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World Behind Bars: The Expansion of the American Prison Sell

2005

Contents

This pamphlet has been written and compiled by Peter Gelderloos, based on a series of workshops about the prison system facilitated by Patrick Lincoln and Peter Gelderloos between 2004 and 2006, at universities and activist conferences across the East Coast. The research, outline, and content of these workshops (and consequently this pamphlet) was formulated by Peter and Patrick, who are anarchist organizers in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Feel free to quote, copy, or reproduce this pamphlet in whole or in part, especially if you're going to distribute it and, spread the word.

— Signalfire Press, 2005

* * *

This is for Earl, Mike (Rodriguez), and Ase. Y'all have taught me so much, and you helped me out during my tiny sentence while you all were doing years. I'm spreading the word and making sure you're not forgotten. I hope I can help bring about what Mike was talking about when he wrote me: "Tell the Government that they owe me 11 years when I get out and I'm coming to collect, straight up‼" In struggle for a world without prisons,

— Peter

For all current inmates and those that love them. For everyone that wants healing and reconciliation over punishment, I know it can be hard. For Greg, Mike and Eric — much love and thanks for the lessons. For Jane and Jonson — you helped me turn anger into something radical. To Sue — your ferocity led the way for me and your ideas resonate in these pages, I miss you. For Peter — your skills as a writer, activist and friend have opened possibilities in everything that I do.

— Patrick

* * *

What is prison?

When most people hear the word prison, they're likely to have a variety of responses. If you make people take a free association with "prison," you're likely to get "dirty," "scary," "bad food," "bars," "rape," and other images that reflect what people think about conditions in prison. "Criminals," "punishment," and other common responses underscore the mainstream understanding that we are used to thinking of prisons as a social response to crime.

However, many people do not have an accurate or well thought-out idea of what prison means for prisoners, and what it means for society at large. The

institution of prison is certainly not known for its transparency. Prisons are typically located in rural areas far away from the populations they imprison, and the very architecture of a prison or jail, with its imposing rows of razor wire fences and its narrow, opaque windows, encourages obscurity. For all the sensational attention that crime receives in the media, the "criminals" themselves are kept out of sight and out of mind.

We owe it to ourselves and to those on the inside to get past our conditioning and get a real understanding of this invisible institution.

Prison in the media

The corporate media — for-profit media including television, radio, magazine, and newspaper companies — play a dominant role in shaping our opinions in this country, often reshaping our reality. If crime, in reality, is dropping, but media coverage of crime is increasing, people typically report being more afraid of crime. And what happens if the media focus on crime but ignore prisons and prisoners, and ignore the community context that gives rise to crime?

In fact, prison does receive attention in the media, though it does not get nearly as much emphasis as crime. How do the media portray prisons? For one, they do not educate their audiences about the prison system as a whole. Consider the following example. "Prison-industrial complex" is a term with wide currency among people developing an analysis of the structure and functioning of the prison system. A few years ago an article using the term "prison-industrial complex" in its title appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, a fairly mainstream journal. However, an Alta Vista search of Fox News, CNN, and the *New York Times* brings up exactly 0 hits for "prison-industrial complex" from all of those media organizations. On the other hand, just searching for the word "prison" does find a lot of hits in the news media. Looking at the stories that come up, we usually find one of two varieties. Either the story is about some celebrity facing prison time, or about abuses in a prison in some other country. After stories of torture at US-run prisons overseas broke open and US media had to cover it (generally in the capacity of damage control) not only did they shy away from suggesting the torture was systemic, or even torture (assertions they would not have hesitated to make in the case of Cuban or African prisons), they failed to illuminate the extent of connectivity between US prisons overseas and at home, including the many torturers at Abu Ghraib who were prison guards and officials in the US before being sent to Iraq.

While fear of crime spread by the media teaches us to think that people who commit crime deserve harsh punishments, prisoners themselves are not humanized, unless they are celebrities, in which case we usually sympathize with them,

and the actual question of what happens to prisoners is ignored; prison abuse is only something that happens far away.

When the topic of US prisons comes up in our media, the question is usually phrased: "Are prisoners pampered?" By giving attention only to unfortunate celebrities facing house arrest or minimum security prison, the media can portray American prisons like a cakewalk or a country club. Abuse at prisons rarely make headlines, and the media never deal with problems as anything other than isolated incidents. If there is a problem with the way the prison system works in this country, people would have no way of knowing. For example, in 2004 when a person in Florida committed a murder after being paroled from prison, that person's name brought up 920 separate articles on an Alta Vista news search. The vast majority of the articles portrayed the criminal justice system as being excessively "lenient" for releasing the convict. However, during the same time period, "mandatory minimums" (the policy of minimum sentencing guidelines, that determine how long prisoners stay locked up, and that can require judges to lock up those convicted of nonviolent crimes for decades, even despite mitigating factors) only got 17 results. There were no stories, during this time period, of any prisoners ripped away from their families and locked up for 12 years for distributing marijuana, for example. Instead, one sensationalized case received dozens of times more attention than the actual government policies determining how long people get locked up. The only prisoner who received attention was one whose story would influence people to support harsher punishments, even when the public is not getting the information they need to understand how harsh punishments already are.

Looking away from news media, we find quite a lot of attention directed towards the criminal justice system in entertainment media. In a TV guide enclosed with our local paper, we found that in one day there were 23 hours of programming relating to the criminal justice system — about the police, courts, criminals, and prison. The vast majority of these shows humanized or glorified law enforcement, and none of them were from the perspective of prisoners, or people who are treated as "criminals." (It is important to recognize that probably every one of us have committed crimes in our lives, but most of us are never treated as criminals). The only time in recent history that a prisoner was portrayed on the front cover of a major US news magazine, it was Martha Stewart. Other prisoners are not given a human face. By dehumanizing prisoners and glorifying those who lock them up, by spreading fear of crime without trying to understand it, by creating a demand for punishment without revealing the actual effects of that punishment, the media are helping create a climate in which a great many people become vulnerable to abuse.

Why is it important to talk about prison?

It's important to talk about prison for a number of reasons. First of all, because of the sheer numbers. Millions of people are directly affected by the prison system. As of February 3, 2005, 2,136,482 people were doing time in US prisons or jails, and another 4.6 million were on parole, probation, under house arrest, or in jail awaiting trial. 4.3 million people are former prisoners (prisonsucks.com). There are millions of children with imprisoned parents. The US has the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world.

It's also important to talk about prison because the problem is not going away, it is increasing. The total number of incarcerated people in this country has gone up by 600% since 1970 (this and other statistics are based on data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the US Department of Justice, unless otherwise noted). Clinton presided over an increase in the prison population of one million people, and it looks like Bush is trying to beat that record. In Virginia in 2003, the prison population rose 4.6%, matching the trends in other states (Virginia DOC web-site).

We pay for the prison system with our taxes, and in some cases with the products we buy, so all of us are involved in some way with the prison system. Furthermore, crime affects an entire society, and in our society prison is sold as the solution to crime.

Finally, it is important to talk about prison because there is something terribly wrong with the prison system, and that's what the rest of this pamphlet will be about.

Not your typical prisoners

Patrick and I decided to come up with a workshop about the prison system after our own experiences getting locked up. We each did six months after being arrested at a protest — he in 2002 and 1 in 2001. In July 2002, I got sentenced and went straight in, spending my first month and a half in three different Georgia county jails, three weeks in transit (in the federal system all prisoners in transit are treated as maximum security prisoners) at USP Atlanta and then via Con Air to the minimum security federal prison at Cumberland, Maryland, where I spent the remainder of my sentence. Patrick got sentenced in 2003 and spent his six months at FPC Cumberland.

Patrick and I had a number of advantages that other prisoners do not get. We had a relatively short prison sentence. Average prison sentences are five years or more. Also, we knew our out-date. The government is able to manipulate most prisoners by changing their release date, threatening to push back their release

date, or keeping the release date unknown. A great help to us was that Patrick and I had the support of a major human rights organization while we were locked up, while most prisoners lack resources and recognition — they are forgotten and invisible. Patrick and I have decided to use these privileges to shed some light on the prison system and win support for the great people we met on the inside.

It is helpful to note that Patrick and I were arrested for protest. Many people do not think the police will arrest you for protesting in the US — this is one of the many myths that gets in the way of understanding the problems in our society. Specifically, we were charged with trespassing on Fort Benning Army Base during the annual November protest against the School Of the Americas, a US military school that trains Latin American officers in counterinsurgency tactics, and that has been implicated in most of the worst atrocities and human rights abuses in the hemisphere. However, Fort Benning is an open base: families live on it, and civilian contractors drive on every day to work. As stated in the trespassing statute, what is forbidden is not entry onto the base, but conducting protests or political speeches on the base. We all admitted crossing onto Fort Benning, but what the prosecutors had to prove was that we were there to protest and speak out against the military. The political nature of the trial is obvious to anyone who observes it. Of course, most prisoners we met did not have trouble believing we were arrested for protest — they have already seen what the government will do to accomplish its objectives.

Who is going to prison, and for what?

When it comes to "typical" prisoners, who are we talking about?

Contrary to popular stereotypes, most prisoners are not "hardened killers." Most prisoners are people of color, poor people, and nonviolent offenders.

- Although people of color make up about one-quarter of the total US population, 65% of the prison population are people of color. 44% of prisoners in the US are black. Meanwhile, a majority of prison staff (65% in federal prisons) are white.
- Because they cannot afford good lawyers, poor people have a much higher chance of being convicted.
- 80% of people who go to prison could not afford a lawyer and were using a public defender at the time of their trial.
- 64% of jail inmates in 1996 had monthly incomes of under $1,000 in the month before their arrest, and 36% were unemployed.

- 70% of those sentenced to state prisons in 1998 were convicted of nonviolent offenses. In some states, the majority of prisoners are there for parole violations. Very few prisoners are "murderers and rapists." Many prisoners who are convicted of violent offenses are mentally ill people who did not have access to treatment.
- In federal prisons, more people are locked up for immigration violations than any other offense.
- Most prisoners are men, but the fastest growing prisoner population are women of color.
- 80% of women in prison are mothers.

In our workshop we hand out cards with prisoner biographies, so everyone in the audience can put themselves in the shoes of a prisoner. At a certain point we have a few people read out their cards and discuss some of the patterns. The twenty biographies, which are interspersed throughout the rest of the pamphlet, are statistically representative of the US prison population in terms of race, sex, type of offense, length of sentence, access to a lawyer, and health problems.

1. You are a white female serving three years for conspiracy to distribute drugs (your boyfriend sold meth). You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender. Since your incarceration, a guard has raped you repeatedly. You became pregnant and your baby, born in prison, was taken away by the state foster system. You have never graduated high school.

