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Coal and Private Prisons: The Appalachian Story of Industrial Retreat, Developmental Decline, and Community Exploitation

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Coal and Private Prisons:

The Appalachian Story of Industrial Retreat, Developmental Decline, and Community
Exploitation

By: Ali Odermann

Introduction:

Making of Mountains

Appalachia has a long history of being defined by outsiders, people who have never stepped foot in the rural towns, driven through the mountains, walked among the hollows. As an outsider myself, I find these definitions to be quite fascinating- problematic and stereotypical- but fascinating, nonetheless. I find myself often pondering who and why someone that has no 'stake in the game,' no reason to or be the leading in 'authority' in understanding Appalachia, was given the right to characterize an entire region of the United States and its people. As I move through this body of work, I will continue to circle back to three questions: what is Appalachia, who defined it, and why has the rest of the country continued to perpetuate and listen to these stereotypes?

However, before I begin my tangent, I want to start off by constructing the region of Appalachia that I will be discussing throughout this work. Many scholars have debated the questions: What is Appalachia? What are its boundaries? And what does it mean to be Appalachian? Because there are so many definitions and characterizations of the region, I have looked towards a wide variety of sources that have all been instrumental in the construction of the region. While steeped in controversy, many scholars will adhere to the boundaries and definition of the region that has been set forth by the Appalachia Regional Commission (ARC). The ARC was created by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 as an attempt to 'fight' the war on poverty and to help the region "emerge permanently from backwardness" (Williams, 2006). While the ARC began by focusing on the region's southern most states, by the end of 1967, the ARC would come to characterize the region's

boundaries to include 13 states and 420 counties that would range from New York to Mississippi (Williams, 2006).

Before we go further, there are a couple of things that are important to note about the region and the mountains that have come to define it. The first is that the Appalachian Regional Commission was not created to hold Appalachia's best intentions at its core. Rather, it was a political ploy by President Johnson and other politicians alike to enter the region and extract its resources, all under the guise of a 'war on poverty.' The second aspect that is vital to understanding this region is that, quite frankly, Appalachia is ginormous. Defining 420 counties as the same is completely outlandish. While there are obvious similarities that arise in many of the counties in the region, to say that parts of New York are inherently the same as parts of Mississippi because they both contain parts of the same mountain range is utterly perplexing and inaccurate.

However problematic the organization may be, the ARC is the leading organization on all things Appalachian and has seen drastic infrastructural change since its inception in the mid-20th century. Many scholars rely on the mapping that has been set forth by the ARC to group their research in a specific and designated territory. For the purposes of this work, I will be using the ARC's definition of the physical borders of Appalachia to orient my study and to outline the Appalachian region as a whole. As I look at specific regions within Appalachia, I will be using authors, artists and scholars that have actually resided or spent a great deal of time in the area of interest.

One such scholar is Wilma Dykeman, an English professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her work has centered around defining Appalachia from a more Appalachian perspective, specifically the mountains and the land that make up the region. She explains that the mountains that have come to characterize this region are “among the oldest mountains on Earth” (Dykeman, 1999) with a rich history that is vital in understanding why this land is so sought after and exploited by extractive and exploitative industries (Dykeman, 1999). According to her work, the Appalachian mountain range was formed some 250 to 540 million years ago. During this time, an “interior crumpling resulting from the stress placed on huge masses of subterranean rock” occurred and created the huge coal beds that companies and corporations now exploit and use for profit (Dykeman, 1999). Understanding this geology of the region allows us to recognize why so many coal corporations moved into the region. The large ‘coal pockets’ that formed millions of years ago have stirred great levels of profiting and resource removal from Appalachia over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries.

A similar geography that could be found in Northern Europe would come to attract a huge wave of Anglo-Saxon immigration that would start in the 17th century and continue well into mid-1990s. The European settlers that would invade Central Appalachia were predominately of German and Scot-Irish descent.¹ The resettlement of these Western Europeans would come to define a huge portion of Appalachia’s identity and population, especially in the regions that I will be focusing on in this text- Kentucky and Tennessee. This immigration and migration to the region would be hugely influential into how Appalachia

¹ (Dykeman, 1999)

would be defined. The second-class citizenship that defined Scot-Irish resettlement in the United States would also come to characterize not only the land but the communities these migrants would reside in. As we look to see how Appalachia became what it is today, it is important that we consider the physical landscape and the ethnographic 'development' of the region.

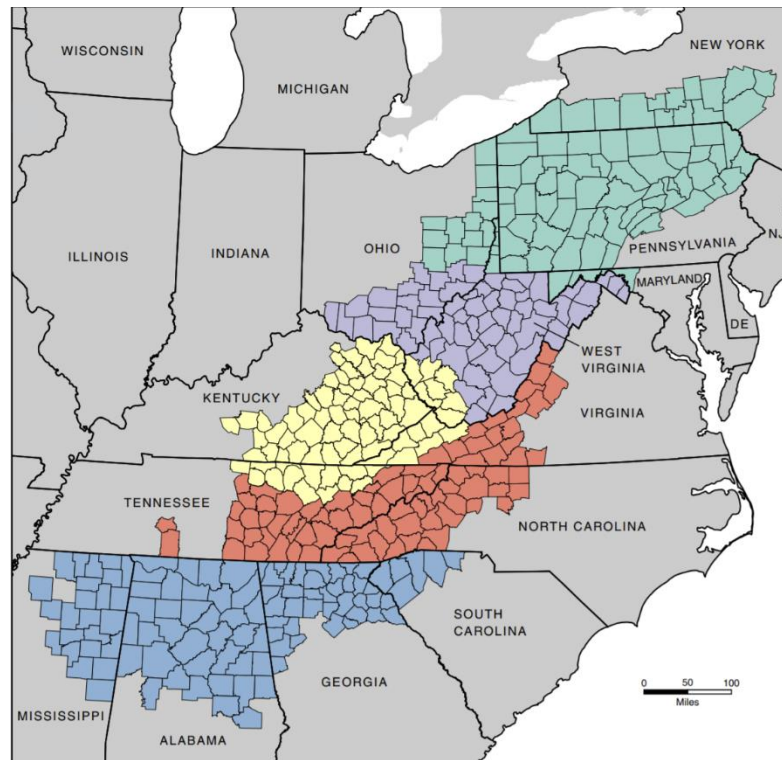


Figure 1: Map of Appalachian Region ("Subregions in Appalachia - Appalachian Regional Commission", 2009)

Methods

Upon setting out to do this project, I did not realize how complex and interwoven the history of migration, slavery, the coal industry, deindustrialization, and capitalism were with one another, especially when we look at Appalachia. This is apparent when we look at the private prison industrial complex in Appalachia and how it affected the economic, political, and social development of the region. I started my research into the region by

reading various works that had a wide range of opinions and ideas that ran the economic, social, and political spectrum. Whether that be J.D. Vance's memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, a conservative perspective on how to 'fix Appalachia', or Frank X. Walker's book of poems that detail his experience growing up as a black man in Kentucky, I found that reading the stories of people that spent time in the region were most telling and gave me a firsthand look into Appalachia and the diverse perspectives on the coal and prison industries.

By starting off my research with mostly 'non-scholarly', literary texts, I was able to gain a perception of the region based off the viewpoints of people that actually lived, worked, and created their lives in Appalachia. This was critical to my research as most of the scholars that have conducted case studies and analysis of the region, especially regarding coal and the private prison industry, are typically not from or have not lived in Appalachia. As I wrote this work, I wanted to be cognizant of the voices I upheld and tried to keep in mind the voices of actual community members that were and still are exploited by both the private and public sector in Appalachia.

That being said, my research began predominately with works of poetry, photography, memoirs, documentaries, novels, etc. Through the use of a literary analysis, I was able to more fully comprehend the various attitudes that have arisen about private prisons and how different communities have responded to their presence in Appalachia. This was critical to my research, as it gave me a place to start when considering what scholarly works I should read and include within this text. By using my literary review as a guide, my next step in this process was to analyze peer reviewed pieces. Using scholarly works coupled with the literary texts, I was able to find the necessary connections between

the hinderances to rural development in Appalachia and the private prison complex while actively trying to maintain and uphold the voices and ideas that originated from people in the region.

While the use of multiple discourses was vital to the development of this text, another crucial part of this research was grounding myself in the geography of Appalachia. In hindsight, my research would have been made much easier if I started with this geographical study, as many Appalachians feel a deep-seeded connection to the land and place. Understanding the unique way the Appalachian Mountains were formed and the subsequent natural resources that emerged because of this rare type of rock and mineral formation gave me a clear picture of the region. It gave me an interesting look into how and why the region came to be (under)developed and appear as it does now in the 21st century.

A Brief Introduction to Appalachian History

For many people, Appalachia can be defined as backwards, ‘redneck,’ or hillbilly, especially when compared to the rest of the nation. This narrative came to fruition during the 2016 election as reporters across the political spectrum flocked to ‘Coal Country’ West Virginia and other similar communities in Appalachia. This was an effort to try to explain why and how the people of this region “voted outside of their own interests” (Catte, 2018). In a Vanity Fair article, author John Saward ventured into Appalachia to “understand Donald Trump... Specifically, [he went] to understand the people who want him to be president” (Saward, 2016). For decades, scholars have tried to understand Appalachia by formulating a story that Appalachians were somehow innately different, that these citizens were of a separate and inferior class, a part of an ‘other America.’ While Appalachia does have some

peculiarities that make it a unique fixture of this nation, instilling “Trump Country” (Vance, 2016) rhetoric does not paint an accurate or entire image.

While it is near impossible to explain Appalachian history in its totality in such a short piece, understanding that the current levels of exploitation are not a 21st century phenomenon is of the utmost importance. Rather its problems are deep-seeded and imbedded in Appalachia’s past; this history is crucially important when we look at how public and private sectors operate within Appalachia, especially when we look at the private prison complex.

Like many places across the United States, Appalachia’s history is imbedded with the injustices of slavery. The region was built off abusive practices: abuse of land, resources, and people. This started with the forced labor and enslavement of indigenous and black bodies.² These enslaved persons were subjected to the harsh conditions of both the highland mountains and swampy lowlands. These conditions, while definitely not optimal for human beings to inhabit, were ideal for the timber and agricultural industry, which became a highly lucrative trade for many elite, white men.³

Slavery, and the corresponding antislavery movement that occurred in the region, was a major part of the first large black migration to the region. This is best described by

² Many people do not recognize the diversity in Appalachia and often think that minority communities do not reside in or influence the region. However, this is not true. While black and brown communities were forced to the region under the guise of slavery, by 1860 all Appalachian counties would have a hand in slavery (Pudup, 1995: 1-31).

³ According to Dykeman, the climate is often defined by heavy cloud coverage and aggressive winds and rains which made it ideal for forestation as “the Appalachian mountain was once almost totally covered with forest” (Dykeman, 1999).

Frank X. Walker, a native Appalachian poet. His work centers around what it means to be black with an ancestral linkage to slavery in the region. His poetry describes what life was like for a black man growing up in Kentucky, a predominantly white society. In his first book of poems, *Affrilachia*, he explains this settlement of African American and black bodies into Appalachia in a stanza from his work, *The Harvest*:

having survived the horrific
middle passage
we planted ourselves in the soil
of this new world⁴

He goes on to describe how this ‘planting’ of black bodies to the region allowed for Appalachian development and industry to take root, specifically the coal industry. While these corporations, mostly headquartered outside of the region⁵, generated huge amounts of trade and commerce, they were heavily reliant on cheap or free laborers from Appalachia. This exploitative industry would maintain its power over the work force well into the mid-1800s and would continue to grow throughout the entirety of the American Civil War and beyond.

