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Behind the Steel Bars of History: The Post-Civil Rights Era Radical Prison Movement

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Cover Page Footnote

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Behind the Steel Bars of History: The Post-Civil Rights Era Radical Prison Movement

Abstract:

The resistance and political action taken by the incarcerated in prisons like Attica Correctional Facility during the post-civil rights era (1968 -1972) faced an unprecedented state-led, counterinsurgent force. The socio-historical context of this suppression is a time of crisis for the U.S. as it struggled to maintain capitalist hegemony in the face of anti-systemic movements from the New Left. The post-civil rights era was a moment in US history that saw the strongest and most radical challenge to racial capitalism to date in the form of a social movement led by prisoners, yet the historical legacy of radical prison organizing continues to be suppressed because the state treated the politics and tactics the incarcerated mobilized behind as a threat to the massive securitization strategy and neoliberal capitalist reconfiguration of the 1970s. I first compare the popular retelling of the civil rights movement as compared to the radical prison movement (in media, education, and collective memory) and then analyze the Attica Manifesto and *Soledad Brother* by George Jackson to understand the contents of radical prison politics and its subsequent suppression. Coming to understand the potential of the incarcerated as a source of a powerful anti-capitalist politic requires us to dispel the idea that history is a form of truth-telling. History is a form of state-mediated collective memory, rather than a “truth,” that justifies the state’s agenda of securitization in the interest of protecting capital.

Keywords: radical prison organizing, racial capitalism, state-mediated history, post-civil rights era

The historical mythology of the civil rights movement includes triumphant stories of Martin Luther King Jr., the Freedom Riders, the Greensboro sit-ins, and Rosa Park’s “misbehavior” (Ulrich, 2007). The tendency for popular history to latch onto a subset of icons as a “repository of edifying examples” (Ulrich, 2007, p. 14) has written out the revolutionary political action of the most demonized and cheapened group in the U.S.—the incarcerated. The prison rights movement has a legacy in the U.S. dating back to the early 20th century, as seen with the political activity of the Nation of Islam (founded in 1930) (Gottschalk, 2005). Incarceration remains inextricably linked to matters of racial justice, so it follows that the prison rights movement progressed alongside the civil rights movement. The leaders and activists of the civil rights

movement knew all too well that the prison was a site of Black struggle—Dr. King spent time in Birmingham Jail, and Freedom-Riders were incarcerated at Parcham Prison, to name just two of countless examples (Chase, 2015). The standard historiography of the civil rights movement terminates it at the passing of civil rights legislation, the assassination of Dr. King, and the rise of the urban rebellions that came to prominence in 1967 and 1968. The post-civil rights era, a contentious but useful periodization¹, was characterized by the highest numbers of prison rebellions to date in the U.S. (Gottschalk, 2005). The popular telling of this historic dissent does not follow the heroism and iconography of the civil rights movement. These political prison rebellions are not even remembered as a continuation of the civil rights movement itself, despite their cooperation and similar agendas. In fact, they are rarely legitimated as social movements. Instead, prison dissent is remembered as an act of disorganized chaos, a far cry from the Freedom movement. They are remembered as riots.

What accounts for this change in the recording of history? The resistance and political action taken by the incarcerated during the post-civil rights era faced an unprecedented state-led, counterinsurgent force in the form of violence and brutality. The political and historical context of this suppression is a time of crisis for the U.S. as it struggled to maintain capitalist hegemony in the face of anti-systemic movements from the New Left. I argue that the post-civil rights era (1968-1972) was a moment in US history that saw the strongest and most radical challenge to racial capitalism—an economic system historically built on the use and maintenance of Black slavery as well as the contemporary dispossession of Black people from land, property, and

¹ Historians of the “long Civil Rights movement” (1930s to the late 1970s) reject the periodization that started the freedom movement in the early 1950s and ended in the late 1960s. They argue that the post-civil rights era narrative does not account for the protest of the communities against mass incarceration and criminalization, which would include the imprisoned (Camp, 2016). I refer to the post-civil rights era narrative only for its historical parameters.

living wages (Kelley, 2016)—in the form of a social movement led by prisoners. The legacy of radical prison organizing continues to be suppressed because the state perceived the politics and tactics that prison organizers utilized as a threat to the massive securitization strategy and neoliberal capitalist reconfiguration of the 1970s. As historians and sociologists grapple with the difficult task of re-configuring common sense understandings of social movements, the incarcerated revolutionaries of the late 1960s and 1970s must be included, but not mythologized like the popular account of the civil rights movement.

