

## REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Tony Platt, *Beyond These Walls: Rethinking Crime and Punishment in the United States* (St. Martin's Press, 2019)

### Beyond These Walls: "Connecting our Sorrows" and Radical Envisioning

Michelle Brown\*

"DISTANCE MATTERS," ENDS THE EPIGRAPH FROM EVA HOFFMAN that opens Platt's (2019, 3) book. It goes on to read, "Stand too close to horror, and you get fixation, paralysis, engulfment; stand too far, and you get voyeurism or forgetting." This is the balancing act of affective and intellectual rigor Platt asks of a historical moment resurgent with radical possibilities. "Finding the right combination of anger, passion, and analytical complexity," he writes, "is the challenge" (ibid., 11). Platt's big-picture effort at this kind of thinking reminds us of the important question of what kinds of writing—and thinking—we need now. In this book, that effort is marked by a passionate, carefully crafted synthesis of history, research, autobiographies, fiction, poetry, and activism. His work falls among the volumes that weave, among a vast set of materials, masterful critiques of the violent mosaic of police, courts, and prisons. In this case, that work is done in a manner that historically situates these institutions within 1) a narrative of the carceral state, where the force of law and the powers to punish extend well beyond any notion of a criminal justice system, and 2) the necessity of a visionary movement to counter these configurations. *Beyond These Walls* reads our history and paradigms—in particular, the profound historical problem of criminal injustice and its foundational inequalities—back to us, while also presenting them in a new and innova-

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tive way that demands better and bolder thinking from expert scholars and the novice student alike. New questions and fertile terrain for research and social movement strategy take shape across nearly every paragraph. For those of us who have been plotting for a while now the amorphous borders of a carceral state, Platt's work provides exemplars to see how the history of the present is grounded in a past with important patterns but distinctive, and sometimes strategic, moments of rupture as well.

Platt does this work through a series of powerful directives that he follows across the book. First, he insists we must see the breadth of the problem of criminal justice, not just its most publicized indicators: police violence, for instance, or mass incarceration. Policing, punishing, and criminalizing are practices that occur broadly across social relations and institutions, culminating in a "double system" of injustice that has always produced exceptions to justice: targeting Black communities, people of color, immigrants, and the poor. Welfare, social services, and labor itself have been transformed by the carceral state, with Platt noting there are more carceral workers than nurses, teachers, and social workers. Second, our analyses are similarly incomplete without historical investigations of the patterns and ruptures in these formations. The past does not simply inform the present; it offers vital perspectives into the extensiveness of police and carceral power as well as the limits and possibilities of reform and transformation. Third, our analysis should be cautiously, rigorously hopeful—attentive to the tensions, fragmentation, conflicts, and contradictions of the state, which is never fully coherent. One of the crucial contributions of Platt's book is that our modes of analysis are not fully developed unless we are attentive to strategies that open up space for an informed politics of resistance. Here, I am reminded of abolitionist Mariame Kaba's invocation: "Hope is a discipline" (Sonenstein & Wilson 2018). Fourth, we must struggle against the collective resistance, historically and now, to structural change. This will require deeper analyses of distinctive kinds of reform across time and their fragility, co-optation, harms, and abilities to open up meaningful pathways to social change (the ubiquitous call for nonreformist reforms).

These themes are carefully worked through across the book but it is the volume's emphasis upon bold, visionary thinking that I was most drawn to. *Beyond These Walls* comes with a perspective that happens only if you are Tony Platt at this moment in life and history, which is not to say it's a life's work (as some reviews are doing) but rather that intellectual and political life has an important work to it. For this reason, it is the Author's Note that emerges as one of the hidden gems of Platt's book. It is a vital personal account of

