

## Transatlantic Visions: Resisting the Globalization of Mass Incarceration

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I got in an accident and I wasn't able to work. I was in a hospital for three months and then I was in a therapy center for another month and a half. So I went through a lot of hassle, I had applied for disability, and I was on my first appeal against rejection of that. I guess it was 6 months after the accident that I was granted a welfare grant. I mean I appreciated it and the food stamps, but I had a \$500 car, a \$500 apartment. So I lost my car, was about to get kicked out my apartment. They were real nice because they knew I'd been in an accident, but I just didn't have any income. That's when it came up that a friend of mine was having problems too because she'd just had a baby and naturally the guy was no good and you know that story. She came to me, she said we could make these couple of runs and be alright. That was how I ended up here.<sup>1</sup>

**D**ENISHA'S STORY IS TYPICAL OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WHO CROWD jails and prisons in the U.S. as a result of a "War on Drugs" that in reality is a war on the poor, on communities of color, and on women who rely on welfare to survive. Yet Denisha is not incarcerated in the U.S. This interview took place in Winchester, a small scenic town and former capital of England, where Denisha is detained "at her majesty's pleasure" in the women's annex of a closed (medium security) prison. Denisha was arrested at Heathrow airport and sentenced to five years for importing cocaine from Jamaica. She is caught up in a dramatic increase in women's imprisonment in England and Wales, which has more than doubled since the early 1990s. This article will focus on the emergence of, and resistance to, the prison-industrial complex in Britain. By mapping the genealogies of resistance that have emerged out of the anti-racist, feminist Left in Britain, I hope to identify possibilities for transatlantic coalition-building and prison abolitionism. The article draws on interviews that I carried out with activists during the years 1999 to 2000, but there are undoubtedly pockets of resistance,

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which have been overlooked. Hopefully these absences will become more visible as global connections are accepted as an essential part of activism against the prison-industrial complex.

### Mapping the PIC in Britain

The relatively small size of European prison populations and the accompanying low official crime rates are often used by advocates of decarceration in the U.S. to demonstrate that a viable alternative to mass incarceration exists and that Europe could be used as a model. However, although rates of incarceration in Europe are lower than in the U.S., we should pause to examine local realities before advocating a European-style penal system. Britain is the most eager incarcerator in Europe (barring Portugal), with an incarceration rate in England and Wales of approximately 128 per 100,000.<sup>2</sup> A dramatic increase in the use of prison during the last decade has led to "the largest prison building program since the middle of the 19th century" (Morgan, 1999: 110). As in the U.S., people of color are dealt with more harshly at every level of the criminal justice system. In 1998, 24% of women and 18% of men in prison were "black" (using the British definition for "people of color").<sup>3</sup> African Caribbean men and women, who make up less than two percent of the free population, are dramatically overrepresented inside. British-born African Caribbean women, at 12% of women prisoners, are imprisoned at a greater rate than men, who make up 10% of men in prison (NACRO, 2000). South Asian, Chinese, and "Other" women and men make up a further five percent and 3.7% respectively. In addition, "foreign nationals," including Caribbean, African, Latin American, and European women, make up 14% of women and seven percent of men in prison. Although prison industries are not as developed as in the U.S., prisoners carry out the maintenance functions of the prison such as cleaning, cooking, and groundwork, as well as assembling electronic components, making clothes, and other contract work for as little as £7.50 (\$12) per week. British prisons vary from the medieval to the latest in "new generation" technology. Increasingly, steel and glass, video surveillance, and "architectural efficiency" are replacing brick, cement, and the traditional guard and key chain as a private prison-building boom transforms the face, but not the substance, of incarceration.

Britain's love affair with incarceration can be traced to the legacy of the Thatcher years and the special relationship developed between the Iron Lady and Ronald Reagan. During 14 years of Thatcherism, a blend of nationalistic populism, free-marketeteering, and trenchant attacks on organized Labour and Left activism, "law and order" became a key weapon in the right-wing arsenal. Two years after Thatcher's first election in 1979, urban uprisings swept through Britain. Middle England watched their TV screens in terror as African Caribbean and South Asian young people from London to Liverpool waged war with the police and smashed up neighborhoods that offered them few opportunities for education

