

The Prison Industrial Complex

“For private business prison labor is like a pot of gold. No strikes. No union organizing. No health benefits, unemployment insurance, or workers’ compensation to pay. No language barriers, as in foreign countries. New leviathan prisons are being built on thousands of eerie acres of factories inside the walls. Prisoners do data entry for Chevron, make telephone reservations for TWA, raise hogs, shovel manure, and make circuit boards, limousines, waterbeds, and lingerie for Victoria’s Secret, all at a fraction of the cost of ‘free labor.’”

—Linda Evans and Eve Goldberg¹⁰⁰

The exploitation of prison labor by private corporations is one aspect among an array of relationships linking corporations, government, correctional communities, and media. These relationships constitute what we now call a prison industrial complex. The term “prison industrial complex” was introduced by activists and scholars to contest prevailing beliefs that increased levels of crime were the root cause of mounting prison populations. Instead, they argued, prison construction and the attendant drive to fill these new structures with human bodies have been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit. Social historian Mike Davis first used the term in relation to California’s penal system, which, he observed, already had begun in the 1990s to rival

agribusiness and land development as a major economic and political force.¹⁰¹

To understand the social meaning of the prison today within the context of a developing prison industrial complex means that punishment has to be conceptually severed from its seemingly indissoluble link with crime. How often do we encounter the phrase “crime and punishment”? To what extent has the perpetual repetition of the phrase “crime and punishment” in literature, as titles of television shows, both fictional and documentary, and in everyday conversation made it extremely difficult to think about punishment beyond this connection? How have these portrayals located the prison in a causal relation to crime as a natural, necessary, and permanent effect, thus inhibiting serious debates about the viability of the prison today?

The notion of a prison industrial complex insists on understandings of the punishment process that take into account economic and political structures and ideologies, rather than focusing myopically on individual criminal conduct and efforts to “curb crime.” The fact, for example, that many corporations with global markets now rely on prisons as an important source of profit helps us to understand the rapidity with which prisons began to proliferate precisely at a time when official studies indicated that the crime rate was falling. The notion of a prison industrial complex also insists that the racialization of prison populations—and this is not only true of the United States, but of Europe, South America, and Australia as well—is not an incidental feature. Thus, critiques of the prison industrial complex undertaken by abolitionist activists and scholars are very much linked to critiques of the global persistence of racism. Antiracist and other social justice movements are incomplete with attention to the politics of imprisonment. At the 2001

United Nations World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa, a few individuals active in abolitionist campaigns in various countries attempted to bring this connection to the attention of the international community. They pointed out that the expanding system of prisons throughout the world both relies on and further promotes structures of racism even though its proponents may adamantly maintain that it is race-neutral.

Some critics of the prison system have employed the term "correctional industrial complex" and others "penal industrial complex." These and the term I have chosen to underscore, "prison industrial complex," all clearly resonate with the historical concept of a "military industrial complex," whose usage dates back to the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower. It may seem ironic that a Republican president was the first to underscore a growing and dangerous alliance between the military and corporate worlds, but it clearly seemed right to antiwar activists and scholars during the era of the Vietnam War. Today, some activists mistakenly argue that the prison industrial complex is moving into the space vacated by the military industrial complex. However, the so-called War on Terrorism initiated by the Bush administration in the aftermath of the 2002 attacks on the World Trade Center has made it very clear that the links between the military, corporations, and government are growing stronger, not weaker.

A more cogent way to define the relationship between the military industrial complex and the prison industrial complex would be to call it symbiotic. These two complexes mutually support and promote each other and, in fact, often share technologies. During the early nineties, when defense production was temporarily on the decline, this connection between the military industry and the criminal jus-

tice/punishment industry was acknowledged in a 1994 *Wall Street Journal* article entitled "Making Crime Pay: The Cold War of the '90s":

Parts of the defense establishment are cashing in, too, sensing a logical new line of business to help them offset military cutbacks. Westinghouse Electric Corp., Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Co, GDE Systems (a division of the old General Dynamics) and Alliant Techsystems Inc., for instance, are pushing crime fighting equipment and have created special divisions to retool their defense technology for America's streets.¹⁰²

The article describes a conference sponsored by the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the Justice Department, entitled "Law Enforcement Technology in the 21st Century." The secretary of defense was a major presenter at this conference, which explored topics such as, "The role of the defense industry, particularly for dual use and conversion."

