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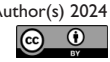

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# (Doing) Time Is Money: Confinement, Prison Work and the Reproduction of Carceral Capitalism

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## Abstract

This article examines how prison work functions as a site where neoliberal and carceral capitalist logics are reproduced across individual, organisational and societal levels. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in a private UK prison, we argue that confinement exacerbates prisoners' obsession with money and predatory entrepreneurialism, reflecting and reinforcing the broader dynamics of carceral capitalism at each level. By analysing these interconnected dynamics, we demonstrate how incarceration perpetuates these logics. Furthermore, we illustrate how prison work perpetuates neoliberal exploitation, surveillance and control, hindering rehabilitation and societal reintegration. Our analysis underscores the need for a comprehensive reassessment of the Prison Industrial Complex. We conclude that rather than viewing prisoners as a captive audience for reproducing carceral capitalism, prisons should be reimagined to prioritise the humanity of those impacted by the criminal justice system and to create alternative models of accountability and social transformation.

## Keywords

carceral capitalism, confinement, ethnography, money, prison work

## Introduction

In an era where the expansion of the carceral state is prioritised over the wellbeing of its citizens, the prison system emerges not just as a site of punishment, but as a powerful instrument of economic exploitation and social control. This dynamic is particularly evident in the UK, where funding is being increased to create space for

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additional prisoners in the biggest prison-building programme in more than a century (Ministry of Justice, 2021). While public services continue to be plagued by austerity and underfunding, the UK is spending more on prisons than any other European country apart from Russia (Bulman, 2021). And yet, research is showing that this funding is not being directed to prisoners' health and wellbeing (Ismail, 2020) but instead this increase is most likely the result of longer prison sentences and prison expansion (Bulman, 2021; Ministry of Justice, 2022). Such ideologically driven trends reinforce the extent and capability of a state to detain, manage and control individuals through its penal or correctional system – its 'carceral capacity' (Schoenfeld, 2018: 4). They also explicate why we anchor our argument in Althusser's (1971) theories on ideological apparatuses and Wang's (2018) concept of carceral capital. While Althusser's work reveals how cultural institutions reproduce the dominant ideology, carceral capitalism refers to the way in which the criminal justice system punishes and oppresses the already vulnerable and marginalised, while simultaneously profiting from this process.

In this article, we examine the hidden workforce in privately contracted prison work and argue that, as prison workers, prisoners enter a system of beliefs and values. Our argument is not that prison work forms prisoners' beliefs and values, but that it reinforces them in such a way as to foreclose possibilities. For this reason, we argue that prison work reproduces carceral capitalism which in turn underpins the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). Davis (1998) highlights how the PIC transforms social issues and human suffering into profit, while Smith and Hattery (2010) suggest it is indicative of a systemic addiction to incarceration. We understand the PIC as the expanding entanglement of governmental and private interests in the prison system, emphasising its economic significance to external organisations and businesses. In this article, we note how the PIC perpetuates poverty, criminalisation and social injustice without addressing root causes by confining prisoners within a neoliberal ideological framework and curtailing their opportunities for rehabilitation and societal reintegration upon release.

Previous work has highlighted how prison work suffers from a lack of rehabilitative potential (Pandeli et al., 2019), often being disguised as therapy while functioning as disciplinary governance and labour extraction (Hatton, 2024). Consequently, it is understood how rebuilding one's life after incarceration is challenging (van den Broek et al., 2021), which forces researchers to confront the true nature of prison work – as salvation, servitude (van Zyl Smit and Dunkel, 2018), or something else? In this research, we examine prisoners' obsession with capital accumulation. We interrogate its link to neoliberalism which, through the sociomaterial conditions of their confinement, positions them and their incarceration as commodities to be bought and sold.

The literature on prison work sits in the broader context of research on prisons (Jewkes et al., 2016), prisoners (Pandeli et al., 2019; Toyoki and Brown, 2014), prison staff (Mikkelsen, 2022), punishment (Resnik et al., 2020; Sim, 2009), rehabilitation and integration (Farchi et al., 2022; van den Broek et al., 2021), and probation (Kirton and Guillaume, 2019). Wider socio-political discourses of law and order (Cooper and Taylor, 2005) further establish how states reinforce their carceral capacity through prison work. This literature is enriched by an academic focus on carceral capitalism (e.g. Hernández et al., 2015; Schoenfeld, 2018; Wang, 2018), which illuminates how neoliberal ideology reinforces capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, colonialism, racism, ableism and white

supremacy (Ware et al., 2014: 163). We contribute to these debates by analysing how confinement reinforces prisoners' beliefs and values; also, how this further marginalises them by fuelling their obsession with money and predatory entrepreneurialism.

We base our analysis on data co-created with prisoners in a UK prison. Using carceral capital and state apparatuses as analytical lenses, we contribute to existing literature by focusing on three key areas. First, the intensification of prisoners' preoccupation with money as a reflection of broader carceral capitalism. Second, the impact of confinement on prisoners, exacerbating neoliberal exploitation, surveillance and control. And third, the potential for reimagining alternative models of accountability and social transformation within the PIC. Our study underscores the human dimensions of these dynamics, particularly as they pertain to the rehabilitation and societal reintegration of prisoners.

At this point it is worth noting that the term 'prisoner' is a contested term that has the potential to dehumanise individuals. There is still much debate on the most appropriate terminology to use, with negative connotations tied to alternative terms, also; as such, the term prisoner is used until a consensus is reached on a more humanising term. In the meantime, we acknowledge that this term may not be ideal.

