

Book Review - Black Commentator 2/28/2013

*Out of Control: A Fifteen Year Battle Against Control Unit Prisons*

A Narrative of Struggle

One of the chief symptoms of every revolution is the sharp and sudden increase in the number of ordinary people who take an active, independent and forceful interest in politics.

Nikolai Lenin

You can never have a revolution in order to establish democracy. You must have a democracy in order to have a revolution.

G.K. Chesterton

Attend a Forum to discuss our assertion that Prisons are about RACISM

What are you doing about it?

What could you do about it?

The Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, *Out of Control: A Fifteen Year Battle Against Control Unit Prisons*

In the years between 1965 and 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. began “challenging the nation's fundamental priorities,” writes Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon in “The Martin Luther King You Don't See on TV” (*FAIR: Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, January 4, 1995). He became “the country's most prominent opponent of the Vietnam War and a staunch critic of overall U.S. foreign policy, which he deemed militaristic.”

Noting that a majority of Americans below the poverty line were white, King developed a class perspective. He decried the huge income gaps between rich and poor, and called for 'radical changes in the structure of our society' to redistribute wealth and power.

'True compassion,' Dr. King declared, 'is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.'

Dr. King's economic critique complained about “capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries.” Here, at home, Dr. King took up a “militant project”--the Poor People's Campaign.

This is the Dr. King we do not see or hear, write Cohen and Solomon. This is the Dr. King the *Washington Post* declared had “diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country, his people.” *The Reader's Digest* “warned of an 'insurrection'” while *Life Magazine* called his “Beyond Vietnam Speech” “demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi.”

Martin Luther King's commitment went beyond *voting* rights.

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For correctly linking the U.S.'s militaristic (imperialist) ambitions with the economic edifice of capitalism, King was targeted for elimination and his legacy of radical thought and militancy omitted, replaced by the mythical: equality for all—at last!

White liberals went home to establish careers and families. Black liberals took up the flag of the donkey and urged Blacks to join the Democratic Party. *The Left*, along with the poor, King and Malcolm X, radical thought and militancy were vilified, and *crime* became associated with Black Americans and the desire for equality and democracy. It is not an accident, writes Michelle Alexander that the civil rights movement is identified as “a threat to law and order” at the same time the FBI is reporting “fairly dramatic increases in the national crime rate” (*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*).

The liberal bourgeoisie, white and Black, awakening now from *the Dream*, appear to be recognizing a narrative to which they have contributed to sustain the omissions and gaps thereby forestalling the movement of the poor and working class. Now, more than 2 million, mostly Black, Brown and Red people, are behind bars, more, according to Michelle Alexander, than were enslaved. Prisons are everywhere and the pipeline from school to prison is very real for poor and working class children left behind in the testing-til-you-drop-out-and-drop-into-a-prison Public School System. Homeland Security and the CIA has its eyes on everyone, as everyone, including American citizens, could become a potential enemy of the State, a State that has declared itself at war with everyone!

The fundamental restructuring of domestic and foreign policy, the kind of fundamental change Dr. King advocated and pursued, demands a commitment to eradicating the omission of truth and the vilification of the poor and working class, a commitment that does not contribute to sustaining any facet of the violence that is the capitalist system. For it is capitalism that is the ultimate enemy of humanity and of this Earth. Our war is to bring about a just civilization for sustaining life not proliferating suffering, destruction, and death.

I know a few long-time, committed activists who have worked for years with and on behalf of poor, working class and political prisoners and who have for years struggled to educate the public with the truth about the link between incarceration and the Empire's wars against humanity. These individuals still sacrifice their time, indeed, their lives to the vision of democracy and freedom they share with King and Malcolm X. In that sense, the “omitted” legacy of Dr. King and of Malcolm X and others still lives on.

*Wherever there is power, there is resistance.*” (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, Introduction*)

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* forced many Americans to understand (and for some to admit) that the criminalization of populations was part of a systematic program to neutralize resistance to a capitalist/imperialist coup that ultimately succeeded in drawing executive, judicial, and legislative resources to the promotion of a capitalist state of “law and order.” On the other hand, *Out of Control: A Fifteen Year Battle Against Control Unit Prisons*, with a forward by Sundiata Acoli, is a well-written, historical, first person account of ordinary people, activists and prisoners, in the struggle to effect fundamental change Dr. King would advocate and participate in were he alive today.

