



Improvising on Reality

The Roots of Prison Abolition

LIZ SAMUELS

Improvising on reality is the key principle underlying the building of a united left and raising the consciousness of the people. It will give us our tactics.

—George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 1972

The five-day seizure of Attica Correctional Facility in 1971 by prisoners held there was pivotal for the development of what can be called prison abolitionist praxis. This political approach, at once an analysis and a strategy, held that “prison reform” was not just insufficient, but also counterproductive. It sought instead to remove entirely the system of imprisonment and policing through a revolutionary transformation that would render such institutions unnecessary. As the rebels at Attica made clear, abolition involved both direct confrontation with the prison system and building alternative practices to replace confinement and solve the social problems that the criminal justice system could not.

The “Attica rebellion,” as it was known, also marked the beginning of the end of the revolutionary prisoners’ movement—at least as an item of national attention. Over the previous decade, prisoners had become politicized alongside and as a part of radical movements of the time. By 1970 many prisoners across the country publicly identified themselves as revolutionaries organizing and fighting for prisoners’ rights, often leading to confrontations with prison officials. Prisoners took control of Attica on September 9, 1971, after a year of rising tensions with the prison administration, led by newly forged alliances among Black Panther, Young Lord, Black Muslim, and white radical prisoners. Members of these groups and unaffiliated prisoners organized water and blankets for people in the yard as well as a negotiation team composed of two representatives from each cell-block. The Attica Brothers, as they came to be called, wanted improved conditions and rehabilitation programs, political and religious freedom, freedom from physical harm, and, in their initial demands, “speedy and safe transportation out of confinement, to a non-imperialistic country.”¹ Negotiations began after the group

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Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, and Mao Zedong. Inmates for Action in Alabama, for example, established survival and political education programs in the mid-1970s that met every day of the week, covering topics such as black history and “Revolutionary theory and the truth of capitalism and its ill effects.”¹¹

Many individuals who had gone to prison for what the Left termed “social crimes” (i.e., street crime) were transformed by ideas introduced to them by literature sent in or given to them inside. A California prisoner named George Jackson became the most well known and influential prisoner-turned-revolutionary. In prison for armed robbery of seventy dollars from a gas station, Jackson became politicized and, ultimately, a field marshal of the Black Panther Party. Through him, Panther chapters sprung up throughout the California prison system. In his best-selling book, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, he articulated how black people were systematically oppressed and exploited in the United States, identifying a direct connection between imprisonment and anti-black racism.¹² This pernicious connection, as Jackson proclaimed in his posthumously published manifesto, *Blood in My Eye*, made prisoners “a mighty reservoir of revolutionary potential.”¹³ While Jackson became a cause célèbre, he was also training cadre within prison in a range of revolutionary theories and fighting techniques.¹⁴ Jackson’s growing popularity and the increasing number of leftists being incarcerated helped put prisoners at the center of the radical Left’s agenda in the early 1970s. Prisoner activism built on the presence of militant organizations on the streets, especially among communities of color. Ralph Hamm, a leader in the National Prisoners Reform Association (NPRA) at MCI Walpole, described NPRA’s program as “rooted within the Black Consciousness Movement of the time.”¹⁵ As with the Black Panthers, the work of the American Indian Movement, Brown Berets, Young Lords, and militant unionism contributed to widespread interest in and from radical prisoners.

Even more than revolutionaries outside of prison, organizers within prison faced violent repression. Radical prisoners, particularly radicals of color, endured additional physical and mental abuse, such as beatings and extended solitary confinement. After acts of resistance, including sit-ins and work strikes, participants were usually physically reprimanded.¹⁶ Prisoners identified as leaders or political agitators were frequently kept in isolation or transferred to different cellblocks and between prisons.¹⁷ In an attempt to squelch radical organizing of any kind, especially among black prisoners, prison officials also took away privileges, censored the mail, and banned books sent to prisoners identified as activists.¹⁸

Organizing

One of the ways prisoners tried to withstand prison administrators’ repression was by forging a culture of solidarity. The main obstacle to building it was racial tension. Following World War II, the racial composition of prisons began to change from majority white to disproportionately black; yet in many places,

78. For a detailed account of the closure of Massachusetts juvenile prisons, see Miller, *Last One Over the Wall*.
79. AFSC, *Struggle for Justice*, 156.
80. Miller, *Last One Over the Wall*, 4.
81. More generally on this point, see David Garland, *The Culture of Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
82. For an overview, see Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2000).
83. Critical Resistance, “Introduction to the Re-print,” in PREAP, *Instead of Prisons*, iii.

AFFIRMATION

I believe in living.
 I believe in the spectrum
 of Beta days and Gamma people.
 I believe in sunshine.
 In windmills and waterfalls,
 tricycles and rocking chairs.
 And i believe that seeds grow into sprouts.
 And sprouts grow into trees.
 I believe in the magic of the hands.
 And in the wisdom of the eyes.
 I believe in rain and tears.
 And in the blood of infinity.

I believe in life.
 And i have seen the death parade
 march through the torso of the earth,
 sculpting mud bodies in its path.
 I have seen the destruction of the daylight,
 and seen bloodthirsty maggots
 prayed to and saluted.



I have seen the kind become the blind
 and the blind become the blind
 in one easy lesson.
 I have walked on cut glass.
 I have eaten crow and blunder bread
 and breathed the stench of indifference.

