

Against Punishment: Centering Work, Wages, and Uneven Development in Mapping the Carceral State

Brett Story & Judah Schept*

WE MIGHT MARK THE CURRENT MOMENT BY THE CONTRADICTIONS revealing themselves within the dominant discourses and politics of imprisonment. During the 2016 presidential election cycle, Donald Trump claimed the mantle of the “law and order” presidential candidate, while others vying for the nomination in both major parties spoke of sentencing reform, mass incarceration, and even “the New Jim Crow,” identifying themselves with the growing bipartisan consensus on prison reform. As we write, the Trump White House is positioned between these same two dominant poles of mainstream criminal justice politics. On one side, formerly embodied in Trump’s original Attorney General Jeff Sessions, the administration is firmly rooted in the populist punitivism characteristic of the rise of the carceral state. On the other is the president’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who helped to draft the First Step Act and was the administration’s connection to prison reform bills in both the House and Senate (Apuzzo 2018, Dolven 2018). The space between racist revanchism and technocratic tinkering is the terrain on which current policy discussions occur.

The dynamics of the moment are also visible in other seats of power. The Koch brothers, Tea Party stalwarts otherwise famous for their aggressive union-busting campaigns (Deal & Lessin 2014), have organized major meetings around penal reform, including a three-day conference in New Orleans that included critical scholars and Black Lives Matter activists among its participants. Strange bedfellows is almost an understatement for

* **BRETT STORY** is Assistant Professor in the School of Image Arts at Ryerson University in Toronto. She is the author of *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power across Neoliberal America* (University of Minnesota Press) and the director of the film *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* (distributed by Grasshopper Films). **JUDAH SCHEPT** is Associate Professor in the School of Justice Studies at Eastern Kentucky University. He is the author of *Progressive Punishment: Job Loss, Jail Growth and the Neoliberal Logic of Carceral Expansion* (New York University Press) and the forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Cages in the Coalfields: Extraction and Disposal in Carceral Appalachia* (New York University Press).

the political shapeshifting of today's prison reform movement, as intellectual architects of tough-on-crime policies say they have been misunderstood, dismantlers of the welfare state like Newt Gingrich join liberals like Van Jones in calling for change, and private prison companies position for a share of the reentry market.¹

This rhetorical attention accompanies some gestures toward legislative and judicial change. More than half the nation's states have passed some kind of sentencing reform, including scaling back mandatory minimums; the federal government passed the Fair Sentencing Act, reducing, although not eliminating, the violent disparity between powder and crack cocaine sentences; and a handful of jurisdictions, including the federal government, have tried to ban the box in an attempt to ease the barriers former prisoners face during reentry and their return to the workforce. Subjecting these changes to scrutiny, however, should give pause to any attempt to characterize them as marking a "new sensibility" (Petersilia & Cullen 2014). A recent Vera Institute of Justice report shows that the dubiously heralded "era of reform" in fact "seems never to have arrived in some jurisdictions, where growth has continued unchecked" (Kang-Brown et al. 2018, 33). Some of the changes that have occurred are quite narrow in scope or merely symbolic. Under the Obama administration, the Department of Justice announcement that it would not renew contracts for privately owned and operated prisons, for example, did not come with any commensurate prisoner releases, nor plans for actual prison closures (Bello 2016); Jeff Sessions made quick work of reversing even this nominal change, rescinding the memo to cease private prison contracts just two weeks into his position as attorney general under the Trump administration. Meanwhile, freedom for what Marie Gottschalk (2015) calls the "non-non-non's"—those so-called redeemable prisoners incarcerated for nonviolent, nonserious, and nonsexual offenses—has been purchased only through the hardening of punishment regimes against many others (see also Gilmore 2015). In addition, and as James Kilgore (2014b) and Maya Schenwar (2015) have pointed out, we are in a moment of net widening through the rise of electronic monitoring and other postcustodial forms of social control. Finally, despite some prison closures and legislative changes, *new* or *expanded* prisons and other carceral institutions continue to appear, albeit at times through different justifying logics than we are used to seeing. Indeed, a fuller vantage of the carceral state affirms Marie Gottschalk's (2015, 1) recent observation that

a tenacious carceral state has sprouted in the shadows of mass imprisonment and has been extending its reach far beyond the prison gate. It includes not only the country's vast archipelago of jails and prisons but also the far-reaching and growing range of penal punishments and controls that lie in the never-never land between the gate of the prison and full citizenship.

Of these constitutive contradictions, one of the most striking is the disjuncture between the reforms to criminal justice policy and the struggles over working conditions, labor power, and living wages that continue afoot. Although decades of research demonstrate that the growth of the prison system is intimately tied up with the problems of structural joblessness, poverty economies, and stagnation of workers' wages following the economic crises of the early 1970s (see Gilmore 2007, Travis et al. 2014, Wacquant 2009, Western & Beckett 1999), prison reform continues to be propagated as if autonomous from the ongoing issue of labor power and income. For example, for all the reentry monies and job readiness training proliferating within penal reform packages, the contemporary period's jobless economic growth and contingent labor opportunities for ex-prisoners in particular coalesce to produce what Hallett (2012) calls the "jobless future" as the definitive condition facing those reentering society. Hallett describes how structural forces work so devastatingly against the income security of the poor and racialized populations that make up the bulk of the US prison population that even the best individual reentry programs offer little chance of offering their participants actual secure employment. The Koch brothers' efforts to drive down wages and undermine labor organizing efforts must thus be seen as *constitutive* of, rather than simply coincident with, the historical present of mass incarceration they ostensibly critique.