or employment. The mainstream media and politicians framed these events as “rioting and looting” by an undisciplined black underclass and black Member of Parliament Bernie Grant was pilloried in the press for stating that he could understand the frustration and anger that lead to the uprisings. Although the official Scarman Report into the uprisings recommended education, entrepreneurship, and community policing as methods of integrating alienated black youth and avoiding future uprisings (Scarman, 1982), Thatcher’s government pursued a more populist agenda, promising and delivering stronger policing and harsher punishments for “street criminals.” Thatcher’s two subsequent successful election campaigns therefore played on the fear of the “alien within,” the unruly and disloyal black colonial subjects who had migrated from the colonies to the metropole. Disciplining this alien presence was presented as an unpleasant task that Labour was unable or unwilling to take on. More subtle than the Conservative slogan, “If you want a nigger for a neighbor, vote Labour”<sup>4</sup> or Enoch Powell’s claim that rivers of blood would flow if black people were not “repatriated,” Thatcher’s coded messages about crime and law and order nevertheless effectively deployed anti-immigrant hostilities and the racialization of crime to woo white working-class and lower-middle-class voters. In placing nationalistic and racist sentiments at the center of the political debate, the Conservative Party was able to portray itself as the party of the average (white) voter, despite a profoundly anti-working class agenda that included dismantling the national health service, social programs, and public housing, gutting the unions, and cutting back welfare. This gradual erosion of the welfare state would in turn contribute to social dislocation that would make survival crimes a viable risk for increasing numbers of women and men.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Emergence of Corporate-State Punishment**

The emergence and maintenance of a prison-industrial complex relies on three factors. The first is a “common sense” connection between crime and punishment, so that other connections — between criminalization, poverty, and social justice or between violence and healing — are seen as peripheral to solving the problems of victimization and lawbreaking. Second is the racialization of crime, so that high rates of incarceration can be presented as a normal reaction to “criminal” black, indigenous, immigrant, or other minority populations. Third is the symbiotic relationship between state correctional institutions, politicians, and the corporate sector (Davis, 1998; Goldberg and Evans, 1998). Although Thatcherism had embedded the ideological connections between race and crime in the public consciousness by the early 1980s, the relationship between prison, corporations, and the state had yet to emerge.

This relationship solidified during the 1980s, when Home Secretary Kenneth Clarke, a fervent advocate of privatization, undertook the reform of the prison system. Before this time, there was opposition to prison privatization on both sides

of the House of Commons. Politicians tended to view the denial of freedom as too serious an undertaking to be entrusted to private interests and the vagaries of the profit motive. During the 1980s, however, U.S.-based prison corporations aggressively promoted the benefits of privatization in Britain using sophisticated marketing tactics to woo politicians. Both Labour and Conservative politicians traveled to the U.S. for tours of flagship private prisons where the new steel and glass buildings and latest technological advances in surveillance appeared to offer a striking advance over Britain's decaying penal estate. The glossy rhetoric of the "new corrections," where prisoners were called "residents," prison guards "supervisors," and cells "rooms," was favorably compared to the brutal and dehumanizing prison culture in Britain that had long proved resistant to reform. As Sir Edward Gardner, Chair of the all-party penal affairs group commented after a visit to the U.S. in 1986, "We thought it was stunning. These places didn't feel like prisons and didn't smell like prisons. There was nothing we could find to criticize" (Young, 1987: 3).

In 1987, the Home Affairs Select Committee visited four adult and juvenile jails run by the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and the Radio Corporation of America. Prison activists in the U.S. who were highlighting examples of abuses of human rights and lack of accountability in CCA-operated prisons were not invited to meet with the fact-finding committee. The Select Committee subsequently recommended that corporations should be invited to bid for contracts to build and manage custodial institutions, initially as an experiment. A key to the recommendation was that privatization would *dramatically accelerate* the prison-building program, which was hindered by lack of public funds (Speller, 1996: 5). Gradually, key British politicians and administrators were won over to the possibilities for cost cutting, modernization, and prison expansion offered by the corporate agenda. Privatization was presented as a panacea to the problems facing the Prison Service: overcrowding, old buildings, high annual costs, resistance to reform, and a rigid prison guard culture reinforced by the powerful Prison Officers Association.

Between 1991 and 1994, the mutually profitable relationship between conservative politicians and the prison industry culminated in a series of acts that allowed for corporations to design, construct, manage, and finance new prisons and to bid to operate existing prisons.<sup>6</sup> By 1997, Britain had become a profitable location for transnational prison companies, producing revenues of over £95 million for the five leading private incarcerators, Premier Prison Services (a joint venture of Wackenhut and Sodexho), Wackenhut (U.K.) Ltd., UK Detention Services (a joint venture of Corrections Corporation of America and Sodexho), Securicor, and Group 4 (Prison Privatisation Report International, 1998a). As private corporations began to build and operate prisons, the government was relieved of the immediate consequences of prison expansion. The Prison Service could commission the construction of new prisons without being restricted by annual capital

budgets. The cost of the new construction would be paid by private corporations, in return for multiyear contracts based on the numbers of prisoners warehoused. Privatization therefore removed financial barriers to the prison-building boom and masked the long-term costs of increasing dependence on incarceration.

