

The Challenge of Prison Abolition: A Conversation

Angela Y. Davis and Dylan Rodriguez

(2000)

Dylan: Your emergence as a radical prison activist was deeply influenced by your experience as a prisoner. Could you talk a bit about how imprisonment affected your political formation, and the impact that it had on your eventual identification as prison abolitionists?

Angela: The time I spent in jail was both an outcome of my work on prison issues and a profound influence on my subsequent trajectory as a prison activist. When I was arrested in the summer of 1970 in connection with my involvement in the campaign to free George Jackson and the Soledad Brothers, I was one of many activists who had been previously active in defense movements. In editing the anthology, *If They Come in the Morning* (1971) while I was in jail, Bettina Aptheker and I attempted to draw upon the organizing and legal experiences associated with a vast number of contemporary campaigns to free political prisoners. The most important lessons emanating from those campaigns, we thought, demonstrated the need to examine the overall role of the prison system, especially its class and racial character. There was a relationship, as George Jackson had insisted, between the rising numbers of political prisoners and the imprisonment of increasing numbers of poor people of color. If prison was the state-sanctioned destination for activists such as myself, it was also used as a surrogate solution to social problems associated with poverty and racism. Although imprisonment was equated with rehabilitation in the dominant discourse at that time, it was obvious to us that its primary purpose was repression. Along with other radical activists of that era, we thus began to explore what it might mean to combine our call for the freedom of political prisoners with an embryonic call for the abolition of prisons. Of course we had not yet thought through all of the implications of such a position, but today it seems that what was viewed at that time as political naiveté, the untheorized and utopian impulses of young people trying to be revolutionary, foreshadowed what was to become, at the turn of the century,

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**CRITICAL
RESISTANCE** 

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True Leap Press
408197 Chicago,
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the important project of critically examining the political economy of a prison system, whose unrestrained growth urgently needs to be reversed.

Dylan: What interests me is the manner in which your trial — and the rather widespread social movement that enveloped it, along with other political trials — enabled a wide variety of activists to articulate a radical critique of U.S. jurisprudence and imprisonment. The strategic framing of yours and others' individual political biographies within a broader set of social and historical forces — state violence, racism, white supremacy, patriarchy, the growth and transformation of U.S. capitalism — disrupted the logic of the criminal justice apparatus in a fundamental way. Turning attention away from conventional notions of “crime” as isolated, individual instances of misbehavior necessitated a basic questioning of the conditions that cast “criminality” as a convenient political rationale for the warehousing of large numbers of poor, disenfranchised, and displaced black people and other people of color. Many activists are now referring to imprisonment as a new form of slavery, refocusing attention on the historical function of the 13th Amendment in reconstructing enslavement as a punishment reserved for those “duly convicted.” Yet, when we look more closely at the emergence of the prison-industrial complex, the language of enslavement fails to the extent that it relies on the category of forced labor as its basic premise. People frequently forget that the majority of imprisoned people are not workers, and that work is itself made available only as a “privilege” for the most favored prisoners. The logic of the prison-industrial complex is closer to what you, George Jackson, and others were forecasting back then as mass containment, the effective elimination of large numbers of (poor, black) people from the realm of civil society. Yet, the current social impact of the prison-industrial complex must have been virtually unfathomable 30 years ago. One could make the argument that the growth of this massive structure has met or exceeded the most ominous forecasts of people who, at that time, could barely have imagined that at the turn of the century two million people would be encased in a prison regime that is far more sophisticated and repressive than it was at the onset of Nixon's presidency, when about 150,000 people were imprisoned nationally in decrepit, overcrowded buildings. So in a sense, your response to the first question echoes the essential truth of what was being dismissed, in your words, as the paranoid “political naiveté” of young radical activists in the early 1970s. I think we might even consider the formation of prison abolitionism as a logical response to this new human warehousing strategy. In this vein, could you give a basic summary of the fundamental principles underlying the contemporary prison abolitionist movement?

Angela: First of all, I must say that I would hesitate to characterize the contemporary prison abolition movement as a homogeneous and united international effort to displace the institution of the prison. For example, the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA), which periodically brings scholars and activists together from Europe, South America, Australia, Africa, and North

ourselves from the assumption that punishment must be a necessary response to all violations of the law. Reconciliatory or restorative justice, for example, is presented by some abolitionists as an approach that has proved successful in non-Western societies — Native American societies, for example — and that can be tailored for use in urban contexts in cases that involve property and other offenses. The underlying idea is that in many cases, the reconciliation of offender and victim (including monetary compensation to the victim) is a much more progressive vision of justice than the social exile of the offender. This is only one example — the point is that we will not be free to imagine other ways of addressing crime as long as we see the prison as a permanent fixture for dealing with all or most violations of the law.

