

Jon Burnett, *Work and the Carceral State* (London: Pluto Press, 2022)

Alexis Marcoux Rouleau

Volume 91, Spring 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1102182ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v91.0023>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Rouleau, A. (2023). Review of [Jon Burnett, *Work and the Carceral State* (London: Pluto Press, 2022)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 91, 328–330.
<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v91.0023>

et hiérarchies sociales, sexualité et travail, ce roman rejoint divers courants qui tentent de dépasser l'opposition entre « gauche culturelle » et « gauche sociale » ou « matérialiste ». Il serait ainsi intéressant de le lire conjointement à *Queer Marxism* de Kevin Floyd. Par ailleurs, j'oserais avancer que Lambert pousse un peu plus loin encore cette lecture queer et rejoint la sensibilité exprimée dans *Filles corsaires* de Camille Toffoli (brillant recueil d'essais), laquelle invite ceux s'identifiant à la « queerness » à tenir compte des « existences qui échappent aux idéaux de gauche » et ont « peu de pouvoir économique, peu de prise sur l'évolution des lieux qu'elles fréquentent ». Ces vies « hors-catégories », qui correspondent conceptuellement aux perspectives queer, mais sont le plus souvent exclues des luttes pratiques qui en découlent (comme de bien d'autres collectif « de gauche »), ces personnes aujourd'hui qualifiées de « white trash » et désignées par Marx comme lumpenprolétariat, elles trouvent dans le roman de Lambert le droit à la représentation car, bien que du « mauvais » côté de la lutte, idéologiquement, elles portent elles aussi, ultimement, une volonté de transgression. Pour elles aussi, comme pour le syndicalisme de combat mythifié de Querelle et Jézabel, le noir soleil de la destruction est la manière de rêver une vie libre, juste, souveraine.

MICHEL LACROIX

Université du Québec à Montréal

Jon Burnett, *Work and the Carceral State* (London: Pluto Press, 2022)

JON BURNETT's book "critically examines the role of work *in* sites of state confinement, demonstrating the ways carceral labour is involved in their material and ideological reproduction" and

"examines the work *of* the carceral state, exploring its role in maintaining and reproducing particular forms of social order." (15-16) He argues that prison labour is malleable as it "can be imbued with different meanings" and can "reconcile different interests and broader contradictions in the idea of punishment itself." (2) For instance, proponents of a punitive prison regime will champion hard labour as a means to achieve this, whereas proponents of rehabilitation will argue that prison labour is a key to reintegration within society upon release.

Although much prior research tackles labour and punishment, Burnett's approach is innovative. The author focuses on the case of England and Wales since 2010 and illuminates global and racial dynamics at play, especially the relationship between capitalism and colonialism. He examines how prison labour is propelled by claims of labour market integration (assimilation) while being integrated into institutions that are designed to expulse: adult and youth prisons, immigrant detention centers, and the wider carceral state, which has expanded far beyond those walls. He shows that work is deployed to manage and remove surplus populations so as to uphold social order.

In Chapter 1, Burnett explores the political and ideological factors behind the Conservative government's efforts to reform the criminal-legal system since 2010. Drawing on liberal notions of reform, this government has emphasized incarceration as a type of social policy; the discussion on prison labour was central to this recalibration as it was put forth as a means for incarcerated people to make use of their time. At the same time, this government has pushed for blunt forms of criminalization of those designated as indicative of a "social breakdown," (29) namely poor and marginalized populations, thus undermining its claims of enabling social policy. Chapter 2 follows the

same period but focuses on the remodeling of the immigration detention estate. Within this institution, which claims to facilitate deportation, labour is also embedded, this time to maintain the institution. For instance, only the “best and brightest” (48) immigrants whose skilled labour will contribute to the nation are welcome, while hostile environment policies aim to push other less skilled immigrants into leaving voluntarily. Both chapters show how work *in* and the work *of* the carceral state contribute to assimilation and expulsion.

Chapter 3 is a counter-history showing how labour and punishment have always been entwined in England and Wales, for instance, through transportation to penal colonies in the context of colonial expansion. Burnett posits that these histories *haunt* the present convergence of punishment and labour. Indeed, the current intersection of punitive and liberal measures and their enactment in labour is simply a reimagination of a classic combination. Further, British colonialism created the conditions enabling today’s migratory movements, which are now controlled through the immigration detention estate.

