Coxsackie

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In 1986, Robert A. Mathias, director of the Budget Education Project for the Correctional Association of New York, prepared a detailed report on the future of prison populations in New York State. In the report, entitled “The Road Not Taken: Cost-Effective Alternatives to Prison for Non-Violent Felony Offenders in New York State,” Mathias attempted to paint a dark picture of where the state might be headed if decisive actions to reduce the use of imprisonment were not taken. This was no abstract concern; correctional policy debates in the years since Coxsackie’s turbulent 1977 had been increasingly consumed by the scale of imprisonment question.

In 1980, Governor Hugh Carey, faced with rising inmate numbers and overcrowded institutions, proposed a prison-building campaign of $275 million, to add four thousand new beds by 1984. By 1981, this had morphed into a massive $500 million prison bond initiative, placed before New York State voters in November. The bond money was to support, among other things, the construction of brand-new facilities alongside Wallkill, Woodbourne, and Coxsackie. The prison bond fight was a lengthy and bitter contest between the advocates of new construction (including the state’s correctional officers) and a broad coalition of reform groups opposed. Groups like the Correctional Association of New York protested, “New York State can no longer afford the human and dollar costs that accompany a policy of continued expansion of imprisonment as the primary tactic in the battle against serious crime” while New York City mayor Ed Koch argued, “When someone who’s convicted of a vicious crime is in jail for that period of time, he or she is not committing a crime.” In the end, the bond issue went down to a razor-thin defeat at the polls—only to have the state respond by finding other sources of new construction funds and begin an unprecedented prison-building boom.
So Mathias had reason to be concerned, in 1986, about where prison populations in New York were headed. He warned readers that the state had taken the path through the criminal justice system and turned it into “a costly superhighway crowded with travelers bound for one destination—prison.” Mathias observed the state’s “frantic struggle” to house all these prisoners and asked readers to conjure up a nightmare vision of New York’s penal future. Citing a recent report suggesting that the state might be housing as many as 46,000 inmates by 1992, Mathias warned, “While we are haunted by the costs of prisons past and present, the specter of prisons yet to come may prove even more frightening . . . Like the terrifying vision presented to Scrooge by the ghost of Christmas future,” he concluded, “the scenario we have sketched [of 46,000 prisoners by 1992] is not inevitable.” Mathias’s vision of prisons to come may have been terrifying—but it dramatically underestimated the future growth of prison populations in New York. By 1992, New York State had more than 61,000 prisoners held in state facilities, and by the end of the century, that figure had topped 72,000.

Given the enormity of mass incarceration in New York State and elsewhere, it is hardly surprising that the terms of public discussion shifted heavily in the direction of scale and scope, and away from prison programs and conditions of confinement. A wave of important social scientific work described the outlines of this hugely important social trend, attempted to sort out its causes, and considered its implications for various communities. Indeed, scholars made the case that mass imprisonment was a social policy moment whose power and significance rivaled that of anything else in twentieth-century American experience. It was no surprise, then, that historians would come eventually, though belatedly, to the mass incarceration moment.

But with the focus so squarely on the post-seventies penal system, it seems reasonable to ask whether the so-called liberal era in prison history holds any relevance for studies of contemporary corrections. The historical experience of New York’s reformatories reveals some essential lessons for students of prison history generally and for anyone interested in the organization and administration of penal systems.

The Origins of Mass Incarceration

New York’s reformatory experience makes it abundantly clear that the roots of mass incarceration, and the corresponding crisis of prison liberalism, are substantially deeper than is commonly understood. At the rhetorical level, the concepts bundled together by the phrase “law and order” were not simply conjured up in the sixties by opportunistic politicians, but were deeply embedded in
prison politics. Denigrations of prisoner worth, a disregard for citizenship and community integration, and an emphasis on retributive sanctioning—these were hallmarks of New York’s prison politics in the twenties, and they never really went away. Coxsackie was built to keep these impulses at bay, but get-tough politics entered the reformatory on the day it opened, carried up Highway 9W by the custodial staff making the trip from the old House of Refuge. Countervailing liberal politics could be found as well, in the Division of Education, the Central Guard School, and the program staff, but these interests were never completely dominant behind bars.

