

Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South. By Alex Lichtenstein (New York, Verso, 1996) 254 pp. \$65.00 cloth \$18.95 paper

Applying to the postbellum South the Marxist penological assumption that legal punishment is "distinct from, and relatively unconnected with, crime," Lichtenstein's deeply researched, well-written book contends that convict leasing and the chain gang "played a central role" in the development of the southern economy and the region's race relations (253, xviii). Although relying heavily on slavery's whips and chains, both of these attempts to economize on prison costs were fostered, according to Lichtenstein, not by benighted southern reactionaries but by "progressives," often from outside the region and often connected with the national government. African-American prisoners kept the coal, brick, and turpentine industries in Georgia (the focus of the study) profitable before 1908, when the abolition of leasing convicts to private companies became a major "progressive reform." Thereafter, the chain gang—overwhelmingly black but with an increasing percentage of whites in the 1920s—was essential in the expanding and paving of rural roads that were necessary for the commercial, industrial, and agricultural development of the state.

Both forms of convict labor helped to discipline blacks in the prison system and, by example, those outside as well, to work hard and accept white supremacy. Because there were too few convicts to drain the agricultural labor supply and because threats of incarceration discouraged agricultural workers from breaking contracts or appropriating disputable property, convict labor (cheap, non-union, immobile, and not very skilled) accommodated the needs of extractive industries without disturbing labor relations in plantation agriculture. This accommodation, Lichtenstein contends, "helped forge the peculiar New South 'Bourbon' political alliance" (xv). In stressing the discontinuity between the antebellum and postbellum periods and the connection between "modern" economic and political systems, the peculiarly southern institution of forced labor outside prison walls, and harshly discriminatory race relations, Lichtenstein's interpretation complements the classic view of Woodward.¹

Antebellum southern prisons housed a small number of whites (245 was the maximum in Georgia at any one time); slaves were usually disciplined privately. After the Civil War, however, southern state prison

populations became almost wholly black. The Radical Reconstruction government, strapped for revenues, followed a recommendation of its conservative predecessor and leased out convicts, most often to rebuild and extend railroads. But the Republican regime in Georgia lasted for only three years. Despite Lichtenstein's attempt to blame the Radicals, it was the Democratic "Redeemers" who fastened the system on the state and developed it with long-term leases that enabled several of their prominent supporters, through brutal and often deadly exploitation of leased prisoners, to become very rich. Under the Redeemers, the number of African-American convicts in Georgia nearly doubled in four years and more than tripled in nine. Despite documentation of abuses in numerous investigations by legislative committees, prison boards, grand juries, and popular exposés, the leasing system did not end until labor unions, opposed to competition from convict labor, joined farmers, shippers, and engineers—all of whom expected to profit from improving highways—as well as the United States government's Office of Public Roads, in pressing to replace private with public exploitation of forced prison labor.

Convincing up to a point, Lichtenstein's book overstates his case for the importance of convict labor. Southern industrialization lagged behind the nation's as a whole; convict labor played little role in the two largest southern industries—lumber and textiles; the largely unskilled convicts' inefficiency discouraged technical progress in the industries in which they worked; and even in such industries as coal mining in Alabama, convicts made up only 10 to 15 percent of the labor force in the 1890s. Although the injustice system was blatantly racially discriminatory, the Georgia state prison system held only 2,300 African-Americans in 1909, less than 1 percent of the state's black males between fifteen and sixty years old. It was merely a part of the extensive web of Jim Crow and disfranchisement laws.

Lichtenstein could also have been more systematic in his treatment of the political mechanics of the initiation, continuation, and abolition of convict leasing, as well as in his treatment of why so few of the many investigations of leasing and the chain gang seemed to have had any effect. Nonetheless, this important revisionist work should have a place on the reading list of every historian of the South. American race relations, or prisons.

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1. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951).