

California's Hinterlands

*Craig Gilmore
in conversation with Trevor Paglen*

Our popular images of the countryside invoke wholesomeness, tranquility, and pastoral beauty, mom and apple pie and that sort of thing. You grew up in California's Central Valley. Can you talk a little bit about life in the Valley?

Many rural areas in California are beautiful; there are places where you can see thousands of stars, and there are spectacular mountains and deserts. California's agricultural rural land, depending on your view of agriculture, is also beautiful land. Seeing hundreds of acres of blooming with cotton, or seeing little grape shoots coming off of grapevines can be very beautiful. But the difference between that and the "American sampler" pictures of typical rural American life is that there aren't very many small, family-owned farms with a couple of cows and a few chickens and a couple of hundred acres. Corporations like Del Monte or Safeway own most of California's Central Valley. Or very big, rich, families own it, and many of them have created large corporations to run their farming operations.

California's Central Valley is now the fastest-growing part of the state. There's rapid suburbanization of agricultural lands, and a lot of service-sector workers and the industries that employ them are moving to the country. Unemployment is two or three times the state average, wages are lower, and there's a greater anti-union sentiment. In the more rural parts of the valley, the population is largely farm workers, many of whom migrate for part of the year, but most of them have a permanent or semi-permanent U.S. base.

If one image of rural image is the family farm, the kind of Normal Rockwell image, another image we have in California is of migrating workers who have no place to live, who are on the go 12 months out of the year, living out of their cars or tents or in worker camps. All of that is still happening, but people are increasingly settling – part of the family is stable for part of the year.

I'm surprised that you said a lot of service sector jobs are moving to the Valley. I usually only think of agriculture when I think about the Valley.



California's Central Valley

The IRS has a processing center in Fresno, Ikea has just built a gigantic warehouse south of Bakersfield that is going to service the entire West Coast. There are service jobs and some office jobs. Those businesses are drawn by cheap land and cheap labor.

The two competing economic drivers in central CA are the old agricultural economy, and by old I mean only that it's been around there for a long time. Agriculture or agribusiness is constantly renewing itself, changing from generation to generation, but it's many of the same families and corporations who've been there for a long time. The other industry is development, suburbanization, more service-sector jobs, warehouse jobs. As real-estate prices in the Bay Area and Los Angeles go higher and higher, people move out towards the Valley. There are people who commute from Bakersfield to Los Angeles, and from Tracy, Modesto, and Stockton, to San Francisco.

There might come a time when the corridor from San Francisco to San Diego is completely urbanized – not along the coast, but through the Central Valley.

Big agribusiness occasionally takes advantage of these new developments by dumping land that they don't want at extremely high prices, but by and large, they're trying to keep a labor market that allows them to keep their labor costs down. Agribusinesses want to maintain their access to cheap water, which has allowed them to grow the way that they have. And the real-estate developers are looking at that land, and more importantly to the water that agriculture is using. In any kind of crop down cycle, more land gets transferred to developers. For example, in the last two years grape prices crashed and thousands of mature grapevines were simply ripped out. Some of them were replaced but some of that land is on the market for potential suburbanization.

Agriculture has changed a lot in the last 50 years or so. I imagine that changes in the agriculture business play themselves out in the political arena.

The two big factors in Central Valley agriculture are cheap water and cheap labor. Agricultural interests in this state have organized themselves to ensure their supply of both. That particular dynamic is pretty consistent throughout California's history. By and large, the intent for years was to keep workers from settling in California, in order to prevent the state from having to incur any of the costs of reproducing workers. The idea has been "let Mexico produce workers and pay for their upbringing and so forth, and when they get old enough they'll come here to work." As groups of migrant workers begin to settle in and perhaps get too much power, they're excluded, and a new national group is recruited to take their place.



Aqueduct Near Stockton, CA

The amount of federal and state money spent on waterworks is a result of the political power of California's agricultural sector. There are some places like Anaheim or Fresno where the water was collectively developed by groups of relatively small operators getting together. But the model has been large land developers and large farmers using state money to develop water for themselves. That model hasn't changed, and it's not going to change, unless something dramatic happens like losing parts of the Colorado River. It may happen that water becomes so valuable that farmers will sell their water to cities, and might make far more money than they would make on their crops. This just happened in Blythe, where the farmers cut a deal to sell water to Los Angeles, and they're going to make far more money selling water than they ever did on their crops.