Even at the level of state politics and policy, it is hard to see liberalism dominant after World War II. To be sure, reformers dictated much of correctional policy during the Roosevelt and Lehman governorships, but they reached their high-water mark of influence before the end of World War II. In the years that followed, drift and indifference were more common than active resistance to prison liberalism, but the fears of youth crime in postwar New York effectively halted further expansion of reformist correctional policy. The twin challenges of gang violence and heroin in the immediate postwar period were accompanied by a decided shift toward tougher and more control-oriented prison policy; if the scale of these challenges was not enough to provoke mass incarceration, the political impulses were already crystal clear.

The creation of the Great Meadow end-of-the-line reformatory in 1953 is perhaps the most obvious transition point between the ambitions of the New Deal–era reformers and the racially charged fears of youth crime that spurred policy in the postwar period. New York abandoned the faith that reform could fit every young offender and embraced instead a strategy of isolating and segregating those who could not be governed in the community or at Coxsackie. Great Meadow looks strikingly like today’s “warehouse” prisons as described by Loic Wacquant: “race-divided and violence-ridden . . . geared solely to neutralizing social rejects by sequestering them physically from society.”7 Coxsackie’s uneducable and ungovernable youth are a useful reminder that prison systems are part of a larger political process, and that progressive rules and rhetoric can give way quickly when confronted with subjects perceived to function outside the limits of social citizenship—precisely the observation made so often by scholars of postindustrial mass incarceration in the United States and of colonial penal regimes globally.8

The Failures of Prison Liberalism

It is not enough to understand the era of mass incarceration as a triumph of conservative politics, for it was also built on the deep limitations of the liberal
prison. These are limitations with which we must reckon, even though (perhaps because) much remains in the worldview of progressive prison reformers that seems attractive and even radical by contemporary standards. Anthropologist Lorna Rhodes has perceptively observed: “Failures of imagination . . . may be failures to see how many imaginations are at play.”9 If so, then the greatest failure of New York’s reformers was an inability to fully confront the power of race and racism in the lives of their prisoners, or in the day-to-day operations of the reformatories they constructed. One searches in vain for extended discussions of race in the work of Austin MacCormick or his contemporaries, save for their investigations of southern penal systems. Blindness to issues of race ultimately rendered institutions like Coxsackie incapable of responding appropriately, or even humanely, to the young men they housed.

A related blind spot for New York’s liberal reformers was their desperate need to preserve their programs by removing subjects who could not benefit from, or who threatened, their efforts. It is worth noting that the state committee that recommended the creation of the Great Meadow option included many stalwarts of reform within the Department of Corrections. The history of reform seems clear—every Coxsackie begat a Great Meadow, a Napanoch, or a Woodbourne, where threatening young men were shunted off to be warehoused, or worse. If young men of color being confined for drug offenses, swept up in a seamless web of community-level surveillance that took them from home to school to prison, sounds familiar today, it should be remembered that this is also the story of the postwar liberal reformatory. Khalil Gibran Muhammad has persuasively argued, “Racial liberalism foundered on the shoals of black criminality,” and it is not hard to see this at play in the New York experience.10 Long before Attica or Rockefeller drug laws, a basic framework for mass incarceration took shape on the streets of New York City, in Albany, and behind the walls of reformatories like Coxsackie. The prisoners of D yard at Attica were veterans of that system, and their frustration and rage was partly rooted in the experiences of the teenage years, when many first learned what racism really meant.

Coxsackie had such a hard time adapting to the changing racial composition of the prison population partly because the liberal prison reformers had a hard time adapting to anything at all. Time and again, the reform regime in New York refused to deal with external changes, instead assuming a rigid and unproductive stance. Coxsackie was built for the young men of the Depression era, designed to feed prisoners back into their communities as skilled tradesmen, or at least prepare them for industrial employment upon release. But, for many of the reformatories’ graduates, postwar urban economies mocked the ambitions
of industrial employment, and local communities increasingly lacked the work opportunities for which young men had been trained. As numerous scholars have shown, the failures of prison liberalism went hand in hand with postwar urban crisis and industrial decline. Given opportunities to rethink reform and to adapt to changing conditions, New York’s reformers instead clung to the New Deal-era system they had constructed, leaving real change to be eventually realized by their opponents.

