

Reflections on Ferguson and Beyond

July 14, 2015

Anyone who has participated in direct action can tell you that your first time is going to be scary, but it comes more naturally after that. When I went to Ferguson, Missouri, along with some students from the University of Missouri-Columbia, I imagined that my past experience would help prepare me for any difficulties I might face while protesting there in the days leading up to the grand jury decision regarding Officer Darren Wilson's killing of Michael Brown. I was completely wrong. The brutality and abuse that I witnessed and experienced there was far beyond anything that I had seen in other protests, and had a profoundly radicalizing effect on me.



I've always had a relatively antagonistic view of police. But my view was dramatically confirmed when I saw police show up in full riot gear to what was a peaceful sit-in of forty or so people, and when I saw officers beat protesters who were already handcuffed and use tear gas on demonstrators who were, in the words of a District Court judge, "not engaged in violence or criminal activity."

A reactionary is someone who is opposed to political or social liberalization or reform. Any time oppressed peoples choose to rise up in defiance of the stranglehold that elites have on them and their communities, reactionaries come out in force. This has been true from the beginning of the labor movement through the civil rights movement, and it will not change until true liberation has been achieved.

The winter made it harder to maintain the mass numbers of protesters that we all had witnessed in the fall, and reactionaries responded with massive campaigns to attempt to sway public opinion. From New York to Oakland, police departments have been cracking down and working hard to maintain their level of brutal force in communities of color. The only solution is to continue fighting back. I don't mean this in an abstract sense, because as I write this, there are working-class people who have died and will die by the hand of those who the capitalist class has led workers to believe should protect them. Silence and inaction on this issue is complicity. If you have ever wondered what you would've done during the civil rights movement, now is your chance. If you deny the brutality of our police departments, go to a protest; they will prove how destructive the police can be.

The final day we protested in St. Louis, the group I was with participated in a sit-in at a local gas station. Naturally, the St. Louis police showed up in riot gear, falsely accused a group of people with their hands in the air of throwing rocks, confined us to a small area, and then finally tear gassed us until we had to leave the premises, all the while being followed by more police banging on their riot shields. The atmosphere as we left under those circumstances was one of fear, but also of newfound awareness. Police response to peaceful protests is a microcosm of the everyday occupation of neighborhoods of color, and the fact that they're cracking down as hard as they can means the protests are working. Bit by bit, the contradictions of these intertwined systems of white supremacy and capitalism rear their head, forcing elites to take notice, and, as they do, the people grow stronger.

However, it is not enough to protest. The dismantling of these systems of oppression also requires more of us: first, careful study of their nature; second, careful plans for alternatives; and third, building organizations and movements that through long-term struggle can achieve meaningful

victories, some reformist, some not, until finally gaining the state power necessary to enact revolutionary change. One aspect of the current systems of oppression deserving scrutiny is mass incarceration.

The current dialogue concerning mass incarceration centers around two sources of blame, the first being the War on Drugs, and the second being the system of white supremacy. There is no question that the War on Drugs has an atrocious legacy of destroying communities and unjustly imprisoning victims, or that under the system of white supremacy, blacks have taken the brunt of police brutality and mass incarceration. However, as Marie Gottschalk of Penn State University has so eloquently documented in her books *The Prison and the Gallows* and *Caught*, even rolling back the effects of these scourges would do little to fundamentally change the fact that the United States has the largest prison population in the world.

In order to fully grasp the nature of mass incarceration and, one day, to change it, the left must transcend the trap of what Adolph Reed and Merlin Chowkwanyun refer to as interpretive pathologies (“Race, Class, Crisis: The Discourse of Racial Disparity and Its Analytical Discontents,” *Socialist Register* 2012) and begin to study the political economy of police brutality and mass incarceration as seen through the lens of class. Interpretive pathologies are assumptions that many researchers, as well as, more broadly, people on the left, make about the causes of various inequalities. Some examples that Reed and Chowkwanyun provide are

a schematic juxtaposition of race and class that frequently devolves into unproductive either-or debates; the dilution of class into a cultural and behavioral category or a static (usually quantitative) index of economic attainment that fails to capture power relations; sweeping characterizations of white Americans’ racial animus and collective psyche; ahistorical declarations that posit a long and unbroken arc of American racism and that sidestep careful dissection of how racism and, for that matter, race have evolved and transformed; and a tendency to shoehorn the United States’ racial history into a rhetorically powerful but analytically crude story of “two societies,” monolithic and monochromatic.

