

Reform or abolition? Using popular mobilisations to dismantle the 'prison- industrial complex'

Julia Sudbury examines how grassroots campaigning is set to transform criminal justice in the US.

In April 2009, California officials unveiled historic plans to cut \$400 million from the state's \$9.8 billion corrections budget by reducing the prison population by 8,000. With half the reductions coming from changes in parole policy that would reduce the revolving door of parolees being returned on technical violations, and the other half from changes in the treatment of property crimes and enhanced credits for prisoners attending education programmes, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation effectively adopted part of a larger plan created by Californians United for a Responsible Budget, a lobby group made up of 43 prison abolitionist, reform and social justice organisations. This temporary alignment between anti-prison activists and one of the nation's largest and most powerful correctional departments is a dramatic shift from a political terrain in which activists have relied on direct action, mass protests and lawsuits to block state officials bent on inexorable prison expansion. I want to argue that the grassroots tactics used by the anti-prison movement over the past decade to transform popular understandings of mass incarceration have opened up the door to new political possibilities at a time of economic crisis. Where prisons were once seen as a recession-proof inevitability, the anti-

prison movement has created a chink in the armour that may be the first step in ending America's over-reliance on imprisonment as a solution to deep-rooted social problems.

The US anti-prison movement is made up of a plethora of grassroots organisations, lobby groups, activist collectives, prisoner associations and student groups (Sudbury, 2008). While the organisations that make up the movement are diverse in their organising strategies, they share the common goal of ending the use of imprisonment to respond to harm. The anti-prison movement differs from voluntary organisations working for criminal justice reform in two key ways. First, rather than viewing imprisonment as a necessary sanction that should perhaps be used with less frequency or made more effective and humane, anti-prison activists view prisons and jails as a form of racialised state violence that must be dismantled as part of a wider social justice agenda. Second, while voluntary organisations provide important research, policy work, lobbying and direct services, their remit seldom includes community organising or mass mobilisation. As a result, the non-profit model of organising is ill-equipped to bring about radical social change (Incite!, 2007). Voluntary organisations can and do influence government policy, but they cannot generate the people-

power necessary to create the kind of fundamental social and economic re-organisation necessary to dismantle what has become a multibillion-dollar industry. In addition, the non-profit model of social change may actually undermine grassroots mobilising because it produces paid experts who are seen as having more legitimacy than directly affected communities, and tends to eschew popular protest that may lead to conflict with the state. In contrast, as anti-globalisation activist Arundhati Roy has stated: 'Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary'. To confront mass incarceration and its corollaries – the overpolicing and criminalisation of poor and racialised communities – anti-prison activists in the US have come to believe that a mass movement similar to the civil rights and anti-war movements is necessary. This movement must involve the active participation and leadership of those from directly affected communities, including low-income racialised youth.

Like other new social movement actors, anti-prison activists have focused much of our attention on rearticulating popular understandings and generating new social meanings. Central to this intellectual project has been the creation and popularisation of a new language to talk about imprisonment. In 1998, when Critical Resistance (CR), the leading abolitionist organisation, organised a conference called 'CR: Beyond the Prison-Industrial Complex', the prison-industrial complex (PIC) was a little known concept. The groundbreaking conference attracted approximately 3,000 students, educators, activists, lawyers, former prisoners and their families for three days of workshops, panels, cultural performances and direct action, and garnered significant media attention. As a result of the gathering, groups opposing prisons began to spring up across the country, and the rubric of the prison-industrial complex emerged as a popular explanation and organising tool. Eleven years later, the concept is widely used in both progressive and mainstream media, wielded by Democrats critical of bloated corrections budgets and examined in

criminology textbooks and classrooms. Critical Resistance has grown from its Oakland roots to encompass chapters in nine cities and most recently hosted a conference to celebrate its 10th anniversary that was attended by over 3,500 people.

