Society for the Anthropology of Work

Book Review: Coerced

Pooja Satyogi

Published on: May 26, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/1d6be30e.68a13579

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

***Coerced: Work Under Threat of Punishment*, by Erin Hatton (2020). Oakland: University of California Press.**

Erin Hatton's book *Coerced: Work Under Threat of Punishment* is at once stunning and disturbing. Not often is a book written about the political economy of work as performed by, among others, graduate students and university athletes. Even rarer is the comparison that it draws between these two groups' respective labor power and that of welfare workers and prisoners. Hatton takes on the challenge of delineating the moral binds facing each of these four categories of workers and argues that it is possible to speak of a common thread running through their labor: that of "status coercion" (p. 13). Borrowing from the anthropologist Ralph Linton's use of the concept of status, Hatton explains that the labor performed by these groups does not legally occupy the status of "work," such that their members do not enjoy the corresponding rights and protections that other workers have. Rather, what these four groups share is a relationship to statutes from which privileges and rights *could* flow.

For example, to be a prisoner is not a desirable status, but to be a prisoner in good standing is desirable insofar as it affords limited privileges. Similarly, welfare recipients in the United States are required to have "good standing" (p. 14) for continued access to safety-net assistance and the shelter system. For university athletes and graduate students in good standing, it is possible to receive a subsidized higher education, access to training and experience, and opportunities for professional recruitment. These potentially valuable privileges, however, are just that—privileges and not rights—meaning that they can be revoked at any time by figures like prison officers, welfare officials, doctoral supervisors, and athletics coaches. It is the expansive punitive power confronting these four groups of workers that brings their labor into the political economy of status coercion and the racialized logics—surveillance, control, discipline—of U.S. capitalism more generally. Hatton's book stuns, but also disturbs, because it turns the academic gaze inwards and makes uncomfortable comparisons between, for instance, the labor of prisoners and that of graduate students.

The fieldwork for this book spanned half a decade, during which Hatton interviewed more than 120 workers from four cities across the U.S. state of New York: New York City, Albany, Rochester, and Buffalo. Early on in the text, the author explains that status coercion is recursively produced and reproduces itself at three levels: cultural, institutional, and individual, even as these are mutually constitutive and dynamic rather than discrete realms. In Chapter One, Hatton examines cultural narratives

sustaining coerced labor across the four groups of workers that the book considers, including ideologies of immorality (being wicked) and privilege (being blessed). She notes that prisoners face the stigma of being viewed as fundamentally immoral, while athletes are supposed to consider themselves blessed for being allowed to play their sport. In both instances, the labor they perform is devalued; for the prisoner, it takes the form of “punishment, reparation, or rehabilitation” (p. 32), while for the athlete, taking the field remains a gift for which they have to be endlessly grateful. Hatton emphasizes that across all of these forms of labor not recognized as work, the benefits accrue to those who create the corresponding conditions of coercion and arbitrariness. These logics of labor, Hatton argues, tie into a longer history dating from the Industrial Revolution, in which racialized and gendered noncitizens were exploited either as slaves, indentured servants, or housewives.

In Chapter Two, Hatton delineates how coercion through institutional practices is used to exact compliance in the four forms of labor under analysis. A significant portion of this chapter examines the curious and often problematic relationship that STEM graduate students have with their supervisors. Denial of access to the laboratory becomes one primary way that coercion is exercised upon these future scientists. While many of the students that Hatton interviewed feared that they could be arbitrarily evicted from their laboratories, they also feared that they would not be allowed to complete their degree without extending their supervisors’ own research. The threat of sanctions also pervades the lives of workfare workers, athletes, and prisoners, and Hatton goes on to detail the specific mechanisms of coercion found around each of these forms of labor.

Chapter Three shows how worker subjugation is effected through bodily surveillance and regulation, degradation and abuse (both verbal and physical), as well as dehumanization. Domination, Hatton argues, remains the primary goal in the context of prisoners and welfare recipients, while in the case of university athletes and graduate students, subjugation is often indexed to more refined forms of exploitation—that is, extracting surplus value from these workers’ specialized labor. What remains common across these cases, however, is the “production and preservation of their vulnerability to employer power” (p. 103). Chapter Four further demonstrates how the body becomes a prime site for subjugating these workers. If complying with workplace exigencies is one form of continuous subjugation, then this chapter shows how this process tends toward *overreach*. Forcing prisoners to clean up excrement and used condoms is an especially repellent example of how incarcerated workers are routinely

humiliated; in the narratives of graduate students and university athletes, though, the trope of feeling “indentured” or unfree also comes up time and again.

Resistance and an understanding of justice, in these examples, are not all-or-nothing phenomena; rather, Hatton takes care to delineate how individual workers’ capacity to resist can vary from one situation to another. In fact, the book ends with a discussion of how certain coerced workers come to rearticulate normative notions of work by attributing value to their labor and tying it to questions of political economy. Invoking a “landscape of work conditions” (p. 209) allows Hatton to blur rigid distinctions in terms of how and where scholars might locate additional questions for analysis. Along these lines, Hatton prompts us to reflect, in what respects might universities be considered sites for understanding coercive and exploitative hierarchies?

I want to end this review of Hatton’s marvelous book by drawing attention to a contemporary example that speaks to its conclusions. In an insightful but distressing analysis of the University of California (UC)’s recent review of its campus policing practices, Lachlan Summers and Kathryn Gougelet, both graduate student workers in the UC system, [detail a concurrent example of militarized police power](#) used against graduate students at UC Santa Cruz who were demanding higher wages due to an extremely high cost of living. By tracing this alarming continuity between police power and administrative control over the students’ working conditions, Summers and Gougelet carry Hatton’s general argument forward. They show how UC executives drew on racialized police reports to frame and escalate charges against the striking graduate students, far beyond what could have been accomplished by the local police alone. Cynically considering these strikes as “risks” to the production of research and equating them to natural disasters, UC administrators stood by the aggressive actions of campus police under the pretense of defending the tenured faculty’s right to conduct their scholarship, which entailed “policing the [graduate student] workers who undertake much of the labor of educating.” If Hatton’s book makes uncomfortable but necessary comparisons between prisons and universities, then Summers and Gougelet give us a real-time example of the raw power that this emerging scholarship-work-policing nexus can wield.

Author Bio

Pooja Satyogi is Assistant Professor in the School of Law, Governance, and Citizenship at Ambedkar University in Delhi. She works in the fields of contemporary policing practices and surveillance and security studies. She is currently finalizing her book

manuscript, which is entitled *Intimate Public Spaces: Policing “Domestic Cruelty” in Women’s Units, Delhi*.