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## Ferguson Reminds Us of the Importance of a Global Context

Interview by Frank Barat in Brussels (September 21, 2014)

*Following what happened in Ferguson, what is your view of the framework of The New Jim Crow, the book by Michelle Alexander?*

Michelle Alexander's book on mass incarceration appeared precisely at a moment that represented the peak of organizing against the prison-industrial complex. It became a best seller, and it popularized the struggle against mass incarceration, against the prison-industrial complex, in a very important way. Of course the argument that she makes about mass incarceration reinstating some of the very strictures on civil rights that were fought for during the era of the mid-twentieth-century Black movement is very important.

Ferguson reminds us that we have to globalize our thinking about these issues. And if I were to be critical in a friendly way of

the text, I would say that what it lacks is a global context, an international framework. And she herself points this out, so this is not something about which she is unaware. In many of her talks she explains that we also need this broader global context to understand the workings of the apparatus that has produced mass incarceration [in the United States].

Why do I say that Ferguson reminds us of the importance of a global context? What we saw in the police reaction to the resistance that spontaneously erupted in the aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown was an armed response that revealed the extent to which local police departments have been equipped with military arms, military technology, military training. The militarization of the police leads us to think about Israel and the militarization of the police there—if only the images of the police and not of the demonstrators had been shown, one might have assumed that Ferguson was Gaza. I think that it is important to recognize the extent to which, in the aftermath of the advent of the war on terror, police departments all over the US have been equipped with the means to allegedly “fight terror.”

It’s very interesting that during the commentary on Ferguson, someone pointed out that the purpose of the police is supposed to be to protect and serve. At least, that’s their slogan. Soldiers are trained to shoot to kill. We saw the way in which that manifested itself in Ferguson.

*I lived in London for ten years and every time you saw a cop in the street you got scared. They are technically “civil servants,” but they do not fulfill this function. You talked about the US, the police being militarized—during the demonstrations for Gaza in France in Paris, it wasn’t civil servants in*

*the streets, it was riot police. Robocop-looking kind of people. This by itself creates and implies violence.*

Precisely. That was the whole point. And also it might be important to point out that the Israeli police have been involved in the training of US police. So there is this connection between the US military and the Israeli military. And therefore it means that when we try to organize campaigns in solidarity with Palestine, when we try to challenge the Israeli state, it’s not simply about focusing our struggles elsewhere, in another place. It also has to do with what happens in US communities.

*We often talk here about the reproduction of the occupation: what’s happening in Palestine is reproduced now in Europe, in the US, et cetera. It is important to make the link for people to understand how global the struggle is. But in your opinion is Ferguson an isolated incident?*

Absolutely not. It’s actually fortunate for those of us who are trying to participate in the building of a mass movement that some recent cases of police killings and vigilante killings have been widely publicized within the country as well as internationally. We had Trayvon Martin, which, of course, was just the tip of an iceberg. Michael Brown is just the tip of an iceberg. These kinds of confrontations and assaults and killings happen all of the time, all over the country in large as well as small cities. This is why it is a mistake to assume that these issues can be resolved on an individual level.

It is a mistake to assume that all we have to do is guarantee the prosecution of the cop who killed Michael Brown. The major challenge of this period is to infuse a consciousness of the structural character of state violence into the movements that spontaneously

arise . . . I don't know whether we can say yet that there is a movement, because movements are organized. But these spontaneous responses, which we know happen over and over again, will soon lead to organizations and a continual movement.

*What does it say about the Black civil rights movement that more than fifty years after MLK and Malcolm X, the targeting of Black people, Latinos/Latinas, is still happening? Does that mean that the Black civil rights movement has failed or that it's a continuous struggle?*

The use of state violence against Black people, people of color, has its origins in an era long before the civil rights movement—in colonization and slavery. During the campaign around Trayvon Martin, it was pointed out that George Zimmerman, a would-be police officer, a vigilante, if you want to use that term, replicated the role of slave patrols. Then as now the use of armed representatives of the state was complemented by the use of civilians to perform the violence of the state.

So we don't have to stop at the era of the civil rights movement, we can recognize that practices that originated with slavery were not resolved by the civil rights movement. We may not experience lynchings and Ku Klux Klan violence in the same way we did earlier, but there still is state violence, police violence, military violence. And to a certain extent the Ku Klux Klan still exists.

I don't think this means that the civil rights movement was unsuccessful. The civil rights movement was very successful in what it achieved: the legal eradication of racism and the dismantling of the apparatus of segregation. This happened and we should not underestimate its importance. The problem is that it is often assumed that the eradication of the legal apparatus is equivalent to the abolition

of racism. But racism persists in a framework that is far more expansive, far vaster than the legal framework.