Judicial Racism

We are taught by our peers, the school system, and the media, not to make systemic criticisms of our government. Whether we're dealing with the prison system or the war in Iraq, we are allowed to criticize specific problems, as long as we pretend that the government means well over all. It is okay to say "The apartheid government of South Africa was racist" because this argument is easily supported by the facts. However, if we state that the criminal justice system in the US is racist, we may be labeled "conspiracy theorists" or otherwise excluded from respectable discourse, regardless of our facts. But if indeed our criminal justice system is racist, we have a responsibility to say so. Because the US prison system almost never receives media attention as a whole, the government never has to explain why exactly most people who are locked up are people of color. Let's take the time to uncover the truth for ourselves, and look at the facts. What

can we make of the fact that — to refer back to our example — the US incarcerates black males at a rate over eight times greater than did the apartheid government of South Africa?

There is without doubt a racial discrepancy in who gets locked up. Black males have a 32% chance of being imprisoned in their lifetimes; Latino males have 17% chance; and white males have only a 6% chance of being locked up in their lifetimes. Though their total population is small, Native Americans have the highest rate of incarceration per capita of any group.

Why are people of color locked up disproportionately? Corporate media often encourage racism by disproportionately portraying people of color as criminals. Some people try to avoid racist explanations, but also claim the government is not racist, by saying people of color are more likely to commit crimes because they live in poor communities more often. But the fact is the government targets people of color for arrest and imprisonment. Black people, for example, comprise only 14% of monthly drug users in the country, but they make up 60% of those sentenced to prison for drugs (*Prison Nation*, ed. by Paul Wright and Tara Herivel).

2. You are a white male in on parole violation after serving six years for theft. You pleaded guilty and were sentenced without ever seeing an attorney. You have never graduated high school.

Also, murderers are significantly more likely to get the death penalty if the victim was white than if the victim was black. And of juveniles sent to adult prisons, 60% are black, compared with only 19% who are white (prisonsucks.com). Imagine what that does to a child, and what lessons children learn about what is expected from them in the future, if they are sent to a prison instead of a juvenile detention facility.

Judicial racism can be encouraged and enforced in numerous ways. On an individual level, many police are racist. Beyond that, the political bosses of the police, and the groups that hold power at the city, state, and national level are more often white, so police can get away with targeting or mistreating poor people and people of color much easier than if they mistreat rich people and white people. There has always been a racial component to policing in the US; modern police forces in this country evolved jointly from slave patrols in the South, and city watches that kept poor immigrants under control in the North (Our Enemies in Blue, Kristian Williams). And because there is much racial inequality and injustice in this country, people of color often fight for change, so an antagonism develops between communities of color and the police, whose job it is to maintain order and protect the status quo. While white suburbs get friendly neighborhood police officers, ghettos and barrios get heavily armed, militarized police forces.

The legislative branch of government can also encode racism into the drug laws. Compare the cultural and legal implications of cocaine and crack. Both drugs are similar in their effect, though cocaine is a little more potent. Coke is associated as a party drug, a drug of socialites and rock stars, and by some accounts the former drug of choice of President George W. Bush. Around my town, a number of swank fraternities are known to use coke. Crack on the other hand is stereotyped as a ghetto drug, a drug for poor people and black people. How are these two drugs punished? According to the mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines, possessing 5 grams of crack gets you a minimum prison sentence of 5 years. To get that same 5 year minimum prison sentence, you would have to be caught in possession of 500 grams of cocaine.

> *3. **You are a white male with significant mental disabilities. You are in on a parole violation after serving eight years for assault. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender. You have been raped by multiple other inmates, and even been sold from one inmate to another, as sexual "property." You have never graduated high school.***

Despite all the evidence of judicial racism, we are not allowed to draw the obvious conclusions. The Supreme Court ruled in 1987 (McClesky v. Kemp) that statistical evidence showing racism in judicial sentencing and the application of the death penalty could not be considered in court, because that evidence "taken to its logical conclusion, throws into serious question the principles that underlie our entire criminal justice system." There you have it: if the facts show that the system is broken, then according to the government we need to ignore the facts.

Conditions in prison

In a word, prison sucks. It is not a healthy place for anyone to be. Anyone who says prisoners are pampered does not know what they are talking about, or they are lying. More specifically, what are conditions in prison like?

> *4. **You are a white male serving four years for possession and distribution of marijuana. You have been raped by your cell-mate. When you complained to prison staff, they told you they weren't interested in "lovers' quarrels" and the rapes continued.***

To start with, prison is an unhealthy place. A prison sentence of any length can be a death sentence. In fact, 20 years in prison decreases your life expectancy

by 16 years. (Silverman and Vega, 1996). Prisoners do not get adequate access to medical care, sunlight, or a healthy diet. During my brief six month prison sentence, I developed health problems that are still with me several years later. Many prisoners are also forced to work in toxic or unsafe environments in their jobs (which are assigned to them and they are not allowed to refuse). Patrick and I met numerous inmates who were badly injured while on their work details. It does not help that prison authorities often use access to medicine and health care to punish or control inmates. In several prisons, especially private prisons, prisoners are subjected to medical experimentation. Involuntary experimentation is illegal, but prison authorities get prisoners to "volunteer" by giving volunteers access to full medical services and keeping the general medical facilities available to other prisoners dangerously inadequate.

Because of the poor healthcare, the prison system is breeding drug-resistant strains of HIV. When HIV-positive prisoners get irregular access to medication, the virus develops a resistance, which is a death sentence and a violation of the human rights of those prisoners, and a threat to society at large when the prisoners are released. Released prisoners constitute 17% of US population with AIDS, and 35% of the population with tuberculosis.

Because of all these factors, health problems kill a significant number of inmates. In Texas, the 2nd largest state prison system, 14 times more inmates died of health problems than from executions. The majority of those who died throughout the 90s were between 30 and 49, in the prime of their lives. In 1998, outside doctors found that one-third of the dead inmates had received "poor" or "very poor" health care, including people who starved to death, died of dehydration, or of untreated infections. In 2000, a study by two doctors at UTSA found that women and black men were less likely to receive advanced medications than white prisoners. A US district judge, in a 1999 decision, stated that "As the law stands today, the standards permit inhumane treatment of inmates." (www.utwatch.org/prisonhealthcare.html)

And while prisoners are suffering and dying from bad health care, private corporations contracted to provide medical care are making a huge profit. One company, Correctional Medical Services (CMS) controls 40% of the prison medical market. In 1998, a 5 month investigation by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* found that CMS was effective at cutting costs, but at least 20 prisoners had died as a result, from neglect or corner-cutting. The Virginia DOC recently fined CMS $1 million because health care at Wallens Ridge state prison was grossly inadequate. But even as budgets for the prison system rise, prison authorities cut costs for prisoner health care by privatizing services. Private contractors lower expenses and take out a large portion for profit, meaning prisoners receive even fewer resources to stay healthy.

In addition to being unhealthy, prison is psychologically destructive.

5. You are a white male with an untreated case of cancer. You are serving a life sentence for homicide. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender

Prisoners live in a sterile, cruel, and degrading environment, where authorities try to institutionalize them, or program them into unquestioning obedience. Prison authorities prefer prisoners who act like numbers, or like paperwork, and they go out of their way to harass or even brutalize those who resist. Meanwhile, prisoners do not have access to good education or mental stimulation, they are separated from their families and loved ones, and in a dehumanizing environment, they do not receive emotional support. Prisoners also are bombarded with the message that they are criminals and bad people, but they do not receive the resources in prison to rehabilitate themselves. People who do experience personal growth while locked up do it despite prison, not because of it.

At the extreme is solitary confinement. More and more inmates are being kept in solitary confinement, lock-down in a small room, usually 8 feet by 5 feet or 6 feet by 4 feet, for years at a time. My friend just got a letter from a prisoner in a Virginia Supermax who had just completed 12 years in solitary confinement. Sometimes solitary comes with sensory deprivation in the form of total darkness, or psychological "depatterning" in the form of constant artificial lighting that prevents prisoners from sleeping or feeling the passage of time. (Incidentally, both of these methods were originally developed as forms of torture). Quite often, prisoners are sent to solitary for things like insubordination or being politically active. I spent my time at USP Atlanta in the Security Housing Unit, simply because prisoners in transit are treated as maximum security prisoners. For twenty-one days, I was locked in a room smaller than 6 feet by 6 feet, with a bunk bed, a toilet, and a sink. Five times a week we got to go to a larger "exercise room" that had vents to let in "fresh air," three times a week we got showers, and we also lined up outside of our cells to get our meal trays every day. Twenty-three hours of every day, and on the weekends twenty-four hours, we were locked in our cells, sometimes two or three to a cell, sometimes alone. A week into my stay there, the light on the ceiling began flickering, and it remained broken, constantly flickering, the rest of the time I was there, despite our requests to have it changed.

I was there for twenty-one days. One of the people I came with from Crisp County Jail was starting a sentence, to be served at Atlanta, of twenty-two years. Two decades, just for drugs, and that was after copping a plea (pleading guilty in exchange for a reduced sentence).

6. You are a white male serving five years for rape. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender. You have never graduated high school.

It doesn't help that prisons are increasingly being used to warehouse the mentally ill. Since 1955, the number of people in hospitals for the mentally ill has decreased 90% due to budget closings. People who needed society's help were kicked into the streets, and from there sent into prison. In 1999 there were three times more mentally ill people in prisons than in hospitals for the mentally ill (1999 report by NAMI). At some point in their lives, 25 to 40% of mentally ill Americans will pass through the criminal justice system (House Subcommittee on Crime).

Prison is cruel. Some prison guards are decent people who needed a job, but many are sadists and racists who are drawn to the power they get over other human beings. In the end, it doesn't matter too much if a guard is a good person or a bad person, because it is their job to be cruel and controlling towards inmates, and if they do not perform their job they will be fired and replaced by someone who can. For one example, there was a guard at Muscogee County Jail who said he respected what we had been arrested for, and he apologized repeatedly for having to be in a position of oppressive authority over us, saying "It's just a job." But when some other prisoners there disobeyed orders and resisted being photographed and fingerprinted, he had to help all the guards who were openly assholes beat up the disobedient prisoners and force them to comply. At FPC Cumberland, there were a couple of nice people in the staff (one was eventually fired), a whole lot of administrators who treated prisoners like we weren't human, and quite a few guards who were white supremacists and wore the tattoos to prove it — this is not uncommon.

In 1988, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals found conditions in one federal prison to be "ghastly, sordid, horrible, and depressing in the extreme," but not a violation of prisoners' constitutional rights because such conditions were deemed necessary for "security" reasons. Imagine what other abuses of our rights are possible when "security" is the highest priority, and you can start to figure out what it means to be a prisoner, or to be a citizen of a "National Security" state, for that matter.

