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"Hell Exploded"

Prisoner Music and Memoir and the Fall of Convict Leasing in Texas

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This article examines the role of prisoner self-expression in destabilizing the harshest penal regime in American history, convict leasing, which developed more extensively in Texas than in any other state. In particular, it analyzes African American work songs and turn-of-the-century convict autobiographies written mainly by Whites. It argues that prisoner criticisms influenced free-world leasing opponents and that convict resentment thereafter complicated postleasing reform efforts. In the tradition of anti-institutional prison sociologists, the article suggests that reform-oriented prisons often have difficulty maintaining order because their newly expectant inmates desire release over rehabilitation.

Keywords: *Texas; convict leasing; slavery; Reconstruction; prisoner music; prisoner writing; prisoner autobiography; prisoner politics; prison reform*

Texas is legendary for its stern brand of criminal justice. Fabled home to the Texas Rangers, lynch law, and successive prison scandals, the Lone Star State has generated more than its share of rough crimes and punishments. In recent decades, though, the state's criminal justice system has garnered fame more for scale than style. In the world's most incarcerated nation, Texas stands out as America's carceral heartland. In absolute terms, it imprisons more persons (172,626) than any other state save California, and its rate of imprisonment (682 per 100,000) trails only Louisiana and Mississippi (Sabol & Couture, 2008, pp. 3, 17). Since 1980, the state has

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built more than 100 new prisons (Texas Department of Corrections, 1980; Texas Department of Criminal Justice [TDCJ], 2008b), executed 406 prisoners (TDCJ, 2008a), and spent more than $30 billion on incarceration (Legislative Budget Board, 2001, p. 64; TDCJ, 2005, p. 9). “In the mid ’90s we were opening a prison every week,” recalled James Marquart, a criminal justice professor then at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, home to Texas’s prison headquarters since 1848. “We had so many people mobilized it was like building the Pyramids” (J. Marquart, personal communication, March 19, 1999). By the dawn of the 21st century, the state had assembled one of the largest punishment complexes in the world. With its prisoner and jail population approaching 250,000, Texas today locks up more people than Germany, France, and the United Kingdom combined (Sabol & Couture, 2008, p. 3; Texas Commission on Jail Standards, 2008, p. 7; Walmsley, 2005, p. 5).

Texas’s breathtaking prison buildup, combined with the state’s rough-and-tumble history, has attracted frequent attention from historians and journalists. Although several recent books have detailed Texas’s notorious crimes, severe juvenile lockups, frequently used death chamber, and overflowing prison system (Dow, 2005; Hallinan, 2001; Hubner, 2005; Texas Monthly, 2007), few scholars have examined the role of convicts themselves in what has become, for better or for worse, America’s flagship penal system. This is partly because of elusive sources. Unlike administrators and reformers, relatively few prisoners kept careful written records of their daily lives. Moreover, prisons—as the quintessential “total institutions”—are designed to extinguish the agency of their inmates, which makes them challenging places to look for subaltern historical influence (Goffman, 1990). Nonetheless, prisoners have exercised political influence, sometimes decisively, at every stage of Texas’s storied prison history—often in unexpected ways.

With a nod to prison sociologists from Donald Clemmer to John Irwin (Clemmer, 1940; Cressey, 1961; Irwin, 1980; Ross & Richards, 2003; Sykes, 1958), this essay examines the role that prisoners played in one of those institutional transitions, specifically focusing on the influence of convict writers and musicians. Traveling back to the turn of the past century—a turbulent era of robber barons and socialists, segregationists and sharecroppers—I explain how dogged prisoner activists helped overthrow one of the most ignominious penal regimes in American history and how, tragically, they helped undermine its reformist successor as well. More generally, using the abolition of leasing as a case study, I speculate on how prison systems change, what convicts have to do with it, and why prison reform so often fails.

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"A System of Vilest Slavery"

Texas's modern prison system took shape in the volatile years after the Civil War, as thousands of former slaves tested their new freedoms and as bitter Whites scrambled to limit them. Almost immediately, punitive "black codes" served up a record crop of African American felons (Crouch, 1993; Texas State Penitentiaries [TSP], 1904, p. 45). Rather than erecting another penitentiary like the Auburn-style fortress at Huntsville, however, White policy makers turned to an exemption in the Thirteenth Amendment, which prohibited "slavery [and] involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime." Along with other Southern states, they decided to hire out convicts to the highest bidder (On Texas, see Lucko, 1999; Perkinson, 2001; Walker, 1988; on the South generally, see Ayers, 1984; Fierce, 1994; Mancini, 1996; Oshinsky, 1996).