I have been locked by the lawless!
 Handcuffed by the haters.
 Gagged by the greedy.
 And, if i know any thing at all,
 it’s that a wall is just a wall
 and nothing more at all.
 It can be broken down.

I believe in living.
 I believe in birth.
 I believe in the sweat of love
 and in the fire of truth.

And i believe that a lost ship,
 steered by tired, seasick sailors,
 can still be guided home
 to port.



KEYNE (RASHID) JOHNSON

56. American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), *Struggle for Justice: A Report on Crime and Punishment in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1971, 1972), 170–173.
57. PREAP, *Instead of Prisons*, 9.
58. AFSC, *Struggle for Justice: A Report on Crime and Punishment in America*, 23.
59. Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 118. Jackson wrote, “But if one were forced for the sake of clarity to define [fascism] in a word simple enough for all to understand that word would be ‘reform.’” Also see Karen Wald and Ward Churchill, “Remembering the Real Dragon: An Interview with George Jackson” in *Cages of Steel: The Politics of Imprisonment in America*, ed. Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall (College Park, MD: Maisonneuve Press, 1992), 178.
60. PREAP, *Instead of Prisons*, 23–25.
61. *Ibid.*, 67.
62. *Ibid.*, 152–153.
63. Daniel Burton-Rose, “The Anti-Exploits of Men Against Sexism, 1977–78,” in *Prison Masculinities*, ed. Donald F. Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 224–229. Available at http://www.gjbip.org/p4_c2_a_mas1.htm#ftnref1 (accessed January 3, 2009).
64. PREAP, *Instead of Prisons*, 114–127.
65. Bissonette, *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole*, 43–44, 78.
66. *Ibid.*, 90.
67. *Ibid.*, 142.
68. *Ibid.*, 130.
69. “Alabama’s Atticas,” *Midnight Special* 3: 4 (April 1973): 5.
70. New England Prisoners Association, *NEPA News* 1:1, 1:3, 2:1–11. Alternative Press Archives. Used with permission.
71. *Prisoner Solidarity Committee* (September 30, 1971): 6. Alternative Press Archives. Used with Permission.
72. Tom Soto, “Tear the Prisons Down,” *Prisoner Solidarity Committee* 3 (November 3, 1971): 4. Alternative Press Archives. Used with permission.
73. This conference took place at University of California, Berkeley, January 28–30, 1972. It featured workshops, films, and speakers. Cummins, *California’s Radical Prison Movement*, 222.
74. See Arthur I. Waskow, “... I Am Not Free,” *Saturday Review*, January 8, 1972, 20–21; Ramsey Clark, *Crime in America: Observations on Its Nature, Causes, Prevention and Control* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970).
75. Jessica Mitford, *Kind and Usual Punishment: The Prison Business* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 299–300.
76. The 1972 National Prisoners Coalition was formed after a prisoners’ conference in Portland; see “National Prisoners Coalition Formed,” *Penal Digest International* 1: 10 (April–May 1972): 3. A national prison network formed briefly after the 1976 Hard Times Conference in Chicago; see “Build the Mass Prison Movement,” *Midnight Special* 5:8 (June–July 1976): 12; and there was a call for a National Prisoner’s Rights Coalition in 1977. See “Building a Mass Prison Movement,” *Midnight Special* 5:12 (October 1977): 10–11.
77. “Announcement of NEPA Dissolution,” stapled letter to final *NEPA News* (June 1976); “Building a Mass Prison Movement,” *Midnight Special* 5:12 (October 1977): 10–11. This position was reflected in several memoirs or exposés by one-time prison activists that were also published in the late 1970s. See, for instance, Jo Durden-Smith, *Who Killed George Jackson? Fantasies, Paranoia and the Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

prisons remained racially segregated until the 1960s.¹⁹ While the Black Muslims and others challenged racial segregation, institutional integration did not address the pervasive racism among white prisoners, prison guards, and administrators. Prison administrators used racial divides to their advantage by favoring and privileging white prisoners over prisoners of color in order to maintain control, such that racial tensions at prisons often resulted in violent confrontations between prisoners.²⁰

By the later 1960s, prisoners influenced by the ideologies of growing Third World movements in the United States and abroad asserted that prisoners constituted a separate political and economic class with common interests. Organizers tried to forge bonds among prisoners to build what they described as a united front that could engage in a common class struggle as an imprisoned class of people “subjected to [a] continuous cycle of poverty, prison, parole, and more poverty.”²¹ Organizations like the United Prisoners’ Union, formed in 1970, sought to organize prisoners as a convicted class to break this cycle. A class-based approach did not define all of the growing prison movement, which was heavily shaped by racial nationalism, but there was a growing recognition that divisions among prisoners hampered organizing to effect change. Racial conflicts, such as a 1967 clash at San Quentin, began to be resolved through truces between white and black leaders and stated commitments to work together for unified goals.²² At Walpole State Prison in Massachusetts, white prisoner Bobby Dellelo gained an “understanding that reform is impossible without racial equity” and if “Black prisoners were left behind, soon all prisoners would be right back with them.”²³ Politicized prisoners argued that racial unity terrified prison officials—for, as Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, a Black Panther imprisoned at Terre Haute prison in Indiana, argued, “all prison officials know that if racism is surmounted, revolt is inevitable.” Ervin considered the relationships between white radicals and black revolutionaries essential in dismantling the Klan’s influence at Terre Haute.²⁴

