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Slavery in the Third Millennium

Introduction

The winter, 2005 issue of Contexts (a leading sociology journal) featured a photo essay on the infamous Cummins Prison Farm in Arkansas. One photo showed about twenty convicts in a field picking cotton, while a white guard stood over them. Another photo showed a tractor pulling about 8 carts filled with convicts returning from the fields, with four guards rode on horses along the left side. The black and white photos could have easily been taken 100 years ago at one of several “plantation prisons” in the south. They were among about 5,000 photographs taken by sociologist Bruce Jackson between 1971 and 1975.[1]

Plantation prisons emerged in the southern states shortly after the end of the Civil War. Not surprisingly they were modeled after the slave plantation. Practically all of the prisoners were black, both male and female. They were sent to these prisons “on the flimsiest pretexts and then put to hard labor in the fields of these prisons, often in chain gangs.”[2] Prisons like Parchman in Mississippi and Cummins in Arkansas were little more than slave plantations which, along with convict leasing, extended the slave system long after emancipation.[3]

Many of these prisons became notorious over the years, resulting in literally thousands of deaths. Perhaps the most infamous case coming at the Tucker Prison Farm where a reform-minded warden named Tom Murton discovered numerous bodies of dead prisoners buried in the fields in the 1960s. The scandal created quite a stir at the time. Even a movie, Brubaker, starring Robert Redford was made about this scandal.[4]

Prisons and Slavery: Seeking Cheap Labor and Control of African-Americans

Throughout history those in power within a given period of time have sought to control in some way groups that they perceived to be a threat and/or groups they wished to dominate for political or economic gain. The methods of control have varied from economic marginalization to thought control via propaganda to subjecting them to the control of the legal system to total or partial segregation and finally, in extreme cases, total extermination (e.g., genocide). In America such control has targeted Native Americans, African slaves, labor agitators and many others.

It can also be said that the use of inmates as a form of cheap labor has been part of the capitalist system from the beginning, as owners seek to maximize profits however they can, including using the cheapest form of labor, whether it be slaves, immigrant labor, or inmates. In fact, taking advantage of those imprisoned (in various forms, including slavery) has been common among nations for centuries.[5]
Among the various forms of exploitation include the use of transportation, which was common up until the start of imprisonment in the early 19th century. Such a practice was developed by private merchant shippers in the 17th century and involved literally taking pardoned prisoners to North American plantations for a period of "indentured servitude." It was one among many methods of amassing large fortunes during this time among certain capitalists, without having to resort to the so-called "free market." It should be noted that most of these "indentured servants" were white, who were separated from black slaves (who were not among the convicted criminals at that time). The end of transportation coincided almost exactly with the increase use of slavery in Colonial America. Capitalists soon learned that there were even more benefits from the emerging African slave trade than white indentured servants. Smith notes that among the many advantages of slaves was the fact that they "were held to perpetual instead of temporary servitude, they were cheaper to feed and clothe, they replaced themselves to some extent by natural breeding, and they endured the hot climate of the plantation much better than white men."[7]

In America, slaves were important to the colonial economy (providing much needed cheap labor for a relatively small group of landowners); yet at the same time most thought of them as "savages" whom they feared. Laws were passed that perpetuated the slave economic system. The slaves were classified as chattel or property. When the Declaration of Independence was written and the statement that "all men were created equal" what they really meant was "all white men were created equal." The emphasis here, of course was on "white" and "men," since women were treated almost as if they were slaves. The white ruling class created an economic and political system, complete with a set of laws, that guaranteed slavery would remain intact.