7. You are a white male serving one year in a federal prison for bank fraud.

In March 1999, a federal court found "wholly unnecessary physical aggression" by prison guards, who exhibited a "culture of sadistic and malicious violence" against prisoners (Human Rights Watch). According to the Human Rights Watch

World Report in 2000, it is not rare for guards to beat or even rape prisoners. Prison rape, though sometimes exaggerated (women at college are as likely to be raped as prisoners), is a major problem. Guards tend to ignore rape, or use the threat of rape to control prisoners. At Crisp County Jail, after I had angered guards by refusing an order that would have put my health at risk, one guard threatened to stick me in a cell with people who would rape me. The court system also supports guards' permissiveness towards rape. In 2005, a court ruled in favor of the Texas prison system, finding that they weren't responsible to stop rape, after a prisoner who had been repeatedly raped and passed around as a sex slave, and whose complaints were ignored by authorities, brought a lawsuit. Prison guards can get away with a lot more than neglect. In the past decade in California, the largest state prison system, shootings killed 39 inmates and wounded another 200, but no local prosecutor ever brought charges against guards for any of these killings.

Prisoners' stories

When we do our workshop, Patrick and I share stories of prisoners we met, to humanize them and not just rely on statistics. In our society, people are trained to depersonalize things. If you get statistics and "objective, unbiased" information, you might be motivated to sign a petition or write a policy paper. We want you to realize that these are human beings who are being oppressed, and fight for them.

Patrick met a guy, Bob, who had a job on the outside. Many minimum security prisons have job details outside of the prison, especially with community service or humanitarian projects to give window dressing to the prison system. In this case, several prisoners were helping Habitat for Humanity build houses. Bob had completed a drug program, taking a year off his sentence.

He was set to be released in just a few weeks. One day while building a house during his job, he fell off a balcony and broke his leg, so the bone came up through the flesh. He was bleeding badly. Fortunately, the work supervisor was a Habitat for Humanity volunteer and not a prison authority, so she did what any human being would do and drove Bob to the hospital. Once there, she called the prison and told them what had happened. They got furious and told her to bring Bob back to the prison immediately (an hour's drive away). The doctor refused — because Bob probably would have bled to death — and operated. Before he got to recover fully, the prison administrators got him pulled out of the hospital and sent to the prison hospital, but because he was not fully recovered he could not be released to a halfway house (which only accept inmates healthy enough to work).

Bob lost his good time, and went from having his release in just a few weeks to having a whole year left to his sentence.

8. You are a Native American male suffering from an undiagnosed chronic liver condition. You are in on parole violation after serving two years for public order offenses. You pleaded guilty and were sentenced without ever seeing an attorney.

Harris County jail in Georgia was overcrowded, so I got put in the INS wing where immigrants were detained. I met one guy, Alberto, who taught me some Spanish, and I taught him some English. Alberto had done several years in state prison for a drug charge, and on the day of his release, just as he was walking out the door, the INS arrested him for violating the conditions of his visa by committing a crime. They locked him up pending deportation. The problem is, Alberto is from Cuba, and the US doesn't deport people back to Cuba. But the authorities didn't want to release him because regulations required he be deported. He had already waited for over a year in legal limbo, not knowing if he would ever be released. And that's the solution of the US government for people without legal status, or without citizenship to any country: imprisonment.

Titus, another guy that Patrick got to know had been in prison for a long time, and all his family members had died. He had no friends, no money and no prospects. To prepare him for release after over a decade locked up, the prison administrators had him watch a twenty minute video on being reintegrated into society.

After release he was being sent to a halfway house, but the house had a thirty day limit, after which people were kicked out. Patrick asked him what his plan was after that, and Titus said after getting out of the halfway house, he would walk down the street to the homeless shelter, and check in.

9. You are a Latino male, who illegally immigrated from Mexico and are being imprisoned by the INS. You do not know when, or if, you will be released or deported. You could not afford an attorney and have been represented by a public defender. You have never graduated high school.

Other protesters I had gotten arrested with told me about something that happened at Crisp County jail a few days after I got shipped out. A number of cells in one wing had gotten a severe lice infestation, including the cell where Toni, one of my co-defendants, was being held. After rec one day, a prisoner refused to go back into a lice-infested cell. Guards beat and sprayed the prisoner

(either with pepper spray or tear gas). They used so much of the chemical agent that prisoners up and down the wing were choking on it, and then they locked the insubordinate prisoner in the cell, without ventilation. The person suffocated and died. The media printed exactly what the jail administrators told them, that the prisoner had died of "natural causes" in the jail's medical wing. Crisp County jail has no medical wing.

How prison authorities maintain control

At this point in the workshop, Patrick and I use a large role-play to illustrate methods of control developed within the prison system. The entire room, we say, is the prison, and everyone in it is a prisoner, except for three lucky volunteers who get to be the guards and the warden. What are everyone's interests? The prisoners want to make their time easy, they want to improve conditions, and they want to limit restrictions placed on them as much as possible, up to and including winning back their freedom. The prison authorities want to maintain order and do their jobs.

We then pose a scenario: In the last election, both political parties promised a tough on crime approach, and more people are being sent to prison, faster than the prison budget goes up. The facility becomes overcrowded, and to reduce expenses prison authorities decide to cut down to only two meals a day on weekends, and to make prisoners pay a dollar a day for food (this policy was implemented at our local jail, in fact).

How do the prisoners respond? Sometimes a politically active person in the audience will suggest something like a hunger-strike. If the audience is short on ideas we mention that hunger strikes are one of the ways prisoners more commonly protest bad conditions.

How do the prison authorities respond to political organizing and insubordination by prisoners? First we ask what barriers and divisions exist among the inmates that might make working together difficult. Racism and the existence of competing gangs can keep inmates divided, as can the presence of snitches. Also, inmates with shorter sentences are less likely to take risks than inmates with longer sentences. Once people have these barriers in mind, they begin to imagine the strategy used by the authorities to maintain control. The person who suggested the hunger strike is sent to the hole. Guards offer privileges to inmates for snitching, and they encourage divisions among the population by encouraging racism and gangs. If the workshop audience consists of white college students, they are less likely to suggest that the prison authorities will use violence against the prisoners.

What at first seemed like conspiracy theory, the audience now understands to be rational behavior on the part of the outnumbered prison authorities. Patrick and I share a few quotes from prison officials, to show that the manipulative control strategies they imagined exist in real life.

Shortly after Patrick got to FPC Cumberland, administrators called a "Town Hall Meeting," which is euphemism for prison staff crowding all the prisoners together to yell at them. The top administrator at the minimum security facility was named, in all honesty, Mrs. Crump, and she delighted in bullying people. Because there were a lot of new prisoners present at the time, the first words out of her mouth were: "Gentlemen, don't expect no rehabilitation here, this is a warehouse!"

When I arrived at FPC Cumberland, Mrs. Crump spoke to my group of new arrivals during the "Orientation" session. She was giving a brief history of the federal prison system, talking with grim relish about a wave of riots that marked the first time authorities had to bring guns into the compound, to quell the riots. She compared this response to recent complaints about prisoners getting beaten, and said she preferred the use of guns because "Dead men tell no tales."

10. You are a Latino male. You are serving nine years for assault charges. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender. You have never graduated high school.

Author Derrick Jensen recounts the words of a prison administrator, who is trying to convince Jensen to work full-time at the facility where he gives a part-time writing class to prisoners. Jensen is reluctant because he needs time to work on his book. The administrator responds that Jensen can write while the prisoners are on lockdown. "And when they're not?" "That's easy," he [the prison employee] said. "Go to Thomas and say, "You wouldn't believe the shit Hollingshead is saying about you." Then go to Hollingshead and say, "Thomas says you're a woman, and says he wants to fuck you." Next time they're on the yard, one of them sticks the other, and there you go: instant lockdown"

(Derrick Jensen, *A Culture of Make Believe.* p.43).

11. You are a Latino male with a serious mental illness. You are in on a parole violation after serving seven years for drug possession charges. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender.

A former prisoner told Christian Science Monitor, "Inmates dramatically outnumber guards, so [the prison] has a vested interest in keeping the inmate population divided against itself rather than [against] them. Guards need to channel any

kind of unrest away from themselves and onto another group." A San Francisco jail warden, speaking about prison gangs, confirmed this policy, telling NPR, "If you're an officer and you've got to supervise 200 people on a tier, it's a lot easier for you if that tier is split up into five bickering factions . . . so there is also that sort of staff encouragement of this kind of thing in many institutions."

Control in higher security and jail

Authorities use a number of methods to maintain control in prison. As already mentioned, prison staff encourage racism to keep people divided. Much racism comes in from the outside, but numerous prisoners report that they "had to" become more racist upon being locked up.

> ***12. You are a black male suffering from heart disease. You are serving fourteen years for possession and distribution of heroin. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender.***

Patrick and I each experienced or witnessed multiple instances of white guards making racist comments, discouraging white prisoners from hanging out with black prisoners, using race fears to control white inmates (e.g. "I'm going to stick you in a cell with a bunch of niggers, oh they're going to love you!"), and the like. Gangs are also a part of this. Many prisoners join gangs for status or to increase their chances of survival, and gangs are frequently organized along lines of race (Aryan gangs, black gangs, Mexican gangs, etc.). Prison authorities repress and destroy politicized, revolutionary gangs very quickly, but curiously racist gangs thrive. In some situations, where racist prison gangs become so powerful they compete with prison officials as the primary authorities, prison authorities take severe measures to isolate gang leadership or protect people attempting to leave the gang, but the gang structure itself, and the racist, micro-capitalist culture that gives rise to it, are left intact.

Authorities also use contraband to maintain control. Prisoners live in a very poor, sterile environment, so it is quite understandable that they will break the rules to smuggle forbidden items into the facility. Prisoners have developed quite a few ingenious means to smuggle in contraband, but it is ridiculous to assert that all the contraband floating around a prison or jail is brought in without the notice of the authorities. In fact, guards and administrators are a major point of entry for contraband. Guards can make money off the prison black market, and they can also maintain control, playing prison gangs off against one another and giving favored, cooperative gangs access to the contraband pipeline.

Prison authorities can create an atmosphere of distrust, and prevent organizing by prisoners, by using "snitches" or informants, who rat out fellow prisoners and keep administrators aware of any plans, agitation, or rule-breaking. Many people get locked up in the first place because people ratted on them. Through "Tough on Crime" hysteria, the government has legislated such draconian penalties — you can get a life sentence for conspiracy and possession charges if you're caught with a large enough quantity of certain drugs — that prosecutors and cops can threaten to lock people up for decades unless they snitch on other people.

13. You are a black male suffering from severe psychosis. You are awaiting execution for homicide. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender. You have never graduated high school.

In this atmosphere of distrust, prison authorities can neutralize (sometimes lethally) politically active prisoners by spreading rumors that they're snitches. This tactic, "bad-jacketing" or "snitch-jacketing," was one of several developed in the prison system and applied at large on insubordinate populations (such as urban blacks) by police in the so-called free world.