Hot topics: defense-industry technology that could lower the level of violence involved in crime fighting. Sandia National Laboratories, for instance, is experimenting with a dense foam that can be sprayed at suspects, temporarily blinding and deafening them under breathable bubbles. Stinger Corporation is working on "smart guns," which will fire only for the owner, and retractable spiked barrier strips to unfurl in front of fleeing vehicles. Westinghouse is promoting the "smart car," in which minicomputers could be linked up with big

mainframes at the police department, allowing for speedy booking of prisoners, as well as quick exchanges of information . . .¹⁰³

But an analysis of the relationship between the military and prison industrial complex is not only concerned with the transference of technologies from the military to the law enforcement industry. What may be even more important to our discussion is the extent to which both share important structural features. Both systems generate huge profits from processes of social destruction. Precisely that which is advantageous to those corporations, elected officials, and government agents who have obvious stakes in the expansion of these systems begets grief and devastation for poor and racially dominated communities in the United States and throughout the world. The transformation of imprisoned bodies—and they are in their majority bodies of color—into sources of profit who consume and also often produce all kinds of commodities, devours public funds, which might otherwise be available for social programs such as education, housing, childcare, recreation, and drug programs.

Punishment no longer constitutes a marginal area of the larger economy. Corporations producing all kinds of goods—from buildings to electronic devices and hygiene products—and providing all kinds of services—from meals to therapy and healthcare—are now directly involved in the punishment business. That is to say, companies that one would assume are far removed from the work of state punishment have developed major stakes in the perpetuation of a prison system whose historical obsolescence is therefore that much more difficult to recognize. It was during the decade of the 1980s that corporate ties to the punishment system became

more extensive and entrenched than ever before. But throughout the history of the U.S. prison system, prisoners have always constituted a potential source of profit. For example, they have served as valuable subjects in medical research, thus positioning the prison as a major link between universities and corporations.

During the post-World War II period, for example, medical experimentation on captive populations helped to hasten the development of the pharmaceutical industry. According to Allen Hornblum,

[T]he number of American medical research programs that relied on prisoners as subjects rapidly expanded as zealous doctors and researchers, grant-making universities, and a burgeoning pharmaceutical industry raced for greater market share. Society's marginal people were, as they had always been, the grist for the medical-pharmaceutical mill, and prison inmates in particular would become the raw materials for postwar profit-making and academic advancement.¹⁰⁴

Hornblum's book, *Acres of Skin: Human Experiments at Holmesburg Prison*, highlights the career of research dermatologist Albert Kligman, who was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Kligman, the "Father of Retin-A,"¹⁰⁵ conducted hundreds of experiments on the men housed in Holmesburg Prison and, in the process, trained many researchers to use what were later recognized as unethical research methods.

When Dr. Kligman entered the aging prison he was awed by the potential it held for his research. In

1966, he recalled in a newspaper interview: "All I saw before me were acres of skin. It was like a farmer seeing a fertile field for the first time." The hundreds of inmates walking aimlessly before him represented a unique opportunity for unlimited and undisturbed medical research. He described it in this interview as "an anthropoid colony, mainly healthy" under perfect control conditions.¹⁰⁶

By the time the experimentation program was shut down in 1974 and new federal regulations prohibited the use of prisoners as subjects for academic and corporate research, numerous cosmetics and skin creams had already been tested. Some of them had caused great harm to these subjects and could not be marketed in their original form. Johnson and Johnson, Ortho Pharmaceutical, and Dow Chemical are only a few of the corporations that reaped great material benefits from these experiments.