The first section of this paper traces the development of the carceral state, a “...more punitive, surveillance and punishment-oriented system of governance” that exercises absolute power over its citizens along lines of race, class, gender, and geography (Weaver & Lerman, 2010, p. 818). It examines the carceral state’s role in the post-civil rights era, and the birth of the radical prison movement. It interrogates why the radical prison movement has been stripped of its legitimacy as a social movement by analyzing the concepts of racial capitalism and historical mythmaking. It features a brief review of the literature on “prison riots” to demonstrate what some dominant areas of scholarship fail to understand about prison riots as social movements. The second section looks to the writings of prolific political prisoner George Jackson and the bloodiest prison rebellion in U.S. history, Attica, as edifying examples that qualify prison activism of the post-civil rights era as a social movement worthy of the same popular attention as the civil rights movement.

The Birth of a Myth

“Black Capitalism, Black Against Itself,” George Jackson, 1970, Soledad Brother

Prison activism in the U.S. is embedded in the broader politics of Black liberation. The civil rights movement's investment in reforming the Jim Crow legal system gave way to using the prison as a site of struggle between white supremacists and Black activists. At the heart of the civil rights movement's attack on the legal tradition and court system was an effort to not only topple segregation but to reconstitute the relationship between Black people and the law. This inevitably comprised a working relationship between those behind bars and those on the streets. Incarceration was both a consequence of challenging segregation and a front to struggle for "Freedom Now," the direct opposition to calls for law and order (Berger 2014). As Dr. King emphasized in his letter from Birmingham Jail, being arrested and sent to jail or prison for engaging in direct action was a given for the freedom movement: "We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: 'Are you able to accept blows without retaliation?' 'Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?'" (King, 1963).

Although there is no denying the relationship between prison and the civil rights movements, the two began to depart from one another in 1967 following the San Quentin race riot. The New York Times reported a racial clash brought on by what assistant warden James W.L. Park, called "activist hoodlums and Black Muslims" (*New York Times*, 1967). Inmates that participated in the riot acknowledged the "self-defeating" nature of it, and underground prison publications and independent, radical ones outside of the prison started to emphasize the necessity of cross-racial struggle focused on class unity (Gottschalk, 2005). This was an open condemnation of the civil rights movement's strategy that focused on explicitly racist practices like Jim Crow laws and institutions like the courts. San Quentin illustrates a turn for the prison movement toward a radical critique of race and class as intertwined oppressive structures, a place

the civil rights movement only grazed the surface of. The Voting Rights Act had been passed by the time the San Quentin riot occurred, and for many this signaled the end of the civil rights movements' battle for civic equality. While this is not to say that political activity ceased, as that is far from the truth, the once strong tie that existed between those fighting on the streets and those behind prison walls began to unravel. The post-civil rights narrative declares an end to the civil rights movement at this historical juncture, but this is premature.

Despite the *de jure* deterioration of Jim Crow, revealing the truth of racism was a difficult task in the newly ushered in “color-blind” era of formal legal equality. As Alexander argues, when one racial order falls, another modified in its form comes to take its place (2012). The toppling of Jim Crow segregation and the gains made by Black citizens produced a backlash from conservative politicians and white supremacists that called for a return to “law and order,” which was a racially coded method of advocating for the reinstatement of a new racial hierarchy. As Camp argues, the bipartisan consensus forged during the Cold War that called for a heightened security regime prioritizing military action, national security policy, and mass prison-building programs was a necessary precursor for the law-and-order movement to have a lasting effect on carceral policy (2016). These actions, referred to as the backlash theory, are only part of the explanation behind mass incarceration. Rather, it is the combined technologies of hegemony—race, police and *profit*—that operate together to build and maintain the carceral state (Patel and Moore 2018). Marginalized Black urban communities were still suffering from a host of problems after the terminal victories of the civil rights movements brought on by what Camp and Alexander term “Jim Crow capitalism” (2016; 2012). Problems with housing, labor, impoverishment, redlining, and police brutality were not just entrenched in racism, but a racist

economic structure. The prison movement's shift to a structural critique, as seen at San Quentin, reflects these political and economic developments.