There are also a number of privileges the authorities can use to maintain control. In prison, being able to talk to your relatives on the phone, to be able to wish your children "Happy Birthday," is a privilege, that can be taken away if a prisoner misbehaves. Television privileges are also important. A number of conservative politicians and commentators have implied that prisoners are pampered because they get color TV. I would bet that a majority of prison guards would rather give up their clubs or pepper spray before they gave up the television. It is a very useful instrument for control. It pacifies and distracts inmates, and numbs their minds. Once, when guards were roughing up someone in a cell next to mine, I walked to the door to watch. Immediately, the guards got angry at me (they get very violent in response to any sign of solidarity between inmates). They told me to mind my own business. When I ignored them, they immediately told my ten other cell-mates they would take the TV out of our cell if I continued to disobey. Likewise, guards can take away commissary privileges, and they often treat medical care like a privilege as well.

For more rebellious inmates, there is solitary confinement, which should realistically be understood as a form of torture. The federal prison system has developed a peculiar form of torture called "diesel therapy" that makes use of the network of federal facilities all across the country. Diesel therapy is quite simply the repeated transfer of a disobedient prisoner. To outsiders, this would never sound like torture, though the purpose is to intentionally subject a person to a prolonged and unbearable amount of psychological stress and instability until

they break. To understand, think of everything that goes along with "transfer." All prisoners in transit are treated like maximum security cases. One morning while you're sleeping, your cell opens suddenly at 4 am, and a guard begins yelling at you: "Gelderloos! Pack up! You're moving out! Get your mattress! Let's go, don't make me tell you twice!"

Disoriented, the prisoners are herded into another room, where they are left for half an hour, to wonder where they are going and think about the letters which will be returned to loved ones, who have no way of knowing what happened until usually at least a week after the prisoner arrives at the next place. Then a guard returns and begins barking out prisoners' names, to which the prisoners have to respond with their prison number. Names are checked off and prisoners are herded into a new line. Their ankles are shackled, their hands are placed in handcuffs, the handcuffs are attached to a chain around the waist. Anyone who has been rebellious up to this point will be "black-boxed," meaning the handcuffs are held close to the belly by a small black lock box that prevents the prisoner from moving his arms at all, and keeps the wrist bent at a nearly 45 degree angle. The shackled prisoners are led to a holding cell, crammed in, and forgotten about for several hours. Then some of them are moved to another holding cell. Then they might be moved back, or moved to another holding cell, and left for another hour. Then the prisoners are strip-searched ("Turn around. Lift your left foot. Lift your right foot. Bend over. Spread your cheeks. Cough. Turn around. Lift your sack . . ." and so on). Then they are made to change out of the uniforms specific to that facility, into another uniform. At every interaction, guards yell at them, threatening violence. Multiple times, prisoners are made to recite their prisoner number. They are moved into another holding cell. They are moved again through the halls of the facility, passing through multiple checkpoints and having to wait each time. They are loaded onto a prison bus, with shotgun-holding guards behind metal cages. They are driven to an airport and wait on the tarmac for two hours, in the heat or cold, depending on the season. They are loaded onto an airplane, again after being asked their prisoner number. The airplane flies somewhere, they are not allowed to know where, and after landing they get on another prison bus with tinted windows and shotgun guards. They may not even know what state they are in. They drive to another prison, go through more holding cells, more strip searches, fingerprinting and photographing and questioning, before finally having their shackles removed and getting dumped in the Security Housing Units pending classification. It's been over twelve hours and their ankles and wrists are numb or even swollen. They will have to repeat this entire process the next morning, or in two days, or maybe in a week, again and again and again, for months, until they are broken.

14. You are a black female serving four years for conspiracy to possess drugs. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender. You have three children on the outside.

Beyond this, guards can beat prisoners, or use prison bullies to keep others in line. At Crisp County jail the guards were mad at me, so they opened the door of my cell so another inmate could come in and threaten me, right before their eyes. And in the final analysis, it is quite easy for a guard to kill a prisoner and not be punished. We are taught to prioritize security and glorify cops, not to think of the lives of criminals. If guards murder a prisoner, the media will not cover it, the prosecutors will not press charges.

15. You are a black male serving nineteen years for robbery. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender. You have never graduated high school.

Control in minimum security

Minimum security prison is an interesting example because prisoners are not kept locked up by force. Any prisoner who wanted to could escape. How do the authorities maintain control under these conditions? Prisoners are unlikely to escape because leaving the compound comes with a five year prison sentence, and all prisoners in minimum security have fewer than ten years left. Many of the same privileges as mentioned before-phone use, commissary, television, visits from family, good or bad job assignments-exist and can be granted or taken away. Inmates who commit greater infractions are handcuffed and taken to the hole. All federal minimum security prisons are satellite camps, meaning they are located right next to higher security prisons, and the threat always exists that a prisoner can be sent back "behind the fence."

16. You are a black transgender woman being kept in a male prison. You are serving six years for possession and distribution of marijuana. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender. You have been raped by other inmates. You have never graduated high school.

There are also some more subtle methods used to maintain control. The environment in minimum security prisons is sterilized, with fewer programs and

resources than at higher security levels. Prisoners have to work full-time, and outside of that they receive little stimulation other than television. Minimum security prisons especially enforce a military aesthetic — you have to get up early, make your bed perfectly, wear a sharp, buttoned-up uniform, stand in your cell during count, and act in an obedient, orderly manner around guards and administrators. Prison life is regulated by minute and contradictory rules. Unless one walks a perfectly straight line, one is probably breaking a rule at any given moment, similar to in the outside world. This means the cops have the power to punish just about everybody, and it is up to them to decide who gets punished. As for contradictory rules, at Cumberland there were numerous instances of signs posted on the walls with obsolete rules, or rules that prisoners were forced to ignore by verbal orders. A door in the rec room had a sign saying going through it was illegal, but to access a certain part of the compound prisoners had to go through that door. Also, there were numerous rules in the prison rule book that might be contradicted by verbal orders given by guards. Or, Mrs. Crump might yell at inmates for spending too much money at the commissary, but then cigarettes would go on sale, encouraging inmates to buy more of them. With contradictory rules, prisoners cannot learn their rights or learn the boundaries of the rules, and possibly push those boundaries. The only safe space is in the middle, in a posture of obedience, waiving as many rights as possible.

People who attempt to exercise their full rights with police on the outside are likely to have a similar experience.

Prison on the outside

An interesting observation I had in prison was that, though I was locked up for the first time in my life, none of it felt new. Patrick and I both noticed striking similarities between prison and relationships or interactions we had encountered on the outside, whether with police, teachers, bureaucrats, or parents. Obviously, people in prison are not free. But if we are free on the outside, wouldn't there be some qualitative shift, some new experience of not being free? Police and prisons have influenced other bureaucracies and institutions on the outside. In a security state, police are the preeminent heroes, and the relationship between cop and citizen becomes the dominant relationship throughout society. Put another way, a government's fundamental purpose is to maintain power. No matter the government, democratic or other, its top priority is its own self-perpetuation and continuity, and prisons are a useful laboratory for an elite group figuring out how to maintain power over a larger population. Schools, especially, have come

to mimic prisons. Architecturally, FPC Cumberland bore striking similarities to many elementary schools.

Schools across the country have begun to use drug searches, zero tolerance policies, "lockdown," guards, security cameras, metal detectors, and other control methods imported from prisons. In several cities, students (especially blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans) are sent to jail for disciplinary problems in school.

17. You are a black female suffering from severe depression and AIDS. You are in on parole violation after serving three years for public order offenses. You have never graduated high school.

How else does the prison system affect society at large?

The Prison-Industrial Complex

The "prison-industrial complex" is a term used to describe the confluence of state and corporate interests in pursuit of a policy of imprisonment. It parallels the earlier term "military-industrial complex," coined by President Eisenhower to describe weapons proliferation that satisfied the interests of the government, by increasing military and thus state power, and also satisfied corporate interests, by funneling billions of dollars of public funds to corporations profiting off military contracting. By the nature of the military-industrial complex, there was no peace dividend after the Cold War; instead the military budget necessarily continued to rise even in the absence of an enemy, real or fabricated. Similarly, the prison-industrial complex will not and cannot see an end to crime.

Especially in rural areas, prisons are sold to the local population as a boost to the economy. When did prisons become a matter of economics? Almost $40 billion is spent every year on the prison system. This is money the government appropriates from the people and funnels to corporations. Corporations can access this money in a number of ways — by winning contracts to build prisons, to sell supplies and services to prisons, to staff prisons. A growing number of prisons are privatized, run entirely by for-profit corporations. It would be naïve to suggest the government holds its subjects, in this case prisoners, as the number one priority, but it is a matter of fact that the number one priority of corporations is profit, and profit is obtained by increasing the efficiency with which one exploits people and the environment.

In the Wisconsin state prison system from 1999 through 2000, over one-sixth of the total healthcare budget went to pharmaceutical corporations (it is the

experience of many prisoners that instead of getting health care they get pills thrown at them) (Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau).

Bob Barker has made some of his millions from contracts selling mattresses, shampoo, and other hygiene products to the federal prison system (the shampoo is made in sweatshops in Mexico and the mattresses are really poor quality). If I recall correctly it was Verizon that had an exclusive contract with all the Georgia county jails where I stayed. In Crisp County jail they even had installed phones in our cell, and we were charged $10 or more for a fifteen minute phone call. In 1996, the University of Texas and Texas Tech, which had won contracts for providing health care to Texas state prisoners, realized a net profit of $300,000, which represents the fairly high rate of 10% of total revenues (Austin American-Statesman). In that same year, around one hundred Texas prisoners died from medical neglect. An "independent" state review found that costs went down and 22 "quality indicators" showed improvement by an average of 85%, but the actual results of the study were secret and they didn't mention that whether prisoners actually survived was not one of the quality indicators. In fact, after the privatization of healthcare in Texas prisons, yearly inmate deaths increased 150%.

In addition to all the money that flows from people to corporations through the prison system, prisons themselves are economically productive. Nearly every prison is also a factory, and in a capitalist society criminologists and correctional theorists are nearly unanimous in proclaiming the rehabilitative qualities of work. For a time there was a penal method popular in Britain under which prisoners were forced to break rocks from sun-up to sundown, just to instill in them the duty to labor. Currently in the United States, prison labor is very productive. In the federal prison system, prisoners make many of the street signs, military uniforms and other equipment, plaques, furniture and other items used by various government bureaus and institutions.

In 1996, a New York investment firm sounded the call: "While arrest and convictions are steadily on the rise, profits are to be made — profits from crime. Get in on the ground floor of this booming industry now."

Note that the filing cabinets or shower curtains that occasionally make the evening news because the government budgeted them at ten times their normal cost were made by prisoners paid less than one-tenth the normal rate. In Virginia, the furniture enjoyed by public university students is made by Virginia state prisoners, and the Virginia DOC advertises prisoner-made furniture and clothing on its website. In California, prison factories make $150 million in annual sales. In some states, prison production is not for government use but sale on the market. Factories in the Oregon state prisons make "Prison Blues," blue jeans that they sell commercially to sick yuppie fucks who apparently enjoy the novelty value of flaunting slave labor.