### **New Labour, New Prisons**

Before the 1997 elections, New Labour had opposed prison privatization, arguing that it was “morally unacceptable for the private sector to undertake the incarceration of those whom the state has decided need to be imprisoned”<sup>7</sup> and promising to return privately run prisons to the public sector. A month after the election, however, Home Secretary Jack Straw renewed a private contract for HMP Blakenhurst and agreed to two new DCMF (Design, Construct, Manage, and Finance) prisons. Within a year of the election, the U-turn was complete. Straw announced that existing prisons would return to the public sector only if they could outbid their private competitors and that new prisons in England and Wales would be privately built and run (Prison Privatisation Report International, 1998b).

The corporate strategy of keeping unions out of the new prisons, wages low, and hours long, combined with the use of new technology to reduce staffing ratios, positioned the private sector as *the* lowest cost incarcerator. Caught between limits to public spending and a growing prison population, New Labour faced two options: decarcerate or privatize. Despite an election promise to be “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime,” the pursuit of populist politics ensured that the government would continue to deploy prison rather than tackle deep-rooted social problems, including drug use, racism, and the feminization of poverty. Only by continuing with the private-sector financed prison boom could New Labour position itself as being as “tough on crime,” and as willing to incarcerate, as the Conservatives. Britain therefore entered an unprecedented period of bipartisan support for the corporate prison experiment.

### **The Prison Boom of the 1990s**

Although Conservative political rhetoric on crime during the 1980s led to an upward trend in imprisonment, Home Office officials in the late 1980s began to challenge the high rates of incarceration, arguing that prison was an expensive and ineffective way of dealing with crime. Indeed, a 1988 policy document that promoted home detention, curfews, and tougher community sanctions as an alternative to incarceration had by the early 1990s created a downward trend in imprisonment (Home Office, 1998). This approach, which criminologist Pat Carlen (1998) calls “transcerceralism,” fails to challenge the logic of punishment as a response to social problems. Instead, it transforms homes into “outposts of the prison estate” and forces women to monitor their husbands and sons on behalf of the state. In the absence of a wider abolitionist framework, the Home Office’s

attempt to move away from incarceration failed as the media decried the new “soft” approach and called for more punitive measures. In this context, the most influential pro-prison Home Secretary in recent times was appointed. Michael Howard’s (in)famous “Prison Works” speech at the Conservative Party conference in 1993 created the ideological framework for a turn-of-the-century prison boom. Prison, Howard argued, “ensures that we are protected from murderers, muggers, and rapists — and it will make many who are tempted to commit crimes think twice” (*Ibid.*: 2). The language of crime Howard deployed was racialized, from the myth of the black rapist to the urban folk devil of the black mugger (Hall et al., 1978). In addition to more cells, Howard demanded an “austere” prison environment with little to distract from the business of punishing the undisciplined bodies of black and working-class women and men.

To achieve this carceral expansion, ideological and practical borrowings from the U.S. were deployed. U.S.-style legislation was introduced to ensure that the judiciary handed down sufficiently punitive sentences. For example, the mandatory minimum sentences for repeat burglars and drug dealers and mandatory life sentences for a second violent or sexual offense, introduced under the 1996 Crime (Sentences) Act, mirrored mandatory minimums and “three strikes” legislation in the U.S. Further, right-wing social scientists such as Charles Murray (1997), co-author of *The Bell Curve* and an advocate of stringent welfare reform, provided the ideological fodder by drawing on a partial picture of U.S. imprisonment and crime rates to “prove” that prison would indeed work for Britain. The courts responded to political directives, new legislation, and the punitive ideological atmosphere by sentencing more people to prison, for longer terms. The pro-prison lobby was successful. In only six years, the prison population increased by more than 50%, from 40,600 in 1992 to 66,500 in 1998 (Morgan, 1999: 110).

### Mapping Resistance

How are activists responding to the prison-building boom, the emergence of corporate-state punishment, and the racialization of crime? Despite the dramatic increase in imprisonment and unprecedented private profit associated with this increase, progressive movements have been slow to launch a broad-based and coherent challenge to the transnational expansion of the prison-industrial complex. Long-established organizations in the penal reform movement, including the Prison Reform Trust, the Howard League, NACRO (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders), UNLOCK, and the Penal Affairs Consortium have consistently opposed Britain’s increasing reliance on incarceration and have focused attention on promoting alternatives to incarceration and challenging the belief that “prison works.” These organizations also vocally opposed privatization when it was first proposed by the Conservative government. However, these reformist organizations are limited by several factors. They have tended to seek a close relationship with the new government, sitting on consulta-

tive groups and developing close working relationships with individual administrators. With the Conservatives in power, penal reform organizations were more likely to take an oppositional position to the state and to make vocal criticisms known in the press:

The previous administration tried their hardest to silence NACRO and cut our central budget by three quarters, simply because the Home Secretary at the time just hated NACRO. They thought that we were on the side of the offender, that we were soft, and that we would often criticize them because of policies which would affect offenders and their families and the knock-on consequences for society. And they also felt because we weren't saying that you should lock up more people that they weren't prepared to fund an organization which didn't play the game (Representative, NACRO).

