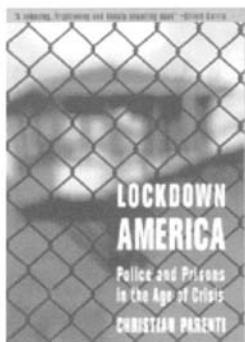


Book review

Ian Taylor reviews *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (1999) by Christian Parenti. London/New York: Verso Books.



One of the most important truths of the new Millennium in the United States was the fact of the prison population reaching some two million people—an increase of over 300 per cent since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981. Alongside that increase in the prison population was an escalating intolerance in official responses towards crime (the Zero Tolerance policing, for example in New York City, ‘Three Strikes and You’re Out’ legislation across the entire country and, in many states, a relatively enthusiastic return to the use of capital punishment). The escalation of intolerance and penalty mirrored a serious decline in official and popular investment in rehabilitative and social welfare solutions to crime and social order problems. Christian Parenti’s extraordinary new book is written not only as an analysis of these developments - the conditions of existence of the new penal severity in America - but also as an exposé of the impact that the transformed criminal justice system is having on a variety of different populations in the United States.

The text is a gold-mine of information on the pre-conditions of the emergence of a ‘Law and Order’ society in the United States (beginning with the U.S. defeat in Vietnam), on the steady militarisation of American policing in the 1970s and 1980s and on the transformation of the American prison system -

‘from reform to revenge’. Parenti’s research methods are those of the committed inquiring journalist - personal interviews and careful and thoughtful personal enquiry (for example, into the world of the homeless in American cities); a tireless and critical trawl through secondary source material and engagement with statements from senior politicians and criminal justice system personnel. The resulting ‘product’ here is a series of discrete, well-focused chapters that are in themselves the equivalent of a postgraduate thesis in academic criminology, but with considerably more social and political purchase. Amongst the striking case-studies presented are the detailed exposé presented of the expanded role being played in the American criminal justice system by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, massively boosted in recent years by a range of new technologies directed at the detection and surveillance of illegal immigration (especially - but by no means exclusively - across America’s southern borders), an analysis of the extraordinarily expanded role of private security interests in the central business districts of America cities (now renamed the Business Improvement Districts) and a very detailed and knowledgeable expose of the ways in which American prisons’ new roles (as abattoirs) has been institutionalised, not least through ‘reforms’ which make it increasingly difficult for inmates to engage in litigation or other forms of protest and resistance.

The politicality of Parenti’s text is a third defining feature. *Lockdown America* is born of an unqualified ‘anti-capitalist’ commitment. The account that is presented of the militarisation of policing and the ‘rise of the Big House Nation’ (the expansion of the

prison system) rests on the familiar Marxist view of the role of the criminal justice system in societies organised in the capitalist mode. In this sense, the expansion of the criminal justice system and the transformation in its organising purposes (from ‘rehabilitation’ to ‘repression’) must be understood in terms of a crisis within capitalist political economy (especially the crisis of mass manufacturing and mass employment) emerging through the 1960s and 1970s, and the mopping up of the resulting ‘reserve army of labour’ by an ever-more active and interventionist police and criminal justice system.

In the United States - a society in which divisions of social position and life chances hang on (or are understood as) matters of race rather than class, the impact of this transformation of American institutions is more keenly experienced by black Americans than by any other segment of the population. In many American cities, fully one-third of all black men are in prison, on probation or awaiting trial. The destinies of those newly-marginalised populations are increasingly hidden from public view, subjected to the whims and the machinations of the criminal justice and police bureaucracies, and to the cost-benefit calculations of the privatised prison and juvenile justice organisations that play so important a role within the new industry of crime control and ‘repression’. In its focus on the explosive growth of a private criminal justice industry, only indirectly accountable to public scrutiny, the analysis offered in the book is an advance on the classical Marxist formulations like that expounded by Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer in *Punishment and Social Structure* in 1938. Parenti’s tireless analysis of the growth of repression in the U.S. system in the last 30-40 years

of the twentieth century is offered as a confirmation of the original Rusche and Kirchheimer argument applied, in particular, to the crisis in Fordist mass manufacturing. In that sense, it works from different political assumptions and perspectives to those of other contemporary theoreticians of penalty, who want to concentrate just on the shift within 'the system' to the management of risk.

Parenti argues that such perspectives neglect the consequences of 'the system' on those millions of people who finish up as victims of these systematic transformations. These people are generally not those whose 'risks' are identified as consequential either by the theorists or the practitioners of the new penalty. Evi-

dence suggests that the exercise of the new repression will not work - that the repression of the underclass, and of other marginal populations, is storing up future trouble for America. Parenti's stance challenges complacency about penalty, and the belief that the expansion of the prison population reduces crime, especially violent crime. The two million people currently being warehoused in American prisons will eventually be released into the broader society. Those many million others currently under some form of supervision and surveillance will carry forward the scars of those experiences. The continuing escalation of systems of exclusion (in housing through to the prison system itself) will produce ever more elaborate and diverse boundaries and forms

of social division, which will render impossible a sense of an America 'at peace with itself'.

Parenti's book can be criticised for its account of the explosion of the drug trade into and within America (in which the main problem under discussion appears to be the preference of particular American police forces for SWAT-style raids into poor neighbourhoods): serious progressive analysis of the drug problem has to deal directly with the growth of the drug trade as a market phenomenon in its own right. Parenti's book also fails to debate with Left Realism, either as a framework of analysis or as a politics - though it has to be said that this perspective has not made the same political or academic impact in the US as in Britain. But Parenti, like Mike Davis

before him in another Verso publication, *City of Quartz*, addresses 'the concerned citizenry' rather than the academic. Lockdown America needs to be read, by those sections of the ever-expanding criminological academy that is now so uncritically complicit in the business of control and exclusion; but also by citizens in Britain and Europe concerned at the potential impact of the continuing mobilisation of American exemplars into the European political theatre itself.

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Notes for Contributors

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