Though prisoners are paid for their labor, the work is not voluntary. Prisoners have to work, or they are punished. Furthermore, the pay prisoners receive does not even cover their basic living expenses, so the fact that prisoners are paid does not elevate their status above that of slave. For my work in prison I received 12 cents an hour, and I've heard of no one, even in the federal system, making more than 90 cents an hour. Significantly, the money paid to prisoners stays inside the system. It is expensive to be a prisoner, because the government has the total authority to rip prisoners off. Just about everything is more expensive in prison.

In the prison-industrial complex, crime leads to profit and increased state power, so criminals become a resource to be mined.

I was a remarkably thrifty prisoner, and spent less money than any other prisoner I met, but I still needed my family to send money in to me. My paycheck couldn't even cover phone calls, stamps, and stationery. Prisoners also have to pay for some of their clothing (usually everything except the uniform, which can't be worn in certain situations, like exercise), and most prisoners also buy extra food because what they receive in the dining facility is so poor. Prisoners can also buy radios and other things to make their time easier, or typewriter ribbons to be able to type out and file legal appeals and the like. Many facilities also charge prisoners for medical visits, and a basic fee for room and board. So the prison system manages to funnel even more money to corporations because family members of prisoners need to mail in money to pay for commissary, phone calls, and the like. In fiscal year 2000, the Virginia prison system made $6.4 million from phone calls, and much of this money came from outside the prison system.

18. You are a black male serving twenty-eight years for conspiracy to possess and distribute crack. You have never graduated high school.

There is also a transfer of political capital involved in the prison-industrial complex. By disenfranchising a significant portion of black voters, urban elites protect themselves from a typically oppositional constituency, and hamper the growth of black political power that might rock the boat. Meanwhile, large populations and the attendant amount of public funds and legislative seats are transferred to rural white districts (where the prisons are located), increasing their power. It is important to understand that voting, or full enfranchisement for black people, will not fundamentally change power relations. Elections are a competition for influence between different factions within the elite. More elite blacks inside the political machine will not change the situation of the majority of poor blacks, but it will involve more wealthy blacks and their friends in profitable enterprises

like graft and urban gentrification. Such a change would never endanger the white supremacist, capitalist system as a whole, but it does threaten the profits of particular good ole boy networks that have historically monopolized these enterprises.

In 1996, a New York investment firm sounded the call: "While arrest and convictions are steadily on the rise, profits are to be made — profits from crime. Get in on the ground floor of this booming industry now." So what does it mean when locking people up becomes a profitable industry? For one, corporations and wealthy people will use their influence in the government to make sure that arrests and convictions continue to increase. And if the state gains more power the more people are afraid of crime and the more the police, the courts, and the prisons expand, then the government is likely to go along with it, or even lead the charge. In the prison-industrial complex, crime leads to profit and increased state power, so criminals become a resource to be mined. And because capitalism is based on growth, the number of people who are branded criminals, and turned into prisoners, must constantly increase. The way it works, prisons and police will never solve or even substantially decrease crime because their jobs depend on it. On the contrary, the police, the courts, and the prison system will work to perpetuate crime.

19. You are a black male with HIV You are serving twelve years for possession of crack. You could not afford an attorney and were represented by a public defender. You have never graduated high school.

Ase, a Drug War prisoner I met on the inside, told me that the US economy would collapse if drugs were legalized. He told me to imagine all the cops, prosecutors, judges, prison guards, defense attorneys, and private contractors whose livelihoods depended on people getting locked up for drugs, and what would happen to the economy if all those people lost their jobs. He's right. After the Great Depression the elite learned that capitalism collapses unless the government continually subsidizes business.

First they did that with military production, now they're also using the prison-industrial complex. To bolster the economy, a prison industry produces criminals. Prisoners are the resource to be found and exploited. However, crime is based on social context. If people are healthy and happy, they are much less likely to commit crime, or at least those forms of crime that constitute social harm, such as rape, assault, and murder. So the legislative branch has to pass laws to continuously feed the prison system. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the government passed harsher and harsher laws, especially to punish drug use. Sentences were lengthened, and conspiracy laws were beefed up so that people

only remotely connected to a drug dealing operation — for example the parents or spouse of a drug dealer — could be charged as a conspirator and punished with the same severity as the actual dealer. A huge amount of women locked up these days were convicted of conspiracy because their boyfriends dealt drugs. Insofar as drug addiction is a social problem, we need to find ways to deal with it, but every independent study shows that treatment and not incarceration is the way to solve drug problems. The government has reviewed these studies, yet they continue to take the course of action that ensures there will always be a drug problem, and drug prisoners, in the future.

Similarly, the government recently stopped funding Pell grants to allow prisoners to pursue higher education in prison. Interestingly, the government had access to the statistics that prisoners who got college degrees and other forms of education while in prison are much less likely to be locked up again after release, but they still cut off Pell grants. Ostensibly their reason was to cut costs, but they know as well as the rest of us that the surest way to cut costs is to decrease the total number of people locked up. Because the number of prisoners needs to rise, the government is responsible for increasing criminality so that more behaviors, including victimless behaviors, are punished with longer sentences. The result is clear to see. In 1980, half of those entering state prisons were convicted of violent crimes, but in 1995 it was only one-third. Between 1991 and 1998, violent crime fell 20% but the prison population rose 50%.

20. You are a black male with severe arthritis and diabetes, but regardless of your condition you still must work close to 40 hours a week at a strenuous job. Because you only get paid a few cents an hour, every month you must limit either your phone calls to family, your commissary purchases of food and hygiene items, or your $5 co-pays for doctors visits. You plead guilty and were sentenced without ever seeing an attorney. You are serving twenty years for assault and robbery.

Law enforcement also understands itself as the supplier of a resource. On April 13, 1997, the US Department of Justice Inspector General released a 517 page report showing that the FBI crime labs manufactured evidence to win convictions. Interestingly, no one in the FBI was imprisoned, the tens of thousands of prisoners affected by this manipulation were not freed, and most importantly, the FBI retains its credibility and is still responsible for locking people up. Judges will regularly bar evidence from trials of systemic corruption or manipulation by the FBI. The courts also understand their role, and become an assembly line. McJustice: 2 million served. Prosecutors are funded better than defense attorneys, and thousands of people, though the exact number is unknown, go through the

entire trial process without ever seeing a lawyer. Most judges are reluctant to punish police wrongdoing or "corner-cutting" that infringes on people's rights, and over the years the Supreme Court has drastically watered down the protections afforded by the Bill of Rights in criminal cases, such that search and seizure without warrants, presumption of guilt, and trials without juries are commonplace. The way the system works, the courts depend on people not exercising their rights. If everybody charged with a crime took it to trial, the current case load would backlog the courts for over a decade. The system would be mathematically impossible to operate if people insisted on their rights. The criminal justice system uses a number of coercive measures to make sure people give up their rights. Public defense lawyers, who are the only option for the poor majority who go through trial and imprisonment, simply do not have the resources to prepare for a trial in even a fraction of their cases, so they nearly always advise their clients to plead guilty. Because the criminal justice system can threaten such draconian penalties, people who think they have a good chance of being convicted are likely to plead guilty in exchange for a promised sentence of, say, two years, rather than facing twenty or thirty years. The police can exert additional pressures. I met numerous people in federal prison who pleaded guilty after the FBI threatened to charge their parents or other family members with conspiracy. One man, who on the advice of his bank conducted a transaction that turned out to be illegal, felt he was innocent because he didn't know he was breaking any rules, and was simply doing what his bank said to do. He ended up pleading guilty after the FBI threatened to charge his parents with conspiracy, because the man had sent his parents a gift paid for with money used in the illicit transaction.

People who are already locked up are prevented from using the courts through a number of bureaucratic hurdles, perhaps the most common of which is they have to pay a fee for nearly every single motion or complaint. Prisoners who have no income have to wait for the courts to declare them "paupers" and waive legal fees, but prisoners with a small amount of income might not get this classification even if their income isn't enough to afford the fees.

What does the prison-industrial complex mean for our society? Let's answer that question with another question. We're taught that we live in the "Land of the Free," but does anyone know when slavery was actually illegalized in this country? Most people will guess sometime in the 1800s. In fact, slavery is still legal in the United States. The 13th Amendment, which in most cases abolished slavery, states: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime . . . shall exist within the United States." After the Civil War, when chattel slavery was abolished and there was a large population of freed blacks but still an extremely racist power structure in the United States, the federal government opened this clear loophole, and it was recognized for what it was immediately.

In 1871, a Supreme Court Justice upheld this government slavery, writing that: "during his time of service in the penitentiary, he is in penal servitude to the state . . . He is for the time being a slave of the state." Note that it was around this time that chain-gangs and sharecroppers began to appear in the South. Chattel slavery was replaced by a streamlined capitalist form, that relegated most of the oppressed to "voluntary" forms of slavery like sharecropping, and preserved involuntary slavery for those who did not stay in line, for those who would be branded "criminals." It is important to understand that many slave-owners themselves, including the important pro-slavery theorist John Henry Hammond, saw northern capitalism as more efficient, and were looking for ways to "dispose of their slaves or incorporate them into more advanced forms of production so they could make the shift. They all agreed that simply letting the slaves go posed too great a threat to their social order. The prison system, along with white vigilante groups that shared many institutional roots with modern police forces, provided the answer. This system has been evolving ever since. And that's what we have in the United States: the prison-industrial complex is a modified form of slavery. One-third of black males go through the prison system in their lifetimes, and most of the rest are submitting to the legal economy that makes them work hard but keeps them impoverished. People targeted by their race, and by economic class, put in chains or behind bars, and made to work for the enrichment of the ruling class — the state and its corporate benefactors. How else are we to describe and understand this system?

Violent and Controlling Intervention

So much of what the police and the prison system do is gratuitous and exaggerated intervention, either punishing so-called crimes that have no victims, or punishing behaviors that need healing, such as drug addiction. But it is also important to recognize that crime is a major problem, even more so because of how the criminal justice system responds to crime.

Former President James Madison, arguing for the increased federal powers granted by the Constitution, wrote that: "the minority of the opulent [the wealthy minority] must be protected from the majority." How are the wealthy minority protected from this majority in our society? With gated communities, armed guards, advanced alarm systems and an increasingly efficient and militarized criminal justice system, of which the police force is a centrally important part. The upper classes (individuals and corporate firms) in the US spend twice as much on security as the public.

Private security for the upper classes pushes crime to where there is the least resistance: impoverished communities. And in these poor communities, the government responds in a way that ensures they can punish people without ever solving the causes of crime.