With end of the Civil War, black and brown enslaved person broke the chains that bound them to slavery. This, of course, is cause for celebration in Appalachia, and the rest of

⁴ (*Affrilachia*, 2000)

⁵ From the early 18th century into the modern era, “smooth-talking land agents from back east swept through the area, coaxing mountain people into selling” their land for “cheap.” This land would later generate millions of dollars that would profit companies that were based outside of the region (Guilford, 2018).

the country. The finality of the war meant that this specific region of the country, the region that served as the bloodiest battleground for the war, would have the chance to rebuild in a more prosperous manner. However, for many parts of Appalachia this would not be the case. The ending of the war, and the subsequent 'end' to slavery, found returning soldiers unable to keep up with and afford the lives they once knew. This is due to the fact that slaves were an integral part of keeping the cost of planting, growing, and manufacturing low. This is explained in the documentary, The 13th. In an interview with Jeloni Cobb, an activist and scholar, Cobb explains that while the abolishment of slavery was a good thing, it was detrimental to the southern "economic system, and... left the southern economy in tatters... There [were] four million people who were formerly property and... kind of integral to the economic production system in the south" (DuVernay, 2016). In other words, Appalachia was a crossroads. With failing agricultural and mining businesses, politicians and the wealthy elites had to look for a way to maintain their previous free labor source. To sustain their once booming plantations, Appalachians (and many other southerners) took towards a more implicit manner of exploitation by using a 'loophole' found in the 13th Amendment.

The amendment states that slavery and involuntary servitude are not permitted in the United States; however, it does stipulate that slavery and involuntary servitude are allowable as a mechanism to hand out 'punishment' for committing a crime.

What happened after this loophole was exploited was a prison boom that would come to define the American criminal justice system. The aftereffects of the amendment are best articulated by rapper and activist Michael Render. In his 2012 song, Michael states

“Cause slavery was abolished unless you are in prison/ you think I am bullshitting’, then read the 13th Amendment/ involuntary servitude and slavery it prohibits/ that’s why they givin’ [offenders] time in double digits” (Render, 2012). Basically, the 13th amendment affectively allowed Appalachia, and the rest of the nation, to harass and commodify black bodies by criminalizing menial and everyday occurrences such as jaywalking or loitering.⁶ Once imprisoned, “convicts worked without choice or compensation to build the region’s infrastructure and industrial system” (Gilmore, 2007). This practice would continue well into the 20th century when Appalachia would experience its second major coal boom.

Coal to Private Prison Pipeline

The prison boom phenomenon was not uniquely Appalachian, rather it was much more nationwide and all encompassing. Its grasp was, and still can be, felt across the entire nation. However, a uniquely Appalachian experience came from the ground below: coal. Sitting under the beautiful mountains that helped form and create this region of the country are billions on billions of tons of coal. As a region of the country that has a long history of being the cornerstone for American exploitation- first with the enslavement of black and brown communities, moving into the objectification of resources and land throughout the Civil War and then exploitation of underserved communities- it was the obvious and

⁶ This is best described in the novel written by Yaa Gyasi. Her work details the different lives that Africans have had since the middle passage. In one of her chapters, she follows a black man imprisoned for looking at a white woman. Once imprisoned, he was put to work in the coal mines. In this position, he has a conversation with a ‘veteran’ convicted black man. The young man is confused as to why he is imprisoned and the veteran states, “‘Boy look... Don’ matter if you was or wasn’t. All they gotta do is say you was... War may be over but it ain’t ended” (Gyasi, 2016).

concurrent step to, once more, use Appalachia as a means for a 'get rich', capitalistic strategy that would, and did, leave the region in tatters.

While the coal production in the region started in the mid-18th century in Pennsylvania, it was not until nearly a century later, in the late 19th to early 20th century, that the Appalachian mountainside was transformed into virtually one gigantic coal mining factory (Goldberg & Power, 1972). By the turn of the 20th century, coal was still a developing industry in Central Appalachia, but was fast on the rise due to westward expansion causing an increased need for petroleum and American involvement in various wars called for need of fossil fuels. Because of this newfound necessity for coal, the industry flourished in this region, bringing in a surplus of jobs and workers to the region.⁷

Like many extractive industries, coal runs on a boom and bust economic system. This means that when 'things are good'- low unemployment, decent wages, availability of social services, parks, and better schools- the region flourished. In Appalachia, these 'good' times were felt by many as coal companies wanted to entice more workers to the area; however, these services were all privately run and owned. This meant that when the coal industry 'busted' these services were all quick to leave the area (Vance, 2016).

Because Appalachian towns are traditionally focused on private industry, there is a major determinant to the "highs" of this sort of economic development, as it naturally

⁷ While many jobs did come to Appalachia, it is important to note that many private coal companies used the prison boom that occurred after the Civil War to gain access to Appalachia's "... captive and compliant workforce" (Catte, 2018). This is depicted in Gyasi's novel Homegoing. Gyasi writes of young black man, H. H was imprisoned shortly after the Civil War and was sent to Appalachia to work in the coal mines for "nineteen dollars a month" (Gyasi, 2016). In her depiction of this Appalachia, Gyasi worked to showcase how private coal corporations partnered with private prisons to attain cheap labor. This kind of cross industry aid was actually encouraged by the government to entice coal corporations to stay in the region.

breeds devastating “lows” that have come to characterize the volatile boom and bust cycle of the coal industry. The boom and bust cycle, and the coal industry itself, is the aftereffect of mass privatization of Appalachia. These small communities were owned by outside coal companies that did and do not care for the people that center their livelihoods around the mines and factories. The corporations

degraded the environment; destroyed material infrastructure; economically exploited workers; subjected workers to dangerous working conditions; expropriated residents’ land; and exposed residents to health risks associated with pollution (Lewin, 2016).

When coal was making the copious amounts of money, the corporations gave back to the community. However, when coal experienced the various ‘droughts’ and dips that coincide with resource extractive business the rural communities suffered as their only means of development (the coal corporations) took away all of the rural town’s funding.

This constant push and pull of the boom and bust cycles in ‘Coal Country’ Appalachia created extreme levels of regional disenfranchisement that left these areas almost entirely dependent on the industries that were exploiting Appalachia and its land. In the work Night Comes to the Cumberlands, Harry Claudill states that absentee, private corporations caused such a heavy reliance on private industries that the towns themselves should not be referred by their given names, rather they should be deemed company towns. While problematic, this sentiment can be seen and felt throughout all Appalachia. When we strip Appalachia of all identity except for that of one defined by “coal-driven modernization”, we

effectively ostracize and further the exploitation of a region that already “[hosts] social, political, economic, and ecological problems” (Lewin, 2017: 53).

At the start of the 20th century, coal was a thriving industry that led many men, women, and, eventually, families to lifelong careers. However, as coal industrialization and mechanization came to the region there was a shift to Mountain Top Removal (MTR) mining. This shift caused many jobs to swiftly begin to dwindle as the need for ‘unskilled labor’ majorly decreased.⁸ Because the region was pushed to rely solely on coal production this major decrease in the need for coal miners was detrimental to the regional economy. Private industry had done its damage. The region was now dependent on the corporations that took all its natural resources. In this text, we will see what the region, specifically Tennessee and Kentucky, did, with little success, to try and encourage and bring in economic, social, and political development to the respective states and larger Appalachian region.

As we look to the various industries that Appalachian politicians tried to entice to the region, we will see that the only interested party was the private prison industrial complex. I was extremely surprised to see that many politicians and powerful elites were championing the prison industry, specifically the private prison complex. With this nugget of knowledge, I set out to answer the following question: do private prisons in Appalachia negatively affect

⁸ When saying unskilled labor, I mean to say that miners and those who worked for the coal companies are not unskilled at their jobs. Coal mining in the 20th century was extremely dangerous and required laborers to be highly proficient in their jobs. In this article “unskilled labor” will mean workers that have not received a college education. In the regions this text will focus on, Kentucky and Tennessee, the percentage of college educated persons is 12.6 percent and 19.5 percent respectively; this is well below state averages of 45.6 percent and 70.7 percent, respectively. (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2010).

rural development? If so, why do politicians, economic elites, and private corporations want them in the region so badly? These questions gave me a clear set up to writing this work.

In hopes of answering these questions, my first chapter will start with describing how the private prison industry has come about in the United States and how its capitalistic ties have affected development on the economic, social, and (to a lesser extent) political front. I then turn to how the industry has specifically affected Kentucky and Tennessee. By using these two states, both regions hugely affected by the demise of coal jobs in the region, I make the argument that private prisons have been to the detriment of rural development based on unemployment rates, poverty percentages, and per capita income. This leads nicely into chapter two's discussion of why politicians and wealthy elites are so keen on bringing private prisons into Appalachia. This section also lent itself to a conversation about the various grassroots movements that have started or continued their battle removing outside, private corporations from the Appalachian region, which is discussed in the conclusion of this piece.

Chapter 1

What is a private prison?

The prison industrial complex⁹ started as a way to incarcerate men and women who were deemed menaces to society. That, of course, has always been subjective, especially in the United States. Black people were incarcerated for running away from abusive slave owners (Nordmann, n.d.); women were incarcerated for ‘sexual promiscuity’¹⁰ (Jones, 2015); Native Americans were incarcerated in the name of American military prowess and the want for westward land expansion (Warburton, 2011). The list of ‘criminal offenses’ against minority communities and women has occurred since the inception of the nation, making it clear that prisons have been used as a manner to control to populace of the United States.

Because this country was established on the ideals of capitalism¹¹, the first private prison was introduced into the criminal justice system not even a century after the beginnings of the nation.¹² While the notion of private prison complex has long been a part of the American story, it was not until the “privatization push by President Reagan” that the country saw a drastic increase in sheer number of not only the population of the prison inmate, but also a coinciding increase in the private prison infrastructure itself (“Private Jails in the United States”, 2017). This push towards the privatization of industries across the

⁹ As defined by Angela Davis, the prison industrial complex is the “structural similarities and profitability of business-government linkages in the realms of... public punishment” (Davis, 1998: 2).

¹⁰ Sexual promiscuity included, but was not limited to, premarital sex, women who obtained abortions, or women who had developmental disabilities.

¹¹ Capitalism, as it will be defined in this text, is the economic, social, and political system in the United States that encourages privatization of goods and services in the name of for profit industrialization.

¹² According to the article, Private Jails in the United States, the first United States for-profit, private prison was founded in 1852 (“Private Jails in the United States”, 2017).

board that gained traction in the late 20th century was generated on the ideals and philosophy of neoliberalism. New neoliberal policies during the Reagan era (1981-1989) were founded on the concept that for America to thrive, there needed to be competition in all sectors. Neoliberalism rejected the premise of 'big' government and sought to privatize industry and social services, effectively putting a monetary value on every interaction. This gave corporations and businesses the ability to redefine the American citizen as a "consumer" and/or a "product" to be bought and sold to the highest bidder. Humans became commodities in this new form of government policies (Monbiot, 2016). Because of the focus away from government and the move towards the commodification of all services, neoliberal doctrine pushed for a decrease in taxes and regulations in the name of the free market; this coincided with the notion that there should be a decrease in the public services. One particularly important aspect of said public services includes the prison industrial complex.

Throughout the 20th century, the executive branch of the United States created many 'wars on' something that they deemed to be a threat to democracy. For example, Lyndon B. Johnson created a country-wide "war on poverty" initiative while Nixon instigated a "war on drugs." Nationwide movements like these were severely steeped in racial bias which only furthered the racialization of American politics and policing practices, creating a certain level nationwide fear. President Reagan fed off this fear during his campaign trail and was eventually elected based off his 'tough on crime' stance. Ronald and Nancy Reagan created infomercials and public service announcements to rally around their newly intensified drug policies which instilled country-wide panic surrounding recreational drugs.

