

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Ricciardelli, Rose and Peters, Adrienne M.F (Eds.). *After Prison: Navigating Employment and Reintegration*. Wilfred Laurier University Press. 2017. 280 pp., \$31.99 (9781771123167)

Rose Ricciardelli's and Adrienne Peters' book *After Prison* provides a nuanced approach to understanding the overwhelming employment hardships that ex-prisoners face upon release. Indeed, *After Prison* comprises 11 wide-ranging chapters and themes that detail the unique hardships ex-prisoners face in securing employment, from ex-prisoner James Young who navigates the job market challenges post-release to the unique experiences that 70 homeless and oftentimes male ex-prisoners face in Winnipeg, Manitoba and Chicago Illinois (Spencer, Chapter 10). In keeping with previous studies (Visser, Debus, and Yahner, 2008; Visser, Debus-Sherill, Yahner 2011), Ricciardelli and Peter analyze how ex-prisoners navigate a series of structural constraints, including their social stigmas, mental illnesses, poverty, substance abuse, and lack of work experience and education.

After Prison empirically draws from the Canadian and American contexts to explain how ex-prisoners navigate the job market, and societal forces more generally. For instance, Harmon, Hickman, and Arneson et al. (Chapter 6), Spencer (Chapter 10), and Peters (Chapter 8) highlight the unique challenges that adult and youth ex-prisoners respectively experience when they balance their social stigmas as ex-prisoners, their lack of work and educational experience, their mental illnesses, and their need to find the only accessible employment opportunity to them: low-paying and short-term contract positions. Indeed, low-paying, undesirable employment opportunities afforded to ex-prisoners represents an overwhelming barrier given that ex-prisoners must overcome waking up early, work long hours with little or no employee benefits, interact with a series of different and sometimes challenging personalities at work, and travel exceptionally long distances via public transit. Although such practices are routine for typical employees, many ex-prisoners often have little or no previous experiences working such jobs and they can routinely make several hundreds of dollars per day selling drugs on the streets, with limited

effort. To put things into perspective, ex-prisoners are expected to reform themselves as ‘respectable law-abiding and employed citizens’ in a short period post-release, despite having never been previously employed in a legitimate environment. Moreover, ex-prisoners must make drastic new lifestyle changes while dealing with overwhelming histories of victimization, substance abuse and mental illnesses, a lack of programming opportunities before they leave prison, an absence of familial and friend role models who work in the formal economy, and entire sectors of the economy who refuse to hire them.

Ricciardelli’s and Mooney’s (Chapter 5) brilliant comparison between the social pariah status of ex-prisoners and Agamben’s (1998) concept of the *homo sacer* provides the necessary theoretical foundation for the book. The *homo sacer* refers to the Ancient Roman practice of excluding a series of citizens of their political and social existence (*bios*). The *homo sacer* is permitted to live in the city and must follow the laws, but they are not protected by the sovereign’s decrees – other citizens can kill them without facing punishment (Dunford, 2016). In the present context, former prisoners are excluded from the same employment opportunities afforded to other individuals (and a series of societal benefits more generally), former prisoners have a series of parole conditions that they must follow to avoid being sent back to prison, and employers and employees use their *criminal records* to discriminate against them and designate them as the criminal other. The Harper government’s *Safe Streets and Communities Act* (2012), which increased the waiting period for criminal record suspensions (formerly pardons) for summary and indictable offenses from 3-to-5 years and 5-to-10 years respectively, provides empirical support that the Canadian government designates ex-prisoners (and those with criminal records) as unworthy of having a job (Chapter 4). In the unlikely event that employers consider hiring ex-prisoners, employers typically only hire former prisoners to work low-paying contract jobs, and ex-prisoners face the constant stress of being fired or let go if their fellow employees and managers find out about the details of their previous crimes – even crimes they committed during early adulthood (e.g. James Young in Chapter 1). In summary, Ricciardelli’s and Mooney’s argument draws similar parallels to the *homo sacer* given that contemporary ex-prisoners are denied the same benefits and rights afforded to non-prisoners.

Overall, Ricciardelli and Peters present a nuanced engagement into the unique, compounding inequalities and challenges that ex-offenders face when they strive to find work in the legal economy. Although their work is impressive, it also suffers from a common,

yet important drawback. Their work, like most research that deals with prisoners, almost exclusively focuses on male prisoners, despite a large Canadian literature that highlights the overwhelming intersectional inequalities and life hardships of female prisoners (Comack, 1996; Comack and Brickley, 2007; Pollack, 2009). Indeed, existing studies highlight how female ex-prisoners suffer from more acute hardships than their male counterparts post-release, including their search for employment. Despite this reservation, this book nonetheless provides an important contribution to the literature and I highly recommend it to students, professors, and criminal justice practitioners. This book provides a nuanced, in-depth investigation into the acute challenges of former prisoners.

University of Alberta

David Tyler Dunford

REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press.
- Comack, E. (1996). *Women in Trouble: Connecting Women's Law Violations to Their Histories of Abuse*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Comack, E., Brickley, S. (2007). Constituting the Violence of Criminalized Women. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 1-36.
- Dunford, David, T. (2016). Legal Nominalism: A Reconceptualization of Post-9/11 Legal Complexes. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* 49, 1-11.
- Pollack, S. (2009). "I'm Just Not Good in Relationships:" Victimization Discourses and the Gendered Regulation of Criminalized Women. *Feminist Criminology* 2(2), 158-174.

David Tyler Dunford is a Ph.D. student in sociology at the University of Alberta. His research interests include social theory, ethnographic studies on street-level drug dealing, and empirical studies detailing the lives of women in prison. His work has been published in the *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, and the *Canadian Review of Sociology*. He is currently working on his dissertation (and a series of manuscripts) that is focused on how female prisoners exercise agency and smuggle and sell drugs inside three Western Canadian provincial prisons.

Email: tdunford@ualberta.ca