a key moment in the history of criminology, one that should resonate with current activist scholars. In this Millsian merging of history and biography, we see what Jordan Camp (2016) calls the Gramscian “conjuncture” of state violence and social movements across Platt’s life—and, for criminologists, forces that mark the founding and infamous closing of Berkeley’s School of Criminology in the 1970s. In a talk about his book, given at New York University’s Prison Education Program, he describes an earlier time when “I stopped writing about criminal justice issues . . . so depressing. How many ways are there to tell people how bad it is? It’s not a good way to teach.” It is not a good way to live or pursue worlds either. However, I hear this same kind of intellectual despair daily among colleagues and students. Indeed, it is the dominant (and, in many ways, necessary) legacy of criminology. Part of what Platt’s book reminds us is that our work is woefully incomplete without attention also to social movements and the perpetual efforts to reform, resist, rethink, and dismantle the structural logics and relationships that undergird criminal justice.

This rethinking stands out in a chapter late in the volume, titled “Radical Visions . . . How the arrested, incarcerated, and humiliated find solace in each other, make do under the worst of conditions, and contribute their ideas and imagination to the world” (Platt 2019, 175). Here, Platt reminds us of an immense historical archive of writings from jail and prison as well as labor, revolutionary, and civil rights movements, one, I would add, that continues into the present across a burgeoning world of digital popular curricula, documentary film, and social media focused on expanding social movements. Platt illuminates how the carceral state has been the site of extraordinary creative output and organizing, as well as an opportunity for the politically committed to deepen their dedication to social justice. Spaces of writing, political study, and affective and artistic expression have helped deepen these emancipatory commitments (signaling a critical need for more of these spaces) and yet they have also been quickly closed off and shut down in counterinsurgent moments. For Platt, we must look to these spaces, not out of nostalgia or a weak form of optimism but in order to understand the challenges we face in movement work, education, and study. He insists that a progressive vision comparable to the Right’s dystopian vision, one that reaches, organizes, and mobilizes people, will require nothing less. We will not all agree on the pathway forward. Indeed, I differ in my own analysis of some of Platt’s recommendations for change. Platt is willing to concede certain reforms of police and governance that I am wary of, but this very

discussion makes us do the work of positioning. Where do we fall on the complex issues of state violence, governance, the needs of justice, community, and people? What are our common points and our points of absolute resistance? How can we organize together across these differences?

We must be relentless in our efforts to dig deeper into these dialogues and engagements. It is in the end, Platt (ibid., 105, 110) writes, quoting James Baldwin, “a long tale to tell.” As a starting point, Platt (ibid., 250–51) tells us we might begin by, echoing Baldwin again, “connecting our sorrows,” doing everything we can to fulfill Fannie Lou Hamer’s imperative to “bring this thing out to the light.” We will no doubt continue to fail but we can, as Platt encourages us, fail better. Someday, we might win too.

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## Toward a Rigorous Unruliness

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**T**ONY PLATT AND PAUL TAGAKI (1977/1981, 31) ARGUED THAT TO understand contemporary intellectual and ideological trends of criminology required locating them “in the context of an expanding criminal justice apparatus, the contradictions of monopoly capitalism and

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the impact of the current economic and political crisis on petty bourgeois intellectuals.” That 1970s crisis produced an unstable resolution of decades of neoliberalism, marked in the United States in particular with the massive expansion of carceral power.

The 2008 economic crash accelerated and deepened the previous three decades’ regime of austerity. The crash and its long aftermath pushed carceral apparatuses, already under siege by a decade of wide and deep abolitionist organizing, into a serious legitimacy crisis brought to a head with the emergence of Black Lives Matter. At the same time, pushback against austerity has stripped many centrist, and especially liberal/centrist, parties of their electoral bases. Socialists and fascists have re-emerged as voices of the abandoned. For an increasing number of people, it seemed clear that, in the words of Édouard Louis (2019, 80), politics had become “a matter of life and death.”

In the midst of the contemporary crisis, Platt offers *Beyond These Walls: Rethinking Crime and Punishment in the United States*. What is on offer? Lessons, suggestions, admonitions drawn from a half century of struggle and study. This review focuses in particular on Platt’s interventions into the “common sense” of our existing analytical concepts as well as his incisive criticism of reform, both of which are informed by Platt’s historical methodology and vantage.