During the many years that Labour was in opposition, these organizations viewed the Labour Party as an ally. After Labour's election, the administration began to work with reform organizations, seeking out their expertise on issues such as preventing suicides in custody, treatment of pregnant women prisoners, and reforming the women's prison estate:

With the new government, there is a change of attitude, if not a change of policy because there hasn't been much change in policy. But we are working closely is not the right word, but we've got involved in a variety of steering groups and monitoring groups with the prison service.... So we're got involved in quite a lot of those things, and Martin Narey the Prison Service Director is coming here next week (Representative, Prison Reform Trust).

Even where organizations had reservations about New Labour's position on criminal justice, many were unwilling to attack the new government out of loyalty, hoping that Labour was temporarily "playing safe," and would later introduce more radical measures, and for fear of strengthening right-wing opponents. A representative from the Howard League, which has stayed an arm's length from government consultative mechanisms, stated:

Differences [between the groups] become more stark with the Labour government; before that we all sounded very similar. And when Labour came in a lot of voluntary organizations were very torn having worked with them for years, hoping to persuade them and we watched for a few months. We disagree among ourselves about how much change there is.... They're doing what they can within the political environment they've inherited and as time passes they might do more to get people out of prison. There have been a lot of changes that are quite positive, but at

the same time they've done things which will probably mean that more children will end up in prison (Representative, Howard League).

The appearance of a new approach — access to prisons, consultative meetings, friendly relationships with administrators, and openness to discussing alternatives to incarceration — is in sharp contrast with the substance of penal policy under the new government. The inherent problem in reformist organizations is that they do not argue against the logic of incarceration, only against its use in certain cases (for women, first-time nonviolent offenders, etc.) and against brutalizing prison conditions. When a government is simultaneously pursuing policies that may improve conditions for prisoners *and* dramatically increase the numbers of men and women imprisoned, as well as the corporate stake in that imprisonment, there is a risk that they can “buy off” vocal opposition to the emerging prison-industrial complex with the promise of newer, more humane prisons. In becoming a resource for information on how to improve the penal estate, British reform organizations are increasingly becoming an integral part of the prison-industrial complex, an essential humanizing element that permits public acceptance of the new private prisons.

A second problem with the penal reform organizations is that they have not sought to create a mass base to generate and force public recognition of their demands. There is therefore a disjuncture between these organizations and those affected by the prison boom: prisoners, former prisoners, and their families. Almost all staff and board members of penal reform organizations are white and middle class, and former prisoners are starkly missing. For example, the (independent) Committee on Women's Imprisonment, which published its findings in 2000, included a membership of four academics, a prison governor, and chair of the Board of Visitors, but no formerly or presently incarcerated women. There are exceptions; NACRO has an active Race Unit and UNLOCK is run by and for “ex-offenders”; however, neither organization has mobilized a mass movement against the prison boom. The lack of involvement and decision-making power of former prisoners contrasts sharply with grass-roots organizations that appoint board members and staff from their membership and other nonprofit organizations in other fields that have moved to establish “user groups” and other mechanisms to ensure that those who are affected by the service have a say in how the organization is run. The failure to include black people and former prisoners indicates a failure to make a decisive break with the missionary roots of penal reform (Sullivan, 1990), and a lack of acceptance in the agency and organizational capacity of women and men who have been in conflict with the law.

### **Black Prisoners' Organizations**

Penal reform organizations have been slow to involve black women and men, but black prisoner organizations have emerged in Nottingham, Leicester, Manches-



ter, London, and Birmingham. These grass-roots organizations grew out of the experiences of discrimination and the lack of legal advice for black women and men in prison. Many of the staff and members are former prisoners and their family members. All the organizations are rooted in experiences of imprisonment, racism, and sexism, but their resources for implementing their visions for change are limited. For example, Nottingham Black Prisoner Support, with one staff worker, had 297 active cases in 1999. Hibiscus, the only organization supporting foreign national women in the country, has a larger staff that spends most of its time visiting prisons and providing information to prisoners. These organizations therefore become service providers that deal with multiple incidents of discrimination and human rights abuses on a case-by-case basis. They rely on good relationships with the Crown Prosecution Service, Probation, and the Prison Service to achieve small gains for individual prisoners and to guarantee continued access to prisons, but this limits their potential for direct confrontation. Local Probation Services fund many of these organizations, and as one member stated, "they don't like us to do that [campaigns and policy work]."