In this article, we argue that the time is right for a remapping of the carceral state to fit the current conjuncture, and with it the development of new analytic tools for appraising penal reform efforts. We question, in particular, whether or not ostensible transformations in the "punitive political climate" (Travis et al. 2014, 4) or the "punitive turn in contemporary penal-ity" (Garland 2001, 142) actually offer a meaningful barometer of reform efforts and the degree to which they portend the retreat of the carceral state, or simply its reformation. Even as punishment itself may have lost some purchase, we conclude, the carceral state reveals itself able to adapt to and stabilize itself through other guiding logics. In integrating what has been called carceral humanism into its animating rationale and in deepening a

commitment to the narrative of prison building as rural economic development, the carceral state's tenacity draws its strength from diverse political and economic pools, allowing prisons, jails, and other constitutive parts to serve as solutions to very different kinds of communities navigating through different elements of neoliberal crisis. With both carceral humanism and rural prison building, we argue, the neoliberal state further retracts from the social wage and further cements its political organization around police and carceral power (Camp 2016).

We make the case for revisiting the material landscapes of carceral power and examining the logics and imperatives at work in these spaces. We suggest such landscapes reveal an array of forces that in many cases have little to do with crime as a social phenomenon or punishment as an ideology. We make an argument against evaluating prison reform through the narrow framework of crime and punishment by drawing from fieldwork conducted in the Appalachian coalfields of eastern Kentucky and examining that geography as a carceral landscape. In eastern Kentucky, prisons are built on top of former coal mining sites as well as into the local imagination as the next form of rural economic development, literally filling the spatial, economic, and psychic void left by coal and the extraction process known as mountaintop removal (MTR).

In excavating the discursive and political work that animates continued prison growth in this region, we find that the material health of incarceration is underwritten *not* by affective commitments to punishment, fears of crime, or even racial animus, but rather by diverse logics arising out of the relations of racial capitalism, specifically, for our purposes, the ideology of work and the fraught social relation of wage labor. We contend that Bethlehem Steel, Inland Steel, and other coal companies in Appalachia—and the history of capitalism of which they are a part and which they index—can tell us as much about the carceral state and its vagaries as the changing sentencing laws and attempts at reform that supposedly serve as its barometer. Here, the carceral state's tenacious grip on society has less to do with a given punishment or treatment regime and everything to do with the ravages of racial capitalism and the attendant concerns about work and wages. The carceral landscape of the Appalachian coalfields thus provides the grounding from which we argue for a decentering of punishment and a renewed focus on the production of poverty and wage labor within both our analytic mappings of the carceral state and our organizing efforts against it.

Coal, Capital, and the Carceral State

Prison growth in Central Appalachia aligns in part with what we know from other scholars about rural regions across the United States increasingly suturing their economies to prisons, including in parts of Arkansas (Eason 2016), California (Gilmore 2007), New York (Huling 2002, Norton 2016), and several other states in the west including Oregon, Washington, and Idaho (Bonds 2009, 2012, 2013). Like these analysts of the carceral state, we find in eastern Kentucky that the prison is used materially to respond to and putatively solve various real and perceived crises simultaneously, including manufactured crises like prison overcrowding and real crises arising out of the cycles of capitalism like deindustrialization, structural joblessness, and low wages. There are 16 prisons in Central Appalachia, eight of which are in eastern Kentucky. Most of those, including three federal prisons, have been built just in the last 30 years.

Prison building in Central Appalachia requires some context-specific consideration. The region, after all, has been synonymous with certain economic industries (coal), topographical features (mountains), and cultural tropes (white moral and financial poverty), which at times collapse into each other to form a composite representation of deficiency. We argue that these material features of the region, as well as their representations, are central to a deeper and historical reckoning with prison growth and bring into relief the limitations of a focus on punishment deployed by many sociologists and criminologists.

Scholars of the region's deep historical connection to capitalism, and in particular the extraction industries of timber and coal, have alternately argued for Central Appalachia to be understood as an internal colony (Lewis & Knipe 1978, Lewis et al. 1978), as an internal periphery of the world capitalist system (Billings & Blee 2000, Dunaway 1995, Walls 1978), and as a "national sacrifice zone" (Eller 2008, Scott 2010). Here the coal industry has produced a place with "rich land and poor people" (Eller 2008) dependent on the insidious material and ideological practice of destroying land and lives while telling residents through targeted campaigns to be "friends of coal."²

Even as coal came to characterize what Kathleen Stewart (1996) calls "the Bourgeois Imaginary" of Appalachia, we must avoid the tendency to see the industry as an almost primordial part of the region. The story of both the dominance of the coal industry and the eventual rise of the carceral state in Central Appalachia must be understood within the broader historical developments of racial capitalism, which set the political economic and

spatial conditions for mineral rights to be sold to speculators and, eventually, for prisons to be imagined for and built on top of flattened mountains.