Imprisoned organizers increasingly called for (and often achieved) unity, which allowed them to organize successful strikes and protests surrounding specific demands. The uprisings at San Quentin in 1968 and at the Long Island branch of the Queens House of Detention in October 1970, and the work stoppages at Soledad, Folsom, and San Luis Obispo prisons in California in November of 1971, were organized by multiracial coalitions that attempted to breach racial divisions among prisoners with a united, cross-race, prisoner class consciousness. Heightened politicization of prisoners, support from outside organizations, and growing rejection of reform contributed to increasing organized prisoner resistance in the form of work strikes, sit-ins, and prison takeovers. Prison uprisings increased from five in 1967 to fifteen in 1968, thirty-seven in 1970, thirty-seven in 1971, and forty-eight in 1972, the most in any year of U.S. history.²⁵

Prisoners across the country used work strikes to win gains in pay, improved conditions, and collective bargaining rights, as well as to express solidarity with other actions or events happening domestically and internationally. Perhaps as

crucial, prisoner strikes aimed to garner visibility for prisoners as an oppressed but organized class. Between 1965 and 1975, prisoners went on strike in more than a dozen states, including Arizona, Ohio, Nebraska, Indiana, New Jersey, and Oklahoma.²⁶ Work strikes at women's prisons, such as the spring 1971 work strike at the California Institution for Women, Frontera, responded not only to labor practices but also to room and body searches.²⁷ Labor-centered organizing highlighted the ways the government profited from prisoner labor. By refusing to work, prisoners asserted their power as workers and challenged the perspective that prisoner labor was free and exploitable.²⁸ Nationwide, working prisoners were paid far below minimum wage, if at all. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, unions were organized in California, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Washington, New England, North Carolina, Minnesota, and Washington.²⁹ Prisoner labor unions fought for prisoners' rights as workers whose labor was exploited by federal and state governments and unable to be used in and for their own communities. In the words of New Hampshire prisoners: "When prisoners rebel and demand to be treated as human beings; they are not only fighting the inhumane conditions; they are striking out against the state which maintains this situation by which each of us is robbed of the fruits of our labor every day."³⁰ Some unions utilized confrontational tactics, while others worked within legal and legislative channels. However, they shared a radical analysis of prison labor as central to American capitalism, and thus consistently pushed against the barriers set by prison authorities. NPRA had 80 percent of prisoners sign union cards when they requested recognition as a collective-bargaining unit for prisoners at MCI Walpole by the State Labor Relations committee. In addition to wanting to function as a collective bargaining unit, NPRA had goals to "exercise self-determination within the prison, and to demonstrate that the prison itself was unnecessary."³¹ NPRA's organizing culminated in a three-month-long takeover of the prison in 1973, when the prisoners ran the institution after guards refused to work in protest of prisoner radicalism and what they saw as a lenient prison administration.³²

Beyond Reform

Groups organizing inside and outside of prisons pushed for social programs, improved prison conditions, and a change in policies, such as indeterminate sentencing. Some liberal prison administrators tried to implement reforms as part of the prevailing "rehabilitation" correctional wisdom of the time, such as increased access to educational and technical training and the formation of "Inmate Grievance Councils." By design, these reforms were minor alterations to the existing system and were often used to dampen the fire of more radical critiques.³³ In Massachusetts, for example, reform legislation that sought to reduce the size of the prison system by linking state prisons in a step-wise "behavior modification program" that expanded work and community facilities resulted in significant prison expansion.³⁴ Former Department of Youth Services director Jerome Miller

30. "Midnight Benefit," *Midnight Special: Prisoners News* 5:4 (July–August 1975): 1–3.
31. Bissonette, *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole*, 89.
32. For an account of the takeover of MCI Walpole, see Bissonette, *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole*.
33. Marie Gottschalk, *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 194.
34. Bob Martin, "The Massachusetts Correctional System: Treatment as an Ideology for Control," in *Punishment and Penal Discipline*, ed. Platt and Takagi, 156–164.
35. Jerome G. Miller, *Last One Over the Wall: The Massachusetts Experiment in Closing Reform Schools* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), 4.
36. Perhaps the most famous indeterminate sentence at this time was that of George Jackson, who was given one year to life and whose militant presence inside led to repeated parole denial. His case, when it achieved notoriety, catalyzed the campaign against indeterminate sentencing.
37. See, for instance, Franklin E. Zimring, Gordon Hawkins, and Sam Kamin, *Punishment and Democracy: Three Strikes and You're Out in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*.
38. Larry Sullivan, *The Prison Reform Movement: Forlorn Hope* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 106–107.
39. "History of the U.P.U.," *The Anvil* (March–April 1975): 3.
40. Miller, *Last One Over the Wall*, 46.
41. *Ibid.*, 4.
42. John Clutchette, "On Prison Reform," *If They Come in the Morning*, 136.
43. See "Nothing is More Precious Than . . ." archives, housed at The Freedom Archives, San Francisco, www.freedomarchives.org.
44. Angela Davis, interview with author, tape recording, Santa Cruz, CA, January 15, 2004.
45. Bettina Aptheker, "Social Functions of Prisons in Society," *If They Come in the Morning*, 57.
46. Prison Research Education Action Project (PREAP), "Time to Begin," in *Instead of Prisons: A Handbook for Abolitionists* (Syracuse, NY: Prison Research Education Action Project, 1976; and Oakland, CA: Critical Resistance, 2005), 16.
47. *Ibid.*, 36.
48. *Ibid.*, 20. At the time, of course, prison abolitionists discussed racism and poverty as structural causes of crime more than sexism and homophobia. Gendered analyses have become more prevalent among contemporary prison abolitionists. See Julia Sudbury, "Maroon Abolitionists: Black Gender-oppressed Activists in the Anti-Prison Movement in the U.S. and Canada," *Meridians* 9:1 (2009), 1–29; Critical Resistance and Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, "Gender Violence and the Prison-Industrial Complex," in Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, ed., *Color of Violence* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006), 223–226.
49. *Instead of Prisons*, 38–45.
50. *Ibid.*, 20.
51. Mafundi, "Understanding the Criminal Justice System," *Committee for Prisoner Support in Birmingham* 5 (April 1975). Alternative Press Archives. Used with permission.
52. "Plea for Unity," *NEPA News* (March 1974): 10–11.
53. PREAP, *Instead of Prisons*, 20.
54. *Ibid.*, 11.
55. Sullivan, *The Prison Reform Movement*, 5; Scott Christianson, *With Liberty for Some: 500*