Economic racism continues to exist. Racism can be discovered at every level in every major institution—including the military, the health care system, and the police.

It's not easy to eradicate racism that is so deeply entrenched in the structures of our society, and this is why it's important to develop an analysis that goes beyond an understanding of individual acts of racism and this is why we need demands that go beyond the prosecution of the individual perpetrators.

*It reminds us obviously of South Africa, where legally apartheid was ended, but an economic apartheid, even sociological apartheid, is still in place. When we were in Cape Town for the Russell Tribunal, I was shocked to see people of color waiting every morning at the corner of the street to be picked up by employers who deemed to pay them three dollars an hour, I was horrified by the ghettos and shantytowns. You drive around the nicest beaches of Cape Town and a few minutes later it's like being in Mumbai or something.*

Well, what's also interesting in South Africa is the fact that many of the positions of leadership from which Black people were of course totally excluded during apartheid are now occupied by Black people, including within the police hierarchy. I recently saw a film on the Marikana miners, who were attacked, injured, and many killed by the police. The miners were Black, the police force was Black, the provincial head of the police force was a Black woman. The national head of the police force is a Black woman. Nevertheless, what happened in Marikana was, in many important respects, a reenactment of Sharpeville. Racism is so dangerous

because it does not necessarily depend on individual actors, but rather is deeply embedded in the apparatus . . .

*And once you're in the apparatus . . .*

Yes. And it doesn't matter that a Black woman heads the national police. The technology, the regimes, the targets are still the same. I fear that if we don't take seriously the ways in which racism is embedded in structures of institutions, if we assume that there must be an identifiable racist . . .

*The "bad apples" type of . . .*

. . . who is the perpetrator, then we won't ever succeed in eradicating racism.

*You were a pioneer thinking along the lines of intersectionality. How has your thinking evolved?*

Of course intersectionality—or efforts to think, analyze, organize as we recognize the interconnections of race, class, gender, sexuality—has evolved a great deal over the last decades. I see my work as reflecting not an individual analysis, but rather a sense within movements and collectives that it was not possible to separate issues of race from issues of class and issues of gender. There were many pioneers of intersectionality but I do think it is important to acknowledge an organization that existed in New York in the late sixties and seventies called the Third World Women's Alliance. That organization published a newspaper entitled *Triple Jeopardy*. Triple jeopardy was racism, sexism, and imperialism. Of course, imperialism reflected an international awareness of class issues. Many formations were attempting to bring these issues together.

My own book *Women, Race and Class* was one of many that were published during that era, including, to name only a few, *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, the work of bell hooks and Michelle Wallace, and the anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*.

So behind this concept of intersectionality is a rich history of struggle. A history of conversations among activists within movement formations, and with and among academics as well. I mention this genealogy that takes seriously the epistemological productions of those whose primary work is organizing radical movements because I think it's important to prevent the term "intersectionality" from erasing essential histories of activism. There were those of us who by virtue of our experience, not so much by virtue of academic analyses, recognized that we had to figure out a way to bring these issues together. They weren't separate in our bodies, but also they are not separate in terms of struggles.

I actually think that what is most interesting today, given that long history both of activism and all of the articles and books that have been written since then, what I think is most interesting is the conceptualization of the intersectionality of struggles. Initially intersectionality was about bodies and experiences. But now, how do we talk about bringing various social justice struggles together, across national borders? So we were talking about Ferguson and Palestine. How can we really create a framework that allows us to think these issues together and to organize around these issues together?

*When we went to New York for the Russell Tribunal on Palestine session we tried to get support from Native Americans and the Black movement, but it*

*proved very hard. We were eight hundred people in the audience. Maybe 5 percent were people of color.*

But you can't simply invite people to join you and be immediately on board, particularly when they were not necessarily represented during the earlier organizing processes. You have to develop organizing strategies so that people identify with the particular issue as their issue. This is why I was suggesting in response to the question about Michelle Alexander that these connections need to be made in the context of the struggles themselves. So as you are organizing against police crimes, against police racism, you always raise parallels and similarities in other parts of the world.

And not only similarities, but you talk about the structural connections. What is the connection between the way the US police forces train and are armed and Israeli police and military. . . . So when you popularize that, encourage people to think about that . . .

*. . . in a global way . . .*

. . . exactly. This is one of the reasons I think so many people began to identify with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. It wasn't a sense of "Oh, we have to lend solidarity to these people over there in South Africa." It was because they began to see that we have a common . . . connection. If that's not created, no matter how much you appeal to people, no matter how genuinely you invite them to join you, they will continue to see the activity as yours, not theirs.