## Literature review

Carceral capitalism operates at multiple levels, intertwining neoliberal ideals – such as individualism, entrepreneurship and consumption – with the PIC. At the societal level, this manifests in the expansion and privatisation of prisons, driven by neoliberal economic policies. Organisationally, the PIC employs surveillance, policing and imprisonment to reproduce these practices, aligning them with the interests of private profit. On an individual level, prisoners internalise these neoliberal logics, viewing their incarceration and work through the lens of personal responsibility and entrepreneurial ambition, thereby perpetuating the system that exploits them. This challenges the belief that increased levels of crime are the 'root cause of mounting prison populations' and points to 'ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit' (Davis, 2003: 84).

Goldberg and Evans (1998) argue that prisons traditionally serve an ideological function, reinforcing a fear of crime and demonising criminals. Terrill et al. (2019: 27) dig deeper into the structural implications of imprisonment, applying Althusserian theory to reveal prisons as 'ideologically ambiguous instruments of state authority'. This ambiguity lies in prisons' dual role: overtly, they are tools for public safety and justice, while covertly, they serve to reinforce state power and maintain social and economic hierarchies through the dissemination of specific ideologies. Such an analysis not only underscores the complexity of carceral institutions as pillars of carceral capitalism but also highlights their function in cementing neoliberal governance – where the punitive management of social problems masks deeper ideological and structural objectives.

Viewing carceral capitalism as entangled with racial capitalism offers a way to better understand the enduring and pervasive racial inequalities within capitalist societies. This intersectional lens reveals the PIC not only as a mechanism of societal control but also as a major conduit for the economic exploitation of marginalised communities. In this exploitation, and central to accumulation, is the role of coercion (Baptist, 2014; Bhattacharyya, 2018). Wang (2018: 122) argues that intersectionality renders people

susceptible to 'hyper exploitation and expropriation in the economic domain and vulnerable to premature death in the political and social domains'. This vulnerability is a direct result of the ways in which carceral capitalism and racial capitalism interconnect, illuminating the exploitative nature of these systems. Further, carceral strategies are entangled with, and indeed propel, the imperatives of global capitalism, thereby nourishing the infrastructure of the PIC: in this, we see 'how carceral techniques of the state are shaped by – and work in tandem with – the imperatives of global capitalism' (Wang, 2018: 69).

Central to carceral capitalism is the commodification of confinement within an industry profiting from incarceration. Wang (2018) shows how incarceration is driven by financial motives, but also relies on racism and neoliberalism (e.g. poverty equated to moral failure, success achieved through meritocracy) to function. Confinement creates opportunities for profit, as private companies are contracted to provide a range of services within prisons, including food, healthcare and communication. These companies operate with little oversight, leading to issues of exploitation and abuse. This profit orientation encourages higher incarceration rates over addressing root causes like education or mental health. Rather than rehabilitating and reintegrating, the PIC perpetuates stigmatisation and marginalisation (Alexander, 2010: 12) and impedes the advancement of the most disadvantaged people (Western, 2006). Carceral capitalism, therefore, serves as a critical lens for analysing these confinement practices and their ramifications.

Wacquant (2010: 205) voices the crucial role that ideology plays in upholding and legitimising carceral capitalism, arguing that the prison is a core political institution and not just an economic one. He argues that the widening of the 'penal dragnet' under neoliberalism has been discriminating, predominantly effecting 'the denizens of the lower regions of social, ethnoracial and physical space' despite bursts of corporate crime. He argues that this demonstrates that penalisation is not blind, it does not affect all people fairly and equally:

> It is a skewed technique proceeding along sharp gradients of class, ethnicity, and place, and it operates to divide populations and to differentiate categories according to established conceptions of moral worth. (Wacquant, 2010: 205)

This view provides an analytic for understanding how the ideologies embedded within the PIC perpetuate and legitimise the inequities inherent in carceral capitalism. According to Wacquant (2010), prevailing interpretations of neoliberalism often limit themselves to an economic focus, highlighting market-friendly policies such as labour deregulation, capital mobility and reductions in public spending. However, this interpretation falls short by aligning too closely with the rhetoric of neoliberal proponents. Wacquant (2010: 213) argues for an expanded understanding that goes beyond mere economic dimensions to identify the 'institutional machinery and symbolic frames through which neoliberal tenets are being actualized'. This reframing allows us to see neoliberalism not just as an economic doctrine, but as an all-encompassing ideological and institutional construct. It affects not only capital and markets, but also state policies, criminal justice practices and cultural discourses, thus shaping individual and collective life in complex ways.

Althusser (1971) understands ideology as a process of interpellation, whereby individuals are hailed as subjects and positioned within a particular social order. For him, the modern state is not just a collection of repressive state apparatuses (RSAs) but a plurality of apparatuses, including ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). ISAs function by ideology – not by repression – though the interaction of ISAs and RSAs is powerful and 'fits' people into society. This holds relevance for the PIC, where dominant ideologies around crime and punishment are reproduced and legitimised, thereby cementing existing power hierarchies (Hernández et al., 2015). This ideological work creates an illusion of a 'natural' or 'inevitable' social order, masking the uneven distribution of power and the contested nature of social relations. Understanding this process of interpellation as the workings of an ISA in conjunction with Wang's analysis of carceral capitalism, reveals how the profit-driven approach to incarceration is intertwined with neoliberal policies that prioritise profit over social welfare. Thus, the PIC acts as a vivid example of an ISA, where ideology produces a system that controls and commodifies human bodies, all under the guise of societal betterment.

