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Midterm

The Hidden Truth of America

Reform of the prison-industrial complex must be done if America is ever going to be truly the land of the free. Elaine Brown (2002) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) both address this issue but in different ways. Brown uses an individual case to keep the reader drawn in, and explains why laws and the programs have failed the average African American and specifically Michael “Little B” Lewis. While Gilmore addresses the prison changes in California and how these changes make the need for new laws and reform to fill these prisons by showing the reader the big picture. While both women use different tactics to show us the problems in the system, the message is the same, America has moved backwards in the fight for equality.

Both women attack the heads of the governments they are researching. Brown ridicules all three levels of government, from the district attorney and mayor of Atlanta to the President and the African Americans in higher government, but primarily focuses on the local level. Brown says, “[...] he [Paul Howard, district attorney] would ‘reestablish a community of justice.’ Howard had never really articulated a plan for such a reestablishment, his clearest campaign goal having been to become a ‘first black’” (Brown 22). Reestablishing a community of justice meant cracking down on crime that had long been left to infest neighborhoods. Howard needed a “prime example” to prove he was cracking down on crime; this example unfortunately was Little B. It looked like the perfect case for Howard to support the imprisonment of what he frequently called a “thug” and soon as the case had Howard’s support

all chances of Little B getting a fair case went out the window. Through many speeches Howard made Little B seem like the exact problem with inner city life and the key word is seem. How can an impartial jury be elected? When the district attorney is stating that the suspect is guilty before the trial ever happens.

Brown also attacks the federal government for changing programs that were barely working in the first place and turning them into illusions. Brown's prime example was when Atlanta was elected to host the 1996 Olympic Games, housing programs changed quickly to encourage higher end homes near the Georgia Dome. Brown states:

[...] Glover had obtained \$42 million in federal funding and had bulldozed homes of all the poor black families from over a thousand units of the massive Techwood Homes as well as the neighboring Clack Howell Homes, casting from sight of the adjacent downtown 'Olympic Village' (65).

Glover is the head of the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) and uses this power to evict all those families that would give a "poor image" of Atlanta in the then upcoming Olympics. Instead of using the years before the Olympics to attempt to improve the neighborhoods themselves they took the easy way out and just moved in families they approved of. Clinton even recognized these changes and gave the AHA \$100 million to make "improvements" (Brown 66).

Gilmore addresses the "prison boom" and the following legal reforms that occurred to fill those prisons, the most famous being the three strikes law. The three strikes law puts any individual in prison for three felonies happening at any time in one's life. It didn't take long for new crimes to be added to the long list of felonies. "More broadly written than any law of its type in the United States, the California version includes nonviolent prior convictions among

eligible 'strikes' set no age, temporal or jurisdictional limitations on priors, and allows prosecutors to use their power to 'wobble' charges in order to make the current misdemeanors into felonies and therefore strikable" (Gilmore 108). Laws don't get poorly written on accident, the three strikes law was written to fill prisons at any means necessary. With this law written as it is and how budgets are rewarded to the most "productive" branches of police departments the over extension of the law was inevitable. The worst part of the three strikes act is that it's almost impossible to change because all those individuals most closely affected by the law lose the right to vote as soon as they're convicted of a felony.

But California didn't stop with the three strikes law; it then added a law for added prison time for any "gang" member with almost no proof of gang membership needed. All that was needed was for an individual's name to be previously added to the gang member database. Gilmore shares an example of an individual who was added to the gang membership database because of a traffic violation. This individual "happened" to be the son of an activist organization leader called Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC). The son was convicted of a crime with no evidence against him and added time for gang membership which the courts also had no evidence, what stops the police department from arresting the entire neighborhood for "gang membership"? There are no checks and balances, the argument can be made that what the police did to this family falls under communist like actions. Using kidnapping and fear to censor an activist, that doesn't sound like the Soviet Union at all...the only thing the police didn't do was kill the mother.

Both Brown and Gilmore agree that drastic change is needed and both share ideas how this could be accomplished. Brown says, "The history of black struggle suggests the American society may not be capable of accommodating the freedom of black people, that it may be

inherently incongruous with the character and structure of America to share its wealth, even with those who represent its very source” (Brown 359). All evidence shows that this statement is completely true; the government has just become more deceptive in its ways of suppression. Instead of being forced into public slave labor, the government uses the economic means, drugs, and a blind eye to the problems of inner city life. By keeping neighborhoods just above the poverty line, it keeps the masses of the inner cities as consumers, but once they buy everything they need for that day, week, month there is nothing left over to save. Living from pay check to pay check is the most dangerous means of survival, especially with the economy as a whole in the state that it is. In an instant a family could be without income and have no money to survive on while the job search is underway, assuming there is a job to be found that’s within a reasonable distance from home. If two parent families were more common among the inner city, I believe remittance would be much more common, for the father to get a job outside the city or in another sector of the city and send money home to the rest of the family, only to come home for the weekends if at all. For this kind of family splitting to be necessary for the family’s survival, it’s no wonder why the family unit is falling apart.

Gilmore talks about how many individual organizations will struggle to make any significant change but if those organizations focused on a single issue at a time their power would be over whelming or as she puts it, “When the capacities of resulting purposeful action are combined towards ends greater than mission statements and other provisional limits, powerful alignments begin to shake the ground, in other words, movement happens” (Gilmore 248). That extreme level of organization would be anything but ignorable. The problem is many individual organizations weaken themselves by trying to attack multiple issues. This leaves Gilmore’s idea very far off, because if these organizations cannot pick up a single issue within themselves, it’s

inconceivable for all major organizations to focus on a single issue. Change would be at the fingertips of the people if Gilmore's vision ever becomes reality.

It seems that everything these books talk about is the government doing everything in its power to prevent such an alignment, to keep the minorities and poor weak and unorganized. This poses the question; can the "peasants" overcome the kingdom in anything short from revolution? Personally I think they have too much working against them, to overcome the discrimination without the most extreme forms of protest. One of the main ideas during the enlightenment was that if a government doesn't suit the people governs, then those people have the right to replace that government with a more desirable one. Both authors end their books with the idea of revolution, I'm not saying that this outcome is certain, but history does have a tendency to repeat itself.