Under California law, people or corporations who've been using water have a legal right to that water, and there's a hierarchy to those rights. It's complicated, but all water in the state is potentially saleable. It's not public property, even though the public paid for developing the water. Farmers have rights to water, but the price can be changed. One of the questions that is going to come up is whether farmers have the right to sell the water if they're not using it for agriculture.

Has the industrialization of agriculture significantly affected the Central Valley?

Today's farm workers would certainly see the difference between their lives, their parents lives, and their grandparents lives. Today there are far fewer people working in the fields. As to whether their power relationship to the owners is any different, the answer is "probably not." They may have slightly more power than in the past. Some have settled, some have become citizens and can vote in

local elections, and so on. The relationship between the farmer workers and the owning class hasn't really changed. The reduction in the number of workers and the reduction in the number of small farms has changed the way of life in small farming towns.

As there are fewer people working in the fields, and whether there are fewer laborers or fewer owners, there are fewer people to support those towns. So, as the fields are blooming, the towns are withering. There is a lot less money going into the local economies of these small towns.

These small farming towns are where you see a huge amount of prison construction happening over the last 25 years. The story is pretty much the same all over the country.

The overwhelming majority of prisons built around the country in the last 20 years have been built in these kinds of rural places. There are a number of reasons for this, and it's pretty complicated. One of the biggest reasons is the lack of political opposition in rural areas compared to urban areas. Back in the early 1980s, the California legislature thought, quite sensibly "a third of our prisoners come from Los Angeles, so let's build a prison in Los Angeles." A group of women in East Los Angeles, a Mexicano and Chicano neighborhood where the prison was going to be built, fought the prison successfully for nine years and stopped it. They understood from the beginning that it was far more likely for their kids to end up in the prison as prisoners than as employees or servicing the prison in other ways. In the face of that opposition, the state looked around for a place where it would be easier to put a prison. And in 1983 the state, looking for a place to put waste-incinerators, hired an L.A. firm to do a study of what areas in the state would put up the least opposition to building waste-incinerators. The report suggested that rural area with high Catholic populations, modestly-educated populations working in mining, agriculture, or timber would put up the least opposition. And those are the places and towns that California's prisons are built in. Mostly in agricultural towns, but there are a couple of prisons in

former mining towns in the desert, and in a couple of former timber towns in the Northwest.



*Agricultural Research Near
Davis, CA*

The people in the rural communities could put up less of a fight, and the city councils and city managers and chambers of commerce in these small towns were desperate because they saw themselves getting to the point where their towns could die. There was too little money flowing through these towns to keep them alive. So the towns were looking for something to relocate there. When they looked to the state in the mid-1980s, the state wasn't offering them community colleges or hospitals. The state was only offering prisons. When it became clear that the state was going to build a large number of prisons, a lot of these towns went to Sacramento and asked for them. We know that happened in California and New York, and I suspect that similar things happened all over.

These were towns that were in bad shape and were looking for anything that they could use to get money flowing through the local economies. Putting prisons in these areas has had a mixed effect overall. There are a few towns that have seen some more money flowing into local economies, but most have seen no benefit at all or have even seen their economies suffer after the prison was built.

Now, you'd think that building a prison is a big job and that it would put a lot of people to work. The way it works is when the state is going to build a prison, they put the contract up for bid for the construction phase. The company that's gotten the bid for the last few prisons is a construction firm from Saint Louis. It's a union firm,

and they hire union workers, but they bring crews in from outside the area. It's not like any of these towns have a large, unionized construction force that is ready to build a prison at a moment's notice, so the construction companies hire people from outside the area. Workers live in trailers or rent apartments while they're there for the 12 or 18 months that it takes to build a prison. While they're there, they spend money, so restaurants and grocery stores see an increase in sales while the construction is going on. Once the construction crews leave, the state staffs the prison from a state-wide hiring pool. So if you want to be a prison guard, you send off your application and if you're accepted to the academy, then you got to the academy. Once you're done, the state places you in one of its prisons, anywhere in the state, so the prison doesn't hire most of its positions locally. The jobs go through Sacramento and the local people don't have any advantage in getting the jobs. And the people who do get the jobs don't usually live in the towns where the prisons are. These towns are small and they're very poor. Most of them don't have movie-theaters or malls, or anywhere to spend the decent salary that a prison guard makes. Most prison guards will live in a bigger city near the prison, not in the prison town itself. Cities like Visalia and Fresno have a fair number of prison employees living there, although there aren't prisons in those places. The people working in the prisons live in the larger towns and commute to the prison towns.