Historians of the region have offered important interventions into the notion that capitalist underdevelopment of Appalachia commenced with the coal industry. Wilma Dunaway (1995, 67) notes of early eighteenth-century Appalachia that

half a century before the decolonization of North America from the British Empire, southern planters and eastern capitalists expropriated vast territories of southern Appalachia from the Native American groups who lived and hunted there ... once the frontiers had been depopulated of their indigenous inhabitants, speculator and settler capitalism expanded into the region.

Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee (2000, 36) note that these economic actors “engrossed more than four and a half million acres from Indian populations on the Appalachian frontier between 1763 and 1773,” demonstrating the rapid transformation of “the land there from a common resource, as defined by indigenous peoples, to a privately possessed commodity.” In other words, capitalism entered the region not through industrialization but through enclosing commons and expropriating and ethnically cleansing land. Within this process, Dunaway (1995, 68) concludes, “land provided the economic basis for the structuring of a polarized Appalachia society in which the wealthy gentry amassed a majority of the acreage while more than half the settler households remained landless.”

In Kentucky, by the early nineteenth century, the state actively opted against legislating acreage to small homesteaders in favor of providing “land grants to ‘monopolizing capitalists’ for ‘the purposes of speculation’ and to promote industry” (*Kentucky State Journal* 1928, cited in Dunaway 1995, 61). Coal seams and other mineral deposits had been observed by the early settlers, and by the end of the Civil War, speculation and development accelerated. Various mechanisms enabled speculators representing Northern capitalist interests to acquire both mineral rights and eventually land from local residents, a process one historian has called “the big steal” (Wright 1978). Mineral rights were purchased cheaply from farmers who were poor and often illiterate. Paperwork known in the region as the broad form deed, for example,

effectively transferred to the land agents all of the mineral wealth and the right to remove it by whatever means necessary, while leaving the

farmer and his descendants with the semblance of land ownership, that is until the industries penetrated the region through railroads and exercised their claims to both land and what lied beneath. (Eller 1982, 55)

In this way, Ronald Eller (*ibid.*, 56) continues, “millions of acres of land and even greater quantities of timber and mineral rights, passed out of the hands of residents and into the control of absentee owners.” These broad form deeds, which facilitated the rise of deep mining and the growth of the industry, would later become powerful mechanisms that enabled the industry to revolutionize production, moving away from labor-dependent deep mining and toward the technologized form of strip mining, which required far fewer miners and much more advanced heavy machinery. Owners of the mineral rights exercised their access to the property without regard for the landowners. Courts sided with the industry that the deeds enabled their ability to access the minerals they owned “by any means convenient or necessary” (Eller 2008, 38), including the destruction of the very land under which the minerals were located and on which the residents lived. Eller (*ibid.*) notes of this period, “roads were cut across pastures, forests devastated, fields ruined and water supplies polluted to get at the coal.” Family farmers were left with little choice but to leave their farms to the mining companies and join the ranks of those roaming or leaving the region or now working in some capacity for the very companies to which they had lost their homes.

Strip mining’s most extreme form, mountaintop removal (MTR), has characterized much of the coal extraction in the region, particularly in Kentucky, over the last several decades. MTR refers to the dramatic and disturbing process of dynamiting and destroying mountains to access the coal within them. MTR’s destruction and disappearance of the mountains transforms peaks into plateaus and, in the process, produces the very spatial conditions—flat, empty land—for prisons to be imagined and built.

For over a century, coal dominated the region as its main economic industry. As a foundational study of land ownership in Appalachia concluded in 1983,

the dominant single industry development is highly dependent upon the control of a few, primarily corporate hands, who control the land and resources; while large amounts of wealth are produced, much of it leaves the region. Even the wealth that stays in the region is unevenly distributed. (Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force 1982, 67)

What this meant, according to the study, was that companies were “taking their money out of the state and leaving nothing behind but wages: no

roads, no recreation, nothing” (ibid.). However, in the years following this landmark study, the combined structural forces of increased mechanization within the industry, internationalization of manufacturing jobs to Asia and Latin America, and the migration of domestic coal production to lower-cost mines in the American West culminated in an Appalachian recession in the 1980s that has only deepened in subsequent decades (Eller 2008). The Appalachian counties of eastern Kentucky remain among the poorest in the country as well as those with distressingly low life expectancies (Estep 2014, Wang et al. 2013). With increased mechanization, shifts in demand, growing reliance on other energy sources, and increased environmental restrictions, the region’s decline has been precipitous. One report from mid-2013 indicated the loss of over 6,000 industry jobs in eastern Kentucky over the previous two-year period (Estep 2013). In the first quarter of 2016 alone, the industry lost over 1,500 jobs, bringing the total number of jobs in the industry down to 6,900 for the state, which marks its lowest total since 1898 (Estep 2016; see also Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet 2016).