As our standard history books have told us, constantly reinforced during our public school education, the slaves were "freed" after the Civil War ended. Well, not exactly. After the war the South was faced with some rather serious economic, political, and social problems. Political and economic recovery was among the first priorities because the economy of the South, based as it was on a slave mode of production, was being replaced by a capitalist mode of production. Another crucial problem was what to do with the newly "freed" slaves. What the white ruling class commenced to do was to begin the systematic oppression of blacks and maintain a system of caste rule that would replace a system of slavery. What happened was that the sharecropping system replaced slavery as a "legal" method of controlling the labor of African-Americans. A system of agricultural (and eventually industrial) "peonage" emerged and was supported by such informal methods as vigilantism, intimidation, Jim Crow laws and the like.[9]

Prisons and Convict Leasing Help Perpetuate Slavery

One popular method of controlling ex-slaves, while perpetuation a form of slavery, was convict leasing. This was introduced throughout the South because "free" blacks represented such a threat to white supremacy, convict leasing would be just another form of chattel slavery that would function to keep the black race in a subordinate position. Some might argue that this was one way to provide an abundant source of cheap labor to help re-build the war-torn South. While this is no doubt partly
true and an abundant supply of cheap labor was in fact readily available, this form of labor was not much of a help in the enormous task of rebuilding that faced the South.\[10\]

The subjugation of African-Americans became common throughout the South after the war. Several laws were passed (or old ones were reinstituted) which helped keep the African-American population in its place, such as vagrancy, loitering, disturbing the peace, and Jim Crow laws, to name just a few. When these methods failed, the use of force was relied upon, especially lynching (and lynchings increased after the war). Indeed, as several writers have documented, the use of force to keep African-Americans in a subordinate position increased dramatically after the war, one example being the rise of the Ku Klux Klan.\[11\]

One result of this practice was the shift in prison populations to predominately African-American following the war. Data for Tennessee prisons demonstrates this change. African-Americans represented only 33 percent of the population at the main prison in Nashville as of October 1, 1865, but by November 29, 1867, the percentage had increased to 58.3. By 1869 it had increased to 64 percent and it reached an all-time high of 67 percent between 1877 and 1879; a slight decrease in the number of inmates (especially African-American) between 1880 and 1898 can be explained in part by the opening of two branches of the main prison, Brushy Mountain and Inman, in the 1890s. The population of Brushy Mountain Prison was predominantly African-American, much more so than at the main prison. The only data available for the Inman branch are for prisoners on hand as of December 1, 1898. At that time there were only 58 prisoners, all of whom were African-American.\[12\]

Data from other states also illustrate the predominance of African-Americans in the Southern prison system after the war. In 1888 the prison at Baton Rouge, Louisiana, held 85 whites and 212 African-Americans; in 1875 in North Carolina 569 African-Americans and 78 whites were sentenced to prison.\[13\]

The actual increase in the populations within Southern prisons is staggering. In Georgia there was a tenfold increase in prison populations during a four-decade period (1868-1908); in North Carolina the prison population increased from 121 in 1870 to 1,302 in 1890; in Florida the population went from 125 in 1881 to 1,071 in 1904; in Mississippi the population quadrupled between 1871 and 1879; in Alabama it went from 374 in 1869 to 1,878 in 1903 and to 2,453 in 1919.\[14\]

Convict leasing involved leasing out prisoners to private companies that paid the state a certain fee. The convicts worked for the companies during the day (convicts were usually not paid) outside the prison and returned to their cells at night. The sole aim of convict leasing “was financial profit to the lessees who exploited the labor of the prisoners to the fullest, and to the government which sold the convicts to the lessees.” One example was a lease system in Alabama. Sellin explains it as follows:

In 1866, the governor of Alabama leased the penitentiary to a contractor who was charged the sum of five dollars and given a sizable loan. The legislature granted him permission to work the prisoners outside the walls; they were soon found in the Ironon and New Castle mines.\[15\]

In Tennessee by 1870 convicts were being leased from the main prison at Nashville to three separate railroad companies in Tennessee. During the 1880s the
legislature appropriated about $14 million to relieve the railroad companies that had suffered great losses during the war. It is no exaggeration that convicts rebuilt Tennessee’s railroads. In 1871 coal mining companies began to use convict labor and by 1882 more than half of the convicts at the Nashville prison were leased out. In 1884 the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railway Company took complete control and leased the entire prison population.\[16]\[16\]