In *Out of Control*, is one story of feet on the ground and the efforts of prisoners themselves resisting their dehumanization. For the story that *Out of Control* tells of one organization's (the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, CEML), efforts to resist, centers the prisoners first and foremost and their activist activities. It does not offer the liberalization of struggle: No activist *in* or *out* of prison expects to be honored at the next annual civil rights conference or invited to the White House for beer and a chat with the president. Lockdown is permanent and control unit prisons are nearly in every state. Although CEML “ceased to exist” in 2000, together, these prison activists were, in fact, so effective that they forced capitalist institutions, particularly the Bureau of Prisons, to reveal themselves as the true monsters of nightmares—not activists who remember the legacy of Dr. King's activism.

*Out of Control* is a documentation of the struggle, in other words, a narrative of resistance against the institutionalization of capitalist/corporate power that in itself challenges the irrational State documentations justifying the necessity for methods of controlling human beings as if repressive uses of technology and brute force are symbols of progress. *Out of Control* attests to the contrary! It could be read as an invaluable lesson to generations taught to believe that ever since the day a bullet landed Martin Luther King on the floor of the balcony at the Lorraine Hotel we all have been freed from deception and corruption. *Skip along with the narrative of the Dream—we have a Black president! Proof of freedom and democracy for all!*

We are not free and our work is not yet done.

I can think of a few former students who could have greatly benefited from a thorough discussion of prison activism that links the repressive apparatus of incarceration and torture to the pursuit of capitalist goals. But we have the young, committed activists, including those participating directly and indirectly with the Occupy Wall Street Movement. Nothing ever happens once, Faulkner once wrote...

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*King, on that Easter Sunday, defied his father and fellow pastors. He had to step up. More sacrifice. More protest. He canceled his appearance at Ebenezer. Put the robe away and donned a shirt and jeans to join the people in protest.*

I cannot end this review of *Out of Control* without mentioning again that we are talking about ordinary people. Not people with, as they say, plenty of “time on their hands.” Both Nancy Kurshan and her life-long partner, Steve Whitman, held “professional” jobs. Kurshan recalls the challenges the couple faced doing “political work” and supporting it financially while raising two children—“oh yes—go to work each day.”

“It pissed me off when people would yell ‘get a job’ as we demonstrated, since we voluntarily took up this second job without financial recompense.”

In 1983, when the government established the first control unit prison in the U.S. at Marion in Illinois, Kurshan remembers that a few friends in Chicago “realized that this was a disaster that could thwart efforts to pursue justice and freedom.” These control units, as Kurshan explains, are 8×10 foot cells in which a human being is contained for 23 hours a day, “seven days a week.” They are not permitted contact with other humans--(except, the guards). “There was no way to know when it would end. Days, months, years would go by. There was total idleness, no work, no education.”

“Intense sensory deprivation and indefinite confinement was a way of life.”

Sometimes, Kurshan continues, prisoners “pondered if they would go crazy. Some did.”

The incident that brought these outside activists and the prison activists together in 1985 was not so extraordinary either. After “two guards were killed by two prisoners,” the prison at Marion was placed under lockdown. An isolated incident left 350 prisoners vulnerable to brutality of institutionalized capitalist power.

From 1983 to 1985, according to Kurshan, all work and educational programs, and religious services (*Out of Control*) were shut down—replaced by *violence*:

During the initial stage of this lockdown, 60 guards equipped with riot gear, much of it shipped in from other prisons, systematically beat approximately 100 handcuffed and defenseless prisoners. Guards also subjected some prisoners to forced finger probes of the rectum. Random beatings and rectal probes continued through the two-year lockdown. Despite clear evidence of physical and psychological brutality at the hands of the guards, Congress and the courts refused to intervene to stop the lockdown.

*Today*, the world has an image of this image of violence: the pictures of U.S. soldiers proudly posing as the powerful beside the humiliated and tortured prisoners from Abu Ghraib and Gitmo. Today, as Kurshan writes, we can see “a direct line” extending from the U.S. control units to “these so-called ‘enhanced interrogation’ centers throughout the world.” As Kurshan points out,

[s]o-called ‘brainwashing’ strategies that involved physical as well as psychological abuse were being adopted from international arenas and applied inside U.S. prisons. Now, in

2011, similar strategies, honed in Marion and its progeny, are being employed around the world in the 'war against terrorism.'

But then, some of us have images of “Indian” hunters, slaveholder and whips, infamous sheriffs and their dogs, the bullet in Crazy Horse's back and the bullets that riddled through the home where Fred Hampton slept. How did the U.S. take control of the Philippines and Cuba?

In 1985, a C-4 bomb landed on the Philadelphia the home of MOVE activists, killing 11 unarmed people—and 5 of these threatening people were children.

Today, the U.S. is a notoriously cruel nation: it holds “more prisoners in solitary confinement than any other democratic (sic) country in the world.”