Critical studies of the prison are typically familiar with how Foucault (1977) noted the emergence of a culture of incarceration from a culture of spectacle. Within this carceral culture, and rather than being conducted through public displays of torture, dismemberment and obliteration, punishment and discipline became internalised and directed towards the constitution and, when necessary, the rehabilitation of social subjects. This shift underscores a broader transformation in societal control mechanisms, aligning with the dynamics of carceral capitalism and its relationship with the PIC. However, it is Wang's analysis of the entanglement of carceral capitalism and the PIC that allows us to account more vividly for how economic incentives and ideologies fuel the growth of the PIC. The PIC acts, in Althusserian terms, as an apparatus through which the ideologies of carceral capitalism are implemented, demonstrating how neoliberal economic policies and capitalist motives profoundly shape the criminal justice system. The entanglement of the two entities is evident in their mutual reinforcement of a system that prioritises economic gain over human rights and social justice. Thus, this evolving carceral culture not only reflects a significant shift from physical to psychological modes of discipline but also highlights the prevailing ideology in which everything is economised – human beings become market actors and nothing but, every field of activity is seen as a market and every entity is governed as a firm (Brown, 2015). This analysis further illuminates the intricate interconnections between state power, economic objectives and social control within modern capitalist societies.

The insight afforded to us by Althusser and Wang equips us to better understand how prison work reproduces carceral capitalism and how prisoners become implicated in this, impacting on the potential for rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Previous research has explored the interplay of neoliberalism and material work conditions. For example, Tarrabain and Thomas (2022) explore how enterprise culture is crafted, dispersed and bears regulatory effects on individuals. They show how migrant agency workers readily identify with enterprising discourses to legitimise their competitive, individualistic behaviour. Musílek et al. (2023) advance this dialogue through their ethnographic examination of start-up entrepreneurs, highlighting how neoliberal norms are

intertwined with, and conditioned by, the material aspects of work and prospects. They advocate for more nuanced research that synthesises discourse analysis and materialist critique within the broader political economy of capitalism. In line with this, our article seeks to amalgamate the material experiences of incarcerated individuals with the ideological mechanisms that perpetuate their confinement. As Wacquant (2010: 204) states: 'penality is a protean force that is eminently fertile and must be given pride of place in the study of contemporary power'.

The following sections will analyse how these ideological and economic dynamics manifest in the lived experiences of prisoners. Through an ethnographic exploration, we reveal how carceral capitalism is reproduced not just structurally, but also through the everyday practices and beliefs of incarcerated individuals.

## Method

This article seeks to address the research question: How does prison work function as a tool for economic exploitation and what are the consequences for prisoners' rehabilitation and reintegration into society? The data presented in this article are based on a 10-month ethnography of a private prison in the UK conducted by the first author. Fieldwork involved observations and participation in the prison workshops, unstructured conversations and interactions with prisoners and prison employees, as well as 40 semi-structured interviews with prisoners. For transparency, the second author joined the project after the fieldwork had ended to engage in the headwork and text work (Van Maanen, 2011) of this ethnographic project. Ethical approval for this research was granted by Cardiff Business School's ethics committee.

### *Research setting*

The research site is a large male category B/C private prison in the UK. This prison was chosen for its status as a private-sector prison which contracts with commercial firms in the provision of in-prison-work for inmates. Once granted access, the researcher was provided with a set of keys allowing movement throughout the prison, except for the prisoners' cells. Most of the fieldwork took place in the Prison Industries Department, an area of the prison specifically designated for work and training (e.g. vocational training such as bricklaying and carpentry workshops and workshops for completing work sent in by outside organisations). This research focused mainly on five workshops where work for private companies was completed. Workshops 1–4 were identical in structure, each comprising 35 prisoners supervised by two instructors. In these workshops, prisoners undertook different types of unskilled work that included recycling computer parts, packing books for a publishing company and repackaging car parts and plumbing parts, as well as other similar activities. In Workshop 5, all the prison's recycling and waste disposal took place and was overseen by two instructors who supervised 12 prisoners. This was a smaller group constituted of prisoners who held enhanced status, meaning that they had qualified for certain privileges due to consistent good behaviour.

## *Data collection and participants*

Wacquant (2002) notes that observational studies of prisons seemed to disappear just as states moved towards programmes of mass incarceration. This research – its subject area, its participants, its political significance, as well as the lack of research on prison work – required a methodology that involved observing the day-to-day and providing voices to these individuals. An ethnographic approach was adopted, which required immersion and translation by the first author over an extended period: interacting with community members, observing, building relationships and participating in community life (Cunliffe, 2010). It was adopted mindfully that it is an 'approach rather than a method, a way of doing *and* writing, focused on understanding people, and as something that is inherently subjective that the ethnographer is inexorably weaved within' (Pandeli et al., 2022: 4, emphasis in original).

Data collection began in Autumn 2011, initiating a period of familiarisation with the prison and its inhabitants. Both participant and non-participant methods were used. Given the constraints – the first author being a cisgender woman and not incarcerated – the level of participation primarily involved engaging with work activities within the workshops and sitting and chatting with participants to experience some of their day-to-day experiences.

Interviews were conducted in 2012, once the research objectives were clearly communicated among prisoners, and the researcher was familiar with the work and participants to tailor the interview questions. A total of 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting between 20 and 90 minutes. Only three interviews were under 30 minutes; these shorter interviews were usually because the participant did not have strong opinions on prison work or they simply were not that interested in engaging or discussing this, primarily attending the interview for a break from the workshop. An interview schedule was used to maintain focus, but this schedule was used flexibly to allow participants the freedom to steer the conversations. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview participants were selected from the workshops and invited to participate during the fieldwork. It was explicitly stated that participation was voluntary, participants were fully informed of the research and its focus, and each participant provided written consent before being interviewed. All participants have been provided with pseudonyms to protect their identities. Interviewees' ages ranged from 18 to 56, and their prison sentences varied between one and eight years. Nearly half had been unemployed before coming to prison. Most had experience of labouring, construction and other types of blue-collar, primarily unskilled, work. However, there were exceptions: one had worked in an estate agent's office, another in a care home and another as a waiter. Nonetheless, these were all low-wage jobs. More than half of the participants (24 out of 40) had previous prison experiences.

