H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert T. Chase. ***We Are Not Slaves: State Violence, Coerced Labor, and Prisoners' Rights in Postwar America.*** Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 544 pp. $37.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-5357-0.

Reviewed by Nina Nevill (Rice University)

Published on H-Nationalism (November, 2020)

Commissioned by Evan C. Rothera (University of Arkansas - Fort Smith)

In his detailed and innovative book, ***We Are Not Slaves: State Violence, Coerced Labor, and Prisoners' Rights in Postwar America***, Robert T. Chase elucidates the mechanisms of violence that have enabled a capitalistic boom and total deficiency of human rights in southern prisons during the latter half of the twentieth century. Departing from the top-down approach of his predecessors, Chase demonstrates how, in the second half of the twentieth century, incarcerated individuals joined with Black Power and Chicano movements to petition the infringement of their constitutional rights. Appealing to historians of political and civil rights movements, labor, and incarceration, Chase offers an answer to the question raised by current scholars—and victims—of the carceral state: how did we get to where we are now?

What differentiates this book from others in the field is Chase's contextualization of prison labor within the context of social and political movements. Through numerous oral history interviews, letters, affidavits, and depositions, Chase shows how fundamental the Chicano and Black Power movements were in the prisoners' rights movement. This departure from employing more traditional legal and constitutional rights sources better foregrounds the actions of individual and collective prisoners. The bottom-up framework brings to light the inherent abuse of power in the carceral system through the perspective of the abused rather than the abusers.

Since their genesis, labor practices in southern US prisons were designed to violently withhold the civil and human rights of their prisoners. Plantation-style agrarian labor allowed the Texan prison system to produce massive amounts of crops, contributing to the institutions' capital success and nationwide reputation. In the 1940s, Texas prisons shifted to a model that furthered the dehumanization of plantation-style punishment yet created a hierarchy of power among incarcerated folks. This era lead to an increase in sexual and racial violence. After an era of litigation throughout the 1970s and 1980s in which incarcerated individuals brought their traumatic experiences to the forefront of the public's theoretical consciousness, southern prisons shifted to a model of militarization. Throughout the history of southern prisons, from agrarian labor to industrial work, incarcerated individuals throughout the South have resisted and rebelled against unfair working conditions by striking, self-mutilation, and litigation.

With impressive depth Chase uncovers an era of prison labor that instilled varying positions of authority and power among incarcerated folks. The inmate trusty system and builder tender system allowed responsibility to be transferred from the administration and employed guards to the

prisoners. These racialized systems created hierarchies of power that allowed some incarcerated folks to serve as guards in return for increased privileges including the ability to punish other prisoners. Some trustees and building tenders would be allowed to carry manmade weapons and have access to empty cells in which they could physically and/or sexually abuse others. Throughout the book, sources from incarcerated folks discuss the brutality of such treatment by these building tenders, often meted out for no reason at all. Any resistance to this system served as justification for further punishment.

Physical and sexual violence was rampant in southern prisons throughout the second half of the twentieth century. During the period of investigation, prisons throughout the South consistently served "as a site of power that intersected with spatial control, gender identity, sexuality and sexual violence, and race and racial privileges" (p. 8). Through interviews and testimonies, we see the extent to which powerlessness, including the inability to file a proper complaint without consequence, slowly chipped away at the dignity and humanity of the incarcerated.

We Are Not Slaves adopts a chronological approach and is divided into three parts: "A Biography of Coerced Labor and State Violence" (chapters 1-3), "From Pachuco to Write Writer" (chapters 4-8), and "Collapse of the Prison Plantation and the Carceral Phoenix" (chapters 9-10). Chase draws examples from across the South; however, he places the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC) at the forefront of analysis.

The first chapter outlines what were perceived as the three main issues with Texan prisons in the 1940s: homosexuality, self-mutilation, and spatial control. The Cold War instigated a fear around homosexuality as a tool of the enemy. During this time, incarcerated folks registered as homosexual were kept separate from young white men, but not necessarily men of color, as the prison system aimed to protect the former. After WWII, southern states hired the director of the Osbourne Association and War Department's chief consultant on military prisons, Austin MacCormic, to assess their prisons and offer reform. MacCormic believed that by moving away from dorm-style living, sexual perversion and self-mutilation would decrease. During this time MacCormic wrote a legislative report that genuinely aimed to spur prison reform, yet as Chase argues, focused on the wrong issues.

The second chapter shows that the prison administration used labor to control and discipline incarcerated men through bodily degradation and by withholding basic human rights. Chase considers the treatment, including the lack of pay and coercion, comparable to enslaved labor. The growth of capitalism prompted the "New, New South" modernity characterized by low wages, low taxes, and anti-unionism (p. 62). Here, the shift in 1948 from the prison farm system to an agribusiness plantation system drew national attention to the South. Incarcerated laborers were forced to pick up to three hundred pounds of cotton per day, drawing attention away from the inhumane conditions and punishments toward capital, production, and profit.

