



Plantation Prisons

The plantation **model** of imprisonment is an overall structure and philosophy of punishment that grew out of racist assumptions about the abilities of the mostly black convicts in the South who, initially, were former slaves. Traditional features of slave plantations combine to form the ideal type of the plantation **model** of imprisonment. Elements of this **model** are as follows: (1) agricultural work, (2) isolation, (3) plantation mentality, (4) mostly black prisoners, (5) worthlessness of convicts, (6) neglect of rehabilitation, and (7) emphasis on economy (Foster, 1995, p. 4). As Mark Carleton (1971) observes, "The survival of agricultural operations within the penal system... suggests that the terms 'convict,' 'slave,' 'Negro,' and 'farm work' have remained unconsciously interchangeable" (p. 7).

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

Southern imprisonment practices did not follow the same pattern as those in the North. Antebellum Southern states did not embrace the penitentiary idea that imprisonment could change or reform the convict as enthusiastically as did their Northern counterparts. With few exceptions, the small number of Southern prewar penitentiaries were reserved for white men; slaves or women were rarely found in these institutions. Slavery controlled the South's lower classes.

Most Southern penitentiaries were damaged during the Civil War and, in any case, were not equipped to house the swelling numbers of prisoners, most of whom were freed slaves. Instead, Southern states soon leased out their prisoners to entrepreneurs and businesses. Some states required the lessee to pay a certain per capita amount to the state. Others gave away complete control of the convicts for nothing; others even paid the lessees to take the prisoners off their hands. Contrary to Northern leasing practices that limited leasing operations to the penitentiaries' sites, Southern states contracted out both male and female convicts to build railroads, levees, and roads and to work in mines and on former plantations. Free from state supervision, some lessees literally worked the prisoners to death. Unlike the previous system of slavery, they did not own the convicts and, consequently, often did not care about their welfare. When one died, they got another.

EMPHASIS ON ECONOMY

Many Southern entrepreneurs who leased convicts became very wealthy from their leasing enterprises. State legislators reasoned that such lease profits rightfully belonged to the state. Simultaneously, leasing ended in the early 1900s as railroad building subsided and road building was designated to local governments. Resuming control of the prisoners, Southern states turned to penal farms as a temporary solution to convict employment problems and "as a supplement which furnished work to certain unproductive classes" (Zimmerman, 1951, p. 466): women, children, the old and infirm. In Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas, the temporary penal farms developed into penal plantations that became the hub from which the entire system radiated. Consequently, the plantation **model** of imprisonment emerged in its most pure form in these four states.

STATE PRISON PLANTATIONS

Southern states purchased thousands of acres of property, often from the descendants of slave plantation owners. Louisiana and Mississippi eventually restricted their farm operations to one remote geographical location each. Louisiana's Angola is now 18,000 acres, while Mississippi's Parchman was 20,000 acres at one time.

Arkansas established two farms: Tucker for white convicts and Cummins for black women and men. Cummins also housed a death row. By 1960, Tucker encompassed 4,500 acres, while Cummins was 16,600 acres. Texas differed from the other states in that it developed multiple penal farms.

The geographic structure of plantations naturally led to isolation. Parchman, Mississippi, was located in an "inland wilderness" in the late 1800s. Even today, the only civilian access to Angola, Louisiana, is 20 miles down a narrow, curving, two-lane country road. Such remoteness has also kept these institutions out of the public eye except for the occasional news exposé, after which state and federal legislative and civilian commissions would be formed to investigate the institutions. Reports and policy recommendations would be made, most often to little or no avail. No fewer than five investigating committees, beginning in the 1930s, recommended that women be transferred away from Angola. They were not transferred until 1961, and even then remained under the administration of Angola for nearly a decade.

AGRICULTURAL WORK AND BLACK PRISONERS

Initially, work on these plantation prisons was almost exclusively agricultural. A 1968 report by the Southern Regional Council castigated Mississippi for harvesting half of its cotton crop at Parchman by hand with prison labor. Incredibly, nearly 20 years later, in 1985, inmates picked all the cotton by hand, as there were no mechanical pickers at the Mississippi State Penitentiary (State Prison Inmates, 1985, p. 14). Practices are similar even to this day in Louisiana. All prisoners admitted to Angola must serve their first 90 days working in the fields, and many of them spend the rest of their lives there.

