

The background of the cover is a photograph of a weathered, arched wooden door. The door is made of dark, vertical wooden planks and has a small metal padlock on the right side. The door is set in a wall with peeling, multi-colored paint in shades of red, blue, and green. The overall appearance is aged and gritty.

**ANGELA Y. DAVIS**

**ARE  
PRISONS  
OBSOLETE?**

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**Angela Y. Davis**

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## **Introduction - Prison Reform or Prison Abolition?**

In most parts of the world, it is taken for granted that whoever is convicted of a serious crime will be sent to prison. In some countries—including the United States—where capital punishment has not yet been abolished, a small but significant number of people are sentenced to death for what are considered especially grave crimes. Many people are familiar with the campaign to abolish the death penalty. In fact, it has already been abolished in most countries. Even the staunchest advocates of capital punishment acknowledge the fact that the death penalty faces serious challenges. Few people find life without the death penalty difficult to imagine.

On the other hand, the prison is considered an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives. Most people are quite surprised to hear that the prison abolition movement also has a long history—one that dates back to the historical appearance of the prison as the main form of punishment. In fact, the most natural reaction is to assume that prison activists—even those who consciously refer to themselves as “antiprison activists”—are simply trying to ameliorate prison conditions or perhaps to reform the prison in more fundamental ways. In most circles prison abolition is simply unthinkable and implausible. Prison abolitionists are dis-

missed as utopians and idealists whose ideas are at best unrealistic and impracticable, and, at worst, mystifying and foolish. This is a measure of how difficult it is to envision a social order that does not rely on the threat of sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families. The prison is considered so “natural” that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it.

It is my hope that this book will encourage readers to question their own assumptions about the prison. Many people have already reached the conclusion that the death penalty is an outmoded form of punishment that violates basic principles of human rights. It is time, I believe, to encourage similar conversations about the prison. During my own career as an antiprison activist I have seen the population of U.S. prisons increase with such rapidity that many people in black, Latino, and Native American communities now have a far greater chance of going to prison than of getting a decent education. When many young people decide to join the military service in order to avoid the inevitability of a stint in prison, it should cause us to wonder whether we should not try to introduce better alternatives.

The question of whether the prison has become an obsolete institution has become especially urgent in light of the fact that more than two million people (out of a world total of nine million) now inhabit U.S. prisons, jails, youth facilities, and immigrant detention centers. Are we willing to relegate ever larger numbers of people from racially oppressed communities to an isolated existence marked by authoritarian regimes, violence, disease, and technologies of seclusion that produce severe mental instability? According to a recent study, there may be twice as many people suffering from mental illness who are in jails and prisons than there are in all psychiatric hospitals in the United States combined.<sup>1</sup>

When I first became involved in antiprison activism during the late 1960s, I was astounded to learn that there were then close to two hundred thousand people in prison. Had anyone told me that in three decades ten times as many people would be locked away in cages, I would have been absolutely incredulous. I imagine that I would have responded something like this: "As racist and undemocratic as this country may be [remember, during that period, the demands of the Civil Rights movement had not yet been consolidated], I do not believe that the U.S. government will be able to lock up so many people without producing powerful public resistance. No, this will never happen, not unless this country plunges into fascism." That might have been my reaction thirty years ago. The reality is that we were called upon to inaugurate the twenty-first century by accepting the fact that two million people—a group larger than the population of many countries—are living their lives in places like Sing Sing, Leavenworth, San Quentin, and Alderson Federal Reformatory for Women. The gravity of these numbers becomes even more apparent when we consider that the U.S. population in general is less than five percent of the world's total, whereas more than twenty percent of the world's combined prison population can be claimed by the United States. In Elliott Currie's words, "[t]he prison has become a looming presence in our society to an extent unparalleled in our history or that of any other industrial democracy. Short of major wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented government social program of our time."<sup>2</sup>