As Gottschalk comments in her most recent book, *Caught*:

Too tight a focus on the racial disparities of the carceral state is problematic for other reasons. The focus on numbers—that is, how many African Americans or other minorities are serving time relative to whites—has overshadowed the qualitative dimension of the penal crisis. The racial-disparities lens obscures the brutal and degrading conditions in which many prisoners, regardless of their race or ethnicity, serve their time. ... Some predominantly white states operate some of the most dehumanizing and dangerous prisons in the country. Idaho’s largest prison was widely known as a “gladiator school” due to inmate-on-inmate violence allegedly fostered by guards at this [Corrections Corporation of America]-run facility near Boise. For many years, Maine, the whitest state in the country, operated one of the worst supermax facilities. By contrast, Mississippi, a deep-South state where more than two-thirds of the state prisoners are black and which has a long history of operating some of the country’s most notorious penal facilities, has been a national pioneer in shrinking and regulating the use of supermax cells (120).

The War on Drugs narrative is equally flawed, as outlined by Gottschalk, again in *Caught*, and repeated in an interview with *Jacobin* editor Connor Kilpatrick. “In fact, if we released everyone now serving time in state prisons whose primary charge is a drug offense, we would reduce the state prison population by only 20 percent,” says Gottschalk. “The overwhelming majority of people in prison are not there because of a drug offense. And even many of the people who are serving time primarily for a drug charge have other kinds of offenses on their records. We have created the mistaken idea that prisons are chock-full of people serving time for petty drug possession.” If the left

is serious about the issues of mass incarceration and police brutality, we will all have to reckon with the fact that increasing numbers of those in prison are incarcerated for violent and sexual crimes.

There has been a lot of criticism of those that have responded to the phrase “Black Lives Matter” with their own refrains of “All Lives Matter.” Although I generally agree that those most often using that phrase are disagreeable, it is my duty as a Marxist to proclaim, yes, the lives of blacks—the victims of racial oppression—matter, but so too do all lives matter, especially the lives of those victimized by class oppression, particularly those in the U.S. penal system—whether they be black, white, Hispanic, Asian, or other.

As Marx noted in Volume 1 of *Capital*, capitalism holds for itself a reserve army of labor, “a mass of human material always ready for exploitation.” The rise of private prisons means that not only does capitalism create this reserve army, but it then criminalizes and profits off the incarceration of it. As recounted by David Roddy in his Democratic Socialists of America web piece, “Resisting the Criminalization of Homeless Lives” (www.dsusa.org, March 20, 2015), this criminalization of the reserves is nothing new. Capitalists take away jobs from the proletariat, the proletariat seeks to survive outside of wage labor, and capitalists criminalize them. Wash, rinse, repeat.

When I heard the tragic story of James Robertson (*Detroit Free Press*, Feb. 10, 2015), a Detroit native who walked 21 miles back and forth to work, it wasn’t too large of a jump for me to imagine a future in which Robertson becomes unable to make the trek, loses his job because “there’s always someone else out there,” and falls into homelessness. Criminalization comes quickly afterward.

An even more odious modern development of our capitalist-fueled carceral system is the growth of private prisons, which have prisoner occupancy goals, and increasingly are serving as detention centers for undocumented immigrants. I am reminded of another Marx quote, this time from *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*: “Each tries to establish over the other an alien power, so as thereby to find satisfaction of his own selfish need. The increase in the quantity of objects is therefore accompanied by an extension of the realm of the alien powers to which man is subjected, and every new product represents a new potentiality of mutual swindling and mutual plundering.”

The solution to destroying our system of mass incarceration is simple: smash capitalism. We must build a world in which human creativity is pushed to its limits, and the solution to crime is more than locking people in cages. Simple calls for anti-racism are not enough; in fact, it is easy for neoliberalism to co-opt them. Any corporation can make an anti-racist statement without actually dismantling any systems of oppression. In fact, even George Soros can be a leading anti-racist! Such a politics is really a non-politics, making claims of intersectionality (a word that has lost much of its meaning), and pushing for liberation based on identity while completely ignoring the systems of oppression that undergird it all. The left should not be fooled: Nothing less than a politics based on dismantling capitalist oppression will come even close to truly attacking the systems of power that keep the carceral state intact. It is time to move beyond nationalism and liberal anti-racism. Our project of human liberation requires the full and united power of the working class to destroy capitalism. Only this will truly free us from the chains of mass incarceration and police brutality.

Footnotes