“Frankly, I do not see having the world’s largest prison population as an issue. If anything, it means we are doing a good job of managing crime.” - Criminal Justice 1100 Professor. If anything, capitalism, the source of carceral states, has never been able to provide a concrete solution for crime. It has merely found a way to profit from it. In the United States, like every other capitalist nation, laws are written by and for the ruling class. Consequently, the way society responds to crime is deeply rooted in class interests as criminalization of those hit hardest by poverty, unemployment, and social decay under capitalism are brutalized by the police and further traumatized by means of incarceration. This was not arbitrary, however, given that the flow of capital has been purposefully facilitated from social-welfare to social-control at the expense of this nation’s poorest residents being abandoned by “the left arm of the state, welfare, and gripped by the punitive right arm of the state, criminal justice” (Rios 29). Therefore, in the history of this nation’s massive shift in the securitization of the poor through their demonization, the state has managed to assert itself into civil society through various institutions, with specific intent of maintaining social order while in the process creating the phenomenon known as mass incarceration. It is through the development of the current carceral state via the allocation of resources from social welfare to social control, that one can best understand how the working class has been pushed into criminality because of their deprivation and imprisoned for capital gain. Thus, rather than provide statistic after statistic of the prison population over the last several decades, the occurrence of mass incarceration in the United States holds its importance in the evolution of policies and conditions that were solidified during the “wars” waged by the federal government.

Perhaps the intent was always to institute a structure replacing that which once chained the bodies of colored people in this nation, one with veiled anti-black rhetoric. So, a prominent origin point for the carceral state has been dated back to the end of the Jim Crow era in which a new system of control was developed that heavily relied on racist sentiments to establish a racial caste system. One “demanding ‘law and order’ with more race neutral language” that has ultimately led to the current influx of prisoners who are predominantly black (Alexander 41). To a certain extent, Michelle Alexander’s analogy presented in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* is persuasive given that there is no question that the targeted social group by which criminalization, and therefore punishment, has been collectively practiced and perfected on has been black, male populations within the United States. Yet, the racial hierarchy in American society itself was purely defined and systematically constructed to benefit the rising bourgeoisie in colonial America through the exploitation of blacks for cheap labor. Conscious of the fact that the most apparent difference between poor whites and black slaves was skin color, land owning whites extended special privileges to poor white settlers to eliminate any future alliances between blacks and poor whites. “White settlers were allowed greater access to Native American lands, white servants were allowed to police slaves through slave patrols and militias, and barriers were created so that free labor would not be placed in competition with slave labor” (Alexander 25). Consequently, there was no better way to feed into their greed for privileged positions in American society other than ingraining a degraded status of Africans who compared to whites were less intelligent, less admirable, and overall an uncivilized, lesser race. In a sense, race was weaponized to fuel the existing class struggles between planter elites and the poor, a weapon that proved to yield a lasting
institution but that nonetheless was implemented within a class context.

If the Jim Crow analogy holds true and the event that gave rise to the birth of mass incarceration is the demise of the Jim Crow South, then the true origin point would be the emergence of racist sentiments in this nation. Which to a certain extent provides an incomplete explanation for explicit motives and policies that established the framework for mass incarceration, and obscures the actual material and social forces brought about by the contending class struggle within the United States. Specifically, as Cedric Johnson explains, “the systematic production and reproduction of a surplus population by the contemporary model of capital accumulation that has driven the economy for decades” (Johnson). Thus, the beginnings of the institutionalization of mass incarceration can be pinpointed to the 1970s, in which an increase of unemployment resulted in the cut back of the welfare state that had been instituted to help the jobless working class. Being as the political discourse of this country revolves around dog-whistle politics, the actual birth of the carceral state necessitates the discussion of the evolution from the War on Poverty to the War on Crime to the War on Drugs - an era of policies vilifying the poor to shield the state’s inability to provide everyday citizens with economic and social protection. It should also be noted that due to the class fragmentation of the United States being coupled with race, the racial lens that Alexander provides proves useful given that the racial disparities within the working class are all the more severe due to this nation’s racism.

While it is rather cynical to state any anti-poverty measure created by Congress, exclusive to the material conditions of the poor, is always doomed to fail. In the most blunt terms, the fundamental cause for why federal legislation unsuccessfully established fundamental changes to eradicate poverty was rooted in policymaker’s presumptions that conditions in low income communities were attributed to individual flaws rather than structural factors. As a result, the main initiative set forth by Congress to fight poverty sought to monitor and regulate the behavior of individuals that in the process would foster ideals that would eventually lead to opportunity (Hinton). The organization of American cities post-WWII brought about class inequality; most clearly depicted through black and white relations due to inner-city black public housing, GI Bill that offered only whites low interest mortgages, and creation of suburbia for whites. Many whites who had endured tremendous hardship during the Great Depression improved their material condition by way of the postwar economic boom that for the first time made homeownership, quality education, job opportunities, and middle-class lifestyles available to them. At the same time, blacks were integrated into the consumer America “through civil rights pressure, anti-discrimination legislation and the arrival of black urban regimes that created a path to the middle class through public employment” (Johnson). However, economic recession sanctioned a national policy of urban neglect that produced the hyper segregation of the black poor - one that ultimately yielded blackness to equate to poor, urban, uneducated, and worse, criminal.

