

Political Theory and Philosophy in a Time of Mass Incarceration: Introduction to Part II

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In the introduction to Part I of this special project, we made the strong claim that philosophy itself—and theory as a practice—has fallen short of its radical potential by not ruthlessly attending to the material conditions of mass/hyper-incarceration in the United States.¹ It is also our claim that it is foremost radical philosophers and theorists who should heed this call. It is especially attendant on philosophers working in the radical traditions of marxism, feminism, queer theory, post-colonial theory, trans* studies, disability studies, critical race studies, and animal studies to be receptive to the material conditions of mass incarceration, precisely because these radical traditions are in a position to be receptive to the material conditions and to listen to the concrete challenges laid down by activists. Put differently, philosophers working in radical traditions can and must be attentive and receptive to the ways that movements—such as prison and police abolition, #blacklivesmatter, decolonial and indigenous resurgence, disability justice, and trans*liberation—seek justice and liberation from current conditions. As Iris Marion Young reminds us, “In order to be a useful measure of actual justice and injustice, it [a theory of justice] must contain some substantive premises about social life, which are usually derived, explicitly or implicitly, from the actual social context in which the theorizing takes place.”²

And at its core, Part II of “Political Theory and Philosophy in a Time of Mass Incarceration” returns to the claim that such philosophical and theoretical work must center on the lived experiences of those most affected by the criminal punishment system in the United States and to related systems

1. Natalie Cisneros and Andrew Dilts, “Political Theory and Philosophy in a Time of Mass Incarceration: Introduction to Part I,” *Radical Philosophy Review* 17. 2 (2014): 395–402.
2. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 4.

of carceral domination and oppression such as policing, immigrant detention, the military, and (as featured in this issue) health-care and education. The essays collected in this installment seek to self-consciously do “critical prison theory” with different emphases: as a way of doing philosophical analysis, as a set of pedagogical practices that involve the prison, and as a practice of collective organization and movement building within (and hopefully beyond) the existing structure of institutional and “professional” philosophy and theory.

In “White Supremacy, Mass Incarceration, and Clinical Medicine: A Critical Analysis of Correctional Healthcare,” Andrea Pitts engages in a critical philosophical analysis of contemporary correctional healthcare practices. In conversation with the work of Frantz Fanon, Pitts argues that correctional medicine, as a function and strategy of white supremacy, operates as an extension of colonial medicine. This essay shows us how correctional healthcare perpetuates and reifies the patterns of structural violence integral to colonial medicine. Through an analysis of both Fanon’s theoretical work and his practice within hospitals, Pitts develops a new philosophical and political approach to questions surrounding healthcare and incarceration. Ultimately, Pitts calls for, offers tools for—and, indeed, engages in—a transformational critique of how structural racist violence continues to operate in the age of mass incarceration.

Like healthcare, education in prison arguably has the same structures as the prison itself. Many critical prison theorists and activists have pointed to prison education’s role in perpetuating the system of mass incarceration while appearing to be radical and liberatory.³ In “Reprobation as Shared Inquiry: Teaching the Liberal Arts in Prison,” Joshua Miller and Daniel Levine contend that so long as we have prisons, then a meaningful humanities education inside of prisons is necessary to make reprobation meaningful. This, they argue, is part of why the prison system has, on their terms and on its own, failed as a system of punishment and reprobation. Allowing such a project does not constitute a complete solution to the violences of mass incarceration, Miller and Levine also describe the integral importance of self-critique and transformation for both educators and students in liberal arts classrooms, drawing on their experience teaching humanities courses at a prison near Baltimore. Their theorization directly addresses the material conditions of such pedagogical work, reminding us how idealized and abstract political thought necessarily intersects with the institutions we currently have, even as we must critique the existence of those institutions themselves.

3. For an especially powerful example, see Robert Scott, “Distinguishing Radical Teaching from Merely Having Intense Experiences While Teaching in Prison,” *Radical Teacher* 95 (2012): 22–32.

To think beyond these institutions, to build a world without prisons, and to do so in concert with current and former prisoners, we lastly turn to the work of the Prison and Theory Working Group (PTWG). We reprint here a collectively-authored statement first self-published by this ad-hoc group of philosophers, theorists, and activists who seek to change both the face and practice of professional theory and philosophy as part of a prison abolitionist agenda. The PTWG's "10 Key Points" is a collectively authored statement of points of agreement and a set of definitions from which to question the relationship between theory and the prison. We read it as both a practical text and a theoretical one. But, more importantly, it is a reminder that our thinking, writing, organizing, and movement building must "increase accountability in our thought and our work"⁴ to those most directly affected by the carceral system and carceral thinking.

We are incredibly grateful to *Radical Philosophy Review* for offering their pages to continue this work. As guest editors of this project, we identify as prison abolitionists, and we feel able to do so in these pages precisely because abolitionist politics is necessarily radical in nature, and because we feel that radical philosophy without an abolitionist ethos is contrary to its own aims. — • —

4. Prison and Theory Working Group, "10 Key Points," <http://ptwg.org/10-key-points/>, accessed August 2, 2015.