These policies would inevitably lead President Clinton to instill a 'three-strike' policy,¹³ increasing the amount of police presence and the subsequent uptick in arrests and prison sentencings. Because there was a gigantic increase in the prison industrial complex and a coinciding push away from big government, the federal, state, and local governments turned towards private corporations to aid in the rapid influx of the inmate population.

While the prison population surged in the early stages of the 1980s, the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), one of the largest private prison enterprises in the world, was also generating strong rhetoric and spent copious amounts of money on advertisements in favor of harsher sentencing laws and the construction of more prisons. This was so pervasive and worked so well that one of the founders of the CCA stated that his company "just [sold private prisons] like you were selling cars, or real estate, or hamburgers" (Pauly & Gilson, 2016). Through this commodification of public services, specifically the commodification of the American prison system, the United States subjected its prisoners to the idea that their lives could and are bought and sold in the name of making a profit which, of course, is based off the principles of neoliberalism and capitalism. While clearly a problematic sentiment that devalues human life, it also raises serious issues for federal and state governments and their prison systems.

The drive towards privatization of social service industries corresponded with a major downtick in coal production in Appalachia. Before the 1980s, coal in Appalachia was experiencing the sort of 'boom' that would entice people in the area and the surrounding

¹³ The three-strike policy "put 100,000 more police officers on the streets [and] locked up 'minor actors for way too long'" ("Bill Clinton regrets 'three strikes' bill", 2015).

counties and states. However, after a short-lived period of an increase in jobs and social welfare to the region, Appalachia was once again on a “resource roller coaster [and] the need to economically diversify [became] acute” (Perdue & Sanchagrin, 2016) as the coal industry, once again, fell apart. This ‘boom’ and ‘bust’ was so fast and furious that by the early 1980s the coal industry had effectively destroyed the natural landscape through the practice of Mountain Top Removal¹⁴ in many parts of Appalachia. Because the region was effectively blown up, especially Central Appalachia, few industries were able, or even



Figure 1: Mountain Top Removal Example ("Environmental Impact Assessment: Mountaintop Removal in West Virginia", 2013)

wanted, to migrate to the region.¹⁵ With an unskilled workforce and little possibility or opportunity for other manufacturers to relocate to the region, Appalachia was at a crossroads. The coal

industry had made the region- specifically Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee-

¹⁴ MTR is the process in which a coal company effectively blows up an entire ecosystem. The first step of this process is known as “razing,” or the clearing of a mountain of its plants and animals. What remains is subsequently set on fire. The ground is then dug up so that explosive that can move over 1,000 feet of mountain can be placed. I detail this here because it is important to understand this process to fully comprehend the varying degrees of exploitation Appalachia has experienced.

¹⁵ With the dwindling of coal jobs and the further environmental degradation in Appalachia, the region soon became known for its LULUs, or locally unwanted land uses. This meant that a huge portion of the land in Appalachia was so devalued that local business and people did not or could not use it (Perdue & Sanchagrin, 2016). This also meant that landowners were desperate for foreign corporations to move into the region.

dependent on outside economic and social stimulation from private corporations, making Appalachians desperate for any sort of industrial development.

The push for privatization and the steep decline of career coal jobs in the 1980s to the present day created a regionwide panic for jobs. A region with little “pull factors”, or factors that make a location desirable for businesses and corporations to relocate¹⁶, Appalachia was in dire need of jobs and was willing to look at and accept almost any industry from any direction. This timing was almost perfectly coincided with the massive increase in inmate population. This increase in name population caused an uptick of seven-hundred percent from 1972-2009¹⁷, effectively catapulting the United States to the highest incarceration rates in the world.¹⁸ This effectively imprisoned 2.3 million people which shot the private prison complex to the forefront of many governments’ minds, specifically the mind of Central Appalachian politicians which disrupted the lives in the regions for decades to come.

Private Prisons in Appalachia

Looking specifically at Kentucky and Tennessee, we will see that both states were virtually desecrated by MTR and other exploitative practices that left many parts of these states, and the larger region of Appalachian, in tatters. The leftover side effects from MTR and the coal mining industry left the land and its people a sort of frenzy as they looked for

¹⁶ There are many factors that corporations consider when thinking about relocating their businesses. Of these factors- nearness to large colleges/universities, small and/or unproblematic union history, access to a college educated work force, presence of other complimentary industries, etc.- Appalachia was and is not an ideal candidate as it lacks in almost all of these ‘pull factors’ (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2018).

¹⁷ (Ghandnoosh, 2019)

¹⁸ (The Sentencing Project, 2020)

new sources of industrialization that were not dependent on coal. However, industries were not keen on coming to a region with such massive amounts of natural resource devastation and so many other side effects of coal.¹⁹ This posed a major problem for the residents of Appalachia. With extraordinarily little to turn to, Appalachian politicians and elites rallied around the idea of the private prison complex. Newly flattened land (of course, through the process of MTR), desperate workers in need of any sort of industry, and the ability to continue the extraction of monetary wealth from the region: Appalachia seemed like a perfect place to set up 'shop' for these private prisons. The promise of "high-paying construction jobs" and long-term careers in the "day-to-day prison operation" excited many Appalachians who were frantically searching for any sort of work (Hooks et al., 2010). However, these promises were, to put it simply, wrong, and inaccurate.

Let us break this down. The notion of "high-paying construction jobs"²⁰ has two problems. The first problem being that while these construction jobs may in fact have been a reasonable mechanism for a decent wage, the private prison corporations wanted and did use outside vendors that came into the region with their own workers and equipment (Hooks et al., 2010). This is because private prison corporations like to use long term contracts with other private corporations to ensure expedite construction and extremely

¹⁹ One major deterrent for industries to move to the region is that Appalachia still shows many signs of negative health side effects from years of coal mining. Aside from the destruction of the land and mountains, the region still faces increased rates of terminal and life threatening illness. When looking at the region, researchers have concluded that air quality and the toxins in the air- including arsenic, aldehydes, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, and sulfur dioxide- have created a major health crisis in Appalachia. These toxicants have been linked to causing cardiovascular disease, asthma, birth defects, hypertension, cancer, kidney disease, and tooth decay (Schmidt, 2014).

²⁰ (Hooks et al., 2010)

cheap labor. The second issue regarding construction work is that construction jobs do not inherently have longevity. The goal of construction is to ‘get in and get out’ as fast as possible. By nature, construction would breed no real long-term job growth for the region of Appalachia, especially if the only industry that is coming to the region is that of the private prison complex.

The other major reason Appalachians wanted to see the private prison industry come to the region was because they saw career opportunities in the “day-to-day prison operation” (Hooks et al., 2010: 231). Sadly, this was another gross oversight. When looking at the question ‘who gets the carceral officer job?’²¹, it is hardly ever the people that live in the region of the prison. According to the work, *Building a Prison Economy in Rural America*, seniority and union rules dictate who will attain the jobs within a new prison and the “higher-paying management” jobs, which are coveted as they foster career longevity, are dictated by “educational and experience requirements” (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002: 3). According to this information, carceral jobs are given to those who have worked in the prison industry for years and have enhanced industry experience. When looking at the higher-paying, career jobs one will notice that they are given to people with higher education experience and steep amounts of carceral experience and expertise.

When we look at the region of Appalachia, one might notice that local citizens do not fit ‘the bill.’ Many of the people who are applying for carceral jobs previously worked in the

²¹ In this work, I will refer to the men and women who work in the prison as ‘carceral officers’ as opposed to ‘corrections officers.’ There is much debate in the academic community about whether or not the use of the term ‘correction’ is actually applicable to the United States prison industry (Young & Pitman, 2020). Using the term carceral officers appears to be the most accurate and appropriate terminology to depict the present day duties of a person who holds this position.

coal mines and do not have the necessary job experience or union seniority that is necessary for obtaining careers in the private prison sector. According to a judge in Kentucky,

of the 300 and something employees that work at the prison, [he does not] think [the prisons] have over 25 to 30 local people that are working there. And the others, they do not even live in [the county] ... It was not what [the private prison corporations] were telling us at first (Perdue & Sanchargrin, 2016: 214).

If Appalachians already live and have built a community in the town, why do Appalachians not receive carceral jobs? An answer to this question would be that these jobs require higher levels of education and job experience. Appalachia notoriously has the lowest college completion rates in the country²² and has little job experience outside of the coal industry. This means that the idea that carceral officer jobs go to the residents in the community is a farse.

While the above notion is true, it is important to note there are some private prisons that do try to hire locally. However, this is often extremely problematic. The first issue is that private prisons do not offer stable employment. When hiring from the region that surrounds the prison, the private prison industry experiences job turnover at almost “three times higher than the rate for public prisons” that use the seniority ranking system (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002). This in part due to the lack of training that carceral officers receive from private prison corporations and in part due to the low wages that Appalachians receive

²² According to a report done by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), the average college completion rate for Appalachia is about 21.8 percent of people. This is well below the national average of 72.1 percent of people completing college.

from these companies. These low wages contribute to “low morale and a sense of instability in the facility and the surrounding community” (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002). This has negatively affected further development in Appalachia for a plethora of reasons. The first is that high job turnover rates are unattractive to industries that considering a move to the region. The second reason is that this continues to prey on and exploit the residents who are in desperate need of work.

Rural and Urban Development in the Wake of Private Prisons

Appalachia has held many definitions in its troubled past and present. Of these various ways in which the region can be seen, the most accurate portrayal is a view Appalachia as a pocket of poverty. In this pocket, one will see low wages, harsh living and working conditions, low diversity, and almost zero urban development. This lack of development has left the region extremely vulnerable and dependent on foreign²³ corporations for job and population growth, economic mobility, and the development of Appalachia. While the majority of industries resist relocation to Appalachia, exploitative businesses typically find the region to be a sort of twisted haven. Most recently, this would be the private prison industry.

Before the big private prison boom in the 1980s to 1990s, the vast majority of prisons and jails were built in urban areas. Over sixty percent of inmates were located in a metropolitan location before the 1980s. From the years 1980 to 1991, this completely

²³ The use of word foreign in this work will refer to industries that are located outside of the Appalachian region.

changed. During these eleven years, fifty-three percent of inmates would be moved into rural regions and many urban prisons would either close or severely downsize. Throughout this time, many rural areas, specifically Tennessee and Kentucky, would see the construction of new prisons in the name of “many new jobs, population growth, an increased tax base and the development of additional businesses” (Besser & Hanson, 2004).

If we start by looking at job and population growth, we will see that the private prisons complex promised an increase in both with their arrival. This is a fallacy that private prison corporations used to market themselves to various towns and governments. However, in a study that compares Appalachian non-prison towns to Appalachian towns with newly established private prisons, researchers found that “prison town did not gain significantly in employment when compared to non-prison towns” and private prisons have higher job turn-over rates, “lower wages and lower level of employee training” (Besser & Hanson, 2004). In Appalachia, this has led to unstable work and working conditions which has coincided with unsafe work environment. Because private corporations try to cut costs and rarely pay a living wage²⁴ for their employees, there is little job retention and this creates “similar, if not greater, levels of economic exploitation” that was experienced in Appalachia, set forth by the coal industry throughout the greater part of 20th century (Young & Pitman, 2020). This left little space for any sort of economic development in the region.

