

Neoliberal Incarceration: How the Modern Prison Enforces Vulnerability and an
Economy of Precarity Both Inside and Out

by

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Joseph H. Jolley has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Politics.

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Introduction

As of 2019, 2.3 million people in the United States are incarcerated. At nearly one percent of the adult population, this is by far the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world. But it has not always been this way. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the U.S. incarceration rate began to explode, growing from a fairly constant rate of around 150-200 people per 100,000 that had prevailed for the preceding half century to over 750 per 100,000 only three decades later. The process of this incarceration boom, of removing millions of people from their homes and relocating them far away in massive concrete facilities, has been a massive undertaking — state and federal spending on incarceration averages around \$182 billion every year. Black people are massively over-represented in this system, comprising 40 percent of the inmate population compared to 13 percent of the total population, while whites are severely underrepresented, at 39 percent of the inmate population and 64 percent of the total population.¹ Almost everyone in prison, of all races, is poor — the wealthy barely appear at all.²

Why is this? What happened in the last quarter of the 20th century that prompted this distinctly huge and distinctly cruel apparatus to be built? Why does it target who it targets? Put plainly, what is the point of all this? These are the broad questions this paper attempts to provide some answers to, guided by the work of those who have investigated them before, either as scholars, activists, incarcerated people, or a mix of all three. More

¹ Prison Policy Initiative, “United States Profile,” Prison Policy Initiative, last updated 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/US.html>; Pete Wagner and Bernadette Rabuy, “Following the Money of Mass Incarceration,” Prison Policy Initiative, last modified January 25, 2017, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/money.html>

² Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009), 312.

specifically, I explore what I see as three distinct and interconnected aspects of modern American incarceration: The emergence of the current configuration of mass incarceration as part of the transition to neoliberalism in the American and global political economy; the role the carceral apparatus plays in creating and maintaining populations of vulnerable people that are exploited by neoliberalism; and how work programs and management practices inside prisons are linked to the rest of the political economy. The first section of this paper works to establish a specific understanding of neoliberalism, a notoriously nebulous word, and explores the historical relationship between mass incarceration and the neoliberal transition; the second looks at the geographic functions of prisons, and how prisons and policing effect places and people outside of prison and support an economy of precarity; and the third moves inside the prison and examines the work prisoners do through the lens of autonomous Marxist theory in order to get a sense of how action inside of prison connects with action outside of it.

Before beginning, I think it is also important to acknowledge my personal relation to this topic as an author. Because of my whiteness and my economic position, I am presented with the upper half of what Loic Wacquant calls the “centaur state”: A carceral state that presents a benign, human face to subjects it deems favorably but is horrifically cruel to those it finds undesirable — namely, people of color and people in poverty. Because of this, I wish to acknowledge, as other white authors on topics of incarceration have, the distance from the threat of incarceration I am able to make these analyses and critiques from — a distance made starker by the extreme geographic proximity of the college this paper has been written at to a site of incarceration, the Washington State Penitentiary. With this position and the necessary limitations of perspective it conveys in

mind, I hope what follows may be of some use in understanding the current arrangement of imprisonment and of neoliberalism as a political economic system, and through this understanding offer perspectives on how to abolish both of these modern projects and their root forms — incarceration and capitalism in general.

Part 1: A History of Neoliberal Incarceration

In order to understand what role the contemporary American incarceration systems play in neoliberal political economy, it is first necessary to establish some sense of what “neoliberalism” as a historically specific process of arranging economic and state power is. David Harvey approaches neoliberalism broadly as a class project concerned with consolidating the power of the capitalist class and redistributing wealth upward, guided by the main axiom of “privatize profits and socialize risks.”³ The upshot of this project, carried out through hallmark policies such as the slashing of social welfare programs, reduction of barriers to global trade, relocation of industry from the Global North to the Global South, application of “structural adjustment” and “shock therapy” programs to countries in crisis, and financial deregulation, has been “the incredible centralization of wealth and power observable in all those countries that took the neoliberal road” — centralization not only within those countries themselves but also, on a global scale, in the Global North.⁴

Coalescing as a response to the economic crisis of the 1970s, the contours of neoliberalism were defined by a number of historically specific conditions. Reduced accumulation of capital from the organization and scarcity of labor throughout the 19th century, internal redistribution of wealth through social security programs (always done unevenly along lines of race and gender), and the creation of new communications and transportation technology all shaped what the neoliberal path out of crisis would look like.⁵ The destination that path lead to was a global reorganization of labor, a process with

³ David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11-12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, 14-16.

predictably profound effects. In the Global North, a combined offensive by the state and capital was launched against organized labor: Rising unemployment and the relocation of major industries pulled the rug out from under organized labor, while right-wing political leaders took up conflicts with big unions when such subversion needed more direct support.⁶ Meanwhile, in the Global South, relocated industry was landing in places without extant labor organizing that could interfere with profits, and peasant communities were pulled into commoditized labor markets to help meet the new demand. Immigration policies in the Global North were also changed to facilitate the movement of exploitable, stigmatized, difficult-to-organize migrant labor from the South to the North to fill in for the organized labor that had just been purged.⁷ These changes, which often entailed profound geographic shifts in the location of the means of production and of labor, constituted a global search for the cheapest possible labor, an international strive to “allocate surplus capital to wherever the profit rate was highest.”⁸ In short, a combination of labor organization and scarcity had emerged as a barrier to capital accumulation, and neoliberal practices offered a way to remove that barrier through state force and the rearrangement of capital.

This process had, inevitably, massive impacts on the lives of people all over the world. In the U.S. and Europe economic security evaporated as old jobs disappeared and social security programs were cut. Outside of capitalism’s geographic core, peasant lifestyles and old means of subsistence were disrupted as new industries arrived in need of cheap labor. Silvia Federici draws a direct connection between these developments and the

⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁷ Ibid, 14-16.

⁸ Ibid, 33.

wave of peasant dispossession in 15th and 16th century Europe that facilitated the primitive accumulation of capital needed to kick off capitalistic production in the first place. These waves of dispossession in early modern Europe and across the globe at the end of the 20th century used comparable means to achieve the same ends: Disrupting established ways of life — enclosing the commons, gutting welfare, outsourcing jobs — so as to “strip the work-force from its means of reproduction” and allow a new socio-economic order to be established.⁹ The language that Federici uses to describe the social effects of such disruption in the 16th century could be applied to many scenes of structural adjustment, shock therapy, modern enclosure, and deindustrialization from the last four decades: “Social cohesion broke down; families disintegrated, the youth left the village to join the increasing number of vagabonds or itinerant workers — soon to become the social problem of the age — while the elderly were left behind to fend for themselves.”¹⁰ The path of forceful economic reordering that neoliberalism charted out of the crisis of the ‘70s everywhere left social dislocation in its wake. To build this new arrangement of production, centered on the international movement of capital and labor to maximize profits, extant “stagnant” socio-economic relations had to be torn down.

