

# How Prisons Serve Capitalism



I once asked a class at a prison in Washington State how they would describe the relationship between capitalism and incarceration. “They get you coming and going,” someone quickly offered.

Perhaps he had in mind the legal financial obligations that are levied against many people upon their conviction.<sup>1</sup> He also could have been referring to the exorbitant costs of commissary supplies. In January, Florida prisoners announced a strike to protest their conditions. Among their grievances, the high cost of commissary, including \$17 for a case of soup and \$18 for tampons.<sup>2</sup> Or maybe he was thinking about the lengths his loved ones went to communicate with him. Since being asked to write this review, I’ve paid \$53 to the telecommunications company Securus so that a friend incarcerated in New York could call me—a \$3 activation fee in addition to a \$50 deposit in his account for future collect calls—and \$50 to JPay, a subsidiary of Securus that bills itself as “the most trusted name in corrections,” so that I could email with people incarcerated here in the Northwest. This money is on top of my regular acquisition of stamps and envelopes to maintain traditional forms of correspondence with incarcerated friends who do not have email access.

That prisons incarcerate almost exclusively poor people is a truism. Less discussed is that imprisonment keeps people—and communities—poor. Although overwhelmingly government-run, the

US penal system extracts wealth from people least able to pay and, by making them pay, it keeps them in its grip.<sup>3</sup>

People often misread the role of economics in giving the United States the world's largest prison system. Surely, many commentators insist, the whole enterprise must be driven by profit; why else would the country lock up so many people for so long in conditions so cruel? Capitalism is a central character in the story of American punishment—but not because the criminal justice system is an elaborate pyramid scheme. A summary review of the half-century expansion of police and prison power shows that debt, violence, and prison have served primarily political purposes in the context of deepening economic inequality. More than profit, capitalism generates *misery* from its poorest subjects.

While it has a long history, the braiding of debt and punishment has become a core feature of how criminal justice has anchored the American state since the early 1970s. In her new book, Jackie Wang dubs this development “carceral capitalism”: a draconian model of economic governance that approaches Black urban communities with a mixture of debt and police violence. Carceral capitalism turns police, prosecutors, and courts into creditors, lessors, and debt collectors. Capitalism, Wang shows, integrates the punitive state through debt. For many people, debt itself is a form of punishment.

Examining how police power grows through the imposition of debt and the deployment of new technologies, Wang wants readers to understand the role of incarceration in “the dynamics of late capitalism.” As city and state governments themselves are squeezed for funds, they pick the pockets of the poor to pay their bills. From the debtors' prisons of 17th-century America to the high-interest legal financial obligations of today that cannot be discharged in bankruptcy, to be in debt is to be exposed to the government's power to

punish. One means for city and state governments to keep the funds flowing is to prey on those who already occupy the economic margins, and novel technologies have elaborated ever-more sophisticated ways of tracking their quarry.

Still, focusing too closely on the technological innovations of finance and debt obscure a more profound transformation. The story of debt that Wang traces says more about broader trends in contemporary American capitalism, including its urban political economy, than about carceral injustice.

The idea of “carceral capitalism” suggests a different way of naming the convergence of finance capitalism and the punitive state that has seen so many people sacrificed to cops and cages. Scholars and activists have offered terms such as “mass incarceration,” which emphasizes the rapid growth of imprisonment since the 1970s; the “prison industrial complex,” which is often misread as an economic focus on prison labor or the small number of private prisons; or the “carceral state,” a clunky phrase that focuses on the state form but makes no mention of the economic transformations precipitating or propelling industrialized punishment.

No single phrase can capture the complex integration of the state, private actors, and impoverishment that is made manifest through the 10 million people that annually pass through America’s jails, the more than 1.5 million held in prisons and detention centers on any given day, the 4.5 million on parole or probation, and the uncounted masses daily stopped, frisked, harassed, and surveilled. But the concept of “carceral capitalism” offers a way to synthesize the parts that have made the United States the world’s biggest jailer.

Today, elites gain political *and* financial rewards for imprisoning groups of people. The roots of this system can be traced to a political-economic project aimed at preserving capitalism’s racial inequalities: the quelling of the rebellions of working-class Black communities in the 1960s. A

deeper look into this history places the repression and disappearance of racialized labor at the center of the story. To fully understand carceral capitalism, then, it is necessary to look at the history of labor and joblessness in Black urban neighborhoods.

