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Book Review

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Playing Politics with California's Prison System

By Joshua Page

The Toughest Beat: Politics, Punishment, and the Prison Officers Union in California. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

In recent years, the politics of corrections has shifted discernibly in California. Although much of the attention centers on Public Safety Realignment and the twin forces of a state budget crisis and a federal court order to reduce overcrowding, prison and parole populations actually began falling before realignment commenced. From its high in October 2006, the institutional population dropped 11% by September 30th, 2011 – the day before realignment took effect. Between the start of realignment to the present, the institutional population has dropped another 17%. Despite these changes, the reductions realized thus far will not be enough to meet the federal court's targeted cap, falling roughly 9000 inmates short. This guarantees that further state efforts to reduce the prison population will remain a central concern in Sacramento over the coming months.

Published in 2011, the moment before realignment, Joshua Page's *The Toughest Beat*, provides some context for understanding how we got to where we are. The key animator of the pre-realignment era, the prison officers union (the California Correctional Peace Officers Association or CCPOA) serves as Page's entry point into California correctional politics, but the real focus is on the larger system of political and social relations, what he calls "the penal field." Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the penal field concept alerts us to the structures, relations, and meanings within which battles over punishment policies take place. Page applies the concept with a light touch, using it to examine how interest groups draw on and create sources of meaning, and challenge, ally with, or chart a compromise with other interests in the field.

The Toughest Beat traces the roots of the contemporary union to its origins in the California Correctional Officers Association (CCOA), organized by guards at San Quentin as a fraternal organization dedicated to "pizza and beer." In the early days, the CCOA ran a snack bar and a dry cleaning service for prison employees based on inmate labor. However, the organization was transformed during the 1960s and 1970s in direct reaction to the prisoner's rights movement

and the violent protests erupting in many prisons in California and other states. Increasingly critical of rehabilitation, affirmative action, and a legislature they viewed as more sympathetic to prisoners than prison officers, the CCOA evolved a hard-nose stance that characterized the job of a prison guard as "the toughest beat in the state." In 1980, Correctional Lieutenant Don Novey led a successful campaign to found the CCPOA as an independent prison officers' union. Under Novey's leadership, the CCPOA created the political strategy that would define its operations for the next two and half decades.

The CCPOA was fueled by and promoted "tough on crime" policies in California through the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, California went from 12 to 33 prisons, the ranks of the CCPOA swelled, and union dues poured in. The CCPOA channeled its resources into PACs to support candidates and ballot initiatives. In 1994 alone, CCPOA lobbied for ten bills, including tougher approaches to violent juveniles and gang members and a "truth-in-sentencing" bill that reduced the amount of good time violent offenders could earn towards their sentences. Remarkably, all ten passed and were signed into law. Key to the effectiveness of the union's approach has been its success in fashioning itself as a "nonpartisan" voice for public safety. As a public sector union, the CCPOA could count on Democratic support for wage and benefits increases, and for law and order policies the union could partner with Republicans. In 2005, the union spent roughly the same amount supporting each party.

Deep pockets and a non-partisan political strategy were not the only things that made the CCPOA the "800-pound gorilla" of the corrections field. The union was instrumental in creating and funding the most influential crime victims groups in the state: Crime Victims United of California (CVUC) and the Doris Tate Crime Victims Bureau (CVB). The CVUC and the CVB organizations serve as proxies for the CCPOA, advocating for policy positions that derive from the union's agenda, but they do so by deploying arguments from the moral position of the victim. Page shows how there were other victims groups with less retributive views, but they lacked the resources to gain visibility. Thus, the union helped create a hierarchical arrangement of victims groups in the penal field and amplified the most extreme voices.

The union was also successful at first fending off entirely and later minimizing the use of private prisons in California. They joined with Mike Reynolds, the force behind California's Three Strikes Law, to adopt the most extreme version of the law in the US and then successfully lobbied against any attempts to modify the law. Although it is an exaggeration to say that the "union ran the prison system" during this period, the CCPOA has exercised considerable influence on the CDCR administration through formal limitations of management authority (particularly over the rules governing the investigation and sanctioning of staff misconduct)

and informally through political pressures on high-level appointments in the department. The union both contributes to and profits from the weakened administrative capacity of the CDCR management.

Combined, these strategies helped construct a California penal field organized around what David Garland (2000) calls "punitive segregation," which gives deterrence, incapacitation, and vengeance the central policy focus and dismisses proportionality and rehabilitation as goals of punishment. However, the penal field has been shifting in the years after Don Novey's departure. The new direction is embodied in the CCPOA's adoption of a range of policy positions that would have been unthinkable in the prior era.

In recent years, the union has supported the implementation of risk and needs assessment, a scheme to allow for increased "good time" credits, and a sentencing commission. Last November, CCPOA did not take a stand on Proposition 36, which altered the state's "Three Strikes Laws" in a way that is similar to changes the union opposed a decade ago. Commenting on this situation for the *Sacramento Bee*, Page attributed the turnaround to the union's declining revenues and increasing expenses and the recognition that the state is not likely to reverse its downsizing in the near future (Ortiz 2013).

It is too early to tell whether the new CCPOA is truly as reform-oriented as it seems. A lot will likely depend on the ultimate impact of realignment. If realignment is seen as a failure and there is renewed call for expanding prisons, the current attitude of the union could shift and punitive segregation could return with a vengeance.

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