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Overview: Critical Resistance to the Prison-Industrial Complex

THE STATISTICS ARE BY NOW WELL KNOWN. THEY ARE, HOWEVER, NO LESS
shocking. The United States, with five percent of the world’s population,
incarcerates 25% of the world’s prisoners. Since 1990, the prison popula-
tion in the U.S. has doubled, reaching the dubious mark of two million incarcerated
in the year 2000. Since 1978, the number of prison and jail inmates has tripled. In
California, it has grown sixfold. Moreover, 1.5 million children in the U.S. are
growing up with a parent incarcerated. Though most of those incarcerated are
male, women make up the fastest growing sector of the prison population, with
California the home of the largest women’s prisons in the world.

The statistics for people of color are even more alarming. One-half of the two
million incarcerated in the U.S. are African American. One out of every 35 African
Americans is behind bars. In 1989, the rate of incarceration of African Americans
surpassed that for blacks living under apartheid in South Africa. One in three
African American male youths is under some type of correctional supervision. The
numbers for Latino youth are one in 10.

African Americans constitute 14% of drug users nationally, roughly the same
percentage as their representation in the general population. In sharp contrast,
African Americans represent 35% of drug arrests, 55% of drug convictions, and
75% of prison admissions for drug offenses.

In New York, a state in which African Americans and Latinos comprise 25%
of the population, they nonetheless represent 83% of all state prisoners and 94%
of those convicted of drug offenses in 1999. Although white youth charged with
violent offenses are incarcerated on average for 193 days after trial, African-
American youth are held 254 days and Latino youths are incarcerated the longest
—305 days.

Due to the incarceration binge, almost four million (one in 50) adults are
currently or permanently barred from voting. Of that figure, 1.4 million have
already completed their sentences. In Florida, where the presidential race was
recently decided, 600,000 are barred from voting.

In many Southern states, up to one-third of African American males are
permanently disenfranchised, and given current incarceration trends, that number
is projected to rise as high as 40%. Today, 1.4 million African American men
nationwide (or 13%) are not eligible to vote because of criminal convictions, a
figure seven times the national average.

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In the last 20 years, California has spent more than five billion dollars building and expanding over 23 prisons, yet the state has built only one new university. Similarly, in the state the total annual bill for prisons and jails has grown about sixfold, to $31 billion, putting budgets for corrections on par with funding for higher education.

Over the past two years, Critical Resistance (CR) has been creating a national movement that challenges the prison-industrial complex (PIC). The initial CR international conference in September 1998 succeeded in putting the term “prison-industrial complex” on a national agenda for change. Even Secretary of State Colin Powell recently told the National Governors’ Association, “There is nothing more important for Americans to do than to build our kids and stop building jails.” At this critical moment, we must push that agenda through to realization.

Since the PIC has only been able to achieve its massive buildup through a campaign of willful misinformation, we see our work to re-inform and reeducate — including this special issue of Social Justice — as crucial to halting mass incarceration and to resuscitating a healthy, democratic discourse of informed participants on the subject of crime. CR intends to influence the direction and content of that discussion, to help shape and reformulate its priorities, and to do that by making our vision of a more just and humane society common sense.

This special issue of Social Justice, edited by Critical Resistance, focuses on prison abolition as a goal and theme. The issue is broadly divided into system analyses and articles centering on organizing for change, that is, reports of struggles against the system and toward the realization of new visions. The first part deals with the politics of prisons and crime, as well as the interplay between immigration, militarization of the border, and the social control of Native populations. The second part examines the elements of public safety and well-being. It also includes discussions on the role of conferences in building movements and the prospects for prison abolition today. The final section offers resources in the form of selected videos, films, and pertinent web sites.

I. The Politics of Prisons

Ed Mead’s “Reflections on Crime and Class” leads off this section of seven contributions on crime and imprisonment. Although prisons are normally regarded as places of dread, the contemporary marketing of prison imagery, in the form of tourist visits of facilities, HBO specials, or hip-hop glorifications of prison, creates the impression to the free world that these institutions are somehow desirable. That such commodification helps to promote acceptance of prison expansion is the theme of Paul Wright’s “The Cultural Commodification of Prisons.” In “The Industry of Fear,” Mumia Abu-Jamal argues that the fear of violence stimulated by the media is used to justify horrific treatment in an ever-expanding net of incarceration. Powerful interests support the fear industry; as such, powerful social forces, from the grass-roots up, need to be energized,
activated, and mobilized to undo the considerable psychosocial damage done to the community mind. “Prisons, Social Control, and Political Prisoners,” by Marilyn Buck, examines the role of political prisoners and politicized social prisoners. Increasingly, the globalization of markets and profit-seeking has pressed U.S. prisons to become profit-generating enterprises — hence, the prison-industrial complex. Nevertheless, prisons continue to serve their main purpose of warehousing and “disappearing” the “unacceptable.” “Urban Pedagogies and the Cellng of Adolescents of Color,” by Garrett Duncan, gives examples of how images of “dangerous youth” are used to justify incarceration. The essay centers on how the association between urban schools and prisons reflects the historical relationship between the white-controlled public education of subjugated U.S. populations and the economy. Specifically, under segregation, urban pedagogies work through students of color to make them less economically competitive and to prepare them to occupy and accept subordinate roles in the socioeconomic system. In “Crime and Social Control,” Christian Parenti looks at past approaches to “street crime” and at the role of criminalization in keeping poor people from organizing. Finally, “Prison Psychosis,” written by Grayson Taylor and introduced by Terry Kupers, analyzes the role of racism and solitary confinement in the creation of psychoses in prison.