Terms like “criminal justice system,” in Platt’s view, have given many organizers too simple a view of what we are up against. He prefers “criminal justice institutions” that engage in “operations” (Platt 2019, 21). Similarly, he argues that we need an idea of the carceral state that recognizes it lacks coherence and is “full of tensions and internal conflicts” (ibid., 20). He insists on a historical perspective that shows us that “the past bleeds into the present” (ibid., 18), as well as grasping the full breadth of carceral operations.

The heart of the book is a series of brief histories showing how the past shapes later struggles. Our historical perspective must, he argues, avoid a couple of traps. First, we cannot think that the present “is merely history repeating itself” (ibid., 18). Second, there is no master historical narrative that encompasses all of today’s carceral institutions. Each has its own history with connections and parallels, but also differences. Platt gives us dense microhistories of the struggles that produced and changed welfare, juvenile justice, public defenders, Black codes, eugenics, suspect populations, police reforms, American Indian boarding schools, private security, McCarthy-

ism, internment camps and deportations, commissions supposedly solving social and political problems, prison writing, and prison organizing.

The breadth of these rich histories of the penal span demands that we include welfare, internment camps, and private security forces in our mental maps of the carceral state, while demonstrating important distinctions and connections among different strands of the carceral. Distance is crucial, he argues, because at the distance that all these institutions and operations look alike, we lack the detail to intervene to make necessary structural changes. Get too close, however, and the structure itself disappears in the confusion of a mass of individual cases. Distances can vary according to the scope and scale of the problem at hand. One reading of Platt's case studies is that he has presented us a way to find the right distance, to bring the structure, the forces, and the players into focus so as to maximize our chances of restructuring the world.

If Platt is generous in offering a dozen pages of further readings, sorted by topic, he is ruthless in showing the "city of intellectuals, researchers, policy makers, experts, educators, bureaucrats, and pundits" (*ibid.*, 8) who have built and rebuilt the intellectual, moral, and economic bases of the carceral state over time. He insists on the importance of the intellectual work that has developed a "revitalized racism, renewed" (*ibid.*, 77) to meet the evolving needs of racial capitalism. He reads the government commissions (McCone, Kerner, Wickersham, Obama, etc.) and the intellectuals (right wing and liberal) like Paul Popenoe, John Randolph Hayes, James Q. Wilson, Lewis Terman, Allan Bloom, Heather MacDonald, and Richard Herrnstein who have for decades "come up with a plausible rationale for why poor and working-class people are more despicable than those who commit war crimes, cover up government malfeasance, and defraud the public" (*ibid.*, 8).

The stories Platt gives us are stories of change, of institutions coming into crisis, and of the work to resolve those crises. His "city of intellectuals" has been kept busy in large part because so many of the crises involve an ethical outrage—those who in Louis's (2019, 80) words, politics has been "a question of aesthetics: a way of seeing themselves, of seeing the world, of constructing a personality," and are upset with children being taken from their parents at the border or women giving birth in shackles.

Today's crisis in the United States appears in part to be that the comfortable classes are no longer so comfortable with locking up 2.3 million people daily or seeing children in concentration camps or knowing that

three people a day are being killed by police. The city of intellectuals that deal with crime and punishment is growing in response to such crises, and Platt gives us a handy guide to sort those offering analyses and solutions to the carceral crisis (or crises) into two broad groups: those who offer reforms to improve and sustain criminal justice institutions and those whose work demands deep structural changes that dismantle the carceral. He reminds us that the history of reform has “a nasty, repressive underside ... [that] reveals the heavy hand of managerial imperatives and a politics of pacification” (ibid., 23–24). Platt continues, “the mixture of benevolent rhetoric and punitive measures of coercive intervention typifies the liberal reform tradition of the United States” (ibid., 149), within which he distinguishes two broad categories of “the professionals and philanthropists who dominate the discourse of reform.” The first is the “philanthropic tradition,” marked by “providing services to individuals” and today “represented by nonprofits that do their best to ameliorate the most debased kinds of poverty” (ibid., 150). The second is the “managerial reform” tradition, which is “more preoccupied with initiatives to real or perceived threats to national identity and stability” (ibid., 151) and often results in “widening the net of social control and diminishing the civil and legal rights of a large swath of people” (ibid., 152).