14. See Jackson's self-description in *Blood in My Eye*. See also Lee Bernstein, "The Age of Jackson: George Jackson and the Culture of American Prisons in the 1970s," *Journal of American Culture* 30:3 (September 2007): 317, and Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 151–186. The online journal *Proud Flesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness*—the title is taken from a letter by Jackson—shows one way in which Jackson continues to influence academic and activist discourse. See especially issue 5, available at: <http://proudfleshjournal.com/issue5/toc5.htm>.
15. Jamie Bissonette, *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole: A True Story in the Movement for Prison Abolition* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2008), 129.
16. Cummins, *California's Radical Prison Movement*, 80.
17. Bo Brown, a former political prisoner and member of the George Jackson Brigade, an armed clandestine group in the mid-1970s, was frequently transferred from prison to prison. To limit her, Bo Brown recalled, they "kept me isolated and they moved me every year and a half to two years." Bo Brown, interview with author, tape recording, Oakland, CA, January 19, 2004.
18. The complaint of prison administration repression features prominently in prisoner writings at the time, as well as in the demands of rebelling prisoners, such as those at Folsom in 1970, Attica in 1971, and Marion in 1972. See, for instance, Alan Eladio Gómez, "Resisting Living Death at Marion Federal Penitentiary, 1972," *Radical History Review* 96 (2006): 58–86. Prisoner newsletters frequently spoke of such harassment; see *Midnight Special: Prisoners News*, NYU Bobst Tamiment/Wagner Archives: Main Collection (HV 6201.m53).
19. James B. Jacobs, "Race Relations and the Prisoner Subculture," *Crime and Justice* 1 (1979): 4–7.
20. Pallas and Barber, "Riot to Revolution," 150; Bernstein, "The Age of Jackson," 317.
21. "History of the U.P.U.," *Anvil* (March–April 1975): 1, Alternative Press Archives. Used with permission.
22. Pallas and Barber, "Riot to Revolution," 150; Cummins, *California's Radical Prison Movement*, 91.
23. Bissonette, *When the Prisoners Ran Walpole*, 28.
24. Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, "Behind the Walls of Prison," in *Race Traitor*, ed. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (New York: Routledge, 1996), 62.
25. Bert Useem and Peter Kimball, *States of Siege: U.S. Prison Riots 1971–1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 18.
26. Arizona State Prison in Florence, 1972; Vermont, Lincoln, NE, October 18, 1971; Nebraska Penal Complex, October 18, 1971 (see *Penal Digest International* 1:5 [October 1971]: 4); Michigan-City, IN, 1972; McAlester Prison, OK, May 1, 1970; Lucasville, OH, May 24, 1973; Framingham Women's Prison, MA, December 13, 1972; and Clinton Women's Prison, NJ, November 8, 1972.
27. Burton-Rose, "War Behind Walls," 26.
28. The Thirteenth Amendment of the United States made slavery or involuntary servitude illegal unless for punishment of a crime: "Amendment XIII Passed by Congress January 31, 1865. Ratified December 6, 1865. Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." Available at www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_amendments_11-27.html, see Amendment XIII (accessed May 31, 2009).
29. Ted Siegel, "Struggle in Ohio," *NEPA News* (October 1973): 3; Burton-Rose, "War Behind Walls," 41.

himself recognized these community corrections facilities as "not so much alternative as additional."³⁵ Even the granting of prison movement demands bolstered the prison system, as witnessed in the campaign against indeterminate sentencing. The reformers who had conceived of indeterminate sentencing in 1870 had viewed it as a "progressive" way to rehabilitate prisoners. But in practice, it was used to keep individuals imprisoned at the discretion of parole boards.³⁶ The 1970s prisoners' movement successfully overturned indeterminate sentencing; by the 1980s, however, individuals on the political Right had viewed this policy as too lenient and used its discontinuation as an opportunity to enact more repressive sentencing policies, such as mandatory minimums in the 1980s and three strikes laws in the 1990s.³⁷

