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**Examining The Role of Capitalism as the Driving Vessel Behind New York City’s Carceral State Development**

PhD Writing Sample

**Introduction**

Starting in 1970’s, New York City’s carceral state has not just emerged within the city’s limits, but continued to expand, grow, and engulf the city proper, producing consequences such as issues of over-policing and mass incarceration. The question this project will attempt to answer is what the cause of the city’s carceral state development is as well as what is the driving vessel of its maintenance. It is argued however that the answer to this question requires us to look no further than our socio-economic system, *capitalism* and the political efforts that help maintain this system, which in result also maintain the carceral state.

Conversations on carceral state development regarding New York City and the United States have dominated academia since the turn of the century.[[1]](#footnote-1) Discussions about the causes of the carceral state’s development are dominated by frameworks of neoliberalism and racial capitalism, in which are said to be what has produced our carceral plague. While race, and the ideologies that make up neoliberalism certainly have some interplay with the development of the carceral state, they themselves are not the root cause of this system.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Research focusing on the carceral state also finds itself increasingly valuable, because issue of mass incarceration, over-policing, and social stratification via our carceral problems, still exist today. The carceral state’s existence is an issue that plagues states, and urban environments, still in this very moment, and is one policy analysts, social justice advocates, and grassroots organizers still tirelessly attempt to combat themselves.

One of the reasons New York City offers itself as a potent urban environment to examine the carceral state because of its diversity.[[3]](#footnote-3) Its diversity would suggest that groups, in which span many ideologies, races, and ethnic grounds, would offer push-back, against the development of something like the carceral state. Especially after the initial developments of the carceral state, when it would be seen first-hand how it would ravage communities of color, and many ethnic populations. But as this project will address, this has not been the case, and the carceral state has emerged across many coalitions, precisely because it is a product of capitalism, and its existence benefits no one racial or ethnic group, but rather the bourgeoise class within capitalism itself. Which is why New York City’s reputation as a diverse melting pot, makes it a prime location in studying the carceral states development.

New York City’s reputation of all these different "types" of people, puts a thorn in the side of those attempting to recognize the carceral states existence, as a problem that is just rooted in racism, and racial prejudice. While there is no secret that racism persists inside New York City's jurisdiction, it cannot fully explain carceral development, as some literature suggest.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is also true a great deal of ethnic minorities and racial minorities supported punitive entrenchment, even if it affected their own.[[5]](#footnote-5) Even Mayors of racial minority status supported what some would deem "racial projects" that developed the carceral state in New York City.

While neoliberalism has been a dominant ideology of elites, and even common folk over the last few decades, *just* neoliberalism does not explain the rise of the carceral state. Many actors, citizens and people in general supported the growth police budgets, and zero-tolerance policies, who were not neoliberals. The variety of peoples within New York City is one reason Ed Koch was able to form a diverse electoral coalition in 1980, featuring constituents and supporters across racial lines and a big boost from the middle and upper classes.[[6]](#footnote-6)

When we begin to examine the political developments within New York City that paved the way for the growth and development of the carceral state, we see that it cannot be neither be based just once nor neoliberal agendas. But rather as this project aims to show, it is the pursuit of capital that has been the driving force behind the carceral states development. Political orders dedicated to serving the capitalist economy have paved the way for the carceral state to grow. Which is why it was able to develop and be maintained, across decades. As well as being supported across racial lines, such as by middle-class and business owning nonwhites.[[7]](#footnote-7) New York City is important to study because the development of its carceral state showcases the impact capitalist projects have, as well as the dynamics they can create. The growth of the carceral state, in short, is a story of political economy.

**What explains Carceral State Development?**

This question of carceral state development, and its origins, is often discussed in the theoretical plane, or by looking at the United States as a whole.[[8]](#footnote-8) While existing scholarship that attempts to circum-navigate to the core of this carceral state, and its origins, points to a lot of potential deadly, beginning roots, some are more fruitful than others. New York City also may paint a different picture, than rural areas within the United States, or even other urban environments.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It should come as no surprise however that neoliberal orders, are a point of focus for those attempting to locate an origin of carceral state development.[[10]](#footnote-10) Our definition of neoliberalism is inspired from the great David Harvey, in where he states himself that neoliberalism is a *“theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.”*[[11]](#footnote-11) This ideology being neoliberalism, attempts to undergird state power in an effort to focus on privatization, which is believed to be more beneficial for capital generation.

