Political Repression and Mass Incarceration

David Gilbert, Dec 6, 2012

Thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, by 1969 politicians tried to avoid using explicitly racist terms in public. That's why President Richard Nixon said to his chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman (recounted many years later when Haldeman published his diary), "You have to recognize that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while appearing not to." Thus were born the terrible twins which continue to take a grim toll today: the illegal, often lethal, covert government attacks on the Black liberation movement and the "War on Crime."

Nixon was right. The greatest threat within the U.S. to the unbridled rule and fabulous riches of the class he served was the Black liberation movement and the high tide of political consciousness within the Black community. In the late 1960s, rebellions (dubbed "riots" in the media) rocked hundreds of urban centers across the U.S., many of which couldn't be contained short of sending in national guard troops. U.S. imperialism, already losing the war in Vietnam, now faced the prospect of a debilitating internal front at the same time. What is more, Black liberation was a powerful catalyst for other emerging radical movements. Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicano/as, and Asian Americans all intensified their challenges to white supremacy. The plows of protest tilled the soil for new crops of struggles: the second wave of feminism and lesbian/gay liberation, which were soon followed by the environmental movement and then a new surge of labor militancy. Revolutionary Black workers led the way, and by the early 1970s many young white workers also became involved in a wave of wildcat strikes,

defying the bureaucratic union leaders. All these upheavals not only confronted the prevailing social order but also threatened the corporate bottom line with new costs for welfare, for better pay and conditions for labor, and for environmental regulations.

With the electrifying rise of Black liberation, the FBI developed a "counter intelligence program" (COINTELPRO) to "disrupt, misdirect or otherwise neutralize" Black nationalist organizations. The most popular and dynamic such group was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover deemed "the greatest threat to the internal security of the U.S." COINTELPRO was just one of the many repressive programs instituted by law enforcement, the military, and the CIA. From 1969 through 1971, some 40 Panthers were killed—some directly by police forces, some as the result of internal frictions fanned to deadly flames by police infiltrators. Over 1,000 Panthers were jailed, almost all of them on trumped up charges. Some of those Panthers are still in Prison today: Marshall Eddie Conway, Romaine Chip Fitzgerald, Mondo we Langa, Ed Poindexter.

COINTELPRO and companion programs were complemented by a broader strategy to deal with social unrest, Nixon's "War on Crime." Using racially coded language (to white Americans, the imagine of the "criminal" is a Black male), the government mobilized public support for a range of police-state powers, such as gutting the Fourth Amendment's protections against "unreasonable search and seizure," and such as the proliferation of highly militarized police units—SWAT teams. There were no SWAT teams in 1965; now almost every city in the U.S. has one.

The Right-wing offensive kicked into higher gear in 1981, with President Ronald Reagan and his promotion of the "War on Drugs." This disastrous policy combined with

other racially coded campaigns—against "welfare queens" (read as Black women) and immigrants (read as Latino/a). Given the potential for Black-led, wide scale worker militancy in a period of stagnating real wages, the ruling class thus used racism to deflect white workers' anger away from their corporate bosses and instead toward the despised "racial others."

At the time drugs were a real but relatively minor problem (which had been made worse by the CIA's repeated use of the illegal drug trade to finance several of the terrorist organizations that it sponsored). But this war was in no way a sincere, if ham-fisted, effort to solve that problem. The U.S. already had gone through Prohibition from 1919-33. Criminalizing alcohol didn't stop people from drinking, but it made the now illegal liquor very lucrative and therefore a major generator of crime and violence. The "War on Drugs" has worked the same way, in spades: and it has worked in spades for the ruling class in using racism to build public support for greater police powers and by catapulting previously cohesive ghettos and barrios into chaos. On that day when Nixon complained to Haldeman about the blacks, 300,000 persons were behind bars in the U.S.; today the number is 2,300,000 human beings, the majority—and way disproportionately—Black and Latino/a.

These barbaric trends won't necessarily stay locked away in the U.S. Europe has its own history of racism and racist scapegoating, now in a vicious resurgence with anti-immigrant demagogy. Some European governments have been complicit in grave violations of human rights stemming from the "War on Terror," such as extraordinary rendition. The U.S. penal system's long history of unjustified arrests and cruel mistreatment of prisoners paved the way to abuses of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Now

the European Court of Human Rights has cleared the way to extradite accused terrorists to the U.S. despite the likelihood of incarceration in a federal supermax prison such as the one in Florence, Colorado, under conditions of extreme isolation that have been condemned as torture by prominent human rights organizations. Will the *Barbar Ahmad and Others v. UK* decision open the door to "legalizing" such brutal conditions in Europe?