The magnitude and growth of mass incarceration as a reinstated racial hierarchy therefore is not unprecedented, but it is shocking. The carceral population increased from two hundred thousand people in the late 1960s to more than 2.4 million people by the 2000s (Camp 2016). Piecing together the various components of incarceration in the U.S., which includes 1,719 state prisons, 109 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails and a patchwork of military prisons, immigration detention centers, civil commitment centers, and state psychiatric hospitals, (Sawyer & Wagner, 2009) exposes that a security apparatus has a stronghold on the U.S. The U.S. was faced with a social crisis as racial narratives from the Jim Crow era were dismantled, and thus turned urgently to mass incarceration as its solution. The post-civil-rights era occurred alongside a crisis of hegemony for the US, where a half-century long “neoliberal political project” came to fruition, a term borrowed from Camp that describes the continued effort by the U.S. to refuse the social wage to increasingly racialized and proletarianized sections of the population (2016, p. 4). The refusal of the social wage (the process of defunding and means-testing social programs to a pittance) was the consequence of neoliberals advocating for a partnership between the state and private entities, where all state intervention that laid outside the domain of military spending and security was deemed subservient to the “invisible hand” of the market and private entities (Harvey, 2007). A vital part of this neoliberal regime dates back to the Cold War, where the U.S. appealed to anti-communist sentiment—currently fixed in “the hearts and minds of the American people”—to justify the construction of a security apparatus meant to surveil and incarcerate racialized “deviants” (Camp

2016, p. 5-7). At this moment, when urban prison rebellion spawned across the nation, increased surveillance and policing were the solution to managing this social breakdown of perceived order, which is exactly the responsibility of the state as constructed by the neoliberal project.

Securitization strategies purposely employed a racial ideology that situated defiance and rebelliousness in Black men. According to Camp, “Common sense narratives of security located the source of social problems in the culture and behavior of the racialized urban poor” (2016, p. 10). The securitization efforts of the state during the Cold War and beyond, paired with the law-and-order movement after the civil rights movement, resulted in a strategy that blamed the late 20th century economic crisis on the Black urban poor. This strategy is articulated in a U.S. Department of Labor report titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, popularly known as the Moynihan Report, after its author. The Moynihan Report cast an image of the Black family as defunct and responsible for their own impoverishment, rather than blaming substandard education, declining wages, or scarce employment opportunities (Greenbaum, 2015). Moynihan pointed to a growing number of Black female-headed families and “violent Black men” as an individual cultural deficiency that perpetuated a cycle of poverty (Greenbaum, 2015). This “tangle of pathology” encapsulated all of the social ills faced by the Black community, or as Moynihan wrote:

...A community that allows a large number of men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future – that community asks for and gets chaos (1965).

Moynihan’s fixation on perceived “disorder” and criminality unique to Black men embodies the carceral common-sense of the time yet is far from accurate in its explanation of mass impoverishment. His report exists in a larger body of work by the likes of Herbert Spencer and

William Graham Sumner (the author of *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*) that justifies color-blind racism, a term that describes racism as devoid of “explanatory power” (Kelley, 2016, p. 36). Color-blind racism claims that the U.S. exists in a post-racial society, where social position is based on a slew of other factors other than race, notably cultural differences, or work ethic.

Far from a credible academic argument, color-blind racism works to simultaneously deny racism and maintain the existing racial hierarchy. This dynamic works in favor of law-and-order securitization by justifying harsher punishment and wide-spread incarceration on individual shortcomings rather than racialized structural forces. Although left unacknowledged by the likes of Moynihan and his academic progeny, global neoliberal capitalism had rendered the urban working class and its labor supply redundant as capital flight and de-industrialization took hold (Wilson, 1996). Thus, mass imprisonment was justified as a commonsense effort by policymakers to quell the unemployed and angry masses of the Black and Brown proletariat. Just as capitalism’s primitive accumulation expropriated the peasantry from their land, so too did neoliberal capitalists displace those in the urban landscape as widespread police surveillance encroached upon the space (Patel and Moore 2018). At this moment in carceral state making lies the central reason for the rise and subsequent suppression of radical prison activism. Prison dissent within carceral walls directly opposed the legitimacy of the prison—the crux of alleviating the crisis of racial hegemony. They sought revolution through antiracist and socialist critiques. But the popular recorded history of the post-civil rights era makes no mention of these revolutionary efforts. Common sense security narratives have seeped into the pores of history.