But some method is needed to contain, mitigate, or otherwise manage the fallout of such large-scale disruptions to social and economic ordering, lest instability grow to the point that production itself becomes impossible. This is one of the central roles played by the prison in the neoliberal moment. In Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s words, prisons are “partial geographic solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state, which itself is in

⁹ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 1998), 82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

a crisis.”¹¹ The particular crisis in Gilmore’s analysis is “the end of the golden age of American capitalism” fueled by “military Keynesianism” in the 1970s — the same crisis that called forth neoliberal economics.¹² And, just as Harvey does with neoliberal economics more broadly, Gilmore sees prison expansion as a contingent and non-inevitable response to certain conditions. Prison building stemmed from “surpluses that were not put back to work in other ways,” but “prison building was and is not the inevitable outcome of these surpluses.”¹³ Examining California as a microcosm of the particular modern mass incarceration paradigm that is now standard throughout the U.S., Gilmore traces just how such a paradigm emerged out of economic crisis. Neoliberal solutions to crisis that centered on boosting profits by retaining earnings (i.e. cutting labor) and deindustrialization resulted in vast cuts to decently waged jobs, especially those employing men of color. This shift in the terrain of accumulation and expenditure created surpluses of “capital, labor, and land” that could not be absorbed back into the collapsing welfare-heavy Keynesian system they were extracted from. Instead, a new outlet was needed, and the specific conditions of the time made prison expansion a prime candidate: It made use of the “state’s aggressive capacity to act” without needing to wait for things like market cues to provide a channel for the reinvestment of ballooning profits and a use for idle rural land that owners were eager to get rid of. While these surpluses of land and capital could have been used “to build schools or parks or anything else,” prisons also had the advantage of being a way to deal with surplus people — all those newly freed from their jobs, housing, or any other aspects

¹¹ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and the Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 26.

¹² *Ibid*, 25-26.

¹³ *Ibid*, 88.

of socio-economic security they may have lost in the neoliberal shakeup.¹⁴ The killing of Keynesianism foreclosed the option of reinvesting in the support of the poor; the carceral approach would attempt to manage, not eliminate, the instability neoliberalism is borne on.

As jobs and social security programs disappeared, desperate and unemployed populations were created. The social cohesion of the previous ordering of society began to break down and the process of “pauperization, rebellion, and escalation of ‘crime’” that Federici describes began.¹⁵ Crime is necessarily put in scare quotes here as the expansion of incarceration in the U.S. categorically *does not* follow an increase in crime. Rather, as Gilmore explains, new conceptions of crime were created to fit the descriptions and actions of newly economically insecure, undesirable “surplus populations.” In fact, when the expansion of prisons and criminalization began to truly kick off in the early 1980s, crime had been going *down*.¹⁶ This is why, as Loic Wacquant insists, it is necessary to divorce analysis of prisons from the question of crime. Prisons are not solely a response to crime, and crime and criminality are not objective, fixed categories. To presume a necessary connection between incarceration and crime hides numerous other factors — poverty, racism, state repression, etc. — and naturalizes both institutions.¹⁷ Gilmore details how the very construct of crime — what constitutes a crime, what makes a person a criminal, and how both should be dealt with — were very deliberately changed in the ‘80s and ‘90s as part of carceral expansion. Widespread sentence enhancement, gang database creation and enforcement, and drug recriminalization starting in the ‘80s created a significant new

¹⁴ Ibid, 126.

¹⁵ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 82.

¹⁶ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 18.

¹⁷ Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2009), 287.

criminal population and kept prisoners incarcerated longer, while new “three strikes” laws gave the state great latitude in expanding the criminal/prison pop.¹⁸ Through heavy legislation and constant news coverage politicians and media “merged gang membership, drug use, and habitual criminal activity into a single sociological scourge, which was then used to explain everything from unruly youth to inner-city homicides to the need for more prisons to isolate wrongdoers.”¹⁹ The results have been highly skewed by race and class, with working class and low income Black and Latinx people being the most heavily criminalized and incarcerated, followed by working class whites. A significant percentage of the incarcerated population are also non-citizens, a demographic that is also predominantly poor and non-white; in short, “as a class, convicts are deindustrialized cities’ working and workless poor,” a category made up in large part of people of color.²⁰ The state itself admits to a connection between these new criminalities and economic desperation and hardships of reproduction with the common portrayal by law enforcement of criminal youth as “profit motivated” and engaging in crime “as a means of making a living.”²¹ All of this is to make clear that current forms of criminality and the means of responding to it are not natural or immutable, but rather intentionally constructed and highly contingent on the specific socio-economic conditions created by the neoliberal transition.

Examining who exactly is being criminalized and incarcerated in the new prison dragnet shows the contours of what Wacquant describes as the (sub)proletariat and Gilmore

¹⁸ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 107-108.

¹⁹ Ibid, 109.

²⁰ Ibid, 7, 110; Prison Policy Initiative, “United States Profile,” Prison Policy Initiative, last updated 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/US.html>; United States Census Bureau, *CSPAN Presentation December 2, 2011*, (Washington DC: Census Bureau, 2011), https://www.census.gov/newsroom/pdf/cspan_fb_slides.pdf.

²¹ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 113.

as “surplus population,” a category of people that are judged by the state and capital as unnecessary, unprofitable, undesirable, and disposable.²² This “surplus” is created by the great neoliberal shakeup and is comprised of the multitudes dispossessed in the creation of a vast “industrial reserve army” that broke the power of labor and facilitated the upward redistribution of wealth, “workers at the extreme edges, or completely outside, of restructured labor markets.”²³ People whose labor is no longer necessary to capital are cast off, while at the same time the existence of this population of un- and underemployed people allows capital ready access to new labor as needed. And as Gilmore details, the practical creation of this abstract idea of a surplus population plays out along the lines of racial hierarchy. The Black population has felt by far the most severe impacts of rising unemployment and decreasing earnings, and the impacts have also been severe on Latinx people.²⁴ Correspondingly, both populations are highly over-represented in the carceral system today. This adds a dimension of racist exclusion to the contours of surplus populations; the label of “surplus” is given by the state and capital not only based on who is least necessary for production, but also by whose presence is least desired in a society rooted in white supremacy.

Incarceration is, in both Gilmore and Wacquant’s analysis, one method amongst multiple for the state to manage this population and deal with the social insecurity caused by massive social and economic disruption. Wacquant considers carceral policy and neoliberal “workfare” — the restructuring of welfare that ties benefits to work requirements —as part of the same process through which the state manages the

²² Ibid, 111-113; Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 297.

²³ Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital*, 15; Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 70-71.

²⁴ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 72-76.

impoverished multitudes the economic transition created. Social and penal policy cannot be considered as different fields, as they are both at their core about the management of poor people.²⁵ Contrary to common associations of neoliberalism with the withering of the state, neoliberal social and penal policy in fact entail dramatic interventions by the state into private and social life. This is obvious on the penal side of things, as the massively grown policing and carceral arm of the state has put millions of people behind bars. But the state is still very present on the side of social policy. In transitioning from Keynesian welfare to neoliberal workfare the state has not just cut the quality and quantity of government support, but also set up numerous strictures on what people must do in order to receive the benefits that remain. Means testing, work requirements, and checks on illicit or undesirable behavior give neoliberal workfare a strong element of paternalism, heavily involving the state in the guidance of the lives and actions of the poor. For Anna Marie Smith the family-planning side of workfare constitutes a full-fledged “paternacare,” as it forces “poor single mothers to conform to a one-size-fits-all heteropatriarchal model of kinship relations” by requiring involvement of the biological father in collecting support.²⁶ In the analysis of Smith and Joe Soss et al., the numerous restrictions of workfare serve a number of purposes: They prevent or discourage large numbers of people from receiving aid; ensnare those who do receive it in a vast surveillance and monitoring network; seek to shape the poor into subjects who will conduct themselves in preferable ways; and, crucially, “mimic the pressures and incentives of low-wage labor markets,” extend them to the most socio-economically vulnerable, and “bolster these pressures with state

²⁵ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 294.

