

## COMMENTARY

# Passive Revolution and the Movement against Mass Incarceration: From Prison Abolition to Redemption Script

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**A**T A RECENT CONFERENCE THAT BROUGHT TOGETHER ACADEMICS and activists from the movement against mass incarceration, one of the authors of this commentary, Oscar Soto, sat through several days of presentations on the state of the prison reform movement and directions for future research and activism. However, entirely and painstakingly absent from the proceedings was the prison abolition agenda. Without a single exception, participants failed to critique—or even mention—the system of global capitalism that has produced surplus humanity and mass incarceration. Instead, the majority of speakers focused on reform and, in particular, on providing prisoners and the formerly incarcerated with the opportunity for higher education. “Education not Incarceration” seemed to be the dominant motif.

The passage in late 2018 of a prison reform bill (the First Step Act) is indicative of the newfound interest among the dominant groups in prison reform. The bill, among its various provisions, gives judges more discretion when sentencing drug offenders, reduces the life sentence for some drug offenders with three convictions, or three strikes, from life to 25 years, and

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boosts prison rehabilitation efforts, including educational and training programs that allow prisoners to earn credit. Although Democrats and Republicans alike cheered the bill as a breakthrough, particularly revealing was its endorsement by conservative and far-right groups, ranging from the Cato Institute to the Koch brothers-backed Americans for Prosperity. Even the Fraternal Order of Police and the union representing federal prison guards backed the bill. What accounts for this rather abrupt change of heart among the dominant groups, the corporate elite, and their political and police agents?

The radical critique of mass incarceration and the movement for prison abolition have been around for half a century, if not longer. That said, the movement gained steam in the early twenty-first century, linking the call for abolition to a critique of global capitalism and empire, as Angela Davis (2003, 2016), among others (see Puryear 2013, The CR10 Publications Collective 2008), has discussed in several recent books, while Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) in her bestseller *Golden Gulag* delivered a devastating critique of the relationship between crisis in capital accumulation and the expansion of the prison-industrial complex. However, it was with the 2012 publication of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* that the mainstream took notice and began to embrace the movement against mass incarceration. However, that embrace has been icy. Far from helping to do away with the causes and consequences of mass incarceration, it has all the makings of an attempt at what the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci referred to as passive revolution, that is, an attempt from above to bring about mild reform in order to undercut movements from below for more radical change.

The irony here should not be lost. The organizations and political agents of the corporate elite that have now embraced reform are the same ones that championed capitalist globalization and one of its by-products, mass incarceration. The Cato Institute, for instance, founded in 1977 to promote the emerging neoliberal agenda of the corporate state, free markets, and globalization, has done as much as any group among the power elite to push the very conditions of capitalist restructuring and class warfare from above in the United States and worldwide over the past four decades that have resulted in an exponential expansion of the ranks of the surplus humanity—disproportionately drawn from racially oppressed populations—and the concomitant systems of mass social control and repression that produced mass incarceration in the first place (see, e.g., Robinson 2014, Chapter 5; 2018a; 2018b; 2020).

In recent years, however, the institute has adopted prison reform as one of its major foci. The Cato Institute is joined in this newfound concern for overincarceration and criminal justice reform by what appears to be the entire assortment of liberal and conservative corporate-funded think tanks and foundations, ranging from The Heritage Foundation, the Koch brothers, and the Ford, MacArthur, Kellogg, Rockefeller, Mellon, Soros, and Carnegie foundations,<sup>1</sup> among others. These foundations, for instance, funded to the tune of \$100 million the Art for Justice Fund in 2017 to dole out grants in strategic doses to criminal justice reform groups (Scutari 2018).

As politicians, foundations, and the corporate media have taken up the matter of mass incarceration, the focus has shifted in the public agenda targeting mass incarceration from radical critique, including abolition, to reform, and from the injustices of a brutal neoliberal global capitalism that has generated the conditions leading to mass incarceration to a redemption script. The theme of co-optation by capitalist philanthropy was first raised by Marx and Engels (1848/1978, 496), who wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* that a sector of the capitalist class is “desirous of redressing social grievances in order to secure the continued existence” of their rule. More recently, the collective INCITE! Women of Color against Violence published in 2007 their groundbreaking anthology, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. In it, they describe this complex as “a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements” (8–9).