There are of course other things that prisons buy besides guards. There's telephone service and electrical service, but a lot of that buying is not done locally either. It's usually done at a statewide level. Most local businesses aren't in a position to compete for prison business. Most local prison towns have a prison-uniform shop that does pretty well, or in Corcoran there's an auto-parts store that got the



contract to sell car batteries and lights to the prison. For a couple of small merchants in each area, the prison can mean an increase in business. But these kinds of things are really small-potatoes when it comes to supporting a town, or strengthening a small economy.

If prisons don't provide any real economic stimulus to a poor town, then why did so many towns lobby for them?

California hadn't built a prison in decades when the prison boom started in the 1980s, so people didn't really know exactly what the economics of it would be. I'm sure that a number of people at the time questioned the extent to which the prisons would be economic drivers. But for a poor town, someone saying "this might not work" without providing an alternative wasn't much of a political position. With 23 prisons built in California over the last 20 years, we're now in a position to help towns see that it doesn't work. Right now, we can point to a dozen or more examples where we can question this. But in 1982 or 1983, those stories weren't really available.

In the mid 1980s, the state actually contracted with a number of economists to see if these prisons would be beneficial to the small town economies. The economists did their modeling and they said "oh yea, absolutely," but a few years later they corrected their assumptions and said that they had been wrong. The economists had assumed that a lot of the prison money would be spent locally, and that turned out to be wrong. The biggest single expenditure that a prison has besides labor is energy, but no energy company is owned by a poor little farm town, so that was a big mistake. Another big mistake was the rate at which prison employees would settle in the town where the prison was. The economists estimated that number to be about half of the total jobs. This hasn't turned out to be true in one single case.

How do the politics of race get played out in the rural parts of the

state?

Rural California, at least in the Central Valley and Imperial Valley, is majority brown, or majority Latino. There are multigenerational Chicano families, and there are Mexicano and other non-white immigrants. The workforce of the California Department of Corrections is one of the most integrated of any state workforce. If you look at the prison guards or clerical staff, there is a large percentage of brown or black workers. Unlike some states like New York where prisons are in upstate, mostly white areas and the prisoners are brown and black people from New York City, the ethnic makeup of California's prisons, the prison workforce, and the prison towns is actually quite similar. One of the things that makes prisons politically appealing to some poor, rural towns, is the promise that the kids of farm workers will have decent-paying, middle-class jobs available locally. They won't have to work in the fields or processing and packing plants.

While that promise is false, in the sense that those kids won't get hired at the local prison – you don't just walk up to a prison and put your application in – there is some truth to that idea statewide. Working in a prison is a form of upward mobility for some black and brown people. The state has Chicana wardens. In the Imperial Valley, which is just above the Mexican border and has two state prisons in it now, the United Farm Workers struggled for years to repeat the successes that they had in the Central Valley. Now, for about three or four years, there's been an annual Cesar Chavez parade. Chicano Corrections Officers organized that kind of civil-rights breakthrough in a very racist and reactionary area. Latinos who work as prison guards locking down other Latinos and blacks and whites, are sort of the middle-class civil rights workers in their communities.

In California, racial politics are very complicated. As we recognize how complicated it is, we need to recognize that that the political power and economic opportunities that come with prisons are being

purchased with the incarceration of tens of thousands of black and brown prisoners. People are just shocked that California has 160,000 prisoners in the state prison system. Most of them are in the system for under four years, so when you think about the fact that this is being done at the cost of 160,000 people you have to realize that that's a rotating body of 160,000 people who are going to continue to bear the cost of that imprisonment for the rest of their lives, and their families who are going to have to share that cost of imprisonment. There are millions of Latino and African Americans in California who are paying with their lives for this new middle-class beachhead for certain black and brown corrections authorities.



Delano II Prison Under Construction

But it's important to keep in mind that the prison system is not a major economic driver in this state. It helps the individuals and families who are employed by the corrections system and certain cities benefit from that. But at the same time, if you pulled out all the corrections officers in Fresno – if we shut down all the

prisons – Fresno wouldn't notice at all. You wouldn't see a spike in the unemployment rate, and you wouldn't see a spike in the poverty rate. In that sense, prisons aren't economic drivers at all.