Prisons are introduced in the region to respond to and resolve such conditions. Supporters argue for the prison’s ability to provide some of the wage labor lost in the departure of coal jobs but also as a kind of Keynesian development tool, providing construction jobs, spreading gas and water to remote areas, and extending other infrastructure.

Following important leads—the land and the money—brings about the realization that prisons in Central Appalachia are often built on top of coal mines, including on MTR sites. The region’s most recently built federal prison, Big Sandy, is on record as the most expensive federal prison ever built, largely due to the extra \$40 million needed for site remediation to address the sinking of the prison’s foundation into the mine below. Prisons literally take the place of coal, built on top of former mines and into the local imagination as the next form of rural economic development, despite the dubious evidence of this as an effective economic strategy (Hooks et al. 2010, Huling 2002, Ryerson 2013). As Rebecca Scott (2010, 177) argues, “In the eyes of industry supporters, the flat land created by MTR epitomizes the civilizational standard of property. Domesticated by corporate ownership, this flat land is an affirmation that nature is always already property waiting to be improved.” Scott (ibid., 179) goes on to state, “In converting wilderness to property, supporters argue that MTR offers southern West Virginia a way to become more modern, more homogenously American.” The idea that flattened mountains introduce modernity to the premodern Appalachian landscape and resident is rooted in the historic conflation of

Appalachian land with people, erroneously promising entry into an economy intimately tied to and built upon Appalachian labor and resources.

Often perched above rural communities on top of coal sites, the prison's view "is a perfect metonymy for a more general verticalization of class relations in the context of an intensified class war from above" (Steyerl 2011, 26). This is an exercise in the politics of verticality, whereby landscapes converted from wilderness to property carry with them a logistical power; the flattened land allows for a layering of industry (Armstrong 2014, Mukerji 2010, Weizman 2007). Once the coal is gone and the land devalued, the prison comes as a "socio-spatial fix," able to reinvest capital into the landscape (Gilmore 2007).

If land is one material basis for the cultivation of a local prison imaginary, then work is the other. As stated earlier, prisons are being actively marketed in postcoal Kentucky—as in similarly depressed regions—as the future of postindustrial economic development. The ideological and affective scaffolding for that narrative is the dire situation of hemorrhaging mining jobs and plunging poverty rates. Indeed, the carceral state animates a particular narrative of *futurity* here, at least partly, by harnessing prisons ideologically to the drive to labor, and all the complex material, psychic, and affective needs and aspirations that drive encompasses.

The Prison at Work

Although crime and punishment remains the dominant framework for theorizing the function and failures of the state's carceral apparatus, scholars have also done important work establishing prisons as a labor market institution (Gilmore 2007, Lichtenstein 2011, Peck & Theodore 2008, Purser 2012, Stein 2014, Thompson 2010, Wacquant 2009, Western & Beckett 1999). The prison's structural relationship to employment has perhaps most thoroughly been analyzed in relation to the idled labor of those incarcerated, a disproportionately urban and African American population rendered increasingly surplus by deindustrialization and the globalization of capital. When put in the context of the US political economy as a whole, one finds that the expansion of the US prison population from the 1970s onward tracks alongside the deregulation of the US labor market and the stagnation of workers' wages. With the decline of Fordist manufacturing economies in many US cities, the reconfiguration of industrial capitalism through what Harvey (1990) calls "flexible accumulation," and the uneven ascendance of urban economies organized primarily around finance, real estate, and the service sector, large segments of the Black urban working class in particular

have been rendered economically redundant. This surplus population, itself abandoned by capital and the state and residing often in disinvested urban neighborhoods, today makes up the greatest share of the nation's prisoners.

Peck and Theodore (2008) have analyzed the labor market impacts of mass incarceration in the more recent period, arguing that the twenty-first-century prison functions institutionally to manage but also to *produce* systemic unemployability across a criminalized class. In the restructured urban labor market of the deindustrialized, neoliberal economy, Black men in particular have been relegated to the lowest echelons of the wage labor system, often as surplus labor. Describing the ways in which incarceration itself functions to structure chronic unemployment, they write that African American men are

first locked out of the labor market, then locked up in what has become a retested prison system. . . . So ensnared, this criminalized class has been almost completely detached from the job market, the segmentations within which have calcified, just as the form of the accompanying regulatory institutions has “hardened.” (ibid., 276)

Peck and Theodore thus suggest that the contemporary prison system wields significant influence on the social distribution of work and wages and thus the relative bargaining power of those racially differentiated segments of the working poor. As a labor market institution, the prison system therefore plays a dual function: “to conceal unemployment in the short run, by absorbing many who would assuredly otherwise be jobless, but exacerbate it in the long run, by dramatically increasing joblessness among inmates after they are released” (Purser 2012, 399).

The intimate relationship between prisons and employment has only intensified in the neoliberal period, as the enforcement of work—as the other side of defending property rights—solidifies as a particular preoccupation and organizational function of the postwelfare state. Writes political theorist Kathi Weeks (2011, 4),

As a result of work's subordination to property rights, its reification, and its individualization, thinking about work as a social system – even with its arguably more tenuous private status – strangely becomes as difficult as it is for many to conceive marriage and the family in structural terms.

