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Tackling the PIC: Successes and Challenges in Teaching the Prison-Industrial Complex

Melissa Ooten

“But they’re criminals. We should lock them up and throw away the key!” my student, using a tired refrain, declared. She soon had a classroom of her peers – thoughtful, engaged students who often enjoyed analyzing complicated and difficult social issues - nodding in support. Thus began my entry into teaching and discussing the prison industrial complex (PIC) and abolitionism in a college classroom. Luckily, the class moved beyond this knee-jerk reaction, but I learned a valuable lesson that day. While I regularly engage students in thinking critically about poverty, social justice, race relations, feminism, and inclusion, exploring the possibilities of abolishing a system of criminalization and imprisonment that seemed so natural and commonplace to them was going to be a new challenge (Foucault).

To that end, this essay will explore my experiences teaching the PIC in two differently situated classes in order to address what worked well and what did not. As a historian who teaches in women, gender, and sexuality studies, my two very different experiences were driven in large part by how I organized and structured the students’ entrance to and evaluation of this topic. Since I experienced some real success when I taught the PIC the second time around (but not the first), the essay includes some “best practices” to consider when approaching this topic with students who are, at best, uninformed and, at worst,

completely resistant to the idea of even recognizing the PIC, much less considering its abolishment.

This essay explores the frameworks in which my teaching of the PIC did and did not work for me in the classroom, including the texts I used, questions we discussed, and assignments that my students and I found most useful. It also examines what kinds of arguments I found to be most compelling in the classroom around the possibilities for abolishing the PIC and what can happen when the prospect of abolition is raised. I also explore how to link the PIC with historical antecedents in order to build an effective groundwork for discussing the PIC, since it has been through this historically-situated framework that I have found the most success and reward in engaging students in the idea of abolition as the solution to the PIC. I also discuss ways to incorporate PIC discussions into other material that intersects with it. I begin by focusing on why I teach the PIC and why my experiences discussing it and prodding students to consider radical acts of resistance have only strengthened my dedication to having these difficult dialogues.

Why Teach the PIC?

Teaching the PIC means challenging how we conceptualize the prison, which, according to scholar Angela Davis, most of us see as “an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives” (*Prisons* 9). The very title of her work, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, is an important question for students to address. Her seminal

work provides frameworks for how to best approach this topic with students. Michel Foucault wrote decades ago about the supposedly “self-evident” nature of the prison, and Davis succinctly writes: “the prison is considered so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it” (Foucault 232; *Prisons* 10). As Davis succinctly summarizes, the ideology of the prison “relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism” (*Prisons* 16). It is for that very reason that we must tackle this topic and these questions with our students.

Creating an environment in which abolition can be raised and seriously contemplated is tantamount to this educational endeavor. I use Davis’s concept of an “abolition democracy,” a definition that incorporates not only tearing down antiquated, racist institutions but also building new, inclusive ones, as a central organizing theme when teaching the PIC. Students often respond to her insistence upon “the abolition of institutions that advance the dominance of any one group over any other” (*Democracy* 7, 29, 73). According to Davis, “the prison is one of the most important features of our image environment” (*Prisons* 18). Thus I begin my classes on the PIC by asking each student to talk about what he or she knows – or thinks she knows - about prisons and where this knowledge originated. Not surprisingly, nearly every student cites popular media, especially the currently popular *Prison Break*. Interrogating students’

concepts of prisons and the imprisoned is an important starting point since it reveals to many students that they actually know very little about prison.

Even for students who fully accept the existence and propagation of the PIC and acknowledge the need for prison abolitionism, the question of viable alternatives creates an impediment to how they conceptualize the problem and possible solutions. Here, I find rabbi Arthur Waskow's assertion that "the only full alternative [to prisons] is building a kind of society that does not need prisons" especially potent (Davis, *Prisons* 105). While some students dismiss it as overly idealistic and impractical, talking with students about a society that guarantees access to quality education and health care and meets people's basic needs of work with dignity and sustainable communities in which people truly govern and feel invested in can help them think through plausible, practical solutions. I have found it essential in envisioning a more just and equitable society that we grapple with the difficult work of introducing students to the possibility of change, even if – perhaps especially if – they find these changes frightening, infuriating, or implausible.

Teaching the PIC: Two Classroom Experiences

I would like to explore some of my challenges and successes in teaching the PIC by comparing my first experience teaching it in a course entitled *The Politics of the Body* where students would not even engage with the idea of abolitionism, and my second classroom experience in a course on *Activism in the*

South, which I constructed very differently, and in which students responded with much more acceptance and moved beyond “reform” frameworks to rethinking the very idea of prisons. I will emphasize the *Activism in the South* course given my much greater success in that particular class.

