

Carcerality is Ubiquitous: Examining the Parallels Between the Carceral System and the American Educational System

The following essay is dedicated to incarcerated human beings like my father, who have been marginalized, dehumanized, and traumatized by the carceral system. It took my father's life and the lives of countless others. The system has no regard for their humanity, health, and loved ones. However, as an abolitionist with a deconstructionist mindset, I must continue to tell their stories without silencing their voices because they still rise.

I. INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault is a notable French philosopher and historian who asked a bold rhetorical question about social institutions' state. He asked: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" The idea behind this notion is that the carceral system is ubiquitous—not only is it a physical structure, but it is also a state or mindset that is evident throughout nature and social institutions supposedly unrelated to that of the prison system. In exploring the universal impact of a physical and mental carceral state, I have decided to extract a specific institution from Foucault's thought-provoking statement: the American education system. The American education system was built with the purpose of educating the ignorant and precisely, the public education system, which was to be sustained and controlled by the public, or everyday citizens. However, the educational system



Figure 1: Michel Foucault

has constantly been entrenched with carceral values from classroom environments to professionals that run these institutions. My belief in Foucault's rhetorical statement stems from my different schooling experiences—from an urban charter school to a private Quaker institution. Today, institutions lack responsibility, creativity, and equity, so students do not fully comprehend the concept of learning like incarcerated human beings do not fully understand the idea of rehabilitation. Neither are effectively offered because both

the carceral and education system are disciplinary structures that emulate each other. Students are made to sit in desks similar to prison cells and look forward at the board while their teacher or correctional officer barks out scripted curricula. ¹

II. DISCIPLINARY SOCIETY AND PRISON FROM FOUCAULT'S LENS

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault tries to investigate how public spectacle and torture transformed into an emphasis on surveillance and the prison system. In trying to trace

¹ "Michel Foucault," The Center for Critical Research on Religion, accessed December 04, 2020, <https://criticaltheoryofreligion.org/michel-foucault/>

back the history of public punishment, Foucault believes that prison creation marks disciplinary society's birth. In observing the result of prison as a method for criminal punishment, Foucault argues that the idea of imprisonment is a part of a more extensive carceral system that is an encompassing sovereign institution. Prison alongside schools, the military, factories, and hospitals are a part of this sovereign institution. Foucault says that the power to punish is no

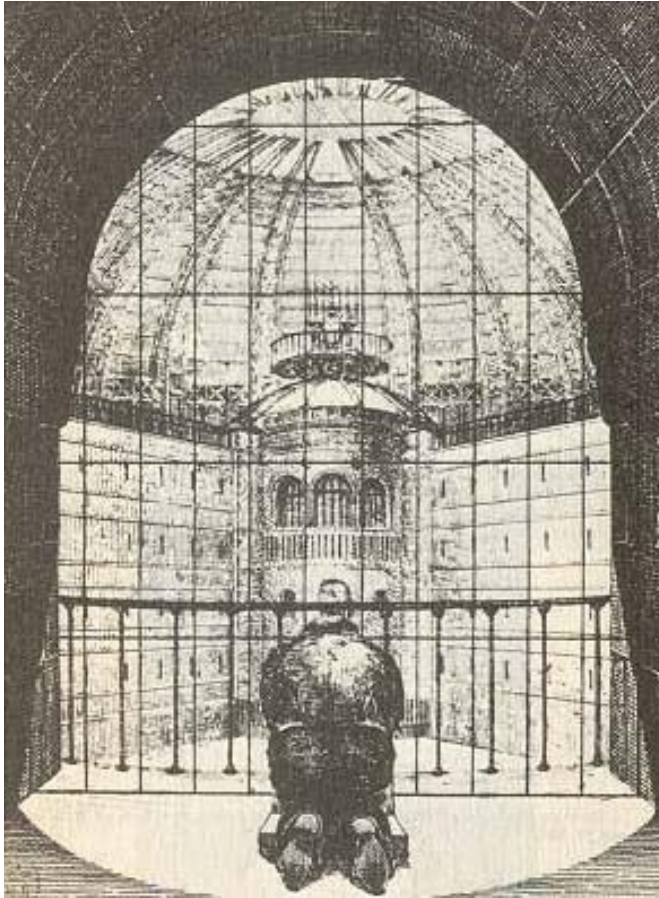


Figure 2: A Scene of Public Shaming

different than curing a patient or educating a child. Thus, the institution establishes “disciplinary careers” that operate throughout it, and punishment functions as a normative power. He calls those who uphold this power ‘judge,’ which can include “the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social-worker judge,” and many others. Moreover, the link between discipline and individualization is created because Foucault believes that “discipline ‘makes’ individuals” and functions as a means of

producing useful individuals. He says, “Each individual, wherever he may find himself, subject to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements” because “disciplinary society” is normalized. ²