*It's crucial to make this connection, right? For people to understand that we are all neighbors because otherwise that's where racism starts. When people think along the line that a Black person doesn't have the same genes as a white one . . .*

One of the things I've been thinking about in relation to the need to diversify movements in solidarity with Palestine is that, the tendency is to approach issues about which one is passionate within a narrow framework. People do this whatever their concerns are. But especially with the Palestine solidarity movement. My experience has been that many people assume that in order to be involved with Palestine, you have to be an expert.

So people are afraid to join because they say, "I don't understand. It's so complicated." Then they hear someone who is truly an expert, who does indeed represent the movement, who is so thoroughly informed about the history of the conflict, who speaks about the failure of the Oslo Accords, et cetera, when this happened and why it's important, but too often people feel that they are not sufficiently informed to consider themselves an advocate of justice in Palestine. The question is how to create windows and doors for people who believe in justice to enter and join the Palestine solidarity movement.

So that the question of how to bring movements together is also a question of the kind of language one uses and the consciousness one tries to impart. I think it's important to insist on the intersectionality of movements. In the abolition movement, we've been trying to find ways to talk about Palestine so that people who are attracted to a campaign to dismantle prisons in the US will also think about the need to end the occupation in Palestine. It can't be an afterthought. It has to be a part of the ongoing analysis.

*Talking about the abolition movement, even with my kids, I've noticed when we're playing my little boy says, "Okay, well, if you're bad, you'll go to jail." And he's three and a half years old. So he is thinking bad = jail. This also applies to most people. So the idea of prison abolition must be a very hard*

one to advocate for. Where do you start? And how to you advocate for prison abolition versus prison reform?

The history of the very institution of the prison is a history of reform. Foucault points this out. Reform doesn't come after the advent of the prison; it accompanies the birth of the prison. So prison reform has always only created better prisons. In the process of creating better prisons, more people are brought under the surveillance of the correctional and law enforcement networks. The question you raise reveals the extent to which the site of the jail or prison is not only material and objective but it's ideological and psychic as well. We internalize this notion of a place to put bad people. That's precisely one of the reasons why we have to imagine the abolitionist movement as addressing those ideological and psychic issues as well. Not just the process of removing the material institutions or facilities.

Why is that person bad? The prison forecloses discussion about that. What is the nature of that badness? What did the person do? Why did the person do that? If we're thinking about someone who has committed acts of violence, why is that kind of violence possible? Why do men engage in such violent behavior against women? The very existence of the prison forecloses the kinds of discussions that we need in order to imagine the possibility of eradicating these behaviors.

Just send them to prison. Just keep on sending them to prison. Then of course, in prison they find themselves within a violent institution that reproduces violence. In many ways you can say that the institution feeds on that violence and reproduces it so that when the person is released he or she is probably worse.

So how does one persuade people to think differently? That's a question of organizing. In the United States, the abolitionist move-

There is no room for talk of violence in the prison

ment emerged around the late 1960s and early '70s. The Quakers were very much a part of the emergence of the idea that we should consider abolishing imprisonment. The Quakers were present at the advent of the prison in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They were the ones who originally thought the prison was a humane alternative to then-existing forms of punishment because it would allow people to be rehabilitated.

I would say that in the 1970s there was a moment when abolition was taken seriously. This was around the time of the Attica Rebellion, when people seriously began to think about—I'm talking about prominent lawyers and judges, journalists—began to think about something other than imprisonment. Of course eventually the pendulum swung in the opposite direction. That in a sense has been the history of the prison. On the one hand, there have been calls for changes, less violence, less repression, calls for reform and rehabilitation. But this never really worked. And so, on the other hand, there were calls for incapacitation and more punitive modes of control. All in all, the framework has always remained the same.

So the idea that I think animated people who were working toward the abolition of prisons is that we have to think about the larger context. We can't only think about crime and punishment. We can't only think about the prison as a place of punishment for those who have committed crimes. We have to think about the larger framework. That means asking: Why is there such a disproportionate number of Black people and people of color in prison? So we have to talk about racism. Abolishing the prison is about attempting to abolish racism. Why is there so much illiteracy? Why are so many prisoners illiterate? That means we have to attend to the educational system. Why is it that the three largest psychiatric institutions in the country are jails

in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Rikers Island, Cook County Jail, and L.A. County Jail? That means we need to think about health care issues, and especially mental health care issues. We have to figure out how to abolish homelessness.

