

***Lockdown America:  
Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis.***

By Christian Parenti.

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A powerful consensus is emerging among the many excellent books now being released on prison in America, such as the texts by Miller (1996), Donziger (1996), Rosenblatt (1997), Currie (1998), Burton-Rose (1998), and Dyer (2000). These books are all delving into the same basic themes: the bizarre relationship between falling crime rates coupled with rising public fear of crime, the massive costs of incarceration, the racism and brutality running rampant through law enforcement and corrections, and the effects of all this on society as a whole.

Christian Parenti's *Lockdown America* is a valuable addition to this literature that is concerned with a dark side of American social life: crime, poverty, police brutality, the violent culture of prisons, and the economic, social, and political conditions that make prison "work" - that is, work for a few at the expense of the many - particularly the poor and people of color.

The book chronicles the rise of what is now called the prison-industrial complex - a massive establishment that has grown from 200,000 inmates in 1970 to two million today. This is an astonishing increase that has effects on society that are extremely far-reaching. Parenti makes use of the scholarship of URPE members such as Bluestone and Harrison (1982), Bowles, Gordon, and Weisskopf (1990) and Schor (1992), to show the relationship between the economic crises and development of the US and how these processes shaped the rise of the prison industrial complex. This is a fascinating story, and Parenti does a fine job telling it.

The rhetoric that has supported the prison buildup is that of war - the war on crime, the war on drugs, zero tolerance. The war metaphors manifest in urban communities as a form of siege, with helicopters and heavily-armed SWAT teams

increasingly used to 'neutralize' and 'contain' the 'enemy'. Some of Parenti's best on-the-ground investigative reporting is revealed here amidst the details of police procedures and attitudes, the language and equipment used, and how easily this turns to brutality. In fact, this reporting is probably what Parenti is best known for, with several articles in *The Nation* on the rise of paramilitary-style policing in California and elsewhere.

Another valuable contribution is the insightful analysis of the power relationships in prison. Synthesizing material as diverse as articles from criminology, political science, and psychology, to correctional manuals and biographies of wardens and inmates, Parenti weaves a complex and disturbing tale of domination. This is not a story merely of the control that prison authorities exercise over inmates (although of course this control is maintained), but also of the power inmates have, shown in prison riots, where it becomes clear that the inmates, provided they act in cooperation, can control nearly any prison.

To avoid this situation, correctional authorities seek to undermine the ability of inmates to cooperate with each other, in other words, divide and conquer - perhaps a microcosm of society. In Pelican Bay prison, California, there is a special high-security part of the prison that is more or less on permanent lockdown, subjecting those inmates caged there to extreme isolation and sensory deprivation. There are only three ways out of this unit, which some have called "a living death": an inmate can "snitch" - that is, provide information about criminal activity among the other inmates, be paroled, or die. Since all the inmates know this, anyone who is released back into the general population is assumed to be a snitch and is immediately attacked. If inmates are fighting each other, they are unable to cooperate, the threat that their numbers represent is effectively undermined.

One of the most powerful sections of the book explains the social functions of rape in prison. Parenti argues that the sexual assault endemic to prisons is more about establishing an oppressive, gendered regime among the inmates than it is about sex per se. When people learn the hidden truth about the prevalence of sexual assault in prison, they invariably ask why the guards permit it - the answer is, what better way to give dangerous men a release for the anger and frustration they must feel at the daily humiliations, the infantilization, the oppression and alienation of being caged, then to reverse and reproduce the power dynamic by savagely abusing the weaker inmates? Of

course, it's not as if guards actually create the conditions for rape - but by looking the other way, by refusing to do anything about it or even acknowledge it, they do much to allow it to flourish and become an established facet of prison life. In fact, the prevalence of rape in prison serves the interests of the guards, because it keeps inmates divided, along the artificially created gender lines that define the inmate who rapes as the "man" and the inmate who is raped as the "woman" - or, in the misogynistic parlance of prisons, the "bitch".

This book reveals many important details of the emerging police state in America - and more importantly, provides a powerful theory in which to contain these details - but don't look here for solutions to the prison crisis. In an all-too-brief conclusion, Parenti sketches a few ideas and policies that would bring about change, but the focus is broad, the recommendations sweeping. It almost seems added as an afterthought. Of course there are no simple solutions to the incarceration frenzy, but a bit more detail may be helpful to those seeking to end the racism, exploitation and oppression that are so clearly manifest in American prisons.

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