In thinking about the possible obsolescence of the prison, we should ask how it is that so many people could end up in prison without major debates regarding the efficacy of incarceration. When the drive to produce more prisons and incar-

cerate ever larger numbers of people occurred in the 1980s during what is known as the Reagan era, politicians argued that “tough on crime” stances—including certain imprisonment and longer sentences—would keep communities free of crime. However, the practice of mass incarceration during that period had little or no effect on official crime rates. In fact, the most obvious pattern was that larger prison populations led not to safer communities, but, rather, to even larger prison populations. Each new prison spawned yet another new prison. And as the U.S. prison system expanded, so did corporate involvement in construction, provision of goods and services, and use of prison labor. Because of the extent to which prison building and operation began to attract vast amounts of capital—from the construction industry to food and health care provision—in a way that recalled the emergence of the military industrial complex, we began to refer to a “prison industrial complex.”<sup>3</sup>

Consider the case of California, whose landscape has been thoroughly prisonized over the last twenty years. The first state prison in California was San Quentin, which opened in 1852.<sup>4</sup> Folsom, another well-known institution, opened in 1880. Between 1880 and 1933, when a facility for women was opened in Tehachapi, there was not a single new prison constructed. In 1952, the California Institution for Women opened and Tehachapi became a new prison for men. In all, between 1852 and 1955, nine prisons were constructed in California. Between 1962 and 1965, two camps were established, along with the California Rehabilitation Center. Not a single prison opened during the second half of the sixties, nor during the entire decade of the 1970s.

However, a massive project of prison construction was initiated during the 1980s—that is, during the years of the Reagan presidency. Nine prisons, including the Northern California

Facility for Women, were opened between 1984 and 1989. Recall that it had taken more than a hundred years to build the first nine California prisons. In less than a single decade, the number of California prisons doubled. And during the 1990s, twelve new prisons were opened, including two more for women. In 1995 the Valley State Prison for Women was opened. According to its mission statement, it “provides 1,980 women’s beds for California’s overcrowded prison system.” However, in 2002, there were 3,570 prisoners<sup>5</sup> and the other two women’s prisons were equally overcrowded.

There are now thirty-three prisons, thirty-eight camps, sixteen community correctional facilities, and five tiny prisoner mother facilities in California. In 2002 there were 157,979 people incarcerated in these institutions, including approximately twenty thousand people whom the state holds for immigration violations. The racial composition of this prison population is revealing. Latinos, who are now in the majority, account for 35.2 percent; African-Americans 30 percent; and white prisoners 29.2 percent.<sup>6</sup> There are now more women in prison in the state of California than there were in the entire country in the early 1970s. In fact, California can claim the largest women’s prison in the world, Valley State Prison for Women, with its more than thirty-five hundred inhabitants. Located in the same town as Valley State and literally across the street is the second-largest women’s prison in the world—Central California Women’s Facility—whose population in 2002 also hovered around thirty-five hundred.<sup>7</sup>

If you look at a map of California depicting the location of the thirty-three state prisons, you will see that the only area that is not heavily populated by prisons is the area north of Sacramento. Still, there are two prisons in the town of Susanville, and Pelican Bay, one of the state’s notorious super-maximum security prisons, is near the Oregon border.

California artist Sandow Birk was inspired by the colonizing of the landscape by prisons to produce a series of thirty-three landscape paintings of these institutions and their surroundings. They are collected in his book *Incarcerated: Visions of California in the Twenty-first Century*.<sup>8</sup>

I present this brief narrative of the prisonization of the California landscape in order to allow readers to grasp how easy it was to produce a massive system of incarceration with the implicit consent of the public. Why were people so quick to assume that locking away an increasingly large proportion of the U.S. population would help those who live in the free world feel safer and more secure? This question can be formulated in more general terms. Why do prisons tend to make people think that their own rights and liberties are more secure than they would be if prisons did not exist? What other reasons might there have been for the rapidity with which prisons began to colonize the California landscape?

Geographer Ruth Gilmore describes the expansion of prisons in California as “a geographical solution to socio-economic problems.”<sup>9</sup> Her analysis of the prison industrial complex in California describes these developments as a response to surpluses of capital, land, labor, and state capacity.