## *Data analysis*

The analytical framework employed in this study was thematic analysis, a method adept at identifying and interpreting shared meanings and experiences within a dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The raw data were dissected into varying size chunks – words,

sentences and paragraphs that told us something specific in relation to a particular theme (Sutherland, 2022). Adopting an inductive approach, the study aimed to remain data-driven, identifying salient elements through a bottom-up approach (Van Maanen, 1988). However, it is important to acknowledge, in line with Braun and Clarke (2022), that no analytical process is entirely devoid of the researchers' interpretive lens/es. Qualitative data analysis was treated as an iterative, reflexive and non-linear approach (Sutherland, 2022) and began in the field, inevitably influencing the ostensibly 'bottom-up', data-driven approach. The emergent themes identified include conspicuous consumption and money, individualism, entrepreneurialism and an admiration for exploitation and profit-making. These themes serve as the analytical linchpins of the ensuing discussion section, wherein the data analysis is presented and interrogated.

## Findings

Here we present the findings of our research which illuminate how prison work functions as a tool for economic exploitation through its reproduction of carceral capitalism. We draw attention to prisoners' obsession with making money and then spending it ostentatiously. We show how prisoners admire people who make money and harbour an underlying enthusiasm for entrepreneurialism. We provide a nuanced understanding of what we perceive to be individualism among incarcerated individuals, who regard prison work as punitive. Finally, we demonstrate how, through the interrelationship of money, consumption, entrepreneurialism and individualism, prisoners become willing accomplices in the reproduction of an ideology which demands they accept their own exploitation. It is striking that prisoners explain that while they do not value privately contracted prison work in any meaningful way, they are impressed by the entrepreneurial actions and ideas of those who benefit from this work.

### *An obsession with money and conspicuous consumption*

Discussions about money dominated the prison workshop, reflecting the internalisation of capitalist logics among participants. This obsession with money is not isolated but linked to broader organisational practices. The prison's approach to work, underpinned by neoliberal ideals, encourages this focus on capital accumulation, while the PIC profits from this very dynamic. Thus, prisoners' conversations about money and their criminal pasts reveal how incarceration reproduces capitalist logics at individual, organisational and societal levels.

These conversations would then most often lead to conversations about what participants could buy with this money, emphasising a clear interest in conspicuous consumption. An extract from the fieldwork diary captured this dynamic, revealing how economic exploitation led prisoners to legitimise drug-selling to provide for their families:

> A lot of conversations today have been about providing for families: 'I have to deal drugs as I need to *feed* my kids'. But, a lot of conversations have gone beyond this; now they also *need* to buy them the newest, most expensive trainers, the newest gadgets, whether iPads or Xbox, for fear that their children will be social outcasts, to improve their social status, show off their

> wealth, and most importantly to show or profess their love and to be viewed as a good dad/father – doing right by their child. [Fieldnotes]

Nelson, a 27-year-old participant, was in prison throughout this research project. He had been to prison at least five times with most of these being lengthy sentences of over one year. He saw criminal activity as his primary source of earning and found that it yielded much larger amounts of money. Despite the threat of imprisonment, Nelson prioritised the larger sums of money rather than pursuing legal employment, as highlighted in the quote:

> I was working (legitimate employment), and I was making about £151 a week but then I would wake up in the morning and make that much money in one hour (selling drugs) and I'd be thinking, 'I'd rather do that than go to work'. (Nelson)

For Nelson, earning greater sums of money more quickly and easily was the goal. For many participants, what was most important about earning this money was what they could spend it on. They spoke proudly of the purchases they made, particularly when it related to what they had been able to purchase for their children and other family members. Nelson talked about how he spent his earnings from prison work from his last period of confinement. He talked through the purchases he made for his children and partner, naming designer brands and costs, which highlights the value he placed on both:

> Last time [I came out of prison] it was my son's second birthday, and obviously I missed his first birthday and Christmas because I was in jail, so I was able to buy him loads of stuff, buy my missus earrings, I bought her £100 earrings and some clothes, a Helly Hansen jacket; I gave the other kids, her two older boys, who aren't mine, I gave them £50 each.

These types of conversations, which focused on spending money, earning money and the purchases that were made, were consistent in the prison workshops and took place on almost every visit:

> I was talking to Paul today about selling drugs. He told me that he regularly earned £3000 a day from selling cocaine. On the same day he would go shopping and spend a large amount of this on a new outfit to wear out to town in the evening. He explained that he would go out on a Saturday night, in his new outfit, and 'blow the rest of the money on buying champagne' for himself, his friends and women that he would meet that night. He spoke excitedly and proudly about this life and clearly missed it. Another of the guys on my workshop table joined in and talked about his earnings from selling drugs, explaining that he wasn't able to save any of the money as he was '*just spending, showing off, looking fresh every day, loads of money, taking girls out, showing off in front of them*'. [Fieldnotes]

Therefore, money and the material things that could be purchased were high priority among participants. Visibly displaying their earnings allowed them to exhibit their success; 'loud' purchases were used to signal not only wealth but love for family too. In researching prisoners, Crewe (2009: 278) found that consumer possessions were important in signalling status in prison, describing it as the 'peacock effect'. Even though

neoliberal capitalist culture and consumption are central to how many produce and reproduce their identities (Hallsworth, 2005), most individuals who buy into consumerism cannot afford to be a part of it (Hobbs, 2013). Consumer culture and the void created by post-industrialism has promoted 'intense personal competition' and incited individuals to consume to a level that for many cannot 'be lawfully sustain[ed]' (Currie, 1985: 278; Treadwell et al., 2013). Some individuals develop illicit means of obtaining these possessions that endorse the use of violence and rule breaking (Hallsworth, 2005; Treadwell et al., 2013). Thus, many researchers have drawn the connection between increased neoliberal ideological views, leading to a flourish in consumerism and, to sustain this, a rise in criminal lifestyles (Hobbs, 2013).