Mancini describes how one company, especially the owner Joseph E. Brown, made huge profits from convict leasing in Georgia:

In 1880 Brown, whose fortune could he estimated conservatively at one million dollars, netted $98,000 from the Dade Coal Company. By 1886, Dade Coal was a parent company, owning Walker Iron and Coal, Rising Fawn Iron, Chattanooga Iron, and Rogers Railroad and Ore Banks and leasing Castle Rock Coal Company. An 1889 reorganization resulted in the formation of the Georgia Mining, Manufacturing and Investment Company. This rested largely on a foundation of convict labor.\[17]\[17\]

The convict lease system was cruel and inhumane, with deaths a common occurrence along with much sickness and suffering. In a coal mine in Georgia convicts were routinely whipped if they did not produce the daily quota of coal.\[18]\[18\] In Alabama inmates were punished by being placed in a ”sweat box” during the day in the hot sun.\[18]\[18\] A Louisiana newspaper reported that “it would be more humane to impose the death sentence upon anyone sentenced to a term with the lessee in excess of six years, because the average convict lived no longer than that.” Indeed, the death rate in 1896 was 20 percent.\[18]\[18\] The mortality rate for inmates in the South was 41.3 per thousand convicts, compared to a rate of 14.9 in the North.\[20]\[20\]

The ideology of white supremacy dominated the entire leasing system. One writer has noted that the “lessees regarded black labor as a commodity inseparable from the convicts themselves, much as slaveholders had regarded slaves.” At the same time, such a system also fit in well with the emerging industrial capitalist system. Indeed, it can be said that the labor of convicts “depended upon both the heritage of slavery and the allure of industrial capitalism.”\[22]\[22\] The convict lease system was not merely a replacement for slavery, but an extension of it, albeit in a new form and serving new interests. The control of the black labor force, writes Mark Colvin, “was a constant goal of the southern punishment system since the Civil War. This labor control function was enhanced with the rise of industrialism in the ‘New South,’ rather than eliminated.”\[23]\[23\]

One additional fact that needs to be underscored - especially as we consider what has been happening in recent years - and this is that convict leasing received wide support in the South because of its alleged success in controlling the so-called “black crime problem.”\[24]\[24\] The fact that there was no “black crime problem” is irrelevant, since this was largely an invention and the vast majority of black prisoners had been convicted of rather petty crimes, such as “loitering,” “vagrancy” and “trespassing.”\[25]\[25\]

The convict lease system, as such, disappeared, yet other forms of convict labor continued (and still exist today) in various forms. McKelvey notes that “the lease system was doomed by its decreasing usefulness to the state, and it was not abandoned until profitable substitutes were perfected.” These other systems included plantations,
industrial prisons, and the famous “chain gang.” The chain gang actually developed alongside the convict lease system as one of the two major forms of convict labor. Weiss provides us with the following graphic description of this system: “Chained together in fetid bunkhouses, suffering malnutrition and exposed to rampant disease, these hapless charges suffered one of history’s most degrading punishments.” It should be noted that the vast majority of those on these chain gangs were African-Americans, often convicted for merely being black.

**Slavery Revisited: the Return of the Chain Gang**

If you think chain gangs are part of the distant past, think again. In Maricopa County, Arizona (Phoenix), Sheriff Joe Arpaio is the self-proclaimed “the toughest sheriff in America.” He requires his inmates “to enroll in chain gangs to perform various community services. The alternative is lockdown with three other inmates in an 8- by 12-foot cell, for 23 hours a day. Chain gang participants wear uniforms with black and white stripes, to ‘make examples’ of the bad prisoners to the community.” He also makes them wear pink underwear. More than 2,000 inmates are placed in tents, outside the jail. Since they are there in the summer, you can imagine what that may be like where temperatures average well over 100 degrees. Most of the 8,000 or so who reside in his jail are awaiting trial simply because they could not afford bail. Others are serving short sentences. Another report noted that he had 15 women “padlocked together by the ankle, five to each chain, and marched military style out to a van that transported them to their work site -- a county cemetery half an hour out of the city in the desert. The women had to bury the bodies of indigents who had died in the streets or in the hospital without family and without the money to pay for a proper funeral.” In Ohio, another ultra-conservative Sheriff has introduced chain gangs. Florida has also introduced chain gangs.