²⁶ Anna Marie Smith, *Welfare Reform and Sexual Regulation*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

authority.”²⁷ Both these punitive and social management interventions combine in a “double regulation of poverty,” as Wacquant calls it, using the carrot of workfare and the stick of incarceration to enforce a regime of working austerity on the poor, while the centrality of such policies to the new socio-economic order has the effect of normalizing social insecurity.²⁸ The alternatives left to people from whom most securities in life have been stripped at the end of the day are to be exposed, unsupported, to the market or be subjected to incarceration. And as the number of insecure people has risen, so prisons have been expanded to swallow them.

Neoliberalism is, then, something much more specific than just the withdrawal of the state from the economy. What we see instead is the state and capital in crisis, and the tandem rearrangement of both as a solution to that crisis. As capital solves the issue of stagnation by recapturing profits and going on a global hunt for cheap labor, the state helps it along by dropping the reins of Keynesianism and letting the forces of the newly global market proceed unencumbered. And when such massive rearrangements of the economic bases of life inevitable lead to social chaos, the state steps in with a heavy punitive hand to pick up the pieces. Profits are privatized and risks — of lost earnings, of economic crises, of uncertainty over time and of insecurity in life — are socialized. Neoliberalism is, in Wacquant’s words, a rearrangement of “the nexus of market, state, and citizenship from above,” built on the essential components of economic deregulation, welfare reduction, ideologies of individual responsibility, and the creation of an extensive carceral apparatus.²⁹ As the state withdraws from control of the economy and from providing social

²⁷ Ibid, 4; Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford F Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1-7.

²⁸ Ibid, 290-291.

²⁹ Ibid, 307.

support to common people, it steps in with great vigor to regulate their lives with punishment and surveillance.³⁰ With the neoliberal transformation pulling the economic rug out from under people across the globe, incarceration emerges as the state's chosen method for keeping some semblance of social order standing.

³⁰ Ibid, 298; Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 11.

Part 2: Geography and Instability in Neoliberal Incarceration

After discerning the broad place that current arrangements of incarceration have in neoliberal political economy and considering the factors of historical contingency that shaped this arrangement, the question remains of how exactly this arrangement works. Through what specific methods does the carceral management of surplus populations operate, and why?

Significant emphasis has been placed recently on the geographic operations of prisons in enacting social control. This function of incarceration, which is centered around the geospatial relocation and containment of people, is centered mainly on controlling conditions outside of the prison, in general society. The geographic function of incarceration, which Gilmore labels “incapacitation” and Wacquant “warehousing,” “simply calculates that those locked up cannot make trouble outside of prison.”³¹ Disruptive or excess elements of society are simply picked up, moved, and held in a different place by the state so as to render outside conditions more desirable. “Socio-economic and political contradictions” are resolved through physical relocation of certain parts of the population.³² While the geographic aspect of incarceration certainly isn’t new or unique to the neoliberal era, it is employed in distinctive ways in the current schema — most notably in the sheer volume of people being relocated. To Gilmore, incapacitation has today overtaken other theories of the operation of incarceration — namely, retribution towards criminals, rehabilitation of criminals, or deterrence of crime.³³ This is not to say that none of those other three elements are present in incarceration today, but that

³¹ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 14; Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 296.

³² Robert Nichols, “The Colonialism of Incarceration,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 17, no. 2 (2014): 449.

³³ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 14.

incapacitation has taken on a particular importance after the neoliberal turn, reasons for which are explored below.

Geographic relocation and incapacitation require what Wacquant calls prison's "institutional tentacles," appendages of the carceral apparatus that extend beyond the prison walls: Probation, parole, gang databases, crime discourse and media coverage, and, centrally, policing.³⁴ The reach of this web of carceral institutions today is vast, and its impacts on communities deep. In addition to the staggering total numbers of the prison population, now at 2.3 million, every other adult in the U.S. has had an immediate family member incarcerated, and one in 38 have an immediate family member currently incarcerated.³⁵ Incarceration has significant impacts on many beyond just those directly imprisoned, as the removal of one person puts strains on the networks of other people they are attached to, "with a consequent thinning of financial and emotional resources," both inside the prison and out.³⁶ On the family level, incarceration imposes severe financial stress by often removing much-needed wage earners and imposing a number of direct costs through bail, legal fees, and visitation costs.³⁷ Gilmore examines specifically the stresses put on mothers of incarcerated children as they struggle to "switch among the many and sometimes conflicting roles required of caregivers, wageworkers, and justice advocates."³⁸ Removal can also strain or sever interpersonal networks both within the family and the larger neighborhood or community, as geographic removal makes maintaining personal

³⁴ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 288.

³⁵ Wendy Sawyer and Pete Wagner, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019," Prison Policy Initiative, last modified March 19 2019, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2019.html>; FWD.us, *Every Second: The Impact of the Incarceration Crisis on America's Families*, (FWD.us, 2018), 9.

³⁶ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 16.

³⁷ FWD.us, *Every Second*, 20.

³⁸ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 182.

contact difficult.³⁹ This poses a significant threat to various “alternative modes of social reproduction” that have become relied on in socio-economically marginalized communities: Informal economic exchanges, social parenting networks, and the management of neighborhoods by street organizations.⁴⁰ And while carceral policy has no necessary dependence on crime, one of the effects of disrupting these social networks through high rates of incarceration has been an increase in crime in the places people are most often removed from.⁴¹ This is noted not to imply that society needs “smarter” incarceration that reduces crime, but to show that the disruption of communities from incarceration and policing has a destabilizing effect on people’s lives that can force them into criminalized activities. Disruption is further compounded by discourses on crime that conflate the images of the most criminalized — poor people, especially poor people of color — with extreme, sensational violence and create an atmosphere of racialized fear and distrust, especially towards the formerly incarcerated.⁴² People returning from prison are also kept vulnerable by being locked out “of education, employment, housing, and many other stabilizing institutions of everyday life.”⁴³ All of these factors work to dissolve social relations, deplete communal webs of support and resource sharing, and force people to isolate, to the effect that “prisons wear out places by wearing out people.”⁴⁴ Both broad and deep, the carceral web has long lasting and harmful impacts on the communities it touches. The geographic aspect of incarceration involves not only the relocation of the

³⁹ Todd R. Clear, Dina R. Rose, and Judith A. Ryder, “Incarceration and the Community: The Problem of Removing and Returning Offenders,” *Crime and Delinquency* 47 no. 3 (2001), 342.

⁴⁰ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 74.

⁴¹ Nichols, “The Colonialism of Incarceration,” 441; Clear et al., “Incarceration and the Community,” 336-337.

⁴² *Ibid*, 341; Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 15-16.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 16-17.

incarcerated to a new space, but also serious and violent changes to the places they are removed from as the multitude stresses of incarceration cause communities to atomize into collections of vulnerable individuals.

Any stabilizing function prisons fulfil are not direct, then, as communities are highly *destabilized* by the isolating and wearying effects of incarceration and police terror. It is a mistake to assume this is a policy failure on the part of the state, however. Far from being a backfire or unintended consequence, this destabilization serves a very intentional purpose. Just as the fallout of neoliberal socio-economic disruption was used to justify the initial occupation of disturbed areas by carceral forces, so the knock-on disruptive effects of that occupation are used to justify its continued operation and expansion. The broad outline of this maneuver is described by Christian Parenti when he states that disruption of society “justifies state repression and the militarization of public space, sows fear, and leaves poor communities — that might have organized for social justice — in disarray, occupied by police and thus docile.”⁴⁵ But as well as Parenti’s analysis captures the relationship between disruption and crackdown, it still misses the mark by focusing on docility. Events like the uprisings in Ferguson in 2014 and Baltimore in 2015, and the emergence of grassroots movements like Black Lives Matter and No Cop Academy, show heavily policed, Black and Brown, and poor communities are not “docile.” Fierce resistance can be and is still mounted, a result that wouldn’t be expected if the outcome of policing was to make individuals merely compliant or submissive. In the face of these displays of organized, collective resistance, the response by the state has again been to increase repression, a clear demonstration of the self-escalating crackdown → disruption

⁴⁵ Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, (New York: Verso, 1999), 169.