## *Let's make some money: Admiration for the mainstream entrepreneur*

Of the 40 men interviewed, each one mentioned a desire to become a business owner in some way or another, indicating their engagement with the neoliberal world:

> I want to own my own business, like a car valeting thing or something like that. (Jamie)

> I used to race bikes and somewhere in the not-too-distant future I want my own bike shop; if I can get enough money together, I'd love to have my own bike shop. (Joe)

Many participants greatly admired others who started up businesses and became entrepreneurs. Particularly the narratives of 'self-made men', those who came from nothing, worked hard and became rich. Luke, for example, admired celebrity entrepreneurs such as Alan Sugar and Richard Branson. At only 21 years old, he was optimistic that after his prison sentence, if he 'got his head down', he would be able to achieve comparable results:

> [I've been] watching *The Apprentice* and all that for years, I've read Lord Alan Sugar's book and Richard Branson's book, I like them all, I do . . . [I'd like to work in] business management or something like that. I want to be a manager, owner or CEO of a big company, that's the ideal dream, with a thousand people under me . . . Top of the table at the press conference and everything, I think I've got what it takes as well, if I use my head now, I'm only 21 now, I'll be out when I'm 24, if I use my head now I'll hopefully be a millionaire by the age of 30. (Luke)

Luke and others were impressed with and interested in television shows such as *The Apprentice*; shows that present a highly individualised, 'dog-eat-dog competition' and an aggressive variant of the values of meritocracy (Couldry and Littler, 2011: 271). These are presented in a positive way as the keys to success and power. Luke had fantastical ideas about becoming a millionaire within just six years of leaving prison. For others, such as Kyle, seeing others around him become successful through enterprise made it seem more achievable. They were excited about the idea that starting a business could potentially yield boundless profits, particularly in comparison to a salary in low-paid work:

> [After prison I'd like to] maybe have my own business, I'd love that. My uncle did it, he had nothing – a 3-bedroom council house . . . and now his business is worth 2.5 million. He does all roofing and flooring materials, and he's got his own yard and that. (Kyle)

In these words, Luke reflects not just personal ambition but also the organisational push towards entrepreneurship as rehabilitation and the societal neoliberal narrative that frames business ownership as the ultimate goal of individual success.

The benefits of business ownership were further articulated by Gurdeep who explained that he did not want a set wage, he wanted the possibility of infinite earnings that could not be achieved in the employment available to him:

> I want to . . . maybe start a family business or something . . . I want to do something where there is profit, not where there is a set wage and you're on £10 an hour and that's what you're going to be on for the rest of your life. I want to do something to benefit me and my kids. (Gurdeep)

The examples presented here illustrate how many participants admired business ownership and entrepreneurship. Their admiration for entrepreneurial figures such as Alan Sugar reflects a societal neoliberal ideology that valorises individual success stories. This narrative is internalised by prisoners, who see their future success as dependent on adopting these capitalist ideals, thus reproducing the very logic that supports the global expansion of the PIC. Importantly, despite many engaging in criminal entrepreneurial activity, it was mainstream entrepreneurialism that they were interested in. Surrounded by likeminded others, and playing their part in the carceral capitalist project, their period of confinement proved fertile ground for developing these strong money-making-at-all-costs instincts.

## *Deserving of punishment: Individual responsibility and prison work as a volitional act*

Many people in prison come from multiply disadvantaged backgrounds (Williams et al., 2012).[1] This disadvantage was evident throughout the research; many grew up in poverty, in care, with drug or alcohol problems and one prisoner witnessed the murder of his father at an early age. While these circumstances do not absolve prisoners of all responsibility for their crimes, they certainly provide context and understanding of how individuals become involved in crime and consequently imprisonment. Nevertheless, in conversations with prisoners, few acknowledged this context when considering whether they were 'deserving' of imprisonment. Instead, most took full responsibility for their situations, describing themselves as 'naughty', 'shit heads' who did 'stupid things' and who described coming to prison as their 'own fault'. This attitude was particularly evident when we discussed their experience of prison work. When they were asked how they felt about doing this work, most did not enjoy it, described it as boring, monotonous, void of skill and poorly paid (the term 'slave labour' was used frequently throughout the fieldwork). But when describing the work in this way a caveat was usually added where

they explained that they should not be complaining about this work as it was their 'own fault' for ending up in prison:

> Nearly everywhere I have been since I started here, the term 'slave labour' has cropped up. Whenever I asked the men about their work, they quickly direct the conversations towards 'poor wages'. Most of them are extremely unhappy about their wages but several have made the comment that, 'we are in prison, so tough shit'. [Fieldnotes]

This was the response of Mackenzie when asked how he felt about doing prison work for private companies:

> You're in jail, there's no point complaining, it's your fault for being in here, you can't start moaning about everything around you, just deal with it.

