

Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South. By Alex Lichtenstein (London and New York: Verso, 1996. xix plus 264pp. \$18.95/paperback).

Alex Lichtenstein's provocative and powerfully written book may well settle the old "continuity debate," that is, the historiographical controversy over just how new the New South was. While to some, this may seem like a tired issue, Lichtenstein brings to it a fresh perspective, innovative research, and the conviction that what happened in the past matters a great deal to the present. To anyone trying to understand why a disproportionate number of African Americans occupy prison cells today, *Twice the Work of Free Labor* is essential reading. Lichtenstein's analysis of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century criminal (in)justice system manages to be both timely and to lay an old debate to rest.

C. Vann Woodward was, of course, one of the leading proponents of the discontinuity thesis, arguing in *Origins of the New South* that the Civil War and Reconstruction unseated the old planter elite, enthroning in its place a new, thoroughly bourgeois, class of merchants and industrialists. The 1970s produced a wave of revisionism, led by Jonathan Wiener. These "new-abolitionists," or "new continuarians," as Woodward dubbed them, insisted that New South society has strayed little from its old ways. Like the old regime, these historians argued, postbellum southern society was built on unfree agricultural labor and antipathy toward industrial development. These historians took convict labor, sharecropping, and debt peonage as signs of slavery's lasting legacy. Moreover, they believed that southern planters' willingness to resort to forced labor was the key to the persistence of economic underdevelopment in the South.

While historians on both sides of the continuity debate presumed the basic incompatibility of forced labor and capitalism—and therefore believed that where one thrived the other had to be failing—Lichtenstein rejects the notion of a dichotomy between the modern and anti-modern South. Instead, he links the region's "most appalling features"—in this case the convict lease system and the chain gang system that replaced it—"to the process of modernization itself." (p. xvi)

Focusing on Georgia, but making forays into the mines of Alabama and Tennessee and down the roads of North Carolina, Lichtenstein forcefully demonstrates that, while convict labor was the New South institution most like slavery, it was also the institution most vital to economic development in the New South. From the very outset of Reconstruction to the Great Depression, forced penal labor was the darling, not just of backward-looking planters anxious to resurrect slavery, but of the chief proponents of progress—the New South champions of industry, efficiency, and reform. Convict labor helped these new industrialists to solve their two greatest problems: the scarcity of capital and the militance and mobility of free black labor.

Although historians have focused on the leasing of convicts to plantation owners, and Hollywood films have depicted the degradation of penal farms, most convicts labored in industry not agriculture, according to Lichtenstein. Convicts were the vanguard of New South capitalism, for they labored in the

industries that were just forming or expanding during Reconstruction: railroad construction, coal mining, brickmaking, and the processing of turpentine and lumber. Indeed, planters often lost out to industrialists in the competition to lease convicts.

Still, Lichtenstein argues, planters too were served by this "system of forced labor in an age of emancipation." (p. 3) Planters could wield the threat of convict labor as a weapon against sharecroppers who might be thinking of breaking their labor contracts; against day laborers who complained of low wages; or against any outspoken soul who threatened the racial caste system. When mere threats failed, planters could call upon the penal system to remove those who dared resist the bonds of debt, low wages, or white supremacy to convict camps in parts unknown. These camps were likely to be in areas where the population was predominantly white and, therefore, where black convicts could be easily identified and controlled.

Thus the convict lease system served three interests. For industrialists it was a system of recruitment, control, and exploitation. For planters it acted as an indirect form of labor discipline and a very direct weapon in the war for racial order. For state officials it obviated the need for prisons, fostered economic growth, and generated revenue (once employers began to outbid each other in the competition for convicts). White law breakers surely benefitted too as all-white juries would often acquit white defendants, rather than have them labor alongside black convicts.

While Lichtenstein includes an excellent chapter on prisoners' largely unsuccessful efforts to control the pace of their labor, this is less a labor history than a political economy of convict labor, as the title suggests. There are more than a few horror stories scattered about the text, but Lichtenstein "deliberately eschewed writing an exposé of the horrors of the convict-lease and chain gang (as if such was needed)." (p. xvii) Given the fact that several states have recently revived the chain gang, and most voters seem to be clamoring for more, not less, draconian punishments for those convicted of crimes, more reminders of penal slavery's "most appalling features" may well have been needed. Still, this is a book that students and scholars should read. Especially if it were assigned alongside first-hand accounts or cinematic treatments of prison labor, *Twice the Work of Free Labor* would be an ideal text for undergraduate and graduate classes in southern, African-American, and labor history. It should be required reading for anyone interested in the history of prisons or in criminal justice in the United States.

The College of William & Mary

Cindy Hahamovitch

Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps. By William Dushinberre (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. xiv plus 556pp. \$55.00).

This book is a thoroughly researched, well-written work. It focuses upon several very large estates owned by two family dynasties during the nineteenth century: the Manigaults and the Allstons. It devotes a great deal of attention to these