Chain gangs are obviously linked with slavery. One report noted that chain gangs had been re-introduced in Alabama, where they became “a new roadside attraction.” A very popular one apparently, reflected in the following statement by a spectator: “I love seeing ‘em in chains. They ought to make them pick cotton.” The writer reporting on this scene had this insightful comment:

The grim, racialized history of the chain gang cannot be separated from this entrepreneurial scheme. At the beginning of this century the chain gang was used to keep African Americans in servitude after Emancipation. Contract-enforcement laws-- directed primarily at African-American farm laborers--transformed contractual obligations into involuntary servitude by imposing criminal sanctions for a laborer's breach of an employment contract. These laborers had a choice: They could work out the contract or spend several months of forced, brutal labor on a chain gang, where death was not uncommon. The historical connection between chain gangs and slavery is well-entrenched in the minds of most Americans and probably all African Americans. For many, commercializing the chain gang is akin to commercializing slavery.
The connection with slavery did not escape notice of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as they filed a complaint noting that 60 percent of the Alabama’s inmates are black.[31]

Most of the arguments put forth by supporters revolve around two issues, both of which ignore race: saving money and deterrence. Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio uses old-fashioned common-sense deterrence logic, saying that “I use it for deterrence to fight crime. I put them right on the street where everyone can see them. If a kid asks his mother, she can tell them this is what happens to people who break the law.” When inmates complain he merely says “If you don't like it, don't come back.” However, a spokeswoman in his jail told a reporter that “60 percent of inmates did in fact come back for more than one term.”[34] The Sheriff of Butler County, Ohio said “I want ‘em to leave here with a bad feeling in their mouth.”[35] It’s the familiar theme that we are “soft on crime.” As for money saved, one Sheriff stated that having work crews out six days per week picking up trash, doing work at public parks and for nonprofit organizations “saves taxpayers up to $160,000 per month, or about $1.9 million per year.”[36]

The fact that most of these prisoners are black seems to escape the notice of supporters of chain gangs, but not several critics. One critic’s comment, at the time Alabama re-introduced chain gangs, sounds familiar: “A group of men, most of them black, chained to each other like animals, being marched along dusty country roads to perform meaningless but painful labor: here is an inspiring vignette for the direction taken by the American criminal justice system.”[37] When Florida followed Alabama’s lead and re-introduced the chain gang, Amnesty International was quick to point out the obvious: “Florida became the third state to use chain gangs in 1995, following the lead of Alabama and Arizona, where the authorities reintroduced chain gangs in May. Last used in the USA thirty years ago, chain gangs are being hailed by their supporters as an effective anti-crime deterrent, but by opponents as a step backwards, evoking images of slavery.” This report also noted several violations of International Human Rights provisions, to wit:

Amnesty International believes that the practice of using chain gangs constitutes cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, prohibited under Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, (ICCPR) ratified by the US Government on 8 June 1992.

Article 10 of the ICCPR says: All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.

Article 33 of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (SMR) states: instruments of restraint, such as handcuffs, chains, irons and strait jackets, shall never be applied as a punishment. Furthermore, chains or irons shall not be used as restraints.

