IN “A WORLD WITHOUT PRISONS,” JULIA SUDBURY TIES THE FATE OF THE marginalized masses — a growing transnational body with linked miseries — to our resistance against intersecting military, penal, and imperial projects of dominant neoliberal regimes. She builds on the critical analysis of neoliberalism by positioning prisons and penal regimes as important counterparts to military aggression in its global diffusion and hegemony. Identifying the prison as a structural linchpin in the establishment, rationalization, and maintenance of global processes of dominance and exclusion gives clarification and momentum to calls for prison abolition.

The essay throws especially valuable light on transnational qualities of the prison-industrial complex and its attendant punishment boom. This is represented in the push by U.S.-based leaders in the private prison industry to claim more and more of the global market for criminal social control, a supply and demand fomented by the spread of exclusionary penal logics of social regulation (i.e., the use of prisons to purge dishonored and superfluous beings), and restructuring requirements of world economic institutions. This penal effort buttresses military interventions seeking to establish control over economic and political interests in Latin America and elsewhere, including the imposition of limits on self-determination, no matter the contradiction, and the suppression of inspired resistance.

It is in this crucible of economic and political repression that militarism and the expansion of empire spins a web of mass criminalization, creating the societal conditions and actual bodies prerequisite to an imprisonment boom. “Penal warehouses for people of African descent, immigrants, indigenous people and the global poor” increasingly dot the global village because, Sudbury argues, they are “central to the new world order.” This is a compelling “cartography of synergies between incarceration and militarism,” its most vivid illustrations coming through the experiences of Latin American, African, and Caribbean women trapped in this web of repression, characteristic of the modern capitalist world system.

The essay leaves a well-marked trail for intellectual and political work to follow in charting our way out of a world overrun with prisons. Yet, in doing
so, we must be mindful of the challenge to appreciate the multitude of forces at work in the creation and maintenance of this social problem, and to avoid a sort of reductionism that has marred critical analyses of punishment before. Indeed, while recognizing their indispensable contributions, scholars have cautioned against rigid applications of conflict theory to explain the development of punishment as a social institution. For example, although Rusche and Kirchheimer’s early Marxist-revisionist history, *Punishment and Social Structure* (1939), represents a breakthrough in the sociological analysis of criminal social control, the study has been rightly criticized for overstating the role of economic forces in shaping penal regimes and overlooking other streams of influence, such as the ascendance of penal administrations, whose officials and bureaucracies also shape the direction and endurance of penal policy (Garland, 1990). Sudbury’s essay does well to avoid such gross oversights. While increasing our understanding of how dominant economic and political interests contribute to the development of a modern penal logic, as well as the proliferation of prisons, we can lose sight of more proximate or intermediate mechanisms related to how industrialized punishment works.

For example, in the expanding apparatus of the prison-industrial complex, we find not only the swelling ranks of criminalized people, removed to prisons and otherwise disappeared from civil society through more and less visible punishments, but also a growing segment of workers employed in industries of social control. Sudbury touches on this in her discussion of the role powerful correctional officer unions have played in encouraging the punishment boom, as an example of non-corporate influences behind the expansion of the prison-industrial complex. Interestingly, she follows this example with mention of the “losers” in our new relations of production (i.e., superfluous low-skilled laborers), who are purged or perhaps put on reserve through the development of prison warehouses. Yet the distance between these two observations (organized correctional officers and superfluous workers fueling the prison boom) is not so great; in fact, they may be seen as two sides of one coin.

The growing workforce of social control reveals much about how the intersecting structural and ideological roots of mass imprisonment extend into the fabric of our society, enhancing our understanding of what Sudbury calls, “the cementing of the prison into local economies.” One can argue that prison guards are among the economic casualties warehoused in prisons, albeit as workers, in generally dangerous and otherwise undesirable occupations. Prison work has come to represent a “good deal” in the new economy of opportunity, perhaps gaining a modicum of glamour through the penal obsession of our popular culture, but mainly because of its sheer abundance and relative security, compared to other options in the low end of the service economy. Recall that direct and intergovernmental justice system expenditures in the U.S. totaled around $36 billion in 1982, and almost $147 billion by 1999. Combined federal, state, and local expenditures on “corrections” totaled just over $9 billion in 1982, and $49 billion by 1999. This
massive expenditure on prisons has not gone mainly to construction, but rather to institutional operations, including labor.\textsuperscript{2}