This "convict lease" system proved as pernicious as it was profitable (Blackmon, 2008; Lichtenstein, 1996). Because prisoner contractors grew rich by minimizing expenses and maximizing labor output, the arrangement encouraged wanton neglect and ghastly abuse. Separated by race and physical strength, convicts were chained at the neck, stuffed into boxcars, and shipped to work camps across the state's former slavery belt. Plantation owners were the most common recipients, especially sugar growers near Houston, but railroad companies, mining outfits, lumber mills, and an iron forge all took their share (TSP, 1884, p. 29; TSP, 1904, p. 38). Although critics would deplore the practice as a "barbarous relic" (Woodward, 1971, pp. 424-425), in fact, the punitive collusion between state coercion and private capital propelled Texas and other Southern states down what Jonathan Wiener (1978) has called the "Prussian Road" to modern industrial capitalism (Lichtenstein, 1996). Just as slaves built the Old South, convicts helped build the New South.

Whatever industries they subsidized, leased prisoners toiled from "sun to sun" in the most wretched conditions: living in squalid, disease-infested barracks, subsisting on "food buzzards would not eat," and enduring grueling punishments. In the summer, convicts labored through days so hot "we wuz almos' dyin'," whereas in the winter they worked "barefooted . . . in six inches of snow." Hundreds of prisoners—many of them convicted of petty crimes such as "stealing a cap"—were simply worked to death, then buried unceremoniously where they dropped (Commission Appointed by the Governor of Texas to Investigate the Alleged Mismanagement and Cruel Treatment of the Convicts, 1875, pp. 72-77; Dickson, 1867; J. A. Lomax & Lomax, 1936, p. 119). Every year, between 2% and 7% of Texas's convict

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population died in custody, most of unnatural causes, with the total rising above 4,900 for the entire lease period (Texas Prison Commission, 1911, p. 36). Rather than building a penal system "in the name of humanity and justice," declared a contemporary, Texas surrendered to "avarice and cupidity," thus replicating "the horrors inflicted on . . . Siberian exiles" (Henderson, 1897, pp. 314, 320-321). To be convicted of a felony in the Lone Star State, chided a prisoner in 1893, was to suffer "a most horrible, merciless, and diabolical fate" (George, 1893, p. 37).

Given the exploitation and brutality, it is no wonder that many convicts fought back. Although most prisoners grudgingly obeyed most of the time, Texas convicts also undermined their lease masters in myriad ways: stealing, quota cheating, faking illness, singing rudely, engaging in sabotage, horribly mutilating themselves, even participating in riots and work strikes. Between 1883 and 1910, some 3,000 prisoners simply ran away (Texas Prison Commission, 1911, p. 38).

Still others cried out in print—assailing their exploitation, begging for redress, and defiantly asserting their personhood. I lost "the prime of my life," exclaimed one prisoner, confined in a "monotonous . . . abject manner, as a slave" (George, 1893, p. 138). Another lamented that he was "buried alive . . . dead to the world" in Texas's "prison hell" (Calvin, 1905, pp. 7, 79). Although relatively few convicts could write and still fewer had the opportunity or gumption to do so, an amazingly rich trove of Texas prisoner writing exists. Ranging from obsequious clemency appeals to eloquent autobiographies, the documents testify to the determination of some convicts to craft a public self beyond the reach of the whip, to channel their rage and hopelessness, and, most of all, to seek redress and release.

Reflecting the relative powerlessness of their authors, many of these documents conformed to the language of power. Grateful for the chance to write rather than cut sugarcane, for example, some prisoner newspaper writers described Huntsville's officers as "sympathetic and friendly," adding that "the feeling among the convicts is one of enthusiasm and hopefulness" ("Comments and Clippings," 1897, p. 19; "Ebb or Flow," 1909, pp. 12-14). Others went so far as to defend the dreaded lash. "A young [inmate] is very like a puppy," editorialized the *Prison Bulletin* in 1897. "He learns good tricks and bad. And if whipped for doing wrong, he is apt to turn tail, run home and try to lead a wiser, more manly—or dogly—life" ("Boys, Chicks and Pups," 1897, p. 7).