**Recovering a Lost Vision**

Given the failures of liberal reform, it may seem incongruous to suggest that we also try to recover something of the breadth and scope of the progressive ambition for prison reform, but this study suggests that there is much to be gained from a reappraisal. To begin with, the reform visions Ben Shahn tried to capture in his Rikers Island mural are much broader than we commonly understand. One of the unfortunate legacies of the Martinson-era debates over rehabilitation is a continued fixation on “objective” measures of success, especially recidivism rates. Defenders of rehabilitative programs have chosen, for more than three decades now, to keep fighting Martinson on his own turf—that prison programs can only be justified by objective measures of policy impact. Where reform interests have been successful with this approach, it has succeeded in helping to claw back much-needed room for prison programs. But a fixation on “evidence-based” corrections continues to sideline any other elements of the older, progressive, New Deal-era vision, particularly ones that cannot be quantified: humanity, compassion, communication, and more.11

Progressives were less interested in the “what works?” question that Martinson brought to the forefront. They argued, instead, for the inherent virtue in offering educational opportunity, even when it did not result in immediate, measurable effects. It is no surprise, perhaps, that educational programming declined most precipitously in the era of mass incarceration. Conservative critics attacked prison education, not for the failures to prevent recidivism, but for the undeserved benefits educational programs accorded to prison inmates.12

In fact, it is worth remembering that terms like rehabilitation scarcely mattered in the Osborne-MacCormick universe; if there was something like a rehabilitative concept, it amounted, more or less, to providing prisoners the resources they needed to fully realize their potential and to accept the community membership being offered to them. As simple as it sounds, Osborne and MacCormick wanted to explore the obstacles to doing well, not only so that prisons could help, but also so that the ways in which prisons and the criminal justice
system actively hindered could be understood and altered. As both men often observed, precious little separated the prisoner from the free citizen. Given the same opportunities for the realization of a satisfying means of living, and freed from needless restraint, the criminal offender would make his own way in the world.\textsuperscript{13}

**Voices Behind Bars**

Prison politics tell us a great deal about the larger social contexts in which they are produced—but they are also shaped by, and lived by, real people. This study represents a modest effort toward bringing those who live and work behind bars back into the historical conversation. This includes the reform-minded administrators, teachers, and vocational instructors who attempted to realize the ambitions of Coxsackie. It also includes, to an extent, the reformatory guards and officers. I have, in other work, delved more closely into the work lives of correctional officers, and there is almost certainly more to be said about the men who worked at Coxsackie.\textsuperscript{14} Most of all, this work acknowledges the voices of those kept in confinement. One of the great constants of imprisonment is the struggle to be heard. At times, rioting and violence become the only instrument loud enough to register beyond the prison walls, and even then only dimly understood.

Internal prison politics at Coxsackie, and elsewhere, were profoundly shaped by the clash of interests among inmates, among prison staff, and between inmates and staff. Like all politics, these never had a static quality but were instead a fluid and dynamic process at work. And, of course, internal prison politics was never separable from external politics. Prisoners brought with them their own understanding of race, manhood, and the legitimacy of the criminal justice system; officers brought much of the same with them—and everyone strove to make connections with political interests on the outside as a way of advancing their own interests and position behind bars.

The young men who lived through Coxsackie were all changed, in some way, by that moment in life. Very few of them ever recorded their feelings about the reformatory. Most, being still very young after their release, moved on to new stages of life where a reformatory experience was either irrelevant or embarrassing and certainly not the stuff of public reflection. But their experiences deserve to be heard, if for no other reason than that we must acknowledge what we have done, and continue to do, in the name of punishment and correction.