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Coerced: Work under Threat of Punishment

By Erin Hatton

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In her 2020 book *Coerced: Work under Threat of Punishment*, sociologist Erin Hatton examines the working conditions of prisoners, welfare recipients, student athletes and postgraduate research students in the United States and uncovers surprising similarities. Hatton argues that because these groups are primarily classified as something other than workers even when they are engaged in work, their supervisors have wide-reaching punitive powers stretching beyond the workplace to other domains of their lives. Hatton terms this form of power *status coercion* as it operates through the ability of supervisors to remove them from a particular status 'in good standing' "and thereby deprive them of the rights, privileges, and future opportunities that such status confers." (13) Hatton identifies the rise of status coercion as a crucial though understudied trend in the world of work under neoliberalism operating independently from, though often compounding, the effects of structural racism and the more widely recognised employment trend of precarity.

The greatest strength of the book lies in its analysis of the discourses used to justify or resist the denial of employment rights to this diverse group of workers. Despite the undeniably enormous differences in their social statuses, the workers identified in the book are commonly portrayed as "subordinate, dependent, childlike figures who require extensive direction, control and (often) punishment," while "narratives of immorality and privilege cast them as something other than 'workers' doing something other than rights-bearing 'work.'" (33) In each case, the exclusion from rights-bearing work encompasses basic labour rights such as coverage by the minimum wage and the right to organise. Prisoners, for example, who provide necessary labour both inside prisons and for contractors, are paid as little as 15 cents an hour, and, like welfare recipients, can be legally forced to work. Welfare recipients, like student athletes, are paid 'in kind' benefits rather than wages – despite the fact that student athletes in some sports like American football and basketball generate substantial revenue streams for their universities. Graduate student researchers receive stipends for their lab work but are coerced into working long and unsociable hours out of proportion to the funding they receive and the skill level required.

However, Hatton also analyses important differences in the form that status coercion takes among each group of workers. In the case of prisoners and welfare recipients, their exclusion from rights-bearing work has far more punitive consequences in store when they are non-compliant with their supervisors. Prisoners can be sent to solitary confinement, denied visitation, recreation or phone rights, and subjected to physical violence by corrections officers for non-compliance with workplace directives. Welfare recipients can be 'sanctioned', leading to a loss of a wide range of welfare benefits that can mean the difference between survival and homelessness. In both cases, their exclusion from rights-bearing work and the punitive consequences of non-compliance are justified through narratives of immorality and irresponsibility, variously serving to prevent supposed laziness and promote a work ethic enabling economic independence, as well as remedying or forestalling criminality. Hatton helpfully traces the long history of these narratives and practices back to slavery and its

aftermath, underlining the highly racialised dimension of imprisonment and workfare in the United States.

Student athletes and postgraduate research students in the sciences face a different set of consequences for non-compliance, in turn justified by a narrative of subordination and dependence. Postgraduate research students in the sciences are generally engaged in lab work under the direct supervision of their academic supervisors, whose projects they contribute to in order to earn their doctorates, which Hatton convincingly argues sets up a very different power dynamic than that of doctoral students in the social sciences who generally work on independent projects. Postgraduate research students in the sciences rely on their academic supervisors to sign off publications, write letters of recommendation and allow them to graduate, giving supervisors wide powers to forestall students' career progression, thereby enabling a high degree of labour exploitation in the form of long and unsociable hours of work on their supervisors' projects in the lab. Student athletes rely on their coaches for playing time and for introductions to recruiters from professional leagues, as well as for the maintenance of their athletic scholarships which allow them to study.

While the punishments meted out to prisoners and workfare workers are justified through a narrative of their 'wickedness', Hatton argues that the potential for punishing students for non-compliance with their coaches or academic supervisors is paradoxically justified through a narrative of their 'blessedness'. Students who complain about their long hours (in the case of postgraduate students) or about being prevented from capitalising on their fame (in the case of student athletes), then, are side-lined by universities who frame them as spoiled or entitled. Undergraduate student athletes, who, like prisoners and welfare recipients, are more likely to come from disadvantaged minority backgrounds, additionally face a high degree of paternalist 'protection' on the part of universities, who monitor their lives on and off the field.

In the book's final chapters, Hatton examines the various forms that worker resistance takes among each group and the discursive foundations of workers' resistance or compliance. The picture that comes across is of a highly constrained environment for effective resistance in which most of the workers interviewed seem to have at least partially accepted the logics of their exclusion from rights-bearing work. Yet, though it's only briefly touched on in the book, labour organising by postgraduate students has gone through something of a renaissance in the US in the past decade and there are promising signs of new organising initiatives by undergraduate student athletes who have recently won a Supreme Court ruling against the National Collegiate Athletics Association, paving the way for them to receive payments for their labour. Understanding the reasons for these advances in the realm of student-labour organising, while prisoners and workfare workers have failed to make comparable advances despite decades of dedicated organising, would enrich the author's analysis of 'status coercion' as a whole.

The analysis would have benefited as well from a more precise delineation of status coercion and economic coercion. Hatton's argument rests on her contention that these workers are coerced primarily on the basis of their status as something other than rights bearing employees. And yet, with the possible exception of prisoners, the coercive "stick" in each case is overwhelmingly an economic one. Postgraduate students and student athletes, for example, are coerced through the threat of loss of future earnings through not being permitted to access experiences or milestones that will allow them to progress into professional careers – an experience shared by many workers in industries with a high degree of social closure. The reality

of economic coercion is even more apparent for welfare recipients who stand to lose a wide range of basic social safety net protections that allow them and their families to subsist. Better understanding the delineation of, and relationship between, coercion on the basis of status and economics would enable the reader to better appreciate the 'value added' of the concept of status coercion to contemporary theorisations of work and employment.

In addition, the book would have benefitted from a more in-depth analysis of how the various sites and practices identified in the project are linked together through broader shifts in political economy. As Hatton notes, the shift towards a highly racialised system of mass incarceration and 'workfare' are part and parcel of the extension of state disciplinary powers at the same time as the state's welfare arm has contracted. Exploring how the latter has impacted university funding models – and the increasing reliance on unpaid or underpaid student labour that has entailed – would have furthered Hatton's stated aim of linking together disparate struggles by workers affected by status coercion. It would also have enabled clearer linkages to be made with workers suffering from other forms of status coercion – such as the millions of highly exploited undocumented immigrant workers in the United States who labour under threat of deportation, compromising their ability to exercise their labour rights at the same time as they are denied access to social welfare programs.

The most convincing arguments with respect to status coercion – and the most gut-wrenching passages of the book – concern the punishments meted out to prisoners perceived as non-compliant in their work. The widespread abuses documented range from physical violence and solitary confinement to extended sentences and denial of contact with family in response to minor infractions by workers labouring for less than a dollar an hour with little recourse to the law. Though Hatton is documenting these trends within a US context, the reality is that an increasing proportion of the British prisoner population is engaged under similar conditions, while overlaps with the UK's own system of workfare, most recently administered through Universal Credit, and the working conditions of postgraduate student researchers in the sciences, tell of further similarities between the two countries. The result is an eye-opening read that will be of interest to scholars of labour, the penal and welfare systems and higher education.