Following John F. Kennedy’s promise to “not only relieve the symptom of poverty but to cure it, and above all, prevent it,” Lyndon Johnson’s administration framed the issue of poverty as a “war” to highlight the urgency of domestic programs needed to alleviate citizens, but inadequately addressed the root cause of poverty as a denial of opportunity based on race and failure to give citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities. The vast majority of the War on Poverty programs offered a cautious approach, creating vocational training and remedial education programs rather than the creation of job measures or an overhaul of urban public schools. By the end of the 1960s, policymakers continued to develop policies to skirt proposals of structural reform for the sole reason that programs seeking to establish long-term jobs were a costly initiative (Hinton 49). As federal policymakers continued to condemn behavior and defiance, rationalizing them as causes of the cycle of poverty rather than symptoms, increased supervision of the poor working class manifested itself into a type of moral crusade combating inequality through the fear of urban havoc. Thus, punitive strategies for managing social inequality replaced the welfare-state due to post-
welfare-state capitalism, where controlling the population became a key function of law enforcement, and later, the prison system.

As structural shifts were facilitated for the expansion of the criminal justice system and punitive crime-control polices, the system became a central mechanism in supervising, and moreover controlling, the working class. With this deliberate shift, the state of the bourgeoisie managed to not abandon the working class, but rather deeply embed itself into their everyday lives - championing punitive social control as the solution to manage marginalized populations. Specifically, the black populations in poor, urban communities whose black subculture became the public enemy by the early 1970s - one that could only be maintained through heavy criminalization (Rios 21). What is important to note is that the conditions of street crime, delinquency, or even drug use have always existed. It was through prioritization by the ruling class, one that is predominantly white, that these conditions became of enough social importance to be framed as a pressing social problem. Thus, it is no surprise that politicians were able to call a War on Crime to address black criminality through none other than “law and order.” However, it should not be overlooked that “economic recession and labor force contraction abetted by a national policy of urban neglect and ultimately neoliberalization,” first produced the black poor that was then heavily criminalized. Nonetheless, this particular racial group is to a certain extent overrepresented in the public image of the working poor. In actuality the increase in number of unemployed produced a surplus population that was confined to “the ghettoized zones of the inner city, blighted inner-ring suburbs, and depopulated Rust Belt towns,” who were routinely policed and imprisoned regardless of race but certainly due to their working class status (Johnson).

As previously stated, since the federal government sought to encourage discipline to break the cycle of poverty, the implementation of a War on Crime was similar in blaming the behavior of individuals for crime, and consequently chose to respond with a “tough on crime” movement. Stating specific actions taken by the federal government to create an environment of constant surveillance simply does not capture their pervasive and trivial nature, and if anything reduces life under the federal government’s methods of control to unfortunate realities suffered by those targeted by these actions rather than deliberate realities. Thus, these circumstances can best be understood on a more micro-level to grasp the everyday life of the working poor under their criminalization. In Victor Rios’ book Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys, he shares his findings during his time examining the vicious cycle of punishment and social-control of poor, urban boys in the city of Oakland, California. His research demonstrates how the flow of capital being facilitated from social-welfare to social control led the city’s schools and community programs to be coupled with policing and penal authorities - ones who prioritized security above all else at the expense of Oakland’s residents being abandoned by welfare and gripped by criminal justice. With this massive misallocation of resources said to be for the “securitization of the working class,” the marginalized people of Oakland actually ended up turning to gangs, drug dealing, and other criminal activity as a response to capitalist globalization that had industry flee their home. Essentially, what Rios’ findings state is that the proliferation of a transnational global economy frees capital to prey on “vulnerable populations and resources” and makes the facilitation of social welfare to social control easily masked (Rios 29). The ironic nature of the production of punitive methods is that it was the preconceived notion of criminality embedded into the working class of Oakland that necessitated the need for their control through allocation of resources touting security rather than their well-being. Thus, this merely accelerated the expansion of criminality that it first sought to end in the process because of this deprivation. In the most simple terms, in an attempt to monitor its population, the criminalization of Oakland’s residents bred their criminality.