ABOLITION IS A REALISTIC VISION

The PIC did not always exist. The modern day prison is only about 200 years old. Even today there are places where people rely on each other instead of police, courts, and cages.

It has taken over 200 years to build up the PIC. We can't expect to take apart such a complicated system in a short time. The first slavery abolitionists began working decades before they won the abolition of slavery. Our struggle is a long one. Believing we can abolish the PIC is the first step.

and criminologists, and many others. Although you were quite clear in the conference's opening plenary session that the purpose of Critical Resistance was to encourage people to imagine radical strategies for a sustained prison abolition campaign, it was clear to me that only a few people took this dimension of the conference seriously. That is, it seemed convenient for people to rejoice at the unprecedented level of participation in this presumably "radical" prison activist gathering, but the level of analysis and political discussion generally failed to embrace the creative challenge of formulating new ways to link existing activism to a larger abolitionist agenda. People were generally more interested in developing an analysis of the prison-industrial complex that incorporated the local work that they were involved in, which I think is an important practical connection to make. At the same time, I think there is an inherent danger in conflating militant reform and human rights strategies with the underlying logic of anti-prison radicalism, which conceives of the ultimate eradication of the prison as a site of state violence and social repression. What is required, at least in part, is a new vernacular that enables this kind of political dream. How does prison abolition necessitate new political language, teachings, and organizing strategies? How could these strategies help to educate and organize people inside and outside the prison for abolition?

Angela: In order to imagine a world without prisons — or at least a social landscape no longer dominated by the prison — a new popular vocabulary will have to replace the current language, which articulates crime and punishment in such a way that we cannot think about a society without crime except as a society in which all the criminals are imprisoned. Thus, one of the first challenges is to be able to talk about the many ways in which punishment is linked to poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other modes of dominance. In the university, the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of prison studies can help to trouble the prevailing criminology discourses that shape public policy as well as popular ideas about the permanence of prisons. At the high school level, new curricula can also be developed that encourage critical thinking about the role of punishment. Community organizations can also play a role in urging people to link their demands for better schools, for example, to a reduction of prison spending.

Dylan: Your last comment suggests that we need to rupture the ideological structures embodied by the rise of the prison-industrial complex. How does prison abolition force us to rethink common assumptions about jurisprudence, in particular "criminal justice?"

Angela: Since the invention of the prison as punishment in Western society during the late 1700s, criminal justice systems have so thoroughly depended on imprisonment that we have lost the ability to imagine other ways to solve the problem of "crime." One of the interesting contributions of prison abolitionists has been to propose other paradigms of punishment or to suggest that we need to extricate

America, reveals the varied nature of this movement. Dorsey Nunn, former prisoner and longtime activist, has a longer history of involvement with ICOPA than I do since he attended the conference in New Zealand three years ago. My first direct contact with ICOPA was this past May, when I attended the Toronto gathering.

Dylan: Was there anything about ICOPA that particularly impressed you?

Angela: The ICOPA conference in Toronto revealed some of the major strengths and weaknesses of the abolitionist movement. First of all, despite the rather homogenous character of their circle, they have managed to keep the notion of abolitionism alive precisely at a time when developing radical alternatives to the prison-industrial complex is becoming a necessity. That is to say, abolitionism should not now be considered an unrealizable utopian dream, but rather the only possible way to halt the further transnational development of prison industries. That ICOPA claims supporters in Europe and Latin America is an indication of what is possible. However, the racial homogeneity of ICOPA, and the related failure to incorporate an analysis of race into the theoretical framework of their version of abolitionism, is a major weakness. The conference demonstrated that while faith-based approaches to the abolition of penal systems can be quite powerful, organizing strategies must go much further. We need to develop and popularize the kinds of analyses that explain why people of color predominate in prison populations throughout the world and how this structural racism is linked to the globalization of capital.

Dylan: Yes, I found that the political vision of ICOPA was extraordinarily limited, especially considering its professed commitment to a more radical abolitionist analysis and program. This undoubtedly had a lot to do with the underlying racism of the organization itself, which was reflected in the language of some of the conference resolutions: "We support all transformative measures which enable *us* to live better in community with those *we as a society find most difficult*, and most consistently marginalize or exclude" (emphasis added). A major figure in ICOPA even accused a small group of people of color in attendance of being "racist" when they attempted to constructively criticize the overwhelming white homogeneity of the conference and the need for creative strategies to engage communities of color in such an important political discussion. Several black student-activists I met at ICOPA told me how alienated they felt at the conference, especially when they realized that the ICOPA organizers had never attempted to contact the Toronto-based organizations with which these student-activists were working: a major black anti-police-brutality coalition, a black prisoner support organization, etc. So I certainly share your frustrations with ICOPA. At the same time, I find myself wondering how a new political formation of prison abolitionism can form in such a reactionary national and global climate. You have been involved with a variety of prison movements for

the last 30 years, so maybe you can help me out. How do you think about this new political challenge within a broader historical perspective?