The potential impact of corporate involvement in punishment could have been glimpsed in the Kligman experiments at Holmesburg Prison as early as the 1950s and 1960s. However, it was not until the 1980s and the increasing globalization of capitalism that the massive surge of capital into the punishment economy began. The deindustrialization processes that resulted in plant shutdowns throughout the country created a huge pool of vulnerable human beings, a pool of people for whom no further jobs were available. This also brought more people into contact with social services, such as AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and other welfare agencies. It is not accidental that "welfare, as we have known it"—to use former President Clinton's words—came under severe attack and was eventually dismantled. This was known as "welfare reform." At the same

time, we experienced the privatization and corporatization of services that were previously run by government. The most obvious example of this privatization process was the transformation of government-run hospitals and health services into a gigantic complex of what are euphemistically called health maintenance organizations. In this sense we might also speak of a "medical industrial complex."¹⁰⁷ In fact, there is a connection between one of the first private hospital companies, Hospital Corporation of America—known today as HCA—and Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). Board members of HCA, which today has two hundred hospitals and seventy outpatient surgery centers in twenty-four states, England, and Switzerland helped to start Correctional Corporations of America in 1983.

In the context of an economy that was driven by an unprecedented pursuit of profit, no matter what the human cost, and the concomitant dismantling of the welfare state, poor people's abilities to survive became increasingly constrained by the looming presence of the prison. The massive prison-building project that began in the 1980s created the means of concentrating and managing what the capitalist system had implicitly declared to be a human surplus. In the meantime, elected officials and the dominant media justified the new draconian sentencing practices, sending more and more people to prison in the frenzied drive to build more and more prisons by arguing that this was the only way to make our communities safe from murderers, rapists, and robbers.

The media, especially television . . . have a vested interest in perpetuating the notion that crime is out of control. With new competition from cable networks and 24-hour news channels, TV news and programs about crime . . . have proliferated madly.

According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, crime coverage was the number-one topic on the nightly news over the past decade. From 1990 to 1998, homicide rates dropped by half nationwide, but homicide stories on the three major networks rose almost fourfold.¹⁰⁸

During the same period when crime rates were declining, prison populations soared. According to a recent report by the U.S. Department of Justice, at the end of the year 2001, there were 2,100,146 people incarcerated in the United States.¹⁰⁹ The terms and numbers as they appear in this government report require some preliminary discussion. I hesitate to make unmediated use of such statistical evidence because it can discourage the very critical thinking that ought to be elicited by an understanding of the prison industrial complex. It is precisely the abstraction of numbers that plays such a central role in criminalizing those who experience the misfortune of imprisonment. There are many different kinds of men and women in the prisons, jails, and INS and military detention centers, whose lives are erased by the Bureau of Justice Statistics figures. The numbers recognize no distinction between the woman who is imprisoned on drug conspiracy and the man who is in prison for killing his wife, a man who might actually end up spending less time behind bars than the woman.

With this observation in mind, the statistical breakdown is as follows: There were 1,324,465 people in "federal and state prisons," 15,852 in "territorial prisons," 631,240 in "local jails," 8,761 in "Immigration and Naturalization Service detention facilities," 2,436 in "military facilities," 1,912 in "jails in Indian country," and 108,965 in "juvenile facilities." In the ten years between 1990 and 2000, 351 new places of

confinement were opened by states and more than 528,000 beds were added, amounting to 1,320 state facilities, representing an eighty-one percent increase. Moreover, there are currently 84 federal facilities and 264 private facilities.¹¹⁰

The government reports, from which these figures are taken, emphasize the extent to which incarceration rates are slowing down. The Bureau of Justice Statistics report entitled "Prisoners in 2001" introduces the study by indicating that "the Nation's prison population grew 1.1%, which was less than the average annual growth of 3.8% since yearend 1995. During 2001 the prison population rose at the lowest rate since 1972 and had the smallest absolute increase since 1979."¹¹¹ However small the increase, these numbers themselves would defy the imagination were they not so neatly classified and rationally organized. To place these figures in historical perspective, try to imagine how people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—and indeed for most of the twentieth century—who welcomed the new, and then quite extraordinary, system of punishment called the prison might have responded had they known that such a colossal number of lives would be eventually claimed permanently by this institution. I have already shared my own memories of a time three decades ago when the prison population was comprised of a tenth of the present numbers.