→ crackdown cycle. The militarization of police forces has continued unabated, and numerous new laws have sought restrictions to public speech and demonstration, increased penalties for interfering with infrastructure and blocking traffic, and expanded to definitions of terrorism and rioting.⁴⁶ Communities able to overcome the isolating and disruptive effects of punitive forces in mounting resistance to them are met with the escalation of those very forces, in the name of containing such future collective acts and with the additional intention of deepening isolation in order to prevent them. Rather than privileging the claim of the state — that maintenance of peaceful public order is the telos of law enforcement practices and its absence is evidence that the punitive system has not grown to the necessary level for achieving it — it seems more reasonable to conclude that *docility and order have never been the goal*, and that disruption and instability are the inherent, intended consequences of constantly escalating incarceration and policing. What is central to the function of this order is not compliance but disorganization, of communities and of resistance.

A useful comparison for this dynamic is found in Gilberto Rosas' analysis of the function of the U.S.-Mexico border in the neoliberal era. Rather than assuming that the U.S. border security apparatus is an incomplete measure in the complete sealing of the border so that no unauthorized migrants might cross — an approach that necessarily leads to the conclusion that the militarized border is failing its purpose — he asserts that *this very incompleteness is a crucial function of the modern border*. Cheap, exploitable migrant labor is, after all, central to neoliberal schemes of profit retention and labor disorganization. In Rosas' view the violence of the border, whether it comes directly from Border Patrol

⁴⁶ Nicholas Kusnetz, "Harsh new anti-protest laws restrict freedom of speech, activists say," *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

agents or indirectly from being forced to walk great lengths through the desert, serves the purpose of conditioning migrants to the socio-economic place neoliberalism has assigned to them; the border creates “conditions of vulnerability and subjugation that violently and criminally inaugurate border crossers to the US economic and racial order.”⁴⁷ The border turns back some migrants and kills many others, but for those who do make it the process normalizes the violence, neglect, and abuse that is so common for people forced to live at the bottom of neoliberal society. Far from being incomplete, the violent but porous border is an “inauguration” to “the direct and indirect brutalities that are central to the everyday governance of contemporary neoliberalism and global capitalism, the latest iteration of the vampirish sucking of life out of labor.”⁴⁸

What are these neoliberal brutalities that people are being inaugurated to through the mechanisms of the border and incarceration? To a significant extent, they center around practices adopted to facilitate the upward transfer of wealth from workers to capital by modifications to working conditions and compensation. One way this has been done, as discussed above, is the alteration of welfare policies into the much less expansive, more disciplinary mechanism of workfare that no longer offers recipients a shield from the market’s commodification of labor. The neoliberal state in this way acts as a tool for forcing more people onto the labor market by withdrawing the shield of welfare and for “imposing market discipline” on those recipients of aid who remain.⁴⁹ Abandonment to the impersonal calculations and whims of the market is established as the norm, with no exceptions. Exploitation is also, of course, found in work itself. Working weeks have grown longer,

⁴⁷ Gilberto Rosas, *Barrio Liber: Criminalizing States and Delinquent Refusals of the New Frontier*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2012), 113.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 105.

⁴⁹ Soss et al., *Disciplining the Poor*, 3.

with the average full-time work week now at 47 hours as opposed to 40, and the need to hold multiple jobs to make ends meet has increased.⁵⁰ The number of people working in temporary or part-time jobs or as independent contractors in what is popularly known as the “gig economy” has also skyrocketed as employers cut full time positions that confer more benefits and protections for organizing rights, safe working conditions, and fair treatment.⁵¹ On top of all this, real wages for American workers have barely increased over the last half century, and have largely fallen “below the socially necessary costs of reproduction.”⁵² That decline in purchasing power has been compensated for by the massive expansion of systems of credit, with the necessary result that debt has exploded amongst ordinary people.⁵³ These sorts of changes to economic conditions, which have revolved around increasing demands of work on the worker, relatively decreasing compensation for work, decreasing quality of working conditions, increasing debt, and the disappearance of social safety nets, can be understood through the lens of increasing worker “precarity.” Paul Apostolidis summarizes precarity as problems “ranging from daily punches in the gut to dwindling hope for long-term personal security, familial well-being, and social justice,” and asserts a series of theses regarding the condition of

⁵⁰ Lydia Saad, “The 40 Hour Workweek is Actually Longer,” Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/175286/hour-workweek-actually-longer-seven-hours.aspx>; Pedro Nicolaci da Costa, “More Americans need a 2nd job to make ends meet — and its sending a troubling message about the economy,” Business Insider, last updated August 8, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/more-americans-working-more-than-one-job-to-make-ends-meet-2017-8>

⁵¹ Paul Apostolidis, *The Fight for Time: Migrant Day Laborers and the Politics of Precarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6; Elaine Pofeldt, “Are We Ready for a Workforce that is 50% Freelance?” *Forbes*, last updated October 17, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/elainepofeldt/2017/10/17/are-we-ready-for-a-workforce-that-is-50-freelance/#15aa7f033f82>; Kelly, Kim. “Freelancers Want to Join Unions but Labor Laws Won’t Let Them.” *Teen Vogue*, last updated April 4, 2019. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/freelancers-want-to-join-unions-but-labor-laws-wont-let-them?utm_brand=tv&utm_social-type=owned&utm_source=twitter&mbid=social_twitter&utm_medium=social.

⁵² Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review* 100 (2016), 112.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 112-113.

precarious workers: Their work makes them suffer, deprives them of control over how their time is spent, isolates them from one another, and forces them to be highly mobile, often across borders.⁵⁴ The scenes of exploitation that come out of this economy of precarity are many and involve workers from around the world: Abhorrent working conditions in the factories in the Global South; collective bargaining through threat of mass suicide at Foxconn's plants in China; using bottles, boxes, and garbage cans as toilets in Amazon warehouses and delivery vans in order to not fall behind schedule; taking ride requests for Lyft while in labor; unending student debt; regular anxiety, sleep deprivation, and difficulty feeding oneself from overwork.⁵⁵ These are the conditions that have been facilitated by neoliberalism's restructuring of the global economy, which in turn have facilitated the massive upward redistribution of wealth that has occurred in the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st; they are, for most people, the new normal conditions of work and life.