Even though prisons are overwhelmingly located in rural areas, most of the prisoners come from urban areas. Prisons, even when they're far away, also change the way that people in urban communities live.

I don't know nearly as much about cities as I do about rural areas, and so this is in no way an exhaustive answer. Prisoners are not taken from cities, neighborhoods, and counties evenly. They're

taken from certain neighborhoods at enormously higher rates than from other neighborhoods. And that involuntary migration means that there is a substantial number of men between the ages of 17 and 35 who are simply gone. They are somewhere else. They're not working in the community, they're not making money, and they're not helping to pay rent. They're away from their families, so if they have kids they're not seeing them. If they have kids, someone else is making up the parenting time and the financial resources that the imprisoned person would have brought to the family. So even if the person was working part time at McDonalds or a department store, that money is not there. You might think that no one can live off 10 or 12 thousand dollars a year, but making up 10 or 12 thousand dollars a year is not a small thing. That's a huge impact.



If we imagine a family, what would it be like to pull the principle breadwinner out of the family? How is that family going to survive? The ways that families do survive those situations is through networks, both formal and informal, whether that means the church or the extended family or the neighborhood. When a substantial number of people are taken out the same neighborhood, the resources aren't there that would exist in a less-stressed community. Because most people who are locked up do on average about 4 years in California, people come back into these neighborhoods. People try to reunite with their families and their communities; they try to get jobs. The state is not only locking up more people for a longer time, but it's making it harder for people to rejoin their families and communities. Public housing, food stamps, and state funding for education are denied to people with felony convictions. It's hard to get a job when you have a felony conviction. People coming out of prison who have had very little education in prison, very little useful vocational training in prison, come out with at best a spotty work-

history, limited education, and very limited opportunities to advance themselves. So who is going to help support them? Again, it's the same network that's stretched so thin already. The biggest impact of prisons that I see on urban California has to do with the communities where prisoners come from.

Certainly, there are other sorts of impacts that the prisons have on the state. As the prison budget grows and grows, the state has to either raise taxes or take money out from other programs. In this state, it's been almost impossible to raise taxes, which means that money for prisons has to come from somewhere else. It comes out of transportation, health, human services, and education. All those programs are getting much less money than they would if we spent less money locking people up. These spending cuts impact poor communities the most, because they have the poorest schools and the greatest need for public health, but they impact everyone in California. California has some of the worst public school systems in the country.

There's another impact that prisons have that people often overlook. They're terrible for the environment.

We ask ourselves "in which ways are prisons bad?" as a way to open up new ways of organizing. And by asking this question, we've found that prisons are bad in so many ways that we're overwhelmed with potential organizing opportunities. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Avenal California is a small town that was almost a ghost-town in some ways. Property values had fallen so much that a lot of migrant workers could buy houses there. It was one of the poorest towns in the state. It used to be a ranching town, and now it's mostly ranching with a little bit of agriculture. They were the first one to go to Sacramento and ask the state for a prison. The goal was that the prison was going to bring them a new middle-class population who would

support local stores, pay taxes, and allow more growth to come in. Now, Avenal gets its water from the state water project, and it has an allotment of how much water it can use. When the town was negotiating for a prison, the state prison underestimated how much water it was going to use, and vastly underestimated the number of prisoners that they were going to put in the prison. The prison had a contract with the city to provide them water, so all of the water that Avenal was going to use to lure new industries and the build new residential areas is now going to the prison. Before the prison got that water, they thought they were going to have to sink ground wells and use the aquifer for water. They started doing that and the local ranchers found that all their wells were drying up, because the prison was using so much water that it sunk the groundwater. So local ranchers and farmers, who had marginal operations, found themselves with a huge new cost. They had to drop their wells another 200 feet and buy a new and stronger pump to bring the water up. The drop in the water table was environmental in the strict sense that it changed the level of the groundwater. But those environmental impacts were felt almost immediately by ranchers and farmers who sued the Department of Corrections and won. The CDC stopped using so much groundwater, but now they use all the water from the city's allotment, so the city has no other water to use for development. The city is now poorer than it was when the prison came in. That's an unusual case, and somewhat of an extreme one.

