

Teresa Blake

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Social Implications of Parchman Farm

The Deep South is perhaps the area of the country with the greatest amount of social problems. Poverty, crime, and racial tensions all contribute to a sense of hopelessness in what is one of the most destitute regions of the United States. These issues can all be seen in the context of the penitentiary system in Mississippi, with a specific focus on Parchman Farm, the oldest and perhaps most notorious prison in the southeast. Parchman has had an enormous affect on the region surrounding it; the prison not only influences and contributes to the complexities of the area, it also reflects them. Parchman's history of labor and profit are linked to the racial complexities of the area, and also have a tremendous effect on the link between crime, poverty, and the economy.

Perhaps the most important and unique feature of Parchman is the fact that it is a farm. The prison sits on around 15,000 acres of farmland which is cultivated by the prisoners. Parchman's history says as much about the social landscape of Mississippi as does its current operation. The farm was founded in 1904 "as a solution to the convict lease system under which authorities hired out black prison inmates to private contractors who employed them as unpaid laborers" (Webb 666). The convict leasing system created a clear division between black and white convicts, drawing parallels to slavery because of the intense work expected from the inmates and the treatment they received while working. While the outside world moved on from slavery to sharecropping as a new means of wealthy landowners to exploit their workers, prisons and jails made use of free

labor by way of convicts. Convict leasing was problematic; however, its demise simply gave rise to the prison plantation: “Parchman was a plantation on which inmates toiled to produce cotton. Prison authorities pushed their labor force hard in pursuit of profit. Discipline was enforced through the threat of and actual physical punishment” (Webb 666). It is clear that humane problems with convict leasing still existed, they were just legitimized by a state institution. Parchman allowed for the same type of treatment to exist, however the state benefited from the labor rather than private companies. This mentality allowed Parchman Farm to operate at a profit for a long time.

Although Parchman is a Mississippi state penitentiary housing criminals of all races, it was able to uphold many of the racially motivated labor principles instilled in society and demonstrated through the convict leasing system. In 1917 Parchman was 90% African American, which contributed greatly to the prison’s commitment to labor. One of the great motivating factors for the plantation penitentiary was race, as it “intended to improve the condition of black prisoners by instilling them with the habits of hard work and respect for white authority” (Webb 666). Perhaps the prison would not have developed into such a factory of production if it had had a more racially diverse makeup of inmates.

The farm became a success because of its dedication to the basic economic principles of means and production. In his book Down on Parchman Farm, William Banks Taylor discusses how the farm turned a profit. He writes:

All of Parchman’s field camps had the same goal: to squeeze the best yield from available acreage. In pursuing that goal, the penitentiary based its labor policy on the golden rule of effective management: do whatever it

takes to get the most out of available labor. Neither the goal nor the means, then, differed from that governing free labor in the world outside....The difference here, at Parchman Farm, was that the laborers were felons. (47)

The prison clearly subscribed to traditional and proven economic principles; however there were more than economic factors going into the division of labor. The penitentiary gave out work assignments based on a variety of factors such as race, gender, age, and health (Taylor 47). This created a hierarchy within the system based not on crime, but on social factors. Similarly to the free labor world outside, Parchman reflected other outside sentiments and forces by segregating its workers. Mississippi was one of the most racist and segregated states in the nation throughout the 20th century, and therefore so was Parchman.

Parchman Farm has a long history of production, and while convicts are no longer forced to pick cotton by hand like they were in the 1960's, it still functions as its own prison-economy. David M. Oshinsky writes that "the prison industries program has been revitalized , and large-scale farming—in hogs, poultry, and vegetables, not in cotton—is being resumed in the hope of cutting costs and putting convicts back to work" (255). By using the inmates to cultivate their own food and sew their own clothes, the prison is essentially self-sustained. The revitalization of the prison industries program has also earned a new life in its catfish farming, which has become one of the most profitable ventures for Parchman. This has a tremendous affect on the Mississippi delta economy because that area is the catfish farming capital of the United States. By selling catfish for profit, Parchman takes away revenue from smaller, independent farms. This has a big

impact on local farmers because the delta is one of the poorest regions in the country, and farming is their only money-making option for many people. Rather than simply sustaining itself, Parchman farm creates more competition for other private farms which desperately need the revenue.

The current state of the prison industries program at Parchman is problematic for more reasons than the competition it creates in the regional economy. The fact that the penitentiary still operates as a plantation prison has a variety of implications. As Marianne Fisher-Giorlando writes: “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” (701). The fact that a mostly African American prisoner population, the worthlessness of convicts, and the neglect of rehabilitation are all key aspects of the prison plantation system demonstrates the backward reasoning behind and maintenance of such a penitentiary. To this day, Parchman’s focus is on the work and not on rehabilitation, as the few classes offered and little support given are almost completely useless upon reentering society. The biggest implication of Parchman being a plantation prison, however, is still contingent on the relationship between race and labor. Mark Carleton makes this connection when he writes: “The survival of agricultural operations within the penal system...suggests that the terms 'convict,' 'slave,' 'Negro,' and 'farm work' have remained unconsciously interchangeable” (7). This shows that even today there are connotations within the system that refuse to disappear. While much farther

removed from slavery than the convict-leasing system, the fact that Parchman Farm still operates as an industry allows for the reproduction of such a social hierarchy.