It is only through the large-scale disorganization of people via the decimation of organized labor, removal of secure jobs and extensive welfare programs, disruption of peasant societies to incorporate previously unincorporated peoples into the global capitalist economy, and the looming threat of a violent carceral system that such abysmal conditions can be rendered acceptable, or at least unavoidable, to those subject to them. And in order

⁵⁴ Apostolidis, *The Fight for Time*, 1, 3-11.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 3; Nina Godlewski, "Amazon Working Conditions: Urinated in Trash Cans, Shamed to Work Injured, List of Employee Complaints," *Newsweek*, last updated September 12, 2018, <https://www.newsweek.com/amazon-drivers-warehouse-conditions-workers-complains-jeff-bezos-bernie-1118849>; Jia Tolentino, Jia, "The Gig Economy Celebrates Working Yourself to Death," *The New Yorker*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-gig-economy-celebrates-working-yourself-to-death>; Zack Friedman, "Student Loan Debt Statistics in 2019: A \$1.5 Trillion Crisis," *Forbes*, last updated February 25, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2019/02/25/student-loan-debt-statistics-2019/#174ac09a133f>.

for such an exploitative economic arrangement to continue, the disorganization of people must continue as well. Prisons and policing reinforce the destabilization caused by the neoliberal economic shift *because destabilization and the creation of vulnerable individuals is essential to the neoliberal political economic paradigm*. Additionally, destabilized communities reduced to collections of vulnerable individuals have fewer means (though increasingly more cause) to mount resistance. The carceral system is the dynamo that both keeps the dispossession of the neoliberal turn going and contains its consequences. As Wacquant states, it is economic success — if massively increased profits are considered success — not failure that demands such an expansive, powerful carceral system.⁵⁶ As with Rosas’ analysis of the border, violent social and punitive policy overlap with neoliberal economics, as incarceration and policing enforce “submission to the dictate of flexible work as de facto norm of citizenship at the foot of the class structure” in an “ordering of social insecurity.”⁵⁷ Similar to migrants crossing the border, people subjected to frequent violent state intervention in the places they live are made vulnerable and exploitable, their networks of family or community support strained, weakened, or dissolved, leaving no alternative but entrance without protection into the precarious economy. While on a macro level incarceration helps preserve the existent arrangement of state and capital by managing potentially resistant and subversive elements, the mechanics through which it operates produce vulnerability on a micro level — within the, neighborhood, family, community, and individual — that makes people conditioned to and available for the exploitation that neoliberalism runs on.

⁵⁶ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 310.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 294.

The political implications of the increasingly militarized policing that has emerged as a central pillar of this punitive system deserves some consideration as well. As Robert Nichols describes, policing comes to be considered militarized when it starts to employ certain weapons and technologies and/or when it becomes clear it is “a force imposed externally by a government that the subjugated population does not recognize, authorize, and/or does not have participation within” — in short, when policing operates with the means and logic of war.⁵⁸ Nichols’ examination of the history of war-as-policing and policing-as-war as methods for attacking the sovereignty of Indigenous nations reveals such state violence as “*constitutive* of territorialized sovereignty in a colonial context, rather than extraneous and novel.”⁵⁹ While this analysis is focused on the historically specific interactions between the militarized policing of settler-colonial states and Indigenous peoples in North America, similar but distinct logics of militarized policing can be seen at other sites where the state’s claims of sovereignty and legitimacy are embattled — namely, the border, poor urban centers, and marginalized neighborhoods.⁶⁰ With the lie given to the idea that policing is for the (poor and non-white) public’s protection, it becomes clear that the carceral apparatus has a function as a response to the flagging legitimacy of the state by reasserting the power and necessity of the state through force. Having withdrawn any attempts at providing social security for its members in any supportive sense at the neoliberal turn, social security in the punitive sense — protection from crime, terror, and external infiltration, and the circular assertion that responses to all three concepts demonstrate their existence — has become the method through which the

⁵⁸ Nichols, “The Colonialism of Incarceration,” 445-446.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 446-447.

⁶⁰ Rosas, *Barrio Libre*, 103.

state re-asserts its relevance.⁶¹ Masking the disconnect between crime and incarceration and the connection between socio-economic and penal policy, the state has sought to cast its embrace of authority through punishment as natural and necessary.

With the neoliberal rearrangement of the economy creating a vast wave of socio-economic disruption, the method that emerged for managing that disruption was incapacitating incarceration. Again, as many authors have emphasized, this response is contingent and not inevitable.⁶² Origins aside, one of the central functions of this response is the geospatial relocation of significant parts of the population out of their communities and into prison. Such relocation has inflicted corrosion of communal bonds, disruption of social networks, and the isolation of individuals, with the result that places where the carceral apparatus touches town most heavily have become less calm and more unstable, not more orderly.⁶³ This should not be seen as an unintended consequence of a punitive regime that is in pursuit of law and order, but the deliberate recreation of the mass disorder that the neoliberal political economy is built on. On top of containing disorder to certain geographic areas through the employment of the carceral archipelago, this system of incarceration also perpetuates said disorder, keeping people exploitable and manifesting the reasoning for its own existence. The deliberate withdrawal of state action from certain places and aspects of life has created new areas of incomplete sovereignty alongside new conditions of socio-economic disruption. Unwilling to ameliorate this disruption because of its necessity to the neoliberal arrangement of production, the state instead responds with a punitive crackdown that simultaneously perpetuates dispossession while also containing

⁶¹ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 298.

⁶² Nichols, "The Colonialism of Incarceration," 441.

⁶³ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 14-16.

and relocating elements that could push disruption into an uncontrollable critical mass with the potential of re-ordering the state and capital on its own terms.

Part 3: Work and Insecurity Inside the Prison

While analysis of how the geographic function of neoliberal incarceration is used to effect the world outside of the site of incarceration is crucial, we must also be sure to not forsake analyzing what is happening on the inside of the prison as well. Although Wacquant's "warehousing" and Gilmore's "incapacitation" are useful analytical frames for better understanding the geospatial aspect, both run the risk of portraying prison as a site devoid of activity. The prison is not merely a neutral location of storage like a warehouse, nor are incarcerated people frozen in amber and rendered free of any capabilities. Life and politics continue on the inside. If the prison itself is a site of activity, and is connected to the particular regime of state and capital called neoliberalism, it seems reasonable to conclude that that activity is not arbitrary but has a purpose in that regime.

One common analysis of how in-prison activity links up with the broader neoliberal political economy is profit extraction, both from the labor of prisoners and from prisons themselves as sites of investment. While there is certainly some truth to that assessment, it falls short of telling the whole story, for a number of reasons. The first and most straightforward of this is that the vast majority of U.S. prisons are publicly, not privately, owned and run. Only about 5 percent of prisons and jails are private, and they contain less than 8 percent of all incarcerated people in the U.S.⁶⁴ In 2017, profits from private prisons stood at only \$374 million, a tiny fraction of the United States \$20 trillion economy.⁶⁵ This

⁶⁴ Ibid, 21; Sawyer and Wagner, "Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2019," Prison Policy Initiative <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2019.html>.

⁶⁵ Pete Wagner and Bernadette Rabuy, "Following the Money of Mass Incarceration," Prison Policy Initiative, last modified January 25, 2017, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/money.html>; Federal Reserve Bank of Saint Louis, "Gross Domestic Product," FRED Economic Data, last modified March 28, 2019, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/GDP>.

marginal place not only in the total economy but in the carceral system itself means it is more appropriate to consider private prisons a derivative subsection of incarceration in general.⁶⁶ Contrary to much popular discourse on incarceration, it has not been the lure of profits from private prisons driving the expansion of incarceration in the neoliberal era, but state-driven expansion of incarceration opening up a niche for private prisons to exist.

