In an essay published in the 1990s, I observed that America’s unprecedented prison expansion was taking place at a time when the once-strong traditions of American prison sociology and American prison literary writing had large fallen silent. The golden age of both prison sociology and prison literature (roughly, the 1940s to 1960s) took shape at a very different moment, one when a relatively modest and stable long-term population of prisoners was declining and was expected by some to practically disappear. In contrast, our current era is characterized by unprecedented prison growth, undertaken with little direct observation by social scientists, and far fewer books and articles by prisoners.

The explosive expansion of prisons includes three distinct dimensions. First, our imprisonment rates are on average from 3 to 5 times what they were in the 1970s (depending on the state), so we’ve built a lot more prisons. Second, the prisons we’ve built are, for the most part, a lot bigger than even the “Big House” prisons of the 1920s. For example, recent California prisons have been built within penal complexes, holding as many as 5,000 prisoners in one location. Third, the prison experience, both the direct one of custody and the indirect one of collateral consequences after prison, now claim a far more totalizing hold on the lives of people who pass through them than in the past. Today, a fifth of California’s giant prison population is serving a life sentence and, unless present parole policies change, most of those inmates will die in prison.

In recent years this unprecedented social transformation has finally received sustained attention by social scientists. Yet while enormously welcome and vital to generating serious public discussion, the new sociology of mass incarceration is better thought of as a political sociology of prison population growth than a true sociology of the prison experience. It is this major gap that makes The Prisoner’s World and Prison Profiteers such welcome contributions for readers interested in what is actually going on in and around our distended penal estate.

William Tregea and Marjorie Larmour, authors of The Prisoner’s World, have been teaching college level courses in Michigan prisons for more than twenty-five years, so they’re in an outstanding position to observe the boom from inside and hear about its meaning from both prisoners and other correctional workers. The prison-college classroom is a remarkably interesting vantage point. Once the crown jewel of rehabilitative penology, prison-college classrooms, where they survive at all, are now marginal enterprises. These programs are ignored rather than resisted by prison staff who no longer feel education’s presence as a challenge to the guiding moral principles of security and custody.

The first part of Prisoner’s World provides a first rate summary of contemporary sociological thinking about the prison boom and its causes. The second part draws on prisoner/student narratives to discuss life before prison and the pathways that take people there. One of the best features of Tregea and Larmour’s approach is that they draw on three decades of collecting narratives to point out changes over time. Even for minority youth of disadvantaged economic status ending up in prison was a kind of anomaly in the 1970s and 1980s and required special explanation. It’s become far more “normal” since the late 1980s.

The latter sections of the book focus on the daily life of imprisonment, the experience of African Americans in the expanding prison world, and what the authors term “the prison self”: the forms of subjectivity that are available for self-fashioning in prison, including prisoner free time, the “homosexual prisoner,” and the role of drugs and contraband.

One of the most noteworthy features brought out in Prisoner’s World is
the degree to which the punishment of imprisonment remains one of physicality—not pain necessarily, but disgust, degradation, and fear. American prisons are lacking in what sociologist Norbert Elias called “civility.” Prisons systematically fail to protect their occupants from exposure to things that can be expected to create revulsion. Food is regularly described as both tasting and smelling disgusting, mostly due to lack of training or care in preparation than the condition of the food ingredients themselves (one area that courts have policed). As Tregea and Larmour point out, this is more than an enormous missed opportunity to train people in food preparation, it’s the core of what punishment in America is: degradation and humiliation. Despite all our talk of freedom being our highest value, being deprived of it is not considered punishment enough.

The theme of what we might call the viscerality of the prison also emerges in many of the chapters in Prison Profiteers. One of the book’s editors, Tara Herivel, is a Portland public defender who began to cover prisons for the alternative press in the 1990s. Co-editor Paul Wright spent more than twenty years in Washington prisons and founded the renowned Prison Legal News, the premier journal of prison-related legal and political developments in the U.S. Along with Louisiana’s Wilbert Rideau, Wright is the best known convict journalist in America and one of the major public intellectuals to have emerged from mass incarceration.

While teachers, like sociologists of the past, have long had access to prisons, journalists have historically had a much more tenuous relationship to incarceration. In the era of rehabilitation, prison officials recognized the potential of journalism to uncover the lies of scientific penology. In the era of mass incarceration, public support for punitive segregation and indifference to the plight of actual prisoners have reinforced the readiness of prison managers to keep journalists and social scientists out. So, the journalists in this collection do not have great access, but have pursued their largely untold stories through traditional investigative ways: by working through lawyers, court records, and victim interviews.