While not focusing just on New York City, much academic work paints a compelling picture, attempting to showcase the carceral state being a product of neoliberal policies, austerity measures, and neoliberal political economy at large. It is certainly true that neoliberalism offers a hand in understanding carceral development in New York City, and maybe urban areas in general. But the notion of it being the centerpiece behind the carceral states development falls victim to some issues.

**There appears to be a tendency to treat neoliberalism as a homogenous term, in which it covers a lot of ground**.[[12]](#footnote-12) It seems that those invoking neoliberalism attempt to explain very issue, even those beyond the carceral state via the use of the term. To an extent where it sometimes may seem that it is being suggested these things did not exist before neoliberalism, and that latter is solely responsible for much of our plaguing issues.

In looking at the definition of neoliberalism, we see that private property, and the privatization of goods, services, and land is a core aspect of the ideology. In general, limiting the function of the state, and focusing on entrepreneurism. Therefore, some people have alluded to the development of private prisons, as one of the reasons neoliberalism explains the carceral states emergence and development. But in New York, and the city proper, the privatization of incarceration never fully took off. And even in locations where it did, it was realized private prisons were not very profitable.[[13]](#footnote-13) The profitability of the carceral state has been from its reach, and its effects on various classes of people, and how it effects their own economic standings. This aspect of the carceral state’s effect on political economy, isn’t a function of neoliberalism, but is a function of capitalism in general.

It should be said however that neoliberalism certainly has stained much of our society. The effects of neoliberalism such as increasing wealth inequality and neglecting the public welfare in favor of funding the repressive arm of the state certainly had an impact in the development of our carceral problems.[[14]](#footnote-14) But before even neoliberalism, these items existed as principal aspects of capitalism. While neoliberalism focuses on austerity measures and removing the states hand in society, the carceral state is not simply just a product of that. It serves as a mechanism within capitalism at-large, in which it is a tool for social oppression, and class exploitation supported by urban political orders. While neoliberalism certainly does not spare any blows towards the working class, the development of social oppression tools to exploit the lower classes within capitalism is not a unique neoliberal project.

The budding field, or topic of racial capitalism, has also been a point of entry, for those attempting to explain the development of the carceral state, and in urban political development in general.[[15]](#footnote-15) But these analyses, are lacking in some respects. To begin with, racial capitalism is a difficult concept, and one that like neoliberalism, has seemed to have lost some of its analytical tooling. The term itself, has also seemingly been muddled greatly, and overall, works on racial capitalism, seem to suffer from an over-compilation of sorts.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The phrase or term racial capitalism originates from apartheid South Africa but was coined and used predominantly by Cedric J. Robinson in his most famous work, *Black Marxism*.[[17]](#footnote-17) It is a theoretical framework that attempts to understand race, and racism, as something that originates before capitalism, and it is race and racism, that helped develop capitalism, through the feudal order. Robinson also suggest that capitalism itself, is not distinctly different from feudalism, and only through pre-existing racial dynamics, could capitalism even develop.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In his seminal work, Robinson says directly*; "The historical development of world capitalism was influenced most fundamentally by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism."*.[[19]](#footnote-19) The notion that capitalism emerged in Europe as an already racialized system, is central to this theoretical framework. For him, capitalist exploitation is intrinsically intertwined with racial differentiation. They are inseparable.

This framework of *racial capitalism* from Robinson, however, does little to understand the development of the carceral state, because it suggests racism is a passive ideology, and therefore this new development of the carceral state is something that likely would have already existed.[[20]](#footnote-20) We know however, that the carceral state has not always existed under capitalism. It is a tool capitalism produced, as a new tool for social oppression. In the same way races and racism were produced. In a society in which people are exploited as laborers, on the basis of class as well as often via their race, it seems that this notion of racial capitalism is redundant. Because capitalism cannot exist without forms or tools of social oppression.

While some scholarship on the prison industrial complex understands its dynamics as a “New Jim Crow” of sorts, this does not fully allow us to understand its origins. Jim Crow laws were very much a social oppression tool, and one used for class and racial conflict in the United States. And so is the carceral state. But the exploitation of whites, is not just a byproduct, or a small consequence of the carceral states oppression, as Alexander would suggest. The almost quarter of the prison population whites make up in New York, is no small margin.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In her work, Alexander is very much right to understand part of the reason the development of her “New Jim Crow” has been achieved is by appealing to racism, and the vulnerability of proletariat whites in capitalism. But on the basis of class, capitalism exploits all. And removing all non-whites from the prison system would still create a carceral pandemic. In New York, according to the Vera Justice Institute, just the white incarceration rate is 103 per 100K. In Germany, the total incarceration rate is 67 per 100k.[[22]](#footnote-22) This is because as Alexander sometimes expresses herself, the carceral state is very much a class based issue system.