Much too has been made of the extraction of profits from un- or lowly-paid prisoner labor in public and private prisons. There is good reason for this focus. The prison exemption in the 13th amendment has allowed for unpaid, forced labor of incarcerated people in the US for a century and a half. As Gilmore points out, this ability to effectively keep slavery going after the Civil War was put to expansive use in the industrializing post-war South, where the forced labor of incarcerated, mostly Black men was used to build much of the region's infrastructure.⁶⁷ The exemption from compensating labor is still central to prison work today, with the average wage equivalent for "correctional industry" work — work for state owned businesses — ranging from \$0.33 per hour to \$1.41 per hour, and the average wage equivalent for non-industry jobs — maintenance and operations of the prison facility itself — ranges from \$0.14 per hour to \$0.63 per hour.⁶⁸ Given the extreme anti-Black racism in the carceral system that can be seen prison from prison demographics alone, the continuing legacy of slavery on the prison system is apparent. But Gilmore argues that the neoliberal prison cannot be fully understood as a straight analogue of the plantation, nor is the current place of prisoner labor the same as it was in the later half of the 19th century and the first half of the 21st — as with many aspects of incarceration,

⁶⁶ Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 311.

⁶⁷ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 12-13.

⁶⁸ Wendy Sawyer, "How Much Do Incarcerate People Earn in Each State?" Prison Policy Initiative, last modified April 28, 2017, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages/>.

the role of incarcerated labor has changed with time.⁶⁹ For as abysmal as the treatment of modern incarcerated workers is, the modern prison system is not particularly adept at extracting profit out of them. For one, almost all incarcerated workers work non-industry jobs within the prison, and the roughly 9 percent of prisoners who do hold industrial jobs are working for state agencies, not private corporations.⁷⁰ An even smaller percentage work directly for private companies through the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program, for which workers are paid according to local wage laws, but with the prison allowed to take up to an 80 percent cut of paid wages in the name of covering incarceration costs.⁷¹ Even in the minority of cases when incarcerated workers are employed by private companies, or when state prison industry agencies sell the products of their labor to private companies, profit extraction is highly inefficient and generates unremarkable results. While the average full-time employee in the U.S. works 47 hours per week, incarcerated workers work far less, averaging just under 28 hours per week.⁷² The prison work site itself is also highly inefficient, with prisoner counts, requirements for escorted movement between sites, security staff interference, lockdowns, and other events all contributing to interruptions of work (one example of absurd inefficiency is a Minnesota prison having to halt all industrial operations on foggy days because prisoners had to walk outside to get to their work site and were obscured from the view of watchtowers).⁷³ The products of prison

⁶⁹ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 20-21.

⁷⁰ Wendy Sawyer, "How Much Do Incarcerate People Earn in Each State?" Prison Policy Initiative, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages/>; Office of the Legislative Auditor, State of Minnesota, *Evaluation Report: MINNCOR Industries*, (Saint Paul: Office of the Legislative Auditor, State of Minnesota, Program Evaluation Division, February 2009), 15.

⁷¹ Wendy Sawyer, "How Much Do Incarcerate People Earn in Each State?" Prison Policy Initiative, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages/>.

⁷² Lydia Saad, "The 40 Hour Workweek is Actually Longer — By Seven Hours," Gallup, last modified August 29, 2014, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/175286/hour-workweek-actually-longer-seven-hours.aspx>; State of Minnesota, *Evaluation Report*, 23.

⁷³ State of Minnesota, *Evaluation Report*, 22-23.

labor are also often of low quality, defective, and delivered late.⁷⁴ All of this adds up to a situation highly unsuitable to the efficient extraction of profit, despite access to effectively free labor and, in some cases, guaranteed markets for products through government contracts.⁷⁵ At the end of the day, the neoliberal political economy is already highly efficient at extracting surplus value from labor outside of the prison, through the proliferation of precarious, low wage, non-union jobs and the gutting of public services. Workers today do not need to be surrounded by prison walls and armed guards to be forced to work 40-plus hour weeks, at grueling rates, for at or below minimum wage. The modern prison is geared much more towards enforcing socio-economic precarity by looming in the distance and reaching out with militarized police than it is to being a factory itself.

And yet prison remains the site of a great deal of activity related to work and labor: All federal prisoners are required to work, and almost every state requires the same.⁷⁶ If direct profit is not the prime motivation, what is? The state's line is that prison labor, whether regular or industry, helps prisoners develop work skills and a responsible, hard-working personal character for their benefit on exiting prison.⁷⁷ This does not hold up to much scrutiny, however. Prison work involves few skills relevant to the outside labor market, unemployment amongst formerly incarcerated people is extremely high at over 27 percent, recidivism rates remain extremely high across the board, and the essentially non-existent wages give formerly incarcerated people no secure platform to stand on upon release.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Parenti, *Lockdown America*, 232.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Federal Bureau of Prisons, "Work Programs," Federal Bureau of Prisons, https://www.bop.gov/inmates/custody_and_care/work_programs.jsp; Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 21.

⁷⁷ State of Minnesota, *Evaluation Report*, 4; Oregon Correction Enterprises, *Annual Report 2018*, (Salem, Oregon: Oregon State Correctional Institution Print Shop, 2018), 4.

⁷⁸ Sawyer, "How Much Do Incarcerate People Earn in Each State?" Prison Policy Initiative, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/04/10/wages/>; Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, "Out of Prison and Out of Work: Unemployment Among Formerly Incarcerated People," Prison Policy Initiative, last

Whatever work is happening in prison is not leading to stability in the lives of the formerly incarcerated, and cannot be considered as part of what Gilmore calls the rehabilitative theory of incarceration; it decidedly does not help “formerly incarcerated people... live lives away from the criminal dragnet.”⁷⁹

Approaching the issue of prison labor through the lens of autonomous Marxist thought can begin to give us some answers. As laid out by Kathi Weeks, one of the central critiques posed by Marxist autonomists both to capitalism and to other Marxisms concerns the abstraction of labor as a process and its essentialization as the purpose of human life.⁸⁰ This line of thought identifies capitalism as “a social system based on the imposition of work through the commodity form,” the social formation required by ideas of inherent resource scarcity and the need for constant extraction and production that rests at the base of liberal thought.⁸¹ Capitalism is centrally defined less by “private property, the market, the factory, or the alienation of our creative capacities” than it is by the relation of mandated work; work is “the glue that holds the system together.”⁸² Another key part of autonomist analysis, and a natural extension of placing work at the center of capitalism, is identifying work outside of the factory, at other sites of both social and private activity. Domestic work and other forms of reproductive and productive work that occur outside of the usual waged work site make up what autonomists refer to as the “social factory,” an analytical framework that acknowledges capitalist relations extend geographically beyond the

modified July 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>; Bureau of Justice Statistics, *2018 Update on Prisoner Recidivism: A 9-year Follow-up Period* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 2018), 1-2.

⁷⁹ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 14.

⁸⁰ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 90.

⁸¹ Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (San Francisco: AK Press, 2000), 82; Robert Skidelsky, *Keynes: The Return of the Master* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010), 76.

⁸² Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 97.

physical factory and socially beyond the wage relation.⁸³ In the modern era the social factory has also latched on to massive avenues of expansion in the internet and social media, subsuming even the most banal aspects of modern life into capitalist relations through the free labor of posting and forum moderation.⁸⁴ This focus on capitalism as work means left wing politics that seek changes to property relations but continue to center productivism have not departed from capitalism as much as they think they have — the social relation of necessitated work, the relation at the center of life under capitalism, remains, even if it is done more cooperatively or its products are less immediately alienated. Unless left politics combats the idea that productive work is the core of human nature, it ends up reinforcing “one of the critical supports of the system it seeks to overcome.”⁸⁵ Autonomous Marxism asserts that to truly overcome capitalism humanity must be conceived of beyond individual’s productive capacities, and seeks “the possibilities of collective constitution” in a society that does not center around relations of work.⁸⁶ Necessary to achieving this postwork future is an antiwork politics which involves both refusing to work, as a means to gain more leisure time, as well as conceiving of leisure time not “as a means to recreate labor power and ensure consumption, nor as a way to spread the available employment and drive wages up, but as an end in itself, as the gratifying time of nonwork.”⁸⁷ Non-work time could then be used for such things as building alternative possibilities for both work and family, communal, and political life — time for both imagining and enacting new visions of our own activities and relationships.⁸⁸

⁸³ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 120-121.