The prison industrial complex is fueled by privatization patterns that, it will be recalled, have also drastically transformed health care, education, and other areas of our lives. Moreover, the prison privatization trends—both the increasing presence of corporations in the prison economy and the establishment of private prisons—are reminiscent of the historical efforts to create a profitable punishment industry based on the new supply of "free" black male laborers in the

aftermath of the Civil War. Steven Donziger, drawing from the work of Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie, argues:

[C]ompanies that service the criminal justice system need sufficient quantities of raw materials to guarantee long-term growth . . . In the criminal justice field, *the raw material is prisoners*, and industry will do what is necessary to guarantee a steady supply. For the supply of prisoners to grow, criminal justice policies must ensure a sufficient number of incarcerated Americans regardless of whether crime is rising or the incarceration is necessary.¹¹²

In the post-Civil War era, emancipated black men and women comprised an enormous reservoir of labor at a time when planters—and industrialists—could no longer rely on slavery, as they had done in the past. This labor became increasingly available for use by private agents precisely through the convict lease system, discussed earlier, and related systems such as debt peonage. Recall that in the aftermath of slavery, the penal population drastically shifted, so that in the South it rapidly became disproportionately black. This transition set the historical stage for the easy acceptance of disproportionately black prison populations today. According to 2002 Bureau of Justice Statistics, African-Americans as a whole now represent the majority of county, state, and federal prisoners, with a total of 803,400 black inmates—118,600 more than the total number of white inmates. If we include Latinos, we must add another 283,000 bodies of color.¹¹³

As the rate of increase in the incarceration of black prisoners continues to rise, the racial composition of the incarcerated population is approaching the proportion of black

prisoners to white during the era of the southern convict lease and county chain gang systems. Whether this human raw material is used for purposes of labor or for the consumption of commodities provided by a rising number of corporations directly implicated in the prison industrial complex, it is clear that black bodies are considered dispensable within the “free world” but as a major source of profit in the prison world.

The privatization characteristic of convict leasing has its contemporary parallels, as companies such as CCA and Wackenhut literally run prisons for profit. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the numerous private prison companies operating in the United States own and operate facilities that hold 91,828 federal and state prisoners.¹¹⁴ Texas and Oklahoma can claim the largest number of people in private prisons. But New Mexico imprisons forty-four percent of its prison population in private facilities, and states such as Montana, Alaska, and Wyoming turned over more than twenty-five percent of their prison population to private companies.¹¹⁵ In arrangements reminiscent of the convict lease system, federal, state, and county governments pay private companies a fee for each inmate, which means that private companies have a stake in retaining prisoners as long as possible, and in keeping their facilities filled.

In the state of Texas, there are thirty-four government-owned, privately run jails in which approximately 5,500 out-of-state prisoners are incarcerated. These facilities generate about eighty million dollars annually for Texas.¹¹⁶ One dramatic example involves Capital Corrections Resources, Inc., which operates the Brazoria Detention Center, a government-owned facility located forty miles outside of Houston, Texas. Brazoria came to public attention in August 1997 when a videotape broadcast on national television showed prisoners

there being bitten by police dogs and viciously kicked in the groin and stepped on by guards. The inmates, forced to crawl on the floor, also were being shocked with stun guns, while guards—who referred to one black prisoner as “boy”—shouted, “Crawl faster!”¹¹⁷ In the aftermath of the release of this tape, the state of Missouri withdrew the 415 prisoners it housed in the Brazoria Detention Center. Although few references were made in the accompanying news reports to the indisputably racialized character of the guards’ outrageous behavior, in the section of the Brazoria videotape that was shown on national television, black male prisoners were seen to be the primary targets of the guards’ attacks.