² Excerpt, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, accessed December 04, 2020, <https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~felluga/punish.html>

Since this argument, Foucault has received criticism from educated professionals in their field, such as Edinburgh law professor and NYU sociology professor David Garland. Garland writes that

the major critical theme which emerges, and is independently made by many different critics, concerns Foucault's overestimation of the political dimension. *Discipline and Punish* consistently proposes an explanation in terms of power—sometimes in the absence of any supporting evidence—where other historians would see a need for other factors and considerations to be brought into account.³

Fred Alford, Professor Emeritus at the University of Maryland, also claims that Foucault is caught up in the “discourse of prison” rather than the practice. He says:

Foucault has mistaken the idea of prison, as reflected in the discourse of criminologists, for its practice. More precisely put, Foucault presents the utopian ideals of eighteenth-century prison reformers, most of which were never realized, as though they were the actual reforms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One can see this even in the pictures in *Discipline and Punish*, many of which are drawings for ideal prisons that were never built. One photograph is of the panopticon prison buildings at Stateville, but it is evidently an old photograph, one in which no inmates are evident. Nor are the blankets and cardboard that now enclose the cells.⁴

With that said, Foucault still makes significant claims that both reformists and abolitionists believe and can get behind in terms of the prison system's issues. For one, Foucault concludes that prisons do nothing to diminish crime rates but instead harbors crime internally. The prison fixes nothing in terms of rehabilitation but instead encourages the organization of crime. Furthermore, prisons only perpetuate a rise in recidivism rates, and when they are released on parole, they only become more subjected to recidivism due to a lack of resources. Foucault is

³ David Garland, "Foucault's "Discipline and Punish"--An Exposition and Critique," *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 11, no. 4 (1986): 872, accessed December 3, 2020, doi:10.1086/492175)

⁴ Fred C. Alford, "What Would It Matter If Everything Foucault Said about Prison Were Wrong? "Discipline and Punish" after Twenty Years.," *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (February 2000): 134, accessed December 3, 2020, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3108481>)

also aware of the prison's external impact on families and friends left with uncertainty and pain. The use of punishment is not to mold an incarcerated human being into a better person of society, but instead to use them as a prop for the prison industrial complex.⁵

III. THE AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Historically, the American education system was an institution built out of Thomas Jefferson's idea that "every child should receive an education at the public's expense." At the time, this idea was seen as radical, and it was challenging to receive legislative approval. However, education became a tool for America to display its uniqueness from the British monarchy, including writing text using westernized spelling. Thus, in the early 1800s, reformists like Horace Mann deconstructed colonial education to ensure that education was a free experience. His ideas led to creating common public schools funded by tax-payer money, that held non-sectarian beliefs, and taught reading and writing to the illiterate. Although Mann had aspirations of education being a universal privilege for all before he passed away, it was evident that many were left out. Education did not include newly freed African Americans, reservation-based Native Americans, and Mexican and Chinese immigrants. Until *Brown v. Board of Education*, Black students were seen as intellectually and morally inferior and controlled by racist Jim Crow laws based on Social Darwinist ideology. *Plessy v. Ferguson* was a testament to the brutality of segregation in that one could not be both separate and equal. However, the Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal was constitutional. Hence, education inequality is ingrained in American history.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 3-308)

Slowly over time, desegregation and integrated schooling occurred from Little Rock Nine to Mexican Americans' protest outside Los Angeles East Side high schools. After much protest and significant white flight in urban communities, Congress passed Title IX (1971) of the Education Amendments Acts that says:

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

Although now the public education system is thoroughly inclusive and diverse in some communities, there are still factors that make the learning experiences harder for students in individual districts. After significant redistricting and harmful redlining practices, many lower-income families lack quality educational resources, qualified teaching professionals, and taxpayer money. These inequalities cause many students to seek instruction in the private school sector that can be expensive, exclusive, and an overall cultural shock compared to their living environments. I can empathize with that experience because I lived that same experience. More than ever today, decades of inequalities that built the history of the American educational system are being exposed to the world through the trauma of two current pandemics: COVID-19 and racism.⁶