The carceral state also cannot be attributed to being just the latest form of racial subordination because the current dynamics of our society are drastically different, as well as the consequences of the carceral state. Support for the carceral state exist across racial lines. Also, while economic and spatial regulation under capitalism may lead to issues such as ghettoization, these areas in which the carceral state is most potent are not affluent, or bourgeoise locations.[[23]](#footnote-23) Research by a project produced in collaboration with Cornell University showed households in which have income less than $25,000, are sixty-one times more likely to have a family member incarcerated, than those who make over $100,000.[[24]](#footnote-24) One’s socio-economic status, class and their social relation to capital tells who has carceral connections. Therefore, while race certainly plays a factor in political economy, and the carceral state, the latter cannot be understood as just a new type of racial subordination.

Some efforts have been made to build on racial capitalism, to form a theoretical synthesis, merging it with other frameworks.[[25]](#footnote-25) To help build a better foundational theory, that might serve the study of city and urban politics well. This effort is applauded, but the road it paves is bumpy. This synthesis also strives to merge with intersectionality, which aims to see, race, gender, and other groups as separate, but merge together to face things like “triple oppression” in society.[[26]](#footnote-26) This is problematic because it often leaves out a class analysis and assumes these ascriptives categories that are social constructs, to have value beyond our social system, when they do not. Race does not randomly exist. It is a consequence that emerges through class structure, and through the political economic conditions of capitalism.[[27]](#footnote-27)

So, just as we see race develop via intra-class struggle, as a consequence of capitalism, we too can see the carceral state become birthed from this very same logic. Race and racism are social oppression tools, just as the carceral state is. As race and racism work to generate capital, and allow for exploitation in capitalism, so does the carceral state. While racist issues exist in class conflict, it is class that first determines how one relates to these issues, just as it does regarding how they relate to capital. These same dynamics are true for the carceral state.

Michael Javen Fortner’s synthesis suggests too those interactions in capitalism, that involve racism, produce unique classes, including a black petite bourgeoise. But it is uncertain what is the value of delineating a new petite bourgeoise, different from the class of the petite bourgeoise that already exists and is understood in Marxism. How would a black petite bourgeoisie differ from a Latino, White or Asian one? It is likely that under a fine-grained analysis there ought to be differences, but they will still aim to support policies and agendas that serve their class status. While Fortner’s efforts are important, and seek to answer important questions, in regards to the carceral state, race does not explain enough, is rather unfruitful in attempting to answering questions about its rise, and continued existence in New York City.

This is not to say race is detached from carceral state development, and that because of this, racial capitalism-based framework is useless, but rather to understand the carceral state in just the perspective of race, and with little emphasis on class struggle, and class politics, presents issues. While incarcerated peoples, and peoples affected by the carceral state in total, especially in New York City is certainly unequal.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is unequal in the sense non-whites are certainly represented and affected more by the grip of mass incarceration, police brutality and over policing, the issue of the carceral state is chiefly a class issue. It is a class issue, with racial undertones.

Affluent members of the upper classes, or the bourgeoise, are not nearly affected as greatly by the carceral state’s entrenchment, as members of middle and lower classes, in our socio-economic system, if at all. The carceral state itself, from a policy level, has emerged from a diverse, bipartisan core, one with a complex group of interests. Whites, blacks, Latinos, and other groups have all at one point supported the development of penal repression.[[29]](#footnote-29) And still do.[[30]](#footnote-30) Attempting to explain that by just solely a racial framework, has its errs.

While not New York City, across the U.S., many areas exist in which blacks are not killed by the police. But rather, it is Native Americans, poor whites and Latinos were the ones killed at the highest rates. [[31]](#footnote-31) The most common denominator for those touched by the carceral state, is those who are in poverty-stricken classes.[[32]](#footnote-32) If one finds themselves in one of the lower-economic strata’s of society, they are much more vulnerable to suffering from the consequences of over policing, and police violence. One of the core reasons for this is many of these same people find themselves committing survival crimes. It is also why statistics and data showing prison and jail populations no longer support blanket statements that suggest the carceral state, is just a new, race focused Jim Crow.[[33]](#footnote-33)

It should be made clear however, racism absolutely exists. It is a pervasive ideology, and a consistent one in our capitalist socio-economic system. But detaching it from class, and or political economy, is a vicious error we ought to work towards not making. Going back briefly to neoliberalism, the latter’s own development presents us with problems about viewing class and race differently. This is because under neoliberalism’s grip, whites have also routinely gotten poorer, and found themselves in the lower strata of society.[[34]](#footnote-34)

A conception of carceral state development, that may be better fit for understanding New York City, or development in general, is by the political orders, that drive urban political development.[[35]](#footnote-35) It is the actions, and agendas of the actors within the political arena present in New York City, which have driven the development of the carceral state. And these orders are material developments of capitalism itself, focusing to benefit the capitalist class, as well as the capitalist system at large. The very issue of mass incarceration, and the development of the dreaded carceral state of New York City, is precisely, a material function and elaboration of capitalism.

