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Our Violence and Theirs: Comparing Prison Realities

In recent decades, the use of imprisonment has undergone a dramatic rise in a large number of countries around the globe. As of late 2013, the estimated number of people held in penal institutions throughout the world had reached a record high of over eleven million (Walmsley 2013). Despite the inherently violent nature of the experience for those subjected to it, as is so frequently attested to by the manifold imprints it leaves on their souls and bodies (in the form, for example, of chronic mental and physical illnesses; see Fleury-Steiner and Crowder 2008; Simon 2013; Moran 2013), imprisonment is more often than not approached in pertinent scholarship in terms that either dodge its painful nature or miss and even mask it behind claims of legality and pretensions of care—what I call elsewhere “decorative justice” (Cheliotis 2014). When scholarly accounts do register institutional violence, it is most commonly portrayed as an exceptional phenomenon whereby individual professionals, specific establishments, or given jurisdictions happen to deviate at a particular point in time from a general rule of affording prisoners basic human respect.

It should come as no surprise that the bulk of such scholarship stems from, and is focused

on, the advanced economies of the West, especially those of the English-speaking world. In addition to what anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2003) critically terms the “global hierarchy of value,” in which powerful Western countries matter and are studied disproportionately more than the rest (see also Connell 2007), there is a long history of scholarly research being deployed in those powerful countries to obscure, relativize, or legitimate violent misdeeds on the part of state authorities so as to help promote projects of politico-economic domination over disadvantaged segments of the population (see further Platt 1969; Garland 1985). Indeed, the structures of Anglophone academia are largely geared toward producing and sustaining ample supplies of politically useful “experts”; that is, researchers who either look exclusively at anodyne questions or address inconvenient issues only in ways destined to please the powers that be (see further Wacquant 1996; Nocella, Best, and McLaren 2010).

These scholarly trends assume additional significance in the context of a gradually but steadily emerging body of scholarship on imprisonment in poorer parts of the world. On the one hand, the violence of imprisonment is once again likely to be ignored, overlooked, or otherwise neutralized by researchers, not least because the precise themes they address and analytic operations they perform tend to be those already favored in the prosperous West. On the other hand, when the violence of imprisonment is properly recorded, it is likely to be interpreted as a feature unique to, or at least more prevalent and intense in, the countries at issue, thus reinforcing another variant of the “global hierarchy of value,” one in which the prosperous West enjoys a far greater degree of civilization than the remainder of the globe (see further Herzfeld 1987; Nelken 2010). Although such interpretations are easier to find among privileged Westerners, some of whom lay claim to truth by evoking their own experiences of fieldwork in “exotic” faraway places, natives of the countries under examination may internalize and reproduce—and if academically attuned to the West, also empirically “validate”—self-deprecating discourses that lock their societies and institutions in an aura of incorrigible backwardness and cultural inferiority (see further Agozino 2003; Fanon 1967).

The essays in this volume of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* offer detailed accounts of prison realities in a variety of subordinate countries and in the US state of California, highlighting the violence of specific institutional practices. But there is more at stake in the scholarly analysis of imprisonment than confinement and its violence as such. To the extent that the prison constitutes a microcosm reflective of trends in society at large, the recent and ongoing boom in the use of imprisonment in so many countries

is a story that tells us much about the world in which an ever-increasing number of us live today. There is, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2002) puts it, a long continuum of ordinary social spaces where violence is exercised over subjects as a matter of course, extending beyond prisons to schools, to emergency rooms and nursing homes, to city halls and public morgues. At the same time, the very fact that prisoners struggle and often manage to resist the conditions of their violent subjugation, along with at least some of the strategies of their resistance, may lend themselves as an archive of inspiration for political action in other cognate sites.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Michael Hardt for his generous support as *SAQ*'s editor; to Michael Herzfeld and Jonathan Simon for their helpful advice and suggestions in the early stages of the project; to the team of reviewers for their detailed and constructively critical feedback on individual contributions; and to Liz Beasley and Stacy Lavin at Duke University Press for skillfully guiding the manuscript to publication.