Juliana Borges

For a democracy of abolition that contest hierarchies and strengthen community processes

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| Brazil |

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On the invisibility of the issue of prisons in Brazilian society: why is it so difficult to overcome a dehumanizing view of incarcerated people, and so easy to naturalize their suffering?

Generally, we believe in, and we sell a peaceful image of the Brazilian society, in which all groups live in harmony. This is an idea that has been questioned over the last few decades by important Brazilian thinkers like Abdias do Nascimento and Florestan Fernandes, as well as our notable Black feminists, on the myth of racial democracy. There's another formulation that I really like, by philosopher Marilena Chauí, who emphasizes violence as a foundational myth of Brazilian society. See, the idea of Brazil was born out of invasions and brutal violence against indigenous peoples and, after that, out of the kidnapping of African people to be used as enslaved labor in our country.

What I mean by this is that violence is normalized in our relationships, be it in macro executions, in institutional ways, or in the form of everyday microaggressions. And if, one day, the image of dehumanization was the enslaved person, the transformations of racism —which has continued to be present and organizes social inequities— the main image of dehumanization today is an incarcerated person.

Despite the fact that, in theory, the prison system has a function to re-socialize, reinstall common sense, societal customs and daily social dynamics, it executes a politics of

vengeance, but it’s still seen as a correction which, in truth, results in society perceiving incarcerated people as “incorrigible.”

It is within this perspective that we find the basis of the belief that incarcerated people must suffer. Brazilian thinker Carla Akotirene, in her book *Ó paí, prezada*[1]Editora Pólen, 2020, she addresses the experiences of incarcerated women in the city of Salvador, Bahia, draws attention to this idea of suffering as the root of imprisonment by showing us something simple: the etymology of "penitentiary" , relating to penance, to a place of atonement.

All these issues are ideologically articulated so that society as a whole believes that prison is not about all of us and that, therefore, the undesirables do not deserve the rights that we all enjoy. In this way, a structure and a dynamic of normalization of violence and suffering with regards to incarcerated people is perpetuated.

How do you analyze the imprisonment of women in Brazil? Why has the rate of female incarceration increased so much in recent years? What are the social effects of this?

We have seen a shocking increase in female incarceration in Brazil. Most of the women in prison are mothers, breadwinners and have not finished high school. In dialogue with the formulations of the philosopher Angela Davis, I note that prisons are mirrors of precariousness in our society. This is not a failed project. As apparatuses of control and extermination, societies, in general, deal with prisons as "the deposits of the waste of capitalism." This means that anything that is undesirable must be incorporated by the dynamic of control and violence over our bodies.

Women are often the heads of their families but this isn’t accompanied by more policies that offer them decent jobs. In general, when we talk about the production of jobs and income, we talk about positions that are highly precarious, still in the fields of care work and reproductive work, repetitive and alienating. If the first people affected by any kind of crisis are women and they are often the ones responsible for the livelihoods of their families, how

can we believe these women will be able to support themselves?

The drug economy and market function very similarly to that of other markets, when the issue is gender inequality. Women are, in general, in retail positions, as base workers and, therefore, in more precarious and vulnerable positions and situations.The consequence of this is that, with an increase in resources and war on drugs policies, these women, who are in the front line not as bosses, but as the base for the exploitation of this type of work, will be the first to suffer this violence, be it in greater rates of imprisonment, or in the loss of their companions, children and family members.

The social effects of this are immense: families that lose their livelihood, women who are separated from their children, and who face even greater penalties for crimes in comparison to men, due to the weight of patriarchy in these decisions. We are talking about, therefore, the destruction of Black and marginalized people's homes and the maintenance of a cycle of violence and socio-racial exclusion.

You wrote the introduction of Carceral Capitalism, a book by Jackie Wang, published by Igrá Kniga in Brazil. When comparing incarceration in the United States with that of Brazil, what characteristics differ and which bring US incarceration closer to incarceration in Brazil? Can Jackie's analysis help us to think about this parallel?

I am very grateful to be invited to write the introduction of Jackie Wang's book [in Brazil]. Her formulations about prison are fundamental, especially because they are positioned in a kind of reading where you can't think about prison without thinking about capitalism and racism. When we talk about prison, we are talking about the managing of socio-racial groups, a kind of management that is fundamental for the inner workings of capitalism and the extraction of valuables.

We are talking about precarization, we are talking about a historical relationship with servitude-enslavement and the construction of this apparatus for the racialization and

hierarchization of racialized groups. We are also talking about the management of precarious labor when we analyze this perspective through a prison industrial complex.

The parallels between Brazil and the United States are many. Firstly, because these are two countries that imprison the most people within a world ranking—the United States is the first, and Brazil closely follows it, as the third country that incarcerates the most people. But it's important to emphasize that, even within proportionate measures, Brazil isn't in a very comfortable position when the subject is incarcerated population, we are at 26th place.