The carceral state is also multiple, and pervasive in existence, and because of this it has various stages and can respond to social dynamics. Therefore, it can feature aspects of racism and class conflict or even neoliberalism.[[36]](#footnote-36) The carceral state we know today, may not be the one we know tomorrow.[[37]](#footnote-37) But always, the carceral state is a pervasive, entrenching mechanism that reproduces, and develops itself, to chiefly serve capital. The root cause of this carceral system, and its reach, is capitalism itself.

**The Rise of New York City’s Carceral State**

To fully understand capital's pervasiveness and capitalism being the primary vessel that drove the carceral state development in New York City, we must look at the core pillars of its development in the city. Beginning in the mid to late 1970s, in the rebuilding years after the financial crisis in New York City, the carceral state began to take place. Throughout the next few decades, it would be founded, developed, and thrive under support from the left, and right-wing political parties and actors, middle and upper socio-economic classes, and white and non-white ethnic and racial groups.

In the late 1970’s and most of the 80s, under Mayor Ed Koch, New York City shifted toward street-level drug policing. This began occurring only when widespread dissatisfaction with street crime, new policing ideas coupled with the revival of the city's fiscal capacity, coalesced together. These layers were part of a broader project to rebuild the city after the fiscal crisis that left much disarray in the early 1970s. Some of this disarray and aftermath of the fiscal crisis was a heroin epidemic that plagued NYC. Combined with President Richard Nixon declaring a national war on drugs, New York's at the time Governor, Nelson Rockefeller, was ready to come down on narcotics. Governor Rockefeller debuted his movement to bring a punitive first to New York' at a presser in January of 1973.[[38]](#footnote-38)

It would take some time before New York City saw the states carceral wishes to fully develop, however. The lack of resources because of the financial crisis meant that the city did not have the material means to fully execute the punitive policies passed. A result of this would be arrest statistics in the first few years after the implementation of the Rockefeller laws would largely stay the same in comparison to years prior. But by the 1980’s however, the New York Police Department (NYPD) begun a focused campaign on street level drugs, which resulted in a surge of felony arrests.[[39]](#footnote-39)

This was a part of an effort attempting to be made for the city to recoup its urban spaces. Which at its core, was a part of a larger initiative to inspire capital investment. One of the primary aspects in getting people to invest, is a level of trust that is often needed to be had. And like everything else, governing coalitions must be trusted. NYC’s policing initiatives and goals of crime stopping were also attempts reassert state authority. An effort to exhibit that public powers were not incapable to combat urban issues. But rather that cities could in some ways, control their own destiny.

With this reclaiming of public spaces, the state also aimed to restore an idea, and vision of a “cosmopolitan” street life, one in which cultural capital came into play. This would contribute to gentrification, and the death and growth of specific urban places.[[40]](#footnote-40) Neighborhoods would be encouraged to be their own pockets of social order and be built on the developing middle and upper classes, and “legit” economies. It would also allow the NYPD to leverage citizen surveillance, and to enact a level of security they at the time could not afford. But most importantly, all these things were essential steps in improving the fiscal health of NYC, making it ripe for investment in a changing economic market.[[41]](#footnote-41)

A level of moral panic would also exist in the "concrete jungle" during this period, which helped provide multi-racial and ethnic support to stop crime.[[42]](#footnote-42) While it is common to assume carceral state development is explicitly racist, middle-class African Americans and other non-whites facing the material threats of crime also played a hand in the policy development of the carceral state as stated before.[[43]](#footnote-43) While certainly dominated by whites, Black and Latino middle classes too helped shape the development of this punitive era. Why? Because their position and socio-economic status took precedence before their assumed racial ideologies. It was suggested by these more affluent classes and groups of people that individuals experiencing poverty of regardless race or ethnicity did not need social or economic programs to support them. They became part of a deserving poor.[[44]](#footnote-44)