Work as an ideology, and wage labor as a market institution, similarly structure the logic of prison building as a development strategy in economically depressed regions. Indeed, from the point of view of those nonincar-

cerated subjects who themselves occupy the lower rungs of what Cowen and Siciliano (2011) call “surplus masculinities” in disinvested rural areas like Appalachia, prisons are first and foremost an employment opportunity, disassociated from any function or animus related to normative attachments to punishment.

In the more than two dozen interviews we have conducted in our respective projects with residents of prison-hosting or would-be prison-hosting communities across Letcher, Floyd, and Martin Counties in eastern Kentucky, not a single person spoke of crime, criminals, safety, or punishment in their reflections about existing or forecasted prison facilities. The terms in which people spoke about prisons in their counties were almost entirely contained within the frameworks of work and the economy. As Gary Cox, a former coal worker who now manages a small airport that shares a resurfaced mountaintop with USP Big Sandy in Martin County, explained, “The prison is a good paying job. And it’s recession proof. You close a factory down, and you ship the jobs overseas. You can’t do that to a federal prison.” Rondell Meade, a local retiree upon whose land the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is considering siting USP Letcher, the region’s most recently proposed federal penitentiary, expressed deep reluctance to relocate and yet was fairly unequivocal on the issue of USP Letcher’s public value: “If the prison brings jobs then of course I’ll welcome it here.” Reports from the county’s newspaper suggest that the county is reorganizing its educational priorities in anticipation of the labor force the prison will require. Representative Hal Rogers, a long-time champion of prison building, has promised between 300 and 450 new jobs for the area in the new prison economy. The newspaper reports that “the Letcher County Board of Education and the Letcher County Area Technology Center have formed a partnership to create a law enforcement and criminal justice program” in anticipation of the coming jobs that will require some training (*Mountain Eagle Staff* 2012). The partnership is partly funded by a \$40,000 gift from Kentucky River Properties, LLC, a mineral rights holding company.

North of Letcher County in Wheelwright, KY, a former coal camp in Floyd County, Sam Little, head of the Wheelwright Historical Society, noted of rumored plans to reopen a decommissioned private prison in the community: “I don’t care if they put in a donut factory, as long as it brings us jobs!” Little’s sentiment, reiterated in some form by many others, conveys the centrality of employment to animating prison siting but also foreshadows the possible abolition geography available through thinking about the prison in terms of work, wages, and uneven development. Prisons do not guarantee

their own reproduction; the existing social formation positions them as the common-sense form of economic development, a contingency that can be undone through struggles for, in this case, alternative economic policies.

Wheelwright offers further insight into the relationships between prison, work, punishment, and shifting discourses about the carceral state. Otter Creek Correctional Center, owned and operated by CoreCivic (formerly the Corrections Corporation of America), has been closed since 2012. The prison's closure resulted in the immediate loss of 180 jobs. Set within the broader political economic conditions of the region, the prison's closure exacerbated rather desperate on-the-ground realities. Recent census data from 2017 shows per capita income in the county is \$18,366 and 30 percent of the population of the county lives below the poverty line. In Wheelwright, conditions are considerably worse, with a \$9,646 per capita income and 36 percent of people in the city living below the poverty line.³

Otter Creek, like many prisons in the region, is part of a geography of extraction and disposal. It sits on top of a former trash dump and is adjacent to a former mine. Tracing the site's history demonstrates the work of uneven development, in particular what Neil Smith (2008) has called "the see-saw movement of capital." The land went from a mountain to a coal mine, from a coal mine to a trash dump, from a dump to a prison, and from a prison to an empty facility, a spatial contiguity and historical continuity between coal and incarceration that should give pause to analyses that insist on punishment as the central animating force of mass imprisonment. These departures and arrivals of capital have structured Wheelwright's constant state of both dependency on foreign capital and proneness to accepting whatever form in which that capital comes. Further testimony from residents speaks to these contradictions. One former judge argued that the changing carceral landscape signified improvement: "Things have progressed up here—we've come a long way—you know, we have a prison up here," confirming the analysis of flattened mountains as signifying progress. Several other residents, all former coal miners and former corrections officers, spoke of adjusting to consistently decreasing wages, a trend against which they felt powerless. One spoke of the relatively high starting wages available to miners, compared with the diminished wage of a beginning CoreCivic guard, which is around \$8.50 an hour. Every resident longed for the prison to reopen but realized they were not in a position to negotiate for wages.

Sam Little's comment above was in response to a recent development in the state capital. The state budget for 2014 included language from the House of Representatives directing the Department of Corrections (DOC)

to transfer at least 100 prisoners age 65 or over to Otter Creek, which would at that point be converted into a nursing facility. Administratively, the prisoners would be “paroled from state prison with the requirement that they live at the facility until their parole term ends. The facility would remain privately owned and operated” (Cheves 2014). In other words, the facility will be a nursing home in name only; people on parole would be required to live in a former medium security prison. There is no pretense that this arrangement expresses some correctional policy or priority; DOC spokespeople openly admitted that the agency had nothing to do with the proposal to reopen the prison (ibid.). Indeed, it is instructive that it was, in fact, House Speaker Greg Stumbo who submitted the proposal. Stumbo represents the district in which Wheelwright and Otter Creek are located and the proposal clearly demonstrates a particular economic strategy.