There is something absurd about perpetually locking up criminals without addressing the factors that make someone a criminal, or understanding the forces that cause a society to view certain acts as crimes. There is an endless supply of crime in this country. Consider all the illegal acts committed, compared with total arrests. How many people have never drunk alcohol before they were twenty-one, have never smoked marijuana, have never lied to a cop, have never stolen something, have never gotten in a fight'? If we really think that incarceration is the answer to crime, this country would have about 120 million prisoners if only the marijuana laws were enforced with 100% efficiency. But none of these laws are enforced with 100% efficiency, and they are also not enforced equally across the board. We have already established that people of color and poor people are targeted by law enforcement. There is also a legal focus on incarceration for the crimes of the lower classes, not only in whose crimes are punished, but also in terms of what actions are even considered crimes.

Consider corporate crime and the lack of legal accountability among the upper class. Enron stole millions of dollars from its workers and investors, and a very few people got very small punishments, but if someone on the street steals a wallet he'll get locked up for years. According to Bureau of Labor statistics, between 1992 and 2000, 55,919 American workers died on the job — that's on par with how many Americans died in Vietnam. According to the government, which is probably giving us a conservative estimate, 30% of those deaths could have been avoided had the employers not been negligent. 55,919 workers killed, at least 20,000 of them through negligence, and no managers, no corporate CEOs, are doing time for manslaughter or negligent homicide. Also consider that by government admissions, around 100,000 Americans have been killed over the years by releases of radiation, accidental and intentional, from the nuclear energy and nuclear weapons programs. Again, this is probably a gross underestimate, and again none of the people responsible for those crimes have been locked up. Do we really think the criminal justice system keeps us safe?

How can communities work together to confront political and economic injustice if they can't even knock on each other's doors? How useful is crime to authorities?

The primary activity of the police is to make arrests, and feed people into the prison system. Hopefully everyone understands that incarceration increases crime. First of all, locking people up steals resources from a community, leading to more poverty and more crime. When people are locked up, they can no longer

support their community, their families are emotionally traumatized, and now have to support them with money and visits. Secondly, prison is a school of crime. We don't mean this in the mainstream sense that people go to prison and learn better ways of stealing cars, although that does happen. More importantly, getting locked up steals opportunities from people. They lose access to education, they lose opportunities for healthy emotional development. In many circumstances, to survive in prison, people have to behave in ways that would be illegal on the outside, whether it's joining a gang, fighting someone who insults you or tries to dominate you, stealing or smuggling in extra resources, bribing guards, and so on. And when people get out, they have a much harder time of finding a legal job, they probably have sorely limited education or job skills, they are emotionally traumatized, and they have been made to be completely dependent on an Authority that will no longer provide them with meals or a bed to sleep in.

Because all crime exists in a social framework, many "street crimes" (e.g. physical and sexual assault, non-corporate theft, and the violence of drug addiction) have an extremely destructive and divisive effect on communities, and also on efforts to organize communities to create social change. What lays the basis for effective community organizing? Solidarity, feelings of safety and connection, confidence. How can communities work together to confront political and economic injustice if they can't even knock on each other's doors? And if we understand that our society has at its very foundations a number of serious injustices, and that those with power benefit from current injustice, we have to ask: how useful is crime to authorities?

White middle-class people who can be allies to the system are protected by police from crime, but among the lower classes there have been all too many instances of police deliberately encouraging crime for us not to believe that it is systemic. Los Angeles police were recently charged on grounds of criminal racketeering, and investigations revealed that the police would eliminate the heads of drug-dealing networks so they could take over those networks and profit off the drug trade, or they were operating as pimps on a large scale. Similar revelations have also surfaced in Philadelphia, Miami, and other major cities. Government involvement in encouraging crime goes to higher levels. Numerous drug dealers I met in prison said they wouldn't have any product to sell if the government really wanted to keep drugs out of the country, and several said some government officials and agencies are directly involved in smuggling drugs in. Investigation into the many illegal acts conducted by the government against social movements in the 1960s and 1970s revealed that the CIA introduced China White heroin into black communities known for being politically radical, to disable them with drug addiction. Former Los Angeles police officer Mike Ruppert said the CIA used local police agencies to help distribute drugs in communities they wanted

to cripple. CIA drug-trafficking was a component of the Iran-Contra scandal, and since the US occupied Afghanistan, poppy production (used for opium and heroin) has increased exponentially, becoming the country's number one export. Because our media instill in us the assumption that our government always means well, we want to respond to allegations like these as though they are ridiculous conspiracy theory, even though we know that all governments and political parties do conspire to break certain rules for their own ends, even though we know that our government deliberately spread alcohol among Native Americans to cripple them, even though we know our country participated with the British program of forcing the Chinese to become addicted to opium so they would have to participate in the world market (having to produce for a money economy to pay for opium imports). When exactly did our government become too honest to continue doing what it has been doing since its very beginning?

The police and the prison system are incapable of addressing the roots of crime, they encourage the perpetuation of crime in oppressed communities, and their response to lower class crimes constitutes an additional form of violence against poor people and people of color. In many ways police are an occupying force working to preserve the status quo and all its inequalities. People who grow up in poor, heavily policed communities often liken it to a war zone. Helicopters with search lights flying overhead, constant police surveillance, police with assault rifles, armored cars and SWAT teams busting down people's doors in the night. At the very beginning of the 21st century, the US military funded itself on the principle of being able to fight simultaneous wars on two separate fronts. At the same time, the country spent $147 billion, roughly half the military budget, on police, prisons, and the criminal justice system, amounting to a war on the home front. In middle class communities, neighborhood police utilizing a long history of research and theory on maintaining social Control fight a "war for the hearts and minds" while in poor communities and communities of color, where they know they'll never be able to pass themselves off as the friendly liberator, they turn the place into Fallujah. Using fear of crime as a justification for ever increasing powers, the criminal justice system mobilizes violence against the lower classes to keep oppressed people disempowered. Four people die from police violence every day. Nearly every year there is some kind of riot in a major US city, and in almost every case the immediate trigger is another act of police brutality. Residents taking part in the riots often remark that the one act of brutality was just the last straw, and that they are fed up with daily harassment, abuse, and violence.

If we look at the history of society, from before the existence of the modern police force, all the way through the creation and evolution of this institution, we see that the police, and by extension the prison system, are very wrapped up in preserving injustice. Police did not exist when the United States were founded.

The institution evolved jointly out of the slave patrols in the South, and the city watch designed to control immigrant populations and support political parties in the cities of the North. The institution of police greatly expanded at a time when crime was decreasing, and there was no actual need for them, if we believe the myth that police are intended to reduce crime.

Given a shortage of crime, the government decided to expand the police and also expand definitions of criminality, to include many behaviors that had not been considered crimes before then. Not surprisingly, the criminal codes targeted the lower classes, illegalizing vagrancy, homelessness, gambling, drinking in public, loitering, prostitution, and "disorderly conduct" (when wealthy people did engage in these activities, it was in the privacy of their large homes, out of the eye of the police). From the very beginning, police have existed to preserve injustice and increase the powers of the state, and they have always gotten their power and their license to exist by targeting oppressed populations.

In the end, police and prisons work to perpetuate crime, whether they know it or not. Top decision-makers who are more aware of the real effects of these policies, who read the scholarly literature on criminology and social control, who call it a "crisis of democracy" when the lower classes organize mass movements to create social change, are more likely to understand that strategically, crime serves as a very effective auto-repression against the lower classes. Why would people with immense privilege work to reduce crime when crime represses the lower classes and preserves the privileges of the wealthy minority?

The way the police and the prison system respond to communities organizing to overcome this violent intervention and create change lends even more weight to this new picture we are developing of the function of the state.

Repressing Dissent

We are taught from grade school and even earlier that we live in a free country, so it may clash with most people's perceptions of reality to say that a major role of the police and the prison system is to repress dissent. The First Amendment guarantees us "free speech," though admittedly there are also certain types of speech that are not free. For example, Patrick and I were not free to protest on Fort Benning Army Base. The common explanation (though it proved false during cross-examination in my trial) is that such a protest creates a "security risk," but this explanation is a distraction. It obscures the major point, which everyone should be able to agree on, that allowing free speech is not the government's first priority. In the case of Patrick and myself, and many other people, "security" is

prioritized over free speech. This is not controversial: to get around the mystifications surrounding our government, we need first to admit that freedom is not the top priority.

In many a high school government class, students learn other exceptions to free speech. A common one is known as "Clear and Present Danger." Generally, the teacher will explain that we are not free to yell fire in a crowded theater, because doing so poses a clear and present danger to people. Curiously, the actual case that established this principle is almost never explained to the students. The analogy of yelling fire in the theater is the same one used by Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, when he was justifying the actions of the government in locking up several people for passing out pamphlets against the draft during World War I. Holmes said the government has a right to prevent people from committing actions that posed a clear and present danger of bringing about those substantive evils that the government has a responsibility to prevent. In this case, keeping out of a bloody war that did not at all concern or threaten the United States was a substantive "evil," and handing out pamphlets saying that the military draft amounted to involuntary servitude posed a clear and present danger of bringing about peace. So, in the government's own logic, the police had the right to lock people up for passing out a pamphlet that contradicted the government's chosen priorities.

What other government priorities are we not allowed to speak out against? If participation in World War I (which helped the US grow in economic and political stature and become a world power, but certainly wasn't required for the survival of the state) was a government priority that justified repressing dissent, then we can certainly expect that preserving and increasing elite power will also be a government priority as well. Not giving the Indians back their land, not paying back black people for everything that was stolen from them during their enslavement, perpetuating US imperialism and corporate exploitation throughout the world; all of these injustices are foundations for the US power structure. If all you want is a new law to prohibit smoking in certain public places, or require that guns be sold with safety locks, you're in luck. It won't be a fair fight: corporations and wealthy individuals that prefer the status quo will have an enormous advantage over you, with better access to the political system, but with enough work and money you might succeed.

Your free speech and your political activity will be respected. But if you want something more than that, if you want a change that challenges the foundations of state power, you will run into some walls you may not have noticed before.

US history is full of examples of social movements violently repressed by the government. Native American resistance was subjected to genocide. — Black slaves were brutalized and terrorized to prevent them from revolting. Striking

workers were massacred, in Chicago, at Homestead, at Ludlow, and dozens of other places. Police and vigilantes organized by bosses destroyed radical unions through beatings, mass arrest, false imprisonment, execution, and lynching. The anarchist movement was destroyed with mass arrests and deportations. The government used its new air force after World War I to bomb rebellious coal miners in Appalachia. Police infiltrators neutralized the Communist Party before World War II. The Civil Rights movement was spied on and brutalized. FBI informants joined chapters of the Ku Klux Klan and helped them carry out attacks and killings against black organizers. State forces killed over 60 American Indian Movement supporters on Pine Ridge reservation, where the group was trying to defend traditional rights. J. Edgar Hoover developed a sophisticated program of repression known as COINTELPRO, which was used against the black liberation movement, the anti-war movement, and others. We only know of the existence of that program because people stole files from an FBI office in Pennsylvania, and the Senate was forced to acknowledge the program in the Church Committee hearings. Consider this one statement from an FBI internal memo in 1968: "The [black] youth and moderates must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teaching, they will be dead revolutionaries." This statement came at a time when dozens of black revolutionaries were dying at the hands of police and police informants, or being framed and imprisoned.