Prisoners' acceptance of their working conditions as a deserved punishment underscores the deep internalisation of neoliberal values, particularly the notion that economic and social outcomes are the result of individual effort and responsibility. This acceptance reinforces the carceral system's ideological control, making prisoners complicit in the reproduction of their own exploitation. For example, Will and Luke explained that they were fine about the private company and the prison earning money from their work because it was their own fault for coming to prison. They saw the 'punishment' of completing prison work as a fair trade off for the crime they had committed:

> We're getting punished because we deserve to get punished. If I didn't do what I did wrong, then I wouldn't be here. So, I can't hold that against anyone else because I'm in here. So, I'm not going to be bothered what they do – if they want to earn money, earn money. (Will)

> But we're in here for committing a crime, we shouldn't be given everything on a silver platter, should we? (Luke)

These conversations with participants gave an insight into their attitudes towards prison work and imprisonment more generally. Most felt that, even if they were unhappy about aspects of prison life, namely completing work for low pay and few benefits, they should not complain as they were deserving of this punishment as a form of penance. The structuring of prison work – emphasising cost-efficiency and profit maximisation – mirrors neoliberal corporate practices. This organisational arrangement not only exploits prisoners as a cheap workforce but also embeds them within a system that normalises such exploitation as a necessary component of economic success. Participants also adopted a perverse admiration for their imprisoners. They viewed coming to prison at a highly individual level, took full responsibility for ending up in prison and referred to themselves in derogatory and negative terms to highlight that it was *their* fault. Comments such as 'we've got too many rights these days' or 'we shouldn't be given everything on a silver platter' reiterate a right-wing rhetoric of the underserving poor with too many liberties. The individuals who experience the most negative effects of this outlook seem to have bought into it with rigour and conviction.

## *'If I were a businessman . . .': Prisoners' admiration of the PIC*

So far, we have sought to demonstrate that the participants in this study are passionate consumers, powered by a desire to obtain money, they greatly admire mainstream enterprise and are interested in business ownership which they view as a heroic pursuit. Moreover, they view their imprisonment as an individual responsibility; it is their own fault for engaging in criminal activity leading them to prison and, as such, they view prison work as additional punishment and accept this as they feel that they are deserving of punishment. These attitudes and behaviours give us some insight into participants' deeper underpinning values about morality and how they might feel about completing prison work for private companies. The consumerism, entrepreneurialism and individualism identified in the previous three sections lay the groundworks for understanding prisoners' acceptance, or more aptly, admiration, for the private companies sending work to be completed inside prisons. The participants in this are aware of the benefits that both the private company and the prison receive because of the work they complete. The maximum a prisoner in this study could earn from completing this work was £30 a week for essentially full-time hours. According to the state, rehabilitation is a key purpose of prison work as work and training have traditionally been considered one of the most effective preventions for re-offending (see Shea, 2007). Nevertheless, research shows that privately contracted prison work has little rehabilitative potential, particularly in terms of skill development and employability (see Pandeli et al., 2019). Much research has found prison work to be a disciplinary device that rarely encompasses a therapeutic and resocialising character in an effective manner (Silva and Saraiva, 2016). Previously, and linked to this study, the first author has reported how many participants voiced little to no enthusiasm for the rehabilitative rewards of prison work, with most working for additional income and to 'pass the time' as it was better than being 'stuck in the cell' (Pandeli et al., 2019: 605). Most prisoners we spoke with viewed the work negatively and did not feel it was worthwhile to them in terms of skill development, engagement or earnings, but were impressed by the private companies for findings these loopholes to use cheap labour. They viewed this work as exploitative, recognising that their time became their imprisoners' money, but admired the exploiters, with most making comments with the sentiments of 'I wish I had thought of it' or 'If I was a businessman, I would do the same':

> Again, the idea of slave labour was raised and again everyone complained about their wages. When discussing their wages, several prisoners tell me how much the company are making off them, how much the contracts are worth; e.g. one working prisoner commented: 'I saw one invoice from [the private contract] and for one order, it was worth £47,000!'. [Fieldnotes]

> It's pretty cool like. It doesn't bother me. I wish I'd thought of it, I wouldn't be sat here now, I'd be making bloody loads of money. (Joe)

Like Joe, many other participants imagined themselves in the position of the private company and thought that, given the opportunity, they would make the same decisions. Though grateful for time out of their cell, both Luke and Jamie were unimpressed with

the work they were completing during their prison sentence and the low wages that accompanied it. Nevertheless, if the roles were reversed and they were running the private company, they explained that they would certainly make the decision to send work into prison and benefit from cheap labour, even if they thought it was exploitative:

> *Researcher*: What about the private company then, do you have any problem with them?
>
> *Jamie*: No, because honestly, I'd love my own business making money like that, so fair dos to them, that's what I think.
>
> *Researcher*: What do you think about privately contracted work?
>
> *Luke*: I think it's alright. If I owned a company, I think it would be brilliant because you're paying them, you're getting cheap work . . .. If I owned a company, I'd be straight in here – cheap as chips really.

Other prisoners like Will and Lori also commended the prison and the private company for their smart business decisions:

> Best of luck to them [the private companies], they're saving a bit of money, I'd do the same if I had a private company, you would, wouldn't you? If you can save money and make more money, fair play to them. If they'd done that in a factory, how much would they have to pay then – they're saving hundreds and hundreds of pounds, probably thousands a week. (Will)
>
> *Lori*: They get paid loads [the prison]. I read some of the job cards and they're getting paid stupid amounts of money, some of them are like forty grand. When we get big orders, they're [prison] getting paid grands and they're paying like 200 odd pounds a week to the prisoners . . . all they've got to pay for is the prisoners, the electric and the officers; they're making so much money this jail . . . if I was a business, I'd have jails, I wouldn't but they're making money, aren't they? That's all they're about is making money. Obviously, it's cheaper to have us doing it than it is to have a warehouse on 'road' [outside of prison], so . . .
>
> *Researcher*: So, you respect that?
>
> *Lori*: Yeah.