This is the neoliberal carceral state at work. Kentucky shoehorns prison policy (and elderly prisoner lives) into a failed rural economic development strategy of building prisons. It does so in order to bill the federal government through Medicare and will likely contract the management of the prison to an Atlanta-based company. It is important to highlight the chronology and logic of this arrangement. First, the drive to punish parolees *follows from* rather than *produces* the prison’s place in the community. Second, it is concerns about rural work, rather than parole policy, that comprise the animating logic underwriting the proposal.

Our findings across three counties are confirmed in other examinations of the region’s prison economies. Sylvia Ryerson’s (2010) exhaustive study of the process and debates surrounding the construction of new prisons in eastern Kentucky over the past 15 years finds a similar near-total eclipse of incarcerated populations, or the punitive logic of their imprisonment. With a few minor exceptions, she writes, “The fate of those to be held within did not enter the public discourse at all” (ibid., 118). Instead, authorities and media tend to frame both the function and promise of new prisons entirely in terms of employment, whether directly through prison jobs or indirectly through the goods and services putatively required by workers and visiting family members. On the opening day of USP McCreary in 2004, for example, Jim Johnson, chairman of the local steering committee, stated, “From the very beginning, the prison has been a symbol of hope and opportunity for McCreary County... The best is yet to come as more citizens are hired and our businesses are able to sell more goods” (Slaven 2004). At the same event, Congressman Hal Rogers remarked,

A lot of communities don't want a prison but obviously there was interest [here], this community and this county were hungry for jobs. . . . For the first time in around 100 years, we're gaining population. . . . We're keeping young people here. We're seeing a whole new middle class develop where one has been absent. (ibid.)

The near absence of punitiveness or concerns about crime in the discourse supporting prison growth in eastern Kentucky suggests the carceral state's adaptability to multiple legitimating narratives. Specifically, even as Kentucky has been among the fastest-growing carceral states over the past 15 years, and one that has seen an expansion of its incarceration rate during the recent period of prison downsizing elsewhere (Kang-Brown et al. 2018, Schept 2015), it is *poverty* rather than *punitiveness* that provides the scaffolding for its carceral logic. Geographer Anne Bonds (2009, 433) points out, for example, that in the case of Idaho and Montana,

as neoliberal rural restructuring leads communities to pursue development strategies that put places in direct competition with one another for scarce resources (e.g. community block grants, industrial development) and employment opportunities, poverty is denied and invisibilized by community officials seeking to remain competitive for investment.

In eastern Kentucky, like elsewhere, one hears in the testimonies of unemployed and underemployed residents little hope for the future outside of the production of stable waged work, regardless of what that work actually is. Berlant (2007, 278) describes such sentiments as "the production as desire of a collective will to imagine oneself as a solitary agent who can and must live the good life promised by capitalist culture." Citizens of modern capitalism in the United States are exhorted, she argues,

to understand that the "bottom line" of national life is neither utopia nor freedom but survival, which can be achieved only by a citizenry that eats its anger, makes no unreasonable claims on resources or control over value, and uses its most creative energy to cultivate intimate spheres while scraping a life together feebly in response to the market-world's caprice. (Berlant 2000, 127)

The drive to work is one very powerful, indeed perhaps the central, response to such caprice. If such an observation seems both self-evident and necessarily true, then it serves us to remember the collective struggles forged historically around demands that *decentered* or *reimagined* the char-

acter, conditions, and psychic value of work in social life. These include the fights for governmental guarantees to full employment or income central to post-Reconstruction Black freedom struggles (see Singh 2003, Stein 2014), campaigns for guaranteed basic income (Van Parijs 1992), and feminist demands forged under the banner of “wages for housework” (Dalla Costa & James 1973). Such aspirational struggles even once had a life in Appalachia. As economic historian David Stein (2014) recounts,

In the early 1960s people in eastern Kentucky formed the Appalachian Committee for Full Employment as a response to widespread poverty and unemployment created by the recent downturn in the coal industry, combined with increased mechanization of mining. They struggled intensely against mine operators, politicians, the police, and the leadership of the United Mine Workers while pursuing governmental guarantees to a job or income.

Full employment was imagined much more expansively than simply the provision of waged work. The committee’s plan included “the creation of medical clinics, a special education center for children who needed supplemental attention and for adult education, day care centers, and rebuilding homes with adequate plumbing and sewers” (ibid., see also Black 1990). Such campaigns underscored that “the problem of wagelessness is centrally a political one” (Stein 2014)—one that, like prisons themselves, is produced out of a series of competing forces and imperatives, including the deliberate suppression of inflation rates by the Federal Reserve. Insofar as control of the wageless constitutes at least a partial function of the criminal justice system, Stein (ibid.) suggests, “perhaps then negating the production of this surplus population can be an important grounding upon which abolitionist reforms can be achieved.” Wage labor thus offers not only a site from which to understand the political work of the carceral state beyond punishment, but also can serve as an organizing platform across key struggles.

