

Imprisoned Intellectuals: War, Dissent, and Social Justice

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Since September 11, 2001, many Americans discuss or represent war, terror, and death in shorthand. Two numbers separated by a dash speak volumes (maybe Wittgenstein was right about math and language). *9/11* signifies American loss and mourning, American victimization and rage, American retribution, and American triumph over tragedy and victory in violent confrontations. In the wake of a national tragedy, which has expanded into global warfare, *9/11* also evokes for some an amnesiac claim of political innocence, a guise of national blamelessness in regard to state terror and violence, one which philosopher Cornel West, in a speech given in the Bay area months after the attack, describes as our “Peter Pan Complex.”

Although evocative, the term *9/11* (which some Manhattanites shorten to *911*) seems mute about U.S. terrorism. Our national refusal to “grow up” does not permit many to become literate in a language that adequately conveys the recent continuing history of the U.S. government in state terror (specifically, in light of *9/11*, its support of violent extremists and the drug trade in Afghanistan and elsewhere, in coalitions seeking to destabilize and destroy communist or hostile governments to U.S. military and business interests).

When I reflect on *9/11*, I am no longer sure of what (my) language can convey. Writing and speech seem contained or restrained by convention or repetition, which alienate me from what I analyze in print (how best to describe my tax dollars supporting a government that refuses to accept responsibility for extreme levels of violence and armaments in the world and state-sponsored terrorism?). The imme-

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diacy and incisiveness of critical thought and action often seem muted by numbness, grief, rage, or political inertia—or locked away in sites I rarely visit.

So, the *Radical History Review*'s request for "reflections" leaves me feeling uncomfortable. How to place myself in my words and on a political landscape marred by crises? For some reason, I feel compelled to try to answer an insistent query, "What did you do during the war?" and the sotto voce interrogation, "What are you doing during the wars?" Responding to interrogation, I place myself in time and space in relation to an event that radically changed our nation and culture and me; yet one that seems to evoke the past and to have altered little of our behavior. We still face the continuing corporate scandals and predatory abuses ranging from military and economic profiteering in warfare to Enron's energy and labor theft to the Catholic hierarchy's antichild machinations—all forms of violence, all more interesting, it seems, to the American consumer than the consequences and casualties of U.S. wars.

The philosopher of African religions and philosophy, John Mbiti, writes that some cultures synthesize past, present, and future time into the immediate now.¹ When I think about the current wars and the loss of thousands of lives—not just those of people in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania, but also the loss of thousands of Afghani lives (since World War II, overwhelmingly warfare disproportionately kills civilians rather than combatants), time compresses itself and the images of wars of the recent history fold into this one. I share an African view of cosmology. In its selective and amnesiac time line of war and terror, the United States (ironically, since it cannot muster either an apology for slavery or negotiate reparations) is also "Africanized," albeit in a distorted fashion, in its popular representations: Time (past, present, and future) is the immediate present. The recognizable victim and inevitable victor—no matter what the cost—is the American citizen. The U.S. response, as articulated through White House spokesmen, to "What were and are you doing during the war?" is a succinct swagger: "Winning."

"What was, am, I doing during the wars?" When the planes hit, I was on our farm in upstate New York, listening to the news, mostly the news on National Public Radio (NPR), because I could not stomach the other media (but later I could not digest NPR either as inane, patriotic rhetoric became its script). At first, hearing that one plane had struck the World Trade Center (WTC), I thought it to be a commuter flown by a pilot with the overconfidence of JFK Jr.; hearing of another plane striking the Pentagon, I knew it to be a declaration of war. Before arranging for the installation of the Dish Network to allow me to watch the war(s) which would subsequently become more "real," I try all day and into the night to phone my godmother in the Bronx. When I finally get through, she tells me that she is missing a loved one, someone who flew out of Boston on the morning of September 11. Secluded, sheltered on a farm, I tune into NPR and listen to their reports. Soon they name the celebrities

lost, and I call my godmother to tell her of her loss. The words *sorrow* and *grief* do not communicate the wail emitted when the mass or individual deaths of others become your own private, terminal disease. And as I listen to my godmother, I associate and sort the sounds, linking them with ones that I've heard in the recent past in response to other manifestations of terrorism: domestic violence and battery, prison beatings, police rapes or executions of black bodies; "contra" or counterrevolutionary maiming instructed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and its torture manuals.