The creation of a national Federation of Black Prisoner Organizations heralds the possibility of taking on a more direct campaigning role and identifying issues at a national level. So far the network has limited its goals to working in partnership with the Prison Service toward reforms related to the treatment of black prisoners. This may achieve an anti-racist or culturally appropriate prison environment, an important gain for black prisoners. It will not significantly reduce the numbers of black people incarcerated or mount a serious challenge to the prison-industrial complex, as minimum standards for racial etiquette and culturally appropriate programming, foods, and hair products are incorporated into contracts with private incarcerators without slowing the prison explosion.

### **Anti-Racist Challenges to Criminal (In)Justice**

The 1990s witnessed the dramatic revival of an anti-racist movement that many considered to be in abeyance. Popular mobilization against racism in the criminal justice system has been at the core of this revival and the murder of African Caribbean teenager Stephen Lawrence in April 1993 served as a catalyst. Stephen Lawrence's fatal stabbing by a gang of white youths who were shouting racist slurs outraged the black community. Yet community activism was galvanized by the failure of the police to bring murder charges against any of the youths and their refusal to recognize failings in the investigation. When Lawrence's parents brought a private prosecution against the alleged attackers, they received widespread popular support from black communities and anti-racist supporters. Black organizations such as the National Assembly Against Racism, the National Black Caucus, and the Black Racial Attacks Information Network drew connections with other racially motivated murders that had received similarly dismissive treatment by police investigators, and emphasized the need for Asian and African

Caribbean communities to create a unified voice in demanding justice for the parents of murder victims. Eventually, popular pressure forced the government to announce an official inquiry that received thousands of submissions from community activists and statutory and nonprofit agencies. The committee, chaired by Sir William Macpherson, delivered a hard-hitting analysis of the black community's lack of confidence in the criminal justice system, as well as of the institutional racism in the police force. Finding that "the investigation was marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism, and a failure of leadership by senior officers," the 1999 report gave official credence to popular sentiments within black communities nationally. Activists demanded that criminal justice agencies, in particular the police, but also the Crown Prosecution Service, the Prison Service, and other statutory agencies, introduce structural changes in response to the report rather than make liberal reforms:

The liberal approach to "matters of equality is about educating hearts and minds," whereas "a Black approach to equality is education, law, and rights." A flaw in the liberal approach is that Black people's right to equality can be dependent on "whether the Chief Constable of the area where I live likes Macpherson or doesn't like Macpherson; thinks it's a good idea, or thinks it's a bad idea." To avoid such a situation, he maintains the right to equality "should be reflected and enshrined in law and that law has to be both adequate and capable of being able to offer me redress and sanctions where I am discriminated against. And that's the acid test of whether we've got a multicultural democracy.<sup>8</sup>

The Stephen Lawrence case has effectively created a strong, popularly based victims' rights movement in Black British communities. Victims' rights groups in the U.S. and elsewhere have tended to promote strong policing and harsh punitive use of imprisonment to tackle crime, and have therefore been used as allies and spokespersons for the "law and order" lobby. Such movements tend to be white and middle class, and to push for harsher sanctions against dangerous racialized "others." The emergence of the "new" anti-racist movement as a form of victims' rights movement should therefore ring alarm bells. The convergence of anti-racist victims' rights and pro-prison perspectives is evident in the promise by black Home Office Minister Paul Boateng to "lock up more offenders" because "the criminal justice system is not just about rehabilitation, it is also about punishment and retribution. *Our system has become focused on the offender and not enough on the victim*" (*Guardian*, May 10, 2000).

The context for the anti-racist movement in Britain is a rising tide of racist attacks by individuals and far-right organizations that have emerged from political and social upheavals throughout Europe. It is part of a wider movement that seeks criminal and social justice for marginalized and brutalized minorities, including immigrants, asylum-seekers, and European-born people of color. Anti-racists are