Throughout the 1960s, Black working-class people rose up against racial capitalism. Their uprisings also catalyzed similar rebellions in Puerto Rican and Chicano communities. Police brutality was invariably the spark. Yet the tinder had been provided by decades of housing and employment segregation that saw Black (and Latinx) communities overwhelmingly housed in squalid conditions and chronically under- or unemployed. In Watts, Detroit, and Newark; in Plainfield, NJ, Cambridge, MD, and Waukegan, IL; and in so many other locales, the fires were lit by the same arsonist: patterned segregation upheld by routine if spontaneous police violence. The National Guard helped local and state police arrest 10s of thousands of people in these long, hot summers. In response, metropolitan police forces increasingly began to resemble the National Guard in weaponry and authority.

The crisis of worklessness led many people to protest in the streets or join organizations ranging from the Black Panther Party to the Urban League, the Communist Party to the NAACP. The government, however, responded to these groups and the crisis by expanding the legal rationale and physical capacity for incarceration. It was not debt, as Wang highlights with regard to the contemporary period, but war that explained the imprisonment of the period: wars on communism, crime, drugs, gangs, and guns.<sup>4</sup>

Debt has become a form of repression for those rendered obsolete by globalizing capital. A number of analysts within the 1960s-era Black freedom struggle recognized the looming challenge. Jack O'Dell opined in a 1967 issue of *Freedomways* that the response to urban rebellions of the 1960s augured a dangerous trend: "Despite certain concessions to civil rights and a number of important court decisions favorable to the defense of civil liberties, militarism and

the military presence are rapidly becoming the main features of governmental power in American life.”<sup>5</sup> Three years later, in his book *Who Needs the Negro?*, sociologist Sidney Willhelm warned that automation caused increasing worklessness for Black communities that would have to be addressed—either through public works programs or increasing authoritarianism, social democracy, or state violence.<sup>6</sup>

Soon after, the US incarceration rate began its inexorable climb.

Punishment came to preoccupy the state in response to Black working-class protests against the racism of 1960s capitalism. Once local and federal government entities redirected public coffers toward punishment, it was only a matter of time before private companies tried monetizing racist and political repression—much as they have done with housing and employment segregation. Their literal and ideological investments in punishment are fundamentally parasitic: punishingly extractive themselves, they are yet still dependent on the motivation of external entities. State policy, and state funding, drives their actions.

As elites responded to labor crises in communities of color with mass incarceration, prisons accelerated worklessness itself. The idea of rehabilitation had always existed uneasily with the punitive mission of incarceration. As prisons became filled with more Black and Brown people, antiracist rebellions erupted within prison with an urgency that matched their urban counterparts. Talk of rehabilitation all but disappeared. Longtime wardens lamented the “new breed of inmate” entering their custody and lobbied for greater severity in punishment.<sup>7</sup> Removing work was part of increasing the prison’s severity. “Prison provided inmates with few opportunities to constructively pass the time they were sentenced to serve,” journalist John McCoy wrote in a 1981 photo-essay on Washington’s Walla Walla prison. “Jobs were few.” Those that

did exist tended to be make-work activities that offered neither gratification nor meaningful training.<sup>8</sup>

The expansion of punishment under neoliberalism has exacerbated the warehouse prison. Less than half of the 2.3 million people currently incarcerated do any work in prison, and the vast majority of those who do work inside work for the prison itself: sweeping the halls of the cell block, cleaning the kitchen, assisting one of the scant programs available to prisoners. Idleness is a feature, not a bug, of American punishment. Conservative criminologists and reactionary politicians soon replaced even the idea of rehabilitation with incapacitation. "Incapacitation doesn't pretend to change anything about people except where they are," writes geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore in her trenchant study of California prisons.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the current scholarship on the carceral state has added more data points to the insights Black radicals offered in the 1960s and 1970s, investigating its metastasization as a reflection of disciplining an unruly, politically militant Black working class. Although there are significant differences in the literature, including how to weigh economic transformations in relation to explicit political repression, there is an emerging consensus that the rise of mass incarceration needs to be understood as the elite response to politically rebellious Black and Brown communities at the advent of neoliberalism.<sup>10</sup>


The phrase "carceral capitalism" raises a question: how do capitalism and carceral power not just coexist but come to constitute each other? Debt is a necessary but insufficient explanatory variable in understanding how carceral capitalism comes to exist—and what it would mean to abolish it. Wang celebrates the utopian, "prophetic dream" of abolition, to which we must add concrete organizing efforts to reduce the scale and scope of the punishment system. Recognizing that carceral power is a measure of American inequality,

abolitionists have pursued full employment, universal health care, educational equity, and restorative justice alongside an end to prisons, jails, and immigrant detention and deportation.