Why this may be relates to theoretical questions of history and knowledge production. It may be that the term *history* implies a truth is being told from the past. But as the old adage goes: history is told from the viewpoint of the victors—from those who have conquered the conquered, colonized the colonized and the few that have profited off of the work of many (Theoharis 2018). History is therefore a process of constructing heroes and designating a select few “historical figures” worthy of being included in the education received by the general, uncritical American population. Popular recognitions of the civil rights movement are better referred to as “memory,” which distinguishes them from the formal historical record that includes its nuances, details and forgotten actors (Ulrich 2007). History must write out those who resist capitalism with calls for radical restructuring. As Jonathan Jackson writes in the preface to *Soledad Brother*, “Nothing is more dangerous to a system that depends on misinformation than a voice that obeys its own dictates and has the courage to speak out” (Jackson, 1971). Memory is not individualized, but rather constructed by the powerful. American classrooms do make mention of Black historical figures like Dr. King and Rosa Parks, but it is done in the most minimal and manipulative way. Far from an objective history, the civil rights movement is surrounded by myth and legend.

The mythicization of history yields political utility for leaders that want to paper over the systemic injustices of the past. Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks are two figures who have fallen victim to these strategies of mythmaking. The “domestication of Dr. King” was played out following his assassination in 1968, when Representative John Conyers introduced the first bill for a federal holiday in his name and honor (Anderson, 2014). According to a 1966 Gallup poll, 72 percent of white Americans had an unfavorable opinion of Dr. King, and this translated into a fierce pushback against the prospect of national recognition for the civil rights leader (Theoharis,

2018). The holiday would continue to be grappled with until Reagan's bid for reelection. Despite his reservations, he recognized the power behind the symbolic act that memorializing King would have when it came to demonstrating racial consciousness and marking the now "completed" battle against racism (Theoharis, 2018). This myth in the making contributed to the carceral state's ability to thwart systemic racial justice. Rather than being a call for radical restructuring, the civil rights movement came to exemplify the U.S. as a post-racial nation of progress. The symbolic power of declaring the civil rights movement to be over, and the triumphant war against Jim Crow won, cast the political activity of Black prisoners as a threat to a racially harmonious America. "Excessive" behavior by Black and poor people in urban rebellions and prison rebellions (open displays of anger, rejecting respectability, etc.) has been written as the source, rather than the solution to, the racial problems that still plagued the noble U.S. (Theoharis, 2018). The post-civil rights narrative was born, a powerful tool for demonizing the prison rights movement.

To be clear, there was never a moment in history where the civil rights movement was accepted by all sectors of society, even after the officialization of Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Nonetheless, King has become a strategic part of mainstream racial consciousness. The process in which this has happened is two-fold: First, news media thrives on individualizing stories of "heroes" and "villains," or simplifying events both present and historical as battles between forces of "good" and "bad"—referred to as the personalization of history (Mahan and Lawrence, 1996). Second, education serves as a method to drill these simplifications of history into the minds of students, where they internalize them to adapt to a world as is (Freire, 1968). Media and education are not always conscious producers of history surrounded by myth and legend, but

rather reproduce the information sanctioned and controlled by the state. The control (and subsequent distortion) of information is only part of the way that the state enforces order, but it is the most relevant to understanding the historical erasure of prison organizing.

In the process of memorializing Dr. King's image, the U.S. has lambasted the prison rights movement for its radical activity. Evoking King and his sanitized image as the pinnacle of racial justice movements was necessary to discredit radical prison organizing. How could a movement that fights systemic racism claim legitimacy when a post-racial narrative dominated public perception? This framing of prisoner resistance manifests as a deeply embedded racism, an almost "polite" racism, that plagues the commonsense of moderate, white liberals. Ironically, it was Dr. King who emphasized this, writing:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice...who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"...who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season" (King, 1963).

The notion that social movements should maintain respectability and adherence to order, like the mythologized civil rights movement, acquired great power in the minds of many. The myth is compelling—it maintains a sense of collectivity and a common ground from which to view social movements more broadly (Theoharis, 2018). In other words, historical myths are comfortable and portray the actors of the past with flattery, which resonates in the hearts and minds of the American people, just as the calls for heightened security did. The harmful material that lies under the surface of these distorted realities make clear what is at stake for prisoners written out of the legacy of social movements. When the white liberal and the overt racist, both

alike, ask why the prison rights movement cannot follow the path of the civil rights movement, they solidify a false narrative meant to deter radical calls for restructuring. The fable of the civil rights movement and the Moynihan Report shed light on the persistent nature of a bad idea: racism in America has been defeated, and those who claim otherwise via political action are to be incarcerated for their disrespect toward law and authority. Prison organizers must overcome the deceptive re-writing of history and a post-racial narrative still in the making.

