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**Hero and Inmate: Engaging the Paradox of Labour, Practice, and
Meaning-Making in California's Prison Fire Camps**

Alongside California's thirty-three walled prisons, and embedded in what is by many accounts a highly dysfunctional and increasingly punitive system are what appear at first to be strange bedfellows: forty-two adult (and one youth) 'fire camps' in which state prisoners housed in open settings—usually without a fence or other secure perimeter—are trained and put to work doing manual labour projects and fighting California's many wildfires. At first glance these prison fire camps—with a total state-wide population of just under four thousand people—appear to have little or nothing in common with California's much larger system of walled prisons. For example, a visitor to almost any of California's walled prisons (especially men's walled prisons) cannot help but be struck by the massive electrified fences and looming guard towers that watch over the perimeter and prison grounds, or by the scores of guards and staff that work among the thousands of men and women consigned to each of the walled mega-prisons. These walled prisons are the places that capture the public's attention and inspire fictionalized accounts in films and television shows such as 'Lockup,' 'Prison Break,' and 'Oz'—large, foreboding places with lots of metal bars and cages, and filled with gray, colourless landscapes inside and outside the buildings.

A visitor to one of California's prison fire camps, in contrast, is likely to quickly notice the camps' comparatively miniscule size, most housing between 100 and 125 men or women, as well as by the lack of a secure perimeter. Electrified fences and imposing guard towers are typically replaced by small, wooden signs reading simply 'camp boundary,' not unlike the signs one sees on hiking trails and in public parks. Instead of landscapes dominated by gray concrete, prison fire camps are often suffused with greenery and trees and brush, and many camps are picturesquely tucked into the sides of hills or mountains; many prison fire camps are striking, even aesthetically beautiful places. Furthermore, whereas a visitor to one of California's walled prisons must pass through metal detectors and myriad types of invasive and/or bothersome screenings, it is usually possible to drive one's private car straight into a fire camp before being casually stopped by a polite, relaxed staff member or prisoner inquiring if they can be of assistance. Visitors treated to a meal at a camp will discover that the food prepared by prisoner cooks is, almost without fail, tasty and wholesome, in contrast to infamously bad institutional prison food. Before or after the dinner meal the visitor might also note that camp inmates are usually free when not working to move around the camp's grounds unescorted, including going to television rooms (sometimes equipped with hi-tech, large screen TVs donated by surrounding communities grateful for the firefighting

work performed by camp prisoners), hobby-craft areas, workout and weight-lifting rooms, and so forth. Although fire camps are by no means luxurious in their amenities—resembling well-kept army barracks or youth summer camps, rather than the apocryphal ‘club-med’ prison—the camps appear a world apart from the massive, walled prisons that dot much of California’s vast territory. In a word, then, prison fire camps in California appear to present a *paradox*, nestled within a larger penological climate that appears to be antithetical in nature and perhaps hostile to many of the fire camps’ most basic features and aims.

‘Like Modern Day Slavery’ or ‘Learning Work Ethic’: Working the Grade for Less Than Two Dollars a Day

Despite a tendency when discussing forestry camps to focus on the work performed by camp prisoners in order to fight and prevent wildland fires (the focus of the next section), it is actually manual labour projects for various public agencies that comprise the majority of staff and prisoner time alike. Ranging from picking up trash alongside roads to clearing brush to helping out at local libraries, the grade work engaged in by prison fire camp crew inmates is similar to that of urban ‘day labourers’. Not surprisingly it is this labour—often referred to by those in the camps as ‘grade projects’ and ‘grade work’—for which inmates receive the least compensation, both pecuniary and in terms of social capital. Prisoners are paid approximately \$1.45 *per day* for these grade projects, and those inside or outside corrections rarely describe them as heroic or transcendent, as is often the case when describing wildland firefighting.

When transcripts from more than seventy interviews with inmates, officers, and other staff at six prison fire camps were coded for the primary meaning people attached to grade work, the results demonstrated, overall, neutral or even positive orientations toward the work, with the three most common frames being hard manual labour (21.7%); the chance to get outdoors, see society and/or going to work (14.5%); and teaching useful skills (11.6%).¹ Other popular frames about grade work are that it teaches work ethic (10.1%), helps the community and/or other agencies (10.1%), is good training for firefighting (8.7%), and a variety of other assorted ideas. Nonetheless, behind these initial evaluations is a complex set of individual and group orientations toward grade work, many of which came out not during respondents’ initial descriptions but rather during more extensive dialogues we had about the nature of grade work and how they view it. From this more intensive discussion, three themes or findings emerged: 1) in contrast to the relative agreement among correctional employees, inmates, and forestry employees noted above, there was a schism between inmates and non-inmates on questions of exploitation; 2) many, but not all, inmates imprisoned in camps view grade projects, and fire camps more generally, at least partially as a form of exploitation; and 3) prisoners view exploitation as inhering almost exclusively in the very low wages paid for grade work and, for some people, in the relative inefficiency and the lack of

generativity of the work, with very few people seeing the exploitation as a systemic effort to treat them as subhuman or as intrinsically unfair. T.C., a prisoner housed at a fire camp in southern California explains:

I joke with a lot of people, a lot of guys in here; when I get to joke, I'll see the morale they'll get mad [inaudible] I'm like, 'hey man, what's wrong, this is legalized slavery.' I say, 'It's not a black thing, anymore. It's everybody, now.' And they get mad, since I'm honest, but then when they listen to me, and they hear how I'm talking, they're like 'ah, man I don't want to hear that.' But it's true, this is legalized slavery, and that's all it is. And, I mean, I'm mad at myself for getting caught in this web, but it is what it is. And if you ever got a chance to walk around, you'll see how it really is legalized slavery...