⁸⁴ Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor,” In *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 33-35.

⁸⁵ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 89-91.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 97-99.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 79.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 168, 170-171.

A key issue of contention for such antiwork politics is, then, how much time is dedicated for work and how much is allowed for leisure. More time dedicated to work forecloses the possibility for pursuing non-work activities — of doing “what we will” — while more time away from work opens up the potential to conceive of and practice alternatives to the current organization of work and the dominant discourses that surround it.”⁸⁹ This contention is present in the neoliberal economy just as it has been in all previous arrangements of the capitalist economy, but this neoliberal iteration does have distinguishing features. As we have already shown, neoliberalism has expanded the amount of time we spend at the formal worksite, but it has done this not only through extending single full-time jobs but also by implementing a patchwork of overlapping temporary, part-time, and freelance work. This gives the neoliberal claims to time a distinct aspect of discontinuity, as Apostolidis observes. Discontinuity manifests in the precarious economy in the short term “as workers constantly shift gears between multiple jobs that they perform for shorter durations during the same day or night,” and in the long term as workers are forced to settle into a routine of holding various separate jobs over a lifetime instead of pursuing advancement in a single career position.⁹⁰ For Apostolidis the temporal discontinuity of precarity has three major effects on workers: “They lack time to do much else apart from working or going to and from whatever jobs they have at the moment,” they must find time in their current work lives to arrange their next position after their current temporary position expires, and because single career-path full-time positions are still held as the norm of work life, they “end up feeling, and being viewed as, out of sync with

⁸⁹ Ibid, 152-153.

⁹⁰ Apostolidis, *The Fight for Time*, 6.

‘normal’ society.”⁹¹ Neoliberalism has also left distinctive imprints on the social factory through the extraction of free labor during ostensibly non-work time via the internet, and through human resources discourses that encourage individuals to spend their non-work time practicing personal development to become better working assets. Finally, synthesis between the formal workplace and the social factory is completed through a “post-industrial work ethic” that hinges on “exhorting us not only to do our jobs dutifully but also to love our work and to seek ultimate fulfillment from working.”⁹² Such logic both justifies the maximization of work in time both in the formal workplace and outside of it. If our work is to be how we seek fulfillment as people, we should be thrilled to extend the workday as much as possible and to devote as much of what would otherwise be non-work time to work, whether it be productive work done out of the workplace, reproductive work, or self-improvement for the purpose of better doing later work.

Understanding capitalism as at its core an imposition of work, and the interactions with time that that imposition has, allows us to make sense out of mandated but unprofitable prison labor and not merely write it off as a coincidental irrationality in neoliberal capitalism. One of the main purposes of prison labor is to take up prisoners’ time and reduce “idleness.” Prison work programs seek to emulate the 40-hour workweek on the inside largely in the name of improving prison safety, as inmates not occupied by work or other programs are viewed by the state as potential troublemakers.⁹³ At the same time, however, many other means for incarcerated people to occupy their time have been restricted. Exercise equipment available to inmates was removed or restricted on a massive

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, 6-7.

⁹³ Sate of Minnesota, *Evaluation Report*, 13; Oregon Correction Enterprises, *Annual Report 2018*, 4.

scale in the '90s, and restrictions on other forms of entertainment, such as music and movies, has been highly restricted as well. Higher education programs in prison were also massively cut in the '90s, with access to Pell grants for incarcerated people rescinded and many degree-granting programs inside prisons eliminated.⁹⁴ What little remain of education programs inside prisons have continued to be cut since.⁹⁵ Education possibilities outside of official programs have also been culled, with expansive book bans and restrictions on book donation to inmates proliferating throughout state prison systems.⁹⁶ Throughout all of these cuts to recreational and educational activities inside prison, mandated work programs have been there to absorb the slack and fill the time of incarcerated people now “freed” from other pursuits.⁹⁷ In these practices we see the external dynamics of precarious neoliberal work replicated on the inside of prison. Work may not monopolize as many hours in total on the inside as it does on the outside, but it has still been centered in life, and through many of the same means. The frequent interruptions of prison industry work for security reasons carries over temporal discontinuities found in much precarious neoliberal work, while the harsh contrast of work programs that try to mimic “normal” working conditions in an environment that clearly does not fit the norm for the external working person is positioned to further feelings of being outside of “normal” society that precarious workers outside of prison also experience. Meanwhile, even while prison work programs struggle to eat up hours in the

⁹⁴ Parenti, *Lockdown America*, 175-176, 181.

⁹⁵ RAND Corporation, “Prison-Based Education Declining During Economic Downturn; More Work is Needed to Better Focus Spending,” RAND Corporation, last updated February 18, 2014, <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2014/02/18.html>.

⁹⁶ Nila Bala, “There’s a war on books in prisons. It needs to end,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>; Armstrong, Mia. “Return to Sender: No More Mailing Books to Inmates in Pennsylvania.” *Slate*, last updated November 5, 2018. <https://slate.com/technology/2018/09/pennsylvania-prisons-ban-book-donations-ebooks.html>.

⁹⁷ State of Minnesota, *Evaluation Report*, 13.

day, the elimination of alternative ways to fill one's time helps to ensure that antiwork and postwork possibilities cannot develop. Under conditions in which strict control is placed over allowed activities, and when the only alternative to work is to sit in a cell, work does not have to try and reduce time dedicated to leisure, it *becomes leisure itself*. This can be seen in the testimonies of inmates who, with little else allowed to them, jump at available work opportunities and advocate for their reintroduction if they have been taken away.⁹⁸ The centering of work in prison life ensures that no respite is found from the neoliberal regime of precarious work inside the carceral archipelago needed to enforce it, and keeps the 95 percent of prisoners who will at some point be released conditioned for what they will enter back in to.⁹⁹

Despite these dire conditions, the centering of work in the management of prison life has also made the refusal of work by prisoners a primary tool of organized resistance. In 2010, thousands of prisoners in Georgia withheld their labor across at least six state prisons as they demanded living wages for work, improved living conditions, nutrition, and healthcare, and an end to cruel and unusual punishment, more access to their families, and the restoration of self-improvement and exercise programs.¹⁰⁰ It was this strike that led Georgia to implement a tier system, and the subsequent use of that system to isolate strike leader Kelvin Stevenson and other organizers.¹⁰¹ In 2016 24,000 incarcerated workers

⁹⁸ Chandra Bozelko, "Think prison labor is a form of slavery? Think again," *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-bozelko-prison-labor-20171020-story.html>; Jason Robb, *Behavior Modification: Super Max Ohio Level System* (Lucasville Amnesty, 2014) <http://www.lucasvilleamnesty.org/p/resources.html>, 20-22.

⁹⁹ Timothy Hughes and Doris James Wilson, "Reentry trends in the U.S.," Bureau of Justice Statistics, last updated March 29, 2019, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/reentry.cfm>.

¹⁰⁰ Christie Thompson, "Do Prison Strikes Work?" The Marshall Project, last updated September 21, 2016, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/09/21/do-prison-strikes-work>; Sara Mayeux, "Georgia Prisoners Strike for Better Conditions," Prison Law Blog, last updated December 12, 2010, <https://prisonlaw.wordpress.com/2010/12/13/georgia-prisoners-strike-for-better-conditions/>.

