

AMERICAN CROSSROADS

EDITED BY EARL LEWIS, GEORGE LIPSITZ, PEGGY PASCOE, GEORGE SÁNCHEZ,
AND DANA TAKAGI

GOLDEN GULAG

PRISONS, SURPLUS, CRISIS, AND OPPOSITION IN GLOBALIZING CALIFORNIA

RUTH WILSON GILMORE



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and cultural de-development brought about by the individualized involuntary migration of urban “surplus population,” and the potential values that go with that population, into rural prisons. For the ROC and FACTS successfully to oppose the disposal of their loved ones, they organized to challenge the fullest possible reach of state (and civilian) powers arrayed against them. Working through cases, they built alliances of and as multiracial groups that create and sustain solid centers of activism throughout and across the “nested scales” (Smith 1992) of the rising prison state. Thus both groups demonstrate the possibilities and the urgent difficulties of organizing across the many boundaries that rationalize and reinforce apartheid America. Indeed, their work might well exemplify what utopia is these days—social perfectibility recognizable in something as modest as people getting on a bus.

SIX

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The patient reader has traveled a long way in a short book. The journey, like the one undertaken by the bus riders in the Prologue, is an adventure of possibility rather than certainty. While the outcomes to cooperative human efforts are never ever guaranteed, I certainly believe this: the lessons I’ve drawn from researching and writing these pages while simultaneously engaging in political work advise us to quit the divisions, old and new, that trap us in doomed methods of analysis and action. There are obvious divisions that, as we have seen throughout the Central Valley Mother’s ROC chapters, can and should be overcome. Most urgently, we must lift our ability to recognize how to craft campaigns that both create solid organizations and foster robust coalitions among already existing organizations. The following theses—which suggest themes for amplifying the work—are a modest attempt to propel us to a different scale by showing both myriad locations where activism can take root and flourish and the potential for connecting those

sites into something bigger. The outcome of this adventure might be simply a more general, and therefore more comprehensive, way of acting on problems in the political-economic geography that currently prevails. Or a different scale might signal the development of innovative social and spatial relationships and capacities for action—just as the “Third World” and “Pan-Africanism” did for earlier generations.

The proliferation of antiprison groups during the decade when this book was in progress indicates how many kinds of people understand that prison is not a building “over there” but a set of relationships that undermine rather than stabilize everyday lives everywhere. Unfortunately, many remedies proposed for the all-purpose use of prisons to solve social, political, and economic problems get caught in the logic of the system itself, such that a reform strengthens, rather than loosens, prison’s hold. In a sense, the professionalization of activism has made many committed people so specialized and entrapped by funding streams that they have become effectively deskilled when it comes to thinking and doing what matters most. What are the possibilities of nonreformist reform—of changes that, at the end of the day, unravel rather than widen the net of social control through criminalization?

If we take to heart the fact that we make places, things, and selves, but not under conditions of our own choosing, then it is easier to take the risk of conceiving change as something both short of and longer than a single cataclysmic event. Indeed, the chronicles of revolutions all show how persistent small changes, and altogether unexpected consolidations, added up to enough weight, over time and space, to cause a break with the old order. Certainly, the political forces that hold governmental power in

the United States of the early twenty-first century figured this out and persisted for decades until they won. With persistence, practices and theories circulate, enabling people to see problems and their solutions differently—which then creates the possibility of further, sometimes innovative, action.

Such change is not just a shift in ideas or vocabulary or frameworks, but rather in the entire structure of meanings and feelings (the lived ideology, or “taking to heart”) through which we actively understand the world and place our actions in it (Williams 1961). Ideology matters along its entire continuum, from common sense (“where people are at”) to philosophies (where people imagine the coherence of their understanding comes from: Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha, Marx, Malcolm X, the market).

The bottom line is this: if the twentieth century was the age of genocide on a planetary scale, then in order to avoid repeating history, we ought to prioritize coming to grips with dehumanization. Dehumanization names the deliberate, as well as the mob-frenzied, ideological displacements central to any group’s ability to annihilate another in the name of territory, wealth, ethnicity, religion. Dehumanization is also a necessary factor in the acceptance that millions of people (sometimes including oneself) should spend part or all of their lives in cages.

In the contemporary world, racism is the ordinary means through which dehumanization achieves ideological normality, while, at the same time, the practice of dehumanizing people produces racial categories. Old races die, through extermination or assimilation, and new races come into being. The process is not biological, however, but rather the outcome of fatal encounters that ground contemporary political culture. This culture, in turn, is based in the modern secular state’s dependence on classifica-

tion, combined with militarism as a means through which classification maintains coherence. A sign of militarism's ideological embrace is the fact that all kinds of U.S.-based people believe without pause that, in a general way, "the key to safety is aggression" (Bartov 1996; R. W. Gilmore 2002a). Where classification and militarism collide is in the area of identifying an enemy. "The Japanese are an enemy race" wrote a State Department wonk in 1941, at the height of both Jim Crow and universal military conscription, as prelude to the internment of 120,000 people in concentration camps in the South and the West.

Sadly, even activists committed to antiracist organizing renovate commonsense divisions by objectifying certain kinds of people into a pre-given category that then automatically gets oppressed. What's the alternative? To see how the very capacities we struggle to turn to other purposes *make* races by making some people, and their biological and fictive kin, vulnerable to forces that make premature death likely and in some ways distinctive. The racialization of Muslims in the current era does double duty in both establishing an enemy whose being can be projected through the allegation of unshakable heritage (fundamentally, what the fiction of race is at best) and renewing the racial order of the U.S. polity as normal, even as it changes. Given these practices, it should not be all that surprising that hundreds of thousands of white men are also in prison; while they might be, as Pem Buck poignantly describes such people, a "reserve army of whiteness" (Buck 2001; see also Roediger 2002), I wouldn't count on it—not when the twenty-first century hasn't quite wrapped up what I call the age of human sacrifice. Such men, and their diverse caged brethren, might alternatively be, as Staughton Lynd's Lucasville prisoner activists novelly named themselves, the "convict

race" (Lynd 2004). As ever, solidarity in the present is a precondition for any future less bleak than the past quarter century.