The racial composition of Parchman Farm is largely due to a variety of factors stemming from society in the Mississippi delta. Many policies involving harsher sentences are in effect as a means of deterring different crimes, with drug convictions being some of the toughest. According to Clive Webb, African Americans receive some of the hardest sentences and make up as much as 70% of the recent prison population (667). As previously mentioned, Mississippi has instituted harsh sentencing policies, specifically when dealing with drug convictions, and this is directly related to the high percentage of incarcerated African American men. These incarceration numbers do not materialize from nowhere, as they are the result of the high levels of poverty in states such as Mississippi. Leah P. McCoy explains the relationship:

Economic problems plague these communities, and there is a pervasive air of despondency. Young men congregate on the street corners to play cards and buy and sell drugs....They have nothing else to do and no place else to go....Drug sales are attractive because they produce immediate gratification, and provide one of the few ways that young people can make money. (752)

The lack of economic opportunities leads young men in these regions to seek money through illegal activity such as dealing drugs, and it is in this way that poverty leads to incarceration. About 85% of the convicts at Parchman are doing time for drug-related crimes, which is a testament to both the tough drug laws in Mississippi and the huge levels of poverty found in many counties of the region.

The number of African Americans doing time in Parchman for drug convictions is due in part to poverty, but it also has an effect of its own on poverty. The number of incarcerated men who come from poverty further contributes to the poverty cycle in a number of ways. Perhaps the most obvious affect imprisonment has on poverty is the immediate affect felt by the family. This puts an additional financial strain on families struggling to find the means to survive, and creates a large number of broken homes and single-mother families. Putting the financial load on one parent oftentimes leads to a lack of parent involvement in children's lives, especially in their education. Without the encouragement of parents, children do not always see the importance of education. "They are in 'a state of hopelessness,' and unable to see a way out of the poverty, they will continue the cycle" (McCoy 752). This observation from teachers in the Mississippi delta shows how living in poverty leads to hopelessness, and how without enough encouragement to overcome this cycle through encouragement, children are quick to fall into the comfort of such a lifestyle.

When high school drop-out rates are over 40% in some places such as the Delta, it is clear that many people are not able to take advantage of opportunities created by education. McCoy writes of the situation: "There is no industry, and the best that young men and women can hope for are jobs as farm workers, store clerks, or security guards in prisons" (752). This becomes extremely ironic because it shows the multiple effects of prisons such as Parchman on the economy. Prisons contain people who have turned to crime rather than legitimate ways of earning money, and are a large part of the poverty cycle. Parchman is a symbol of hopelessness, the same hopelessness that leads young men to selling drugs. A result of the despair felt throughout a community and region is

the lack of initiative put into education, and high drop-out rates. At the same time, “the prisons provide the few low-paying jobs that are available” (McCoy 752). Being a prison security guard is not in the least bit a desirable job, but many must do it out of desperation. This job has become increasingly self-selecting over the years, as there are only a certain few people who are both qualified to do it and who need this kind of job. Oshinsky discusses this situation at Parchman:

To become a guard, an applicant must pass a written test and be a high school graduate, at least twenty-one years old....Almost half the guards at Parchman are black women, mainly single, heading households on their own. ‘They are the ones who graduate high school in the Delta,’ said a black official. ‘They are the ones who can pass the written exam and will work an eight-hour shift for less than \$20,000 a year.’ (253)

A lot can be said about the socioeconomics of the region that these women are increasingly becoming the only people who will do such an undesirable job for such low wages; yet at the same time they are some of the only people who are qualified enough for the job. This shows that the people who have more than a high school education are far above working as a prison guard, but having a high school degree is the qualifying factor that also eliminates many others from such jobs. Women who graduate from high school are given some opportunities in this system; however, it is clear that they still fall at the bottom of the social stratification system in the Delta region because men of their similar qualifications will no longer work as prison guards.

Parchman Farm has a great effect on the Mississippi Delta’s economy through a variety of social factors. The plantation prison’s history of segregated convict labor arose

from the convict lease system in which African American convicts were leased to private plantations as free labor. This system had its roots in slavery, and the social implications of labor at Parchman Farm today are still reminiscent of this because of the current racial composition of the prison, which is about 70% African American. The effects of such a large number of African American inmates on society are many, as this contributes to the poverty cycle which leads to hopelessness within the community. The destitution leads to more drug convictions, more time served, many broken families, and decreased value in education. Because the high school drop-out rate in the Delta is so high, there are very few occupational opportunities, and many women who graduate end up working for Parchman as security guards. This demonstrates the complexities of the social stratification system in the Delta region, as women are the only people lowly enough to accept such jobs, and it also shows how Parchman's effect on its community is manifold and even cyclical.

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