The scholarship on prison riots frames prison organizers and their uprisings as a physical response to their material conditions, omitting the vital “thinking” elements of these uprisings; political writings of prisoners, the manifestos of demand, the rallying cries and speeches, the recorded negotiations between officials and prisoners, etc. These protests do not fit the dominant model sociologists use for analyzing social movements, and this theoretical problem is created by a distinction between what is considered legitimate political activity and resistance characterized as disorderly (Camp & Heatherton, 2016). In short, we remember some movements and let others disappear into the folds of history. The problem with historicizing prison organizing is that it is neither remembered as a movement nor forgotten, but instead vilified as an act of defiant savagery. If it is not vilified, as academic circles have made an effort to mitigate, it is often simplified into an analysis of unthinking animalistic responses to physical conditions. Ulrich argues that the histories of those who have been glanced over are important to create meaning for the past, but also to create meaning for what generations of people care about now (2007). Current organizers and scholars that work for any movement against injustice, state violence and the exploitation of capitalism must be critical of the history of prison movements to perform meaningful activism.

The current literature proposes a variety of explanations for the causes of American prison riots.² What links these explanations together is their tendency to treat prison riots as isolated events independent of one another; as “one-shot” deals. There are two primary branches of approaches pointed out by Larsen that explain the current state of knowledge on prison riots, the first set focusing on their causation: “powder keg” and “grievance dramatization” theory (Larsen, 1988) . In its simplest form, powder keg theory explains prison riots as a gradual buildup of grievances in response to poor conditions like unsanitary cell blocks, low-quality food, and guard brutality, or in other words, “inhumane conditions change the prison into a time bomb waiting to explode” (Boin & Van Duin, 1995). Grievance dramatization is related to the powder keg theory and explains prison riots similarly as responses to the material conditions that exist within the penal institution. What is unique to grievance dramatization theory is that it explains the origins of prison riots as a purposeful effort by prisoners to bring light to the struggle they currently face, rather than it being some spontaneous action (Larsen, 1988).

Boin and Van Duin propose a new approach: the managerial perspective. The managerial perspective argues against only analyzing prison rioting based on the causes of the disturbance, and seeks to take into the account the happenings of the riots themselves (Boin and Van Duin, 1995, p. 361). Further, Boin and Duin argue that a shift from studying the “kept” (the incarcerated) to studying the “keeper” (correctional administration) leads to one conclusion: “management matters” (1995, p. 362). Boin and Van Duin argue that crisis preparation becomes

² “Riot” is a problematic term I only use when discussing the current literature. Prisoner “rebellion,” “resistance,” “organizing,” and “insurgency” are all better terms that encompass the political nature of events like Attica. Although they all imply different things, they largely refer to the same thing – prisoners within facilities fighting back against carceral authorities and targeting their actions at structures like race and class that uphold the carceral state. They also encompass the activism that was targeted toward securing improved day-to-day material living conditions.

an integral part in prison administration, which has the potential to prevent prison riots before they can flourish. Framing the prevention of prison riots in managerial terms serves to cover up the brutality and violence inflicted against inmates that participate in these actions. Officials utilize language similar to that of the managerial perspective to eliminate “unreliable elements” of their speech (Orwell, 1950). If previous theories are inadequate in explaining the causes of prison riots, the managerial perspective goes even farther, creating another issue. Theories of management, collective behavior and causation are part of an ideology that views the carceral state as legitimate, which does not work to explain the rebellions that were explicitly political in their agendas. Embedded within these theories are strategies to strip prison organizing of its legitimacy, obscure their actions as “riotous,” and confer upon correctional administrations a form of sympathy as they turn to “solutions.” This language of “preventing” prison rebellions underscores not only the way that academia has worked to portray prisoners as non-political actors, but also how there is rarely any value given to them as movements for progress.

By reducing prison riots to a series of disobedient actions in response to immediate conditions, it individualizes a societal problem. Jackson pointed to this flaw in criminology: “The textbooks on criminology like to advance the idea that prisoners are mentally defective. There is only the merest suggestion that the system itself is at fault” (Jackson 1971, p. 26). The managerial perspective’s focus on the administration of the prison reduces the agency of prisoners to a minimum. The inclusion of inmates in theorizing prison riots must go a step further beyond just including inmates’ relationship to material needs and violent activity. Prisoners are part of a larger network of anti-capitalist, anti-racist, liberationist political activity, which has galvanized generations of prisoners to take charge and resist the carceral state. Further,

the prison is not a place where politics go to die. Quite the contrary, the prison works to shape and create new forms of politics.