thus in the contradictory position of calling for more incarceration (of racists) and for less (of asylum-seekers). David Michael, chair of the Black Police Association, summarized black perspectives on criminal justice when he stated that the black community still feels underprotected and overpoliced (*Ibid.*). In the anti-racist movement's two-pronged approach to criminal justice, activists have demanded that the police protect black communities from racial attacks and prosecute incidents of racially motivated violence aggressively; they have also challenged racist practices by police and prison officers, for example, by campaigning against deaths in custody, "stop and search" practices, and the detention of asylum-seekers. An unresolved conflict at the core of this approach is the role of the state and the relationship of anti-racist activists to law enforcement agencies. In the 1970s, when African Caribbean and Asian women and men formed alliances against racist immigration legislation, workplace and union discrimination, educational exclusion, and Depo Provera and police brutality, activists took a clear stance in locating themselves outside and in opposition to the state. Three decades later, spaces have opened up for collaboration, dialogue, and employment with the police, Prison Service, and other statutory agencies. As a result, significant numbers of police and prison officers and black associations have formed within both services. The anti-racist movement thus finds itself called on to support black police officers victimized by racist colleagues and institutional discrimination, black youth victimized by the police, black prison officers suffering racist abuse, and black prisoners who experience brutalization and infantilization at the hands of prison guards. From an anti-racist or "black perspective," both groups may be victims of a racist criminal justice system. However, adding an analysis of class and the role of the state indicates that black prison officers are simultaneously victimized by and implicated in the racist incarceration of black (and working-class white) women and men. Yet the invisibility of black prisoners and their inability to attend anti-racist meetings and rallies means that the criminal justice system will be represented at such events not by prisoners, but by black professionals.

In such alliances, anti-racist approaches to incarceration have focused on miscarriages of justice, rather than on a broader systematic critique. Important grass-roots struggles that have demonstrated widespread racism within the Crown Prosecution and Prison Services include the cases of African Caribbean remand prisoner Alton Manning (asphyxiated by prison officers in 1995), Satpal Ram (sentenced to life for defending himself from racist attackers in Birmingham after a trial at which the evidence of key Bengali-speaking witnesses was not translated), and Biba Sakharia (a Sikh political prisoner who went on hunger strike to protest human rights abuses against Asian prisoners). These campaigns have not been positioned as part of a dialogue on prison abolitionism and corporate-state punishment. For example, that Alton Manning's death took place in one of the new private prisons, run by CCA venture U.K. Detention Services, went largely unnoticed by anti-racist organizations. Lacking such a context, common-sense

ideas — that prison works, that most prisoners are “rapists and murderers” (and, now, racists) who get their just deserts — remain unchallenged. Human rights abuses and miscarriages of justice are managed by the state through inquiries, reforms, and bureaucratic inaction and more deep-seated challenges to the emerging prison-industrial complex are sidestepped. One year after publication of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry report, activists have already begun to identify a “backlash.” The Police Federation claimed that “political correctness” is preventing officers from apprehending criminals and has led to an increase in street crime, an argument supported by Leader of the Opposition William Hague, who stated that Britain needs “more PCs [Police Constables] and less PC” (*Independent*, May 19, 2000).<sup>9</sup> Although the Prison Service appointed its first Race Equality Advisor in 1999 and established RESPOND in response to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, the corporate sector stands to benefit most from concerns about racism. By presenting itself as an alternative to the entrenched racist culture of British prisons, the corporate sector is speeding up the privatization process. For example, after investigating a scandal at HMP Brixton, where officers targeted black prisoners for punishment and segregation, the Prison Service decided that privatization was the only way to significantly change the prison’s culture (*Guardian*, July 7, 2000). This step was supported by the former prisoner-led advocacy group UNLOCK. Radical activists have yet to respond to corporate appropriation of the language of anti-racism and the contradictory emergence of the “anti-racist corporate prison.”

### Feminist Organizing

The feminist movement in Britain, as elsewhere, has been more concerned with women as victims of crime than as victims of criminalization. Feminist activists have demanded more forceful protection against violent husbands, abusive fathers, and rapists.

Women prisoners were less visible and less clearly victimized by patriarchy and therefore received little support from the early feminist movement. In the early 1980s, a group of mainly former prisoners came together to form Women in Prison to raise the profile of women prisoners and the inequity of women’s treatment by the Prison Service. The group focused on vigils outside Holloway Prison in London, and, in collaboration with sympathetic academics, on producing publications and letters. Women in Prison advocates the abolition of prisons for women as a first step in a more general strategy of prison abolition (Carlen, 1998: 5). However, they have not received the widespread support of the broader feminist movement. This may be due to the reluctance of activists who have long campaigned for men to receive prison sentences for violent acts against women to envisage a world without prisons. For many activists, the goal has been to tackle patriarchal judicial collusion in which men who have killed their wives for adultery or “nagging” receive a community sentence, whereas women who kill their male partners receive mandatory life sentences. Abolitionists have not

adequately addressed feminist concerns that women's safety may be compromised by an abolitionist stance. Indeed, there has been little dialogue in Britain about the possibilities for a feminist abolitionism. Most feminists involved in prison advocacy, including criminologists, have argued instead for an autonomous approach, suggesting that the in/decarceration of women has little in common with men's imprisonment (Heidensohn, 1985).