Opposed to both approaches are those working toward structural reforms, that is, “ground up initiatives that seek to both improve conditions of everyday life and challenge established political-economic systems” (ibid., 193). Platt’s book is a warning that those working toward structural change pay close attention to the complexities of what we are facing and echoes analysis of other left organizers and theorists like Beth Richie’s (2012, 111) diagnosis that one of the factors that “lost the [feminist antiviolence] movement” was “overly simplistic analysis.” Although demanding complexity might seem daunting, there is a silver lining in seeing the system in all of its contradictions and incoherencies. If there is not a single narrative or cause that has produced our current carceral nightmare, neither is there only one path out or a unique point of entry for useful struggle.

Platt’s tripartite schema of reformers gives us a tool with which we can begin to sort the wheat from the chaff in today’s ever more crowded field of carceral studies, finding those who can help us to eliminate the carceral and not simply to interpret it and to “face up to the boundaries beyond which the revolutionary petit bourgeoisie could not be trusted” (Robinson 1983, 388).

Platt (2019, 187), quoting Dan Berger (2014), describes the new prison movement of which he was a part in the 1960s and 70s as “a coalition of the unruly.” *Beyond These Walls* is a beacon toward a new rigorous unruliness.



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## Beyond the Carceral Imagination

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IN HIS FAMED 1845 BOOK *THE CONDITION OF THE WORKING CLASS IN England*, Friedrich Engels (1987, 119) described how police treated the surplus workers in Manchester who struggled for subsistence by “begging, stealing, street-sweeping, collecting manure ... or performing occasional small jobs.” “When these people find no work and will not rebel against society,” he asked, “what remains for them but to beg?” The answer to this question, Engels (ibid., 120) wrote, is that “it is left to the police [who then] carry on perpetual war” against those who are unruly, deviant, and unneeded as waged labor. It is to this war, in its myriad forms and

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manifestations, that Tony Platt—raised in Manchester about 100 years later—has dedicated his career.

Platt's latest book, *Beyond These Walls*, uncovers the many expressions of state and parastate violence that have been deployed against marginalized and oppressed people throughout the history of the United States. Although allegations of crime often serve as a proximate rationale for this violence, as Platt argues, criminal justice institutions are not neutral parties, and they serve a much wider political and economic function than simply addressing lawbreaking. As Platt (2019, 13) writes, "domestic counterinsurgency operations are routinely entangled with everyday criminal justice operations, as in maintaining public order at political events and monitoring social movements." For Platt, criminal justice institutions operate to maintain a status quo of social hierarchy and class exploitation. In so doing, they both enact and uphold the state's monopoly on legitimate violence.

Just as Platt rejects the ruse of the state's neutrality, he makes no pretense to a stance of dispassionate investigation. In *Beyond These Walls*, Platt discusses his long career as an activist and intellectual. Throughout this time, he has sought not only to investigate state violence but to overcome it. As a heretical criminologist, his research has been concerned with how law and social control actually operate in practice. He has been uninterested in upholding myths of legal impartiality. Platt's research utilizes a scientific analysis of harm, one that refuses to accept that a police or military uniform, or the pretense of order, absolve the state of violence. By training the criminologist's analytical gaze on the state itself, Platt demands that his readers rethink state power.