On top of the difficult task of attaining such a job in the private prison industry, the CCA and Appalachian politicians have been cited stating that carceral officers and other jobs

²⁴ The average family size in Appalachia is four people. The national poverty, as defined by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2020), for a family of four is \$26,200. In Kentucky and Tennessee the gross salary for a carceral officer is between \$23,000-\$24,000 (Young & Pitman, 2020).

in the prison system are 'recession safe' careers. The idea behind this is that even during a recession, there will still be crime. Some even go so far as to state that during the Great Recession crime actually went up.²⁵ That being said, during a recession, private corporations enact "mass layoffs, while at the same time the federal government and some state and local governments actually increased their employment numbers" (Mitchell, 2012). In other words, the privatization of the prison complex has actually led to less secure jobs. This was seen across Appalachia, even before the Great Recession when the private prison industry experienced

budget problems... [causing them] to furlough and not replace departing prison staff... [leading] to an overall decrease in employment in correctional facilities.

Therefore, what were once recession proof jobs are now subject to the same layoffs and 'plant closings' that characterize private sector jobs" (Besser & Hanson, 2004: 9).

This is extremely exploitative of a work force that has been forced to become dependent on the private sector for employment and economic development of a region. With little to no other employment options, Appalachians have to rely on the incoming prison industry. In many cases, the communities were excited about the prospect of incoming prisons as it would be the only source of development. After the OCCC closed, a man who was in charge of guarding the empty building stated he was "trying as hard as possible to recruit private prison company to the site" not because he wanted the job, but because the community

²⁵ According to author of Crime and the Great Recession, crime rates actually decreased during the 2007-2008 economic crash; however, many politicians stated that poor communities saw an increase in non-violent and violent crime. Rosenfeld declared this to be a farce.

had once again become reliant on an outside, exploitative, private corporation. When asked if he liked working for the prison, he stated he did not like the job and the pay/benefits were atrocious, however “there just hain’t no jobs in eastern Kentucky” (Schept, 2014: 207).

This exploitation did not just affect the people who worked in the prison industrial complex, rather it contributed to the downfall of other industries in the region. One such industry that has taken a major toll since the inception of the private prison industry in Appalachia is the retail industry. As private prisons operate on a ‘for-profit’ basis, corporations rely on huge, multi-year contracts with foreign vendors for various aspects like inmate uniforms, food, and health care. Rather than rely on local businesses for these basic necessities, the CCA uses cheap, mass production companies, or chain stores. This causes a “replacement effect” (Chesney-Lind & Mauer, 2002: 3). The replacement effect is the phenomenon of big, private organizations following the complimentary types of industry.²⁶ This plays out for private prisons as mega organizations like McDonald’s and Walmart are quick to move or develop in the same regions as a new prison. While this may seem like a ‘good thing’, as it brings new jobs to a town, it is not. These corporate machines actually push out local, small businesses and there is

no net increase in tax revenues, and, because profits made by chain stores are not locally reinvested in the way that locally-owned profits may be, the circulation of dollars within a community may drop in absolute terms (Chesney-Lind & Mauer, 2002: 3).

²⁶ Complimentary industries are industries that are used in accordance with other industries. For example, a car manufacturing corporation would benefit from a close proximity to a tire manufacturing company.

In other words, major private corporations closed local businesses which caused a loss of local tax revenue. Looking specifically at Walmart, with headquarters in Arkansas,²⁷ or McDonald's with headquarters in Chicago,²⁸ it is important to note that these corporations are not located or even near Appalachia. That means that the revenue these national and international corporations make did and does not actually get funneled back into the community. This is juxtaposed to a local business model. If a person purchases an item from a local business, that revenue not only benefits the individual business, but, in turn, that business pays local taxes which benefits the wider local community. The business also is more likely to invest and participate in the local economic market. Mega corporations do not benefit at the same level that local businesses do when local economies thrive. Foreign companies benefit when the wider, global economy is doing well. This means that a large corporation like the CCA, Walmart and McDonald's are not likely to invest in rural Appalachia as it does not garner a profit for their private business ventures.

This regional phenomenon is a testament to the capitalistic tendencies of big corporations in Appalachia. By private prison corporations stating that their business, and the coinciding mega corporations that follow said business, will boost regional economy, they are preying on Appalachians' deep need for any type of industrialization. The "continued expansion of carceral privatization provides great potential for further exploitative behaviors under the guise of profit" (Young & Pitman, 2020). In other words, the privatization of prisons has created a fallacy of economic and social development; however, in reality, their presence is by nature exploitative and focused on monetary gain

²⁷ ("Our New Home in Betonville, Arkansas", n.d.)

²⁸ ("U.S. Franchising", n.d.)

for their company rather than the workers and community at large. When government moves a public ‘problem,’ such as committing a crime, into a private ‘solution,’ such as private prison, it makes the public problem into a ‘get rich quick’ scheme that undervalues regional economic development which in turn undervalues the community and the people that are committed to making their lives in Appalachia. In the following section we will look at Kentucky and Tennessee for specific examples of how the private prison industry has affected rural and urban areas in Appalachia.

Private Prisons and Development in Appalachia: A Case Study of Kentucky and Tennessee

As we have seen, in the 1990s, private prisons were all the ‘rage.’ Politicians and local governments were ready to donate land, producing huge bids to entice corporations to move into the area; basically, people were ready to sell their souls in the name of development.²⁹ However, in the wake of all this promised development, what development actually happened? Private prison corporations, specifically Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), stated the industry would entice outside vendors and further development and industrialization to the region. However that was simply not the case. When looking specifically at Hardeman County prison in Whiteville, Tennessee and Southeast State Correctional Complex in Wheelwright, Kentucky, there has been little, if any, development except, of course, for the prisons themselves.

²⁹ There was such a craze for rural prison development in the 1990s that “students in a Sunday school class... prayed that a new prison would open in their area”, states “offered free land for a new state prison”, and residents attained billboards to entice prisons to the region (Mosher, 2005). This frenzy is important to note and will be discussed in greater lengths in chapter 2.

Whiteville, Tennessee is a small Appalachian town located about one hour away from Memphis, the second largest city in the state. In the late 1970s, Hardeman County experienced a severe dip in employment and population due to the foreclosure of the county's mining plant. There were little prospective job opportunities and many people in the town and surrounding areas migrated north to states and cities with manufacturing jobs. For those that stayed, there was little economic mobility or development. Fast forwarding a couple of years, the country was in the midst of a private prison craze. Whiteville would contract the CCA to run the Hardeman County Correctional Facility (HCCF) in 1984. This created an initial rush of population growth as many people theorized the prison would bring in new jobs. In reality, Whiteville has experienced an ever increasing poverty rate which is currently at 33.54 percent.³⁰ Coinciding with this increase in poverty rates, Whiteville has also seen a further decrease in population of 3.95 percent ("Whiteville, Tennessee Population 2020", 2020).

While these realities are staggering, it is important to understand why Whiteville, and the greater Hardeman County region, has seen such a repugnant decrease in population and increase in the poverty rate, especially when compared to other regions of the state and the nation. This can be attributed to the HCCF. The CCA promised to bring local jobs and entice other industries to the region; this, once again, ended up not being the case. Many people were excited at the prospect of over two-hundred new jobs to the county. They rallied around the prison and held the private corporation to be their saving grace as

³⁰ This is well above not only the national average of 10.8 percent of people at or below the poverty line (Friedrich, 2020), but also the statewide poverty rate of 13.9 percent (Duffin, 2020).

even more coal jobs were being lost to automation and mine closings. The corporation stated that their presence in Appalachia would bring jobs to an area heavily disrupted by the coal industry and would foster much need diversification of industry.

In other words, the CCA promised to employ local Appalachian residents in the prison, and the company ensured that the prison would persuade manufacturing and other corresponding and complimentary industries to relocate to the region. A local news reporter, Stacy Jacobson, decided she would see if any of these claims held true thirty years after the inception of the prison. She began her study by looking at the career growth within HCCF itself, finding that because the CCA is “for profit... they’re chronically understaffed to save money...” (Jacobson, 2018). Rather than creating over two-hundred new jobs, the prison only introduced one-hundred-fifty full time employees, and the majority of those one-hundred-fifty new jobs did not actually go to people who had built their lives in Appalachia. In the case of the HCCF, the CCA relied on outside companies to bring in employees that did not reside in the county to work as carceral officers, managers, therapists, nurses, and other professions that were needed to run the prison.

The next promise made by the CCA was the enticement of outside industry. While this aspect was not covered directly in the Jacobson piece, it is much more telling of how the private prison industry affects overall development. According to the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, “Hardeman County [is] a tier four economically distressed county” and has seen significant job loss, specifically over “2,500 manufacturing jobs in the last fifteen years” (Stevens, 2017). Not only did the HCCF rely on non-county employment for their prison, but it also drove away outside investment and

business.³¹ This severely affected the economic development of this region as, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment saw a stark increase. Since the HCCF has been in operation in Whiteville, the unemployment rate has shot up to 10.9 percent, above the state rate of 8.6 percent and well above the national unemployment rate of 7.9 percent. This is not surprising considering that private prisons in rural areas have been linked to a negative correlation with per capita income, poverty, and employment rates (Perdue & Sanchagrin, 2016).

While the vast majority of industries in Whiteville, Tennessee have seen a drastic decline in employment and income, the retail industry in the county saw marginal improvement when compared to the rest of the state when the private prison was first introduced to the town. This is quite paradoxical when looking at how retail has typically been affected by the private prison industry. This is more than likely attributed to Hardeman County's historical closeness in proximity to Bolivar Energy Authority (BEA). The BEA is a private energy corporation that is contracted by the state of Tennessee to provide electricity to Hardeman County and the surrounding areas and is also the leading coal extraction corporation in the region. Unlike many corporations that have specialized in resource extraction and exploitation in Appalachia, the BEA actually has its headquarters in Hardeman County. Because the BEA is located in a rural town with little ties to a city, the corporation has tried to entice other blue-collar industries to the state in hopes that these

³¹ When comparing Whiteville to the rest of 'Appalachian Tennessee', one will notice a stark contrast between the town and the surrounding region. In all industries (social services, manufacturing, information services, warehousing, etc.), Whiteville has seen a drastically lower employment rate since the inception of HCCF (Hardeman County Employment and Industry Overview, n.d.).

manufacturing companies will use the BEA for energy purposes. This has created a decent relationship between the corporation and Whiteville itself. Because of this relationship, the BEA spent a decent portion of their marketing on enticing various types of industry to come to Hardeman County in the late 1970s. However, because of the severe resource depletion caused by the Bolivar Energy Authority, many blue-collar businesses did not see a cost benefit to moving into the region.

When Whiteville attained the private prison in the mid-1980s, the BEA reworked their marketing ploys to try to bring in retail industrialization to not only to the town, but also the greater Hardeman County region in hopes that these amenities would drive the relocation of workers. This was not the case. According to the piece, *Don't Build it Here- The Hype Versus the Reality of Prisons and Local Employment*, over “60 percent of [carceral] workers move from elsewhere, [and] rarely end up residing in the actual prison town” (Mosher, 2005). This means that carceral officers and their families would and did only use the new retail options sparingly. This caused many foreclosures and furthered unemployment in the town of Whiteville. In a recent analysis of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, it is shown that retail still accounts for 11.3 percent of employment; however, the retail industry in Hardeman County is ranked ninth lowest in the entire state and has been steadily decreasing (Industries in Hardeman County Tennessee, 2020). This small, but noticeable, increase of employment and advancement in industry followed by a stark decrease appears to be on trend with rural Appalachian development. Like the boom and bust cycle of the coal industry in the region, the private prison industry created a similar phenomenon of initial highs followed by decades long lows.