Located at the intersection of the anti-racist and women's movements, black feminists have also challenged the prison system. This engagement has been predominantly in support of victims of domestic violence who have been incarcerated for killing their abusive male partners. Black women's organizations had been campaigning for provision and support for black victims of domestic violence since the 1970s, but one case brought that struggle into prison. In 1989, Kiranjit Ahluwalia, a Sikh woman from India, was sentenced to life for the murder of her physically, verbally, and sexually abusive husband. The prosecution used Kiranjit's disconnected demeanor immediately after the event and the fact that she had set him on fire to depict her as a calculating and sadistic murderess. Kiranjit mounted an appeal with the support of the Southall Black Sisters (an organization that has been at the forefront in breaking the silence around violence against Asian women) and Justice for Women (a predominantly white feminist group). Amassing extensive evidence, they argued that the traditional notion of provocation should be expanded to include the cumulative effects of a history of violence and that Kiranjit's behavior was influenced by battered women's syndrome. The shame she felt at being a battered woman, her unwillingness to seek help due to her sense of *izzat* (honor), and her desperation and isolation as an Indian woman were taken into account and in 1992 she was released on time served (Ahluwalia and Gupta, 1997). Kiranjit's case raised public awareness about domestic violence and the judiciary's inadequate treatment of women who defend themselves. It also made visible the treatment of Asian women in prison. The successful appeal opened the door for subsequent appeals by black and white women and for the use of battered woman's syndrome in the defense of abused women. It was therefore an important victory. However, activists involved in the case have since expressed concern that Kiranjit's profile as a middle-class woman from suburban London, as well as stereotypes about Asian women's passivity and need for protection, were key factors in winning public support for her case. In deploying racialized and class-based notions of guilt and innocence, Kiranjit Ahluwalia's successful appeal did little to challenge the increasing incarceration of poor African Caribbean women, many of whom have been victims of male abuse and violence, but are imprisoned for other types of "survival crimes," such as welfare fraud, theft, and drug importation (Sudbury, 2001). Activists fail to challenge the logic of incarceration or to stem the criminalization and feminization of poverty when cases of women who were "falsely imprisoned" for defending themselves against violence are separated from the mass of women who are "justly imprisoned" for

a "crime." Even as significant gains have been made in changing judicial attitudes toward survivors of domestic violence, three new women's prisons to warehouse poor and black women are slated for construction.

### **Opposing Capitalist Punishment**

In June 1999, the City of London, Britain's financial center, was brought to a standstill by a "Carnival against Capitalism." The demonstration, known as J18, brought together activists from a broad range of struggles in a broad-based direct action to oppose the free reign of multinational corporations, to challenge exploitative sweatshop conditions globally, and to demand an end to Third World debt. The carnival was part of a mass movement against globalization, which had its counterparts in Seattle and Washington, D.C. Its strength lay in its broad-based, nonhierarchical form of organizing, anonymity, and use of new technology. The Internet and nightly fly posting were used to call on activists and supporters to converge at locations in London for the demonstration and rally. Thousands responded to the call, which mirrored weekly calls to "Reclaim the Streets" in various parts of London, where supporters turned up for unpredictable and therefore uncontrolled street parties. Prisons were not visible on the agenda of these protests, but a network of groups emerged from these actions to focus specifically on the emergence of "capitalist punishment" in Britain. By providing information about corporations that are profiting from incarceration, CAGE seeks to create grass-roots opposition to the prison-building boom:

The most significant thing about prison privatisation is that it allows the government to build a lot more of them and lock more people up. This is part of a general state clampdown that is felt in harsher sentencing, zero tolerance policing, and everyday surveillance, as well as the criminalisation of dissent (most recently the Anti-Terrorist Bill) and attacks on environmental protesters and anticapitalists.... Our resistance is growing.... By physically disrupting prison building, by targeting the companies who build and run prisons or use prison labour, by solidarity with prisoners and by linking our struggles, we can stop this.<sup>10</sup>

Although the Reclaim the Streets movement was predominantly an urban youth phenomenon, CAGE is also made up of activists from Earth First, a grass-roots environmentalist group with strong representation in rural areas. CAGE operates in small towns and in urban centers and has groups in Oxford, Brighton, Swansea, Sheffield, Nottingham, Leeds, and London. CAGE has created coalitions with black and prisoner organizations to reach beyond the predominantly white anticapitalist and environmentalist constituencies. Many of the group's actions are against privately built and managed immigration detention centers. During the past decade, asylum seekers in Britain have been vilified by the right-

wing press, branded “bogus” by the government, and forced to live on vouchers rather than on welfare payments. By connecting the vibrant mass movement in support of asylum seekers with the struggle against prison construction, CAGE brings an important analysis of the symbiotic relation between the state and prison industries to direct actions by immigrant rights organizations, prisoner rights groups, and anticapitalist activists. However, opposition to the prison-industrial complex needs to tackle state and privatized manifestations of punishment as well as violence if it is to challenge the racialized logic of incarceration. As such, these direct actions have yet to win the broad-based mass support mobilized by demands for state redress for black victims of racist violence.