Sorting sounds of grief, I realize that when time folds, space collapses as well, and everything seems to converge in a circle or loop. Although those who responded to 9/11 by quoting Malcolm X's infamous metaphor for the John F. Kennedy assassination were often castigated, I found that terrorism officially condemned while manufactured at home (through police and military elites) had been exported only to return as a (domestic) import.²

So American exceptionalism rewrites history and time lines to make immediacy and punitive reflex action normative and to place the wounded and traumatized American body center while denying the terror it has inflicted and does inflict on other bodies. These are our self-inflicted wounds: Escalating wars on terrorism or terrorist wars are transformed from police and military acts into pop cultural aggression and aggrandizement that invite every "loyal American" to participate; these wars will cost everyone dearly in monetary reserves, civil liberties, and political freedom. There is also an ethical and spiritual cost. Exceptionalism that allows a national preoccupation privileging the deaths of American citizens deflects attention from massive losses of non-U.S. citizens. That over 500,000 children were killed during the 1990s largely due to the U.S. embargo of Iraq appears to go unnoticed by most Americans, or at least merits no public expression of outrage on their part.

Confronting American exceptionalism and the denial of state-inflicted terror and death, Mumia Abu-Jamal observed in the months following 9/11 how we rank suffering: "People in the United States, drunk on imperial pride, think of themselves as quintessential Americans, and think of the rest of the people of the world as something else; something lesser: the Other."³ (Often the "free" think of the imprisoned as the subhuman Other, ignoring the wars waged inside the interior—within prisons, jails, detention centers.) Of the terror and foreign wars waged by the U.S. government, Abu-Jamal references Latin America and the U.S. Army School of the Americas, located at Fort Benning, Georgia, used to train leaders of paramilitary death squads. Abu-Jamal quotes Chilean novelist Ariel Dorfman: "During the last 28 years, Tuesday, September 11, has been a date of mourning, for me and millions of others, ever since that day in 1973 when Chile lost its democracy in a military coup, that day when death irrevocably entered our lives and changed us forever." The U.S.-backed coup bombed the presidential palace, engineered the death of the demo-

cratically elected president Salvador Allende, and installed the violent dictator Augusto Pinochet.⁴ Those who would break from American exceptionalism to protest this and other U.S.-sponsored tragedies in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and southern Africa during the 1970s and 1980s would eventually find themselves imprisoned for their dissent.

Political Prisoners, Imprisoned Intellectuals, and the War(s) on Terrorism

I continuously seek the “exceptional” American who seems to remember this recent history and how it plays out in the present to shape our future. In the months preceding and following 9/11, the exceptional Americans who would most occupy my thoughts and energy would be imprisoned radicals: thinkers and activists who attempted to re-create reality, to rewrite the past, present, and future in line with some vision of social justice. Following the September 2001 attack and tragedy, I swam in grief and paradoxically sought and found an anchor and buoy in working with current and former U.S. political prisoners. This political community’s proximity to state terror, resistance, and violence offered an alternative to sterile, conventional political language that seeks to pacify rather than explain. Although the United States officially denies having political prisoners or detainees, the international human rights organization, Amnesty International, has noted the scores of political prisoners, which have numbered up to a hundred, in U.S. prisons. A select few exist as writers; these imprisoned intellectuals began to shape my political life following 9/11.

Depressed yet galvanized by the tragedy and the (cluster) bombings that followed, throughout the winter of 2001 and into the winter and spring and summer of 2002, I increased my interactions and work with political prisoners (and in the process gradually came to better understand myself as an academic constrained by academe, and as a citizen confined by illusory political choices). I began to plan a spring conference at Brown University, “Imprisoned Intellectuals: A Dialogue with Scholars, Activists, and (Former) U.S. Political Prisoners on War, Dissent, and Social Justice.” I also renewed my efforts in gathering and editing material for several anthologies of writings by imprisoned intellectuals.⁵ In October, November, and December of 2001, drafts of manuscripts that I sent from the university and personal correspondences mailed from the farm to political prisoners for their review were confiscated by prison authorities.

When a prison administrator wrote, informing me that I was sending material advocating “illegal and unlawful acts,” I read through a 9/11 lens: I was unpatriotic and potentially criminal. That seemed both a politically obscene and logical pronouncement: One anthology opened with Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail” and Malcolm X’s speech “The Ballot or the Bullet,” both essays advocating respectively nonviolent disobedience and armed self-defense to combat

white supremacy and government repression. The manuscripts also included essays by former members of the American Indian Movement, the Puerto Rican Independence Movement, the Black Panther Party, and white anarchists and anti-imperialists. All of the authors question the U.S. state, its monopoly on violence, and the blind or loyal obedience of its citizenry. None are remotely linked to the Taliban, but that did not deter the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Prisons from enacting punitive, “protective” procedures, directed against U.S. political prisoners and their advocates.