In other words, we are talking about a social construction highly based on punitivism. And this punitivism is expressed in these two societies through the groups selected for punitive action from the State: Black people, Indigenous people and immigrants**.** The war on drugs is another connection between the two. Brazil, surprisingly, was one of the pioneer countries in requesting the criminalization of the use of substances such as marijuana in international organizations, under the argument and "white fear" that the use of cannabis would be related to a type of revenge by Black people in relation to enslavement.

The United States is responsible for structuring and exporting the so-called "war on drugs", at a fundamental historical moment in the country, when the agendas of civil rights and social and racial equality and equity were already advancing.

The so-called war on drugs, in fact, has as an ideological background of control and criminalization of certain cultures and ethnic-racial groups. So much so that the opioid crisis faced today in the United States does not have a tough police response as a solution, but it is considered a public health problem. Like in the US, the issue of problematic consumption of substances like crack here in Brazil isn't seen as a public health problem, it's seen as a police issue. And if we look at the demographics of majority of opioid and crack users, the different approaches to the issues become completely evident, as they are both, at their core, a debate about the use of controlled substances in abusive quantities by people.

And lastly, but not less importantly, another discussion that doesn't have a lot of parallels but that needs to be paid attention to, is the question of legalization of cannabis. In the

United States, because this is a debate that happens in a non-centralized way, and varies state by state, there are many legislations. What we see is an organization of dominant groups and financial capital who are disputing models of legalization.

There are states where people who have left the prison system, who were arrested for being in drug trafficking operations, are forbidden from acting in the market; in others, the economic model for participation in the cannabis market, makes it impossible to integrate groups who were historically affected by the criminalization of cannabis. Legalization without reparations should not interest us, otherwise, we will be defending the maintenance of the concentration of wealth in the hands of the 1% to the detriment of the 99% affected by the violence of prohibition for so many years.
I could theorize for a long time about the possible parallels between Brazil and the United States when the subject is incarceration, but I will invite you to read the introduction of the book and that you read the whole book too.

We know that actions to improve incarceration conditions are palliative and incapable of solving the prison issue in the short term. Even so, we have examples of actions that involve incarcerated people in a process of dialogue that at least point out possible paths for practical solutions. How do you see the power of subjects in the process of facing inhuman and degrading conditions?

I think it’s fundamental. I am not an enthusiast of the idea that worse conditions [in prison] are better for exposing contradictions and violent dynamics of the system. Firstly, we are talking about people, about lives, about families, about sons and daughters, about fathers and mothers, about nieces and sisters. We cannot, from the comfort of our homes, be intransigent in defending the abolition of prisons without thinking about the people surviving that hell, who have urgent demands. It’s about life and having the minimal conditions for dignity. At the same time, I do not believe that in order to deal with over-incarceration and overcrowding, we must defend the creation of more prisons.

According to a report by the Federal Government's Department of Penitentiary Policy, in the last 16 years, we have had an intense expansion of criminal units: 4 out of 10 prison units in the country are at most 16 years old. Overcrowding will be solved by decarceration, which

could begin with the 25% of incarcerated people who are incarcerated through provisional measures, that is, they're waiting for trial.

There are many policies that could be carried out simply by respecting and complying with the Criminal Execution Law. For example, access to work placements and education. Not even 30% of incarcerated people work or study. This is a right they have. Additionally, many women are in prison and are mothers of underage children and they could, therefore, be serving their sentences at home. Another issue concerns the facilities of the prison units, which are totally unsanitary. Despite it being an obligation of the State, it is the family members of people in prison who guarantee basic hygiene and food products with minimum quality to incarcerated people. Medical and hospital care, gynecological care, access to toilet paper and sanitary pads. These are basic questions of dignity that are daily and repeatedly denied to incarcerated people.

Based on contemporary these socio-political conditions, is it possible to think about alternative practices to prison?

I think it's not only possible, but also necessary. We already have evidence that an increase in imprisonment doesn't necessarily mean a decrease in crime. So why do we keep advocating for an system like this? If the argument is that prisons are spaces for resocialization, why do we accept degrading and dehumanizing conditions for incarcerated people? Why do we think it's acceptable to enact violence on people and then, expect them to exit a space like that feeling humanized, wanting to hug us? What social conditions do we give incarcerated people when they come out of prison?

Prison, in addition to being a space of brutal violence and dehumanization, is a space of definitive marginalization, given that the stigma that these people carry, even after having served their sentences, is continuous. We must urgently think about and invest in more and more alternative spaces, create civil spaces for conflict mediation, guarantee basic social rights and dignity.

Society will always be conflicting, because we are talking about different interests, desires, perspectives, stories, ways of existence and thinking. However, it is up to us to think of solutions and mediations that are reparative and restorative of the bond and dynamics of social conviviality.

Excluding an individual so he develops empathy, and a sense of community does not work. Furthermore, if we are talking about an egalitarian society, with social justice, how can we continue defending a space that serves to control and exterminate social groups? We urgently need to move towards policies and dynamics for a democracy of abolition, in which hierarchies are contested, and community processes aimed at healing and restoring bonds are the focus of action.