Seeing as how similar motives were reiterated throughout the wars on both poverty and crime, the graveness of their implementation manifested itself in October of 1982, when Ronald Reagan officially declared that “public enemy number one” was the rampant use of drugs - sparking.
what today is infamously known as the War on Drugs. This initiative holds special importance in the
boom of the prison industry given that convictions for drug offenses are the single most important
cause of the explosion in incarceration rates within the United States. As Michelle Alexander notes,
the war was not specifically aimed at ridding the nation of big-time dealers, and in actuality resulted
in the arrest of those not charged with serious offenses. Part of this era entailed public concern about
illicit drug use built throughout the 1980s that was largely due to media portrayals of people addicted
to “crack,” Nancy Reagan’s highly-publicized "Just Say No" campaign, and passages of draconian
penalties in Congress and state legislatures such as minimum sentencing guidelines and three strikes
laws (Alexander 60). However, framing this initiative by the federal government as “war on drugs”
veils the government’s biggest encroachment on civil liberties that is responsible for the merger of
state and corporate power with the rise of private prisons since this campaign. To be clear, it was
really a war on people, one that was eager to profit off the caging of the poor. Arguably, the effects
of the evolution of the same rhetoric used throughout the War on Poverty and War on Crime is made
clear through statistical evidence on this nation’s incarceration rates since Reagan’s declaration of
“war.” Throughout the first three quarters of this century the incarceration rate remained relatively
stable, at about 110 prison inmates for every 100,000 people. In the mid-1970s the rate began to
climb, doubling in the 1980s and then again in the 1990s. The rate is now 445 per 100,000; among
adult men it is about 1,100 per 100,000 (Schlosser).

Thus, three decades after the War on Poverty began, the United States has managed to
develop a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending
from welfare to social control to, most recently, imprisonment. Perhaps the most notable bourgeois
aspect in this recent development is that it is composed of politicians on both parties who in order to
gain votes, advertise economic development for prisons in impoverished rural areas of the working
class as “riddance of criminality” instead of cornerstones for private companies that see the
warehousing of individuals as a profitable market. Moreover, the backwards logic of this
development is equally, if not more, troubling than the quote at the beginning of this analysis. As
Steven R. Donziger, a young attorney who headed the National Criminal Justice Commission in
1996, explains: “If crime is going up, then we need to build more prisons; and if crime is going
down, it’s because we built more prisons—and building even more prisons will therefore drive crime
down even lower” (Schlosser). Yet, the rate of violent crime in the United States since 1991 has
fallen by about 20 percent, while the number of people in prison or jail has risen by 50 percent. What
was once the responsibility of local, state, and federal levels has become a multibillion-dollar
industry with its own “trade shows, conventions, websites, mail-order catalogues, direct-marketing
campaigns, Wall Street investment banks that handle prison bond issues and invest in private prisons,
plumbing-supply companies, food-service companies, healthcare companies, and even companies
that sell padded cells in a vast color selection” (Schlosser). The privatization of prisons has
essentially become the fastest growing portion of the prison-industrial complex since it was greeted
with enthusiasm during the Reagan and Bush Administrations. The belief was that it fit perfectly in
small governments and for the promotion of the privatization of public services. However, the award
for the “Most Repulsive Administration in Aiding the Warehousing of Inmates for Profit” goes to the
Clinton Administration, who encouraged the Justice Department to place undocumented immigrants
and minimum-security inmates in private correctional facilities to reduce the federal working class.
The rationale for private prisons is that government monopolies such as old-fashioned departments of
corrections are inherently wasteful and inefficient, and the private sector, through competition for
contracts, can provide much better service at a much lower cost. The manner in which prison
privatization emerged and how it operates requires an in depth analysis of its own that is separate
from the makings of mass incarceration. Nonetheless, addressing that such a market exists as a result
of the surplus population of prisoners serves to highlight the severity of how the ruling class in this
nation chose to criminalize anything that they deemed to provoke social unrest, endanger the public,
or challenge the status quo. Frankly, having the world’s largest prison population is an issue given that its emergence is justified as maintaining “crime,” and merely serves as a method to disguise capitalism’s inability to provide for its lowest class. As seen, the development of the current carceral state was due to the misallocation of resources from social welfare to social control to imprisonment through modification of policies and conditions that were instituted during the “wars” waged by the federal government. Perhaps the biggest take-away from this examination is that what is defined as a crime and response to crime is deeply rooted in the capitalists’ class interests much like anything socially derived under a capitalist nation. More importantly, in the grand scheme of things even crime, like any social behavior, owes itself to the system it is within. To be clear, the social conditions of those lost to poverty perhaps turned to criminality because their material needs were not being met under capitalism. Thus, in a sense, capitalism demonstrates itself to be the very source of carceral states, but more specifically, it proves to be the basis for modern crime as well. Hence, in the most Marxist way, society cannot seek to eradicate criminal activity through sole imprisonment. Rather, it must start by its material basis: capitalism – a solution nowhere near the grasp of the United States.

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Works Cited


