



The Powers that Punish: Prison and Politics in the Era of the "Big House", 1920-1955 (Law, Meaning, and Violence)

Charles Bright

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In a pathbreaking study of a major state prison, Michigan's Jackson State Penitentiary during the middle years of this century, Charles Bright addresses several aspects of the history and theory of punishment. The study is an institutional history of an American penitentiary, concerned with how a carceral regime was organized and maintained, how prisoners were treated and involved in the creation of a regime of order and how penal practices were explained and defended in public. In addition, it is a meditation upon punishment in modern society and a critical engagement with prevailing theories of punishment coming out of liberal, Marxist and post structuralist traditions. Deploying theory critically in a historic narrative, it applies new, relational theories of power to political institutions and practices. Finally, in studying the history of the Jackson prison, Bright provides a rich account, full of villains and a few heroes, of state politics in Michigan during a period of rapid transition between the 1920s to the 1950s.

The book will be of direct relevance to criminologists and scholars of punishment, and to historians concerned with the history of punishment and prisons in the United States. It will also be useful to political scientists and historians concerned with exploring new approaches to the study of power and with the transformation of state politics in the 1930s and 1940s. Finally Bright tells a story which will fascinate students of modern Michigan history.

Charles Bright is a historian and Lecturer at the Residential College of the University of Michigan.

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