Industrialized punishment is not only paying off for big corporations, politicians, and towns supporting the prison-industrial complex, but also for a growing service workforce, which includes many women and people of color. Consider the increase and demographic proportions of the U.S. prison workforce (guards only). In 1983, there were 146,000 correctional officers in the U.S., 18\% of whom were women, 24\% of whom were black, and three percent of whom were Hispanic. By 2002, there were 328,000 correctional officers in the U.S., with corresponding increases in the number of women (to 23\%), African-Americans (28\%), and Hispanics (11\%) so employed. Women of color are employed in prisons at particularly high rates. Whereas African-Americans comprised roughly 20\% of male correctional officers nationwide in 1990 and 2000, almost 40\% of female correctional officers were black in those years. Representation varies dramatically between rural and urban settings. In New York City, more non-Hispanic black women (1,337) were employed as corrections officers in 1990 than non-Hispanic white men (1,213).\textsuperscript{3}

The prison-industrial complex has tapped the real interests of marginal workers, who find in this expanding field a ladder leaving the basement of underpaid and irregular service work — a chance to escape the rolls of casual workers. Interviews with prison workers reveal how the squeeze from neoliberal adjustments of the labor market and the retraction of social welfare have made the steel and concrete prison a sort of oasis of opportunity, and prison work appealing. Consider the 37-year-old mother of four, now earning a steady paycheck ($3,009 per month) as a guard. She receives two meals a day at the prison, has her clothes laundered and pressed for five dollars a month, and gets cheap prison haircuts for her children, amounting to, in her words, “a good deal for a divorced mother.” A 21-year-old male Latino prison guard agrees: “It’s a secure job...always going to be here. It’s good pay. You can move up. Good benefits. Secure. What else do you need?”\textsuperscript{4}

The attraction of prison work is undoubtedly driven by economic pressures, but it also signals, I suspect, the turn in our understanding of social welfare, and thus the necessity of maintaining dual analyses of structure and ideology as we map our way out of this world overrun with prisons. We are a rather war-torn nation, divided if not yet wearied by the material and symbolic devastation of several decades of “war” against crime, drugs, and welfare. We have learned to dilute expectations of due-process protection and civil liberty, to accept increasingly preemptive, collective, and severe punishments of criminalized people and “their kind” (i.e., undeserving criminal classes), and collectives with no rights others are bound to respect (see Davis, 2003). We are not so outraged, for example, by state-sponsored assassinations of criminal suspects. We have been conditioned to expect and ask less and less of the state, other than to furnish a secure environment for our leisure, production, and consumption. Wars on crime, drugs, welfare, and
now terror have turned “average Americans” against their counterparts outside the U.S., as well as against each other within. Such is evident in the plight of Arab and Muslim Americans, the new folk devils in the American epic of moral panic, for whom even African-Americans have ambivalent regard on the matter of equal protection under the law. We can anticipate similar inward division in the imperial outposts.

The pandemic of fear and distrust, laced with contempt for enemy classes devoid of redeeming qualities (i.e., “people who hate freedom”), and combined with the growing number of paychecks attached to social control, undermines our collective willingness and ability to imagine “A World Without Prisons,” let alone organize the local and transnational effort required for its creation. This is especially true for those not already connected to activist initiatives or otherwise inoculated against the propaganda of the global war and punishment machine. The scale of this challenge occurs to me in interactions with students, many of whom are eager to join the social control workforce, yet are rather unaware of, or consciously indifferent to, the possibility of a world with more humane and socially viable responses to crime and other problems. The “cementing of prisons in local economies,” and within local hearts and minds, here and around the world, makes resisting militarism, globalized punishment, and empire difficult and divisive work, for we must not only contend with macro social and political forces, but also with dynamics much closer to home.

NOTES

1. A 1969 poll found that only one percent of high school students had considered a career as a prison guard. This percentage may have increased in the wake of the punishment boom and the professionalization of corrections, though one suspects it remains very low (cited in Jacobs and Grear, 1991: 275).


REFERENCES