The combination of the disappointing reality of reform and the rapid radicalization of people inside, facilitated by the steady influx of radicals entering prison on politically motivated charges, led reformers and revolutionaries to start coupling demands for institutional changes with calls to overhaul or eliminate the entire system.³⁸ A radical analysis of imprisonment spread, identifying prisons as "warehouses of the poor" or weapons of "genocide" meant to oppress individuals and communities rather than promote safety. In this analysis, rather than being broken and in need of repair, U.S. prisons functioned as they were designed: to be tools for maintaining racial and class hierarchies. The United Prisoners Union wrote, "It is a gross political mistake to struggle for minimal reforms, because even when these reforms are granted, the Koncentration Kamps are still there for those who threaten the ruling class."³⁹ Jerome Miller agreed, characterizing reform as "innovation without threatening the institution's stability"⁴⁰ and "new language to cover old realities."⁴¹

The only solution, then, was to abolish prisons and develop new structures that dealt holistically with the root causes of societal harms. In a letter to one of his supporters, John Clutchette, one of the Soledad Brothers, wrote, "There is but one imperative—overhaul! [Reform] means changing the frame on the wall—but not the picture itself."⁴²

It was in this context of a developing radical, prisoner-class consciousness and regional and local prison organizing that the prisoners at Attica occupied D Yard. The violence by New York State Troopers in response to the takeover (and subsequent self-organizing) of the facility by the prisoners at Attica proved to many the necessity of radical change. Calls for abolishing prisons were widespread. They intermingled with other approaches to prison organizing, including individual prisoner defense committees, prison moratorium organizing, legislative efforts, and insurrectionary appeals. Leftist media, such as the KPFA (Pacifica) radio show *Nothing Is More Precious Than*, covered news of prisoner organizing, promoted campaigns to free political prisoners, and circulated communiqués of underground groups such as the Black Liberation Army that challenged the prison system.⁴³ But even many in the prison movement did not view abolition as viable. It was not until after Attica that organizations explicitly focused on abolition

Although initially dispersed, a common set of abolitionist ideas, strategies, and tactics coalesced during the early to mid-1970s. Abolition was based on the shared belief that social inequalities caused interpersonal violence. In the abolitionist handbook *Instead of Prisons* (1976), the Prison Research Education Action Project (PREAP), a collective of abolitionist pacifists, defined crime “as a problem with roots deep in the social structure, not just as a series of problems of individuals. Rather than punishing individual actors, collective response to the root causes is needed.”⁴⁷ These root causes, including racism, poverty, sexism, and homophobia, were produced by society and the state and resulted in an unequal

began to make concrete demands. They created programs that could effectively abolish prisons by directly addressing the sources of social inequality and interpersonal and systemic violence. From the perspective of Angela Davis, herself a political prisoner in 1971, “the Attica rebellion marked a moment within the history of this country when people started to take seriously the possibility of abolishing the prison.”⁴⁴ Not masses of people, however, as the subsequent rise of mass imprisonment well attests. But to some, Attica and its aftermath raised the specter that the best prison was no prison at all.

Abolition was predicated on the idea that imprisonment was a means to control, maintain impoverishment among, and exert systemic violence upon, communities of color and poor whites. The demand to abolish prisons, and, more recently, to abolish the prison industrial complex, emerged as a challenge to white supremacy, economic inequality, and systemic violence. Activist Bettina Aptheker, a supporter of the Soledad Brothers and active in the campaign to free Angela Davis, wrote,

The issue is not only reform, but also to mount a struggle to abolish the present functions and foundations of the prison system, an effort which can finally succeed only with the abolition of capitalism. . . . Of course, what reforms can be won in day-to-day battle on the legal and political front will be important concessions. But the point is to attack the whole foundation—all the assumptions—involved in maintaining [the] prison system.⁴⁵

A variety of organizations, individuals, and means were employed to further the cause of abolition. This included prisoner unions, prisoner support organizations, revolutionary organizations, pacifists, and even a few judges and prison administrators. The broad politics of abolition provided one of very few places where black nationalists, proponents of armed self-defense, and primarily white, radical pacifists came together in shared politics and practice. Self-identified abolitionists considered themselves a part of a “living tradition of movements for social justice” directly connected to movements to abolish slavery in the nineteenth century. They saw the present-day terms of imprisonment as a different form of slavery that was paradoxically enabled by the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery *except as punishment for a crime*, thereby writing (penal) slavery into law while seeming to formally abolish it.⁴⁶