This conceptualization is needed as much as ever today, as we confront widening inequality and a heating planet. The 2008 global financial crisis was facilitated by massive frauds in mortgage origination and securitization (Carter 2018, Fligstein & Roehrkasse 2016, Herndon 2018, Pontell et al. 2014). Across the world, technology companies use regulatory arbitrage and evasion of laws as a business model. Bitcoin is using as much electricity as Las Vegas—ostensibly thumbing their nose at what has historically been among the state's most powerful and guarded monopolies on currency creation (Teirstein 2019). Recall, for example, that the Secret Service was created in the wake of the Civil War, not to protect President Lincoln but to chase down counterfeiters (Mihm 2007). An analysis that ignores socially harmful and often illegal behavior of elites is ill-equipped to understand the current moment. Accordingly, *Beyond These Walls* also spends significant

time analyzing the power and violence of Donald Trump and the roots of Trumpism. *Beyond These Walls* offers readers key analytical frames from which to apprehend our most urgent problems.

Per the title, Platt argues that one must venture beyond the sites of prisons themselves to understand the broader reach of state and parastate repression in society. As he explains, “criminalization is only one of many ways to exercise coercive power and social control” (Platt 2019, 11). Thus, *Beyond These Walls* puts needed attention on the private security industry. As Platt documents, private security is more pervasive than police, outnumbering their labor force by 25 percent. His appendix shows that there was a dramatic increase in private police between 1980 and 1990. In 1980, 251 people worked in this sector per every 100,000 people, and by 1990 that number jumped to 350—about a 40 percent increase, where it would more or less stabilize for the next two decades. To show us just how significant this labor force is, as of 2010, 1.7 million people worked in that sector. As Platt explains, we need a broad analysis that sees the linked relations of private security and public policing. As he writes, “criminal justice institutions . . . do not monopolize the job of social control” (ibid., 16). In this way, *Beyond These Walls* enlarges a Foucauldian analysis to show us precisely what Foucault’s “great carceral continuum” looks like.

By compelling us to recognize formal criminal legal institutions as only one feature of this carceral continuum, *Beyond These Walls* emphasizes the importance of settler colonialism and slavery to the history of the carceral state—a term, I might add, that though many use remains slippery in definition. In *Beyond These Walls*, the term’s evasiveness is a strength. Platt’s conceptual use of it reminds us to not reduce an analysis of the carceral state to formal state institutions. Instead, it reveals the carceral state’s intimacies with the winding history and geographies of war and violence (for a kindred analysis, see Lowe 2015; Schrader 2019a,b). As Platt (ibid., 19) writes, “the carceral imagination is quite prolific.” Accordingly, *Beyond These Walls* asks readers to link formal prisons with the histories of Native American reservations, slave plantations, Japanese internment, and the concentration camps. As Platt (ibid., 63) notes,

The reservation and concentration camp can be understood as relatives of the prison and ghetto, and an early predecessor of today’s policed enclaves used throughout the world, such as refugee camps in Europe, immigrant detention centers in the United States, and the entire Gaza Strip, whose nominal independence as a Palestinian territory is subject to Israel’s military control.

In asking readers to make these connections, Platt argues that one must always be vigilant to the changing techniques of surveillance and repression—an urgent lesson during an era when many of us live with spy machines in our pockets.

Another important contribution of *Beyond These Walls* is the location of socialist Eugene Debs in the pantheon of theorists of prison abolition. Debs (1902) had famously described how he became a socialist in the context of the 1894 Pullman Strike, when the American Railway Union was attacked by “An army of detectives, thugs and murderers . . . equipped with badge and beer and bludgeon and turned loos[e].” As he described, “in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle the class struggle was revealed. This was my first practical lesson in Socialism” (ibid.). He would subsequently begin a brief but politicizing stint in Cook County Jail, which would be followed in the ensuing decades by several imprisonments. Platt (2019, 194) recovers Debs’s prison writings, quoting him saying that “[the prison] ought not merely be reformed but abolished as an institution for the punishment and degradation of unfortunate human beings.” Considering that Bernie Sanders, the incoming chair of the Senate Budget Committee sees himself in Debs’s lineage, this act of historical recovery is auspicious, yet undetermined (Berger & Whitlock 2019).