The constant push and pull of foreign industry have come to define Whiteville, creating almost a deeper pocket of poverty inside of a preexisting pocket. Poverty has come to define the small, rural town; and it has everything to do with the industries that have made their *temporary* homes in the county. When we look at how Whiteville has been developed, we can begin to see a pattern. A foreign corporation comes into the town or surrounding area; it claims that it will solve all of the region's problems but never actually does; after all of the resources are depleted and a profit is made, the corporation closes its doors to helping Appalachian people. This was the cycle in Whiteville with the coal industry, and it is happening once again with the private prison industry. The CCA moved into Hardeman County; promised to help develop the region, and then proceeded to fail on all accounts (except for making its own profit, of course). In research done by Perdue and Sanchagrín, it was found that the prison county has "lower per capita income and higher poverty rates than counties without a prison" (Perdue & Sanchagrín, 2016: 219). This is important to note because without economic growth, all other forms of development are stunted and virtually impossible.

A similar phenomenon can be seen nearly five-hundred miles away in Wheelwright, Kentucky. Wheelwright is an even smaller town located about two and a half hours outside of Frankfort, the capital of the state. Wheelwright was at the center of the coal boom in the mid-1900s. The economy and any development experienced in the town was heavily reliant on the coal corporations in the town and county. After the private coal corporation finished its exploitation of Appalachian land and people, it immediately departed from the town.

Wheelwright then experienced a similar phenomenon of population decrease and poverty increase. With the founding of the Otter Creek Correctional Center (OCCC), there was a slight positive change to both poverty and population. However, like Whiteville, the population of Wheelwright has henceforth seen a declining rate of population by 37.69 percent³² and a poverty rate of 45.33 percent (“Wheelwright, Kentucky Population 2020”, 2020).

When Southeast State Correctional Complex (SSCC) was originally founded as Otter Creek Correctional Center (OCCC), the town was extremely excited. Floyd County had experienced detrimental side effects from MTR and other exploitative practices of the coal industry. Aside from the gross environmental devastation, the coal corporation in charge of mining in Wheelwright, Redhawk Mining LLC, saw the largest decrease of coal production in the state. A decline of 70.2 percent³³ caused a loss off over six thousand coal careers from 2011-2014.³⁴ With this rapid decline of coal jobs, coinciding with an overall statewide unemployment crisis, Governor Steve Beshear rallied for private prisons to move into the state.

Obviously the most ‘logical’ place to put a new prison was in Wheelwright, a town fraught with severe environmental, social, economic, and health degradation. While it may seem counterintuitive to move industry into Wheelwright- and other Appalachian towns for that matter- author Neil Smith explains this as the ‘seesaw movement.’ By moving an

³² Similar to Whiteville, the poverty rate in Wheelwright is well above the national average and the Kentucky state poverty rate of 16.3 percent (“Poverty rate in Kentucky from 2000 to 2019”, 2020).

³³ (Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet, 2017

³⁴ (Schept, 2014)

inherently discriminatory industry into a region that has already experienced high levels of exploitation, businesses can continue trends of using and hurting their local employees and communities based off the idea that workers in these regions are used to this treatment and are so desperate for work they accept it as their 'fate' or 'lot in life.' As defined by Neil Smith, the seesaw movement is the attempt to move capital and business from a "developed to an underdeveloped area, then at a later point back to the first area which is by now underdeveloped..." (Smith, 2008: 6-11). This has come to define Wheelwright and greater Appalachia. Coal corporations came to a highly rural, uneducated and resource rich part of the country and took what they wanted and left as soon as the resources ran dry. After the departure of coal, no long term industry would come back to the region until the private prison boom. By that point, Wheelwright, like many other parts of Appalachia, was so underdeveloped and untrained, when compared to the rest of the nation, for other types of work that the labor force was willing to undergo any treatment and welcomed *any* industrialization with open arms. Schept used this 'seesaw logic' and applied it to specifically to Wheelwright, stating "the constant state of both dependency on foreign capital and proneness to taking whatever form in which that capital comes" left the town vulnerable to any industry (Schept, 2014: 205).

This exploitation can best be explained by looking into Wheelwright's first venture into the private prison industry, the OCCC. Upon construction of the OCCC, the state government presented the CCA with a long term contract to run the private prison. The contract stated that the corporation would generate jobs and industry growth. Similar to the tactics used to attain HCCF, the CCA campaigned on the idea of community growth and

enrichment. The CCA promised that their motivation to enter Wheelwright was to help develop a region that was struggling because of a lack of employment opportunity, preaching that the CCA actually cared about Wheelwright and the surrounding area. This was, again, simply inaccurate.

In 2013, the town of Wheelwright was devastated by a tornado that obliterated a vast majority of its commercial and residential buildings. In the wake of this devastation, the OCCC stood strong and actually saw infrastructural improvements. In the ethnography, *(Un)Seeing like a prison: Counter-visual Ethnography of the Carceral State*, the author states that the

contrast between the empty devastation of the proverbial and literal Main Street and the humming, fortress-like invincibility of incarceration raised layers of questions: about what it means to invest more human, financial, and political capital in institutions of exclusion than the public commons; about the physical and symbolic place of incarceration in the rural landscape... (Schept, 2014: 201-203)

Situated on the very mountain that was blown to pieces due to MTR, the OCCC was a literal and metaphorical symbol of the oppressive and developmentally detrimental practices of the private prison system. It raises the questions: what is important when considering development; what does 'development' look like in Appalachia; can private prisons be a solid foundation for development in rural regions; and should private corporations be held accountable for the development of the regions they prosper from?



Figure 3: The Otter Creek Correctional Facility built into and on top of an MTR site (Schept, 2014).

The answers to these questions are simple: if we continue down the path of neoliberal policy and capitalistic values, it is imperative that private corporations take a stronger role in the development of the nation. Slight problem: when there is nothing to gain or profit from a region, the private sector has traditionally done little to nothing. In Appalachia, the first private sector to bleed the region dry and leave immediately after was coal. In Detroit, Michigan, car production left when there was opportunity for cheaper labor in the south (Plumer, 2013). Manufacturing left the rust belt in shambles in search of cheap labor in other parts of the world. After all of the money has been drained, private corporations have no use for the developing a city or town that can no longer serve them. In an article that looks specifically at Detroit to highlight the manners in which private corporations operate in a region, author Plumer states, “occasionally some operations get moved in and out of the [cities]... but I don’t think there’s ever been any sense that [private corporations are] going to invest to a large extent in the cities themselves” (Plumer, 2013). To put it simply, when American towns and cities rely as heavily on private corporations to

stimulate the economy as they currently do (especially in Appalachia), those towns and cities are at the mercy of the private sector.

Needless to say, soon after the natural disaster and the subsequent non-redevelopment of Wheelwright, the OCCC and the CCA were both under public scrutiny. However, this was not the final straw. The private prison would not close until after it went under fire for a sexual assault scandal, understaffing, and legislative issues.³⁵ Do not worry, this was not the last of prisons in Wheelwright, Kentucky. The OCCC is currently working on reopening its doors as the Southeast State Correctional Complex (SSCC).³⁶ Rather than reopen as a state run facility, the Kentucky State government contracted the project to CoreCivic, a company that, to the outside perspective, was completely unrelated to the CCA. In all actuality, the CCA is the parent company to CoreCivic and is run by the same board.³⁷

Why - after all of the political, social, and economic problems that arose from OCCC - would politicians and a large portion of local town dwellers want to reinstate another private prison corporation? The answer is that it is the most immediate solution to problems that will take years to work through. In an interview with a former OCCC carceral officer turned abandoned prison watch guard, Schept asks the man to describe why the town of Wheelwright is so desperate to have another prison return. The man did not cite benefits or

³⁵ This disaster was in part due to the CCA and their lack of training of prison personnel but was also due to a government oversight and a lack of government intervention. This will be discussed further in chapters two and three.

³⁶ The SSCC was set to reopen at the turn of the year; however, there have been minor Covid-19 setbacks that have thus far inhibited the official opening.

³⁷ (Board of Directors, n.d., CCA-Board of Directors, n.d.)

high wages³⁸, rather he stated that the prison created 180 local jobs. Due to the loss of the prison and these jobs, there was an atmosphere of dread that could be felt “in the empty gas station, the low utilities payments, and the money that 180 people... working in and around [the town] then spend in [the town]” (Schept, 2014: 207). In other words, there was so little employment opportunity that any sort of industry coming to the region was welcomed.

This is what I am to call the band aid effect. If a person falls down a flight of stairs, gets up, and realizes they have scraped their knee, that person would put a band aid over their cut and go on their way, unfazed by the incident. But what happens when a person is push down a flight of stairs, scrapes their knee, hits their head, lands at the bottom and is given a band aid and told that they, in fact, did not hit their head and they were personally responsible for falling down a flight of stairs even though they were pushed? I know, dramatic; however, let us apply this to our two case studies. For both Wheelwright and Whiteville, the coal industry acted as the initial push down the stairs. Before the coal industry virtually blew any chances of upward development out of the door, the industry did allow for temporary upward economic and social growth in region. The corporations built schools, parks, enhanced social services, and much more. However, when there was a chance for big companies to use automation rather than expensive unionized labor, the coal companies took it, basically pushing Appalachian workers out of the door and down the stairs. Aside from the obvious loss of income, Appalachians also experience major hits to

³⁸ Carceral Officers are not given a salary, rather they work on an hourly rate of \$8.75 per hours. Their wages working in coal mines and in manufacturing jobs was over double this rate (Schept, 2014).

social welfare programs that ceased, parks that were no longer maintained, and overall infrastructural decay. This left the two towns with massive hemorrhaging. These hemorrhages supplied wealthy foreign companies with serious monetary gain from Appalachian resources. Rather than blaming the private coal corporations, the country blamed Appalachians, citing the 'backwards nature' of the region's people as the catalyst for its demise. They removed all the blame from the private corporations, creating even further social and political unrest and economic uncertainty for the everyday family.

Rather than fix these systemic issues, private prisons slapped a cheap band aid over the body and told Appalachians that it would fix everything. This effected no real change. That band aid obviously did nothing to stop the internal bleeding that was caused by a dependence on foreign privatization. To make matters worse, the band aid was coated with capitalism which caused even greater damage to these two small towns. Because there was no development that was focused on regional growth as opposed to the growth of foreign corporations, Appalachia is still hemorrhaging millions of dollars in annual revenue to a non-Appalachian, private sector.

As we have seen, private prisons have not and do not benefit the local economy or further develop the region. Small towns like Wheelwright and Whiteville have seen an immensely negative effect to their poverty rate, employment percentage, and per capita income. But how does this effect the development of a region? With businesses and corporations taking over and exploiting towns like Wheelwright and Whiteville, it is hard for these communities to see economic mobility and, therefore, development. With local businesses closing, a

severe lack of job longevity, and a system that drains public resources to private, non-Appalachian companies, it becomes vital for politicians and local government in the region to become involved. As we look towards the public sphere, especially in these two towns, it is important to look at the various manners in which the government has been a key player in the private prison complex and what needs to be done next.

Chapter 2

The Duties of the Government

To protect and serve: while more complex and nuanced than this statement in reality, the general gist of the American government is to protect and serve the people who reside in and are citizens of the nation. However, much like the prison complex, there is a question in this country of who has been deemed ‘worthy’ of this protection and service. Made even more apparent by the Black Lives Matter protests and rallies in the summer of 2020, the government and all its agencies would protect and serve wealthy, white men and, occasionally, obedient citizens. While Appalachia has been defined as many things, ‘obedient’ is not one of them.