One of the things that we hear most frequently from people who live in or near prison towns has to do with the night lights. Many of the people who live in rural California are very poor, but many of them love living there. There's a beauty to agricultural California. In every town that we've worked in, people have talked about the beautiful night light that distinguishes them from their families who might live in Los Angeles or the Bay or even Bakersfield or Fresno. When the

prisons came, that night light disappeared, because prisons run their lights nonstop.

Prisons also have impacts on waste disposal – a lot of the towns where prisons go are smaller than the prisons themselves, and just don't have the infrastructure to deal with waste disposal. The traffic is another incredible issue. For a small town to suddenly have 800 or 1000 or 2000 people commuting through town everyday is a major issue. In the Central Valley as a whole, air quality is as bad as anywhere in the country. It's as bad as Los Angeles in three rural counties. So setting up prisons in which most of the workforce is going to commute 30, 40, or 50 miles each way – there's no carpooling effort or public transportation available even if people wanted to use it – is just contributing to an already bad air-quality issue.

When these rural towns get prisons, they don't necessarily reap the economic benefits of the prison, but they become responsible for the prison to a certain extent. They become responsible for the roads, for the sewage, and for law-enforcement. It's not that people escape from prison very often (they don't) but if people are arrested in prisons, which they increasingly are, they're brought out of the prison to be tried. So the county is responsible for the costs. Even if the state pays for the bus to bring the prisoner to court, there's going to be a judge and a staff and the county has to pay those costs.

If a private corporation said "we have a great idea, we're going to build a private city of 5 or 6-thousand people in central California" people would laugh. How are you going to support it? The very economic factors that are drying up the prison towns are evidence that the prison itself is a completely artificial economy and one, because so little money is spent locally, that is a drain on municipali-



Prison Lights at Avenal, CA

ties. I suspect that people could argue that certain counties have done all right, that Kern county as a whole is doing ok even though the prison towns are suffering. But again, if we closed all the prisons, Bakersfield and Fresno would barely blink. You'd see a firestorm of publicity as the CCPOA (California Correctional Peace Officers Association) protested, but if they lost you wouldn't be able to measure that the prisons had closed.

The growth of prisons in rural towns has had another political impact. Most rural prison towns are even less democratic than urban areas. There are usually a small number of people who run the town. They might own the newspaper or the radio station. The prison adds slightly to that mix, in that there are new people to be on the city council or to be mayor from any middle class that might arrive. But there's also the political force of the guards' union, who takes an interest in local politics as well as state politics. They're interested in local politics in particular for two reasons. First is to make local politicians responsive to law-and-order issues. There's a stereotype that rural America is conservative in all things, that of course they'll support three-strikes, mandatory minimums, and that sort of thing. But in my experience growing up in the Central Valley, there was conservatism, but it was more concerned about personal responsibility, more about family control. It didn't necessarily have to do with grabbing kids away from their families and locking them up – although that did happen of course. But certainly not to the extent that it does today. I think that we're seeing a lot of local politicians taking money from the CCPOA and trying to turn a certain kind of conservatism into a different kind of conservatism, to push it in a certain direction. It's not a huge push, but it's a certain kind of push. It's not like turning all the Baptists into Episcopalians, but it's pushing them towards a certain edge of Baptism. The other thing that we're seeing is that the CCPOA takes a particular interest in the local District Attorneys in the towns and counties where prisons are located, because they want control over who is prosecuted and who isn't. They want to make sure that if they want to bring charges against a prisoner

that they'll have a receptive District Attorney to do that. They also want to make sure that if someone wants to bring charges against the guards, the D.A. will know to stay away from that. We know of at least one case where a D.A. who tried to prosecute prison guards had a well-financed, well-organized campaign against him financed by the CCPOA. Those two things, the D.A.'s office and the local poli-

ticians who are supporting a certain kind of law-and-order regime at local levels and state levels, are real changes in rural politics.

Rural California has always flirted with fascism: there have been vigilante groups to keep farm worker organizing down, and in looking at the power of prisons. I see these sorts of developments as being a part of a continuous history.



*Former Japanese Internment Camps
Near Tule Lake, CA*

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RECORDING CARCERAL LANDSCAPES

Recording Carceral Landscapes is an investigation of the United States' enormous prison system by artist/geographer Trevor Paglen. By inquiring into the financial, social, and cultural elements that compose the Prison Industrial Complex, the project shows some of the invisible ways that mass incarceration has been woven into the fabric of our society. More information about this project is available at www.prisonlandscapes.org.



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