Remarkably, even prisoners who spoke very positively about the fire camp program, and their personal experiences in fire camps, frequently also felt strongly that some of the work they were required to perform should be understood as the state taking unfair advantage of their status as inmates. The next section discusses how some of the same issues unfold in the context of firefighting.

‘They See Us As Firefighters’: Heroic Labour and Transcendence or ‘Dirty Work’?

It is easy to focus on what might be called the inherent *seductiveness* of the work of fighting fires. By seductive, I mean those aspects of the work—including the inherent dangers, exotic nature of the labour, and cultural capital attached to the work—that can be deployed at key moments (including memorials) to elevate participants to the status of selfless heroes by referencing simultaneously the danger and raw physicality of the work. Such feelings are both real and legitimate, and they indeed dominate how many people in the camps talk (at least at first) about firefighting; similarly, when California’s prison fire camps get media attention—which is not all that often—it is nearly exclusively positive in character.² And yet my interviews uncovered a second level on which those in the camps are much less sanguine about the firefighting work. In another parallel with the grade work discussed earlier, it turns out that when given the time and rhetorical space to air concerns and frustrations, the majority of people speak of firefighting as problematic and, for some, partially exploitative. Thus even those who say they “love” the firefighting will, when given the opportunity, speak about its drawbacks, injustices, and the camp programs’ limitations. As with grade work, much of this pivots around issues of wages and compensation (material and non-material), but unlike grade work the exploitation is constructed by many as inhering in the very nature of the work. Thus whereas many believe the exploitative nature of grade work could be cured with higher wages, the problematic aspects of firefighting are seen as running deeper: although higher wages would be a welcome relief it would not, in and of itself, supply the sense of fairness and justice many of those imprisoned in the camps seek. Depending on the person, it would take one or more of the following elements to rectify the exploitative aspects of the firefighting work: sincere and widespread recognition, sizeable opportunities for careers in firefighting, being treated as true

equals of other firefighters, and equality in the character of the work performed. Notably, few people expect any of that to happen, instead most are convinced that because they are inmates they will always do the least desirable work; what is more, almost everyone in the camps is glad to be there, and accepts mostly without complaint that the exploitative elements are here to stay and that it is a bargain they are more than willing to accept.

In discussing the proverbial “dark side” of wildland firefighting, men and women incarcerated and employed in prison fire camps focus on a variety of elements. Consider the following two quotes from my interviews with Mike and Terrence:

They say they charge thirty-five thousand dollars a year for an inmate, right? Okay, so I mean if we're out there making money on grade projects for this camp and everything else and the state's still going to give you that budget, why can't you kick out a few extra dollars for the inmates so maybe they can pay their restitution off? Maybe they can pay what they need to pay off and then come out with some money when they do leave since we are working. Not like the ones behind the wall. Give me some money so I can go out and do something. And \$200.00 [in “gate money” given to inmates upon release] to me is not enough to go out - that's back in the old days...especially nowadays with the law, with all the background checks and everything else. I'm a college grad but that doesn't mean anything right now. I've got a felony and strikes.

I don't want to answer, but these cops here, they don't give a damn about you. They don't give a damn about you. You're just like another guy. Sometimes they will mistreat you because they know you want to be here. So they'll kick all the fucking dirt in your face and you've got to bite your tongue. That's how it was at [camp name omitted]. You've got to bite your tongue and if you don't, they'll roll your ass up. It all depends on how bad you want to be at camp. And they don't care because as soon as they roll you up, they'll get another person. And sometimes that's their attitude. It's ugly.

Looking across these two and many other interviews, one can distil five principal elements of fire camp prisoners' critique of firefighting: 1) many prisoners, and to some extent officers and forestry crew leaders, believe that inmate firefighters work harder and perform less desirable work than civilian firefighters, all the while getting paid only a dollar an hour; 2) inmate firefighters get some recognition and appreciation, but not as much as they would like or believe they deserve, and not as much as non-incarcerated firefighters do; 3) although prisoners deployed to fires may be considered by the public and forestry crew leaders as “heroes” and/or “firefighters,” the elevation in status is partial and sometimes fleeting, 4) firefighting is sometimes used by staff as an excuse to enact stricter social control and/or to act out personal vendettas, pettiness, and hostilities; and 5) for those who do not want to be firefighters after release, the cost/benefit calculation of firefighting is askew compared to the minority of camp prisoners who plan to seek out that line of work when they get released. Of course, not everyone subscribes to all of these positions—and some, such as officers' behaviour on the fire lines, are subject to significant contestation and variance in opinion—but taken together they represent many of the dominant