The government in Appalachia has done a lot of disservice to the very community it has been charged with nurturing and growing. Many of the harmful policies I have described in previous chapters were set forth by its various senators, mayors, governors over the course of Appalachian history. Author Elizabeth Catte, an eastern Tennessee resident, states that because of the way the government in the region has personified what it ‘means’ to be Appalachian, outsiders have come to think of the residents as “white, deprived, and spiritless” (Catte, 2018b). This does not accurately portray what is really means to be an Appalachian³⁹; however, through the case study of the private prison industry, I will work to depict how government on all levels have worked to build this rhetoric.

³⁹ In my conclusion, I will be discussing the various movements that I believe showcase how Appalachians view themselves and problematize the above notion.

Let me take us back to the 1960s. Lyndon B. Johnson pronounced a nationwide war on poverty. Rather than focusing on inner cities and communities of color, the president focused on Appalachia. While Appalachia at this time, as in the present day, was in desperate need of federal and state attention and intervention, the war on poverty created a glorification of the region. The country was astonished that white people, *white Americans*, were poor. Johnson sent photographers into the region to depict white poverty to stir outrage and garner support for his 'war.' While this did produce outrage, it created a sense of othering and 'bad' whiteness. Appalachians, in the eyes of the rest of the country, were people that needed to be saved, need to be helped out of their circumstances, and needed outsiders to develop the region.



Figure 1: Photographed by John Dominis, this picture sparked national outrage due to the conditions white children were 'subjected' to in Appalachia (Dominis, 1964).

Because Appalachians were deemed 'incapable' of taking care and developing their own region - even though by the time the war on poverty had started private coal corporations were already a major factor in income inequality - the federal government

pushed for private corporations from other parts of the country to develop the region. As we have seen in previous chapters, the private sector does not work for the economic mobility or growth of the town it resides in unless there is gain for the specific company. In Appalachia, the private gain would come from coal and the exploitation of a work force in need of jobs. Rather than protect its citizens and environment, the Appalachian and federal governments allowed coal companies to wreak havoc on the mountains and the miners. This is depicted in a Sturgill Simpson song when the artist sings “I’ll be one of the first in a long, long line/ not to go down from that old black lung/ My death will be slower than the rest of my kind/ And my life will be sadder than the songs they all sung...” (Simpson, 2013).

Analyzing this portion of the song, we will notice that Simpson’s family was a cohort of generational coal miners who relied on the private corporations for their economic, political, and social wellbeing. However, the exploitation of this family, and of the rest of Appalachia, can be explained in terms of devastating health side effects and a lack of resources and economic development. In an interview after this song was released, Simpson stated that even through all of the tragedies, he missed coal. He missed that Appalachians could have careers. However, he did say that having a job came to the detriment of society, but he did not know what other industry could or would move into a depleted region, citing frustration at the government for not providing the adequate tools for development. In other words, the government, on all levels, allowed the private coal corporations to move into Appalachia and to ignore health and environmental regulations in the name of mass production and extraction. This would lead to decades long diseases and health conditions for coal miners and the families that resided in or around coal towns, the

desecration of beautiful mountain views, and the removal of natural resources - and their revenue stream - from the region.

The war on poverty led officials on the state and national level to push for development of foreign corporations in Appalachia. This began with coal, but after almost a century long battle of the boom and bust cycle, the industry has left a large percentage of Appalachians unemployed and in need of work. Rather than look internally, the state and local officials still actively tried to recruit other foreign corporations to move into the region. This effort was in vain. The war on poverty had effectively shown that Appalachians were in need of saving but did not have the skills to save themselves, depicting a region with a poor rate of education, high levels of health problems, and a severe lack of industrialization and job opportunities. This was not very enticing to a new business trying to put roots down somewhere. Rather than changing policy around increased educational efforts and poverty reform, the Appalachian governments continued to rally around neoliberal notions of development. If there was to be development in the form of economic, political, and social mobility, it would come from the private sector. However, businesses could not find value in LULUs (Locally Unwanted Land Uses), an uneducated work force, and a region desecrated by poverty. While Appalachian politicians were trying to entice the private sector into the region, there was a coinciding increase in the private prison industrial complex.

Privatization of the carceral industry had numerous problems; however, one that I will highlight is that it moved prisons out of cities. Prior to the push for neoliberalism in the country in the 1980s, “only 36 percent of prison were located in rural communities and

small towns” (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002: 1). Now, well over 60 percent of prisons are located in rural regions (Besser & Hanson, 2004). Why, from 1980 to the early 2000s, was there such an increase in prison infrastructure in rural areas? The answer is that the prison industry has slowly become more privatized. This affects the development of the prison industrial complex because companies like the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) are run on a for-profit basis. This means that these corporations look for inexpensive land to build on, access to cheap labor, and low government involvement. This left Appalachia ripe for the picking.

Appalachian Politicians and Private Prisons

We know that private prisons negatively affect economic mobility and overall development of rural regions. They have a low ‘multiplier effect’⁴⁰, provide low wages and poor working conditions, and has been a cause in “a decline in social wellbeing” (Besser & Hanson, 2004: 5). Even though this industry is to the detriment of development in Appalachia, politicians and wealthy elites heavily favor the use of private prisons as a means for political, social, and economic mobility for a region. In one case, the local government

raised \$500,000 from private sources for a prison industries facility, donated 60 acres of land, and paid \$150,000 from tax revenue for a back-up generated for the electric utility in their bid to attract a prison to their community (Besser & Hanson, 2004: 3).

⁴⁰ A multiplier effect is the ability, or inability, to attract and promote further industrialization of other businesses. Corporations like Ford have a high multiplier effect as they obviously encourage car manufacturing but also businesses like steel and rubber benefit from being close in proximity.

This is not the only case of such frenzied lobbying and political schmoozing for a private prison. There are numerous examples of similar rallying and *actual* government handouts to private corporations to try to entice private prisons to their region. In California, a group of 140 citizens marched to the state capital and protested so that a private prison would relocate to their town (Mosher, 2005); rural communities have been cited upgrading sewer and water systems that would lead to the prison (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2004); and most notably, governments have given “property and other tax abatements” to further entice corporations to come to the region (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2004).

In a study through Iowa State University, researcher and professor Terry Besser was aiming to look at why, even though all of the evidence dictates that private prisons are a bad investment for a rural town, politicians rally so hard behind the private prison industrial complex. The answer: political power. In this study, Besser found that small town politicians and state senators and representatives push for prison infrastructure because it skews census data. Inmates, while mostly from urban and metropolitan areas, are “counted as residents of the prison town for census and legal purposes” (Besser & Hanson, 2004: 7). Because prisoners are counted as residents of a particular area, the region not only becomes disproportionately politically powerful but also receives increases in federal and state aid. As ‘citizens’ of a rural town who make little to no money, federal funding is sent to local governments to support their ‘increasing’ poverty rate.

Because inmates are counted in the census as legal residents of the rural town they are incarcerated in, they influence the legislative boundaries and, subsequently, the level of representation the town receives on both state and federal levels. Take for example, the

Southeast State Correctional Complex (SSCC), formerly known as Otter Creek Correction Center (OCCC). Before it was shut down, it housed inmates from Kentucky and Hawaii. Wheelwright, the small town that hosts the SSCC, is about three to four hours away from bigger cities like Louisville and Frankfort. The majority of the inmates that were imprisoned in the OCCC were incarcerated in Kentucky's more metropolitan areas or far *across* the country in Hawaii (Otter Creek Correctional Center; CCA, n.d.). This means that these prisoner's lives and families, what they will return to, were not in Wheelwright. It is, for the most part, somewhere, *at least*, hours away, if not across the entire nation. However, they are counted as Wheelwright citizens. This means that resources and funding are funneled, inaccurately, to the small town's government, as opposed to the communities that the inmates actually reside in.

There are two problems here. The first, most obvious, problem is that this is not representative of the nation. If an inmate resides in Hawaii, they should be counted in the Hawaii census, not the Kentucky census. Not only does the state lose voting and political power, but it also loses valuable federal funding. To add salt to the wound, prisoners do not receive the aid that, theoretically, is for them. The second major problem is that the federal funding the region receives because of its 'increased poverty rates' is at the discretion of the government that receives it. Politicians are able to spend that money where they see fit for improving economic mobility. In a perfect world, this money would go to helping the inmates who are a huge reason why these rural areas have increased federal funding and state importance. However, that would be a pipe dream. A secondary option would be that

the money would go to the community - the money would go to supporting education, job growth, public health, etc. Again that is not the case. Rather, the money is funneled back into the pockets of the private prison industry and its officials. This phenomenon is seen across the industry, specifically with the CCA. In a small, Appalachian town, it was seen that the “prison supervisor belonged to the Chamber of Commerce... one warden serves on the City Council while another was president of the city’s fair association” (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2004: 5).

Why is this important? Other than the fact that is a major conflict of interest, as the only people who gain from this type of industrialization are politicians and the private prisons corporations, it is also grossly underserves the community and rural town. This includes a decrease in employment rates, a decrease in locally owned businesses, and, most notably, “local residents compete with prisoners for jobs” (Hooks et al., 2010: p 241). Appalachian governments pushed incredibly hard for private prisons to ‘revolutionize’ the economy. Kentucky Representative John Blanton stated that the state “need[s] the jobs. We suffered a lot in the downturn of coal in eastern Kentucky, so every job means something to us” (Latek, 2019). However, he failed to recognize how his endorsement of the industry has left the region, the inmates, and Appalachians in a perpetual state of exploitation by the private sector.

Let’s break this down. Understanding that the private prison industrial complex “[does] not solve the economic problems of rural areas but [does] create new ones” (Hooks et al., 2010: 240), it is clear that it negatively affects development and does not foster social

growth and mobility. To add salt to the wound, prisons do not actually create the jobs that it promised Appalachian communities. Rather, they pushed away further industrialization⁴¹ and created even further economic turmoil. In one such coal mining community,

“the town purchased the land for the prison and issued bonds to help pay for \$14 million in improvements that included new roads, sewer and water lines. But the town has been forced to pay back the debt on these loans without the expected increases in revenue from the prison” (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2004: 4).

In other words, this rural community, like so many other towns across Appalachia, was fed similar rhetoric from their politicians and from the private sector. They stated that private prisons in Appalachia would breed development in all aspects. However, many rural governments used taxpayer money to win private prison bids; they gave tax breaks to the private corporations; they built new infrastructure and increased community taxes to pay for it; and now, because there was no increase in jobs or wages, taxpayers are forced to compensate after gaining nothing.⁴²

It is most vital to note that through all of the tax write offs and kickbacks that both the politicians and private corporations receive from one another, the residents and the inmates in Appalachia have only once again be relegated to the status of second class citizen. Obviously, non-inmate residents of these rural locations have received no benefits

⁴¹ Scholars have proven that “once you have the reputation of a prison town, [the town] won’t become a Fortune 500 company town, or an Internet or software company town, or even a diverse tourism and company town” (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2004: 5).

⁴² This is not to say that we need to abolish government in Appalachia and rely on private corporations. Rather, the Appalachian government needs to recenter around providing more funding to social welfare services. One legislator stated: “for every dollar that you’re spending on corrections, you’re not spending it on the colleges and tourism. It’s money down a rat hole, basically” (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2004: 5).

from the prisons. However, it is important also to realize that the inmates have been forced to undergo a form of modern slavery. The private prison industry has a gross income of around three billion dollars annually. This money is made in a variety of ways. A major factor is that state and local governments have made deals with the private prisons in order to bypass paying taxes. The CCA also generates about forty percent of its revenue from the federal and state government who provide the corporation with decade-long contracts. The rest of the revenue that is generated by these for profit industries is from the slave labor the inmates must endure (Goodkind, 2013).

