

**David Skarbek: The social order of the underworld:
how prison gangs govern the American penal system**
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Graham Denyer Willis

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Every once in a while a daring book or article comes along that helps us establish new connections between apparently distant analytical and geographic locations. For my own work on Brazilian prisons, police and organized crime in cities of the developing world, *The Social Order of the Underworld*, by David Skarbek does just that. It is now increasingly clear that prisons the world over and in dramatically different contexts of state institutions and political regimes are increasingly sites of self-governance. Not just that, these forms of self-governance cannot be divorced from their urban correlates. This is inescapably consequential: If prisons and cities in the United States, Brazil, Guatemala, or South Africa are experiencing comparatively low levels of violence, this often has little to do with state policies, formal institutions or democracy, but, rather, as Skarbek points out from an epistemological base in California—it may be occurring in spite of them.

The Social Order of the Underworld takes the reader on a tour of the organizing logic of life inside United States prisons. Following a brief conceptual and methodological introduction, the narrative moves to an analysis of the historical pattern of violence on the inside, particularly as it existed prior to the explosion of the prison population in the early 1970s. In the period before 1970, when the prison population was low, governance was possible based on personal ties, reputation, and the chronic recidivism of a small population with less divisive racial characteristics. It then details the rise of large-scale prison gangs along racial and identity lines and for self-protection purposes from the 1970s onward, transitioning to a deep discussion of the parameters of governance, cleavages and enforcement of notions of right and wrong, and the bureaucratization of rules and objectives, often across groups. Skarbek then discusses the internal constitution of different gangs, their organizational characteristics, and membership enforcement mechanisms. The book then makes an important turn, leaping over the prison walls and into cities. The author looks at taxation as the constitutive link that binds gangs and their members on the

G. Denyer Willis (✉)
Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, 7 West Road,
Cambridge CB3 9DT, UK
e-mail: gdw27@cam.ac.uk

outside to the system of governance, authority, and extralegal punishment on the inside, explaining that the normalcy of movement to and from prisons legitimates a system of taxation and protection. Those gangs or individuals that have been delinquent in paying taxes when they enter the prison system face death, serious personal harm, or being held hostage until their debts are recouped. The book concludes with a discussion of the policy and political ramifications surrounding the rise of systems of extralegal governance, not just in the United States, but increasingly around the world.

This book has much to offer in terms of ideas and analytical contributions. First, I find the author's depiction of the social order within prisons particularly interesting, and counterintuitive. The prison landscape is fractured and controlled by groups that operate on notions of racial solidarity. Yet these apparently simplistic ideas of solidarity are routinely and systemically superseded by the need for a predictability of exchange and a stability of morality and security. That is to say, race matters in superficial ways but not when it comes to concerns of an apparently larger order. In those cases, the author argues, race-based gangs will protect the superstructure of predictability by disciplining their own in a range of ways. This is an important take away, if contentious for some: people desire security and order more than identity or race. In other words, white power is useful insofar as it doesn't make its followers outwardly unsafe.

Second, *The Social Order of the Underworld* details how modern day protection rackets transcend all sorts boundaries—physical, institutional, and identity, to start—that most would hold are hallmarks of today's configuration of political power. Skarbek shows that the power of groups like the Mexican Mafia or the Aryan Brotherhood may be marginally constrained by the state but they are little deterred by the walls of prisons, the prospect of legal sanction or, even, by the fractured and rivalrous gang landscape of sprawling cities like Los Angeles. They punish those on the outside from inside, legal sanction is a point of social esteem and rival gangs like the MS-13 and the Marasalvatrucha—themselves transnational—are nothing more than taxable constituents. This kind of protection racket, legitimated via extortion, depends on a monopoly on violence that is not so much territorial in a Weberian sense as it is emergent from a space of penalty and marginality that is linked to the drug trade.

Third, this book is sufficiently broad as to establish a convincing thematic and conceptual storyline about why extralegal or criminal governance is important and how it has become so deeply institutionalized. Its ample scope is necessary for dealing adequately with some of the larger concerns about the genesis and interdependency of complex institutions in an evolving (and indeed expanding) context. This book is an excellent example of thought that both reconsiders assumptions about governance, social relations and policy as they relate to seemingly intractable political problems. This kind of scholarship and critical thought allows us to fully and convincingly examine how a horrifically wrongheaded and moralistic policy, like the war on drugs, can create far more complex social and political challenges for security and governance than those that it started with.

This ample undertaking certainly required some methodological acrobatics. Methodologists from either side of the spectrum may take issue. But that would be beside the point. This book is not an example of academic myopia. Instead, it is prime evidence of why rigorous, but methodologically flexible, academic research and heterodox thought is often much more deeply relevant for the real world. No reader of this book will be left gazing at his or her disciplinary navel.

Many fields of study need to take notice of what this book provides. It is deeply relevant for anyone interested in prisons anywhere, but also to those working on organized crime and gangs, violence, ethnicity and race, governance, urban sociology and politics,

economics and, even, international development and anthropology. The basic premise that people organize in search of authority and security is of near-universal importance in a historical moment where the prescription is for states to become ever more streamlined and slim. From my perspective, this book is most applicable outside of the United States, in places like Mexico, Italy, and Brazil where forms of extralegal governance do not so much exist in the underworld as they are increasingly interwoven into the practices and formal institutions of states. I look forward to what Skarbek offers us next.