Bill, one prisoner serving an eight-year prison sentence, went as far as to suggest that opening a jail was a missed opportunity that he wished he had pursued:

> They pay me £15 a week to do a job they charge £43 for – for one pallet . . . I wish I'd thought of it before I stabbed my missus . . .. I could have started my own jail, I could be a millionaire by now . . . I wish I'd thought of it, cracking idea. You've got clients who are always going to come back all the time . . . there's a quicker turnover than McDonald's here. Boys are let out, they're out and then they come back in, out, back in, longer sentences, longer sentence, it's a money-making scheme. (Bill)

Many participants held a particular view on how 'business' works; the idea that the pursuit of profit should be prioritised over everything else and where exploitation is simply collateral damage in pursuit of that profit. John viewed this as rational and logical:

> If it [privately contracted work] wasn't being done here [the prison], it would be done somewhere else – it's work that's got to be done. A lot of people would say it's slave labour or they're using us, [but] they've got to find something to occupy people's time here, so if work comes from outside [private companies] and it's got to be done, so be it. Alright, the outside companies are having it done at a lower rate, but if I was a businessman, I'd want my stuff done at a lower rate. You're not doing it to punish people, it's just the way business works. (John)

With the privatisation of different elements of the penal system, often the 'business case' (cutting costs and making profit) can be prioritised over the 'moral case' (rehabilitation and reducing criminality) (Liebling et al., 2012) and this study has found that the prisoners within this institution approve of this logic. The participants of this study overwhelmingly described prison work as slave labour and considered this work to be a form of exploitation and/or punishment, but they simultaneously celebrated those organisations who seized this opportunity to obtain cheap labour and make a profit.

The findings presented reveal a complex interplay between prisoners' lived experiences and the neoliberal ideologies that permeate the carceral system. In the discussion that follows, we interrogate how these findings not only support but also complicate existing understandings of carceral capitalism, particularly in relation to the ideological internalisation by prisoners.

## Discussion and conclusion

Wang (2018) demonstrates how carceral capitalism is sustained by external forces centred around the PIC and reproduced internally through prisoners' labour and ideological acceptance of the system's underlying capitalist logic. We show this in revealing the admiration prisoners express for the business acumen of companies exploiting their labour which illustrates the multi-level reproduction of neoliberal and capitalist logics. At the societal level, the PIC's expansion reflects neoliberalism's prioritisation of profit over welfare. Organisationally, prisons organise work to maximise profits, normalising exploitation. Individually, prisoners internalise these logics, viewing their labour as both a punishment and an opportunity to engage with capitalist ideals, thus reproducing the system that subjugates them. The extent to which prisoners internalise capitalist norms indicates a level of ideological reproduction of carceral capitalism. Simultaneously, prisoners like Jamie and Joe articulate entrepreneurial aspirations that align well with capitalist imperatives, reflecting the ideological reproduction of carceral capitalism. Throughout our data, we see admiration of entrepreneurial success – posited as a virtue – thus contributing to the legitimacy of a system that exploits labour.

Prisoners understand their confinement in terms of individual failings rather than systemic injustices, indicating how they have also internalised the neoliberal notion of personal responsibility, thereby further legitimising the system that exploits them. The capitalist ethos is further evidenced in the prisoners' lack of ethical qualms about the

exploitative practices of private companies involved in prison work. Statements like 'I'd love my own business making money like that', reveal how the ideological fabric of carceral capitalism is not just imposed from above but is also endorsed from within. These sentiments offer an empirical unveiling of Wang's conceptualisation of prisoners as both a captive workforce and a commodity, thus substantiating the nexus between economic exploitation and ideological control delineated by both Wang and Althusser.

Our reference to prisoners as commodities highlights a critical and unsettling aspect of carceral capitalism. This signifies that prisoners are treated as items of economic value, thereby further dehumanising them. Prisoners engage in economic roles through prison work, positioning them not only as workers but also as products that generate profit for the PIC. During their confinement, prisoners learn to accept compensation far below minimum wage standards. Beyond tangible economic exploitation, they assume roles which exemplify failure within a neoliberal framework that emphasises individual responsibility and meritocracy. This intersects with Althusser's arguments about ISAs, portraying prisons as institutions that reinforce capitalist ideology by maintaining and legitimating the economic status quo, thus shaping subjects who accept and perpetuate their own subjugation and exploitation.

It is prisoners' exposure to prison work and its ultra exploitation, and their acceptance of this, that we see as the key to the exacerbation of carceral capitalism. Their exposure to this type of 'slave labour' (as they referred to it) potentially desensitises them to further economic exploitation outside of the prison walls. Private prison work uses the labour of some of the most vulnerable members of society, who hold little agency over their everyday lives and receive little remuneration for their work. Private prison work shows them that everything, even prison institutions, are about profit and reproducing inequality. The all-consuming confinement of prison life means that there are no other influences, only the culture, structures and institutional behaviours of the prison.

The data capture the mutually reinforcing relationship between carceral capitalism and neoliberal ideology, both sustained and legitimised by the internalisation of these ideologies by the prisoners themselves. Althusser's theories help explain how prisoners are interpellated as neoliberal subjects who are 'deserving' of their punishment and internalise an ideology of justice that emphasises individual moral failings over systemic issues. Through this notion of 'deserved punishment', prisons rationalise and legitimise exploitative working practices which paint a picture of how RSAs work together with ISAs to create consenting subjects who partake in their own subjugation. Data presented here reveal how popular culture and capitalist icons shape prisoners' understandings of success. Participants' entrepreneurial ambitions corroborate how ISAs work in tandem with RSAs to produce consenting subjects, while participants' dreams articulate a willingness to assume a position in a capitalist hierarchy, thereby implicitly endorsing the logic of the system by which they are currently subjugated.