The 13th Amendment stated that slavery and involuntary servitude was unconstitutional but was deemed allowable in cases of imprisonment. This practice has been seen across the entire nation. Private prisons are contracted by both the private and public sector to perform “dirt cheap, sometimes free” labor (Hooks et al., 2010: 241). Companies like McDonald’s and Wendy’s have used prison labor to process, produce, and package frozen foods; Walmart uses inmates across the nation for manufacturing purposes; Victoria’s Secret used Appalachian female inmates to sew; Kmart and J.C Penney use Tennessee prisoners to make jeans (Shabazz, n.d.). In other words, private corporations use private prison labor in order to reduce or completely cut labor costs. While there needs to be serious policy reform around private corporations using prison labor, it cannot be fixed until federal, state, and local governments cease to use this labor force as well. Basically, across the United States, the governments, on all levels, have utilized prison labor to perform grueling jobs. The Marshall Project - a nonprofit, investigative journalist site about

criminal justice - has documented the stories of countless inmates and their families. In a recent subsection of the project, the Marshall Project has set out to document the stories of incarcerated persons who have been forced to work for next to nothing. Below I have highlighted four separate stories.

Hawkins, a man serving a life sentence for a crime he committed when he was twenty, was first put on manual labor for the prison grounds. After some time, he was 'promoted' to the manufacturing jobs. His prison was contracted by the government to produce desks and office supplies. In this new role, Hawkins was forced to wake up at three in the morning to be at work on time by four. They worked for six hours, without break, and would then return after their lunch. His specific duties were to assemble the desks; however, his station was directly next to the sanding station. While the inmates who were relegated to the sanding station were given proper face shields and mask, Hawkins' station was coated and the air thick with sawdust. He began having major health problems and even cited an incident when he vomited after eating because of how much sawdust he had inhaled. After seeing too many of his colleagues have worsening health side effects, Hawkins decided to pay one-hundred dollars to see a health professional within the prison. It was found that he was exposed to so much dust that his air was closing and causing long term lung problems.

Aside from this gross exploitation of his time and labor, Hawkins was also not compensated for his work. He received no pay. He said that the only compensation he and his fellow inmates received was a day off if the group reached their unrealistic quotas.

While all of the prisoners had the ability to make beautiful furniture, Hawkins noticed that there was actually an incentive to take short cuts when assembling the desks, stating,

for instance, why bother to build six drawers for every desk when you can just nail a faceplate over one of the holes and move it down the line, no one the wiser? Well, no one except the *state* employee...” (Hawkins, 2017: 3).

Not only were the prisoners not compensated for their work, but they were also subjected to deplorable working conditions and incentivized to do ‘bad’ work. While this is deeply tragic, it is important to note that this plant has henceforth been closed down due to increased health regulations. The prison Hawkins is still residing in failed to comment (Hawkins, 2017).

In another story, written by Crosson, he stated that he was “now [a] part of a machine. Most everything in prison is made possible with inmate labor, from the cooking of food and washing of clothes to maintenance of the institution” (Crosson, 2019: 2). Serving a thirty-year sentence for the side effects to his addiction to cocaine, Crosson stated that he has worked various odd jobs in the prison, working in kitchen, making “27 to 45 cents per hour” (Crosson, 2019), in the garage fixing cars across the county, on the electrical team to fix odds and ends throughout the prison. In these positions, Crosson faced a multitude of dangerous situations. He was forced to fix an electrical circuit with fingernail cutters because he could not check out the proper equipment, he jerry-rigged an extension cord out of loose wire for the prison recreational room, and work on the prison fence electrical current. On job that he goes into utmost detail is when he had to fix a sidewalk for the city.

He states, “I don’t think I was ever paid for the night we went out at 6 p.m. to replace a concrete walkway. There was no jackhammer, so we took turns with a sledgehammer until 6 a.m.” (Crosson, 2019: 2). He was not only left unpaid for his work, but he was also forced to work in harsh conditions with improper equipment. Crosson remains living and working in the same prison to this day.

This extreme level of exploitation continues as Adrian DrePaul tells his story. He recounts many instances of being forced to do excruciatingly hard labor the minute that he was incarcerated, stating

I had been, through no choice of my own, on a work detail at a [prison] for more than a year now. The prison had four contracts with three different local towns when I first started, providing me with a variety of tough task. Cutting grass in city parks and on roadsides in extreme temperatures, clearing out sewage-line overflows, digging trenches to replace broken water lines, and manually cutting pathways through dense woods (DrePaul, 2019).

Breaking this down, not only was he relegated to unpaid slave labor⁴³, but DrePaul was also forced, against his will,⁴⁴ to work demanding and degrading jobs for the government. He details a very heartbreaking day when it was over one-hundred degrees outside, and he was

⁴³ Georgia is one of five states that does not compensate *at all* for the work that imprisoned persons are forced to do (DrePaul, 2019).

⁴⁴ Later in the article, DrePaul articulates that it is important to understand he and his fellow inmates were forced to perform in these jobs, stating: “we [are] at the mercy of the city contractors. Any task required of us, we were to complete without complaint. Refusing to work on detail resulted in a Disciplinary Report, which would negatively impact your prospect for parole [or] bought you a night or two or seven in the hole (DrePaul, 2019).

forced to mop up sewage waste for hours on end. Fitted with heavy work boots and unbreathable long pants and shirt, he remembered looking up out of the sewer after working for hours on end, straight through their *legally* mandatory lunch break, and almost passing out in the waste. He details how he climbed out of the pit and took off his hazmat suit and saw a rush of liquid, sweat, leave the arm of his work attire. After ten minutes outside of the sewer, a government worker screamed “inmate” at him and demanded he return to work. The Georgia private prison he is incarcerated in failed to comment on this incident (DrePaul, 2019).

The final example I will relay is that of the prisons in California. For years, California state has relied on private prisons to put out wildfires. In 2017, the wine fires mobilized over 11,000 firefighters. Of the 11,000 people needed to control these fires, over 1,500 were incarcerated men (Fang, 2017). According to sources, “[the inmates] work just as hard as any hand crew doing the dirtiest, hardest part of firefighting... they do the brutal, backbreaking part of digging fire lines and clearing fuel out of the path of a fire - the thankless work” (Fang, 2017), but make “\$1 an hour containing fires, clearing brush, and doing other dangerous labor” (Thompson, C., 2020). Other than the gross discrepancy in compensation for their work, incarcerated firefighters are not given these jobs, or even have the ability to attain these jobs, after they are released from prison because of strict background checks that are required to join the force. However, the only reason this program is enforced and utilized is because the government said it will give inmates applicable job experience once they are released from prison. So, not only are the inmates

subjecting themselves to incredibly dangerous situations for next to no compensation, but they are being lied to by risking their lives for job experience that will not serve them after their sentence is complete (Thompson, C., 2020).



Figure 2: Inmates line up ready to fight a forest fire in northern California (Fang, 2017).

These stories are important to share because they showcase that it is not just private corporations that are benefiting from prison labor. Federal, state, and local governments have all used and gained from prison labor. This is because it cuts costs at the public level. However, using unpaid prison labor, ethics aside, is specifically detrimental to a rural region like Central Appalachia. As governments use private prison labor as a mechanism to “save money on work they would otherwise have had to contract out to workers at a prevailing wage, prison labor [results] in [the] displacement of workers in these communities and can deepen local poverty” (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002: 4). As we look towards Appalachia, and the various government agencies that allow for and profit from private prison labor, it is

of vital importance to keep these stories in mind and see how these practices are not only exploitative of inmates but also for residence of the Appalachian community.

The Private Solution Turns to a Public Problem: A Case Study of Kentucky and Tennessee

In the 1980s, President Reagan told the American people that the way to solve its issues were with neoliberal policies that pushed away from government regulation and taxes, promising that the market would reward hard working Americans (Monbiot, 2016). This meant that social services were diminished. One major deterioration was the criminal justice system. As opposed to being a system set up for rehabilitation, personal learning, and community growth, prisons became yet another industrial complex that was used for the economic gain of *already* wealthy elites. Private prisons tried to create a private solution for the growing public problem of mass incarceration. However, this is extremely confounding. Why would the United States government allow the private sector to have any role in the incarceration process of a person breaking a law against the public sector? The answer is that a small number of mega corporations saw a growth industry that they could capitalize on. Now, the two leading prison corporations, CoreCivic (formerly known as the CCA) and the GEO Group have virtually created a duopoly for private prisons. They have expanded their reach into state *and* federal prisons, immigration detention centers, and parole and surveillance services (Stevenson, 2020), effectively working to remove or lessen the grip of the government's hand on the prison sector.

As we have seen, this neoliberal policy coincided with the collapse of the coal industry in Appalachia. There was a ferocious search for any new industry with "people [so]

desperate to replace their only source of employment [that they continued to tear] apart the mountains” (Catte, 2018b) for these private prisons, all under the guise of profit. This was exacerbated by the government’s continual push for privatization of all industries. While the public and private sectors both declared that the for profit prison system would be more cost efficient and take less taxpayer dollars, that was not the case. Not only do governments provide multi-million dollar contracts to these organizations (with taxpayer money, or course), but agencies like CoreCivic also create stipulations in their contracts to ensure long term, non-violent offenders stay in their jails. This is important because the longer a person stays in a prison the more expensive they become to a prison and the more money a private corporation will have to receive. Another key factor in these is that private prisons do not take inmates with mental health disorders or violent tendencies; this greatly reduces the amount of money they spend on security personnel and mental health services. In other words, private corporations capitalize on housing inmates with expensive long term sentences while simultaneously saving money because they turn down inmates with mental and physical health problems. This means that government agencies pay an abhorrent amount of money to these corporations to provide services that would be cheaper for taxpayers if the corporations were actually government agencies.⁴⁵

So why, if all of the evidence shows that private prisons are a detriment to the economic, social, and political development of a rural region, do politicians still endorse

⁴⁵ According to the Reason Foundation, the average cost of housing a medium security inmate in a private prison is \$53.02, as opposed to \$48.42 in a public prison. This discrepancy is paid by the taxpayers of the state that the inmate resides in during their sentence through the government contract that the private corporation receives ("Pros and Cons of Private Prisons", n.d.).

them? Once again, the answer is money and political power. Appalachian politicians benefit from these private institutions, as a county or state makes money from the federal government because of increased and exaggerated poverty rates. The local government also uses free or cheap prison labor to work on public projects which drastically decreases the expenditures of these small towns. This is not only highly exploitative of the prisoners, but it also decreases the employment opportunities for Appalachians in towns like Wheelwright and Whiteville. Jobs that could be given to Appalachians to help alleviate the unemployment and poverty rates of the region are instead forced upon the inmates. This creates many subsequent problems for the residents but huge benefits for the government.

The first issue is that because prisoners are forced into this demeaning and involuntary servitude position, Appalachians do not get the chance to earn a living. This benefits the government in a few ways. The first being that the government does not have to pay high wages to the people that work on the various projects; it does not have to worry about the highly unionized Appalachian population; nor does it have to take care of the workers' benefits such as health care and insurance. While these are astronomical benefits, another major factor for contracting out government jobs to inmates is that it perpetuates a cycle of poverty. Appalachians cannot get jobs from the only private sector in the region⁴⁶ and they cannot get jobs from their governments, as a great many are going to inmates, so they are left unemployed and well below the poverty rate. The more people below the poverty rate, the more federal money gets sent to the county. This coincides with even

⁴⁶ The private prison industry uses foreign contractors to employ people from outside of Appalachia and has a turn over rate for carceral officers three times as high when compared to publicly run institutions.

more money getting pushed back into a corporation that does not foster development to the people that actually reside in the state.