Historically, agricultural work was believed to be suited to the South's "ignorant classes" (Perkinson, 2001, p. 73). Mississippi's Governor Vardman, who took charge of developing Parchman in the early 1900s, believed that

a good prison, like an efficient slave plantation, could serve to socialize young blacks within the limits of their God-given abilities. It would not raise their intelligence or their morality, but it could teach them proper discipline, strong work habits, and respect for white authority. (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 110)

Texas legislators made similar observations about their black and Mexican convicts: "The limited capacity of these races to acquire technical knowledge ... as well as their general adaptability to farm work, indicate the advisability... [of] employing [them] on farms" (Perkinson, 2001, p. 110). Such beliefs about prisoners' limited abilities not only strengthened the plantation prison but also subtly reinforced Southern segregation. Upon release black and Mexican prisoners were able to do only agricultural work. This racist ideology also illustrates why Southern penal philosophy and practices excluded any ideas about changing the individual prisoner; it was presumed that black convicts (and Mexicans in Texas) were capable of doing only agricultural work. The organization and classification of prisoners echoed this view.

PLANTATION STRUCTURE AND MENTALITY

Generally, prisons use some kind of classification system with the purpose of separating prisoners from one another in terms of age, gender, and seriousness of crime. It is believed that separating young prisoners from older prisoners especially will prevent the young ones from being corrupted and becoming more criminal. Although couched in reformatory language, early Southern prisons' classification schemes were similar to antebellum slave owners' workforce divisions. In Louisiana, for example, convicts were divided into four classes: first-class men accustomed to manual work were sent to the levees, where the work was most severe. Second-class men with moderate strength and abilities were assigned to the sugar plantations. Third-class men went to the cotton plantations (Angola), and the hospital was home to the fourth-class men. All white men, with few exceptions, and all females were assigned to Angola. Some white men were "sent to the other plantations and the levee camps for commissary clerks, or *similar mental services*" (Carleton, 1971, pp. 100-101; author's emphasis).

Work on the prison plantation was organized in the same manner as on slave plantations. Both systems used

captive labor, the former convicts and the latter slaves. A small staff of rural lower-class whites supervised black gangs “and mixed physical punishment with paternalistic rewards in order to motivate their workers” on both slave and prison plantations (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 139). Convicts were driven from sun up to sun down, or as they said, from “can to cain’t.” The few paid white civilian guards supervised the convict guards or trustees, who were the equivalent of slave drivers.

Plantation prisons were both literally and figuratively slave plantations, even in convicts' perceptions of themselves. Texas convicts resented the fact that they were being treated as slaves and blamed a 1911 revolt on “a slave driver” (Perkinson, 2001, p. 331).

GENDER

Fieldwork was not restricted to men only. Although women's main jobs were gender specific, such as making all prisoners' clothing and working in the canneries, Louisiana's convict women hoed the sugar cane stumps in 1938 and worked in the sugar cane refineries in the 1950s. Louisiana and Mississippi did not hesitate to use their women convicts in the fields also, especially when the harvest demanded more laborers. Interestingly, Mississippi even used both white and black women as trustees armed with rifles.

TREATMENT OF PRISONERS

By the 1900s, corporal punishment for prisoners had been abandoned—in law, if not in practice—by most states outside the South. However, it was still commonplace in Southern prisons, since it was believed that only physical punishment could adequately discipline blacks. Leather straps known as “Black Annie” in Mississippi and “Old Caesar” in Texas were used for whippings.

In 1933 alone, 1,547 floggings were administered, with a total of 23,889 blows in Louisiana. Prisoners could receive as many as 50 or 60 lashes at a time. White sergeants in Mississippi delegated the chore to the black trustees in the black camps. Whippings were administered on bare flesh, and were not limited to men. Louisiana convict women working in the cannery were lashed on their bare chests in front of the men. A 1960s exposé also revealed that lashings still were commonplace on the Arkansas plantation prisons after corporal punishment had been outlawed in every state (Murton & Hyams, 1969).

CONCLUSION

The Southern plantation **model** of imprisonment was based on the ideological and racist assumptions that blacks and Mexicans were inferior to white people. These ideas dominated Southern penal practices well into the late 1970s and early 1980s, until federal judges finally intervened in prison business. In fact, plantation prisons inspired some of the most hotly contested federal prison lawsuits in the 1970s and 1980s. *Holt v. Sarver* (1970) declared the entire Arkansas prison system to be in violation of the Eighth Amendment ban against cruel and unusual punishment and set the stage for federal takeovers in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and elsewhere. Federal interventions were necessary; as Judge West observed about Angola in 1974, the conditions were so bad that they would “shock a civilized society.”

Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas have come a long way in the past 25 years; the worst characteristics of the plantation **model** have disappeared. However, the long line (all the field lines) returning to the main prison at the end of the day illustrates the “aura if not the reality of a plantation run with docile slaves” (Johnson, 2002, p. 46).

—Marianne Fisher-Giorlando

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