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PROGRESSIVE PUNISHMENT: JOB LOSS, JAIL GROWTH, AND THE NEOLIBERAL LOGIC OF CARCERAL EXPANSION

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## BOOK REVIEW

PROGRESSIVE PUNISHMENT: JOB LOSS, JAIL GROWTH, AND THE NEOLIBERAL LOGIC OF CARCERAL EXPANSION. BY J. SCHEPT (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015, 320pp. \$27 pb)

Judah Schept's *Progressive Punishment* (2015) brings to mind the proverb about crisis and opportunity as the twin faces of danger: the crisis of mass incarceration and today's opportunity for reform present the danger that we might miss this moment to achieve system-wide decarceration across both prisons and local jails. We have gotten used to thinking about this danger in terms of moral panic and the threat of public backlash against spectres, or realities, of rising crime. However, Schept makes clear that the present danger is 'absorption' (165) of decarceration and abolitionist goals by liberal reform agendas. The book also occasions timely reflection about what should come 'after' mass incarceration in light of the abolitionist critique. Schept forms his arguments based on a local case study of Monroe County in Indiana, and offers a deep, processual account of progressive reform by synthesizing evidence from field notes, interviews and organizational texts. Through the prism of locale, the author reveals a powerfully unsettling view of the liberal reform/prison abolition problematic, which I describe as the *uncanniness of reform*. Scholars and activists, and especially scholar-activists, should read the book precisely for this unsettling.

The case of Monroe County, a largely white, Democratic-affiliated place in the United States, which understands itself as exceptionally progressive, gives us the chance to see a fine-grained and embedded account of [Gottschalk's \(2015: 3\)](#) central argument in *Caught* regarding liberal complicity in what she calls the 'three R's' of reform (reentry, justice reinvestment and recidivism), as well as of [Murakawa's \(2014\)](#) political history of liberalism and mass incarceration in *The First Civil Right*. Schept innovates by delving into the liberal cooptation of decarceration, decriminalization and abolition at the local county governmental level. In doing so, he engages recurring yet recently awakened tensions between criminal justice reform and prison abolition goals, which we remarkably have occasion to revisit at the beginning of the 21st century after decades labouring under the surge of incarceration as an orienting social fact of our time.

Against the backdrops of US federalism and localism as 'an emerging zeitgeist in public policy thinking' in Western Europe ([Commission on English Prisons Today 2008](#)), the local geography of incarceration continues to present a curious set of sub-national social facts. Schept's story of the puzzle of progressive punishment in Monroe County evokes but also complicates previous critiques of liberalism and reform. In *The Perils of Federalism*, [Miller \(2008\)](#) suggests that local political spheres give mobilization advantages to people most directly affected by criminal justice policies. Schept shows how, even with some of the most seemingly favourable progressive conditions at the local level, those very people did not participate in the inclusive way we imagine under Miller's account, nor according to Locavore ideals (whereby all politics are local; shop local, eat local and so on).

Through the prism of locale, Schept draws out the uncanniness of reform—the uncanniness of a place you thought you knew (a progressive county); the uncanniness of people you thought you understood (liberal allies) and an uncanniness in the very reform goal advanced: decarceration ‘absorbed’ in the light of liberal reform, liberal reform seen in its own shadow and, yes, even an image of prison abolition that leaves the ‘carceral habitus’ and ‘carceral epistemology’ (199–124) well intact. Even the political imperative of ‘safety’ derives uncanny meanings as Schept (212–3) illuminates unexpected and conflicting visions of how multiple eyes see what makes their community safe.

I read the concept of ‘carceral habitus’ introduced in the book in much the same way as I read Page’s (2011) articulation of the ‘penal field’ in *The Toughest Beat*. Both concepts are premised on Bourdieu’s social field analysis and the building blocks of *habitus* and *doxa*, and they are put forth as having implications for resistance and the prospect of penal change. It remains unclear how ‘carceral habitus’ is analytically distinct from Page’s ‘penal field’ or from Goodman *et al.*’s (2015) extension of an ‘agonistic’ theory of change within the ‘penal field’. Schept does not engage or reference these works, but they provide a foundation for his central theoretical contribution, which is to articulate county-level carceral habitus as a crucial terrain for what may otherwise appear to be a national or federal-level reform moment.

Readers familiar with these works may be left wondering how a dialogue might have deepened Schept’s account. For instance, Schept lays out a case of carceral habitus and carceral epistemology in a ‘progressive’ locale, but what are the implications for places that are not progressive, and how would those attempting local resistance there benefit from these analytics? Is the provocation that carceral habitus reveals something about liberalism and progressiveness in particular—that what we can more easily and readily observe about power and social exclusion in conservative locales operates just as powerfully yet in harder to discern ways in the Monroe Counties of the world? Or do Schept’s concepts reveal something hidden about conservative punishment locales as well?

Schept’s propositions may apply to both kinds of places but with locally embedded, relational implications. For example, in Monroe County, consultants outside the local criminal justice system are cast as villains, but this may not be the case in conservative counties where no abolition advocacy exists at all. I thus read Schept’s critique of outside consultants not as a critique of technical consultants in general, or even as a larger critique of outside influence over local politics (the national/transnational influence of the group Critical Resistance is an obvious counterpoint he includes), but rather as suggesting that in our theories of change we simply cannot label any such forces as ‘progressive’ or ‘liberal’ or ‘reformist’ or ‘abolitionist’. This is the value of analyzing a local case. For Schept, Monroe County is not just an empirical case that leads to particular existence proofs about ‘progressive’ punishment in ‘progressive’ places. It is a theoretical case that shows the relational meaning of variables, including race, ethnicity and political affiliation, which we thought we recognized as progressive or not.