TEN THESES

1. A new kind of state—an antistate state—is being built on prison foundations. The antistate state depends on ideological and rhetorical dismissal of any agency or capacity that "government" might use to guarantee social well-being. Beginning with the premise that social wages in the shape of tax dollars belong to all of us, inasmuch as we produced them, people can organize at some political-geographic levels to take charge of resources and turn them to life-enhancing use.

2. Capitalists are not equally footloose, and the employment of working people's future surplus (what repayment of public debt is) is a political decision. Public sector financiers had a crisis in the 1980s—growing pools of investable cash but shrinking outlets that could only be resolved in the *political* arena. The problem is not, then, debt, but rather the uses to which public borrowing is put.

3. Starting in the 1980s, the federal government reduced its participation in state and local government funding of social programs, thereby passing along to lower-level administrative units the task of making up for federal tax cuts granted to big firms and rich individuals. This practice endures into the early twenty-first century, and scaling back—"devolution"—characterizes economic relations between states and their constituent cities and counties. These rollbacks demand attention to the dynamics of abandonment and the possibility of activism, and demand action to foster greater alliances between currently geographically and politically nonaligned impoverished places.

4. The compensatory implementation of regressive taxes such as sales tax and user fees has helped ensure that as local governments drew down their reserves and then tightened their belts, the poor would have higher relative costs and fewer services than their richer neighbors. As this complicated jumble of fiscal apartheid failed adequately to produce the desired goals, certain kinds of dead-end redevelopment schemes based in fiscalization of land plus tax breaks suggest a new regionalization of production and services, inviting activists to consider ways and means to intervene in decision making.

5. Voters and legislators decided to lock immigrants out of social services, to lock more people into prison for part or all of their lives, and to put a personal lock on opportunities in public sector education, employment, and contracts. This triple-pronged attack on working people demonstrates the potential for identifying linkages between immigrant, labor, and antiprison activism. In particular, if public sector and low-wage unions have made the greatest strides in the past twenty years, then their members are constrained by the growth of prisons. Prison jobs are few next to the plethora of non-cage-based employment possible when public sector investment is maximized for social goods such as schools, parks, museums, and mass transport.

6. In a place where research indicates that other outcomes might have occurred, Mothers ROC built an organization that spurred the founding and growth of even larger organizations. The ability to reach across social and spatial divides came from the Mothers' use of the ideological power of motherhood to challenge the legitimacy of the changing state. This activism, rooted in earlier rounds of antiracist work by both these women and their prior generations, shows how using the familiar opens the

possibility of identification through the crafting of purposeful action by continual revision.

7. Mothers ROC's frontline relation to the state was not that of petitioners for a share of the available social wages, but rather in opposition to the state's form and purpose with respect to the life chances of the mothers' family members and those like them. By thinking through the general details of this antagonism, we can see how other kinds of oppositions become possible. Such imaginative responses then open the way to new solidarities based in recognition of the life-threatening harms that new and old racist structures produce in all kinds of households of all races and ethnicities.

8. The places where prisons are built share many similarities with the places prisoners come from. Rural communities stuck in economies that have languished for more than twenty years have not profited from prisons as expected; rather, they continue to struggle for the same kinds of opportunities and protections that the urban mothers want for their biological and fictive kin. These forgotten places, and their urban counterparts, can be understood to form one political world, abandoned but hardly defeated.

9. Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. Prison expansion is a new iteration of this theme. Prisons and other locally unwanted land uses accelerate the mortality of modestly educated working people of all kinds in urban and rural settings and show how economic and environmental justice are central to antiracism.

10. Power is not a thing but rather a capacity composed of active and changing relationships enabling a person, group, or institution to compel others to do things they would not do on

their own (such as be happy, or pay taxes, or go to war). Ordinarily, activists focus on *taking* power, as though the entire political setup were really a matter of “it” (structure) versus “us” (agency). But if the structure-agency opposition isn’t how things really work, then perhaps politics is more complicated, and therefore open to more hopeful action. People can and do *make* power through, for example, developing capacities in organizations. But that’s not enough, because all an individual organization can do on its own is tweak Armageddon. When the capacities resulting from purposeful action are combined toward ends greater than mission statements or other provisional limits, powerful alignments begin to shake the ground. In other words, *movement* happens.

EPILOGUE

ANOTHER BUS

In 2001, a group of people boarded another bus in South Central Los Angeles, this time bound for Fresno and a conference called Joining Forces: The Fight for Environmental Justice and against Prisons. Fewer rode this time, but their determination was no less fierce. They were headed to the second small conference in California bringing together rural people trying to stop the building of prisons and urban activists trying to stop the production of prisoners. Meeting was not easy, because for quite some time each group imagined that the other, in a general way, was the reason for its struggles. City people presumed everyone in rural towns wanted prisons, and rural activists feared that nobody in urban centers was trying to get at the root causes sending so many people into cages.

The recognition that forged solidarity between unlikely allies from Farmersville and Los Angeles was not spontaneous. However, something like magic seemed to happen. At the conference, activists talked about how their organizations identified prob-