The last two chapters draw on 29 qualitative interviews with people who worked while detained and with former prison officers, as well as data obtained through freedom of information requests. Through this data, Chapter 4 offers a ground-up analysis from 2010 on. Beyond the gap between policy and practice, this chapter illuminates the will to reconceptualize prisons as labour market institutions. Burnett shows how labour was put forth in prison reform and highlights attempts to expand the market for such labour, both in the public and private sectors. This chapter starts to expose the role of carceral labour in reproducing the carceral state, and Chapter 5 expands upon this by positing that carceral

institutions are labour control regimes. Labour is shown to reproduce order within these institutions, as employment and unemployment are part of an incentive system designed to pacify detainees. Terrible incarceration conditions create a hunger for distraction and a need for income to fulfill basic needs; thus, a willing and infinite labour force is created. Workers cannot organize against unsafe working conditions and tiny salaries as they are instantly replaced. This creates prime market conditions for industries that are already accustomed to exploitation, such as the recycling and hotel laundry industries.

This book’s strength resides in its diversity in scope, sources, and concepts. Indeed, Burnett avoids two pitfalls: treating incarceration as localized exclusively within the criminal-legal system and treating incarcerated populations as a monolith undifferentiated by class, gender, race, and nationality. The author relies on many primary and secondary sources, from qualitative interviews and freedom of information requests to official sources, media coverage, and academic literature. This enables him to offer both a macro- and micro-level analysis of the subject matter. This analysis is further sustained by the conceptual richness of this book, which cites classic concepts pertaining to labour and punishment as well as more recent advances. The author also draws upon scholarship across disciplinary boundaries, such as political science, history, geography, sociology, criminology, and Black and gender studies. The book thus formulates a theoretical contribution that will reach far beyond England and Wales.

This book’s strength is also its shortcoming: parsimony, methodological clarity, and readability are sacrificed in favour of conceptual richness. The research scope is so broad and involves so many concepts that the hierarchy

between central and peripheral arguments is difficult to follow. The methodological note did not mention how primary and secondary data were analyzed and how theoretical insights came to be developed. The author used an overly convoluted syntax at times and nodded to many concepts without systematically defining them, making this book more appropriate for prison scholars and other academics than for students, activists, or other laypeople. The latter is unfortunate, as the book concludes with abolitionist insights and calls for labour movements and struggles to show solidarity with incarcerated workers.

ALEXIS MARCOUX ROULEAU
Université de Montréal

Judith Rainhorn, *Blanc de plomb. Histoire d'un poison légal* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2019)

JUDITH RAINHORN'S remarkable exploration of white lead in the workplace is a book that is at once a model of erudite historical research and a reflection on the ethical and environmental questions of our own era. In this scholarly study, which spans several centuries, Rainhorn attempts to understand the persistence of white lead in French workplaces, despite its known toxicity and the devastating physical consequences for the workers involved in its fabrication and use. Her book is a study of collective accommodation, or "l'approbation passive de l'intoxication collective" (5), that is, how societies come to accept a certain degree of risk and tolerate the consequences of known "legal poisons" such as white lead. Far from reciting a typical public-health narrative of steady, if incremental, progress over time, Rainhorn demonstrates that the indignation expressed by some citizens and political authorities over the toxicity of white lead ebbed and flowed

over the course of more than two centuries; the dangers that it posed were more perceptible at some moments, imperceptible at others, despite irrefutable scientific proof of its deeply damaging effects on those who were paid to handle it.

Used in cosmetics for centuries, white lead ("céruse" or "blanc de céruse") was also a key element in the paint deployed by artists ranging from Vermeer to Van Gogh. Large-scale production of white lead began in France in the early nineteenth century, with its manufacture concentrated in the outskirts of Paris and in northern France, particularly Lille, already a major site of textile production. The white lead thus produced was integral to the paint that covered the exterior and interior walls of buildings, and that was also used to paint the surfaces of ships and, later, road markings. In a deeply researched study drawing on an impressive array of manuscript and printed sources (government documents, medical reports, business records, union minutes), Rainhorn traces the efforts made over the course of two centuries to draw public and political attention to the catastrophic physical consequences of white lead for the adult men who fabricated it (in France, this was a male workforce, in contrast to England, where workers in this industry were primarily female) and for those who worked with lead-infused paint, including house painters and the young women employed in the porcelain and artificial-flower industries. White lead's toxicity manifested in crippling neurological damage, the symptoms of which included headaches, vision problems, convulsions, deformed limbs, and paralysis; lead poisoning also affected the kidneys, the liver, and the reproductive system. Despite abundant scientific evidence of these symptoms, mainly collected by the physicians who treated the victims of lead poisoning in the hospitals of Paris and Lille, little progress was