The Ideology of Punishment and the Ideology of Work

At the summer 2016 gathering of the Shaping Our Appalachian Region summit, US Representative Hal Rogers, a coconvener of the annual gathering, took the stage to discuss the need for economic diversification. Rogers, mentioned above as the central political force behind prison growth in the region, was disrupted by activists from the Letcher Governance Project who stood up and unfurled a banner reading “Prisons are not Innovation” and

“Our \$444 million,” referencing the projected costs of prison construction and demanding the money be used in other ways.

These activists are challenging prison siting on the terrain of a just economic transition in Appalachia. They also deploy racial justice analysis in their work, insisting that the eastern Kentucky economy not be built on the caging of Black and Brown people. What they perceive, which is often lost in sociological and criminological treatments of the prison, is that prison growth is only loosely tethered to punishment regimes. This reframing is important, because it broadens the political horizons of possibility for those arguing for alternatives to incarceration. We contend that a focus on punishment as *the* work of the prison reveals the success of punishment as ideology, proscribing our analytical vocabularies to questions of the suitability and scale of punishment, rather than questioning the very materiality of the prison itself.

There is, of course, a long and celebrated body of scholarship that lays the rise of mass incarceration at the feet of what has been called the “punitive turn,” the “culture of control” (Garland 2001), the “punishment imperative” (Clear & Frost 2014), and the “get tough” or “tough on crime” movement. These works make some variation of the same argument: the rise of the carceral state is largely or exclusively due to changes in sentencing law and patterns and a broader politics characterized by hardened attitudes toward crime.

These works make valuable contributions to an understanding of such an unprecedented rise in imprisonment. They accurately note the harsher and broader scope of sentences that are constitutive of our national reliance on incarceration. However, as Jordan Camp (2016) notes, the carceral state arose as the central political expression of neoliberal racial capitalism concerned with challenges to its legitimacy. Camp argues that prison and police power became the predominant—and, crucially, the common-sense—way for the state to respond to freedom movements. Similarly, we contend that the prison is used as a political tool to resolve numerous crises of the neoliberal moment, particularly those arising out of structural joblessness and chronic poverty.

Evidence from the present moment of the carceral state would seem to confirm our analysis. First, as we know from recent work on carceral humanism, incarceration and forms of custodial control do not necessarily need to rely on discourses of punishment for legitimacy (Kilgore 2014a, Schept 2015). Indeed, historical examinations of the development of some punishment regimes locate practices of detention and imprisonment in logics of

saving and treatment (Platt 2009, Rothman 2002), albeit refracted through racialized selections of deserving subjectivities (Ward 2009, 228; 2012).

Evidence from a number of places around the United States suggests a materialization of imprisonment in carceral institutions marked by different rhetoric if not different material conditions. The advent of reflection cottages, justice campuses, gender-responsive prisons, and mental health jails would seem to suggest the carceral state's adaptability against and beyond punishment, at least as a guiding logic if not an actual practice and experience (Braz 2006, Cullors-Brignac & Zuñiga 2014, Parks 2013, Schept 2015). How does punishment explain the stability and even growth of the carceral state when carceral institutions—jails, prisons, juvenile detention centers, work release programs, etc.—expand through other guiding logics and among people who reject punishment?

Following suit, punishment itself can operate ideologically to mystify the animating forces of police and carceral power. The problem with punishment as a guiding concept for critique is that it is indexed to a deviant act. Its very demarcation alludes to the existence of a thing to be punished. That thing—which in the case of prisons we call crime—is bracketed off as self-evident and beyond debate. The concept of punishment thus succeeds in framing any contestation over particular practices deemed punitive in terms of degree and of type: how much punishment is enough or too much, and what should be its proper character and form? The fact that crime itself has been historically demonstrated to be both a relative and mutable sociolegal category, let alone one that, as Linebaugh (2004/2006) argues, belongs to capitalism and its vicissitudes, is allowed little space within the characterization of incarceration as a regime of punishment. The same goes, necessarily, for the category of the criminal, which, as Gilmore (2009, 80) points out, “has long been on the rise in the lexicon of putatively transparent or self-explanatory terms – like race or gender – used to designate fundamental (whether fixed or mutable) differences between kinds of people.”

Disturbing the prison as a “key ingredient of our common sense” (Davis 2003, 18) thus requires thinking less about punishment and more about the functions of, for example, property, work, and race as social relations ordering the contemporary social landscape. In other words, the political project of rethinking the practice of incarceration and of abolishing prisons and other like structures of captivity and premature death will fail so long as the terms we use to describe or denounce them hinge on the assumption that prisons emerge *out of* the logic of punishment, rather than vice versa. Such thinking produces a critique of mass incarceration on the grounds

that it is a disproportionate, unaffordable, excessively cruel, or racially biased response to the problem of crime and the punitive feeling crime ostensibly generates. Though it may also be those things, the problem is that the prison regime is rendered itself *correctable* or *reformable* within such a framework. Confusing the ideology that “matters along the prison’s entire continuum” (Gilmore 2007, 243) with that of *punishment* leaves the logics, relations, and interests that do actually produce prisons, prisoners, and the carceral state wholly intact.

