

Private prison Undercover

Journalist Shane Bauer has written a book about his four months inside as a security guard and the shameful legacy of prison labor

BY EMILY GREEN
SENIOR STAFF REPORTER

There are few pretenses under which it's considered ethical for a journalist to go undercover.

Shane Bauer used Poynter's criteria as a basis for weighing his decision: It has to be in the public interest. It has to be the only way to get the information, and any harm that might be prevented must outweigh harm that could be caused.

With 130,000 people held in America's privately run, state and federal prisons, there is a vested public interest in understanding how they operate. Because the companies that run these prisons keep their business practices and operations secret, it's nearly impossible for reporters to find out what goes on within their walls. Inmate accounts suggest these prisons are operating in a dangerous and inhumane way, but there's no way to verify inmate accounts without being able to see inside.

And Bauer was up to the task. Just three years earlier, he was a prisoner himself. He was held

captive in Iran for two years after he and his friends unknowingly came too close to the Iranian border while vacationing in Kurdistan.

So in 2014, Bauer went to work as a prison guard at a privately-run prison in Winnfield, La. He used his real name, job history and employer when he applied for the position.

For a period of four months, he worked at Winn Correctional Center, often bringing with him a hidden camera and recording device. The resulting exposé in Mother Jones magazine won the National Magazine Award for Best Reporting, but Bauer wasn't finished telling his story.

His full account appears in his book, "American Prison: A Reporter's Undercover Journey into the Business of Punishment," and Bauer will be at Powell's City of Books at 1005 W Burnside on Wednesday, Sept. 26 at 7:30 p.m. to talk about it.



Shane Bauer

PHOTO BY TED ELY

Released this month by Penguin Press, "American Prison" weaves Bauer's shocking experience as a guard with the brutal history of America's penitentiary system as he explores the evolution of using inmates for profit.

Street Roots spoke with Bauer in advance of his visit to Portland.

Emily Green: A national prison strike recently made headlines, and just last night in Portland, three protesters were arrested during a demonstration in front of a hospital (OHSU) they said is using prison labor to wash its linens for as little as 5 cents an hour. I was hoping you could put modern-day prison labor in context. Are today's inmate laborers similar to American prison laborers of the past?

Shane Bauer: There's a long history of the use of prisoners for labor in the United States, from the very beginning of the prison system.

The first penitentiaries in the U.S. in the late 18th century were essentially textile factories, and they were intended to turn a profit from the very beginning. A couple decades into the creation of the penitentiary system, these penitentiaries were actually making money for states through the use of inmate labor.

This labor changed over time. Before the Civil War, in the South, prisoners were being used to make clothes and shoes for slaves at reduced prices for the plantations who owned slaves. After slavery ended, prisoners were used to replace slave labor.

For all intents and purposes, prisoners in the South for decades after slavery, remained slaves. They worked on plantations, they were whipped, and they were often tortured for not working and for not meeting quotas. They worked in coal mines for huge companies, like the U.S. Steel Company, and the work was so brutal and they were driven so hard that they actually died at a much higher rate than slaves did before the Civil War. Annual death rates in the South ranged from 16 percent to 25 percent of all convicts. It was a brutal system, and even after this period of convict leasing, where states were leasing prisoners to private business and private companies, states themselves bought plantations and were forcing prisoners to work on plantations. States were actually adding money into their treasuries from these prisons, so it was baked into the prison system that prisoners would be forced to work, and it was a money-making venture for states.



MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY - MISSISSIPPI STATE PENITENTIARY (PARCHMAN) PHOTO COLLECTIONS

Above, Convict labor with the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, Miss., 1911.

Today, prisons are not bringing in money, they cost states a lot of money. But this kind of model of prison labor, while it may not be as brutal as it was in the 19th century, is still intended to offset the costs of running prisons. Without unpaid or very poorly paid prison labor, a lot of these prisons wouldn't be functioning. They are completely dependent on prisoners to run them.

E.G.: Corrections Corporation of America, now CoreCivic, which runs the prison you worked at, was co-founded by Terrel Don Hutto. Why was it important to detail his background in your book?

S.B.: Hutto, in many ways in his CoreCivic career, is a link between the past of American prisons and the present of this new form of profiting from prison labor.

When I dug into Hutto's past, I learned that he started his career running a prison plantation where inmates picked cotton in an area the size of Manhattan. I found photos of the plantations that he ran, and they looked like you would imagine a slave plantation to look like: White men on horseback, standing over black men hunched over in a field, dragging bags of cotton.

I tried to find any kind of information I could about what life was like on these plantations, and I found a memoir from a neighboring plantation where a man described being hung by handcuffs when he didn't make his cotton quotas. I found evidence later of life under Hutto and other plantation owners where inmates would be put on the hood of a truck and driven at high speeds through the plantation if they weren't meeting quotas. There were people who were in plantations at that time who were electrocuted if they were not meeting quotas. This is shocking to me that this was happening in the 1960s and 1970s.

Hutto also lived on the plantation and had a houseboy - an inmate who almost always was black - who would serve him and his family, make their beds, cook their food. He lived this life that resembles the life, in many ways, of a slave owner 100 years earlier.

What was also significant about him is that he later ran the Arkansas prison system, which was entirely made of plantations, and he ran that system at a profit to the state. As far as I know, he was the last person to run state-run public prisons at a profit.

IF YOU GO

What: Shane Bauer, author of "American Prison: A Reporter's Undercover Journey into the Business of Punishment."

Where: Powell's City of Books at 1005 W Burnside

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 26

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