

BOOK REVIEW

Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (University of California Press, 2016)

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A FEW PAGES INTO THIS INSIGHTFUL AND IMPORTANT NEW BOOK, Jordan T. Camp lays out a set of numbers that are by now as familiar as they are depressing: between the end of the 1960s and 2000, the United States' prison and jail population grew by an order of magnitude—from 200,000 to 2.4 million—and has continued to grow since (now 6.9 million adults are incarcerated or on parole or probation). In the 1960s, the majority of prisoners were white; now more than 70% are people of color: “The United States currently incarcerates Black people at rates higher than South Africa did before the end of apartheid. All of these numbers bespeak a collision of race, class, and the carceral state power without historical precedent, but certainly not without historical explanation” (p. 3).

The point of *Incarcerating the Crisis* is to provide this historical explanation by showing that “prison expansion ... has been the political expression of neoliberal racial and security regimes” (p. 5). Drawing on the theoretical and methodological insights of Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and thus also deeply indebted to Gramsci, Camp offers a “conjunctural” analysis of the “long counterinsurgency against the Black freedom, labor and socialist alliance that took shape in the struggle to abolish Jim Crow racial regimes” (p. 5). It is a long counterinsurgency because, Camp argues, the Civil Rights movement did not culminate during the 1960s; rather, the 1960s were a “turning point” in the struggle, out of which

a bipartisan consensus [was] forged ... about the necessity of prioritizing security – a consensus that has justified the withdrawal of the social wage and created an increasingly central role for military

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action, national security policies, aggressive policing, and mass prison-building in the counter-insurgency governance of neoliberal racial capitalism. (pp. 8–9)

By a conjunctural analysis, Camp means one that seeks “to distinguish between political, economic, and ideological factors in shaping social formations” (p. 14), because by doing so one can begin to see the points of rupture that give rise to structural crisis. Analyzing the moment of crisis reveals, in Gramsci’s words, “the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure,” and thus the “terrain [upon which] the forces of opposition organise” (p. 14). Camp’s method is to focus on pivotal events—such as the Watts rebellion, Detroit in 1967, Attica, the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, Post-Katrina New Orleans, and the roiling, violently policed tumult that is contemporary Skid Row in Los Angeles—and to place them within their historical and geographic contexts (i.e., the set of conjunctural factors that led to their emergence, and, often, explosion); at the same time, the author shows how each of these events reshaped (and deepened) revanchist ideologies and policies while giving rise to new forms of struggle and resistance in the Freedom Movement. Following Ranajit Guha, Camp argues that each moment is shaped by and launches anew a “prose of counterinsurgency”: “the state’s representation of subaltern insurrections as irrational and violent acts that must be crushed to restore order and enforce the rule of law” (p. 17) (that is, “to defend the existing structure”). The prose of counterinsurgency can and ought to be read “against the grain,” since by doing so one can begin to understand “how crises have been narrated and defined in the interest of capital and the state” (p. 17).

Yet, Camp shows that the way moments of insurgency, rebellion, and revolt (or even just implacable resistance) are sparked, unfold, and are (often violently) resolved is also a function of “the poetry of social movements” (p. 18). By this term, Camp means not only social movements’ and radical intellectuals’ own (often poetic) analysis of the conjuncture, but also their practical struggles. The poetry of social movements is living and lived history, and therefore continuously reshaped by the events. A full understanding of the rise of the “neoliberal carceral state” within “neoliberal racial capitalism,” then, requires a close, and dialectical, reading of the historical and geographic context, the prose of counterinsurgency, and the poetics of social movements. This is what Camp nicely achieves in each of his chapters.

If the 1960s (which ought to be understood as extending to the end of the Nixon Administration) were a pivotal moment in the struggle for Black

Freedom, then what that struggle pivoted on was the Attica uprising, the analysis of which is, in my reading, the beating heart of *Incarcerating the Crisis*—and the book’s best chapter, despite being prefaced with some classically meaningless gibberish from the pen of Louis Althusser. Camp uses the chapter to argue, among much else, that the counterinsurgent reaction to Attica not only justified a massive expansion of prisons nationally (and indeed the invention of the supermax prison), but was also, through prison expansion, “a means of cutting the social wage” (p. 81). Camp is here arguing against theorists who see prison expansion as a kind of “carceral Keynesianism,” asserting instead that the event of Attica, as much as—or maybe even more than—the coup in Chile or New York City’s fiscal crisis, must be understood as vital for the birth of neoliberalism. He argues that Attica makes clear “the role of racist state violence” (p. 81) in producing consent for the wrenching political-economic and social changes entailed by the rise of neoliberalism, including what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has identified as the organized abandonment of whole places and populations, culminating, perhaps—as Camp suggests in his last chapter—in Los Angeles’ Skid Row as a new kind of carceral space: a violent, vilely policed warehouse of the abandoned.

But Camp only hints at this function of Skid Row, because, as he also suggests, the pressures of gentrification on this area are intense. Skid Row is thus an intensely contradictory space: at once “an ‘open-air prison’ for people deemed disposable” (p. 141) and a place of feverish real estate speculation. Camp takes his lead from activists associated with LA CAN (Los Angeles Community Action Network) and the Western Regional Advocacy Project to argue (in the words of the director of the latter) that “local ‘anti-homeless’ police enforcement campaigns, separate court systems, property confiscations and the closing of public spaces—these are in the forefront of today’s civil rights battles” (p. 145). Camp concludes: “This intervention compels us to reckon with the unfinished business of the long civil rights movement in confronting mass homelessness and mass incarceration,” a reckoning that immediately understands that “another city is not only possible but a burning necessity” (p. 145).

It is, of course, an open question what such another city might look like; but Camp does note, in his analysis of the Detroit uprising and the work of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League of Revolutionary Workers, that when the world is upended by revolt, new possibilities suddenly emerge. And when this happens, as League founder General Baker remarked of his fellow workers in the wake of a rebellion that

had exposed “the naked role of the state,” people became different: “They were not the same folks they were before the rebellion” (p. 55). Not only had the “conjuncture” shifted, so had the people inside it. And this was, and is, precisely what the “counterinsurgency” has always had to confront—and, with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, is having to confront again, as Camp indicates in an epilogue. Quoting recent remarks by Tony Jefferson on *Policing the Crisis*, Camp argues that the neoliberal state, which has thus far sought only to incarcerate the crisis, has indeed “resolved the old crisis, but coercively and without proper consent” (p. 152). Camp suggests that conjunctural analyses such as his can go a long way in helping people transformed by revolt—by “the current conjuncture”—to find a way to distinguish the strategic options open to them; and he is certainly right.

REFERENCES

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