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**A Book Review of Prison Profiteers:
Who Makes Money From Mass Incarceration, By Tara Herivel and Paul Wright
Color of Law
By David A. Love, JD
BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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Incarceration is perhaps America's leading method of social control. With 2.5 million in the nation's jails and prisons - 7 million people when you include people on probation and parole - the U.S. accounts for a quarter of the world's prisoners, the world's largest prison population.

An important factor which is fuelling the alarming growth rate of America's prisons is the profit motive. Making money, rather than deterring crime or promoting rehabilitation, is a guiding factor which determines why and how many prisons are built. In a book published by The New Press, [Prison Profiteers: Who Makes Money from Mass Incarceration](#) (2008, 352 pp.), editors Tara Herivel and Paul Wright present an anthology of essays which discuss the beneficiaries of the prison boom. Herivel, a public defense attorney, and Wright, the founder and editor of [Prison Legal News](#), have assembled an impressive array of eighteen advocates, journalists, attorneys and prisoners for a comprehensive analysis of a \$186 billion taxpayer-funded prison industry.

Punishment for profit is a sordid, unethical and immoral enterprise, and no other nation places more prisoners in the custody of private corporations than America. Consequently, this system produces winners and losers:

Primary winners include the politicians and prison corporations who benefit from the construction of new prisons, while Wall Street banks benefit from private prison

funding schemes that lie outside of the public purview.

The private entities that administer and supply the prison industry attempt to evade public accountability.

Telephone companies benefit from an unregulated marketplace and charge exorbitant rates for prisoner calls, making it prohibitive for inmates to communicate with their families and thereby stifling the rehabilitation process.

Badly needed educational, rehabilitation and drug treatment programs are cut or eliminated in the prisons in order to realize cost savings.

Correctional officers' unions advocate for more draconian sentencing that will fill prison cells and maintain their livelihoods. Meanwhile, as the book rightly argues, there is no relationship between crime and incarceration rates.

Often, prisoners - predominantly poor, of color, and unable to vote - are counted for census purposes in the mostly white and rural districts in which they are incarcerated. These prison towns receive more clout, more influence and more than their fair share of public resources in the process. Meanwhile, the inner city neighborhoods that produce these inmates suffer not only from a depletion of their population as a result of the exodus of men and women to the prisons, but a smaller share of government resources. This is similar to the three-fifths compromise of 1787, in which slave states were able to count three-fifths of their enslaved population, who could not vote, for purposes of determining distribution of taxes and representation in Congress. This compromise was codified in Article 1, Section 2, Paragraph 3 of the U.S. Constitution.

Depressed rural communities clamor to attract prisons to their town. Yet, they do not receive the benefits they believed the prison would create. Prison economies may stifle other forms of economic activity, and in any case, the true beneficiaries of are corporations, shareholders and executives. Besides, many industries are eager to use prison laborers, earning pennies a day, thereby displacing high-paying union jobs.

Prison growth, fuelled by Corporate America, has created the phenomenon of "one million dollar blocks." In some inner city neighborhoods, so many residents of the same city block have been incarcerated that it costs up to \$1 million each year to imprison them.

In an effort to shift the prohibitive cost of prisons away from taxpayers, some localities and states charge prisoners for their own incarceration, including room and board, healthcare, food and other necessities. Inmates, usually lacking resources and hailing from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are further punished through the imposition of court and administrative fees they cannot afford. Probation may be conditioned on the ability to pay restitution and fees, and failure to pay could result in a "go to jail card." Thus, Neo-Dickensian debtors' prisons are created.

And Prison, Inc. is particularly cruel towards the young and the ill. Private youth facilities, staffed with undereducated, untrained and underpaid staff in order to maximize corporate profit and executive pay, are rife with child abuse. Meanwhile, private prison healthcare providers, indifferent to human suffering, purposely deny medical care for the sake of the bottom line. The book provides accounts of

particularly unconscionable acts of medical neglect and malpractice, in which babies are born and die in jailhouse toilets, and prisoners needlessly suffer and die from horrific infections.


Although an increasing number of Americans are going to prison, few Americans care to fully understand what actually happens in these institutions. Out of sight, out of mind, lock them up and throw away the key. Yet, the derivation of profit from the suffering and captivity of others is made more socially acceptable through conflicting images in the mass media. One set of image depicts and glorifies prisons as chic, fashionable, luxurious places where prisoners are coddled. Another image depicts prisons as horrible places, where male rape is viewed as a fitting, acceptable and even humorous form of punishment for violent lawbreakers.

Prison Profiteers provides the reader with a thoughtful, comprehensive and accessible analysis of the money trail behind the prison-industrial-complex. It is required reading for students of the criminal justice system, civil rights and civil liberties advocates, and those who desire a greater understanding of the underbelly of our nation's prisons-for-profit system.

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member David A. Love, JD is a lawyer and journalist based in Philadelphia, and a contributor to the [Progressive Media Project](#), [McClatchy-Tribune News Service](#), [In These Times](#) and [Philadelphia Independent Media Center](#). He contributed to the book, [States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons](#) (St. Martin's Press, 2000). Love is a former Amnesty International UK spokesperson, organized the first national police brutality conference as a staff member with the Center for Constitutional Rights, and served as a law clerk to two Black federal judges. His blog is davidalove.com. [Click here](#) to contact Mr. Love.

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