II. Native Populations: Confronting the INS and Reservation Politics

Some of the most pernicious and oppressive forms of law enforcement developed in recent years have targeted immigrants and Native Americans. Over the last 20 years, immigration to the United States has increased dramatically. Among the reasons is that economic restructuring in the South, or Third World, is destroying local economies and deracinating entire populations, leading to mass urbanization and then to mass emigration. In addition, the U.S. has transformed its industrial base from manufacturing to services. This requires enormous amounts of inexpensive labor, which is frequently supplied by immigrants.

Thus, the South supplies and the North consumes in a nearly perfect system for the business classes. Yet immigrants are not just labor; they are human beings who quickly form stable communities, formulate political demands, and organize to win better treatment. Justice for Janitors in Los Angeles is one such movement rooted in immigrant communities. What does all this mean for capital? If immigrants are allowed to organize, they will drive up the price of labor and demand social justice. Such developments hurt profits and threaten a white supremacist worldview and power structure.

What is the response to such challenges? The essays in this section help to illustrate that the response is simple and brutal. As Jose Palafox in “Opening Up Borderland Studies: A Review of U.S.-Mexico Border Militarization Discourse” and Michael Welch in “The Role of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the Prison-Industrial Complex” describe, immigration is met by a militarized
border, interior enforcement, and a mammoth Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) jail system. “Political Surveillance, State Repression, and Class Resistance: The Puerto Rican Experience,” by René Poitevin, addresses the hybrid madness that characterizes policing in Puerto Rico, which involves the worst of U.S. high technology and Third World super-poverty. Finally, in “Policing the Rez: Keeping No Peace in Indian Country,” Dian Million interrogates the policing of reservations, or, perhaps better said, the continuation of the “Indian Wars” in slow motion without horses and cavalry, but with Bureau of Indian Affairs police and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

III. A Left Anticrime Strategy

In “Maximum Security,” Margo Okazawa-Rey and Gwyn Kirk critique the notion that prisons create security, arguing instead that security is found in social and economic changes that create the possibility of human well-being. Julia Sudbury’s groundbreaking article, “Transatlantic Visions,” foreshadows the formation of an internationalized prison-industrial complex, which reproduces what Sudbury terms a “logic of incarceration.” According to Sudbury, this logic incorporates: (1) a combination of ideological premises linking common-sense notions of personal, community, and national security to the enhancement of the state’s ability to pursue and punish those deemed “suspect,” (2) a discrete racialization of crime as the domain of dangerous, violent, black, indigenous, immigrant, and other minoritized, peoples, and (3) the fostering of symbiotic connections between political elites, correctional institutions, and the corporate sector. Importantly, Sudbury points to the way in which the U.S. prison-industrial complex constitutes a model through which other national states are blueprinting their own versions of the punishment society. The final piece in this section, “Yell Real Loud: HIV-Positive Women Prisoners Challenge Constructions of Justice,” by Cynthia Chandler and Carol Kingery, provides life histories and proposals for change from women with HIV in California prisons.

IV. The Role of Conferences in Building Movements

A major goal of the 1998 Critical Resistance conference was to help build a movement in opposition to prisons. How successful was the conference? Has it helped build the movement?

To contextualize that conference, we asked three long-time organizers to write about the historical role of conferences in radical mobilization and prison organizing. The first article, an interview with Marge Frantz, examines the impact of radical conventions and meetings by groups such as 19th-century feminist abolitionists, anti-racist organizations active in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and anti-nuclear activists who found themselves in jail in the early 1980s. In separate articles, Ellen Barry, a lawyer, and Karlene Faith, a criminologist, explore the roles of prisoners and ex-prisoners in the meetings, conferences, and roundtables that
helped build the women’s prison movement from the 1970s through the 1990s. The section concludes with the reflections of four members of the Critical Resistance organizing committee concerning the conference and its impact over the past two years. Their responses range from great enthusiasm about meeting other activists to deep frustration over the ways in which racial diversity, prisoner participation, and lesbian visibility were handled, but all agree that their lives and ways of organizing have been deeply affected by the Critical Resistance movement.

V. Abolitionism Today

The political challenge of penal and prison abolition is perhaps foremost a challenge of language, political creativity, and historical imagination. This section attempts to elaborate several critical elements of this radical and severely undertheorized political project. Activist and Critical Resistance East organizing committee member Kim Gilmore’s essay discusses the ways in which the formation of the prison-industrial complex is related to, though distinct from, histories of racialized chattel slavery. Tracing juridical and ideological transformations in U.S. imprisonment practices since the era of emancipation, Gilmore provides a historical sketch of the antecedents to current anti-prison and anti-racist movements. Poet/activist Camille Acey’s piece, “This Is an Illogical Statement,” constructively departs from Gilmore’s piece. Arguing that fundamental challenges to racialized state violence necessitate radical opposition to the general legitimacy of state institutions, Acey critiques those increasingly popular organizing strategies that reinforce the ideological tenets of U.S. liberal democracy. Finally, a conversation between Angela Davis, former political prisoner and long-time international anti-prison activist, and Dylan Rodríguez, a member of the Critical Resistance organizing committee and one of the co-editors of this issue, offers a meditation on the political challenges of prison abolitionism. Beyond discussing the recent history of radical prison movements, they examine the pitfalls of certain theoretical assumptions prevalent in much of current liberal-to-progressive prison activism. Refusing closed definitions of prison abolitionism, the conversation instead suggests several points of political departure for opposing Sudbury’s “logic of incarceration.”

Concluding Remarks

We are pleased to offer a combination of theoretically cogent articles and activist-inspired proposals for moving forward. It is a timely contribution considering public recognition of the bankruptcy of the War on Drugs as a central feature of the national crime policy, the movement away from the use of the death penalty, and the clear need to reappraise the prison-building boom in a period of constantly declining crime rates. The question is how such illogical and destructive policies could be sustained for so long; organizing is the answer, the path to its undoing.