Angela: There are multiple histories of prison abolition. The Scandinavian scholar/activist Thomas Mathieson first published his germinal text, *The Politics of Abolition*, in 1974, when activist movements were calling for the disestablishment of prisons — in the aftermath of the Attica Rebellion and prison uprisings throughout Europe. He was concerned with transforming prison reform movements into more radical movements to abolish prisons as the major institutions of punishment. There was a pattern of decarceration in the Netherlands until the mid-1980s, which seemed to establish the Dutch system as a model prison system, and the later rise in prison construction and the expansion of the incarcerated population has served to stimulate abolitionist ideas. Criminologist Willem de Haan published a book in 1990 entitled *The Politics of Redress: Crime, Punishment, and Penal Abolition*. One of the most interesting texts, from the point of view of U.S. activist history is Pay Honey Knopp's volume *Instead of Prison: A Handbook for Prison Abolitionists*, which was published in 1976, with funding from the American Friends. This handbook points out the contradictory relationship between imprisonment and an "enlightened, free society." Prison abolition, like the abolition of slavery, is a long-range goal and the handbook argues that an abolitionist approach requires an analysis of "crime" that links it with social structures, as opposed to individual pathology, as well as "anticrime" strategies that focus on the provision of social resources. Of course, there are many versions of prison abolitionism — including those that propose to abolish punishment altogether and replace it with reconciliatory responses to criminal acts. In my opinion, the most powerful relevance of abolitionist theory and practice today resides in the fact that without a radical position *vis-à-vis* the rapidly expanding prison system, prison architecture, prison surveillance, and prison system corporatization, prison culture, with all its racist and totalitarian implications, will continue not only to claim ever increasing numbers of people of color, but also to shape social relations more generally in our society. Prison needs to be abolished as the dominant mode of addressing social problems that are better solved by other institutions and other means. The call for prison abolition urges us to imagine and strive for a very different social landscape.

Dylan: I think you make a subtle but important point here: prison and penal abolition imply an analysis of society that illuminates the repressive logic, as well as the fascistic historical trajectory, of the prison's growth as a social and industrial institution. Theoretically and politically, this "radical position," as you call it, introduces a new set of questions that does not necessarily advocate a pragmatic "alternative" or a concrete and immediate "solution" to what currently exists. In fact, I think this is an entirely appropriate position to assume when dealing with a policing and jurisprudence system that inherently disallows the asking of such fundamental questions as: Why are some lives considered more disposable than

others under the weight of police policy and criminal law? How have we arrived at a place where killing is valorized and defended when it is organized by the state — I'm thinking about the street lynchings of Diallo and Dorismond in New York City, the bombing of the MOVE organization in Philadelphia in 1985, the ongoing bombing of Iraqi civilians by the United States — yet viciously avenged (by the state) when committed by isolated individuals? Why have we come to associate community safety and personal security with the degree to which the state exercises violence through policing and criminal justice? You've written elsewhere that the primary challenge for penal abolitionists in the United States is to construct a political language and theoretical discourse that disarticulates crime from punishment. In a sense, this implies a principled refusal to pander to the typically pragmatist impulse to demand absolute answers and solutions *right now* to a problem that has deep roots in the social formation of the United States since the 1960s. I think your open-ended conception of prison abolition also allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the prison-industrial complex as a set of institutional and political relationships that extend well beyond the walls of the prison proper. So in a sense, prison abolition is itself a broader critique of society. This brings me to the next question: What are the most crucial distinctions between the political commitments and agendas of prison reformists and those of prison abolitionists?

Angela: The seemingly unbreakable link between prison reform and prison development — referred to by Foucault in his analysis of prison history — has created a situation in which progress in prison reform has tended to render the prison more impermeable to change and has resulted in bigger, and what are considered "better," prisons. The most difficult question for advocates of prison abolition is how to establish a balance between reforms that are clearly necessary to safeguard the lives of prisoners and those strategies designed to promote the eventual abolition of prisons as the dominant mode of punishment. In other words, I do not think that there is a strict dividing line between reform and abolition. For example, it would be utterly absurd for a radical prison activist to refuse to support the demand for better health care inside Valley State, California's largest women's prison, under the pretext that such reforms would make the prison a more viable institution. Demands for improved health care, including protection from sexual abuse and challenges to the myriad ways in which prisons violate prisoners' human rights, can be integrated into an abolitionist context that elaborates specific decarceration strategies and helps to develop a popular discourse on the need to shift resources from punishment to education, housing, health care, and other public resources and services.

Dylan: Speaking of developing a popular discourse, the Critical Resistance gathering in September 1998 seemed to pull together an incredibly wide array of prison activists — cultural workers, prisoner support and legal advocates, former prisoners, radical teachers, all kinds of researchers, progressive policy scholars