So it means you cannot think in such a narrow framework. This is what has, I think, permitted the jails and prisons to continue to grow and develop. Because we all have these ideas that somehow if you've committed a crime, then you need to be punished. So this is why we have tried to disarticulate crime and punishment in a popular sense by thinking about the "prison-industrial complex." Mike Davis was the first scholar/activist who used the term, especially with respect to the growing prison economy in California. The group that founded Critical Resistance thought that this would be a way for people to move away from that notion of bad people deserving punishment and to begin to ask questions about the economic, political, and ideological roles of the prison.

*It's a big money-making business.*

It's totally a money-making business.

*They do need prisoners, right?*

Absolutely. Especially given the increasing privatization of prisons, but there is privatization beyond private prisons. It consists of the outsourcing of prison services to all kinds of private corporations, and these corporations want larger prison populations. They want more bodies. They want more profits. And then you look at the way in which politicians always note that, whether there is a high crime rate or not, law-and-order rhetoric will always help to mobilize the voting population.

*It makes you think about laws as well. I remember when I was in Australia talking to aboriginal people there was this law in central Australia that in practice meant "three strikes, you're out." Three strikes could be you stealing a loaf of bread one day, that's one strike; you stealing a pen, that's two strikes; you stealing another pen, that's three strikes. Some aboriginals are in jail for these type of strikes. You first think that it's crazy, but then realize that a lot of people are in jail for really minor offenses.*

Well, I think that you can say that all over the world now the institution of the prison serves as a place to warehouse people who represent major social problems. Just as there is a disproportionate number of Black people in US prisons, there is an equally disproportionate number of aboriginal people behind bars in Australia. Getting rid of the people, putting them in prison is a way not to have to deal with immigration in Europe. Immigration, of course, happens as a result of all the economic changes that have happened globally—global capitalism, the restructuring of economies in countries of the Global South that makes it impossible for people to live there. In many ways you can say that the prison serves as an institution that consolidates the state's inability and refusal to address the most pressing social problems of this era.

*I am thinking again about the abolitionist movement, which is about a better society. It's not only about prison abolition, it's about much more than that.*

It is about prison abolition; it also inherits the notion of abolition from W. E. B. Du Bois who wrote about the abolition of slavery. He pointed out the end of slavery per se was not going to solve the myriad problems created by the institution of slavery. You could remove the chains, but if you did not develop the institutions that

would allow for the incorporation of previously enslaved people into a democratic society, then slavery would not be abolished. In a sense, what we are arguing is that the prison abolitionist struggle follows the anti-slavery abolitionist struggle of the nineteenth century; the struggle for an abolitionist democracy is aspiring to create the institutions that will truly allow for a democratic society.

*What about prisoners in prison? Can you talk about agency and struggles, prisoners and their own struggles?*

Whenever you conceptualize social justice struggles, you will always defeat your own purposes if you cannot imagine the people around whom you are struggling as equal partners. Therefore if, and this is one of the problems with all of the reform movements, if you think of the prisoners simply as the objects of the charity of others, you defeat the very purpose of antiprison work. You are constituting them as an inferior in the process of trying to defend their rights.

The abolitionist movement has learned that without the actual participation of prisoners, there can be no campaign. That is a matter of fact. Many prisoners have contributed to the development of this consciousness: the abolition of the prison-industrial complex. It may not always be easy to guarantee the participation of prisoners, but without their participation and without acknowledging them as equals, we are bound to fail.

As you were referring to the need to ensure that there are women represented, you have to go a little bit further. I can give you some examples. Prisoners are able to make collect calls and so therefore how do you allow prisoners to participate in readings? It doesn't really take very much technology to rig up an amplification

apparatus to a telephone and have people call in. I did an event on Mumia Abu-Jamal. I was on stage with a telephone. Mumia called in and he was able to address the entire audience. We have to think about those processes.

I work with a women's prison organization in Australia directed by Debbie Kilroy called Sisters Inside. Whenever I go to Australia, and I'm about to go now, we always go into the prison because a good portion of the leadership of the organization is in prison. It's so easy to just forget, to think about the prison and its population abstractly. If you're serious about developing egalitarian relations, you will figure out how to make these connections. How to stay in touch with people behind bars. How to allow their voices to be heard.

