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Book Review

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Carceral, K. C. and Flaherty, Michael G. (2021).

The cage of days: Time and temporal experience in prison. Columbia University Press, 303 pp., \$35/£28, ISBN 9780231203449/9780231203456

Reviewed by: Rod Earle , *The Open University, UK*

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“Do your bird” was a phrase I became familiar with as I served a short sentence in an English prison in the 1980s. For years I thought that talking of prison time as ‘bird’ referred to what prisoners miss most, the sense of time flying by, ‘like a bird.’ Sometime later I discovered how wrong I was. The term is abbreviated rhyming slang for birdlime, the sticky stuff poachers use to trap birds’ feet as they land on a perch: Do your time; do your bird. The way the word plays on the relationship between unfreedom and flight speaks to the complexity of meanings and experience around time that prisoners encounter so directly in prison. Time served. A cage of days indeed.

Prisoners know time well, for better or worse, and this book is the result of an intellectual marriage that might have been made in academic heaven. It combines the insights and training of a sociologist of time (Michael G Flaherty) with the insights and training of a prisoner-as-sociologist, or convict criminologist. A prisoner for more than 30 years, KC Carceral provides his own and other prisoners’ accounts of time, temporal regimes, and ways of staying human in often inhuman times, while Professor Flaherty provides the sociology of time.

Because of my own efforts at convict criminology (Earle 2016) I was desperate to read this unique and exceptional book and it pains me to report I did not find it as rewarding as I had hoped. The first chapter tells of how the two authors came together via an extended period of correspondence from Carceral’s various cells to Flaherty’s more singular office. As they put it “This book is a product of dialogue between co-authors who approach the subject from two very different positions.” Their Introduction is useful in setting out how Carceral and Flaherty were drawn into dialogue by a combination of happenstance, common interests, and intentions. The significance of the authors’ contrasting positionalities compels them to set out their methodology at some length, rather than consigning it to an Appendix. But Flaherty’s biography remains considerably more opaque than Carceral’s. This reinforced the lack of symmetry between them. Their ambition is to bring together the copious academic literature on time with autobiographical and autoethnographic accounts of prison time from the point of view of prisoners. The range of literature reviewed and discussed are combined with additional rich first-hand accounts provided from Carceral’s extensive prison contacts, research, and experiences.

Chapter 1 sets out their thesis: “We misunderstand [prisoners] predicament if we focus on architecture and surveillance. Incarceration is about time, and prison is a cage of days.” Both feel there is undue emphasis on the physical structure and design of prison in penal studies, and I share their concern to bring more attention to temporal experience. Chapter 2 advances under the title of *Time and Space* and includes an illuminating section on ‘*The Prison Sensorium*’. It includes their second quote from my favorite prisoner, Victor Serge, a communist whose luminous prose always leaps straight from the page to the imagination: “I am already in a sort of tomb. I can do nothing. I see, hear, and feel nothing. I only know that the next hour will be exactly like this one.” The evocative titles of the

subsequent five chapters indicate the book's trajectory: *Temporal Allowances*, *Serving Time*, *No Future on the Horizon*, *Marking Time*, and finally, *Resistance and Temporal Agency*.

Although a global experience of prison time is suggested by the breadth of readings presented, the focus is the specific carcerality of the USA, and this is what gives rise to some of my difficulty. I found it hard to relate to the prose, the prisons, and the experiences. This might be an implicit epistemological nationalism on my part, or a hint of US imperialism on theirs.

It is a shame, for instance, from the point of view of this reviewer writing from the non-American side of the Atlantic, that there is no engagement with one of Europe's pre-eminent philosophers of time, Bernard Stiegler, not least because he is also a former bank-robber who served five years in French prisons. It was in prison that he formulated some of the ideas that were to become a three-volume magnum opus, *Time and Technics*, which propelled him to the top of the academic tree in France, where he is widely recognized as one of their most significant public intellectuals (Earle 2021). Stiegler's career would interest KC Carceral as it stemmed from his extensive correspondence with an academic mentor while he was in prison, as has been the case for Carceral.

It is unfair to criticize a book that gathers so widely from diverse and unusual sources for its omissions, but they contributed to my sense of a missed opportunity. Within contemporary critical theory there is increasing attention to what Guy Debord referred to as the 'temporalisation of humanity' and the 'humanization of time.' These connect with analysis that suggests that contemporary racial capitalism is entering a critical new phase of development, driven as ever, by the ceaseless advance of technological industries. Historically, these theorisations put the prison and the factory in close communion. If you are reading Foucault, Melossi and Pavarini, Pasquino or Garland, the prison is one of the machines central to the making of European modernity. It was not just that the early radical critic of industrialization, Lewis Mumford, who insisted "the clock, not the steam-engine, is the key machine of the industrial age", was missing in Carceral and Flaherty's account, it was that nearly all the contemporary European critical theorists of time and modernity that interest me were also absent.

When I was in prison, that long while ago, I remembered a book I had studied at school. In *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett has Vladimir plead with his companion, Estragon, to play some word games – "It'll pass the time," he begs in desperation. "It will pass anyway," comes the forlorn reply. Even as KC Carceral reports the frequency of similarly desperate interchanges in prison, there is little reaching out to connect such human experiences across the penal divide. Even though I agree with their conclusion that "there is something essential to the human condition at the heart of [incarceration]" (p.242), I found the attempt to build on that common ground lacked something. They close their remarkable book with an extended reflection on the distinction between waving and drowning. It sadly concludes that as prisoners "sink.. beneath the surface of time, they drown in what most of us thirst for." Reading this, their last line, all I could think of was Stevie Smith's famous poem, *Not Waving but Drowning*, and her morbid delight in its ambiguities. That creativity seemed to have escaped Carceral and Flaherty.

The Cage of Days is a brave and daring book that did not work for me. The synthesis did not manifest. The correspondence between the authors, in the end, seemed more postal than epistemological. It is undoubtedly a significant development in convict criminology and an informative book to read if you want to know how American prisoners 'do their bird.' If you have the time.

ORCID iD

Rod Earle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9068-9849>

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