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Globalisation and US prison growth: from military Keynesianism to post-Keynesian militarism

Excerpt

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Why 1968? Historicising crime, Keynesianism, and crises

I have said that the ‘moral panic’ underlying prison growth achieved formal US-wide recognition in Nixon’s 1968 ‘law and order’ campaign. Mid-sixties radical activism, both spontaneous and organised, successfully produced widespread disorder throughout society. The ascendant Right’s effort to gain the presidency used the fact of disorder in persuading voters that the incumbents failed to govern. The claim was true insofar as it described objective conditions. But in order to exploit the evidence for political gain, the Right had to interpret the turmoil as something it could contain, if elected, using already existing, unexceptionable capacities: the power to defend the nation against enemies foreign and domestic. And so the contemporary US crime problem was born. The disorder that became ‘crime’ had particular urban and racial qualities and the collective characteristics of activists (whose relative visibility as enemies was an inverse function of their structural lack of power) defined the face of the individual criminal.

A broad-brush review of some major turning points in political radicalism highlights who became the focus of moral panic. Given that criminalisation is most intensely applied to African Americans, it makes sense to start with the Black Power movement. Black Power became a popularly embraced alternative to assimilationist civil rights struggle in 1964, after the Democratic Party publicly refused to seat the Black Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the national convention. The delegation represented women and men who had engaged in deadly struggles with white power southern elites in order to gain the vote. While antisystemic bullets did not replace reformist ballots with the emergence of Black Power, the MFDP experience convinced many activists who had worked within legal and narrowly (electoral) political systems that tinkering with the racial structure and organisational practices of the US state would not make it something new. In response to the plausible impossibility that Black or other subordinated people could ever sue for equality within the framework of constitutional rights, below-surface militancy popped up all over the landscape.

Until the 1960s, virtually all riots in the US were battles instigated by white people against people of colour, or by public or private police (including militias and vigilantes, also normally white) against organising workers of all races. But, from the 1965 Los Angeles Watts Riots forward, urban uprising became a means by which Black and other people held court in the streets to condemn police brutality, economic exploitation and social injustice. Radical Black, Brown, Yellow and Red Power movements⁴ fought the many ways the state organised poor peoples’ perpetual dispossession in service to capital. Radical white activists – students, wage workers, welfare rights agitators

– added to domestic disorders by aligning with people of colour; they also launched autonomous attacks against symbols and strongholds of US capitalism and Euro-American racism and imperialism.

Indeed, growing opposition to the US war in Vietnam and Southeast Asia helped forge one international community of resistance, while an overlapping community, dedicated to anti-colonialism and anti-apartheid on a world scale, found in Black Power a compelling renewal of historical linkages between ‘First’ and ‘Third World’ Pan African and other liberation struggles. At the same time, students and workers built and defended barricades from Mexico City to Paris: no sooner had the smoke cleared in one place than fires of revolt flared up in another. The more that militant anti-capitalism and international solidarity became everyday features of US anti-racist activism, the more vehemently the state and its avatars responded by, as Allen Feldman puts it, ‘individualizing disorder’ into singular instances of criminality, that could then be solved via arrest or state-sanctioned killings rather than fundamental social change. With the state’s domestic war-making in mind, I will briefly examine another key aspect of the legendary year.

Something else about 1968

If 1967-68 marks the domestic militarist state’s contemporary rise, it also marks the end of a long run-up in the rate of profit, signalling the close of the golden age of US capitalism. The golden age started thirty years earlier, when Washington began the massive build-up for the second world war. Ironically, as Gregory Hooks has demonstrated, the organisational structures and fiscal powers that had been designed and authorised for New Deal social welfare agencies provided the template for the Pentagon’s painstaking transformation from a periodically expanded and contracted Department of War to the largest and most costly bureaucracy of the federal government. The US has since committed enormous expenditure for the first *permanent* warfare apparatus in the country’s pugnacious history.

The wealth produced from warfare spending underwrote the motley welfare agencies that took form during the Great Depression but did not become fully operational until the end of the second world war. Indeed, the US welfare state bore the popular tag military Keynesianism to denote the centrality of war-making to socio-economic security. On the domestic front, while labour achieved moderate protections and entitlements, worker militancy was crushed and fundamental US hierarchies remained intact. The hierarchies map both the structure of labour markets and the socio-spatial control of wealth. Thus, white people fared well compared with people of colour, most of whom were deliberately excluded from original legislation; men received automatically what women had to apply for individually, and,

normatively, urban, industrial workers secured limited wage and bargaining rights denied household and agricultural field workers.