¹⁰¹ Hackett and Turk, *Shifting Carceral Landscapes*, 17.

across 12 states struck on the 45th anniversary of the Attica Prison uprising, with inmates at various locations again presenting demands that centered around fair pay for labor, better living conditions, and the return of education and self-improvement programs.¹⁰² The summer of 2018 saw what was potentially the largest prison strike in U.S. history as inmates across 17 states organized to stop work and engage in other forms of protest while presenting a unified list of demands.¹⁰³ The past decade has also seen the emergence of new prisoner advocacy and abolition groups that coordinate activists both inside and outside and have located labor as a central aspect of prison organizing — notably, the Industrial Workers of the World Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee and the Free Alabama Movement, both of which were involved in organizing the 2016 and 2018 strikes.¹⁰⁴ Despite employment inside prison being less universal and more chaotic than on the outside, work is still a prominent aspect of the current carceral system, and as much of the day-to-day operation of prisons relies on the labor of prisoners, withholding work remains a central lever by which incarcerated people can make demands.¹⁰⁵ Through their refusals of work prisoners have articulated demands that place the restoration of non-work

¹⁰² Beth Schwartzapfel, “A Primer on the Nationwide Prisoners’ Strike,” The Marshall Project, last updated September 27, 2016, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/09/27/a-primer-on-the-nationwide-prisoners-strike>.

¹⁰³ German Lopez, “America’s prisoners are going on strike in at least 17 states,” Vox, last updated August 22, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/8/17/17664048/national-prison-strike-2018>.

¹⁰⁴ Schwartzapfel, “A Primer on the Nationwide Prisoners’ Strike,” The Marshall Project, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/09/27/a-primer-on-the-nationwide-prisoners-strike>; Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, “2016 Prison Strike Call to Action,” International Workers of the World Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, last updated January 11, 2017, <https://incarceratedworkers.org/resources/2016-prison-strike-call-action>; Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, “Prison Strike 2018,” International Workers of the World Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, last updated October 15, 2018, <https://incarceratedworkers.org/campaigns/prison-strike-2018>.

¹⁰⁵ Lopez, “America’s prisoners are going on strike in at least 17 states,” Vox, <https://www.vox.com/2018/8/17/17664048/national-prison-strike-2018>; Free Alabama Movement, *Let the Crops Rot in the Fields: A Call For New Strategy in The National Movement Against Mass Incarceration and Prison Slavery – Short Version* (New Market, Alabama: Free Alabama Movement, 2015), 7-8.

activities alongside basic respect for human rights and compensation for work — the ability to pursue possibilities outside of working is a key aspect of being treated as a human being.

But if we are to complete an analysis of the prison as a fully integrated aspect of neoliberal society and not something standing outside it, we must also look at how such resistance is policed and contained within the prison. For just as with regimes of work, neoliberal policing has consistency both outside and in. Carceral researchers and abolitionists Colleen Hackett and Ben Turk note that life inside prison often involves the development of “surrogate families, social networks, and affiliations to navigate the deprivation of imprisonment.”¹⁰⁶ Just as exterior policing strains and ruptures the social bonds at the heart of communities, so do numerous internal punitive policies. One internal policing model that has risen to prominence over the past decade is the “tier system” that divides the usual four or five security levels of most prison systems into a complex array of sub-tiers that grant different levels of privileges to inmates for good behavior. Done in the name of rewarding good behavior and decreasing violence by separating dangerous prisoners from others, the actual effect of tier systems has been to disrupt the social organization of incarcerated people by separating and spreading them out across the various stratified tiers. This has been particular directed at longtime prisoners, prison organizers, and gang leaders. This disruption of social networks and the removal of prominent social members has led to *decreased*, not increased, stability within prison. In the words of Hackett and Turk, “the tier system, like prison and police in general, promises safety through isolation and control, but actually creates increased stress, trauma, and

¹⁰⁶ Colleen Hackett and Ben Turk, *Shifting Carceral Landscapes: Decarceration and the Reconfiguration of White Supremacy* (Fire Inside, 2017 <https://abolitionjournal.org/shifting-carceral-landscapes/>), 18.

danger by removing stabilizing forces.”¹⁰⁷ Jason Robb, incarcerated at the Ohio State Penitentiary, has written on how the pressures of the tier system have led to inmates to self-harm and get into arguments and violent altercations with one another, events frequently encouraged by guards.¹⁰⁸ And just as the destabilization and vulnerability making caused by policing on the outside has been used as a justification for further increasing policing, so the instability and violence caused by the tier system has been used to justify further carceral expansion and increased internal policing.¹⁰⁹ The effects of this internal disruption also bleed out into society outside prison as well. Often used to punish anti-carceral organizing around politicized understandings of race and disrupt cross-racial organizing between inmates, the tier system often reinforces hostile racial groupings by “aggravating tensions, isolating leadership, and discouraging cooperation or understanding between racialized prison gangs.”¹¹⁰ The hostilities and identities that coalesce under these conditions then transfer outside as prisoners are released, where “the release of Aryan prisoners directly produces white supremacist violence” and increases “the ranks of neo-Nazi and white supremacist organizations,” while the “racialized prison identities” of released Latinx people and people of color feed discourses of racial criminality and the cycle of police repression.¹¹¹ Internal policing, like external, is used to isolate inmates and make them vulnerable, as well as reproduce external racial hierarchies. As with external policing, such practices do not prevent but exacerbate violence and instability while making difficult organized resistance, and use the conditions they create to justify their

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 16-19.

¹⁰⁸ Robb, *Behavior Modification*, 20-22.

¹⁰⁹ Free Alabama Movement, “The Holman Project,” Free Alabama Movement, last updated September 17, 2016, <https://freecalabamamovement.wordpress.com/2016/09/17/the-holman-project/>.

¹¹⁰ Hackett and Turk, *Shifting Carceral Landscapes*, 18-19.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 19.

further expansion. The vulnerable individuals they produce then bring these vulnerabilities with them upon release, furthering the ends of external policing, maintaining their position of exploitability, and bringing the cycle of abuse that swirls at the foot of the neoliberal socio-economic ladder full circle — only, perhaps, to start once again.

Conclusion

The modern prison is not just a tool of geographic removal, of “warehousing,” but one of vulnerability making, both inside and outside the prison itself. This carceral system, which has grown up with the neoliberal political economy from their very beginning, carries its dynamics of isolation and exploitation to the inside of prison, reproduces them there, and then exports them back out. All the while, the policing regime that is incarceration’s outward appendage maintains the conditions of socio-economic disruption that neoliberal economics inaugurated. To develop a complete sense of what neoliberalism is as a political economic project, various activities that occur both inside and outside the prison — precarious work, disruptive policing, and organized resistance — must be seen as being pursued in consistent ways. The prison is not an island of exception to the neoliberal regime solely used as a threat to enforce it, or to isolate elements that might disrupt it, but an engine for the neoliberal order’s constant reproduction. While the carceral archipelago is necessarily geospatially separate from the locations it is used to police, it remains linked to them through the frameworks of economically and racially biased state violence, the dissolution of social relations into separate, vulnerable individuals, and the enforcement of an economy of precarity. Understanding this is key to revealing neoliberalism as much more than just the withering of the state, and to seeing the prison as more than an exceptional institution unconnected to the arrangement of the political economy outside of it.

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