This aspect of the carceral state’s development drives home the idea that the root cause is indeed capitalism. Despite one’s race, or ethnic background, it was primarily their social relation to capital, and their class status in which dictated the support they had for pro capitalist policies, in which were often pro carceral state, or carceral expansion. In a neighborhood dominated by African Americans, such as Harlem, black business owners and middle-class workers were outspoken about their support for policy changes that increased policing.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Beyond just the Rockefeller laws, a development of an “orderly” city began in the big apple. This notion of an orderly city presented an opportunity for economic prosperity. As a result, the idea of attempting to eliminate crime and disorder by any means became a core goal of NYC's governing bodies and law enforcement. What the makings of an orderly city were, however, was an attack on those stricken by poverty in a city that suffered from tremendous wealth inequality, even after a few years and decades after the fiscal crisis. And still does today.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The policies that aimed to make an orderly city specifically targeted youths, people experiencing homelessness, and people who drugs and alcohol may have influenced. The homeless folk who were present in the subways in the late 80s became the NYPD’s primary focus. This appearance or the illusion of order was vital because of the presence of homeless people, or people stricken by poverty, wandering the streets of New York City in a disorderly situation had to be correct.[[47]](#footnote-47) Given that the orderly city has thrived during periods of low crime, it has become a tool for capitalist development in urban areas that conveys economic prosperity with spatial regulation.[[48]](#footnote-48) Irrespective of crime trending up or down, support for carceral and police expansion still was present.

During this era of Ed Koch in New York city, the recovering metropole saw almost every aspect of policing, balloon. Koch and his coalition would lay the groundwork in implementing policies such as the Rockefeller laws, and take the needed steps to create an “orderly” city**.**[[49]](#footnote-49)From 1980, to 1989, under Mayor Ed Koch, police and correction spending surged 120% and 3195%, respectively. The police department of New York City, or NYPD, would increase at the same rate as overall employment. It was at this point too, that Rikers Island prison may have become the world's largest penal colony. Ultimately, the Koch regime fulfilled its promise to come down on criminals.[[50]](#footnote-50) But in 1989, New York City would see their first African-American mayor come to power, in David Dinkins.

David Dinkins, however, would continue developing New York City's penal system. Part of Dinkins’ political agenda was to retake the city from the “the pushers” and “the muggers”. The result of this rhetoric, and self-described plans would be hiring an additional 6,000 officers.[[51]](#footnote-51) Despite these efforts Dinkins would lose re-election in 1993 to Republican Rudy Giuliani.

As the new Mayor of New York City, Rudy Giuliani and then NYPD commissioner and “top cop” William Bratton would continue to maintain the cities carceral state. The two helped derive a strategy to stop crime based on the broken windows theory.[[52]](#footnote-52) Which was developed from scholarship funded for by conservative think tank, the Manhattan Institute.[[53]](#footnote-53) This broken windows theory, suggested that visible signs of crime, such as the broken windows, promoted more crime and in general, civil disorder. The enaction of broken windows theory was particularly done in “high-crime” neighborhoods, in which economic insecurity was also concentrated.

The carceral state’s existence now being maintained and supported from Ed Koch to the reign of Rudy Giuliani highlights the logic behind urban political orders, in the name of capitalism, is what drives the carceral states development and maintenance. Despite these regime changes, and over two decades, New York City saw little to no break in the development of its carceral state. The latter spanned democratic, republican, and even social democratic regimes, none of which swayed greatly away, if at all, from supporting the carceral state.

In 2001, another change of guard would occur when Michael Bloomberg would defeat Mark J. Green in the mayoral election, starting another regime within New York City. Under the Bloomberg Administration, police spending went up by over ten percent between 2001 and 2013. This would occur despite declining crime rates. Showing that even in time of economic normalcy and low crime the carceral state was still able to be maintained and be a source of capital accumulation and generation. In Bloomberg’s twelve year run as mayor of New York City, the NYPD’s operational costs amounted to more than $54 billion.[[54]](#footnote-54)

The Bloomberg Administration also cannot be discussed without the mentioning the policy colloquially known as Stop-and-frisk. A result of this was the high criminalization of young Blacks and Latinos, living in low-income parts of the city. The era of stop and frisk also shows the reach of the carceral state, as many of those subjected to the police tactic were barred from jobs and other aspects of life.[[55]](#footnote-55)

The building of New York City's carceral state has many pillars. The increase in crime in various periods, such as the post-NYC fiscal crisis and post-national recession, which resulted in increased poverty, played a massive factor. It is no secret that New York City at times did indeed feature high levels of crime, and even higher levels of drug abuse. But this often came as a casualty of economic issues, both at the local and national level. Survival crimes, and the use of drugs to cope with precariat economic positions are not novel to New York City, and certainly not urban areas in general.