In the third chapter, Chase illuminates how the building tender and inmate trusty systems functioned as a kind of double enslavement: inmates were forced to work in the fields and to surrender their gender identities and bodies to sexual violation. Inmate trustees used handmade weapons and access to empty cells to punish other inmates through physical and sexual violence. The previously lauded building tender system, which empowered the internal prison economy, in combination with racially divided labor and the frequent occurrence of violence served as a tipping point for those incarcerated in Texan prisons.

Chapter 4 underscores a significant shift in resistance from prison strikes to legal battles. This chapter is centered around Fred Cruz, an incarcerated Mexican American who became a law student during his time in prison in order to fight for

civil rights. After leading a strike of three hundred inmates, Cruz decided to take his activism to the court room through writ writing, inspiring others to join him. The fifth chapter continues the theme of resistance, highlighting the multiple cases filed by Cruz and introducing the involvement of the Chicano civil rights movements in Texas prisons. In the 1970s a group of incarcerated Mexican Americans and African Americans worked together with Frances Jalet, a civil rights attorney, to make the infringement of their constitutional rights visible to the courts and to the public. The evidence for their cases included the brutal conditions of solitary confinement, denial of religious freedom and access to courts, censoring of the mail, race-based discrimination, and the building tender system. Jalet and her clients, a group of interracial writ-writers known as Eight Hoe Squad, lost numerous cases to the TDC before gaining an ounce of legal justice.

The sixth chapter introduces the influence of the Black Power movement and the significance of community among incarcerated African Americans. In 1973 a group of African American prisoners chose to resist the orders of the building tenders as an act of group and individual rebellion. In so doing they "reinterpreted Black masculinity in the Black Power era as a figure of communitarian protection rather than as one driven by false discourses of pathologies and prone to violence" (p. 138). Despite the prevalence of white supremacy at systemic, institutional, and individual levels of the carceral state, Chase shifts the reader's attention to the agentic activism that occurred under these conditions.

In the seventh and eighth chapters Chase discusses the Carrasco hostage crisis and the Prison Labor Strike of 1978, respectively. The particularly gruesome descriptions of self-mutilation in chapter 7 is fundamental in understanding the comparison to conditions during enslavement. Self-mutilation, often resulting from the psychological trauma of solitary confinement, was also a form of rebellion. Here Chase speaks to the importance of using the language of slavery, allowing readers to draw historical connections among the various abuses of Black bodies in the United States since captivity. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, tough-on-crime policies coupled with law-and-order agendas led to the overcrowding of prisons. Incarcerated folks relied on the language of local civil rights movements to connect with growing awareness of racism outside of prison, and language of slavery to portray the brutality of coerced labor.

Chase's penultimate chapter showcases the decisive victory for the civil rights of incarcerated folks through the prisoner testimonies in the 1980 ***Ruiz v. Estelle*** case. After two decades of legal complaints and trials, the judge in this monumental case reprimanded the TDC, noting that prisons were "overcrowded and understaffed, that prisoners had poor medical and mental health care, and that prisoners were exposed to wanton abuse and frequent violence by guards and other prisoners" (p. 327). Although this case set a precedent for prison systems across the nation, the TDC merely renamed the building tender system continued the same abuses of power under a new militarized prison system. The final chapter highlights the evolution of prison gangs including the Texas Aryan Brotherhood, which was closely connected to the Ku Klux Klan. Through this chapter the evolution of carceral system is evident, including the bone chilling persistence of carceral violence nearing the twenty-first century.

One drawback of this book is the transition in analysis out of the early 1980s. Chase succinctly traces the influence of the civil rights movements in the prisoners' rights movement, yet provides a weaker thematic analysis after ***Ruiz v. Estelle***. The discussion of gangs and the transition to militarization in the tenth chapter falls flat. Readers may find themselves wanting to know more about the implications of the building tender and inmate trusty systems through the end of the century. Per-

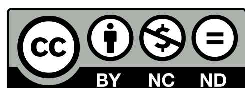
haps this leaves room for other scholars to investigate what prison resistance and rebellion looked like at the turn of the twenty-first century. Chase explains his decision to study incarcerated men rather than men and women as allowing for a vast avenue of inquiry for scholarship on the history of labor, resistance, and litigation in southern women's prisons.

We Are Not Slaves successfully marries historical analysis to carceral studies. Chase extends the timeline of incarceration in the United States, picking up from convict leasing to draw broader connections over the *longue durée* of caged and carceral labor. The book is well suited for graduate student courses and many chapters would be useful in undergraduate teaching. Understanding the influence of political and social movements in southern prisons illuminates the extent of civil rights activism across the nation. Chase's work is a welcome contribution to the shift in the discourse of prisoners' rights toward activism and the agency of incarcerated folks.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-nationalism

Citation: Nina Nevill. Review of Chase, Robert T. *We Are Not Slaves: State Violence, Coerced Labor, and Prisoners' Rights in Postwar America.* H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. November, 2020.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55588



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.