

**Silent Cells:**  
**The Secret Drugging of Captive America**  
**by Anthony Ryan Hatch**  
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*Reviewed by Lucas Ridgeway*

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Anthony Ryan Hatch is an Associate Professor in the Science in Society Program at Wesleyan University in Atlanta. *Silent Cells* is his second publication through the University of Minnesota Press, with his first being *Blood Sugar: Racial Pharmacology and Food Justice in Black America* from 2016. He dedicates *Silent Cells: The Secret Drugging of Captive America* to:

...the millions of people the world over who experience bondage of mind and body and to those who yearn for their immediate, unconditional, and permanent liberation”. In this book, the author aims “to the fullest extent permissible by available evidence, to dislodge the dominant and partial narrative of psychotropics as agents of healing in favor of a more nuanced view that recognizes these drugs’ great potential as instruments of human suffering (Hatch, 2019, p. 135).

He furthermore submits that it is the carceral institutions themselves that have a drug addiction problem and therefore need to be treated in the same way that we would treat any other addict moving forward. Not only does he expand on this idea of corporate personhood, but he also uses this platform to enlarge the definition of total institutions (Goffman, 1961). In short, and relevant to the main hypothesis put forward in this short but concise treatise, prisons, asylums, active-duty military personnel, foster care systems, elder care institutions, unaccompanied immigrant children, assisted care facilities, and undeclared POWs should all be considered active components of a captive state.

The primary focus of *Silent Cells* is on the American prison-industrial complex though the same arguments extend to the above-mentioned tentacles of total institutions. Hatch calls this broader system of confinement, Captive America. Throughout this provocative text, the author employs “historical and comparative analyses of archival, scientific, and policy documents to chronicle meaning making in the social, medical, and ethical dimensions of psychotropics” (Hatch, 2019, p. 19). He proposes that a collective psychic death is taking place alongside the untold story about how America has achieved its mass incarceration inside their liberal democratic state. Hatch

attempts to prove his hypothesis predominantly with statistics, although he is often forced to take on an alternative *ad hoc* approach due to incongruent national reporting standards. However, he did manage to effectively use the numerous case studies and regional data sets to successfully argue “that psychotropics have become central not only to mass incarceration in prisons but also to other kinds of mass captivity within the US carceral state” (Hatch, 2019, p. 10). Crucial to this argument is his rationale that states, “Psychotropic drugs manufacture two kinds of silent cells: one at the level of the bodies and brains of captive people and the other at the level of knowledge about the material effects of those drugs on people” (ibid). These two interlocking concepts of silent cells permeate this book.

The problem at hand is undeniably the most prominent in the United States, as over 5 million people are already serving time in prisons (US DOJ, 2022) or on probation and parole (US DOJ, 2021). Additionally, their laws grant institutions the power to administer psychotropic drugs to any detainee (citizen or otherwise), even when an individual may not need or want the drugs. Noticeable to the astute incarcerated reader will be the numerous examples of government-produced ignorance, non-knowledge, medical incompetence, and bureaucratic malfeasance in the weaponizing of medicine for the purposes of carrying out state violence and repression. One shocking case study that demonstrates these unjust policy choices and social inequalities is of a Black woman, Kamilah Brock, who worked as a banker in New York City and was arrested because she did not have her hands on the steering wheel while she was stopped at a red light. Her BMW was impounded as she was forcibly detained without any charges ever being filed. Returning the next day to retrieve her vehicle, the officers called the Harlem Hospital, labelling her, ‘an emotionally disturbed person’. She was handcuffed to a gurney, at which point lorazepam and lithium were injected under duress. On her release from the hospital, 10 days later, she was issued a bill for \$13,637, all for challenging “the bedrock assumptions that uphold white supremacist capital patriarchy” (Hatch, 2019, p. 92). Meanwhile, a report in June 2018 from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* told the story that emergency medical services had injected criminal suspects with the powerful tranquilliser Ketamine at the behest of the Minneapolis police a total of 62 times (Mannix, 2018).

Apart from anecdotal evidence, Hatch effectively explains exactly why silence is central to the meaning and practices of subordination. He

uses Michel Foucault's (1976) framework of biopower and social theorist Achille Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropower to position his biopolitical arguments to demonstrate the coercive ways in which psychotropics serve to manufacture prisoners' silence. This orientation asks us to interrogate the ways in which racism, sexism, and class inequality work together as complementary, rather than competing explanations, for mass captivity. He also cites legal scholar Patricia Williams (1987) who defines this 'spirit-murder' as "disregard for others who lives qualitatively depend on our regard" (p. 151). Achille Mbembe (2003) detailed, "Governments target particular human social groups for death, define those groups as enemies, herd them into isolated territories with no viable social infrastructure, and use overwhelming technological force to kill them" (p. 14). Thus, the socially sequestered have been socially abandoned in Captive America. Anthony Ryan Hatch surmises that the question should not be whether these practices are legitimate or illegitimate, but rather how social power functions to obliterate any meaningful distinction between normal medicine and abnormal killing in our so-called free society.

Towards the end of this book there is an excellent case study on George Zimmerman, the exonerated killer of Trayvon Martin and the role that psychotropics potentially played in enabling his violent conduct. Similarly, this topic has taken on a new global significance in the context of the ongoing epidemic of gun violence and mass shootings, as these tragedies are always followed by new debates about access to mental health care and the role that psychotropics played in pushing perpetrators into violent behaviours. However, prosecutors in the United States cannot currently argue that psychotropic drug use is a contributing factor when attempting to convict murderers, as it is not possible to prove that the consumption of a psychotropic drug caused a specific individual to commit violence independent of the other factors that shaped the violent event itself.

The idea of utilizing 'chemical strait jackets' or 'chemical restraints' is explored significantly in this study since over 73% of maximum-security prisoners in the US are on some form of psychotropic drug such as an antipsychotic, antianxiety, antidepressant, or mood stabilizer compared with 70% of active-duty military members (Beck and Maruschak, 2000). In both cases, they are not only used to manage mental illnesses, but also to help people cope with exposure to stressful institutional environments, like prison or warfare. Furthermore, the author postulates, "What if the

new plan for governing and controlling the millions of people forced to live in Captive America is to move them into new locations inside their own brain cells, into mental prisons that perform the same work as the old physical prisons or barracks or hospital rooms, but with new technologies of pacification?" (Hatch, 2019, p. 9). As a precursor to this claim, he shows how psychotropics themselves first arrived in prisons in the 1950s. Hatch shows that between 1962 and 1975 virtually all of the human research subjects used in safety and bioavailability studies were American prisoners despite the post WWII Nuremberg Code. The Nuremberg Code is an ethical framework agreed upon by both the American Medical Association and the World Medical Association, which states explicitly that it is unethical for prisoners to participate in medical experiments.

Throughout *Silent Cells* Anthony Ryan Hatch is not afraid to state his conclusions and he efficaciously shows the reader just how such blatant violations have continued to occur without intervention. I found this short book to be both an excellent read for the seasoned academic and a siren song to the uninitiated. For me, *Silent Cells* has established a baseline for opening up many of the conversations that we need to be having surrounding these issues. This study offers us a critical perspective on the key carceral debates of our time and provides some concrete linguistic terms that will aid all parties to arrive on, at very least, an initial consensus for productive discussions moving forward. I commend the author and his publisher on a seminal work that conveys such an immediate call to action to bring this tragedy to light.

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