Development, and realization in the fluidity of capital, also forced the hands of many urban environments in which they were required to transition from a managerial to an entrepreneurial position. Which largely begun to occur in the rear quarter of the 20th century. This was also a driving cause for many of the urban political developments focused on increasing the wealth and investment within New York City. All these aspects played key roles in the development, and the later maintenance of the carceral state, which was developed as a byproduct of capitalist pursuit of profit.[[56]](#footnote-56)

The existence of racism in New York City certainly had much to do with the advancing of the carceral state. However, even the rates at which whites are locked up in NYC would still present alarming numbers of those affected by the carceral apparatus if that rate was standard. As mentioned before, the carceral state was also supported across racial lines. Moreover, the first black mayor of NYC, David Dinkins, did more than his part to increase the size of NYC's law enforcement sector and contribute his efforts to the carceral problems.

The socio-economic system of capitalism, itself, is not an urban political order, or development. New York City’s carceral state system also has only existed for roughly forty years, while capitalism has been around much longer. It is these political developments within New York City however, in response to dynamics, and situations arising in capitalism, is what has developed the carceral state however, and maintained it. Issues of inequality, crime, the necessity of reclaiming land and space for the sake of investment, are all things that have led the development of the carceral state. In an effort to serve capitalism, the political developments within the New York City, produced the carceral state as a byproduct of these developments and orders.

**Capitalism: New York City’s Carceral Development Lead Driver**

This project has attempted to first, lay out the potential frameworks that may help us to understand carceral state construction, within New York City. Along with an attempting to look at the history of political development within the city, in which allows us to see the carceral state materially develop. The argument this paper strives to make however, is that the frameworks of neoliberalism, and racial capitalism, do not tell the whole story of the carceral state’s development, within New York City, nor can they be attributed with the label of being the “root cause”. But rather a storm of multiple political orders and political alliances focusing on serving capital constructed our carceral conundrum.

Indeed, the rise of neoliberalism was undoubtedly present in New York City. The regime of Ed Koch practiced its fair share of austerity politics and attempts to implement neoliberal orders. With the slashing of the welfare state and the focus on creating an attractive urban environment for capital investment, NYC was not absolved from neoliberal agendas. The city’s urban orders were very much driven by privatization, business development in finance, and real estate, as well as other aspects of capital accumulation that relate to neoliberalism.[[57]](#footnote-57)

It is also true that these neoliberal orders, and agendas, were not just supported by wealthy ruling class whites. The Koch regime in New York City mobilized people across racial lines. However, it was the middle and upper classes of each respective race in which were central his coalition, which featured blacks, whites, Hispanics, and "ethnic" whites.[[58]](#footnote-58) Recognizing the dynamic support these agendas have, puts a thorn in the side of attempting to recognize the carceral state as just a racial project, or one that is driven by racial capitalism. But rather, the growth in police budgets, and the expansion of the carceral state in general, is a product of bourgeoise politics, and in general, has more to do with one’s social relationship to capital. Both in the sense of how they are affected by the carceral apparatus, and the level and type of support one has for the latter.

Within New York City, whites too are also affected by the carceral state. The policies such as the Rockefeller Drug Laws, or the development towards creating an orderly city did not occur in affluent areas. Neither did stop and frisk. These political developments and orders focused on making areas not ripe for capital investment more suitable. However, it is also true we must look beyond just arrests to understand the carceral grip fully. Only then can we see the whole picture of how capitalism drives the carceral crisis in New York City.

It is also important to note that at one point in the United States, half a million convicts would exit prisons, generating a vulnerable labor force nationwide. Many of these former inmates would find themselves working in the service industry, or in jobs traditionally deemed “low-skilled”, and in general, were low quality.[[59]](#footnote-59) In post-financial crisis environment, the service industry in the 1980’s began to surge in New York City. And many of those existing within the incarceration system as victims of the carceral state were there, and available to fulfill these new service industry jobs.

Jail and prison populations only tell part of the carceral story, however. People getting arrested and receiving misdemeanors but not prison or jail time, those who picked up status offenses, or were forced to pay fines are all part of our carceral problem. One can become a victim of the carceral state and face the consequences of this in many ways. When people are set back financially from the carceral states reach, it also may not just affect them. But also, the many friends and family members who they may or may not financially support.