In his remarkable study *Under the Mask of Philanthropy*, Michael Barker (2017, 217) shows how the politics of capitalist philanthropy is aimed at deflecting challenges to the system:

Reform or revolution? This is a question that is central to effective progressive social change. From many people’s point of view there is little doubt that capitalism must be eradicated, so the only question that remains is “how might this revolutionary process proceed? Revolutionary action does not negate reform, as radical reforms are a critical part of any socialist praxis of change. On the other hand, liberal reforms without revolutionary direction are unlikely to build the momentum that will be necessary to oust capitalism. Thus understanding how leading activists and intellectuals who were formerly committed to

revolutionary social change give up on such principles and dedicate their lives to moderating capitalist oppression is critical for social and political movements seeking to resist such challenges.

The danger here is that the radical critique of mass incarceration that has gained traction in recent years, linking it to capitalism, the mass repression of oppressed communities, and a ruthless prison–industrial complex bent on turning mass social control into multiple sources of accumulation, will become eclipsed by the rise of the redemption script. In this script, the foundations and institutes of the corporate order fund researchers and activists to focus on the redemption of those incarcerated in place of a radical critique of the prison–industrial complex. These ostensibly private institutions of the ruling class have set about to fund organizations, grassroots campaigns, and progressive groups that have taken up the struggle against mass incarceration. As the headline in one article by the industry publication *Inside Philanthropy* proclaimed: “Redemption: An Accelerator Puts Former Inmates in the Driver’s Seat” (Rojc 2017). The redemption script is all about helping those incarcerated and released to absorb capitalist ideology and integrate into the capitalist labor market as compliant workers and so-called social entrepreneurs. As the article reads:

With funders like the Ford Foundation, the Public Welfare Foundation and others footing the bill, a range of nonprofit and community groups have been helping the formerly incarcerated successfully reenter society. Techniques like job training, education (including by bringing college into prisons), and even “pay for success” programs have paid off. According to Tulaine Montgomery, who leads New Profit’s Unlocked Futures program, job creation and economic opportunity are the surest ways to make those second chances stick.... [This] new initiative, Unlocked Futures, is an incubator that supports, in part, formerly incarcerated social entrepreneurs who’ve turned their lives around and want to give back. “This program is a rebuke to the narrative that ‘these people’ can’t be viable business leaders,” Montgomery told me. Unlocked Futures’ first cohort includes eight entrepreneurs operating both nonprofit and for-profit ventures. They’re all united by a “double bottom line”—succeeding in their own spheres and working to end mass incarceration. They get \$50,000 each, plus individualized training, coaching and workshops over the course of 16 months. (ibid.)

### **Abolition, Redemption, Hegemony, and Passive Revolution**

The Italian communist Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of passive revolution to refer to efforts by dominant groups to bring about mild change from above in order to defuse mobilization from below for more far-reaching transformation. Integral to passive revolution is the co-optation of leadership from below and the integration of that leadership into the dominant project. Gramsci also referred to this process as *transformismo*, in which rule by the dominant groups is dependent on the ongoing absorption of intellectual, political, and cultural leaders of the subordinate majority into the ruling bloc and the resulting decapitation and disorganization of resistance from below.<sup>2</sup> Passive revolution comes into play at times when the system faces an impending crisis of hegemony. Whenever the hegemony of the bourgeoisie begins to disintegrate and a period of organic crisis develops, the process of reform or reorganization that is needed to reestablish its hegemony will to some extent have these characteristics of passive revolution.

Gramsci developed the general concept of hegemony to refer to the attainment by ruling groups of stable forms of rule based on consensual domination of subordinate groups. Gramsci's notion of hegemony posits distinct forms, or relations, of domination, in brief: coercive domination and consensual domination. Hegemony may be seen as a relationship between classes or groups in which one class or group exercises leadership over other classes and groups by gaining their active consent. Hegemony is thus rule by consent, or the cultural and intellectual leadership achieved by a particular class, class fraction, strata, or social group as part of a larger project of class rule or domination. All social order is maintained through a combination of consensual and coercive dimensions; in Gramsci's (1972, 263) words, hegemony is "consensus protected by the armor of coercion." For Gramsci, then, the state is not all repression; it plays an educative role, seeking consent through intellectuals and activists brought into the state's programs through political, professional, and syndical associations that are funded and organized by the private associations of capital and the ruling class.

As William I. Robinson (2004, 2014, 2018a) has discussed in considerable length elsewhere, in the wake of the worldwide rebellions of the 1960s and the 1970s crisis of world capitalism, emerging transnational elites launched capitalist globalization as a project to break resistance worldwide, regenerate global capital accumulation, and reconstitute the hegemony they had lost. These emerging transnational elites appeared to have carried out a passive revolution involving the reorganization of the world political economy

and social relations while neutralizing the resistance of the subordinate majority through a combination of consensual incorporation (co-optation) of leading strata of activists and organic intellectuals from below—often through diversity and multicultural agendas and the identitarian politics of inclusion—and the development of new systems of mass social control and repression. Capitalist globalization has had the effect of an unprecedented expansion of the ranks of surplus labor that, in the United States, has been drawn disproportionately from racially oppressed communities and that came to constitute the raw human refuse for mass caging alongside other forms of social control carried out by an expanding global police state (on this latter matter, see Robinson 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020).