NOTES

1. Tom Wicker, *A Time to Die: The Attica Prison Revolt* (1975; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 28.
2. For accounts of the Attica uprising, see Brad Lichtenstein, dir., *Ghosts of Attica* (New York: First Run/Icarus Films, 2001); Samuel Melville, *Letters from Attica* (New York: William Morrow, 1972); Wicker, *A Time to Die*. See also Heather Thompson, *Attica!* (New York: Pantheon, forthcoming).
3. See, for instance, Syracuse Attica Coalition, *Attica Is All of Us* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Attica Coalition, 1974).
4. Families and Friends of Prisoners Collective, “Introduction,” in *Doing Time* (Dorchester, MA: Families and Friends of Prisoners Collective, August 1977). Attica was a common point of reference for prison activists throughout this period. For example, Inmates for Action, a prisoner group in Alabama prisons, called its 1974 update “Alabama’s Atticas.” *Midnight Special* 3:4 (April 1973): 5.
5. Daniel Burton-Rose, “War Behind Walls: Work Strikes and Prisoner Self-Organization in U.S. Prisons, 1967–76” (Bachelor’s thesis, Oberlin College, 1998), 37–38.
6. Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 66; Bob Barber and John Pallas, “Riot to Revolution,” in *Punishment and Penal Discipline: Essays on the Prison and Prisoners’ Movement*, ed. Tony Platt and Paul Takagi (San Francisco: Crime and Social Justice Associates, 1980), 148–150.
7. James B. Jacobs, “The Prisoners’ Rights Movement and Its Impacts, 1960–1980,” *Crime and Justice* 2 (1980): 433–434.
8. The vast array of political organizing and cultural production to emerge from behind prison walls in the 1970s has yet to be fully documented. For preliminary overviews, see Ronald Berkman, *Opening the Gates: The Rise of the Prisoners’ Movement* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1979), as well as the texts cited in notes 4 and 6 above, and note 13 below.
9. Outside groups came together around specific campaigns to free political prisoners. For example, the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners (NUCFAD), and later the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (NAARPR), included a wide range of Left groups, with members of the Black Panther Party, the Communist Party USA, and liberal sympathetic lawyers. See *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1988 [1974]), 397–398. NUCFAD co-edited the 1971 book *If They Come in the Morning*, which spotlighted dozens of cases then ongoing, including those of Black Panthers, antiwar activists, women of color feminists, and militants from the American Indian, Chicano, and Puerto Rican independence movements. See Angela Davis et al., eds., *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (San Francisco: The Third Press, 1971). The NAARPR files at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture reveal the ongoing movement solidarity the group attempted throughout the 1970s, as it organized to support political prisoners from a range of causes and fought back against repressive legislation.
10. Ashanti Alston, interview with author, tape recording, Brooklyn, New York, January 5, 2004.
11. “Alabama’s Atticas,” *Midnight Special* 4:6 (August–September 1974): 8.
12. George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).
13. George Jackson, “Toward the United Front,” *Blood in My Eye* (New York: Random House, 1972 and Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1990), 108.

in communities most impacted by imprisonment—mostly poor and black.⁸⁰ Even with a certain liberalization of penal policies in the short term, the long-range-policy approach in the wake of prison radicalism was a massive extension of the prison system in American life.

The growth of the prison system was not just a set of policy decisions but a philosophical orientation toward punishment and control.⁸¹ Abolitionist organizing in the mid-1970s had not only identified the limitations of prison reform but also laid the ideological and organizing foundations that abolitionists continued to use in the early twenty-first century. Twenty-nine years after *Instead of Prisons* was first published, the abolitionist organization Critical Resistance reprinted the handbook. Since the book first appeared, the U.S. prison population has grown from more than 200,000 to more than 2 million, with a massive increase in surveillance and policing, both in prison and in society as a whole.⁸² Yet, according to Critical Resistance's introduction to the new edition, the fundamentals of abolition elucidated in the 1970s remain relevant to ending the current phenomenon of mass imprisonment. "While the climate in which we fight against imprisonment has certainly changed . . . *Instead of Prisons* is as timely and necessary as ever."⁸³



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distribution of power and wealth that benefited only a few.⁴⁸ Prisons were used to maintain this imbalance, failing to make the public safer and endangering the communities they targeted.⁴⁹ For PREAP, "the only meaningful way to change the prevailing American system of liberty for the free, justice for some, and inequality for all [was] through shifts in the distribution of power."⁵⁰

Inmates for Action (IFA), an Alabama anti-prison prisoner group, and its allied organization on the outside, the Committee for Prisoner Support in Birmingham (CPSB), shared this perspective and connected abolition with the need for social change. Mafundi, a former IFA member who worked with the CPSB, wrote, "without the restructuring of society—its values, morals, priorities, etc.—there could never be a realistic effort to rid the country of crime and criminals."⁵¹ Similarly, New England Prisoners Association members in New Hampshire held a "final and foremost objective to abolish prisons and the system which breeds them."⁵² PREAP advocated a three-pronged abolitionist agenda that included "(1) economic and social justice for all, (2) concern for all victims and (3) rather than punishment, reconciliation in a caring community."⁵³ The handbook attempted to ground this tripartite strategy in concrete, community-based models of social change that connected revolutionary transformation of society to personal transformation of individuals and communities.

