and took off, exchanging mean glances with the young man driving the white car, who then followed them to the edge of the property and sat there like a guard dog until they left.

Having done ethnographic work in the same region, this story was all too familiar. As a reader, I wondered about this young man, patrolling the mountain on which the incinerator burned trash for a thousand different communities, most of which weren’t his. What might he have to say about the prison economy? What would have happened

if his voice and those of others like him were brought more fully into the text? Would it have done anything to alter the book's claims or analysis?

This points to a second question: what are the implications of Schept's analysis for contemporary debates about mass incarceration? Schept himself showcases his deep engagement with these debates throughout the book. For instance, writing about the Otter Creek prison in Chapter 4, he states that it "cannot be understood in the narrow confines of explanatory frameworks that focus on corporate power and profit alone, nor in those that focus on mass incarceration, nor still in those that argue that the rural prison is just about jobs. Rather, the prison must be understood as reflective of changing state capacities and logics under neoliberalizing racial capitalism, and therefore as the state's primary approach in this moment to a much older project of producing and reproducing capitalist social order" (126–27). But at no point does he offer a systematic assessment of what his analysis means for these debates. This left me wondering: if Schept is correct here, where does that leave accounts that center other social forces, such as the reproduction of the racial caste system? Does his analysis pose a fundamental challenge to such accounts? Or is this simply a different point of view that complements rather than contests other explanations?

Of course, such questions could only arise from a book as rich and nuanced as *Coal, Cages, Crisis*. It is highly recommended for anyone seeking to understand the place of prisons in contemporary life.