Book review



Theoretical Criminology

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DOI: 10.1177/1362480618796893

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Patrick Lopez-Aguado, *Stick Together and Come Back Home*,University of California Press: Oakland, CA, 2018; 240 pp.: 9780520288591, $29.95 (pbk)

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It is well established that US criminal justice systems are, in effect, racialized social systems (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). We have a growing knowledge about the historic and structural roots that have contributed to the mass criminalization of people of color, and the intersecting social forces that lead to the uses of imprisonment as a form of racialized social control. We know less about the ways that imprisonment itself may actually *itself* structureand contribute to the racialized social systems external to prisons that enmesh Black and Brown people in processes of criminalization and social control. Patrick Lopez-Aguado makes a significant contribution to our knowledge on this issue, producing a nuanced, rich, and theoretically sophisticated portrait of the ways that the state structures, produces, and reproduces ideas about the criminal “other”, which in turn feeds systems of mass incarceration.

Lopez-Aguado approaches this subject in an empirically original way: intrigued by the California Department of Correction’s policy of racially sorting incarcerated people upon their arrival into the system, Lopez-Aguado chose to locate his research in Fresno, a city in the middle of the state, and thus a “borderland” (p. 15) in the state’s “rival prison-based subcultures” (p. 15). Even a site such as Fresno, which ostensibly sits outside of existing boundaries between North and South (most notably demonstrated through the Norteña/os and Sureña/os, who are defined as some of the largest “gangs” in California state prisons) can reflect the racialized consequences of mass incarceration. As Lopez-Aguado details the emergence of the Bulldogs, or the Fresno-based “gangs”, he reveals the ways that artificial boundaries (typically imposed by prison officials) become durable ones, as individuals find that adopting these categories not only becomes a requirement for their safety, but also for their emerging sense of self (and his focus on young people is a particularly important dimension in which to understand this socialization process). Fresno also represents a community hard hit by incarceration, with incarceration rates higher than that of the Bay area and Los Angeles, high poverty and unemployment, and deep racial disproportionality in imprisonment rates.

The book is an ethnography that takes place in a juvenile hall, a continuation high school for young people on probation, and a reentry center for adults. Lopez-Aguado acted as a volunteer at the sites, conducting interviews and engaging in participant observation. His focus was on the ways that all three sites may impact on the lives of criminalized youth. He devoted a relatively limited amount of the text to his methodological approach, which could have benefitted from some more detail in order to shape the readers’ understandings about his role as a researcher in a complex and contested terrain, which is revealed through his ethnographic data. In that data, he reveals the ways that neither those that are criminalized nor the people that manage them are free from the dominating—and often all encompassing—racial logics that form what he terms the “carceral social order”. Lopez-Aguado carefully demonstrates the ways that racialized identities become linked to crime, violence, and in particular, the social construction of gangs in ways that even the subjects of those associations begin to internalize themselves. They are upheld not only in the sorting processes that happen in carceral institutions, but also within the high school setting, where young people are seated for lunch at tables defined within criminalized racial identities, but also in ways that feed back into neighborhood-based dynamics and social boundaries.

Lopez-Aguado also makes a powerful contribution to our thinking about how the state-based categorization of “gangs” contributes to perceptions about dangerousness and safety both among prison authorities *and* the people they manage. He argues that this happens not only through the enforced segregation of individuals by race in prisons, juvenile facilities, and the continuation high school, but also through the enforcement of ideas about risk and safety that individuals themselves use once they have entered the carceral social order. Lopez-Aguado points to the ways that people enforce spatial borders both within and without custody, reinforce those boundaries through clothing and dress style choices, and “confronting nonconformists” within custody (p. 43). He argues that young people on probation are effectively being socialized into these identities with the support of probation officers and teachers who reinforce and build on notions of racial boundaries, even when young people themselves rarely fit within the rigid racialized social systems that they are presented with, and many do not even identify as gang members themselves. Lopez-Aguado points to the examples of biracial youth; youth of color whose dress style or cultural practices do not conform to the expectations of the social order; or youth whose practices are labeled as “gang” related for their loose associations with gang activity, even if they are not gang identified, to reveal the power of the carceral social order and young people’s resistance to it.

The text engages with some important questions about style and aesthetics in the maintenance and reproduction of the carceral social order. The author’s examination of style poses important questions about style and hegemony (is the gang-associated style adopted by young people in a self-aware way resistant or reproductive?), explored in earlier texts by scholars such as Hebdige (1979). Lopez-Aguado seems to suggest that young people’s embrace of putative “gang” aesthetics, while also resisting gang identities, actually raises complex questions against the existing literature on subculture and resistance that I would have liked to have seen the author explore in some more depth.

This is a rich text which makes an important theoretical contribution, as it grapples with—and extends—core sociological themes about the reproduction of socially structured social arrangements. Lopez-Aguado points to the ways that a social group’s deep embeddedness in the social institutions of punishment can also serve to shape the broader social order; one wonders whether it was indeed the city of Fresno (and state of California) that allowed him to make this insight, or if it may indeed be possible to examine these dynamics in other, less explicitly segregationist state penal systems? For example, he points to the desegregation of Texas prisons and the resultant decline in assaults. One also wonders whether an analysis of prison guard and police perspectives on these dynamics—which Lopez-Aguado begins to do through some of his field notes about teacher perspectives—might also shed light on the ways that those in power contribute to the carceral order.

Lopez-Aguado uses a powerful term—“imprisonable” (p. 191) to describe the ways that people’s identities become marked within carceral institutions and then “exported” (p. 191) back into the communities they come from. His book provides us with a stark understanding of the processes of mass criminalization and incarceration through a rich analysis of the ways that notions of criminality adhere to racialized social identities through the work of the very institutions of punishment themselves.

References

Bonilla-Silva E (2001) *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*.Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner.

Hebdige D (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.Padstow: TJ International.