Take for example Whiteville, Tennessee. With a population of approximately 4,500 people, it has seen a drastic decline in the employment and an increase in the poverty rate since the inception of the prisons. Almost thirty-four percent of its people live below the poverty line, and in the last decade, the unemployment rate has fluctuated between ten and fifteen percent (*Whiteville, Tennessee Population 2020*, 2020). Both of these statistics are *well above* the national average. Because of these extreme rates, the federal and state governments have sent a significant amount of money and financial support that only goes towards further privatization of the region. However, privatization of industry has led the government to funnel even more money into Hardeman County Correctional. Because HCCF is a private institution, we are not privy to the way that said money is spent, which creates a separate problem that “the private prison [being] treated so differently from the publicly-run prisons, then they’re allowed to keep things under wraps” (Stevens, 2020).

Because the public does not have access to the private prison’s financial statements, we do not get to see where the money goes. However, if we flash over to Kentucky, journalist Sam Adler-Bell did a deep dive into the Kentucky state penitentiary complex. This forced him down a path that led to Representative Hal Rogers. In 2005, Rogers pushed for the region to move a private prison into the region. He used the Letcher County Planning Commission, a public ‘sounding’ private coalition, to improve the county’s chances of attaining a private institution. According to Adler-Bell,

the prison would be the crowning achievement of a career defined by his prodigious ability to bring huge sums of federal money to his home district, much of which according to a 2011 investigation by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, ended up in the hands of a close network of family members, former aides, donors, and business associates (Adler-Bell, 2019: 2).

While developing the Kentucky prison, Rogers brought in thousands of dollars to the state and county, but it has gone to the prison, its associates and to close family and friends.

While Rogers and his inner circle get rich off the backs of free labor and the private prison industrial complex, his district suffered and was rated the worst place to live for overall wellbeing. It is clear to see that even while millions of federal dollars were being racked into Kentucky, its people were and are still struggling to develop the region because both the private and public sectors are working against Appalachia's best interest. By looking at the examples from Tennessee and Kentucky, it is clear to see how the continuation of a mono-economy in these towns has perpetuated a cycle of reliance on private institutions that has only been exacerbated by Appalachian government agencies.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to show how the exploitation of Appalachia has been perpetuated and enhanced by both the private and public sectors. This started with the exploitation of coal miners and the boom and bust cycle that inevitably follows an extractive industry. The coal industry left the Appalachian region severely underdeveloped with almost zero prospects for industrialization of any kind. With an entire region of the country labelled as dirty and poor, Appalachians were desperate to find jobs. This coincided with nationwide push towards privatization and neoliberal policies that encouraged state and local governments to decrease social services and allow big corporations to monopolize small, rural towns like Wheelwright and Whiteville and the counties around them.

As we have seen, Appalachia was virtually desecrated by big coal and little, if any, manufacturing companies were enticed to the region. However, because state governments were encouraged to downsize their public works, there was a big push towards a private carceral system. This new industrial complex found small communities perfect for 'setting up shop', as the vast majority of these locations were desperate for work. Because of this desperation, governments were willing to fulfill any needs or wants that corporations like the CCA or GEO Group would possibly possess. In doing so, government on all levels were willing to pay millions of taxpayer dollars to private entities that would not have to answer to anyone but themselves. This caused a vicious cycle of the public sectors encouraging the private sector to take more responsibilities; however, because the private prisons are for-profit institutions, there was little need for these corporations to give back to the towns in which they were located. This meant that the only privately run business, in towns like

Whiteville and Wheelwright, was draining millions of taxpayer dollars without giving anything back to the community while the government was not only letting it happen, but they were also encouraging it.

Freedom and Privatization: An Inherent Contradiction

There are a couple of things that I want to point out here. The United States was founded on the principles of freedom. This freedom meant that people⁴⁷ were able to do and create whatever they wanted. This led down the path of the American Dream, which cemented the ideals of capitalism concretely into how the United States operates in the modern era. The ‘pull yourself up by your own bootstraps’ or individualistic approach to economic, social, and political mobility and development pushed American politicians towards neoliberal policy that would create a toxic dichotomy between the public and private sector. Rather than simply encourage people and communities to build private businesses the complimented and coincided with government agencies, the public sector often defunded and closed their doors to social services, making social programs no longer available through government. This is important because, as I have shown, private corporations are not ‘for the people.’ They are set up to maintain the ideals of the American Dream, set up to profit a select few as opposed to working towards leveling the playing field. When we put private corporations in charge of taking care of citizens’ social wellbeing, it should be obvious that it would, did, and still does end poorly.

⁴⁷ The word ‘people’ is subjective to the time period and the place a person is talking about. Since the inception of the nation, people meant wealthy, white men. As the nation has moved through time, the definition of what it means to be a part of the ‘people’ group has changed and has *slowly* become more inclusive. That being said, there is still *much* further to go.

That being said, because our country was founded on the ideals of freedom, capitalism, individual values, it would be naïve to think that private corporations would not want to be a part of the social service sector. However, there needs to be a sort of checks and balance system put in place; because this country was founded on the notion of freedom, that meant that every governmental system was given a way to be checked. That needs to be true for our private institutions, especially when the United States gives these private corporations the power of taking care of its citizens. If we look at private prisons, there needs to be a way to check corporations like the CCA. If the government gives millions of dollars the CCA for a prison, then the taxpayers should be privy to what their money was spent on. If the CCA promises development of region and takes money from the region based off these promises, then the CCA should have to develop that town. These are not hard things to do. This is accountability. These corporations have taken an extremely vulnerable subgroup of American people and forced them into a modern day form of slavery. I am not naïve in thinking that this country can move away from private institutions, but if we continue to move down current path, many people will suffer and continue to live in underdeveloped and underserved manners of life.

What Happens in Appalachia Can No Longer Stay in Appalachia?

Appalachians have borne the brunt of unchecked privatization in the country. They have been left to fend for themselves. In many places this fight has been against both the private and public sectors of life in this mountainous region. If we look closely at Kentucky, a state that was demolished by private coal companies, we can see a small group of people

fighting back against the impending prison boom that is fixing to take over the rest of the state.⁴⁸ Chapter 2 discussed Hal Rogers, a Kentucky state representative who was actively pushing for yet another Kentucky private prison. He wanted this specific prison because it would generate over 444 million dollars for the state. This money, of course, would be going to his associates, family, and friends, but to the outside eye, Hal Rogers would have been raking in almost half a billion dollars.

However, he met with opposition. Appalachians, not the government that was set to serve and protect the region or the private institution that promised development, set out to ensure that this prison was not built. Tom Sexton, a native Kentucky environmental activist, and eight of his fellow colleagues led the charge. This would soon grow into the Letcher Governance Project (LGP) that was running various campaigns such as #Our444Million, a twitter movement where Kentucky residents tweeted out how they would spend \$444 million to help their community, or “Prisons are not Innovation” rallies. These grassroots movements would help stall the prison and call attention to the severe lack of development that occurred nearly *four decades* after the first private prison was inducted into Appalachia. Development, industrialization, a booming economy; that was what private corporations and governments promised Appalachia. However, that was not the case. By using social media platforms, the LGP was able to call nationwide attention to

⁴⁸ According to Adler-Bell, Kentucky has seen an increase of thirty-nine percent in the number of inmates that are currently residing in the state (Adler-Bell, 2019).

an issue that their government and the private corporation that is located in the region were actively sweeping under the rug.

In talking about this movement that occurred in Kentucky, it is important to note the various aspects that I did not cover in the above chapters. The private prison industrial complex, and the prison system in general for that matter, have long been under public scrutiny. There has been a plethora of federal and state mandates that have increased the prison population. These various acts have disproportionately affected communities of color, poor neighborhoods, LGBTQIA+ groups, people who experience homelessness, and other marginalized groups. This has been done through the War on Drugs which unequally policed heroin, a drug that historically ripped through poor black communities, as opposed to cocaine, which was considered a 'white person' drug (DuVernay, 2016). The 'No Child Left Behind Act', enacted by President George Bush, underfunded poor minority communities which led to the school to prison pipeline. Another example is racialized policing practices which have gained national attention through the Black Lives Matter movement. These are important to note because black and brown and other marginalized bodies are policed at higher rate, and these are the bodies that are forced into Appalachian territories and relegated to slave labor through the prison system. This mashup of overlapping urban crises and rural poverty would have been a powerful example for urban studies of the inextricable links between urban and rural development crises, but time prevented me from further research for exploring this angle.

Another key factor that I must draw attention to is the environmental devastation that comes from the private prison system in Appalachia. Because private prisons are for

profit institutions, they look for the cheapest land to build upon. This land, in rural Appalachia, is land that has been blown up, mined, and subsequently flattened. One private carceral institution, Big Sandy, was built upon land that had undergone this mountain top removal. Over \$174 million dollars went into building this prison. Now, the prison is “sinking into the blast-softened earth” and still accepting prison (Adler-Bell, 2019: 6). Aside from these strictly Appalachian environmental problems, prisons also produce a surplus of waste, trash, and pesticide runoff and the amount of power to heat and cool such monstrous buildings is astronomical ("Background on mass incarceration and the environment", n.d.). Had there been further time beyond the window of time provided for a one-semester thesis, I would have been able to explore these environmental consequences more thoroughly – potentially through reference to urban political ecology.

There are probably many more factors that I have not mentioned in the thesis; however these two problems that I see with mass incarceration in Appalachia, and in the broader United States context, are issues that are worth exploring and would be the next place I would look towards when answering the question of how Appalachian private prisons affect development in the region. As we look towards changing these public and private pushes towards mass incarceration, we have to begin by looking at what the policies and neoliberal practices were based on. Were they based in capitalistic freedom (which would be problematic enough) or in much darker realms of racism, misogyny, or homophobia? As we look towards actual alleviating the detrimental effects of private prisons in Appalachia, we must also look at how the problem reached such massive heights.

Call and Response

Thousands of Appalachians like Tom Sexton, Elizabeth Catte, bell hooks, and Frank X. Walker have called attention to Appalachia. Rather than continually define and place a stigma of 'otherness' on the region, these activists have led us down a different path. Appalachia has continually been used. Used for its resources, used for its labor force, used for its natural environment, and used based solely off of the fact that it could be used.

In the introduction of this piece, I pondered the question of why Appalachia has been labelled "Trump Country." Why did the vast majority of people in the Appalachian states vote for the Republican party in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential election? While there have been many nuanced and researched responses to this, I have an idea of my own, built from this research. Appalachia has been brutalized by both the private industry and the government. Appalachians have seen countless coal restrictions⁴⁹ from the government; they have seen private corporations' boom and bust in their backyards; they have seen failure on both sides of the public versus private dichotomy. So, when a man comes in and says that he has gamed the system, that he has been able to trick both sides into making him rich, it is no wonder that this region was excited about the prospect.

However, Trump's presidency and his defeat in 2020 was a call to action. Rather than meet Appalachians with mistrust, superiority and, at times, hatred, Americans must look at what *Americans* in other regions of the country have been able to do riding off the back of Appalachians. I do not want to glorify a region that has a long racist, misogynistic and

⁴⁹ Under the Obama administration, the EPA placed restrictions on coal production. While this did affect some of the mines in Appalachia, the vast majority of coal jobs had already conceded to automation and were already lost by the time these restrictions were put in place.

bigoted past, but I think it is important to understand how Appalachia appears to be so different from many other parts of the country. In the Adler-Bell reading, the author makes an exceptional point that I wish to highlight: “Generations of miners sacrificed their lungs and limbs to King Coal. But prison work was not just hard on the body; it was bad for the human soul to be responsible for another person’s unfreedom” (Adler-Bell, 2019: 3). The United States has consistently, for centuries, pushed the ugly and bad into Appalachia. Now it is the country’s job to aid and support in the development and progress of this beautiful region.

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