Although the prison movement can be traced as far back as the early 20th century, the work and death of the incarcerated intellectual George Jackson marks a turning point in the radicalization of prison rebellion. Jackson served as both a mentor for prisoners and a model for political and physical literacy. He gave voice to a broader political impulse that characterized the radical movements of the 1970s. The dawning of the 1970s saw the bloodiest prison rebellion in U.S. history—Attica. The Attica rebellion is more than just a violent riot; it was the culmination of the radical political sentiment that swept among prisoners in the U.S., and a byproduct of the anti-systemic leftist movements that spanned the globe. Although not remembered in historical memory as heroic triumph, the legacy of Jackson and Attica should be written as a potent call for re-structuring an oppressive regime, or the “sound before the fury of those who are oppressed” (*The Attica Manifesto*).

The Ultimate Remedy—Revolution

Upon entering the correctional system, George Jackson recalls a “psychic adjustment” necessary to live in prison. While part of this adjustment was necessary for physical survival, there is no doubt that entering prison produced a radical political imagination in Jackson. On entering the carceral system, he writes: “The very first time, it was like dying. Just to exist at all in the cage calls for some heavy psychic adjustments. Being captured was the first of my fears. It may have been inborn. It may have been an acquired characteristic built up over the centuries of Black

bondage” (Jackson, 1971). For Jackson, the sobering reality of prison led to a distinct political imaginary unique to the incarcerated. It started with radicalization.

Jackson gave himself a political education by reading Mao, Lenin, Trotsky, and other revolutionaries as a means to avoid eternal bondage (Jackson 1971). The importance of a political education for the incarcerated cannot be understated. Prisoners garner an understanding of the common source of their oppression, which positions them to take political action against their oppressors. As Freire writes, “Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated” (1968, p. 74). A political education that critiques existing systems of domination also works to derail the same practices that shroud the history of prison activism in myth and legend. A clearer picture of the microcosm and the macrocosm contextualized Jackson’s suffering in broader historical and political currents. This is evidenced by the progression of his prison letters, where he begins to frame himself as a victim of the state, rather than as a perpetrator. Jackson writes,

You know in fact I’m fast awakening to the idea that I may not owe anyone anything and that they even might owe me. I have given four-and-a-half years of life, during which I have had to accept the unacceptable, for \$70 that I didn’t take – I protest, I protest (1964).

Furthermore, Jackson solidified his agency through political education by gaining the ability to contextualize his experiences and articulate his grievances with a strong command of the literature. The direct focus on Jackson’s revolutionary zeal as well as the story that created it props him up as a building block in a revolution (Sciullo, 2017). Just as Dr. King gained momentum due to the efforts of the unnamed comrades and workers on the streets, Jackson’s

legacy is built on the work of many unrecognized prison activists. To recognize this is to resist the personalization of history that subverts prison activism.

There are many revolutionary figures in the prison movement and fight for Black power that should be recognized for their work, but Jackson was an obvious choice for this analysis. Firstly, he has well established ties to revolutionary thinking through his prison education. His collection of letters, *Soledad Brother*, proved influential beyond the scope of Black literature, capturing the way prison disenfranchises “social as well as individual bodies” (Berger 2014, p. 161). His critical observation of the carceral state provided a useful metaphor of the prison as a site of the hidden forces of oppression in the U.S., all rooted in fascism and capitalism (Berger 2014, p. 164). Jackson combined the brutality of the caged carceral environment with the idea of metaphorical confinement to contextualize social issues within the prison. Whereas the mainstream view of prisoners viewed them as perpetrators and the state as victim, Jackson’s thinking helped forward the narrative that the opposite was the case: prisoners were victims of state violence (*Soledad Brother*). Re-framing prisoners’ position in relation to the state was crucial for the radical anti-capitalist critique of the prison movement to take hold. Jackson is vital to the history that writes prisoners as activists.