Such censored, compromised writing constitutes what political scientist James Scott (1990) has called a "public transcript"—the deferential, duplicitous language of power that both masters and subordinates adopt in rigidly

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hierarchical settings. Even more so in prisons than other authoritarian milieu, however, an angrier critique of power, a prisoner's "private transcript," lurks just beneath the surface. In fact, many Texas convicts never mastered the two-faced servility necessary to curry favor with their keepers. Jewish prisoner Samuel Kaufman, for instance, carefully plotted his pardon for months, befriending a powerful rabbi and ingratiating himself with Huntsville officers. But when these efforts failed, his carefully crafted persona abruptly snapped. Having previously strived to "think pure thoughts and perform good deeds," he warned that "uncharitable conditions . . . bring out the brute passions in men, when the thirst for blood becomes inevitable" (Kaufman, 1914).

Neither writing style, neither obeisance nor outburst, proved especially effective. Fawning newspaper articles, while preserving the authors' trusty status, portrayed Texas punishment as justice and tended to reinforce administrators' loftiest visions of themselves. Sudden ruptures in the public transcript, on the other hand, confirmed stereotypes of the convict as sullen, shifty, and dangerous. On their own, neither tactic posed an acute threat to convict leasing.

Prison Blues

Prison field music, by contrast, although never directly confronting authority, helped harmonize prisoner perspectives in ways that encouraged more overt subversion. African American convicts, in particular, drew on slavery's cultural memory to compose thousands of field hollers and work songs that would eventually coalesce into an original body of music. We might think of this as Southern justice's only praiseworthy gift to world culture. By preserving the practices of slavery and by herding Black people together in conditions of such dreary servitude that only oblique, soulful music offered partial solace, Southern prisons became key incubators of that uniquely African American style at the heart of so much modern popular music: the blues (Filene, 2000; Franklin, 1998; Levine, 1977; A. Lomax, 1993). In later years, many of the most virtuoso bluesmen, among them Leadbelly, "king of the twelve-string guitar," honed their skills in prison and thereafter brokered their suffering into lumpen proletariat authenticity (J. A. Lomax, 1947; Wolfe & Lornell, 1992).

Less individualistic and more pragmatic than blues in the free world, bluesy field hollers served a variety of purposes. Old slave songs such as "Go Down Ol' Hannah" helped pass the time even as they lamented its agonizing creep in the broiling sun (J. A. Lomax & Lomax, 1936, pp. 118-120).

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They set the work pace and synchronized dangerous tasks such as group wood chopping. Yet Black prison music was more than utilitarian. With lyrics about hard bosses, cruel treatment, long sentences, loves lost, and spectacular crimes, convict ballads also enabled prisoners to pool their sorrow, revel in past exploits, and verbalize defiance (see B. Jackson, 1972).

Consider the work song "Great Godamighty," which John Lomax and his son Alan heard at Texas's Imperial Farm (now the Central Unit) in Sugar Land; it was recorded in 1933 but harked back to the leasing era. Set in the fields, the song at one level does the master's work. When an angry captain rides up on the squad, "bull whip in one han', cowhide in de udder," the lead singer (often the work gang's strongest hand) urges his comrades to pick up the pace: "Better go to driven'." At the moment of confrontation, however, the singers depict mercilessness rather than just punishment.

"Cap'n let me off, suh!"
Great Godamighty!
"Woncha 'low me a chance, suh?"
Great Godamighty!
"Bully, low' down yo' britches!"
Great Godamighty!
De Bully went to pleadin',
Great Godamighty!
De Bully went to hollerin',
Great Godamighty!

According to John Lomax, who described the song in his colorfully exoticizing *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter,* the lead singer's melody and the chorus' refrain gained force, with ever more voices joining in, as the marked convict pled his case and finally surrendered to "hollerin'" when the leather came down on his bare skin. All the while, a higher power looks down in judgment: "Great Godamighty" is the dirge's repeated and final incantation. The music has a "terrible sweep," wrote Lomax, and the severity of the prisoners' critique was not lost on Imperial's guards. "The goose pimples always come out along my spine when I hear niggers sing that song," whispered a guard accompanying the folklorists (J. A. Lomax, 1947, pp. 159-161).