ways in which people struggle with firefighting and find aspects of it seriously wanting.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing from binaries in the literature on prison labour—especially discussions of slavery and exploitation and diametrically opposed arguments about how work can be a vehicle for reform—and drawing from a subset of the literature on punishment that argues prisons today are “warehouses” or part of a modern hyperghetto prison complex, one might expect to find a discourse in the fire camps in which work is seen as either exploitative or as a genuine opportunity for reform. Surprisingly, and I think revealingly, nearly everyone in the fire camps subscribes to aspects of both perspectives. In this manner the same people who speak about grade projects as teaching useful skills and/or work ethic, as helping the community and/or government agencies, as good training for the important work of firefighting, and as grounds for unprecedented cooperation between prisoners and staff, talk equally emphatically about it being onerous, exhausting, physical labour that they have no choice but to do, and for which they are paid appallingly little, making it therefore in some ways a form of exploitation. Furthermore, their drawing from multiple frameworks does not come across as a tortured or schizophrenic orientation toward the work. Instead, people are untroubled with what would seem *a priori* to be contradictory orientations precisely because it matches the larger culture of punishment and work in which elements of exploitation and reform are omnipresent (if not always in equal doses).

Evidence of this can be found in the pragmatic approach many fire camp inmates use with regard to their labour on grade projects: for instance they simultaneously regret the degrading nature of the abysmal pay but celebrate the tangible and intangible perks that come from being in a camp instead of a walled prison. Many attribute the former to their status as inmates—and therefore powerless to lobby for higher wages, and the latter to their status as prisoners who “program”—that is, generally compliant people who agree to toil long, hard hours in exchange for better conditions. Fair or unfair, their status as inmates decreases their ability to avoid exploitation, and their desire to be in a fire camp means it is a bargain they find favourable. In this way those incarcerated and employed in fire camps understand what scholars of punishment sometimes overlook: contemporary imprisonment sometimes presents as both a warehousing of “dangerous” people and a second chance for those considered worthy of redemption.

An Appendix With a Brief Note About Data and Methods

This paper is based on a larger (dissertation) research project studying California's prison fire camps that includes archival research into the history and nature of outdoor prison labour in California, fieldwork observations of everyday life in the camps, and interviews with prisoners, staff (corrections and forestry), and program administrators, as well as ongoing analyses of return to prison rates for those in the camps compared to similar individuals housed in mainstream walled prisons. In the interest of space, I will briefly note three aspects of the data and methodology particularly relevant to the current paper. First, interview participants were recruited from six prison fire camps selected via a stratified random sample designed to ensure variation by geography (northern, central, and southern California), sex (men's and women's camps), and fire agency responsible for sharing administrative duties with corrections. In total I interviewed sixty-nine people in the camps, including 45 prisoners, 12 officers, 6 forestry crew leaders, and 6 corrections supervisors, as well as two high-level administrators currently or in the past responsible for overseeing one or more aspects of the camp program. Second, the overall participation rate of 93.4% was excellent—especially when compared to other scholars' descriptions of the inherent challenges of conducting research in prison settings. Third, the interviews themselves were designed to be semi-structured, intensive, and wide-ranging discussions of a variety of topics ranging from background characteristics to people's descriptions of grade work and firefighting to what they would change about the camps if they were to become head administrator. As is typical of ethnographic, semi-structured interviewing, I used these pre-determined questions only as a guide, and depending on the flow and content of the interview sometimes changed the order, inserted new questions, or altered questions to be responsive to topics and content being discussed; my goal was to achieve a balance between consistency across interviews to facilitate comparisons while still providing opportunities to dig deeply into issues and to capitalize on what people related to me to better inform the interview underway as well as future interviews.

Works Cited

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¹ There are three general points of nearly universal agreement that form the backdrop of how people think and talk about grade work: 1) that the work performed is more often than not hard, physical labour, albeit sometimes in the form of an abbreviated work day (often out of necessity from having to drive long distances from the camp to the worksite); 2) cooperation between and among inmates and non-inmates on the grade is striking, with very few disciplinary or other ‘problems’; and 3) that working on grade projects is viewed by most people as one of the non-negotiable requirements of being housed in a fire camp, and so (even among those who see grade work as exploitative), complaining about it is often seen as futile, senseless, or inappropriate.

² A video piece by Current (the news organization funded and managed by, among others, former U.S. vice president Al Gore) describes inmate firefighters as “uncommon heroes” (Current.com 2008). In one particularly memorable scene reporter and producer Taymar Pixley puts on an inmate firefighter’s pack, struggles visibly with its weight, and is awed by their ability to hike up and down mountains with the packs. Somewhat different in tone, a short piece that aired in 2008 on Fox News contained a moment when the anchor seemed genuinely surprised to hear that camp inmates make only a dollar an hour and barely stifled a snicker, but it too was on balance supportive of the program, calling it “interesting.” In short, those inside and outside the camps are unified in their celebration of the firefighting work performed by inmates in California’s prison fire camps.