Where I think the book misses an opportunity to reveal an even more unsettling account is that it could more fully recognize the *internal* dimensions of habitus, which also contribute to the uncanniness of reform—the uncanniness of *ourselves* in the carceral habitus and the knowledge we have, and produce, according to carceral epistemology; the willingness to acknowledge that despite our best efforts, we sometimes fail to recognize ourselves, even and especially as passionate advocates for abolitionist

agendas, as being complicit in precisely the dangers of liberalistic reform assumptions about democracy and participatory process in the carceral *doxa* that we too swim along in. This is akin to some version of developing an experiential, deeply personal awareness of our own white privileges (whether we may be ‘white’ or not) and seems one critical implication of the book’s central argument, which is that awareness of the carceral habitus and the epistemology underpinning it is a necessary condition for meaningful resistance and righteous reform. Yet the step not fully taken in the book is to reflect on our own complicity and participation in constructing and reconstructing our carceral world just as we believe we are dismantling it.

Schept’s account seems to lack some necessary reflexivity given his deep participation, even co-founding the community group DMC (Decarcerate Monroe County) that serves as the axis point for his analysis. This lack of reflexivity leads in my view to insufficient critical reflection about DMC until the final chapter, including insufficient discussion of whether there was not more internal contestation and conflict. The contestation described (222–5) seems limited to the structure of the organization rather than to its core message and framing around abolition. In community organizing and advocacy, the message itself is often at the heart of internal debates about the organization of messengers. I first wondered if Schept’s embedded commitments to DMC led him not to see veins of dissent. However, by the end of the book, it is revealed, too late in my view, that the core of DMC was mainly white, ‘young, punk and anarchist’ (232), and Schept acknowledges the failure to meaningfully and sustainably engage the people most directly affected by incarceration in Monroe County. I understood the explanation, then, for what is presented as relative consensus on the abolition message and goal to perhaps simply indicate consensus among those particular people at DMC’s table.

In this sense, the book could have done more to problematize DMC’s make-up in the same way other seemingly ‘progressive’ groups and people are taken to task. The final chapter and conclusion read a bit as an appended ‘limitations in findings’ section, with a tinge of white guilt. What could have been more meaningful would have been a deeper discussion, infused from beginning to end, about the *stakes* of not being able to include those most directly affected by the carceral habitus. To have done so might have led to questions we should be asking ourselves in what Schept aptly calls this ‘insidious’ (254) moment of reform: Do those most directly affected support the reform goal of abolition? Do they agree with the list of prescriptions and alternatives to incarceration presented at the end of the book (235–52)? How does the author—how do *we*—know whether those are the best and right alternatives to pursue?

I am grateful for the book’s explicit conclusion with policy-relevant ‘what now’ steps, which scholars are often dissuaded from wading into, especially in a first book. Here, I am not taking issue with the author’s choice nor with the substance of his proposals, but rather, to use the book’s own terminology, with how we can know whether they too might reflect a kind of ‘carceral epistemology’.

The final solution under consideration for materially repurposing the 85-acre former Radio Corporation of America/Thompson site as a permaculture, local food, urban garden haven illustrates just this risk. Are these resources the ones incarcerated people and people most at risk for incarceration in Monroe County need? Schept references the production of jobs via this particular proposal for repurposing the land, but he does not interrogate its prospects for improving the economic standing of poor people in the county. I found it difficult not to envision a kind of material repurposing that is

precisely carceral, that creates a different kind of zone of social exclusion through gentrification made possible by an eerie historical continuity of employing low-wage labour from the same would-be ‘consumers’ of the proposed and thankfully defeated ‘justice campus’ to build and operate a utopian campus of farmer’s markets instead.

The power of Schept’s account is to put larger critiques of liberal reform in dialogue with empirical realities on the ground. The disjunctures revealed serve as reminders that we do not stand in a state of exception to Schept’s central theoretical propositions—researchers and academics also exist within the carceral habitus and remain complicit in forging epistemologies of all kinds, potentially carceral and ‘carceral humanist’ (253), invoking Kilgore (2014) as much as transformative, liberationist and abolitionist.

*Progressive Punishment* is no doubt strengthened by Schept’s deep participation more than it is weakened as a whole. Perhaps because the book is courageously honest enough to expose the embeddedness of its analysis to the preceding critiques, scholar-activists will especially enjoy reading it. Detachment and distance characterize the mainstream scholarly aesthetic, and in destabilizing and contesting that aesthetic at times, *Progressive Punishment* represents some of the best of the activist-scholar genre. Readers will appreciate this book as an example of policy-engaged research that breaks down tired binaries that pit ‘policy’ research against ‘theoretically-driven’ (read: ‘real’) scholarship. Schept’s book is thoroughly both, and moreover is better at each because it does both. My critiques about the need for more reflexivity should not be read as a critique of the extent of the author’s participation. Rather, by being explicit about his clear personal and political positionality in the problematic of the book, Schept breaks out of yet another dimension of the scholar/activist binary. Surely students and emerging and established scholars alike who have felt the need to defend, deflect or even reject their activism as a valid source of knowing will read *Progressive Punishment* with enthusiasm and draw inspiration from the model Schept provides.

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