Kurshan quotes activist Fay Dowker who was a citizen of the United Kingdom: “on the British news when there is a story about U.S. Politics, they always show the White House as a symbol of U.S. power. Fay suggested it would be more appropriate to show a picture of Marion because it is the 'real dark heart of the U.S. Where the government incarcerates those it feels most threatened by.’”

Was it easy for Kurshan and Whitman to envision a situation in which the lockdown at Marion becomes the normal state of business for the operation of prisons throughout the U.S. “It seemed imperative to do something before the lockdown became set in stone. We were terrified that if Marion became an accepted model that proliferation would inevitably follow.” Kurshan, Whitman, and those enlightened to see “saw” the “first-time-ever repressive apparatus” for what it would produce: an “incipient evil.”

Kurshan and others began their work by contacting existing organizations, including Freedom Now! and Jericho, grassroots presses—anyone working on behalf of prisoners, and by organizing conferences a handful of people ultimately formed a coalition of prisoners, former prisoners and activists. This was no small feat then or now! “Prisoner” Bill Dunne, for example, had been editing of a newsletter called *The Marionette*, “despite the repression and the efforts of the authorities to destroy it.”

The Bureau of Prisons' response to prisoners who had had enough and to the activists who joined them in protest is to step up its use of violence. Recalling a conference in which the head of the BOP, Michael Quinn, appeared in Chicago, in 1988, Kurshan writes that “Quinn and his colleagues slunk out the door, and the workshop was terminated” when she and other activists tried to confront the BOP's one-sided description of the criminal.

It was apparent to most of us present that the response of the BOP was characteristic of that institution and the people who run it. In the face of the mildest opposition, they responded immediately with no allowance of dissent, no pretense of dialogue. To them, we were the enemy.

*Out of Control* recalls the conferences and demonstrations, including the valuable because historical and educational documentations arguing that “prisons are a tool of social control and that the problems are societal, not individual.”

In 1986, “in a continuing effort to connect the issue of racism to our work at Marion, Kurshan and fellow activist presented a film on the life of Malcolm X. It was May 19<sup>th</sup>, Malcolm's birthday.

By now we were no longer fooling ourselves into believing we were a temporary, *ad hoc* group. In fact, we made a conscious decision to continue and were developing a rhythm to our work, alternating between educational events and demonstrations and actions. We called ourselves The Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CEML).

*Out of Control* clearly describes and illustrates that following in the footsteps of Dr. King and Malcolm requires a steady commitment to fundamental change. “I believe it's important,” Kurshan writes, “to explain the labor-intensive nature of serious political work.” And *Out of Control* does just that!

CEML lasted fifteen years, and its core members, some 8-12 activists, organized educational workshops and presentations, (often featuring former prisoners such as “Jaime Delgado, a Puerto Rican *independentista*,” Safiya Bukhari-Alston, the late former Black Panther activist, Akil Al-Jundi, of the Attica Brothers), members of the American Indian Movement (AIM), and others, worked to distribute the “Dear Friends” newsletter and press releases, and yes, organize and engage in demonstrations and protest. *Out of Control* includes pictures, posters, pamphlets, including “Resistance Won't Stop,” press releases, samples of handouts, poetry, and newsletters.

As Kurshan recalls, she, Sundiata Acoli, Steve Whitman and others worked on “a piece about the Black struggle behind prison walls.” Kurshan wrote a chapter on “women and imprisonment” for the project they called *Out of Control*. Kurshan and Acoli sent a proposal to South End Press and the editors “agreed to publish it and assigned” the project to an editor. Everything was fine until the editor left South End. A “new editor wanted more control over the content of our book. Her political views differed significantly from ours, and so the project never came to fruition.”

This version of *Out of Control*, including the documentations of CEML's struggle, is available online as an e-version. Kurshan: “[w]e realized that we should produce a hard copy version of the main narrative (a book, if you will) that could be distributed to people without web access, notably prisoners, but others as well. The e-version can be accessed through Freedom Archives website ([www. Freedomarchives.org](http://www.Freedomarchives.org)).”

There is so much history in *Out of Control*. There are people and events some of us remember. There are activists who sacrificed everything for to be remain on the right side of history. Some are still with us and others have passed on. Nonetheless, here in *Out of Control*, is their story—and for this—the narrative and supplemental documentation cannot and does not record a failure!

We are appreciative to Kurshan and former members of CEML for making this narrative and a history of resistance available to new generation of activists. *Out of Control* proclaims that human beings are not expendable and the prisoners' narratives are not subversive, but represent a crucial reminder of the potential for peoples' power to effect fundamental change. We thank those friends who said—write a book!

Yes, Dr. King would be proud!