While part of the difference may be contributed to different students, I think most of it had to do with how I chose to approach the subject. In the *Politics of the Body* course, I started with Angela Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?* Despite its essential, overarching question, which I thought the students would find provocative, I realized that I wrongly situated it at the beginning of our discussions. I had much more success in the second course by using other texts to create a more open environment that then allowed students to seriously entertain the questions posed by Davis’s book later in the course.

I chose to focus on the PIC as part of my *Politics in the Body* course in large part due to both Foucault’s work and the edited collection *Policing the National Body: Race, Gender, and Criminalization*. I wanted students to grapple with what it means for physical bodies to be heavily surveilled, physically constrained, and imprisoned. One unit of the course addressed bodies’ “freedom of movement,” in which we analyzed practices as varied as nineteenth-century footbinding in China as compared to corset-wearing in the West to imprisonment, in which the physical body literally functions under constant regulation. Since this work would require us to think about those in prison, I thought it would be important to address the PIC and how the structure of the prison system has manifested in

a wide-ranging system of control and surveillance even outside of it.

The texts worked less well in the *Politics of the Body* course because we simply had less time to interrogate the PIC and its history. Whereas I spent most of the semester in my second class weaving themes of the PIC into our material, we spent only a couple of weeks on it in this class. For a topic that can be jarring to students, it simply was not enough time to achieve the depth of research and discussion necessary to challenge students to rethink how they think about the prison system and the ways in which it is embedded in society as a whole.

In both courses, I found Foucault's work on prisons a useful and provocative starting point. While the final section of *Discipline and Punish*, "Prison" is an essential theoretical starting point, the opening chapter, "The Body of the Condemned" also provides an important way to underscore the connection between prisons, the freedom or regulation of movement, and questions of liberty. While many students had not previously considered it on this level, they found his idea that the supposedly "'self-evident' character of the prison...is based first of all on the simple form of 'deprivation of liberty'" an interesting way to think about how prisons have become the defining feature of punishment in our society (Foucault 232).

As stated earlier, I learned that in both situations, students based their ideas on prisons and policing almost wholly on media-constructed images. Thus it is important to actually explore the purpose of prisons and what takes place inside of them on a daily basis at the beginning of any discussion of the PIC. For

students to fully understand the place of prisons in society, I had to situate the prison not only historically, socially, and politically within American culture, but I also had to situate prisons within communities. Exploring both communities inside prisons (who is in prison and for what crimes, and who is doing the police and surveillance work of the PIC) and the communities in which the prison resides are vitally important to humanize these experiences. It also helps students explore the questions of what function the prison serves and whose purposes it serves. Helping students interrogate how they define “safety” and what prisons are “for” becomes paramount to these discussions.

When teaching the course *The Politics of the Body*, I approached the PIC from the standpoint of modern-day policing and surveillance, beginning with intentional theoretical discussions on power, knowledge, and criminalization. We began our examination of the PIC through Angela Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, and we also studied selections from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” In hindsight, arranging the introduction to the PIC in this way immediately caused students to defend the current prison system and focus on simplistic issues of prison “reform.” The texts challenged students, but because they had not previously considered the idea of the PIC and abolitionism, they found it too radical and foreign to critically examine and consider at the onset of our discussion. Also, given the nature of the course, we devoted only a few class periods to the study of the PIC and abolitionism, which left little time to

historically situate the topic.

In hindsight, I led with a theoretical foundation that alienated most students before I even addressed practical issues like the hugely disproportionate imprisonment of minority men and the enormity of the U.S.'s current prison population of 2.3 million inmates, a number that reflects a 500% increase during the past 30 years (Sentencing Project). A better introduction would have led with this information as well as discussions about who is in prison and why, in order to emphasize the heightened surveillance experienced by particular communities and to introduce the concept of institutionalized racism before beginning to address how to rethink our criminalization process. By introducing the topic in this way, students first would have grappled with issues around surveillance and the intersections between race, class, and geography that create specific populations under heavy surveillance, concepts that my students expressed a willingness to discuss and understand.