Discussions of the criminal justice system often omit or neglect women because they constitute only 7% of prisoners in the U.S. (although 205,000 is still a formidable number), but the impact on women is dire. The expansive and aggressive "War on Crime" has led to a much more rapid increase in the rate of incarceration for them, especially for African American women whose numbers in prison have gone up 108% between 1990 and 2000. The number of women in prison, not including jails, jumped 646 percent between 1980 and 2010. Additionally, women prisoners are often, 65% of them, the primary caregivers for minor children--making the enforced separation and restrictions especially wrenching. The mother's incarceration can be very harmful for the children, who are more likely to have psychological problems and who then stand a much greater chances of getting in trouble with the law as they grow up.

Since the war on crime started as a form of counterinsurgency against entire communities, the impact on women is both broader and deeper than the numbers actually in prison. The wholesale lock-up of Black men leaves gaping holes in families and communities, with needed co-parents, wage-earners, brothers, uncles, sons missing. Mainly it is women who assume the Herculean labor of keeping families and communities together, often within an economically devastated community. Then there is

4

the additional time, energy, and expense to make the arduous journeys to visit loved ones in prison, usually at great distance from the cities. As rough as it is to be in prison, the difficulties for those on the outside left to keep families together can be in many ways even more challenging.

This society is rife with violence against women. One-third of women in the U.S. have been raped, beaten, or stalked, which doesn't include the even more rampant issue of sexual harassment. The criminal justice system hasn't been and can't be the solution. Oriented toward punishment and often doing severe psychological damage, it only makes things worse. The public is mobilized around the classic racist image that white women have to be protected from Black men—a mythology that probably arose as a psychological inversion of the history of massive rape of Black women by white slave owners. But in reality, the overwhelming percent of sexual and physical assaults on women and children are perpetrated by intimate partners, or family members, or acquaintances. The racist fearmongering at the heart of the "war on crime" thus entails a massive misdirection away from approaches that would serve to protect women of all races: e.g., fostering and empowering women's organizations, safehouses and anti-rape centers, anti-violence counseling and workshops for men, mental health services, and overall community awareness and organizations around these issues. (For examples, see *The Revolution Begins at Home*, edited by Ching-In Chen, Jai Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha).

The situation for women is at the heart of that for oppressed communities overall. The "War on Crime" was created to turn back the advances of power to the people and self-determination for the oppressed, and it functions to keep those communities in a

perpetual state of chaos and agony. Our concern isn't solely for the 2.3 million human beings locked away but is centered even more in what it takes to build safer, healthier, and ultimately flourishing communities.

Political repression and mass incarceration have been joined at the hip since the inception of both COINTELPRO and the "War on Crime." The connection is also embodied in the more than 100 political prisoners incarcerated as a result of struggles against oppression, many dating back from that period, and many involved in struggles against the racism and brutality of the criminal justice system. At the same time, the injustices and stark conditions have led many prisoners who weren't politically conscious when they were first incarcerated to go on to become insightful and committed activists. George Jackson was the most outstanding example; and hundreds, probably thousands, are involved in struggles for prisoner justice today.

It's no accident that those who came in as political prisoners often led in struggles for better conditions. One important example is to foster parent and children bonds, such as with MILK (Mothers Inside Loving Kids) in Virginia, and as the parenting center in NY State's women's prison at Bedford Hills. Another crucial example is AIDS. Back in the 1980s several political prisoners, along with conscious social prisoners, were able to see the urgent need and to initiate programs despite the climate of official neglect, to fight the epidemic that was well on the way to becoming the leading cause of death among prisoners. Rejecting the prevailing homophobia that led to terrible criminal neglect throughout the U.S., these PPs saw the urgent need to act and were able to propose programs based on the leading campaigns in the gay community. The PPs orientation toward grassroots organizing and bottom-up mobilization fit perfectly with the *peer*

education and support method, later proven to be the only effective approach among prisoners.

Many humane and thoughtful people recognize that mass incarceration is not an effective strategy for fighting crime: the whole approach reinforces the very harmful punitive and might-makes-right values that generate violence; prisoners are warehoused rather than rehabilitated; resources that should be used for constructive community programs get siphoned off into the prison industrial complex. The challenge for reformers, though, has been to come up with effective community-based alternatives. To address this need we must recognize that the current system is not misguided; it is fundamentally wrong. These government attacks, which inextricably link political repression and mass incarceration, were designed to destroy the very kind of popular cohesion, vision, and initiative needed to develop safer and healthier communities. The Panthers and other revolutionary groups were building programs such as free breakfasts for school children, neighborhood health clinics, clothing give-aways, and free schools. Even more profoundly they advocated self-determination for those communities and, in a service to the vast majority of citizens, challenged the misappropriation of resources to war and repression.

The rulers' very purpose was to blunt community development and to crush the leading efforts for a more humane society, with self-determination for the oppressed and which put human need ahead of corporate greed. To turn today's destructive juggernaut around, we need to support political prisoners, oppose mass incarceration, and most importantly, build powerful movements for fundamental social change.