Lastly, Platt would be disappointed if I eschewed any critiques. One of the vexing things about a book as broad as this is that its historical trajectory can also be difficult to apprehend. Platt (2019, 19) describes *Beyond These Walls* as a “dynamic genealogy that zigzags in time, searching for persistent patterns and ruptures in history.” The text frequently jumps back and forth from the past to the present. Such a mode at times creates a kind of analytical vertigo. Although on the one hand it offers historical contextualization, it also raises questions about how precisely we got from that prior era to today. This stylistic choice has its strengths—it would be nearly impossible to write with the historical breadth and scope of institutions in a direct linear style. However, I worry if it can seem at times as if the history is one of relatively smooth and constant increases in repression, despite the attention to those ruptures and alternative visions that Platt brings forth. How are we to make sense, for example, of the important statistical point I highlighted earlier—the rapid increase in private security between 1980 and 1990 and its relative stabilization after 1990? Why has private security remained more or less constant between 1990 and 2010? Is this a social movement victory, or a diversification of social control strategies with more high tech,

less labor intensive strategies seeing greater shares of growth? Is it both? Something else? Answering such a question will require further analysis, one that scholars and activists are better positioned to do with the help of *Beyond These Walls*. As scholars and activists take up these questions, Platt's broader concern—deciphering the prolific carceral imagination in order to create a more humane world—provides a critical guide to evaluating which reforms are managerial mirages, and which may prove to be more durable.

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## A Critical Call to Change the US Criminal Justice System from Below

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**T**ODAY, THE UNITED STATES IS THE MOST POWERFUL COUNTRY, WITH the White House, Wall Street, and the US Army serving as the political, financial, and military centers of the world. It also preserves, as Platt (2019, 6) exposes, the most irrational, punitive, and biased criminal justice system. Numbers show that, by 2015, 31 states had the highest incarceration rates in the globe—higher even than Turkmenistan, one of the most repressive regimes—whereas 38 states lock up a larger proportion of their residents than El Salvador, a country recovering from a civil war and dealing with one of the highest homicide rates worldwide.

Unfortunately, this is far from all. As the book depicts, prison walls are not the edge of the US carceral state. The unjust and double system of crime control goes way beyond the prisons and absorbs a wide range of areas under state control. As Platt (*ibid.*, 27–28) describes,

It encompasses how criminal justice personnel carries out their mandate, where the police are dispatched, how legislators and prosecutors

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determine what constitutes social harm, and how criminality becomes politically and culturally identified as the exclusive preserve of the poor. The double system works internally through racial and ethnic profiling and economic biases that permeate criminal justice operations, and it works externally through the diversion of corporate criminals and other perpetrators of large-scale harm to civil and non-criminal resolutions.

Following this lead—the book argues—we need to open up our focus from the traditional areas of urban policing, mass incarceration, and sensational felony cases, to also consider the functioning of intelligence and security agencies, banishment, exile, transportation, deportation, reservations, refugee camps, private security operations, and even welfare (*ibid.*, 11–15).

Besides this key lead, the book offers further lessons to learn if we really want to change current unfairness. Notably, Platt's (*ibid.*, 18) work is settled on the conviction that current criminal justice despair spans a long history that demands us to pay attention to “how the past bleeds into the present and how the present transforms the past.” Indeed, current practices of crime control can be traced back to the birth of the country. Crime control is blind today to the most horrendous crimes, such as tormenting prisoners with sleep deprivation, cells filled with mice, and naked humiliation and physical pain in the Middle East under the guise of the so-called War on Terror, as it was once blind to the inhumane transportation and slavery of Africans, the killing of Native Americans, and the lynching of African-Americans in the name of civilization (Vegh Weis 2017; see also Wacquant 2001). On the other hand, “city councils, hard up for funds, enable the police to make arrests for ‘manner of walking’, saggy pants, loitering in the park, even firing up a barbecue in the wrong place” (Platt 2019, 12), following the same pattern of the eighteenth century, when small acts of resistance or disobedience against oppression were, paradoxically, conceived as major harms (Vegh Weis 2017).