California's new prisons are sited on devalued rural land, most, in fact on formerly irrigated agricultural acres . . . The State bought land sold by big landowners. And the State assured the small, depressed towns now shadowed by prisons that the new, recession-proof, non-polluting industry would jump-start local redevelopment.<sup>10</sup>

But, as Gilmore points out, neither the jobs nor the more general economic revitalization promised by prisons has

occurred. At the same time, this promise of progress helps us to understand why the legislature and California's voters decided to approve the construction of all these new prisons. People wanted to believe that prisons would not only reduce crime, they would also provide jobs and stimulate economic development in out-of-the-way places.

At bottom, there is one fundamental question: Why do we take prison for granted? While a relatively small proportion of the population has ever directly experienced life inside prison, this is not true in poor black and Latino communities. Neither is it true for Native Americans or for certain Asian-American communities. But even among those people who must regrettably accept prison sentences—especially young people—as an ordinary dimension of community life, it is hardly acceptable to engage in serious public discussions about prison life or radical alternatives to prison. It is as if prison were an inevitable fact of life, like birth and death.

On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted. It is difficult to imagine life without them. At the same time, there is reluctance to face the realities hidden within them, a fear of thinking about what happens inside them. Thus, the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives. To think about this simultaneous presence and absence is to begin to acknowledge the part played by ideology in shaping the way we interact with our social surroundings. We take prisons for granted but are often afraid to face the realities they produce. After all, no one wants to go to prison. Because it would be too agonizing to cope with the possibility that anyone, including ourselves, could become a prisoner, we tend to think of the prison as disconnected from our own lives. This is even true for some of us, women as well as men, who have already experienced imprisonment.

We thus think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, a fate reserved for the “evildoers,” to use a term recently popularized by George W. Bush. Because of the persistent power of racism, “criminals” and “evildoers” are, in the collective imagination, fantasized as people of color. The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers. This is the ideological work that the prison performs—it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism.

What, for example, do we miss if we try to think about prison expansion without addressing larger economic developments? We live in an era of migrating corporations. In order to escape organized labor in this country—and thus higher wages, benefits, and so on—corporations roam the world in search of nations providing cheap labor pools. This corporate migration thus leaves entire communities in shambles. Huge numbers of people lose jobs and prospects for future jobs. Because the economic base of these communities is destroyed, education and other surviving social services are profoundly affected. This process turns the men, women, and children who live in these damaged communities into perfect candidates for prison.

In the meantime, corporations associated with the punishment industry reap profits from the system that manages prisoners and acquire a clear stake in the continued growth of prison populations. Put simply, this is the era of the prison industrial complex. The prison has become a black hole into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited. Mass imprisonment generates profits as it devours social

wealth, and thus it tends to reproduce the very conditions that lead people to prison. There are thus real and often quite complicated connections between the deindustrialization of the economy—a process that reached its peak during the 1980s—and the rise of mass imprisonment, which also began to spiral during the Reagan-Bush era. However, the demand for more prisons was represented to the public in simplistic terms. More prisons were needed because there was more crime. Yet many scholars have demonstrated that by the time the prison construction boom began, official crime statistics were already falling. Moreover, draconian drug laws were being enacted, and “three-strikes” provisions were on the agendas of many states.

In order to understand the proliferation of prisons and the rise of the prison industrial complex, it might be helpful to think further about the reasons we so easily take prisons for granted. In California, as we have seen, almost two-thirds of existing prisons were opened during the eighties and nineties. Why was there no great outcry? Why was there such an obvious level of comfort with the prospect of many new prisons? A partial answer to this question has to do with the way we consume media images of the prison, even as the realities of imprisonment are hidden from almost all who have not had the misfortune of doing time. Cultural critic Gina Dent has pointed out that our sense of familiarity with the prison comes in part from representations of prisons in film and other visual media.