Maintaining the belief that imprisonment was "morally reprehensible and indefensible," as well as ineffective in actually promoting safety and the healing of interpersonal harms, abolitionists advocated for "reconciliation, not punishment [a]s a proper response to criminal acts"—what would grow to be called transformative justice. PREAP wrote,

The present criminal (in)justice systems focus on someone to punish, caring little about the criminal's need or the victim's loss. The abolitionist response seeks to restore both the criminal and the victim to full humanity, to lives of integrity and dignity in the community. Abolitionists advocate the least amount of coercion and intervention in an individual's life and the maximum amount of care and services to all people in society.⁵⁴

This perspective was shared by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker peace and social justice organization; several members of PREAP were themselves Quakers.⁵⁵ While the Quakers had invented the penitentiary system in 1791, they became leaders in prison reform and, later, prison abolition organizing. AFSC ran a Criminal Justice Program that worked on prison reform and advocated for crisis centers and community empowerment as prison alternatives to more fully address the harm that people experienced and endured, as well as to improve living conditions and help people find employment and educational opportunities. They recommended "that a full range of therapy, counseling, and psychiatric and educational services be made available, free, on a voluntary basis, to the entire population, inside prisons and on the street."⁵⁶ The project of abolition, then, was just as much creative as it was for the destruction of the existing system

of punishment. Prisoner M. Sharon Smolick defined the task in the prologue to *Instead of Prisons*:

It is not enough to endorse a movement, support an issue or reach out among ourselves, inside and outside prisons. As abolitionists we must look to the future and examine the long term impact of their present reality. We must be creative and inquisitive. We must understand our direction and abolition must be that direction because the entire system of punishment has failed.⁵⁷

Abolitionists understood that the development of such a community was a long-term project, and while they advocated swift and massive change, they took steps in the short term to build this new society. In its 1971 report on the state of prisons and the criminal legal system in the United States, AFSC called for investment in communities through funding for education, jobs, housing, and healthcare, as well as an immediate moratorium on prison construction and an end to indeterminate sentencing.

If the choice were between prisons as they now are and no prisons at all, we would promptly choose the latter. We are convinced that it would be far better to tear down all jails now than to perpetuate the inhumanity and horror being carried on in society's name behind prison walls. Prisons as they exist are more of a burden and disgrace to our society than they are a protection or a solution to the problem of crime.⁵⁸

While urgently resisting the current prison system, abolitionists were strong critics of prison reform as it was then unfolding. Echoing Jackson's claim that reform only meant greater repression, abolitionists argued that many reforms only masked the true nature of prisons.⁵⁹ Abolitionists sought to expose prisons as nothing more than the caging of humans, and advocated for "abolitionist reforms" that took power out of the prison system, empowered communities, and created opportunities for expanding abolitionist praxis. This praxis meant reducing and eliminating prisons, most immediately, but it also entailed a broader assault on the ideologies and institutions that made imprisonment possible. As PREAP defined it, "Modern reforms attempt to mask the cruelty of caging. Our goals are not diverted by handsome new facades, the language of 'treatment' and prison managers who deftly gild the bars. Present reforms will not abolish the cage unless they continue to move toward constant reduction of the function of prisons."⁶⁰ Alongside avowed abolitionists, other organizations also worked for moratoriums on prison construction. Abolitionists viewed moratorium as merely a first step, and combined efforts to halt prison construction with programs that empowered communities and furthered decarceration and excarceration.⁶¹ Abolition reforms ranged from expanding community-based services to funding housing and job-creation programs, to improving prison visitation policies. These initiatives sought to address the social problems that caused crime and tried to minimize the isolation that prison imposed. Abolitionists worked to empower their communities

reporter and longtime activist, challenged both men in her 1973 prison expose *Kind and Usual Punishment*. In the book's conclusion, Mitford argued that Waskow and Clark both betrayed the principles of abolition by calling for the confinement of social deviants on enclosed farms—which would not be called prisons but, she argued, would serve the same purpose.⁷⁵ Abolition, therefore, was a contested concept, with a sweeping critique that appealed to a wide range of activists, intellectuals, and policy makers in the 1970s. Even when proponents disagreed on the specifics, the 1970s witnessed a widespread rejection of the existing prison system. Several reforms followed the wave of prisoner organizing and riots between 1968 and 1972. However, the Right and not the Left achieved greater success in massively overhauling the prison system—through its expansion rather than its retraction.

Backlash and Decreasing Momentum

Abolition efforts started to crystallize as the prison movement started to decline. In the mid-1970s, there were numerous calls and efforts to develop national organizations and a coordinated strategy to fight for prisoners' rights, prison reform, and prison abolition.⁷⁶ By the decade's end, these calls faced limited support. This waning support owed, in part, to a combination of limitations within the prison movement and expanded policing and retributive legislation. Recognizing the decline in the movement's appeal, some prison activists acknowledged that they had romanticized prisoners, failed to build popular support for their politics in a "law and order" climate, and responded to urgent crises rather than developing strategic priorities.⁷⁷ Many organizing efforts also depended, in part, on strategic, sympathetic key-holders, such as judges and prison administrators who were sympathetic to prisoners and prisoner advocates. Some of these power brokers made large-scale, if short-lived impacts, such as Jerome Miller, who closed juvenile prisons in Massachusetts in favor of decarceration and improved education because, in his words, "juvenile justice has always been and continues to be neglectful, demeaning, frequently violent, and largely ineffective."⁷⁸ With the increasing salience of law-and-order politics, however, there were fewer sympathetic officials like Miller to whom organizers could turn for support.

Law-and-order politics—which produced control units, created maximum-security prisons, and reintroduced the death penalty—made it more difficult for prisoners to organize. Increasingly punitive sentences were adopted, and an expanded drug war sent unprecedented numbers of people to prison. AFSC recognized that abhorrent practices, such as solitary confinement, were adopted "partially or minimally through the efforts of well-intentioned reformers," which led the organization to wonder whether "the changes we recommend turn out to be two-edged swords?"⁷⁹ Gains made by the prisoners' movement were often utilized or reinterpreted to expand the breadth and severity of the prison system, create more stringent sentencing policies, and "extend the net of social control?"