Carceral power exceeds the framework of finance capital and technological innovation around which Wang builds her argument. Rather, carceral expansion is a form of political as well as economic repression aimed at managing worklessness among the Black and Brown (and increasingly white) working class for whom global capitalism has limited need.<sup>11</sup> The generative theorizing of *Carceral Capitalism* needs to be put in further conversation with the empirical work on the political economy of prisons.








Police and prisons have expanded in both quantity and meanness over the last half century to enable the brutal management of (potentially) rebellious workers made obsolete by the increasing globalization of American capitalism. But perhaps, in the depths of the Trump era, buoyed by the hunger and labor strikes that increasingly dot the American carceral landscape, the demands for full employment and universal health care, the civil disobedience actions aiming to halt the detention and deportation of immigrant workers, we can start to see the abolitionist horizon come into focus.

*This article was commissioned by [Destin Jenkins](#).*

1. On legal financial obligations, see Alexes Harris, *Pound of Flesh: Monetary Sanctions as Punishment for the Poor* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2016). 
2. The claim about the price of a case of soup can be found in "FL Prisoners Call for Operation PUSH to Improve the Lives of Incarcerated People and the Communities We Come From," an open letter from Florida prisoners, reprinted in Jerry Iannelli, "[Florida Prisoners Plan Huge Strike for Civil Rights on MLK Day This Monday](#)," *Miami New Times*, January 9, 2018. PolitiFact Florida tried to



investigate the accusations of price-gouging; information provided by the state's Department of Corrections showed prices to be much lower, though still marked up. See Allison Graves, "[Claims about Prison Price-Gouging Decry \\$17 Soup, \\$18 Tampons](#)," Politifact Florida, January 22, 2018. 

3. On the community costs of incarceration, see the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Forward Together, and Research Action Design, "[Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families](#)," September 2015. 
4. In his Pulitzer-winning book, James Forman adds the "war on guns" to the list of interrelated domestic wars targeting the Black urban working class since the 1970s. See James Forman Jr., *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux: 2017). 
5. Jack O'Dell, "July Rebellions and the 'Military State,'" in *Climbin' Jacob's Ladder: The Black Freedom Movement Writings of Jack O'Dell*, edited by Nikhil Pal Singh (University of California Press, 2010), p. 154. 
6. Sidney M. Willhelm, *Who Needs the Negro?* (Schenkman, 1970). 
7. For an example from Washington State, see the comments of Walla Walla Warden Bobby J. Rhay, quoted in Charles Stastny and Gabrielle Tyrnauer, *Who Rules the Joint? The Changing Political Culture of Maximum-Security Prisons in America* (Lexington Books, 1982), p. 81. 
8. John McCoy and Ethan Hoffman, *Concrete Mama: Prison Profiles from Walla Walla* (University of Missouri Press, 1981), pp. 134–135. 
9. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007), pp. 14, 21. 



10. See, for instance, Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime* (Harvard University Press, 2016); Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and its Legacy* (Pantheon, 2016); Julilly Kohler-Hausman, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton University Press, 2017). For critical debates on these questions, see Alessandro De Giorgi, "Five Theses on Mass Incarceration," *Social Justice*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2015); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "[The Worrying State of the Anti-Prison Movement](#)," *Social Justice* blog, February 23, 2015; and Orisanmi Burton, "[Diluting Radical History: Blood in the Water and the Politics of Erasure](#)," *Abolition*, January 26, 2017. For an activist attempt to synthesize these issues, written by a longtime political prisoner, see David Gilbert, *Our Commitment Is to Our Communities* (Kersplebedeb, 2014).



11. Michelle Chen, "[Is the Opioid Crisis Leading to a Spike in the White Incarceration Rate?](#)" *The Nation*, March 7, 2018.



Originally posted at [Public Books](#).