Jackson’s work helped develop a template of how to assert one’s agency in the prison system. He positioned himself as the subject of his letters and pushed back against the common practice of de-individualizing prisoners into masses known only by the numbers on their cell blocks (Sciullo, 2017). More than just an autobiographical story, *Soledad Brother* remains a milestone because it demonstrated the failure of the justice system and served as an outright rejection of Black criminality. Jackson refused to be muted and dedicated himself to a life

fighting for political revolution in spite of, and directly positioned against, incarceration. The prospect of a radical imaginary attempting to make his politics a reality proved to be a threat taken seriously by carceral authorities. Not just Jackson alone, but the fact that his writings and teachings were disseminated amongst other prisoners across facilities made once far-off radical politics an expected reality. His second book, *Blood in My Eye*, has been accurately described as a “manual for guerilla warfare” that emphasized revolutionary warfare and the political interventions Jackson wanted to advance (Berger 2014, p. 158). Unfortunately, capitalism’s dictates are impossible to avoid, and it will stop at nothing to silence dissenters.

In 1971, San Quentin prison was launched into a scene of chaos, the events of which still remain unclear. By some accounts, Jackson had a visitation and used the opportunity to launch a long-planned escape attempt with fellow comrades, armed with a gun taken from an officer (Berger 2014). The evidence behind this theory is thin and the details are hazy. Others speculate that Jackson did not gain possession of a firearm, and instead overpowered an officer on his way to the Adjustment Center (AC) of San Quentin, where his “half hour revolution” began (Berger 2014). After a brief takeover of the AC, the inmates were suppressed and captured by correctional officers who proceeded to brutalize them with extreme physical and racially charged punishment (Berger 2014). After a gruesome evening of torture by correctional officers, some men, including Jackson, were murdered on sight and left for dead in the San Quentin courtyard.

The nature of prison is predicated on death, where life is defined by the possibility that one could die at any point in time (Berger, 2014). Communities that are shaped by death form their social bonds through the act of memorializing those that have fallen to the carceral state, or as Berger argues, “[To] organize in and against the prison, then, is an act of memory. It requires

remembering, across the divide of space more than time, the existence, the humanity, of those in prison” (2014, p. 143). Acts of memory are a political force for prisoners as they mobilize behind their fallen brethren. Prisoners saw Jackson as a martyr for a just cause and as a symbol for the assault on the carceral state. His death would haunt carceral authorities for decades to come as prisoners began to take radical action toward realizing the political imaginary established in Jackson’s writings. What further galvanized prisoners toward revolt was the treatment of Jackson’s death by “law and order” authorities and media, who generated an air of distrust and extreme thinking as they could not agree upon the facts of the murder. Jackson’s memory was contested ground for political gain – whether it be his demonization by carceral pundits or his memorialization by prisoners. Just as in life, in death Jackson was a figure for prisoners to believe in action that could topple the system that holds them so close to death. Jackson’s legacy would catalyze one of the strongest challenges to racial capitalism in American history. His spirit’s first destination—Attica Correctional Facility.

Upon hearing the news of Jackson’s death, inmates at Attica, located in Upstate New York, launched a silent protest and fasted. The daily living conditions in Attica were in desperate need of improvement that prison administrators had not bothered with. The unifying banner of Jackson and his radical politics combined with a desire to improve their lot launched Attica toward full blown rebellion on September 9th, 1971. For the next four days, prisoners created a community within the yard as they were being watched by police and national media. Often described as one of the bloodiest prison riots in U.S. history, with a death toll of 43 (32 inmates and 11 officers) (Mahan and Lawrence, 1996, p. 425), it is also a story that shows the dignity and strength of men, rallying behind a carefully constructed political message. The inmates of Attica

produced the *Attica Liberation Faction Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Depression Platform*, a document outlining demands for reformed healthcare, better quality food, unbiased legal advocacy and the right to unionize for fair working conditions. Although these demands are significant because they show the deplorable conditions the incarcerated are subject to in max-security facilities like Attica, a closer reading of the document reveals the radical politics that these inmates organized behind.

The inmates refer to prisons as the “Fascist concentration camps of America,” where there is violation of “Man’s right to knowledge and free use thereof” (Attica Liberation Faction 1971). They continue on: “Many prisoners believe their labor power is being exploited in order for the state to increase its economic power and to continue to expand its correctional industries...This is class legislation, class division” (Attica Liberation Faction 1971). Illustrated here is a fatal flaw in the managerial perspective. The revolutionary politics espoused in this manifesto are but one of many examples of prison intellectualism being at the root of prison resistance that focus on the administration’s actions misses entirely. Administrative perspectives are willfully ignorant to these politics and serve to maintain a status quo that is opposed to revolutionary politics. Furthermore, the Attica Manifesto was produced within a global political context that Wallerstein refers to as the 1968 “world-system revolution” (1989).