IV. THE PARALLELS

There are distinct parallels between prisons and schools when considering Foucault's thoughts on one encompassing sovereign society and the educational system's historical inequalities. There is a strict list of rules in schools that one must follow, such as not being late

⁶ Julia Baxter Tasneem Amatullah, "Foundations of Education," 8.1 History of American Education | Foundations of Education, accessed December 03, 2020, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-oneonta-education106/chapter/8-1-history-of-american-education>)

or having limited time to speak between classes. There is little freedom to be a kid in school, and if one breaks “zero-tolerance” policies, then the punishments are severe. From detentions to expulsions, these types of disciplines are made based on a supposed “crime” instead of investigating why the action occurred in the first place. In a recent six-year period, Texas police gave 1,000 Class C misdemeanor tickets to elementary school kids which resulted in a trip to the court instead of their principal’s office. It is astonishing that almost 70% of the students involved in “in-school” arrests are students of color. Thus, children are funneled out of their public schools and into juvenile detention centers and criminal justice systems. They lose out on their education, their futures are forever changed, and their friends and families are emotionally impacted. This is known as the school-to-prison-pipeline which shows how students of color are disproportionality impacted by “zero-tolerance” policies and disciplinary decisions.⁷ Furthermore, almost “95% of suspensions, out of the 3.3 million children suspended from school each year, are for nonviolent offenses such as violating the dress code or ‘disruptive behavior.’”⁸ Students of color fear for their lives when walking around their neighborhoods due to over-policing. So, when an officer is in their school hallway, it causes a fight or flight mentality. School is supposed to be a safe place for students to learn, but instead, it emulates that of a prison.

The physical structures of the prison system and a traditional public high school are also similar. The hallway doors that open and close across from each other just like prison cells and

⁷ "School-to-Prison Pipeline," American Civil Liberties Union, accessed December 04, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline>)

⁸ Empower Community Care, "School-to-Prison Pipeline Infographic," School-to-Prison Pipeline Infographic, accessed December 04, 2020, <https://info.mstservices.com/school-to-prison-pipeline-info>)

no one can come in or go out unless you have the privilege of being rewarded bathroom use. In a Chicago area public school, children are required to eat unhealthy cafeteria food similar to Aramark prison food instead of bringing their own lunch.⁹ Also, students are granted limited time for recess or time to engage with the world around them until they go home, just like a prison yard. On top of that, the curriculum does not give way for intellectual freedom or political discourse because teachers are either made or choose to create a fixed curriculum. The worst part is that what you thought you knew in elementary school is taught to you differently in high school, especially in history classes. I am sorely reminded of my elementary and middle school education experiences when I felt like I did not learn. I felt like I was forced to comprehend what my teachers wanted me to learn, and I could not discover what I wanted to know. However, I spoke on these ideas in high school because I felt that there needed to be a change in the way we were educated. I enjoyed the transition to Harkness tables or our outdoor learning spaces because I could converse about principles and values that I admired. These untraditional learning practices allowed my peers and I to think critically about what we believed in for certain topics in connection to the material in class. We were able to conversate about these topics from a wider societal lens instead discussing what would be on a quiz or test. When one cannot use their school as a sacred place for intellectual enrichment, community engagement, and civic growth, there is a prominent issue at hand that is bigger than us.

⁹ Michael Snyder, "18 Signs That U.S. Public Schools Are Now Equivalent To U.S. Prisons," Business Insider, June 02, 2011, accessed December 04, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/public-schools-are-now-comparable-to-us-prisons-2011-6>)



Figure 3: Comparison Between the Prison System and Education¹⁰

V. CONCLUSION

As I close, I reflect upon and think about ways America can move forward not only from its prison-like educational environments, but more so from the carceral system itself. First, I consider current abolitionists in the educational field such as Bettina L. Love who writes about the deconstruction and rebuilding of schools in her book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. Love notes that her vision for schooling is one that is embedded in a loving environment surrounded by both equal amounts of therapist and teachers, no standardized test, teachers would be skilled in cultural competence, and there would be no police. I not only agree with Love’s vision, but I am a fierce advocate for unorthodox institutions which are models for progressive change. If educational institutions started to emulate schools such those without walls that explore the outside world or innovative and technologically forward incubators that allow students to choose their own path, then administrators would be actively inviting abolitionist tactics. Educational reforms such as police oversight to decrease “bad behavior” only make situations worse for all parties. However, if we realize that smaller reforms can ultimately lead to abolitionist tactics, we can evolve our education system on a platform that does not send our children to cages, but instead shapes them into challengers and leaders of the world around us.

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