This history of repression continues into the present day. Multiple people have been arrested for wearing political t-shirts or holding protest signs at events where President Bush was speaking. Police have beaten and arrested anarchists, anti-war protesters, and especially politically active people of color and queer or transgender people at multiple protests every year this decade. The FBI is targeting radical environmentalists as part of the War on Terror. In Harrisonburg a few years ago, the cops shut down an anarchist community center we set up, using regulations that are never enforced against businesses in town. Just this year, the police spied on the Virginia Anarchist Gathering that was hosted here, and we learned from people contacted in the investigation that the police were working on behalf of Homeland Security. We have yet to know the extent of repression happening right now, because it is happening in secret, but government documents obtained by the ACLU and other groups consistently show the FBI and police spying on and repressing activists.

Police and prisons play a major role in the repression of dissent. Our government claims not to have any political prisoners, but like any dictatorship the US government insists on calling political prisoners "criminals." Where political activity is not criminalized outright, effective political organizers are framed and imprisoned, or police brutalize and spy on activists when the media is not paying attention. Ralph Aron, former Warden of Marion Federal Penitentiary, said: "The

purpose of the Marion Control Unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in the society at large" (From "In the Spirit of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark: Carry On the Tradition of Resistance," published in *Notes From A New Afrikan POW Journal, Book Seven*, 1980).

It is impossible to give a detailed history of government repression here, but if you want to find it the information is out there. If you are not aware of it already, you will discover government repression once you step out of line, especially if you are trying to change the system. In my experience, the most freedom of speech I ever had was in the Security Housing Unit, in federal prison. For the first time in my life, I could say whatever I wanted, and not have to worry about punishment from parents, teachers, bosses, or cops. That's because my words were hot air, and the walls were solid concrete. What makes us free is not speech and opinions. What makes us free is power, and we are only allowed to speak freely when our speech does not pose a threat, does not present the clear and present danger, of changing who holds power in this society. We are free to talk about clothing and TV shows, we are free to talk about voting for this politician or to tell jokes about politician, we are free to petition for bald eagles or two hour work days or to yell out that it's all a big conspiracy, or to write careful analyses of what's wrong with the government in scholarly journals. We are not free to tear these walls down. But we must find the power to do so, and use it.

Peddling Fear, Selling Security

The Prison-Industrial Complex needs us, because it uses our own fears to justify its existence. The government and the media teach us to be afraid. We watch shows like COPS and news like FOX and become inundated with the idea that some mysterious stranger, probably black or brown, is out to get us. We are indoctrinated with the notion that the world is filled with criminals and terrorists constantly dreaming of ways to hurt us, and everything would fall apart in a minute if the government weren't there to provide us with security. We live in a nation where everything, justice included, is sacrificed on the altar of security. But ask yourself: if security is the number one priority, what freedoms can't be sacrificed? We let the government spy on us to feel secure against terrorists and radicals, we let ourselves be fooled into supporting war to secure the US position as undisputed ruler of the world, we sacrifice peace of mind and Constitutional guarantees so the police can wage their War on Crime, we sacrifice our lives working 40, 60, 80 hours a week for economic security in an economy apparently so afraid of freeloaders and welfare moms it would let you starve before it gave you a hand up. Sensationalist news coverage in the mass media

aggravates white, middle-class fears of skyrocketing crime rates even as crime is statistically decreasing. The DC Sniper killed 10 people in an area of about 4 million and people were staying indoors, afraid, even though they faced a greater danger from air pollution or their morning commute.

When we examine our fears it becomes more obvious how unreal this idea of "security" is. How did security become a priority? In 1950, government planners released NSC 68, a secret study recommending the conversion of the US into a "National Security State." The plan, authorized by the Truman administration, emphasizes the need to curtail public dissent, indoctrinate the public into accepting government priorities — at the time the main priority was instilling a fear of the "danger of communist subversion and aggression" — and keep the country in a state of full-time preparedness for war, thus subsidizing the economy by funneling the budget into military production: the military-industrial complex. And now we have stockpiles of nukes sitting around slowly releasing their radiation; they are an empty symbol of security leftover from the Cold War. The new symbols of security are prisons, and we're building them faster than we can stop and think about the last time we heard that lie, faster than we can get our priorities straight. Is not being in prison enough of a reward? Is freedom from the invisible horde of rampaging criminals all the freedom we need? What about things like decent housing, an economy we choose to participate in, health care and empowering, accessible education?

And what about this threat we're protected from? Even though street crime tends to cycle in poor communities, privileged people are afraid of being victimized by criminals from the lower classes, so they clamor for harsher punishment, lock 'em up and throw away the key, but are the two million prisoners we're taught to be so afraid of even a threat? A study done by the US Senate found that 91% of wardens in the federal prison system said that over half of the inmates in their custody would present no threat to society if released. And even in this case why should we keep relying on government officials to tell us what is a threat? Why couldn't it be enough to share stories of all the incredible, compassionate people we met in prison? Mike, who made wooden toys to send home to his kids; Earl, who kept an eye out for me when the guards encouraged another inmate to bully me; Eric who was teaching himself Spanish and Chinese; Greg, who snagged me a big bag of raisins from the kitchen and showed me all the radical political literature he'd gotten into the prison; Angel and Carlos, who let Patrick borrow their radios and shorts and make use of their food until he got settled in.

Why can't friends and family decide who is a threat? When did crime become the government's business in the first place? We need to redefine crime as social harm, a harmful action that becomes the responsibility of the people directly involved, and their communities. And if there's no victim, it's not a crime. The

authorities have proven that they have no idea how to reduce social harm, and many of them are involved in perpetuating it. Let's look at a real crime that we're not taught to be hysterically afraid of, a crime that's left to the privacy of our own homes: domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse of children and spouses. Our whole society perpetuates these crimes by teaching men that they own their partners, and teaching parents they own their children. Sexual domination and violence is glorified. Husbands, boyfriends and parents who get trampled down and disrespected at work take it out on the only people below them in the hierarchy. And what then? A woman who is beaten by her partner has the option of getting her abuser locked up and ripping apart the family, staying in an abusive situation and trying to fix it on her own, or moving out and, facing isolation and poverty. If her abuser is locked up, he or she is likely to be even more violent and emotionally repressed after going through prison. A child who is abused also faces the choice of ripping apart the family or remaining in an abusive situation, and unless the parents are poor or people of color, authorities are very likely to disbelieve or ignore the child claiming abuse. At no point in this process do the authorities offer us anything remotely resembling healing. People who are abused as children are more likely to commit abuse as adults. Hiding the problem away, or encouraging people to deny responsibility to avoid the draconian punishments, will not change that, and will not end the cycle of abuse. One in every four women is raped in this country, a huge proportion of homes are abusive — among the people I know well, about half of us have grown up in abusive homes, and the authorities have duped us into being afraid of random psychotic killers and purse-snatchers?

Across the world, a number of indigenous societies that existed without a state solved conflicts and social harm through community mediation. A conflict was rightly seen as a problem of the entire group, because it threatened the health of the community. They dealt with conflicts in the open, with an eye towards healing, not punishment. Equal distribution of resources helped ensure that these societies were not "overrun by crime" (as our modern paranoia would lead us to fear) despite a total lack of police and prisons. When these societies were colonized by Europe, whether it was in West Africa or in Mexico, whether the colonizer was Britain, France, or Spain, one of the first things the colonizer did to gain control was to disrupt the communal mediation traditions and impose a new justice system, one that defined crime as an act against the state. By doing so they could lock up rebels, impose fines (thus forcing the colonized to work for an income), influence the society's morality through legal codes (often imposing sexist attitudes or criminalizing the transgender identities that were once common throughout the world), and most importantly make the colonized

people dependent on the colonizers. What better way for a government to protect its power than to manipulate society so things fall apart without it?

The prison system to its very root is about oppression and control. It cannot be reformed away. When the prison system was first being developed, progressives applauded it as an improvement over corporal punishment. How wrong they were. If we want to solve the social harm of which the prisons and the police are an integral part, we need to talk boldly about prison abolition. Prison abolition means fighting the prison system and struggling against the power of the state to violently intervene in our communities and our lives. It also means developing the community power to make us independent of the state and its false solutions to crime. Social harm is a problem we need to be able to address in our communities. Nowadays, people are trying to redevelop techniques of community mediation. Sometimes this takes place in the context of reclaiming indigenous traditions, sometimes it occurs based on Western psychological and sociological research. We need to put these techniques into practice, and root them in our communities. Once we get past this fear of dealing with our own problems, the next steps will come easier: giving prisoners the support they need, organizing our communities to counteract the forms of police intervention we're faced with, and working towards a point when people won't need to call the cops if they are hurt, because they know their community will give them all the help they need.

Breaking Down Walls: Anti-Prison Organizing and Movement Building

After facilitating our first workshop model several times, Patrick and I decided to come up with a workshop model that wouldn't just educate, but would also help people take action against the prison system. After leading a few group brainstorms to discover why there wasn't more organizing taking place against the prison system, especially among radicals from a similar background as Patrick and myself (white and middle class), we came up with another workshop model. This workshop focused mainly around a role play, in which participants became a microcosm of society and took up various roles (politicians, corporate execs, police, prisoners, activists with friends or family locked up, activists without friends or family locked up) to strategize how to respond to different situations, how to build power and create change, how to react to the strategies of those in power, and so on. After that, we break down into small group discussions, for people to discuss the importance of personal relationship building in radical organizing. The importance of strong relationships was always underscored by

the strategy role play, because any division between prisoners and activists, or between the different groups of activists, were easy for the state forces to exploit.

Before all this, Patrick and I start off the workshop by sharing lessons learned from earlier brainstorms: six major obstacles to organizing against the prison system. Because Patrick and I have mostly been talking to people with similar experiences (e.g. we don't go into poor neighborhoods profiled by police to teach people about prison), these obstacles apply mostly to the experiences of people who are white, college-educated, and middle class, although hopefully everyone can find something useful in the following.

Policy Activism v. Power Activism

There are two different ways of viewing activism that have relevance on how we might approach organizing against the prison system. I'm going to call these two ways "policy activism" and "power activism." Policy activism, which seems to be the default mode for privileged people, seeks to make a change in a law, a regulation, on paper, within the political system. Power activism seeks to change the distribution of power, within a community or across society. What policy activism forgets is that laws make the government stronger. Laws are tools, and only the government has the authority to employ them. A good example is the recent lawsuit by white cops in California, who were punished more than a fellow black officer after beating a person of color, and won a large sum of money under anti-discrimination laws. A huge amount of work by well meaning people got those anti-discrimination laws on the books, and they are used to protect and enrich white cops who were beating a person of color. Another example is the current destructive coal-mining practice of Mountaintop Removal, which was encouraged in part by loopholes in strip-mining legislation won by environmental organizations. Activists closer to power wrongly think of change as a policy shift. Policies executed by our government will always be intended to preserve and increase the exploitative and oppressive powers of the government: a policy shift is simply a shift to a new strategy in pursuit of that goal.