Prayers for otherworldly deliverance were a common feature of prisoner songs, but their storylines did not always have convicts submit to worldly discipline. In the popular work song "Ol' Rattler," which the Lomaxes date back to Reconstruction, a wily prisoner, Riley, manages to outrun Imperial's most prized chase hound, Rattler. When Riley first bolts from the

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line, a field sergeant blows an alarm horn, and the chase team quickly puts Rattler and his pack on the trail. "Ketch that nigger, ketch that nigger," the singers chant, beginning the song from the perspective of the guards. With famous speed, the "huntin' dog" barrels through the cane and breaks after the escapee. But Riley proves too strong; he embodies a potency that, in reality, convicts rarely experience. He runs from "sun to sun," and Rattler finally collapses. Then, "like Christ," in Leadbelly's interpretation, the man comes to the banks of the mighty Brazos River and glides across, with the singers switching voice from the pursuers to the pursued at the moment of apotheosis:

> Ol' Riley los' ol' Rattler,
> Riley walked the water,
> Ol' Rattler couldn't walk it.
> Bye, bye, Rattler. (J. A. Lomax & Lomax, 1936, pp. 105-108).

The final taunt surely gave convicts a chuckle, but such songs also imagined freedom, however ambivalently, and helped forge a collective sense of oppositional identity. At moments when the prison's mythic invincibility faltered, prisoner music helped give convicts the courage to rebel.

Caustic Convict Exposés

Prison work songs persisted through the lease era and beyond, but as the legitimacy of privatized punishment began to crumble in the late 19th century, more overtly subversive forms of prisoner self-expression achieved greater political influence. Convict leasing had always been controversial; as early as 1876, legislative investigators had denounced leasing as "a system of vilest slavery" (Texas State Legislature, 1876, p. 9). By the 1890s, however, as the Populist revolt swept the nation, leasing had become so unpopular that every political party advocated its abolition (Winkler, 1916). Amid this gathering storm of opposition, prisoner dissidents became increasingly bold. They signed detailed grievance petitions, candidly testified to investigators, and fired off angry letters to the press.

Most remarkable, a new form of prisoner writing flourished as leasing faltered: professionally published memoirs. Starting with *The Texas Convict,* written by Andrew George in 1893, roughly a dozen prisoner autobiographies appeared during the next 20 years, all of them written by well-educated White men, whom Texas imprisoned in higher numbers than any other Southern

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state (Calvin, 1905; Campbell, 1900; George, 1893; Gillis, 1906; Griffin, 1914; Hardin, 1961; McIntyre, 1894; Mills, 1938; Shotwell, 1909; Tomlin, 1906; Wilkinson, 1912). Angry, muckraking, sometimes introspective and sentimental, the documents varied in style and literary merit, but together they constitute perhaps the most intimate, detailed record of leasing in any state. In their own time, the texts spurred on prison reformers and helped define convict leasing to the public. What was in reality a hodgepodge collection of penitentiaries and far-flung labor camps, convict writers depicted as a unitary system—as a spirit-breaking throwback to "slavery" staffed by "brutes of the most savage kind" (George, 1893, p. 148; Shotwell, 1909, p. 16).

Among the most compelling memoirs was Charles Campbell's *Hell Exploded: An Exposition of Barbarous Cruelty and Prison Horrors,* published in 1900, shortly after the author's release from a prison ironworks. Like many prison autobiographies, the book began with a hard-luck tale of Campbell's childhood but quickly boiled over with rage. Composed in an apocalyptic idiom with the cadence of a curse, Campbell forged words as weapons against his former tormenters. Borrowing from Dante, he commanded, "Follow me, and I will place before you acts of fiendish cruelty the like of which ought to cause even the red hot dragons of lowest damnation to thunder forth protests" (Campbell, 1900, p. 19).

After recounting his conviction before a "thick-headed" jury, Campbell dwelled on his transformation from citizen to convict, which he described as a harrowing descent from man to beast. Arriving in neck chains, he soon had his property confiscated, his head shaved, and his civvies traded in for prison stripes. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1990) has written extensively on these mortification rituals, which he has argued systematically replaced self-fashioned identities with institutionally molded, semideadened ones. For Campbell—a proud White man in the Jim Crow South—the metamorphosis proved insupportable: "Subjection! Oh, the terrible, the awful import of that word!" (Campbell, 1900, p. 14).

Inadvertently no doubt, Campbell's memoir followed the plot structure of many slave narratives, guiding the reader through a series of grueling tests until he finally reclaimed self-respect and freedom (see Gates, 1987). His trials began on the first work day, when, as a "fresh fish," he was assigned to drag a charcoal cart across the yard on all fours like a mule. Later, he moved to the ore beds, where the "rough-handled pick" soon rendered his hands "as devoid of skin as a beefsteak." On his first act of impertinence—a brief altercation with his field boss—Campbell was stripped,

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held down, and lashed until his back and legs were shredded (Campbell, 1900, pp. 16-19).