The title of Prison Profiteers and its cover photo (which depicts orange jump-suited prisoners mowing what looks like a golf course) invoke the argument of many radical prison critics that American mass incarceration is driven by corporate greed. But the carefully researched chapters belie a simplistic or economistic explanation of the prison boom. Instead, each chapter helps us to grasp the material reality through which the efforts of American political leaders to make crime a key governance issue have become a self-perpetuating complex of interests and routines.

The insight that ties these chapters together is that the consequence of creating a prison boom at a time when Neoliberal policies have made privatization the frequent solution to public policy problems is to create a system of cruelty and injustice that extends well beyond the physical prison and its direct captives. In documenting the exploitation and abuse of non-prisoners generated by the privatized correctional industry, the authors of Prison Profiteers have contested the central political logic of mass incarceration—the division of the public into a vast majority of vulnerable victims who suffer from crime and a minority of hardcore criminals that afflict us law-abiding citizens.

The book is divided into three parts. The first addresses the political economic factors that helped to build the prisons of mass incarceration. Judith Green’s chapter, “Banking on the Prison Boom,” provides a detailed history of the rise of private corrections giant, the Correctional Corporation of America, and traces its aggressive corrections giant, the Correctional Corporation of America, and traces its aggressive and its story of mass incarceration. While privatization of the core custody function of prisons has never really taken off in a big way, the CCA experience documents a pattern repeated in the privatization of immigration custody.

Jennifer Gonnerman’s contribution in this section draws on the pathbreaking incarceration mapping work of prison researcher Eric Cadora. New York’s crime policies have produced the now infamous “million dollar blocks,” where a million or more dollars a year are spent by New York incarcerating residents of the same city blocks, mostly in Brooklyn. By revealing the spatial logic of mass incarceration, Cadora showed that the war on crime was really just a corrupted...
version of the much maligned “war on poverty.”

Similarly, Kirsten D. Levingston’s piece, “Making the ‘Bad Guy’ Pay: Growing Use of Cost Shifting as an Economic Sanction,” opens a rare window onto the increasing financialization of penalty itself. This goes beyond traditional fines as a supplement or alternative to prison. Instead, counties and states are increasingly charging those convicted of crime for all kinds of ordinary services (including custody itself, medical care, legal services, and even court-ordered services like probation). And in “Don’t Build it Here: The Hype Versus the Reality of Prisons and Local Employment,” Clayton Mosher, Gregory Hooks, and Peter B. Wood pursue economic evidence to contest the aggressive marketing of prisons to rural communities in need of economic development.

The final chapter in Part I, perhaps the strongest in the book, is Paul Wright’s “The Cultural Commodification of Prison.” Wright identifies one of the most classic conundrums of the prison, how to make it real enough to deter people without becoming so familiar that it ceases to strike terror. Wright points to a class bifurcated audience for lessons about incarceration. Tales of prison rape are circulated to a middle class public, which accepts them along with little prospect of actually going to prison, as well as to a lower class audience, which has much more local knowledge about prison and some real prospects of going there, but for whom the rape and violence discourse is less about creating fear than reinforcing the sense that they have no rights that the system needs to respect. Wright offers numerous and horrifying examples of state officials citing prison rape as an acceptable and expected feature of penal deterrence. These stories suggest how mass incarceration, maybe even more than capital punishment, is operating as a decivilizing force in American society, driving us further and further from the human rights consensus increasingly shared by the rest of the world.

Parts II and III of Prison Profiteers address various aspects of the privatization of the prison experience from custody itself to labor, correctional professionalism, rehabilitation, medical care, telephones, and transportation. The most powerful chapters, if only because of the core nature of the function they examine, are two that investigate the largest private corporations engaged in delivering prison health care. As one might imagine, an HMO devoted exclusively to prisoners is a threat not only to their health, but to public health as well. Without fear that juries will award large damages for inmates who lose lives and limbs (as they would for non-prisoner victims), these companies and their medical employees act with such callous indifference that few readers will not wish that some district attorney somewhere would literally give them a taste of their own medicine.

The authors included in Prison Profiteers provide a comprehensive and powerful review of how the material elements of incarceration are produced (and reproduced) under conditions of Neoliberalism. Taken together, the chapters generally understated and non-polemical reminder that America’s quest for crime security through incarceration and efficient government through privatization are not necessarily part of one common logic (as some critics insist) but they do form a highly perverse combination. In most cases, public officials are turning to the market to shuffle off their own responsibility for managing inherently complex tasks.

The rich descriptive materials in both books and the personal narratives in Prisoners’ World and Prison Profiteers provide an excellent addition to the highly theoretical and macro-oriented sociology of mass incarceration. If they are not yet a return to the golden age of prison sociology, these volumes do provide a thought-provoking account of the prison world that’s been created in the last half century.

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