However, global capitalism is again facing a crisis of hegemony that has involved renewed challenge to the system by mass movements from below, including the movement critiquing the prison–industrial complex, linking it to capitalism and calling for abolition. For passive revolution to succeed in stabilizing ruling-class hegemony, the mild reform from above must also involve the diffusion of the ideological and programmatic content of reform and have it achieve hegemony over calls for more radical change. That is, legal reforms such as the First Step Act and others undoubtedly to come must involve the diffusion of the redemption script so that it displaces the radical critique of the prison–industrial complex and abolition as the hegemonic narrative.

Abolition activist Dylan Rodriguez (2008, 99) notes in his contribution to the activist book *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle Against the Prison Industrial Complex*:

Avowedly progressive, radical, leftist, and even some misnamed “revolutionary” groups find it opportune to assimilate into this state-sanctioned organizational paradigm, as it simultaneously allows them to establish a relatively stable financial and operational infrastructure while avoiding the transience, messiness, and possible legal complication of working under decentralized, informal, or even “underground” auspices. Thus, the aforementioned authors [fellow contributors to *Abolition Now!*] suggest that the emergence of the state-proctored non-profit industry ‘suggests a historical movement away from direct, cruder forms [of state repression], toward more subtle forms of state social control of [of the movement against mass incarceration].

Hegemony should be understood as an expression of broadly based consent, manifested in the acceptance of ideas and supported by material

resources and institutions. There has been a symbiosis between corporate funders, institutions, and the state in the current campaign to co-opt the new movement against mass incarceration. The resurgent investment in prison educational funding, educational programs for the formerly incarcerated, and programs for the formerly incarcerated to enroll in higher education may be welcome in and of themselves. However, they serve the larger purpose of the hegemony of the redemption script. Deprived of a radical critique of capitalism and its prison-industrial complex, the movement against mass incarceration runs the risk of being tamed before it has the chance to develop into a revolutionary movement for abolition as part of the struggle against the depredations of global capitalism.

Of course, co-optation of the movement against mass incarceration is the consent side of consensus protected by the armor of coercion. As the state-philanthropical-corporate complex sets about at passive revolution, the state is also drastically expanding its repressive apparatuses as a global police state comes into existence (Robinson 2018a, 2018b, 2020). Recall that a hegemonic project is constructed, in Gramsci's view, from within the extended state. In Gramsci's notion, this extended (or enlarged) state incorporates both political society (the state proper) and civil society. For Gramsci (1972, 12), "these two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of hegemony which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'juridical' government." As social justice struggles face off against the increasingly repressive state in this time of renewed capitalist crisis, those of us in the movement against mass incarceration must at the same time wage an uncompromising political and ideological struggle in civil society against co-optation by the redemption script.

## NOTES

1. A single Google search of "Cato Institute prison reform" reveals numerous entries. See also the institute's home page at [www.cato.org/](http://www.cato.org/). The same goes for The Heritage Foundation. Similar searches for other conservative and liberal corporate-funded foundations reveal, virtually across the board, a newfound concern with overincarceration and prison reform. See, e.g., The Heritage Foundation, "Overcriminalization," at [www.heritage.org/crime-and-justice/heritage-explains/overcriminalization](http://www.heritage.org/crime-and-justice/heritage-explains/overcriminalization). See also: the MacArthur Foundation's Criminal Justice program, at [www.macfound.org/programs/criminal-justice/](http://www.macfound.org/programs/criminal-justice/); the Ford Foundation's Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Justice strategy, at [www.fordfoundation.org/work/challenging-inequality/gender-racial-and-ethnic-justice/us-program/](http://www.fordfoundation.org/work/challenging-inequality/gender-racial-and-ethnic-justice/us-program/); information about the Kellogg Foundation (and other programs), at <https://slackhq.com/next-chapter-a-pilot-program-aiming-to->



help-formerly-incarcerated-individuals-find-work-and-succeed-in-tech; and the Rockefeller Foundation's Criminal Justice Initiative, at [www.drfund.org/programs/criminal-justice/](http://www.drfund.org/programs/criminal-justice/).

2. Among other places, Gramsci developed the notions of passive revolution and *transformismo*, and discussed fraud and corruption, in his various writings on Italian history. There is no one section in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1972), but see in particular pages 52–120.

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