The majority of my students come from suburban, middle-to-upper-class communities, and the knowledge they hold about how their own communities operate helps further this discussion. Repeatedly, students discussed that while they consider drug use prevalent in their communities, it is not prosecuted because these actions take place in private. They recognize that this privacy is class-based and dependent on individuals' ownership of single-family homes residing on private property (Scully 59). These discussions also prompt students to discuss how they view entities like the police department as operating to

“help” and “protect” their communities from what is assumed to be crime brought to the community by “outsiders.” By using students’ experiences in their own communities as a starting point, regardless of what those communities look like, they begin to see how the same activity looks and is regulated very differently based on location, and they can more readily understand how issues of regulated space vary drastically depending on one’s class and racial status. These discussions helps students understand how public spaces can render individuals more visible and how, perhaps as a corollary, public space also has become devalued due to the perception of these spaces as lacking control and utilized primarily by poor people in the minds of many Americans (Collins 25). Anannya Bhattacharjee’s article, “Private Fists and Public Force: Race, Gender, and Surveillance,” provides an important starting point for analyzing these issues and helping students understand law enforcement as a “seamless web” in which authorities move routinely from minor practices, such as a traffic stop, to severe practices, such as deportation (6-7; 45-46).

I taught the PIC for the second time in a course entitled *Activism in the South*, a history course which focused on social justice movements in the southern U.S. from Reconstruction to the present. In this course, I approached the idea of the PIC and prison abolitionism from a broader historically-based standpoint with a particular emphasis on the development of penitentiary “farms” and the imprisonment of African American men in the New South after and in response to the abolition of slavery.

In this course, tracing the development of modern surveillance and imprisonment practices allowed students to conceptualize the prison as a modern, created environment that has incorporated institutionalized racism as a dominating practice from its inception. By understanding this history, students are better able to understand ways in which abolishing a system built on injustice could create more viable institutions to address underlying issues of poverty and institutionalized inequities. It also allows students to think of the abolition of slavery and the abolition of the PIC on a continuum with overlapping similarities. I also think the strong ties to the post-slavery South following the Civil War and the inclusion of former Civil Rights activists who now do work around prison abolitionism allowed students to construct an alternative framework in which they could more adequately explore abolitionism and move beyond knee-jerk responses of confusion and resistance that I experienced when I first taught the subject.

The framework of the course *Activism in the South* provided a more foundational way in which to discuss the PIC. We started the course by touring the city of Richmond, Virginia, where my university resides. Foundational to this tour was a stop at Lumpkin's Jail, the archaeological site of a former slave jail, possibly the largest such site outside of New Orleans in the nineteenth century, that housed many thousands of slaves prior to their auction (Lumpkins). This tour created a link to discuss not only the enslavement of African Americans, but also the practice many Southern states used of jailing African

American men after the abolition of slavery as a defining way in which they attempted to control and coerce significant populations of free African Americans.

The course's focus on the "long" civil rights movement allowed us to trace the history of localities across the South that arrested freedmen simply for being unemployed under stringent vagrancy laws. Selections from David Oshinsky's *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* proved central to these discussions. Oshinsky documents how early prison "farms" deliberately recreated the circumstances of slavery by forcing African American men who often had committed no real crime to work on a plantation farm without pay in order to generate profit for the specific locality or state. Situating the modern-day prison system in this way provided a space in which students could question the very creation of a prison system that worked to deliberately criminalize specific individuals as a means of social control. Exploring the history of prisons like Parchman (the Mississippi State Penitentiary) also helped solidify students' understanding of how the intersections of race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location largely determine who was incarcerated from the outset of the modern-day prison system. Getting students to understand institutionalized racism as inherent in the very creation of our current system of imprisonment helped move them further in questioning and considering the abolishment of that system today.

Having established Parchman as our example, we periodically returned to it throughout the semester. We examined how and why Mississippi officials housed Civil Rights activists in the state's maximum security prison during the 1960s. We also examined criminalization in the context of convict leasing and the lengths public officials would go to in order to harness the labor of freedmen in a way in which their labor would be free. I also incorporated an extensive unit on lynching and explored the ways in which whites who exercised extralegal authority not only received community praise rather than sanction but also how these acts often included local law enforcement officials as participants (Hale; Litwack).

Much of our study in this course centered on the "long" Civil Rights movement, and we spent weeks studying the history of disfranchisement in the South. The knowledge that most African Americans in the South could not vote until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made students take seriously the estimation that in some areas of the country, 40% of the next generation of African-American voters may face permanent disfranchisement due to laws that prevent people convicted of felony from voting (Scully 69). While 2.4% of the total U.S. population is disfranchised due to laws forbidding those convicted of felonies from voting, these laws disfranchise over 8% of the African American population. I have found these staggering statistics helpful in focusing students' attention on this subject. As Ken Silverstein writes in his introduction to *Prison Nation*, the U.S. prison population of 2.3 million individuals "roughly equal[s]

the combined population of Austin, Denver, Nashville, and Washington, D.C.” with half of the population consisting of African Americans (in a country with a nationwide African American population of 12.3%) (Herival 1). Paul Street furthers this trajectory by noting that “on any given day, 30% of African-American males aged 20 to 29 are ‘under correctional supervision’” (31).