However, the book does not leave us hopeless. Conversely, it sheds light on the fact that there is no such thing as a US criminal justice system, which is in reality a chaotic, decentralized, and irrational bunch of agencies and institutions of crime control that, therefore, creates space for a politics of critical resistance (Platt 2019, 20–21). To take advantage of these rifts, there is an urgent “need to grapple with the legacy of stubborn resistance of meaningful structural change” (*ibid.*, 23). But what does this mean?

A comprehensive reading of Platt's book shows that transformative change demands, on the one hand, being aware of the fact that “the history

of the carceral state is inescapably linked to reforms that purport to reduce suffering and better people's everyday lives but often do the opposite" (ibid., 150). The creation of the houses of correction in sixteenth-century Europe or the Pennsylvania Quakers' system of daily work in enforced silence and nightly solitary confinement are only two of the vast historic examples of well-meaning reforms ending up in brutal conditions (ibid.). Therefore, "we need to be aware of both the unintended and sometimes intended repressive consequences of reforms" (ibid., 152).

On the other hand, as Platt reminds us throughout the book, meaningful structural change requires us to pay attention to the limitations of top-down initiatives. Indeed, the history of US criminal justice reform has followed a path of top-down superficial and desegregated initiatives. To exemplify, in 2017, state officials in Oklahoma made 27 technical recommendations for reducing the prison population by 7 percent during the next 10 years without even mentioning racial inequality, and reintegration programs have been carried out without providing funding to compensate for the fact that ex-cons are mostly unemployable after detention (ibid., 247–48). Conversely, a bottom-up approach that grows from grassroots movements and is set up on an intersectionality perspective is still missing in the United States. This might be attributed, following the author, to the absence of a progressive political party that supports real change in criminal justice, or to the lack of lasting and committed engagement among different social movements (ibid., 248–51). In what matters,

the radical view, which stresses the necessity of a broader analysis of the relation between punishment and the reproduction of oppression and inequality, cautions against putting faith in reforms that are decoupled from large-scale, vibrant grassroots social movements, especially during an era in which inequality is at its deepest in decades. (Stein 2014, 75)

If we link the biography of Tony Platt to the movement to change crime and punishment, we can see that when he was publishing the groundbreaking book *The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* (1969), a variety of local movements were challenging the Johnson administration to go further than limited institutional reforms, contributing to an important national debate about criminal justice issues. When Professor Platt was denied tenure at the University of California, Berkeley, and had to find a job at a California State University, the national opportunity to radically change the criminal justice system was lost via the repressive regime of Nixon. When Platt was called back to Berkeley to join the Center for the Study of Law and



Society in 2014, the United States had a second opportunity to transform the criminal justice system via the Obama administration. Today, Platt is back on the scene with *Beyond These Walls: Rethinking Crime and Punishment in the United States*—an easy-reading, comprehensive, thought-provoking, and stimulating book—and it seems that, once again, it is time to make transformative changes to the rotten US criminal justice system.

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## At a Crossroads

Tony Platt<sup>1</sup>

I VERY MUCH APPRECIATE THAT *SOCIAL JUSTICE*, THE JOURNAL WITH which I have been associated since its founding in 1974, is devoting this symposium to my latest and no doubt last book. I was encouraged to write *Beyond These Walls* by the resurgence of anticarceral struggles during the Obama years. I hope it contributes to a dialogue between contemporary activists and my generation of activists, who came of age in an era that, in the words of Alice Walker (1967, 554), gave us "hope for tomorrow" and "called us to life."

<sup>1</sup> TONY PLATT is a Distinguished Affiliated Scholar at the Center for the Study of Law & Society, University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of numerous books dealing with issues of criminal justice, race, inequality, and social justice in US history, including most recently *Beyond These Walls: Rethinking Crime and Punishment in the United States* (St. Martin's Press, 2019). He previously taught at the University of Chicago, UC Berkeley, and California state universities. Platt is a founding member of *Social Justice Journal*.