Campbell took a certain pleasure in peddling what Karen Halttunen (1995) called a "pornography of pain," in yanking his gentle readers to the limits of human misery. In the book's climax, he described in wrenching detail having his fingers cut off by an axe, being chained to a wall in the "luny's cell" after being accused of self-mutilation, and lancing his own abscessed wound with a shard of glass. "If ever there was . . . a soul in hell that suffered . . . greater agony," he wailed, "heaven is a farce and God a tyrant" (Campbell, 1900, p. 24).

Yet through it all, Campbell insisted he was an unbroken man. Like Frederick Douglass (1973), who defined his manhood through suffering and his deliverance through resistance, Campbell boasted he "would not get down in the dust and beg them for mercy." Rather, he closed his polemic with a vow of revenge. "The only reform" he sought, he declared, will be complete "when the form of the devil is seen clambering up out of [the prison's] hot ashes and takes the entire gang by the neck and slams it into hell!" (Campbell, 1900, pp. 25-26, 13).

Campbell's memoir was uniquely furious, but it shared many elements in common with others in the genre. It defined leasing as inherently corrupt, sadistic, and spirit breaking; as dedicated to avarice rather than public safety; as staffed by White degenerates; and as incompatible with an "advanced and enlightened age" (George, 1893, p. 159). Bourgeois reformers adopted these tropes wholesale, such that by the dusk of the leasing era, clergymen, club women, and opposition politicians seemed to speak in one voice with convicts. Texas prisons are "gruesome and satanic," declared one newspaper, whereas key lawmakers excoriated the system as "a disgrace to Christian civilization" ("Convict Camps," 1909; "Torture in Texas," 1912; also see Texas State Legislature, 1910, pp. 7-19).

Crucially, though, penal progressives almost always ignored prisoners' most radical critiques of the prison. Set on building scientific reformatories, they sidestepped the fact that most convicts valorized resistance over cooperation; that they thirsted for revenge and release rather than rehabilitation. Texas prisoners portrayed not a paternalistic world, in which inmates and their teachers would join hands to produce honest citizens, but a Manichaean arena, in which subjected convicts suffered under the lash and yearned to trade places with their persecutors (for parallels, see Fanon, 1970; G. Jackson, 1970). This fateful divide would spell trouble for penal reformers when they finally came to power.

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Abolition and the Agonies of Reform

Already crumbling by the 1890s—its walls pounded from within and without by prisoner and free world critics, its foundation eroded by demographic and economic change—convict leasing in Texas finally collapsed in the first decade of the 20th century. A precipitating factor was another piece of prisoner writing, an incendiary letter sent to the governor by convict Lula Sanders, who revealed that leasing's worst vices prevailed on the women's farm as well. Not only did Sanders report that Black women prisoners "cut down trees . . . like [they] were men" and were stripped naked and whipped if they didn't, she also detailed a sordid tangle of coerced sexual exchanges. Guards could take "any woman in any squad they want to use for their convenience," she charged, adding that "two thirds of the Children that have been borned down there is the guards'" (Sanders, 1907). One critic went so far as to accuse lessees of intentionally breeding convict workers, just like in the days of slavery (Tardy, 1907).

Penned neatly on 10 sheets of loose-leafed paper, Sanders's letter set off a maelstrom. A new progressive governor ordered the women transferred to a different farm. And when more scandals erupted there, two major newspapers and both houses of the legislature launched sweeping, sensational investigations—interviewing scores of prisoners, auditing lessees' crooked books, and confirming nearly every charge outlined in convict exposes (Briggs, 1909; Gregory, 1994; Texas State Legislature, 1910).

Finally, in the fall of 1910, Texas legislators abolished convict leasing, some 40 years after its inception. Swept up in a landslide of public indignation, legislators set out to build a new system based on "order" and "humane treatment" rather than "profit and brutality" (Texas, 1910). As chief administrator, they hired Ben E. Cabell, a wiry former sheriff of Dallas who became an unlikely but impassioned advocate of scientific penology. His task was to implement a far-reaching legislative program: a 10-hour work day, convict wages, a cottage system for women, and expanded recreation and education programs. The new system would continue to rely on prison agriculture for revenue, and it would actually strengthen racial segregation in an attempt to protect White offenders, but it nonetheless represented a sharp break with the past. "Kind treatment and a ray of hope to the forsaken felon," pledged the governor, will be "more potent . . . in his reformation than the lacerations . . . of the strap" (Colquitt, 1911).