This course also allowed me to connect the criminalization of immigrants to the PIC. As Jael Silliman writes, “mandatory detention provisions have made immigrants the fastest growing incarcerated population in the United States” (xx). I have found the use of the documentary film *The Least of These*, which explores the legality of a Texas jail facility housing primarily mothers and their children seeking asylum in the United States, helpful in humanizing these voices for students. Ideas of citizenship and who has the right to move freely in society flow logically from these broader issues of nationhood and citizenship and contribute substantially to our discussions on the far-reaching nature of the PIC.

Building a foundation to recognize and study the criminalization of poverty also has been central in my discussions with students regarding the PIC. To this end, I found the essay collection *Prison Nation* especially useful due to its focus on ways in which poverty is criminalized, from neighborhoods where the poor live to what they can expect in terms of attorney representation when they do not have private funds to pay for legal representation. Students especially respond to Paul Street’s “Color Bind: Prisons and the New American Racism.” Street pushes them to think about what it means that prisons are one of the

nation's (few) current "growth" industries. Street's work also provides a foundation for students to grapple with what it means for "the mostly white residents of [newly built prison towns to place] their economic 'dreams' on the transport and lockdown of unfree African-Americans" (31).

Engaging Students in Researching and Writing on the PIC

In terms of assignments, I have found that asking students to research the prison industry in their hometowns and home states to be an effective way to humanize the statistics and make the subject seem relevant to them (although some certainly do not need to be convinced of its relevancy to them). The Sentencing Project website easily allows students to study comparative data among states. Given that my university is located in Virginia, I use the state as an illustrative example to great effect. Virginia currently incarcerates nearly 65,000 individuals, or slightly less than 1% of its population. African Americans outnumber whites in Virginia prisons and jails by a nearly 6 to 1 ratio, in a state with a white majority population (U.S. Census). While 6.8% of the state's total adult population is disfranchised due to laws forbidding voting by those who have a felony conviction, nearly 20% of the African-American population is currently disfranchised by these laws. Thus Virginia disenfranchises African Americans at a rate more than double (19.6%) the national average (8.3%). A *Washington Post* article noted that Virginia's spending on imprisonment far outpaced the state's spending in other areas in recent years, with the state now

spending over one billion dollars each year on prisons (Barkow). This provides another opportunity for students to talk about what we value as a society in terms of how our elected officials spend allocated public funds.

Students also read and analyzed the text and images presented in a five part series entitled “Hard Time: Inside Richmond City Jail,” which originally ran in the Richmond *Times-Dispatch* in December 2006. Students responded particularly to the many photographs of the jail, which show overwhelmingly African American inmates, although African Americans are present as enforcers as well. Students read other articles from this time period in which Richmond’s sheriff regularly allowed a reporter and photographer from the local newspaper access to the jail. In one article, sheriff C. T. Woody called the jail “a dumping ground for the mentally ill,” and jail officials estimated that $\frac{1}{4}$ of its 1500 inmates at the time suffered from mental illness (Ress, *Lost*). This jail was known for years to house 150 inmates in large cells designed to hold 50 people, with most people sleeping on mattresses (when available) simply piled on the floor. In a 2008 article, journalist David Ress quoted Woody stating that as many as $\frac{1}{3}$ of the city jail’s inmates simply did not belong in jail. A review of the jail by the *Times-Dispatch* found that many inmates had been incarcerated for trespassing (one man, for example, fell asleep in the lobby of a local medical center and police officers arrested him for trespassing), disorderly conduct, writing bad checks, and possessing small amounts of drugs (Ress, *For Want*).

There is certainly a risk in this type of analytical project to focus on “reform” rather than “abolition” due to its specific information and the obvious need for direct intervention to immediately relieve overcrowding, the neglect of the mentally ill, and the criminalization of the poor who cannot afford even the smallest bond to leave jail. Yet, in my opinion, the value of such a project outweighs the problems as it pushes students to contemplate why picture after picture records a sea of imprisoned African American men and the larger problems of racism and class inequity that so obviously are institutionalized and perpetuated by the PIC. I have found that while students often begin by focusing on the specifics of the project with “reform” in mind, class discussions and revisiting the project at a later date when they have read the theoretically-driven work on issues of liberty and imprisonment actually pushes them further to question the entire enterprise of prisons as an organizing mechanism for punishment and profit.