What so many people encountering the carceral state does, however, is present a large workforce available for capital exploitation in New York City—the same as it did nationwide. As previously mentioned, this was a big help for the development of the service industry. In New York City, between 1980 and 2019, the NYPD made almost ten million arrests. This resulted in over three million convictions, and the creation of criminal records for almost 750,000 people. The reach of the carceral state is showcased when we look at those affected financially by carceral projects, as they are often if not always more vulnerable to be coerced by capitalism’s dynamics to take on low-wage jobs. Existing economic research shows that those with a record earn half as much throughout the career as those who do not.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Inmates do not exist within the jails for "free." Pools of money are spent and dealt to private companies to pay for inmates’ food, beds, services, and other goods. Moreover, while New York nor the city is a chief violator of prisoner rights in comparison to some other areas in the U.S., NYC paid prisoners to make disinfectants 65 cents per hour, while also making Rikers Island inmates dig graves during 2020 coronavirus pandemic.[[61]](#footnote-61)

The same economics of supporting prisons and jails exists for NYC's *finest*, the NYPD. With a budget of more than many armies globally, the NYPD collects over $5 billion, and has a total expensive of over $10 billion.[[62]](#footnote-62) However, again, this is a causality of capitalism, as much of NYC's wealth exists in private actors' hands, who want to ensure their remains profitable. The NYPD Budget for patrol services currently stands at over $1.6B and grows yearly, attempting to ensure the city remains *orderly*. Because of this spending, billionaire and former Mayor Michael Bloomberg has also referred to the NYPD as his private army.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Capitalism has been the key force behind the development of New York City’s carceral state, and support of capitalism has driven the politics that have help craft the carceral state’s web. With a focus on making the city investment friendly, the bloated police budgets can help ensure the protection of the billions of dollars in private property, within the city’s limits. The policies focusing on dealing with crime, and drug addictions, are a result of the inequality and precariat positions capitalism places on people. Ideas of an orderly city too, as we’ve seen, are very much driven by capitalist investment. The same can be said for OPP, or Operation Pressure Point, another tactic used in the 1980s, helped shepherd in a wave of real estate investment, attempting to capitalize on property values. As stated by the New York Times, "Thanks to Operation Pressure Point,", “art galleries are replacing shooting galleries”.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Many of these dynamics are still present and continue to help maintain the carceral state in New York City. The over five-billion-dollar budget the NYPD has focuses on policing patrols and having presence in much of the common living and public spaces of the city. Ensuring that they are either ripe for capital investment or helping to maintain their value. All this also comes as the NYPD budget goes up, even as crime goes down. Despite being almost 150,000 fewer misdemeanor offenses in 2022 than in 2000, the NYPD budget is over $2B more.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Current mayor and former NYPD employee Eric Adams has also taken steps revive orderly city policies and agendas. Adams has been at the forefront of stationing even more cops around New York City. Specifically in areas of transit. With the goal of having the NYPD maintain a strong presence in regular life within NYC. In doing so, the city can do its best job to protect capital and continue to make it attractive for investment. Which is why it also worth mentioning Mayor Adams was the benefactor of large sums of campaign donations via New York City real estate interests.[[66]](#footnote-66) While even today, the carceral state is painted as primarily a racial project, by scholars of critical race theory, racial capitalism and critical legal studies, Mayor Eric Adams, an African-American, won his election appealing to minority and white voters by promising to be tough on crime. Showcasing that his social relation to capital, as a former police officer, and current role within the democratic party, supersedes whatever ideologies may be ascribed to him based on race.

The carceral state as we know it, and all the ills it places on society is a fundamental dimension of capitalism itself. The justice system, policing and the carceral state in toto, is a political and social system built up of many layers. But these layers, such as the urban political orders that helped perpetuate the social circumstances that produced by the Rockefeller laws, the priority of creating an “orderly” city, all have been efforts to secure the existence of capitalism, as well as generate, and secure capital. Agendas such as making New York City appear like an orderly city, and reclaiming urban spaces are ones that are rooted in capital accumulation. Even enforcing punitive measures on drug offenders is a consequence of capitalism because of the erosion of the public welfare spending, in the wake of neoliberalism, generated a surplus labor force, which needed to be corralled, in the absence of the mentioned removed state funded welfare systems.

While it is true neoliberalism may have had a hand in the development of the carceral state in New York City, labeling it as the root cause neglects the fact the carceral state is developed and maintained across many regimes, in which may or may not have been neoliberal ones. The concept of corralling a surplus labor force too, cannot just be contain to neoliberal politics. Many of the dynamics of the carceral state are also firmly rooted in the division of labor, and class conflict, which is something that precedes neoliberalism. In the same ways the material conditions under capitalism produced the reshaping of cities, and the development of neoliberalism, these same conditions are what drove the development of the carceral state. It should also be said, the carceral state is not necessarily a byproduct of neoliberal ideas such as privatization and state budget slashing either. While public welfare budgets were cut, state spending on law enforcement and corrections went up drastically. The privatization efforts of prisons too, were also found to be unsuccessful, as mentioned before in this project.