*One cannot be lazy. How do we do that? How do we win men to fight for women's liberation? How do we win whites to struggle against racism and for the emancipation of people of color? It's the same thinking, right?*

Well, it is. We have to extricate ourselves from narrow identitarian thinking if we want to encourage progressive people to embrace these struggles as their own. With respect to feminist struggles, men will have to do a lot of the important work. I often like to talk about feminism not as something that adheres to bodies, not as something grounded in gendered bodies, but as an approach—as a way of conceptualizing, as a methodology, as a guide to strategies for struggle. That means that feminism doesn't belong to anyone in particular. Feminism is not a unitary phenomenon, so that increasingly there are men who are involved in feminist studies, for example. As a professor I see increasing numbers of men majoring in feminist studies, which is a good thing. In the abolitionist movement I see particularly young men who have a very rich feminist



perspective, and so how does one guarantee that that will happen? It will not happen without work. Both men and women—and trans persons—have to do that work, but I don't think it's a question of women inviting men to struggle. I think it's about a certain kind of consciousness that has to be encouraged so that progressive men are aware that they have a certain responsibility to bring in more men. Men can often talk to men in a different way. It's important for those who we might want to bring into the struggle to look at models. What does it mean to model feminism as a man? I tour the campuses regularly, and I was speaking at the University of Southern Illinois during a Black History Month celebration and I came into contact with this group of young men who are members of a group they call "Alternative Masculinities" and I was totally impressed by them. They work with the women's center. They have been trained in how to do rape crisis calls. They were really seriously engaging in all of that kind of activism that you assume that only women do. And then I remembered that many years ago in the 1970s there were a couple of men's formations like Men against Rape, Black Men against Rape, Against Domestic Violence, and I remember thinking then that it's just a matter of time before this gets taken up by men all over. But it never really happened. So I was reminded by these young men in "Alternative Masculinities" that after all of these decades they should today represent a far more popular trend. But this is the kind of thing that needs to be happening.

It doesn't happen by itself. It doesn't happen automatically. You have to intervene. You have to make conscious interventions.

*About the death penalty. Is there actually a chance to abolish it at the state level in the United States?*

Well, fortunately, there are some signs that it might be possible to abolish the death penalty in New York, for example. Of course, there have been moments in certain states that it almost feels like we're on the verge of abolishing the death penalty, and then it doesn't happen; even if people are not executed, it remains on the books. When Troy Davis was killed, on September 21, 2011, there was an international movement. People were convinced that the state of Georgia was not going to execute him. But they did. I don't know whether we are ever going to abolish the death penalty without a mass movement. And the state-by-state approach may take far too long.

But at the same time I should say that oftentimes a particular conjunctural set of conditions will arise, a particular conjuncture, and it reveals the opportunity to accomplish something. For example when the Occupy movement emerged in 2011, that was a really exciting moment. Had we previously done the organizing that would have allowed us to take advantage of that moment, we could have really used that opportunity to build, organize formations—whether we're talking about party formations [or not]—and we would have a much stronger anticapitalist movement today. I think that moment was important because it did provide an opportunity to develop a critique of capitalism that had not previously been popularized, and now we talk about the "99 percent" and the "1 percent"—that's a part of our vocabulary.

... *changing the narrative* ...

Yes. Sometimes we have to do the work even though we don't yet see a glimmer on the horizon that it's actually going to be possible.

*The groundwork has to be done on a daily basis . . .*

The prison abolitionist movement is also incorporating demands for the abolition of the death penalty. We need to develop broader resistance to the death penalty. In the case of Mumia it worked on a small scale—he was removed from death row, but we should have been able to use that as a launching pad for Mumia's full freedom, for abolition of the death penalty, and, of course also of prisons. Capital punishment remains a central issue. We need to popularize understandings of how racism underwrites the death penalty, and so many other institutions. The death penalty is about structural racism and it incorporates historical memories of slavery. We cannot understand why the death penalty continues to exist in the United States in the way that it does, without an analysis of slavery. So this is again one of the really important issues confronting us. But I think we will need a mass movement and a global movement to finally remove the death penalty from the books.

### THREE

## We Have to Talk about Systemic Ch

Interview by Frank Barat in Paris (December 10, 2014)

*The last time we spoke about Ferguson, the crime had happened, but the grand jury had not given its verdict yet. Following the death of another Black man, Eric Garner, at the hands of police, I'd like to talk about it again. Two Black men died and the cops are walking free. What needs to change?*

First, I would point out that police killings of Black men and women are not unusual. Robin D. G. Kelley wrote an article recently, which you might find interesting. You can find it on the Portside website. The name of the article is "Why We Won't Wait." The article lists all of the Black people who had been killed by police, while we were waiting to hear the results of the Ferguson verdict.

*These killings all took place in a couple of months?*

Exactly—during the time the grand jury was in session listening to evidence. I think that we often treat these cases as if they