I was surprised by the response—censorship and intimidation—from prison authorities. For although I had listened attentively to the public radio reports on the U.S. war on terrorism (having turned off the television in order to protect myself from its visual bombardments), I did not connect these news accounts with my academic and political work with imprisoned writers, creating a language that could grapple with the violent realities we endure and that could lead to new critiques and confrontation with police and state abuses. I had minimized the project as just an educational intervention. After all, a book is just a book. Consequently, I failed to anticipate how the government would wage its domestic war on terrorism by attempting to criminalize and disappear some of its most radical critics. I underestimated the weight of words, even ones that would find limited acceptance. And so, I failed to immediately comprehend that my contributors, although already criminalized, had been designated by the attorney general John Ashcroft as public enemies and national security threats in the new “war on terrorism.”

Since September 11, in a heightened age of security, increasing police and military presence, and eroding civil liberties, the 2001 USA Patriot Act and other legislation or directives (many of them challenged by advocacy groups), permit secret military tribunals and mass detentions for noncitizens; the extension of wiretaps; the monitoring of previously private attorney-client communications; and the “lockdown” of U.S. political prisoners (some of whom have been incarcerated for decades). On October 26, 2001, Ashcroft signed the directive, the “National Security: Prevention of Acts of Violence and Terrorism,” enabling the Department of Justice to select certain prisoners for “special administrative measures,” including isolation and denying correspondence and communication through telephone, visitations, or media interviews. The new regulations allow an intelligence agency to instruct the Bureau of Prisons to detain an inmate incommunicado for up to one year, with additional one-year periods of detention. These regulations were used to remove imprisoned intellectuals from their families, attorneys, and political communities after 9/11.

Criminalizing dissent in the United States, the government placed in lockdown the catholic Ploughshares pacifist Philip Berrigan, the white anti-imperialist Marilyn Buck, the former Black Panther leader Sundiata Acoli, and the Puerto Rican

Independence leaders Antonio Comacho Negrón and Carlos Torres. (As attorneys J. Soffiyah Elijah and Robert Boyle note, in barring prisoners from communicating with their lawyers, the government depicts counsel as potential “co-conspirators” in terrorism and hence legitimate targets for harassment and prosecution.)

A number of the prisoners mentioned above, Acoli, Berrigan, and Buck, incarcerated for their political acts against the U.S. government, provide individual and collective works and analyses of U.S. society, politics, culture, and social justice rarely referenced in conventional political or historical discourse.⁶ Their writings were central to the teaching and research that gave me a response to what I was doing during the war(s). They constitute a body of outlawed public intellectuals, with commentaries on our contemporary state and society and our recent history of radical resistance to violence and war. Prisons are intellectual and political sites unauthorized by the state, where analyses and writings in opposition to repressive policies often go unnoticed on this side of the walls and concertina wire. Writer-activists incarcerated because of their political beliefs and acts or politicized while incarcerated for social crimes, working as educators and activists behind bars, offer controversial and thought-provoking theories of politics and liberation. They therefore provide a body of resistance literature reflecting political dissent for social justice. For some teachers and students, they allow us to explore parameters and possibilities of democratic change that merge intellectualism with community building and activism. Our encounters with imprisoned intellectuals meant to either challenge, buoy, or anchor us, present possibilities for change and commitment.⁷

Conclusion: Shared and Expanding Community

Amid U.S. wars on terrorism, my memory fills with data on U.S. domestic and foreign policies. I remember that prisons constitute one of the most controversial and contested sites in a democratic society and that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the industrialized world, with over 2 million people in jails, prisons, and detention centers. With over 3,000 on death row, it is also one of the few developed countries that continues to deploy the death penalty. Given the class and racial disparities in sentencing, 70 percent of the incarcerated are people of color. That the Thirteenth Amendment legalizes slavery by codifying slavery, legalizing it for those duly convicted of a crime, compresses time on my political continuum of reflections on repression and resistance. Some of that resistance led to the formation of communities of imprisoned intellectuals or political prisoners.