This elaboration of the carceral also suggests that looking at latter as a product of capitalism itself, is not necessarily reductionist, oversimplifying its development because much of the competing explanations are byproducts of capitalism themselves. Class analyses of politics and political developments cannot be reductionists because they are at the heart of capitalism. And when we discuss our social world, we are discussing a social world that is present inside the socio-economic system of capitalism. The state, and class, are also the two most important things that make up capitalism. Capitalism serves well in explaining the carceral state in New York City in its totality because it is not something that has stalled, or been washed away by a new, competing ideology, rivaling neoliberalism. Neither has it developed to be exclusive to any race or ethnicities. But rather in the agendas and policies that support it, there is the common goal of creating investment, pursuing capital, that are consistent.

**Conclusion**

Despite efforts to unclench the carceral fist, the United States is still engulfed by penal repression. Moreover, this is the same for New York City. Beginning in the 70s & 80s and being maintained until this very moment, the carceral state still has a strong presence within one of the most dynamic urban environments in the United States. If not the world.[[67]](#footnote-67)

This comes even after New York and the city have had advocacy and reform efforts, which were successful. Despite this, and the many political actors in New York City's regime(s), the carceral state has have maintained a significant presence. Increasing police budget, development of moral panic, and support of penal repression across racial and ethnic lines still occur. Capital continues to win out, even amongst parts of the middle classes.

The effects of the carceral state also goes beyond cell walls. From current economic predicaments caused by it, and likely a featuring of generational wealth losses and opportunities. Having a criminal record interplays with one’s abilities to get specific jobs, attend universities with scholarships or aid, or even have consequences that trickle down and often hurt families with kids or those with a close family structure. This is because if one person is affected economically or socially, it can affect the family as a whole. The carceral state deepens inequality in many ways.

If capitalism holds a firm grip on New York City, the carceral state will too, as long as the latter system serves useful for the ruling, capitalist order. As discussed in this text, the carceral state has operated as an incredible opportunity for the growth of capitalist pockets and the generation of wealth in many direct and indirect ways.[[68]](#footnote-68) In New York City, even today see current Mayor Eric Adams continue to attempt to rule NYC with a punitive first. Actions such as hiring a rat czar, can potentially be attributed to shaping an imagine of an orderly city.[[69]](#footnote-69)

While the carceral reach is not absent of racism, its effect on people’s class position first cannot be ignored or detached from our understanding of its development. First and foremost, it is one’s socio-economic status, and their social relation to capital, that not only dictates whether they likely support carceral projects, as well as if they are affected by them. While capitalism is much older than carceral projects, the latter has emerged as a way in which is beneficial for the capitalist order and can be used not just as a tool for capital accumulation, but also social oppression. In the same way ideas such as accumulation via dispossession, can be understood to be developed through capitalism’s dynamics, the same can be said for the carceral state.[[70]](#footnote-70)

It is true, that an analysis in which sees neoliberalism as a driver of the carceral state may be fruitful, but it cannot be deemed the root cause. As discussed at length in this project, the carceral state is not just a byproduct of privatization, and austerity measures. And it also spans many political regimes, neoliberal or not. It the same breath that acknowledges neoliberalism as a production of capitalism, the carceral state too, is a product of this very same system. Both of which are productions of capitalism that focus on capital accumulation.

In short, we can see capitalism being the one responsible for the carceral state because of the urban political orders, ones in which are sometimes racist, or sometimes classists, or focus on investment, or even the development of a punitive focus on crime and addiction. But all of which, are part of the greater order of capitalism. And serve to either remedy its consequences or forgo the lower classes of people within our socio-economic system in pursuit of capital.

It should also be said that this project only begins to scratch the surface regarding the ills the carceral state has caused in New York City. Moreover, further expansions into political economy, class, and racial analysis, as well as politics, would all be worthwhile to continue to deepen our understanding of the grip mass incarceration, over policing, and efforts to maintain "orderliness" have had inside New York City. Understanding the true nature of the carceral reach is also worthy of future research. However, at its core, the carceral state is a project of capitalism, and at almost every level, across many lines, such race and political ideologies, its end goal is to serve that system and keep up with its required reproductions.[[71]](#footnote-71)

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18. Robinson, 9–28. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Robinson, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
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