Article 45 (1) of the SMR states: When prisoners are being removed to or from an institution, they shall be exposed to public view as little as possible, and proper safeguards shall be adopted to protect them from insult, curiosity and publicity in any form.[38]
The most recent data show that nationwide blacks are far more likely to find themselves inside a local jail than any other racial group: as of Mid-2004, their incarceration rate stood at 765, more than four times that of whites (160) and about three times the rate for Hispanics (262). Altogether, racial minorities constituted about 60 percent of jail inmates. Racial overrepresentation is even more dramatic within the largest urban jails. The proportion of jail inmates who are racial minorities is greater than 50 percent in most urban jails, with some reaching higher than 80 percent (Los Angeles, 85.5%, Chicago, 90%, New York City, 93%, Philadelphia and Baltimore, 86%, Detroit, 85%) 

The same can be said with our prison population. At midyear, 2004 the overall incarceration rate (prisons plus jails) for black males was 4,919 compared to only 717 for white males and 1,717 for Hispanic males; for women, the rate for blacks was 359 compared to 81 for white women and 143 for Hispanic women.

It has also been noted that the lifetime chances of a black male of going to prison is about one-third! Such a dramatic statistic needs more detailed elaboration, which will be done in the next section.

### Chances of Going to Prison Becoming Greater for Blacks

“The lifetime chances of going to prison reached 6.6% in 2001, up from 1.9% in 1974.” This is the title of figure 3 in a recent report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Even more revealing, however, is what is found in Table 9, par of which is reprinted below.

#### Lifetime chances of going to State of Federal prison for the first time.

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<tr>
<td>White male</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White female</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black male</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black female</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic male</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic female</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
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Another table in this same report reveals that the percentage of the adult population “ever incarcerated” in a prison as of 2001 was 8.5% for black males between the age of 18 and 24 (compared to only 1.1% of white males in that age group); for black males 25-34 the percentage was 20.4, compared to 2.8% of white males; for ages 35-44 the percentage of black males was 22 compared to 3.5 for white males. The percentages for Hispanic males stood between whites and blacks (4%, 9% and 10% respectively). The differences for females according to race were similar.

The report clearly shows that with each new cohort in the past 50 plus years the chances of going to prison has risen. In 2001 about 2.7 percent of all adults had been to prison (5.6 million); by the year 2010 it is estimated that this will rise to 3.4 percent (7.7 million). Given that blacks are four or five times more likely than whites to ever
experience incarceration, this suggests that by 2010 between 12 and 15 percent of all blacks will be in prison, if recent incarceration trends continue.

Another way of viewing these trends is to look at the sheer numbers. At midyear 2004, a total of 910,200 black people were in prison or jail, representing 48 percent of the total; Hispanics represented another 20 percent of the total. About 1.4 million were in prison alone and about 47% were black. Taking the above estimate for the total number in prison in 2010 (7.7 million), this means that about 3.6 million blacks will be in prison.

What should be noted here is that these projections do not include the probabilities of being in jail on any given day. It is hard to imagine the proportion of the black population (especially young black males) who have experienced some contact with the criminal justice system in recent years, let alone the proportion that will have had such contact by the year 2010. We know from a study by the Sentencing Project that in 1995 about one-third of black males in their 20s were somewhere in the criminal justice system (prison, jail, probation and parole). This was ten years ago and the estimate has not been updated. The most recent survey on probation and parole was for 2003. Although they do not break it down by age, at that time blacks were 30 percent of those on probation and 41 percent of those on parole. We do know that the largest proportion of black males in prison or jail is in their 20s (38%), so we could assume the same for those on probation and parole. However, we do not have the numbers on probation and parole broken down by race and age. It is probably safe to say, however, that the proportion of black males in their 20s within the criminal justice system on any given day is greater than one-third.

It is clear that what we have here is another form of slavery, a more advanced development of what I and others have called the “new American apartheid.” It may even be called a form of fascism, with the ultimate goal, like Nazi Germany, of racial extermination.

Notes


Sellin, *Slavery and the Penal System*, pp. 149-159.


Sellin, *Slavery and the Penal System*, pp. 146-150.

Shelden, “From Slave to Caste Society, p. 467.

Mancini, p. 342.

Ibid, p. 347.


Sellin, pp. 150-153.


http://magazine.uchicago.edu/9602/9602Voices.html


[34] “Sheriff runs female chain gang.”


[36] “Chain gangs of a different sort.”

http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9512/opinion/opinion.html