Acknowledging prisons as spaces for capital accumulation as well as imprisonment (Pandeli et al., 2019), private companies increase their profits under the guise of offering 'rehabilitation' and 'work experience'. Still, data suggest there is little rehabilitative value in the work conducted and prisoners reproduce their own marginalisation as they produce value for a system built on their disenfranchisement (Alexander, 2010; Western, 2006). We see how this perpetuates a cycle of recidivism – highlighted by the prisoner who mentioned that clients 'are always going to come back' – and serves as another

avenue for reproducing carceral capitalism. It also complicates the challenges of advocating for reform, as it indicates that systemic change must also be accompanied by ideological transformation. In noting earlier how critical studies of prisons often surface Foucault's theorising of the emergence of a carceral culture, we are also conscious of a Foucauldian reading of power (where disciplinary mechanisms infiltrate all aspects of life, including the ideologies internalised by prisoners). This helps us understand why prisoners admire the 'smart business sense' of the companies that exploit them and demonstrates how ideology aligns the subject's interests with those of the ruling class. This ideological internalisation also extends to the realm of personal responsibility and ethical considerations. Mackenzie's remark that being in prison is his own fault, illuminates how neoliberal ideologies of personal responsibility are appropriated. Prisons, as ISAs, do more than confine; they actively reproduce neoliberal values by structuring prisoners' lives around capitalist logics. Through the routine of prison work and the narratives of individual responsibility and success, prisoners are interpellated as subjects who accept and perpetuate the very ideologies that justify their exploitation. This constitutes an urgent call for scholars and activists alike to challenge these ideological structures that perpetuate both incarceration and social inequality.

Still, our focus is on combining Wang's writings on carceral capitalism and Louis Althusser's theories on ideology to illuminate the interplay of socio-economic and ideological mechanisms that sustain the PIC. Wang's recognition of confinement as a financial enterprise reveals prisoners as both a captive workforce and a commodity. Also, the existence of the PIC and companies that specialise in providing services to prisons indicates how prisoners are viewed as a market demographic. These companies often charge inflated prices for goods and services, capitalising on a captive consumer base that has no alternative options for procurement. Imprisonment is less about 'correction' and more about profit-making, while it maintains a repressive system that disproportionately impacts marginalised communities. Althusser shows us how ideological mechanisms legitimise the dehumanising conditions and exploitation within the prison system by aligning prisoners' subjectivities with the goals of the capitalist enterprise. Incarceration is thus maintained not merely through physical confinement but through ideological control.

The key link between Wang and Althusser lies in their analysis of the entangled nature of ideological control and economic exploitation within carceral systems. Althusser suggests that carceral capitalism is perpetuated as both captors and the confined internalise its underlying ideologies, reinforcing the system that subjugates them. On the other hand, Wang emphasises that prisoners are not only physically confined by literal walls but are also trapped within an ideological framework that coerces them into complicity in their own oppression. This results in a dual form of confinement: one is tangible and materially visible, the other intangible and psychologically profound. Combining these insights helps reveal the PIC as a complex system in which economic exploitation and ideological control are deeply entangled. Our analysis reveals how prison work exacerbates prisoners' obsession with money and predatory entrepreneurialism, highlighting the role of economic exploitation within the prison system. This economic exploitation perpetuates neoliberal exploitation, surveillance and control, hindering prisoners' rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Through this, we demonstrate how prisoners internalise neoliberal ideologies and capitalist practices, paradoxically contributing to the very conditions of their own exploitation and confinement.

In reflecting on our analysis, we are drawn to Freire's (1970) assertion that when education is not liberating, the aspiration of the oppressed shifts towards embodying the role of the oppressor. The data reveal prisoners expressing entrepreneurial ambitions and admiration for the very capitalist enterprises that exploit them. While prisoners' entrepreneurial aspirations could be seen as a form of resistance, our analysis leads us to conclude that such ambitions are co-opted by the carceral system, which frames these aspirations within a neoliberal logic that reinforces the status quo rather than challenging it. Prisoners' dreams are not of liberation but of ascending the existing hierarchy – a hierarchy that would see them assume roles not dissimilar to those who currently oppress them. Nevertheless, these dreams are unlikely to ever be realised; given prisoners and ex-prisoners' marginalisation in society, pursuing legitimate entrepreneurialism and being economically successful in these endeavours will be difficult if not impossible. This brings us back to the question regarding the consequences for prisoners' rehabilitation and reintegration into society – without legitimate means to pursue this, it is likely that some will pursue this illegitimately. The ideology that confines them and oppresses them works in a cycle to lead them back to crime, and back to prison. Our findings point to an urgent need for a revaluation of both systemic and ideological frameworks. Any efforts at prison reform or prisoner rehabilitation must account for the complexities of a system that functions not merely through physical confinement but also through ideological interpellation. These intertwined mechanisms not only perpetuate the cycle of incarceration and recidivism but also extend the reach of global capitalism.

This article demonstrates how prison work reproduces carceral capitalism across individual, organisational and societal levels. By examining these interconnected dynamics, we highlight the need for a comprehensive reassessment of the PIC, emphasising the global capitalist motives driving its expansion. Addressing these issues requires dismantling not just the physical structures of incarceration but also the ideological frameworks that perpetuate them. Thus, we find ourselves echoing Davis's (2003: 100) admonition that 'in the era of the Prison Industrial Complex, [we] must pose hard questions about the relationship between global capitalism and the spread of [. . .] prisons throughout the world'. We see that our findings complicate the understanding of prisons as mere sites of confinement, revealing them as active agents in the reproduction of neoliberal and capitalist ideologies. The prisoners' internalisation of these ideologies, as evidenced by their work attitudes and future aspirations, suggests that carceral capitalism operates not just through economic exploitation but through deep-seated ideological control. Indeed, our data show how prisoners, entangled within this nexus, become unwitting participants in their own subjugation.

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## Note

1. Research suggests that 24% of sentenced prisoners have been in care at some point while they were growing up, 29% have experienced abuse and 41% have observed abuse, 37% have a family member who had been found guilty of a criminal offence and 15% have been homeless prior to custody (Williams et al., 2012). In comparison, the general population statistics for these areas are significantly lower; for example, only 3% of children are in the social care system at any one time (Ofsted National Statistics, 2023) and less than 1% (0.004%) of people are currently homeless (Big Issue, 2023).

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