The thirty-two-minute Brazoria tape, represented by the jail authorities as a training tape—allegedly showing corrections officers “what *not* to do”—was made in September 1996, after a guard allegedly smelled marijuana in the jail. Important evidence of the abuse that takes place behind the walls and gates of private prisons, it came to light in connection with a lawsuit filed by one of the prisoners who was bitten by a dog; he was suing Brazoria County for a hundred thousand dollars in damage. The Brazoria jailors’ actions—which, according to prisoners there, were far worse than depicted on the tape—are indicative not only of the ways in which many prisoners throughout the country are treated, but of generalized attitudes toward people locked up in jails and prisons.

According to an Associated Press news story, the Missouri inmates, once they had been transferred back to their home state from Brazoria, told the *Kansas City Star*:

[G]uards at the Brazoria County Detention Center used cattle prods and other forms of intimidation to win respect and force prisoners to say, “I love Texas.” “What you saw on tape wasn’t a fraction of

what happened that day,” said inmate Louis Watkins, referring to the videotaped cellblock raid of September 18, 1996. “I’ve never seen anything like that in the movies.”¹¹⁸

In 2000 there were twenty-six for-profit prison corporations in the United States that operated approximately 150 facilities in twenty-eight states.¹¹⁹ The largest of these companies, CCA and Wackenhut, control 76.4 percent of the private prison market globally. CCA is headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, and until 2001, its largest shareholder was the multinational headquartered in Paris, Sodexho Alliance, which, through its U.S. subsidiary, Sodexho Marriott, provides catering services at nine hundred U.S. colleges and universities. The Prison Moratorium Project, an organization promoting youth activism, led a protest campaign against Sodexho Marriott on campuses throughout the country. Among the campuses that dropped Sodexho were SUNY Albany, Goucher College, and James Madison University. Students had staged sit-ins and organized rallies on more than fifty campuses before Sodexho divested its holdings in CCA in fall 2001.¹²⁰

Though private prisons represent a fairly small proportion of prisons in the United States, the privatization model is quickly becoming the primary mode of organizing punishment in many other countries.¹²¹ These companies have tried to take advantage of the expanding population of women prisoners, both in the United States and globally. In 1996, the first private women’s prison was established by CCA in Melbourne, Australia. The government of Victoria “adopted the U.S. model of privatization in which financing, design, construction, and ownership of the prison are awarded to one contractor and the government pays them back for

construction over twenty years. This means that it is virtually impossible to remove the contractor because that contractor owns the prison."¹²²

As a direct consequence of the campaign organized by prison activist groups in Melbourne, Victoria withdrew the contract from CCA in 2001. However, a significant portion of Australia's prison system remains privatized. In the fall of 2002, the government of Queensland renewed Wackenhut's contract to run a 710-bed prison in Brisbane. The value of the five-year contract is \$66.5 million. In addition to the facility in Brisbane, Wackenhut manages eleven other prisons in Australia and New Zealand and furnishes health care services in eleven public prisons in the state of Victoria.¹²³ In the press release announcing this contract renewal, Wackenhut describes its global business activities as follows:

WCC, a world leader in the privatized corrections industry, has contracts/awards to manage 60 correctional/detention facilities in North America, Europe, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand with a total of approximately 43,000 beds. WCC also provides prisoner transportation services, electronic monitoring for home detainees, correctional health care and mental health services. WCC offers government agencies a turnkey approach to the development of new correctional and mental health institutions that includes design, construction, financing, and operations.¹²⁴

But to understand the reach of the prison industrial complex, it is not enough to evoke the looming power of the private prison business. By definition, those companies court the state within and outside the United States for the pur-

pose of obtaining prison contracts, bringing punishment and profit together in a menacing embrace. Still, this is only the most visible dimension of the prison industrial complex, and it should not lead us to ignore the more comprehensive corporatization that is a feature of contemporary punishment. As compared to earlier historical eras, the prison economy is no longer a small, identifiable, and containable set of markets. Many corporations, whose names are highly recognizable by "free world" consumers, have discovered new possibilities for expansion by selling their products to correctional facilities.