Internationally, I recall that the United States has attacked institutions that could sustain a world community. Although the International Court of Justice and the United Nations were created in response to World War II, the United States declares itself bound by neither the court nor by the proclamations of the United Nations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁸ In theory, human

rights protections exist for everyone in the United States under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the international convention's ban on racial discrimination, abuse, and torture. The United States continues to exempt itself from international human rights obligations and place itself above the law; the government can weaken treaties it ratifies with reservation. The U.S. withdrawal in May 2002 from the International Tribunal on War Crimes, and earlier from the September 2001 United Nations World Conference against Racism and xenophobia in South Africa signaled its aloof stance toward peace and antiracist initiatives. It failed to sign on, as the European Union did, to a statement designating the slave trade as a "crime against humanity." Yet within days after the tragedy, the United States would condemn the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks as "a crime against humanity," call on Americans to voluntarily relinquish political rights, and demand global solidarity in a world community united to isolate and "destroy"—a word of finality and eschatology—terrorism. This in a national military/police campaign initially named Infinite Justice, overseen by the Pentagon, White House, and its new cabinet-level post for the defense of homeland security.

What many of us did and do during the wars is to continue to struggle and work with colleagues and caged intellectuals targeted by the state. Shouldering and sharing democratic responsibilities while rejecting promises of protection and comfort via military supremacy, many seek to extend the Black Panthers' maxim: "All Power to the People!" Although a liberal castigator of black militancy and civil disobedience and dissent, Hannah Arendt noted that the importance of critiquing and confronting the expansion of government control and domination marks an essential act if democracies are to survive: "It is the obvious short range advantages of tyranny, the advantages of stability, security, and productivity, that one should beware, if only because they pave the way to an inevitable loss of power, even though the actual disaster may occur in a relatively distant future."⁹

The very possibility of realizing a world in which terrorism is not common and the Panthers' refrain not merely a slogan—that is, to create and re-create societies where power resides not with the police or ruling elites who determine domestic and foreign policies and the levels of institutionalized violence, nor with vanguards, but with the multitude resisting institutionalized force and violence from others and themselves—relies on a democracy where we form communities with incarcerated to confront violence and disappearances. In such communities, we can respond to our own queries and decisions about what to do during the wars, and collectively raise new questions to articulate a vision of transformative struggle better equipped to challenge terror in its varied manifestations.

Notes

1. John Mbiti, *Traditional African Religions and Philosophies* (London: Heineman, 1969).
2. Noam Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism* (Boston: South End Press, 1988).
3. Mumia Abu-Jamal, "Voices from the Other America," December 3, 2001, available at www.socialistaction.org/news/200112/mumia.html.
4. Ibid.
5. For writings by political prisoners, see Joy James, ed., *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write for Social Justice* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); *Abolitionists* (forthcoming); and *Social Justice* (winter 2003), a special issue featuring 2002 "Imprisoned Intellectuals" conference proceedings.
6. In recent history, American resistance to state violence led many to organize in antiracist and antiwar organizations, to work for independence moves and antisexual campaigns. This progressivism was met with further repression aptly administered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and its counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO), whose activities against radicals ranged from the FBI-orchestrated assassinations of Chicago Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in 1969 to the surveillance and destabilization of CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, seeking to stop death squads funded by our taxes in the following decades.
7. Academic Barbara Harlow writes: "Reading prison writing must . . . demand a correspondingly activist counterapproach to that of passivity, aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption that are traditionally sanctioned by the academic disciplining of literature." Barbara Harlow, *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992). Academia often prides itself as a site in which immediacy and engaged critical thought and action are mediated through distance, objectivity, and scholarly endeavors, whereas activism prides itself on an immediacy and responsiveness in order to challenge the state's determination of which citizens or noncitizens live or die. Yet activism, like academia, can also commodify imprisoned intellectuals, appropriate their words, reify them in oppositional stances as either objects for censorship and ridicule from conservatives and reactionaries or for valorization from progressives or radicals. When the imprisoned intellectual finds herself or himself in a peculiar situation of becoming an object of discourse, or an icon for inspiration, the "activist counterapproach" may merely reproduce forms of consumption in the political marketplace as activism commodifies the political prisoner.
8. On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its thirty articles outline the major precepts for human rights and civil society, while the preamble asserts that the inherent dignity, equality, and the "inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." Drafted in response to the atrocities of a devastating world war, the declaration describes: "The advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people." Democratic tyrannies can ostensibly promote freedom from fear by removing from society segments of its population (deviants, criminals, the addicted, the impoverished, the racialized) deemed dangerous and destabilizing to individuals and the social collective.
9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 222.