Other abolitionist groups, such as Inmates for Action (IFA), The New England Prisoners Association (NEPA), and the Prisoners' Solidarity Committee (PSC), shared similar short-term goals as part of an effort to make prisons obsolete. In addition to better prison conditions, IFA advocated for an expansion of educational and vocational programs, "more humane and expanded visiting privileges," conjugal visits, union representation, and the "abolition of segregation (lock up/solitary confinement) and punitive isolation (hole/doghouse) cells, the termination of prison and jail construction, and the development of community-based treatment centers as alternatives to incarceration."⁶⁹

Founded in Rhode Island, NEPA was a multiracial coalition of prisoners, ex-prisoners, and people outside of prison that initially came together to mobilize a national movement for prison reform. Between early 1973 and late 1974, they started to advocate for abolition. They organized for minimum wages for prison labor, a uniform penal code, and prisoner unions. NEPA also helped released prisoners find employment, edited and distributed a newspaper, *NEPA News*, and coordinated family visits at prisons throughout the Northeast. They wanted to "accomplish, promote, and cause creative, modern, progressive, and non-violent prison reform in the United States [that would]:

1. Abolish prisons as they exist and are used today
2. Replace prisons and imprisonment with an alternative that will work and phase out jails for awaiting trials
3. Deal with problems that are NOW facing prisoners, prisons, and the prison system.⁷⁰

With chapters in a dozen states in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest, the PSC organized for the abolition of prisons while providing concrete services in the form of legal assistance, transportation for family visits, and help with correspondence. The PSC also published a newspaper by the same name and publicized news in prisons through pamphlets, press releases, and demonstrations. While PSC activists worked for prison reforms, they consistently argued that justice and true change would only come through the abolition of the existing prison system.⁷¹ "There is only one solution," wrote PSC organizer Tom Soto, "and that is to tear the prisons down."⁷² That position was repeated by abolitionists across the country, including at the 1972 Prison Action Conference at the University of California, Berkeley, which adopted as its slogan, "Tear Down the Walls."⁷³

In addition to these organizing projects, the call for abolition made its way, briefly and sometimes confusingly, into the broader public sphere. Beginning in 1971, Arthur Waskow at the Institute for Policy Studies called for a bicentennial without prisons or jails, a proposal he circulated informally but also published in the *Saturday Review*. Former attorney general Ramsey Clark published a book in 1970 that many journalists and others described as calling for abolition.⁷⁴ Yet some were skeptical of both Waskow's and Clark's proposals, seeing their abolitionism as too thin and not thought out. Jessica Mitford, a bestselling investigative

by designing and implementing solutions to problems of sexual violence, such as rape crisis centers, self-defense instruction, and provision of antirape education to people of all ages and genders. Prisoners also organized inside to prevent sexual assault and to empower survivors of sexual violence who were locked up. Prisoners Against Rape in Virginia and Washington, DC, focused on consciousness-raising, political education, and self-help, with the goal of eliminating rape.⁶² Men Against Sexism (MAS), a gay prisoners' organization in Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla, linked an analysis of sexism, homophobia, and racism to organize against the sexual violence prevalent at the prison. MAS published a newspaper, the *Lady Finger*, provided physical protection for individuals targeted for assault, and fought for gay prisoners' rights.⁶³

Decarceration strategies included fighting against indeterminate sentencing and parole, advocating for shorter sentences, and organizing community-restitution programs. Abolitionists advocated methods of incarceration to reduce dependency on prisons. These strategies included decriminalizing drug use and sex work, lowering bail fines, establishing community dispute and mediation centers, facilitating victim-offender reconciliation programs, alternative sentencing policies, and community probation that would be carried out by community organizations instead of "correctional" probation by probation officers.⁶⁴ Organizers utilized some prison administrators and government programs to make abolitionist gains. In Massachusetts, Commissioner of Corrections John Boone supported the development of community programs as alternatives to imprisonment and, although inconsistent, helped and supported prisoner- and community-led reforms at Walpole, including the formation of the NPRA.⁶⁵

Abolitionist reforms aimed to transfer power from the courts and prisons to "the people." Organizations outside prisons, like the Ad Hoc Committee on Prison Reform in the Northeast, as well as inside prisons, like NPRA at Walpole, "were opposed to all treatment that was not demanded, developed, and self-selected by the prisoners, recognizing that 'normal' could also mean enforced compliance with societal ideals."⁶⁶ Instead, the abolitionist reforms that prisoners designed would improve immediate conditions while contributing to empowerment within their home communities outside of prison. Education was a vital element of this process, understood as a vital step in transformation rather than just a means of self-betterment. At Walpole, NPRA and Black African Nations Towards Unity (BANTU) organized classes in black history; remedial learning programs for reading, writing, and arithmetic; and classes to prepare imprisoned students for college.⁶⁷ BANTU organizer Ralph Hamm recalls,

The Black prisoner population had far-reaching expectations that took from behind the prison walls, having entered as proverbial pariahs; back to our respective communities as educated and contributing members of the Consciousness Movement. We sought meaningful vocational and educational programs to transform us into productive human beings.⁶⁸



Revolution is Never BeGUn 4New, It only Continues where others Left off...