My thanks to Michelle Brown, Craig Gilmore, David Stein, and Valeria Vegh Weis for seriously engaging the book's emphasis on praxis and for appreciating that ideas matter. I am encouraged to see a revitalization of what we used to call radical criminology, this time with new ideas and research emerging from a much wider variety of intellectual disciplines: geography, criminology, law and society, sociology, women's and ethnic studies, and history. What is too often missing from carceral studies—my own work included—is a global and comparative perspective. I share Mike Davis's (2020) concern that “there's a disturbing element of national solipsism in the progressive movement.”

This tendency to minimize global issues is evident in the current long moment of the coronavirus pandemic. As I write at the beginning of May 2020, there are more than three million reported cases in the world, with the United States accounting for one third and its death toll approaching 60,000. By the end of this year, the numbers and human cost will be much greater, and we will have a much clearer idea about the political and economic fallout.

The legacies of American history suggest that during times of global emergencies and crises—such as World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War—the state's repressive capacity typically expands and reinforces structural inequalities. The political danger in the United States is that the Trump administration and other leaders with fascist instincts will make extraordinary executive measures needed to control the pandemic into the ordinary routines of authoritarian governance: closing borders, selectively enforcing quarantines, normalizing the role of the military in everyday life, and expanding the carceral state and technologies of surveillance (Gebrekidan 2020, Golte & Boyle 2020). There are even rumors that the November presidential elections could be delayed or scuttled. Trump's April 17th green light to the separatist and populist Right to “liberate” Minnesota, Michigan, and Virginia from shelter-at-home and social distancing policies, and to defend the NRA from gun reformers, echoes the defeat of Reconstruction after the Civil War and the 1970s rollback of gains made by the civil rights movement.

The economic danger, already evident in the Spring of 2020, is that corporate and finance capital will be the primary beneficiary of government bailouts; that the most impoverished and racially segregated communities will become more impoverished and segregated, just as their illness and death rates are disproportionately affected by the pandemic; and that millions of undocumented workers and people employed part-time and in the

gig economy and service sectors will become permanently unemployed and likely candidates for carceral institutions.

On the other hand, the hope is that this unprecedented health and economic crisis will regenerate a global vision of social justice and revitalize left and progressive movements. Although the Trump administration has used this moment to bail out its capitalist cronies, it has also been forced to abandon, at least for now, some of its foundational neoliberal principles. We have not seen this kind of expansion of unemployment insurance since the New Deal and of public social services since the War on Poverty. The release of many elderly and sick from state prisons and waiving of bail for people arrested on minor charges has made a much larger dent in the incarcerated population than the so-called reforms of Trump's First Step Act. In California, the government is offering thousands of homeless abandoned in California's slum settlements free housing, food, and medical care in hotels appropriated by the state, and Governor Newsom has ordered a moratorium on evictions. Bernie Sanders's call for health care for all no longer seems like a fringe idea. At the global level, the call of the environmental movement for a deep adaptation agenda that requires communitarian resilience, radical changes in habits of consumption, and restorative solutions is a compelling alternative to Trumpism—what Jem Bendell (2018) calls “hyper-individualist, market fundamentalist, incremental and atomistic approaches.”

We are at a crossroads. The weight of history leans heavily against the possibility of structural change. Even so, a crisis of this magnitude is also a moment to unleash bold ideas and visions. Being stuck in quarantine and not going anywhere, to paraphrase James Meek (2020, 14–15), is an opportunity to see more clearly, more widely, and more deeply “the way things are going.” It is also an opportunity to take action. “When things come apart,” observed the government of Scotland (2020) in April, “there is always the opportunity to put them back differently.”

Which road did we take? How did we do? Are we doing things differently? By now, as you read this, you'll know the answer.

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