Power activism works to empower people. Successful power activism increases the autonomy of people or a community, and decreases the power of the government (or other powerful entities, such as corporations) and their presumed right to interfere in people's lives. Under power activism, a small victory encourages people to take back more, and push the walls of power even further back. Using power activism, people do not negotiate for better regulations or more education programs at a prison where their friends and families are locked up. Instead, they militantly assert that the government has no right to mistreat the prisoners

or deny them education; if they exercise enough power, the government will institute those reforms anyway in an effort to prevent people from getting out of control, and this only encourages people to fight for more. A Protest used by policy activists seeks to assemble large numbers or media coverage, to show the existence of a constituency, as a sort of informal vote. A protest used by power activists seeks to make itself a threat, to take the streets, to make the members feel empowered, and to make the authorities feel that things will get out of hand if they don't offer some concessions; but because the power activists were never negotiating for concessions, they won't lose any momentum when concessions are granted.

A good example is that of prison labor. Many college students who do get active around the prison system sink their teeth in a campaign to divest their school of prison labor. And though prison labor is a bad thing, such a campaign does not at all help or empower prisoners. Factory jobs are often the most popular and best-paying jobs in prison. A campaign that changes school or prison regulations is just another coercive reorganization of prisoners' lives coming from above — it does not take into account their needs or desires, and does not grant them extra leverage or power within the prison system, or bring them attention and resources.

Reform vs. Revolution

An often misplaced dichotomy between reform and revolution can be another obstacle. You cannot tackle the prison system without addressing day-to-day problems, short-term measures, and "band-aid" activism (you better believe that prisoners are in need of a lot of first aid). At the same time, simply helping prisoners out is a hopeless or a cynical activity, if you ignore the fact that more and more people are continuously going to be locked up. You need a long-term, revolutionary goal — the abolition of prisons (and the racist, capitalist state that requires prisons), along with an understanding of the nitty-gritty work that's needed in the short-term. Working for major reform of the prison system is also not a viable option. The fact that prison itself started out as a "humanitarian" reform demonstrates that as long as power is held by an oppressive elite, any reform will be corrupted to meet their interests, if the reform isn't planned by them in the first place. Only broad social revolution will solve the problems of prisons, police, and crime, but revolution does not mean rhetorical grandstanding. It is a drawn-out process of struggle, growth, destruction and creation.

Sustaining Activism

The way the criminal justice system disempowers oppressed communities should demonstrate how we need to go about our activism to empower communities. Prisons steal people and resources from a community, keeping people poor and busy, while crime divides them and makes them fearful. In such conditions, people cannot do the necessary work of revolution. The way activism is structured in many of our communities, it's assumed you have free time. When people have kids, get sick, get a relative in prison, they often have to drop out. On the contrary, our activism should work to sustain us and heal our communities. Once we build survival networks, once activism can help pay the rent and provide childcare or healthcare, we'll see that many of the right people will get involved.

Academic Activism

Some people suggest that radicals who are white or middle-class are not effectively engaging the prison system because we are usually not personally affected by it — most of us don't have a friend or a sibling locked up. However, most of us are also not directly affected by sweatshops or the World Bank, but these are major targets for privileged radicals. Another reason may be that people who get a college education are taught to view social change in an academic way. The World Bank is chartered on paper, and could be abolished on paper. Stores and universities could be made to stop buying sweatshop goods with a new code of conduct. But prisons are stone walls and razor-wire: they are much more concrete, and much more deeply rooted in our society. Abolishing them would require a much greater commitment, a greater struggle, and a greater risk.

War at Home

Speaking of risk, many activists demonstrate an inability to see the existence of a war at home. Even the language of war is shocking to many. Especially privileged activists focus their attentions on conflicts happening elsewhere in the world, like they don't want to recognize similar conflicts in our own backyards — conflicts that are much less comfortable because they're close to home. But right in this country, people are being tortured in prison, and cops are shooting down people of color, while simultaneously fighting a war for people's "hearts and minds," just as our Marines are in Iraq (in fact the lessons of occupation and

counterinsurgency are studied and applied both by the military and by branches of our domestic police). Many people ignore this war, or think they can rise above it. This leads many people to dismiss many forms of resistance, particularly illegal acts that are not sanctioned in a respectable protest. Many white activists make manipulative usage of Gandhi and King to justify their passivity, though neither of them said pacifism would always work, or refrained from voicing support for armed struggle in certain instances. If we all recognized the existence of a war at home, being waged against us while we try to look the other way, our commitment and responsibilities might drastically change.

Morality of the State

Finally, many activists, even anarchists, unknowingly embrace the morality of the state. Many people have an unquestioned understanding that prisons are there to protect them, and are afraid of what would happen if prisoners were freed and we had to actually address and reconcile problems of social harm, rather than locking those problems away, out of sight. When privileged activists do support prisoners, they focus on political prisoners, which is good and necessary, but often comes at the expense of ignoring all the other prisoners or perpetuating the belief that those other prisoners deserve to be there. And support for political prisoners is usually based on an assertion of their innocence. We say that Mumia abu-Jamal and Leonard Peltier should be free because they are innocent. In these cases, we are employing the same morality as the state, but just using a more impartial burden of proof It is understandable if these two people base their legal strategy on their professions of innocence (and all the evidence suggests they are), but shouldn't we support them in any case? Didn't Mumia have a right to shoot that cop, who was savagely beating his brother, at a time when Philly cops were killing black people for their political beliefs? Wouldn't Leonard Peltier have been right to kill those FBI agents, who were invading native lands, at a time when FBI-backed paramilitaries had killed dozens of Indian activists? Do we really believe that people do not have a right to defend their lives if the people trying to kill them are wearing a badge?

We must acknowledge that the government has no right to lock people up, because there are no crimes that people in prison have committed that the government has not also committed, and at a greater scale. So many of the crimes of this country's prisoners are victimless, and in the other cases the crime is something that concerns the people involved, and their communities. Communities must become strong enough to again deal with their own problems, or we will be dependent on the continued violent intervention of the government.

Post Script: December 10, 2005

On December 10 (International Human Rights day), a day when others were focusing on human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, a group of people gathered outside the Richmond city jail to protest bad conditions in that facility, and to bring attention to abuses throughout the entire Virginia prison system. Organizing efforts for the protest brought together people who had never worked together before; black people and white people; local activists and activists from across the state; ex-prisoners, family members of prisoners, and middle-class people not directly affected by the prison system. One of the groups that helped organize the protest already included a number of inmates at Virginia's supermax prisons, so the prisoners themselves were able to give input and be involved in the protest: one prisoner wrote a letter which we read out at the protest, and organizers wrote and signed a letter of support to inmates, which was subsequently mailed in to prisoners at facilities across the state. Protesters chanted loud enough for the inmates at the city jail to hear, and they cheered and held their hands out the windows in response. That evening we held a panel for several speakers to go into more depth about the problems of the prison system, and how people were organizing to confront and solve these problems. The next day, a delegation drove six hours to Red Onion state prison to deliver a petition to stop the beatings and abuse of inmates, creating media attention and popular support that made it harder for guards to commit abuses with impunity.

The protest would have been a hollow media spectacle if not for the crucial groundwork laid by activists (mostly from oppressed communities) to provide immediate support to prisoners, and build connections with prisoners and networks among those hurt by the prison system. In building a coalition and coordinating activities across the state, privileged activists had the upper hand because we had more free time and greater access to resources. We avoided creating yet another exploitative, manipulative coalition by being aware of privilege. Concretely, this meant making sure the non-privileged activists (e.g. activists of color and family members of prisoners) got concrete benefits from giving their time to the protest such as access to wider audiences and resources, assistance for their own projects and campaigns; making sure they got media access generated by the protest and got places as spokespeople; making sure we privileged activists listened and learned from them more than we tried to educate them; making sure we were working with people with similar radical goals and not recruiting token people of color whose ideas we would not respect; and making sure that decision-making power was shared and the concerns of non-privileged activists would be prioritized. We also did not put organizing efforts under the control of any

one organization or permanent umbrella group, thus people helping out with the campaign did not have to surrender any autonomy. Additionally we tried to be aware of sharing communication styles (email or phone? Formal or informal discussion process?) and cultural spaces (do we meet at a restaurant that serves vegan food or soul food?) that might be more welcoming to one group of people than to another. Our efforts were not perfect but I think we were moving in the right direction.

In the space of a few months organizing, we educated people and brought attention to systemic abuses in the prison system; we brought hope and support to thousands of prisoners; we involved prisoners in organizing the protest; and we made mutually beneficial connections between different groups of people fighting against the prison system We hope the networks created will continue to grow and empower prisoners, communities directly targeted for incarceration, and all people living under the shadow of the prison system and the oppressive Authority that depends on it. The struggle continues . . .

Recommended Resources

- Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue.*
- Paul Wright and Tara Herival (eds.), *Prison Nation.*
- Jimmy Santiago Baca, *A Place to Stand.*
- Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression.*
- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.*
- Leonard Peltier, *Prison Writings.*
- Jill Nelson (ed.), *Police Brutality.*

Prisoners can find many helpful resources in the National Prisoner Resource List (NPRL), available from several sources, including Prisoner Activist Resource Center (PO Box 339, Berkeley CA 94701) and The Reader's Corner (Prison Book Program, 31 Montford Avenue, Asheville NC 28801. Also try *Prison Legal News* (2400 NW 80th St. #148, Seattle WA 98117) a newsletter written for and founded by prisoners.

- www.jerichony.org/prisoners.html
- www.prisonactivist.org
- www.breakthechains.net
- www.anarchistblackcross.org
- www.abcf.net
- www.november.org

- www.famm.org
- www.criticalresistance.org

Support Prisoners: Write Them!

A great list of political prisoners, with descriptions, is available from the Anarchist Black Cross Federation. You can find it online at

www.abcf.net/abcf.asp?page=prisoners#

Or find "normal" prisoners from your area and write them or visit them. They need support too.

Many people are intimidated by the idea of writing to a prisoner, but it's work we need to do. Write them an introductory letter, telling a little about yourself, and why you're interested in being a pen pal. Let them know what you can offer, in terms of letter-writing, sending books or money. Offer your pen-pal support and a lifeline to the outside. Don't be afraid to let them know your limits, in terms of how frequently you can write or how much money or printed material you can send. Before sending anything other than a letter, contact the prison to find out the regulations (for books, money, etc.). Don't be discouraged if the prisoner doesn't write back; try someone else.

Peter Gelderloos and Patrick Lincoln
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