The term 'prison-industrial complex' was first used by urban theorist Mike Davis to describe a prison building boom that, he argued 'rivals agribusiness as the dominant force in the life of rural California and competes with land developers as the chief seducer of legislators in Sacramento' (Davis, 1995). Angela Y Davis, a co-founder of CR, describes the prison-industrial complex as a symbiotic relationship between state criminal punishment agencies, politicians, corporations and other interest groups, manifested most obviously in the transformation of prisoners into profits (Davis, 2003). Private prisons, for example, transform the warehousing of prisoners and immigrant detainees into a transaction that is traded on the stock market. Prison expansion in the US, UK and internationally has also generated profit-making opportunities for construction and architecture firms, manufacturers of security and telecommunications equipment, and for service industries including real estate agencies, banks and restaurants (Sudbury, 2000). As a result, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore documents, small towns and entire regions have become economically dependent on prisons to absorb surplus land and labour displaced by decades of global economic restructuring (Gilmore, 2007). Using the term prison-industrial complex turns our attention to the enormous and growing cost of imprisonment, reveals the dependencies that influence criminal justice policy, and demonstrates who profits from a continued over-reliance on policing and imprisonment.

Anti-prison activists also work to erode popular support for the 'tough-on-crime' philosophy underpinning US criminal justice policy. In the context of drug-related violence and despair in urban centres, even members of communities negatively impacted by racial profiling and

police brutality may see harsher sentences as the only 'solution'. In contrast to the claim that *prisons work*, CR refutes the belief that 'caging and controlling people makes us safe'. CR reminds us that both 'perpetrators' and 'victims' co-exist in a social context devastated by a combination of social exclusion, poverty, racism, addiction and government neglect. This analysis shifts our focus from the commonsense assumption that policing and prisons create security, to the possibility of creating safety by redirecting resources to provide for the basic human rights of all community members. On their website, CR asserts:

We work for PIC abolition because we do not believe that any amount of imprisonment, policing, or surveillance will ultimately make our communities safer or more self-determined, prevent 'crime', or help repair the damage that happens when one person hurts another. We believe, instead, that access to basic necessities like food, shelter, meaningful work and freedom as well as alternative systems of accountability create the conditions for healthier, more stable neighbourhoods, families, and our wider communities.

Contrary to popular understandings, CR argues that prisons undermine safety by absorbing scarce public resources that might otherwise pay for social services that address the root causes of survival crimes – from education, youth and drug treatment programmes, to housing and employment. For this reason, an anti-prison agenda that includes 'alternatives to cage-based punishment' as a response to harm, as well as investment in community infrastructure has become popular in urban communities as a pathway to *genuine security*.

Popularising the concept of 'abolition' is also central to the anti-prison movement's radical critique of imprisonment. By adopting this term, activists make deliberate links between dismantling prisons and the abolition of slavery. Taking the

analogy further, these 'new abolitionists' identify the abolition of prisons as the logical completion of the unfinished liberation marked by the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, which regulated, rather than ended slavery. In this sense, abolition of the prison-industrial complex is seen as central to contemporary struggles for racial justice.

Abolition exists in productive tension with efforts to reform the penal system. While abolitionists point out that reform in isolation of a broader decarcerative strategy serves to legitimate and even expand the prison-industrial complex, we also work in solidarity with prisoners to challenge inhumane conditions inside. Described by Angela Y. Davis as 'non-reformist reforms', these efforts are assessed first in terms of whether they contribute toward decreasing or increasing prison budgets and the reach of the criminal justice system. For anti-prison activists, however, reform is not the primary objective. Rather we work toward dual priorities. First, we aim to transform popular consciousness, so that people can believe that a world without prisons is possible. Second, we take practical steps toward dismantling the prison-industrial complex. These steps include campaigns for a moratorium on prison expansion, mobilising community power to prevent the construction of proposed new prisons, shrinking the system through decarcerative efforts and creating community-based alternatives to imprisonment.

By helping the public to imagine the possibility of shrinking the prison-industrial complex and ending their reliance on imprisonment, the anti-prison movement has created a new political climate in which closing prisons is a viable solution to the current economic crisis. For a nation in which being 'tough-on-crime' has been a prerequisite for election, this is a significant achievement. Given the success of the US anti-prison movement in mobilising popular support to confront mass incarceration, academics and non-profits should pay more attention to

the role of popular movements in shaping criminal justice policy and consider how they might use their own resources to facilitate and support grassroots popular protest. ■

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