The military Keynesian or 'warfare-welfare' state (to use James O'Connor's term) was first and foremost, then, a safety net for the capital class as a whole in all major areas: collective investment, labour division and control, comparative regional and sectoral advantage, national consumer market integration and global reach. And, up until 1967-68, the capital class paid handsome protection premiums for such extensive insurance. However, at the same time that Black people were fighting to dismantle US apartheid, large corporations and other capitals, with anxious eyes fixed on the flattening profit-rate curve, began to agitate forcefully and successfully to reduce their contribution to the 'social wage'. Capital's successful tax revolts, fought out in federal and state legislatures, provoked the decline of military Keynesianism.

Put broadly, the economic project of Keynesianism consisted of investments against the tide, designed to avoid the cumulative effects of downward business cycles by guaranteeing effective demand (via incomes programmes, public borrowing strategies and so forth) during bad times. The social project of Keynesianism, following from the central logic that full employment of resources enhances rather than impedes the production of new wealth, was to extend to workers – unequally, as we have seen – protections against calamity and opportunities for advancement. In sum, Keynesianism was a capitalist project that produced an array of social goods that had not existed under the preceding liberal (or *laissez-faire*) capitalist state form.

Keynesianism's economic project, severely weakened by capital's tax revolt, encountered its first round of dismantling in the early 1970s, but the social project took the rap for all the anxiety and upheaval that ensued. Part of the post-war civil rights struggle had been to extend eligibility for social welfare rights and programmes to those who had been deliberately excluded. The individualisation of *this* disorder (from the 1965 Moynihan report on the pathological Black family, through the 1980 Reagan presidential campaign) increasingly starred an unruly African American woman whose putative dependency on the state, rather than a husband, translated into criminality.

Crisis and surplus

To sum up: there is a moral panic over 'crime' – civil disorder, idle youth on the streets, people of colour out of control, women and children without husbands and fathers, students who believe it is their job to change the world (not merely to understand it) and political alliances among organisations trying to merge into full-scale movements. In other words, there is a social crisis. And there is also an economic panic

– capital disorder, or the profits crisis. These crises collide and combine into the crisis that prison ‘fixes’.

The new state emerging from the crises, and materialised as the integument of the prison industrial complex, is neither unexpected nor without roots. Rather, the US state (from the local to the national) can claim permanent ideological surplus in the realm of ‘defence’. Indeed, from the genocidal wars against Native Americans to the totalitarian chattel slavery perpetrated on Africans, to colonial expansion, to the obliteration of radical anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements, the annals of US history document a normatively aggressive, crisis-driven state. Its modus operandi for solving crises has been the relentless identification, coercive control, and violent elimination of foreign and domestic enemies.⁵

Notes

My special thanks to Craig Gilmore.

- 1 'State' with an upper-case 'S' designates a specific political geography or government (such as the State of California); 'state' with a lower-case 's' designates the general political-territorial form (the rising prison state) that ranges, in scale, from municipality to nation state.
- 2 Prisoners are classified according to their 'controlling' or most serious conviction. Thus, the more than 6,500 people in CDC custody for 'petty theft with prior' did not commit other, more serious crimes, such as robbery.
- 3 The low ratio is critical: gang membership designation allows prosecutors to demand longer, fixed sentences for dealers, and local law enforcement throughout California has conducted a census of gang membership so zealously that, in at least one city, according to Mike Davis, the police enumerated more gangsters between the ages of 18 and 25 than were actually resident in their jurisdiction.

- 4 The colours refer, respectively, to African, Latino (especially Chicana/o and Puerto Rican), Asian American and Native American groupings.
- 5 Outside the scope of this essay is a discussion of two key themes. One concerns how the US also built into the legal landscape a notably high tolerance for homicide, by defining 'self-defence' so broadly that today the 'average American' believes it is human nature to kill over property or insult as well as to remedy greater perceived wrongs; not surprisingly, the case law establishing aggressively violent standards consists exclusively of incidents in which white men killed white men. The law therefore establishes norms that fix particular relationships among gender, race, citizenship, and power (see Brown, 1991). The second key theme concerns violence differentials between nation states, and the role of victorious war-making in modelling civilian behaviour in the US (Archer and Gartner, 1984).
- 6 Of course there are multi-State and multinational finance capital firms; but, deal by deal, they do their business in places, not in undifferentiated space. No matter how quickly value can be transferred between currencies and polities, each accounting moment occurs in, and by virtue of, a jurisdiction. Thus, when Leeson brought down Barings Bank (that accumulated much lucre in the nineteenth century lending money to US cotton plantations worked by slaves), he fled Singapore, not Barings, to evade punishment.

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