

***Twice the Work of Free Labor:  
The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South.***

By Alex Lichtenstein.

London, United Kingdom and New York, NY: Verso. 1996, 264 pages.

Reviewed by Asatar Bair

Department of Economics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst

asatar@econs.umass.edu

February, 2001

This book marks a welcome resurgence of scholarship on the subject of in prisons and the peculiar labor regime of convict leasing that existed predominantly in the South during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lichtenstein's fascinating and well-argued thesis is that the exploitation of convict's labor is to be properly regarded not as some kind of anachronistic vestige left over from Antebellum slavery, but an important force that was used to provide the conditions for the industrialization of the South. This is certainly a bold thesis, and one that stands on its head many of our often-unexamined notions about the inevitability of progress. Indeed, Lichtenstein makes explicit exactly this theme at several points, citing others whose work also rejects the 'dichotomy between a modern and antimodern South' - with slavery, segregation, and white supremacy seen as decisively modern forces - that is, institutions and ideas that were created to serve roles particular to the newly-emerging capitalism of the South.

Lichtenstein shows the role of convict leasing in providing labor to the newly emerging industries of the South - particularly industries that produced primary goods and the infrastructure that made industry possible - the railroads, the mining operations, timber, and later, roads. This provides us with a valuable study of what could be considered a new form of primitive accumulation that emerged with the New South. While Marx discussed primitive accumulation in the context of the enclosures of common land into a few hands in medieval Europe, it seems fitting to include the exploitation of convicts as another form of primitive accumulation, as it represents the theft of a resource - in this case human labor-power - to enrich private capitalists.

The book shares a great deal of similarity in terms of theme and argumentation with Eric Williams' classic *Capitalism & Slavery*, where Williams famously argues that the development of capitalism and the subsequent rise of the British empire is at least partly due to the accumulation made possible through the vast profits made directly and indirectly, from the barbaric slavery of the New World. Lichtenstein's work is a remarkable achievement, deserving of a place among the classics of economic history, and is required reading for anyone seeking information about a dark but important chapter in American history. The book is especially important now, when the exploitation of prison inmates is often presented by the boosters of the emerging prison-industrial complex as a way of reducing the massive costs of incarceration.

One shortcoming of the book is in the treatment of the relationship between convict leasing and slavery; here, Lichtenstein seems content to focus on other matters. He considers convict leasing in Marxian terminology, not as a 'fully-developed' mode of production, but rather as some sort of 'hybrid' form. However, little is said about what demarcates slavery from other kinds of production, or what is involved in a hybrid mode of production. To be fair, this is hardly a settled question in Marxian theory, but it is an important one in the case of convict leasing, for both rhetorical and political reasons. Slavery is a powerful label to place on an institution, since slavery is universally regarded as morally repugnant. It also has implications for our understanding of U.S. history and society as to whether slavery was abolished in 1864, or 1937 (with the passage of Federal laws that effectively ended convict leasing), or whether slavery continues in prisons to this day. Moreover, focusing on an amorphous, big-picture conception of a mode of production seems to eliminate the possibility that many complex labor processes may be taking place in the same society at the same time, so that the complicated interaction of class and non-class processes is lost. A more nuanced class-analytic approach might look at how the various class processes in the New South - including slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and ancient, or individual production - interacted with the various political, cultural, and social processes to produce the horrors of exploitation not only in prisons, but also in a variety of other sites in society, such as factories, households, schools, and so forth. Such a view has the potential to present a view of slavery that is both more comprehensive, and sheds more light on the complexities of present-day exploitation.

While many scholars agree that convict leasing is either akin to slavery or the genuine item, none have convincingly and rigorously shown, first, what defines slavery, and second, what makes convict leasing a form of slavery. Mathew Mancini's *One Dies, Get Another*, goes into the most detail in attempting to create a theory of slavery with which to interpret convict leasing, but Mancini's analysis is problematic in that he uses several different, conflicting theories to patch together an argument that leasing was *not* a form of slavery, but rather a form of 'coerced labor'. For example, Mancini conflates the neoclassical theory of exploitation, which holds that exploitation occurs when the wage is less than the marginal product of labor, with the Marxian theory of exploitation, which defines exploitation through the appropriation of surplus labor. Mancini then goes on to argue - without any evidence or estimation - that the rate of exploitation of convict leasing, by either the neoclassical or the Marxian measure, is higher than the rate of exploitation in slavery. Aside from the problems in this argument, it is far from clear why we should maintain this distinction between slavery and 'coerced labor'.

While Lichtenstein deserves, in my view, to be credited for applying Marxian class analysis towards understanding convict leasing, the book would be improved by a re-examination of exactly what is meant by exploitation of the inmates, what form that exploitation took, and what would be necessary to eliminate that exploitation. For example, is the prison labor taking place right now a form of slavery? Does it involve exploitation? It is unclear how to answer these questions from Lichtenstein's analysis, as important as it is in understanding the role of convict leasing in the economic development of the South.

## References

Mancini, Matthew J. (1996) *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*. University of South Carolina Press.

Williams, Eric. (1994) *Capitalism and Slavery*. University of North Carolina Press.