Other Directions and Future Directions

Having specifically taught the PIC in these two different classes, I now find it imperative to extend these discussions to required courses that I regularly teach. In this section, I will address several other important areas that can easily be explored in terms of the PIC, although they have had only a minor focus in my own discussions and teachings on the PIC simply due to time constraints. I include ways to consider the prison as a working site, the global PIC, the

gendered nature of the prison, and the increasing ways in which youth are incorporated into the PIC.

In a course I teach annually that examines historical and contemporary issues facing women in the work place, I found the section entitled “Making a Buck Off the Prisoner’s Back” in *Prison Nation* an invaluable tool for talking about what it means to harness incarcerated labor for profit while paying the producers of such labor little to nothing. Acknowledging the prison as a work site is important in understanding who profits from unfree labor and why. Yet as Paul Wright notes, “the real issue of prison labor is not so much the 3,000 prisoners working for private businesses, but the two million who aren’t” (Herival 111). In other words, students need to consider what it means to these prisoners’ families and communities that they are not and cannot earn wages (often permanently, given the difficulty those convicted of felonies face in finding jobs) to financially support their children, partners, and community institutions. These questions help students understand why these families often become the least able to support themselves and why they have little to no mobility in terms of living and educational spaces. While I have had the most success in teaching the possibilities of abolitionism in my *Activism in the South* course in which I could continually focus on the history of criminalization in a specific region of the U.S., its importance to many curricular topics must be realized in its incorporation into less specific and more broadly constructed course topics.

Another important way to expand our discussion of the PIC is to examine it in a global framework by analyzing, for example, experiences at Abu Ghraib (Hames-Garcia). The potential domestication of Guantanamo (and its past and current form) and extraordinary rendition practices are both important inclusions in any discussion of the PIC and abolitionism. The global “war on terror” and “homeland security” practices have made such connections indispensable as we see the PIC expanded into global mechanizations of criminalization, incarceration, and execution. While much more has been written on the subject since 9/11, I still find Eve Goldberg and Linda Evans’s article, “The Prison Industrial Complex and the Global Economy,” one of the most useful sources on teaching transnational connections between the PIC, the military-industrial complex, and contemporary U.S. foreign policy (Goldberg).

Discussions of the gendered dimensions of imprisonment and the PIC are particularly important given that everyday routine in women’s prisons “verges on sexual assault” (Davis, *Prisons* 63). While women constitute only a small percentage of those imprisoned, they account for the fastest-growing U.S. prison population. As Angela Davis notes, “prison is a space in which the threat of sexualized violence that looms in the larger society is effectively sanctioned as a routine aspect of the landscape of punishment behind prison walls” (*Prisons* 78). Dorothy Roberts’s *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* proves especially useful in the women’s and gender studies classroom. Roberts’s introduction provides a valuable starting point for thinking about

reproduction, race, and incarceration as she explores a policy begun by Charleston, SC officials in 1989 to “[arrest] pregnant women whose prenatal tests revealed they were smoking crack” (3). Roberts’ work provides a springboard for discussing our perceptions about where responsibility lies for social problems and the link between who is punished and regulated for supposedly perpetuating those problems. Her work can easily be linked to Foucault’s in discussions on liberty and what it means to punish by constricting or forbidding one’s liberty.

While my current classroom discussions have only broadly addressed issues of criminalization and youth, students continually express interest in the subject, and it provides another important layer of the PIC. My discussions on this subject from this past fall began when the Supreme Court agreed to review the case in which two youths in Florida received terms of life imprisonment without parole for crimes that did not result in anyone’s death (Liptak). Furthermore, “school-to-prison pipeline,” a concept analyzing how under-resourced and neglected public school systems create punitive systems that effectively prepare many students simply to enter prison after their schooling, is also an important concept for students to contemplate (NAACP).

Possibilities for a Prison-Free Future

In conclusion, I have found exploring the possibilities of prison abolitionism with students difficult, frustrating, and exhilarating. It is hard work

that teachers and students must equally be willing to undertake, but when we do, I believe it can be some of the best classroom work that we undertake. I find it imperative that we work with our students to tackle this challenging work and help motivate our students to realize the real possibility of a prison-free future.

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