In the 1990s, the variety of corporations making money from prisons is truly dizzying, ranging from Dial Soap to Famous Amos cookies, from AT&T to health-care providers . . . In 1995 Dial Soap sold \$100,000 worth of its product to the New York City jail system alone . . . When VitaPro Foods of Montreal, Canada, contracted to supply inmates in the state of Texas with its soy-based meat substitute, the contract was worth \$34 million a year.¹²⁵

Among the many businesses that advertise in the yellow pages on the corrections.com Web site are Archer Daniel Midlands, Nestle Food Service, Ace Hardware, Polaroid, Hewlett-Packard, RJ Reynolds, and the communications companies Sprint, AT&T, Verizon, and Ameritech. One conclusion to be drawn here is that even if private prison companies were prohibited—an unlikely prospect, indeed—the prison industrial complex and its many strategies for profit would remain relatively intact. Private prisons are direct sources of profit for the companies that run them, but public prisons have become so thoroughly saturated with the

profit-producing products and services of private corporations that the distinction is not as meaningful as one might suspect. Campaigns against privatization that represent public prisons as an adequate alternative to private prisons can be misleading. It is true that a major reason for the profitability of private prisons consists in the nonunion labor they employ, and this important distinction should be highlighted. Nevertheless, public prisons are now equally tied to the corporate economy and constitute an ever-growing source of capitalist profit.

Extensive corporate investment in prisons has significantly raised the stakes for antiprison work. It means that serious antiprison activists must be willing to look much further in their analyses and organizing strategies than the actual institution of the prison. Prison reform rhetoric, which has always undergirded dominant critiques of the prison system, will not work in this new situation. If reform approaches have tended to bolster the permanence of the prison in the past, they certainly will not suffice to challenge the economic and political relationships that sustain the prison today. This means that in the era of the prison industrial complex, activists must pose hard questions about the relationship between global capitalism and the spread of U.S.-style prisons throughout the world.

The global prison economy is indisputably dominated by the United States. This economy not only consists of the products, services, and ideas that are directly marketed to other governments, but it also exercises an enormous influence over the development of the style of state punishment throughout the world. One dramatic example can be seen in the opposition to Turkey's attempts to transform its prisons. In October 2000, prisoners in Turkey, many of whom are associated with left political movements, began a "death

fast" as a way of dramatizing their opposition to the Turkish government's decision to introduce "F-Type," or U.S.-style, prisons. Compared to the traditional dormitory-style facilities, these new prisons consist of one- to three-person cells, which are opposed by the prisoners because of the regimes of isolation they facilitate and because mistreatment and torture are far more likely in isolation. In December 2000, thirty prisoners were killed in clashes with security forces in twenty prisons.¹²⁶ As of September 2002, more than fifty prisoners have died of hunger, including two women, Gulnihal Yilmaz and Birsen Hosver, who were among the most recent prisoners to succumb to the death fast.

"F-Type" prisons in Turkey were inspired by the recent emergence of the super-maximum security—or supermax—prison in the United States, which presumes to control otherwise unmanageable prisoners by holding them in permanent solitary confinement and by subjecting them to varying degrees of sensory deprivation. In its *2002 World Report*, Human Rights Watch paid particular attention to the concerns raised by

the spread of ultra-modern "super-maximum" security prisons. Originally prevalent in the United States . . . the supermax model was increasingly followed in other countries. Prisoners confined in such facilities spent an average of twenty-three hours a day in their cells, enduring extreme social isolation, enforced idleness, and extraordinarily limited recreational and educational opportunities. While prison authorities defended the use of super-maximum security facilities by asserting that they held only the most dangerous, disruptive, or escape-prone inmates, few safeguards existed to prevent

other prisoners from being arbitrarily or discriminatorily transferred to such facilities. In Australia, the inspector of custodial services found that some prisoners were being held indefinitely in special high security units without knowing why or when their isolation would end.¹²⁷

