

THOMPSON, Heather Ann – *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and its Legacy*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2016. Pp. 724.

The prison confounds its society, perhaps more than any other institution, and it is no less daunting to the social scientist. It is deliberately opaque to the average observer, and yet the social contract depends upon it being known, as a deterrent. Unlike all other institutions, too, it offers at best a muddled narrative. Other institutions purport to build character, produce healthy or smarter citizens, or respond to threats to citizens' safety; the prison seems to assure us that it is inert. It too has a narrative, about reform of those who have strayed. Yet in many modern societies that purpose is at best gestured to becoming subservient to the prison's role as a place where bad people are put and kept. In American society—not uniquely, but, given the size of the prison population, most dramatically—the prison also complicates our understandings of race. Even the most sanguine about race relations in America must acknowledge the massively disproportionate effect that the prison has on Americans and immigrants of color; this was no less true during the Obama years as it was before or has been since. Protest within and about incarceration, though, must grapple with legal norms as much as with the social dynamics inside and out.

The prison, then, is inexorably a part of American life, and yet separate and resistant to analysis. Not only does no other society have anywhere close to the prison population as in the United States (as has been true since the 1990s); no other society places such an emphasis on prisons as economic engines. While prisons everywhere tempt both central and local governments with the promise of cheap labor and dependable jobs, it is striking how the public discourse of prison building in America elevates economic arguments even above those about security.

Through these lenses the social historian can appreciate the impact of Heather Ann Thompson's *Blood in the Water*, winner of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for History. It is not, on the face of it, a social history. The book's well-deserved fame derives in large part from the enormous work the author has done to excavate the true history of the uprising at Attica Correctional Facility in New York in 1971. The somewhat familiar story of the takeover of the prison by over a thousand prisoners on September 9, 1971, and the storming of it four days later, in which nearly forty men were killed by gunfire, gains much greater depth thanks to Thompson's sensational uncovering of forgotten archives (some of which have since disappeared again). Thompson is absolutely unsparing in her chronicling of the horrors endured by prisoners and by their hostages, during and after the brutal and chaotic attack on the thirteenth.

When the tear gas has cleared, however, we are less than two-fifths of the way into the text. The bulk of the book explores, to equally devastating effect, the massacre's cover-up. For well over thirty years victims and their lawyers have endeavored to win compensation and an apology, while the state of New York has withheld or refuted as much of the story as it could; those efforts, Thompson affirms in her introduction, continue today. The prose is relentless, never allowing

the reader to look away from one of the largest massacres committed on American soil by government employees.

Blood in the Water aims to place Attica in American history, and it does so in many ways. First, Attica is a part of the history of radicalism in the “long sixties.” Here Thompson is cautious, as she works against the myth, popularized by the administration of New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, that the uprising was produced by radical prisoners from the Black Panthers and the Weathermen. Rather, she shows that the uprising was a cloud chamber through which various political movements shot. For the most part, political activists preferred to keep their distance from the plight of prisoners; Thompson devotes much attention to those few who devoted years to their defense.

The Attica prison, in a small town thirty-five miles east of Buffalo, New York, was also the workplace of the ten hostages who died, and the home of many of the men responsible for the massacre. It is, Thompson reminds us, a place from which for many there is no escape, figuratively and/or literally. In *Blood in the Water*, we come closer than ever to seeing how deeply entrenched prisons are in American society.

Ultimately, the story of the Attica prison uprising and the decades of ensuing legal battles is about what Americans believe prisoners deserve, physically and legally. The sentences that the convicted receive do not, as they might expect, define the limits of the restitution they owe society, but only mark a beginning to which is added poor living conditions, systematic abuse, and then lasting stigma after putative freedom. As we approach the fortieth anniversary of the uprising, it is not only the prisoners, the prison workers, and their families who are still paying for what happened at Attica; so too is American society.

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