The history of visuality linked to the prison is also a main reinforcement of the institution of the prison as a naturalized part of our social landscape. The history of film has always been wedded to the representation of incarceration. Thomas Edison’s

first films (dating back to the 1901 reenactment presented as newsreel, *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison*) included footage of the darkest recesses of the prison. Thus, the prison is wedded to our experience of visuality, creating also a sense of its permanence as an institution. We also have a constant flow of Hollywood prison films, in fact a genre.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the most well known prison films are: *I Want to Live*, *Papillon*, *Cool Hand Luke*, and *Escape from Alcatraz*. It also bears mentioning that television programming has become increasingly saturated with images of prisons. Some recent documentaries include the A&E series *The Big House*, which consists of programs on San Quentin, Alcatraz, Leavenworth, and Alderson Federal Reformatory for Women. The long-running HBO program *Oz* has managed to persuade many viewers that they know exactly what goes on in male maximum-security prisons.

But even those who do not consciously decide to watch a documentary or dramatic program on the topic of prisons inevitably consume prison images, whether they choose to or not, by the simple fact of watching movies or TV. It is virtually impossible to avoid consuming images of prison. In 1997, I was myself quite astonished to find, when I interviewed women in three Cuban prisons, that most of them narrated their prior awareness of prisons—that is, before they were actually incarcerated—as coming from the many Hollywood films they had seen. The prison is one of the most important features of our image environment. This has caused us to take the existence of prisons for granted. The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us. We do not question whether it should

exist. It has become so much a part of our lives that it requires a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond the prison.

This is not to dismiss the profound changes that have occurred in the way public conversations about the prison are conducted. Ten years ago, even as the drive to expand the prison system reached its zenith, there were very few critiques of this process available to the public. In fact, most people had no idea about the immensity of this expansion. This was the period during which internal changes—in part through the application of new technologies—led the U.S. prison system in a much more repressive direction. Whereas previous classifications had been confined to low, medium, and maximum security, a new category was invented—that of the super-maximum security prison, or the supermax. The turn toward increased repression in a prison system, distinguished from the beginning of its history by its repressive regimes, caused some journalists, public intellectuals, and progressive agencies to oppose the growing reliance on prisons to solve social problems that are actually exacerbated by mass incarceration.

In 1990, the Washington-based Sentencing Project published a study of U.S. populations in prison and jail, and on parole and probation, which concluded that one in four black men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine were among these numbers.<sup>12</sup> Five years later, a second study revealed that this percentage had soared to almost one in three (32.2 percent). Moreover, more than one in ten Latino men in this same age range were in jail or prison, or on probation or parole. The second study also revealed that the group experiencing the greatest increase was black women, whose imprisonment increased by seventy-eight percent.<sup>13</sup> According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, African-

Americans as a whole now represent the majority of state and federal prisoners, with a total of 803,400 black inmates—118,600 more than the total number of white inmates.<sup>14</sup> During the late 1990s major articles on prison expansion appeared in *Newsweek*, *Harper's*, *Emerge*, and *Atlantic Monthly*. Even Colin Powell raised the question of the rising number of black men in prison when he spoke at the 2000 Republican National Convention, which declared George W. Bush its presidential candidate.

Over the last few years the previous absence of critical positions on prison expansion in the political arena has given way to proposals for prison reform. While public discourse has become more flexible, the emphasis is almost inevitably on generating the changes that will produce a *better* prison system. In other words, the increased flexibility that has allowed for critical discussion of the problems associated with the expansion of prisons also restricts this discussion to the question of prison reform.

As important as some reforms may be—the elimination of sexual abuse and medical neglect in women's prison, for example—frameworks that rely exclusively on reforms help to produce the stultifying idea that nothing lies beyond the prison. Debates about strategies of decarceration, which should be the focal point of our conversations on the prison crisis, tend to be marginalized when reform takes the center stage. The most immediate question today is how to prevent the further expansion of prison populations and how to bring as many imprisoned women and men as possible back into what prisoners call "the free world." How can we move to decriminalize drug use and the trade in sexual services? How can we take seriously strategies of restorative rather than exclusively punitive justice? Effective alternatives involve both transformation of the techniques for addressing

"crime" and of the social and economic conditions that track so many children from poor communities, and especially communities of color, into the juvenile system and then on to prison. The most difficult and urgent challenge today is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice, where the prison no longer serves as our major anchor.