Among the many countries that have recently constructed super-maximum security prisons is South Africa. Construction was completed on the supermax prison in Kokstad, KwaZulu-Natal in August 2000, but it was not officially opened until May 2002. Ironically, the reason given for the delay was the competition for water between the prison and a new low-cost housing development.¹²⁸ I am highlighting South Africa's embrace of the supermax because of the apparent ease with which this most repressive version of the U.S. prison has established itself in a country that has just recently initiated the project of building a democratic, non-racist, and nonsexist society. South Africa was the first country in the world to create constitutional assurances for gay rights, and it immediately abolished the death penalty after the dismantling of apartheid. Nevertheless, following the example of the United States, the South African prison system is expanding and becoming more oppressive. The U.S. private prison company Wackenhut has secured several contracts with the South African government and by constructing private prisons further legitimizes the trend toward privatization (which affects the availability of basic services from utilities to education) in the economy as a whole.

South Africa's participation in the prison industrial complex constitutes a major impediment to the creation of a democratic society. In the United States, we have already felt the insidious and socially damaging effects of prison

expansion. The dominant social expectation is that young black, Latino, Native American, and Southeast Asian men—and increasingly women as well—will move naturally from the free world into prison, where, it is assumed, they belong. Despite the important gains of antiracist social movements over the last half century, racism hides from view within institutional structures, and its most reliable refuge is the prison system.

The racist arrests of vast numbers of immigrants from Middle Eastern countries in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent withholding of information about the names of numbers of people held in INS detention centers, some of which are owned and operated by private corporations, do not augur a democratic future. The uncontested detention of increasing numbers of undocumented immigrants from the global South has been aided considerably by the structures and ideologies associated with the prison industrial complex. We can hardly move in the direction of justice and equality in the twenty-first century if we are unwilling to recognize the enormous role played by this system in extending the power of racism and xenophobia.

Radical opposition to the global prison industrial complex sees the antiprison movement as a vital means of expanding the terrain on which the quest for democracy will unfold. This movement is thus antiracist, anticapitalist, antisexist, and antihomophobic. It calls for the abolition of the prison as the dominant mode of punishment but at the same time recognizes the need for genuine solidarity with the millions of men, women, and children who are behind bars. A major challenge of this movement is to do the work that will create more humane, habitable environments for people in prison without bolstering the permanence of the prison system. How, then, do we accomplish this balancing

act of passionately attending to the needs of prisoners—calling for less violent conditions, an end to state sexual assault, improved physical and mental health care, greater access to drug programs, better educational work opportunities, unionization of prison labor, more connections with families and communities, shorter or alternative sentencing—and at the same time call for alternatives to sentencing altogether, no more prison construction, and abolitionist strategies that question the place of the prison in our future?

Abolitionist Alternatives

“Forget about reform; it’s time to talk about abolishing jails and prisons in American society . . . Still—abolition? Where do you put the prisoners? The ‘criminals’? What’s the alternative? First, having no alternative at all would create less crime than the present criminal training centers do. Second, the only full alternative is building the kind of society that does not need prisons: A decent redistribution of power and income so as to put out the hidden fire of burning envy that now flames up in crimes of property—both burglary by the poor and embezzlement by the affluent. And a decent sense of community that can support, reintegrate and truly rehabilitate those who suddenly become filled with fury or despair, and that can face them not as objects—‘criminals’—but as people who have committed illegal acts, as have almost all of us.”

—Arthur Waskow, *Institute for Policy Studies*¹²⁹

If jails and prisons are to be abolished, then what will replace them? This is the puzzling question that often interrupts further consideration of the prospects for abolition. Why should it be so difficult to imagine alternatives to our current system of incarceration? There are a number of reasons why we tend to balk at the idea that it may be possible to eventually create an entirely different—and perhaps more egalitarian—system of justice. First of all, we think of the