Inaugurated with great expectations, the new government-run penal system nonetheless faced "trying and vexing" problems from the start (Texas Prison Commission, 1911, p. 7). The legislature appropriated no money for the

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new setup, which meant prison commissioners had to keep most convicts on cash-crop plantations and soon dispensed with prisoner wages. Moreover, top reformers had to contend with embittered, old-regime officers, who hoped for failure and doubted any prison could be managed without whipping. “You can’t work a convict without having some fear in him,” warned one veteran (Texas State Legislature, 1915).

Most unexpected, Cabell’s team of penal progressives received little cooperation from prisoners—the presumed beneficiaries of their benevolence. Excited by 2 years of feverish press coverage and legislative pronouncements, Texas convicts expected immediate and substantial changes. But they were quickly frustrated. Months after the abolition of the lease, most convicts still labored in field gangs and still returned every night to crowded, ramshackle barracks. Most of all, they were still prisoners, held against their will and made to work for nothing. Having been briefly quieted, prisoners resumed stirring up trouble in 1911. During the arduous harvest season, arsons and work strikes spread across the system. During the next 2 years, disciplinary cases and escapes doubled. As one former leasing official gleefully observed, “They had more mutiny and hell raising all over this country than ever in the history of [Texas]” (Texas State Legislature, 1921; also see Texas State Legislature, 1913).

As Ben Cabell’s reforms staggered, old-line retributionists pounced. Out-of-work lessees fed stories to the press about out-of-control plantations run by “convict . . . governors” and “subservient” guards (Regan, 1912). Tax-averse politicians urged a return to profitable cane and cotton farming, arguing that “enough expensive experiments have been indulged” (Texas State Legislature, 1913, pp. 27, 36). Finally, Cabell himself succumbed, increasing labor quotas, defunding programs, and approving punishment orders en masse. Then, crestfallen, he resigned. Two months later, as if to sound the death knell of reform, eight Black prisoners suffocated to death in a sweatbox, an apparatus Cabell had favored as a humane alternative to the strap (Bacon, 1917, pp. 219-226; Cabell, 1913; Finty, 1914). The toll was higher than any single incident under leasing. Barely 3 years after the state resumed control of its prison system, the spirit of reform was dead.

Prison Failure

This cycle of reform, rebellion, and retrenchment forecast the rest of the 20th century. In the 1920s, 40s, and 80s, convicts and free-world progressives would again embark on grand experiments in reform only to be driven back

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by parsimonious politicians, revanchist guards, and irascible convicts. In each case, Texas prisons returned to their roots—a climate of punitive, profiteering penality won out over its rehabilitative rival, and to this day Texas has yet to step out of the long shadow of slavery.

So what political lessons can we draw from this tortured trajectory of Texas prison writing? One possibility is that Texas's reform regime faltered because it too hastily relaxed prison controls and too zealously pursued the elusive promise of what the first penologists called "moral regeneration" (Wines, 1871, p. 541). This interpretation jibes with conservative critiques of post–World War II rehabilitation efforts, from the insinuation by Robert Martinson in 1974 that "nothing works" in the field of inmate treatment to John DiIulio's (1987) assertion, in his first book, *Governing Prisons,* that authoritarian, plantation-style prison environments best serve the public interest by controlling costs, enforcing discipline, and most effectively incapacitating offenders. Yet if we pay careful attention to the private transcript of Texas's convicts—their struggles for humanity in song and print, their resistance to exploitative as well as therapeutic punishment—an alternate conclusion comes into view: that the prison as an institution is more irredeemable than most of its inmates. This was the position advanced by deinstitutionalization advocates in the 1970s (Dodge, 1975; Morris, 1974; Party, 1971; Sommer, 1976), but it has been too easily forgotten in our "age of mass imprisonment" (Abramsky, 2007). To our peril. In overincarcerated America, we would do well to heed the advice of Texas's angry prison writers, to recognize that after two centuries the modern prison has produced little more than human misery. We might do well, even, to heed Charles Campbell's rancorous suggestion to slam our prisons to hell and begin seriously looking for alternatives.

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