### **Building Coalitions Toward a New Abolitionism**

The first step in challenging the globalization of the prison-industrial complex is to make visible its diverse manifestations. The prison system in Britain is the result of racist and postcolonial ideologies, an economic landscape, and a political history, all of which are unique to that country. However, it owes much to the U.S.: the corporations that facilitate and profit from the prison-building boom, the scholars who provide the academic justification for the continued use of incarceration, and the politicians who eagerly share legislative innovations such as three strikes and mandatory minimums. By tracing shifts in ideologies and practices of penalty, we can identify the emergence of the prison-industrial complex in Britain as part of the aggressive globalization of capital. Though this complex has roots in the moral panics on crime and mugging of the 1970s, the introduction of private profit into penal practices in Britain has enabled the state to continue a prison-building frenzy that, despite frequent predictions about a downturn in imprisonment, has yet to slow.

Despite a long history of penal reform activism in Britain, it lacks a broad-based radical prison movement. Instead, piecemeal opposition to the prison-industrial complex arises out of a plethora of anti-racist, feminist, anti-capitalist, environmentalist, and immigrant rights groups. The opposition’s fragmentation is a weakness in that it prevents a comprehensive critique of imprisonment that includes capitalist exploitation, corporate profit, racism, xenophobia, patriarchy, and homophobia. It is also a potential strength, for it speaks to the possibility of a broad-based movement with support from diverse locations, along the model of the coalitions that created “Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison-Industrial Complex.”<sup>11</sup> The attendance at Critical Resistance of activists from black British organizations was a starting point in establishing transatlantic connections. However, though black professional associations in Britain such as the Society of Black Lawyers and the Black Police Association have been nurtured and supported by their African American counterparts, the radical prison movement has not been so proactive. This contrasts sharply with transatlantic activism in support of the Irish Republican struggle, where the financial, political, and practical

support from Irish Americans played an important role in the recent closure of Long Kesh (known officially as HMP Maze) and in the release of prisoners of war under the Good Friday Agreement (*An Phoblacht*, August 9, 2000).<sup>12</sup> Radical anti-prison activists in both countries have perhaps been caught up in immediate battles against prison-building projects and legislation such as Proposition 21 in California and the Anti-Terrorist Bill in Britain. Activists in the U.S. have therefore focused their energies on challenging developments within U.S. borders. Meanwhile, corporations in an era of globalization respect no borders, and the prison-industrial complex has long since spread beyond its birthplace. The challenge for activists is to extend the scope of our coalitions and vision to battle a phenomenon with tentacles throughout the Americas, Europe, Southern Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. Indeed, attacking the prison-industrial complex in the U.S. alone is like attempting to kill a weed by chopping off the head. The roots, nurtured in the blood and sweat of prisoners from London to Johannesburg, will continue to thrive and search out new, more sympathetic locations for growth.

### NOTES

1. Interview, Her Majesty's Prison Winchester, June 23, 1999. "Denisha" is a pseudonym.
2. Prisons in England and Wales are governed by the Prison Service within the Home Office. The prison population of England and Wales in 1998 was 66,500 out of a total population of approximately 46 million.
3. The term "black" was adopted in Britain by the anti-racist movement in the 1960s as a political category that would unite African, Caribbean, and Asian people in struggles against racism and colonialism. For further details, see Sudbury (1998).
4. The slogan was used successfully by Conservative Peter Griffiths to win the 1964 Smethwick By-election.
5. For example, the replacement of housing "rates" with a poll tax that taxed the number of inhabitants rather than the value of the property led to prison sentences for those who were unable to pay the inflated taxes for overcrowded homes in poor neighborhoods. Mass protests eventually led to the repeal of the poll tax.
6. Politicians hurried to cash in on the private-prison boom. For example, Sir Edward Gardner of the penal affairs group, quoted above, left Parliament to become chair of Contract Prisons, a company set up to bid for contracts to run U.K. prisons.
7. Shadow Home Secretary Jack Straw in "Labour to Halt New Private Prisons" (Prison Privatisation Report International, June 1996).
8. Lee Jasper, Secretary, National Assembly Against Racism, interviewed in *The Runnymede Trust Bulletin* (London: Runnymede Trust, 2000).
9. From a speech to the Police Federation Conference, "Criminals Are Not Victims of Society."
10. CAGE website, [www.veggies.org.uk/CAGE](http://www.veggies.org.uk/CAGE) (August 31, 2000).
11. See articles in this volume and [www.criticalresistance.org](http://www.criticalresistance.org).
12. See [www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/4025/prisoners.html](http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/4025/prisoners.html).



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