The historian Barbara Jeanne Fields (1990, 106), in her own investigation of the production of race as ideology, instructively writes,

A commonplace that few stop to examine holds that people are more readily oppressed when they are already perceived as inferior by nature. The reverse is more to the point. People are more readily perceived as inferior by nature when they are already seen as oppressed.

The challenge for prison activists, reformers, and abolitionists alike, then, is not that of *convincing* people that African Americans and other highly incarcerated and criminalized groups are not indeed inferior, for that is not how ideology works. The task is rather to abolish the very institutions and relations that oppress them. Doing so requires *demystifying* the prison as itself a set of social relations, including wage labor, one which *produces* ideas of punishability rather than the product of punitive feeling or the ideology of punishment.

Conclusion

In 2011, Kentucky passed House Bill 463, the Public Safety and Offender Accountability Act, which was designed to reduce the number of people in prison through nominal sentencing reform. In addition, in recent years the state organized a bipartisan sentencing commission and the governor, a Tea Party Republican, signed an executive order designed to ease the ability of former prisoners to apply for state jobs. These indications of reform, however, belie clear signals of recalcitrance. The state is considering reopening three private prisons as a response to massively crowded jails and, as we discuss above, federal prison growth continues in eastern Kentucky. If Kentucky were a country, it would have the seventh highest incarceration rate in the world. Its incarcerated population has grown about 45 percent since 2000, far outpacing the nation’s 13 percent rate; at this same rate, a recent Vera Institute of Justice report concludes, everyone in Kentucky would be incarcerated in 119 years (Kang-Brown et al. 2018).

It has been our argument that the politics of punishment reform fail to offer a meaningful barometer of broad change and can, in fact, signal the reformation of the carceral state rather than its retreat. Instead, we argue that attachments to *work*—both the wage relation and the work ethic—rather than attachments to punishment constitute the animating ideological pillar of Kentucky’s carceral state. Certain levels of unemployment and wagelessness share with prisons a reified status in the modern landscape, but also a historical contingency that tells us, importantly, that it could be otherwise. Although high rates of unemployment might be essential from the perspective of capital to maintain working-class discipline and depressed wages, their disciplinary power only works if struggles and aspirations are also tied to wage labor; one must see jobs as central to one’s capacity to both materially survive and have value in the capitalist economy. This is also to suggest that the joblessness of poor Appalachians cannot be seamlessly disentangled from the structural joblessness that both characterizes and follows the predominantly racialized population of prisoners across the country. Wage labor thus offers not only a site from which to understand the political work of the carceral state beyond punishment, but also can serve as an organizing platform across key struggles and disparate geographies. Challenging the production of poverty and wagelessness—of those who are incarcerated as well as those for whom prisons figure as possible workplaces—should thus constitute a core demand and target of activist focus and decarceration efforts. For it is precisely as a social system that inheres poverty and precarity that work bears so meaningfully, and devastatingly, on the carceral production of surplus life.

The relationship of the prison to the labor market, the wage relation, and normative attachments to work must be considered central to any meaningful efforts to devolve, decarcerate, and eventually abolish the prison as an institution and idea. This is also to suggest an insurmountable contradiction between the so-called prison reform efforts of those, like the Koch brothers, who simultaneously act to undermine worker power and living wages among both the urban poor and the rural poor. Indeed, this contradiction points to some of the larger problems with contemporary bipartisan reform efforts. Although decades of research demonstrate that the growth of the prison system is intimately tied up with the problems of structural joblessness, poverty economies, and stagnation of workers’ wages following the economic crises of the early 1970s, mainstream prison reform continues to be propagated as if autonomous from the ongoing issues of labor power and public entitlements.

Abolitionist writing and organizing must be imagined as the spatial enactment of abolition democracy for sacrifice zones like Central Appalachia. A sacrifice zone is a geographic area impaired by environmental damage or by economic disinvestment. Both have ravaged eastern Kentucky. The devastation brought upon this region and the space it has opened up for prison boosters to pitch carceral infrastructure as the future to which locals must hitch their aspirations tell us that simply disrupting the organizing logics that produce prisons is not enough. Abolitionist scholarship must think through the historical relationships and patterns that have underdeveloped the region and produced the conditions of possibility for the prison in the first place. What this means, then, is that abolitionist strategy and scholarship must focus on questions of dispossession, the wage relation, and uneven development, because these—along with, but not necessarily less important than, crime and punishment policy—are the issues that, left unaddressed, underwrite the continued health of the carceral state even during periods of so-called reform.

NOTES

1 On 2016 Republican presidential contenders and criminal justice reform, see Blakinger (2015), Campbell (2015), and O’Keefe (2014); George Kelling (2015) has written recently of how broken windows policing was misinterpreted by police departments. On the dismantling of the welfare state by the people now discussing reform, see Bauer (2014). On private prisons and reentry, see Takei (2014). On bipartisanship and the carceral state more broadly, see Gottschalk (2015).

2 See, for example, www.friendsofcoalky.com/ and www.friendsofcoal.org/.

3 <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US2182272-wheelwright-ky/>.

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