The world-system revolution was a three year period marked by demonstration, disorder, and violence by movements across the globe and conditioned by the social and political struggles within their geographic origins. Wallerstein defined six varieties of global anti-systemic movements that emerged from 1968. In the U.S. (and West more generally) the two most prevalent are the “old left” movements in the form of trade-unions and labor parties and the new

social movements that are defined around particular oppressed groups—women, “minorities,” etc. (Wallerstein, 1989). Prison organizing may be fit into the latter categorization because it is rooted in the anti-systemic heritage of the civil rights movement and Black Nationalism. Additionally, the disproportionate incarceration of the Black and poor presents an opportunity for prison organizing to center its strategy around resisting racism and economic suppression. Wallerstein argues that these varieties of movement are not isolated from one another, and at the intersection of them lies geographic overlap and innumerable disagreements and hostilities (442). These categorizations are part of the incomplete effort to properly historicize prison organizing as a signal shift in resistance against capitalism.

Attica comes toward the end of the world-system revolution, so it may be described as the product of global movements positioned against fascism and capitalism, rather than it being a bout of untethered violence. It is a microcosm within the macrocosm, the grain of sand within the sandbox of class and racial struggle (Bannerji, 2005). The strongest feature of the Attica Manifesto and the politics of the inmates that created it is that they avoid what Bannerji refers to as “an ordering of regulatory parts—the old utilitarian arithmetic” (2005, p. 146). As argued by Bannerji, social and political theorizing has fallen into a practice of algorithmically combining race, class and gender through the practice of intersectionality, leading to inadequate conceptualization of the social experience (2005, p.144-145). The politics formulated behind prison walls are all encompassing—they structure resistance around a worldview that places the prison as a microcosm for structural forces at work. Attica revolutionaries articulated an understanding that the prison serves more than one purpose for the state. They understood their site of struggle to be a central component in what Patel and Moore call “making new capitalist

frontiers” (Patel and Moore, 2018). Part of this frontier making involved enclosing upon just what the prisoners of Attica referred to as “Man’s right to knowledge.”

The unique social position of the prison—and therefore the status of the incarcerated—is contradictory to the classifications posed by Wallerstein. The day-to-day living conditions and material living of the incarcerated are unique when compared to other populations in other social movements. Confinement, geographic sequestration, and social death make for a peculiar struggle. Prisoners are in a league of their own, so much so that their political activity has been disqualified from the state-mediated telling of history. They have also been excluded from the intellectual conversation about social movements and their trajectories in the post-war era. As mentioned, part of the linkage between differing movements is their ability to traverse geographic boundaries. This is near impossible for the incarcerated, as most carceral facilities are located away from population centers. This “out of sight, out of mind” nature of prison facilities is not some unintended action of government officials, cartographers and the various other architects of mass incarceration, but rather a purposeful deed to suppress prison resistance more easily, and to reinforce the prison as a removal from society. Their demands go beyond the material conditions of the prison facility, what Holloway calls “the scream” of social movements: the dismay at their current reality and the imagined alternative to that reality (Holloway, 2019). For example, the Attica revolutionaries demanded that they be granted permission to emigrate to a non-imperialist country. The inherent anti-imperialist, de-colonial consciousness of the Attica prisoners framed the prison as a component of the state violence used against the “Global South” for the gain of profit via labor and resource extraction. Despite Attica’s eventual violent

suppression by Governor Rockefeller, it still lives on as a touchstone of radical activity against mass incarceration and racial capitalism.

The political consciousness of the Attica revolutionaries provides the template for modern prison-abolitionist social movements. According to Barbra Fields, “Ultimately, the only check upon oppression is the strength and effectiveness of resistance to it” (1990). But how are modern movements to proceed if prison activism like Attica is not taken seriously? If history writes out Attica and strips it of its revolutionary legacy, a dangerous ideology will persist. This ideology structures prisons to be focal points of capitalism’s maintenance, where incarceration is the go-to solution for any resistance that threatens the state’s ability to accumulate capital via exploited labor. By acknowledging Jackson, Attica and the long legacy of radical prison organizing not included in this paper as legitimate social movements with an array of knowledge, leftist movements of today will gain momentum. This is not just a call for acknowledgement across the prison walls by those on the outside. Rather, movements must start from the real locus of oppression. The lived experiences of the incarcerated and their unique political configuration should be the source of movement building, not an afterthought or accessory to those on the streets.

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