

among the two hundred and fifty others it features, which serves as a response to and representation of that inequity. The fourth chapter, "Women," is exceptionally effective. As the authors note, "Not surprisingly, exploitation has motivated particularly strong images concerning women and work," and these posters are among the most unique as they indicate the complex, gendered historical process of social presence and labor power (50-63).

The artful designs of these posters, some not seen for decades by the public, are as valuable and engaging as the history they represent. The anti-discrimination poster from 1945, "Knock him out! Labor can do it" is one such example, as an oversized metaphorical fist slams into a figure representing labor-related biases (69). In *Agitate! Educate! Organize! American Labor Posters*, the poster-as-political-art reveals the power of the medium in a language that is free from the gender and cultural biases that generally accompany how we engage memory. One of the most important discoveries when reading *Agitate! Educate! Organize! American Labor Posters* involves not only recalling our history and its representation, but also the value of progressive art in both the modern and contemporary political world.

The Real Cost of Prisons Comix

**Edited by Lois Ahrens
(PM Press, 2008)**

Reviewed by Nisha Thapliyal

As an educator of undergraduate students who have grown up in the digital

age, I am always in search of materials on social justice issues that engage the ways they encounter and digest information. For this reason, I have begun to integrate comic books into my teaching. The first comic book I introduced into my classes on education and globalization was *A Field Guide to the US Economy* by economists Nancy Folbre and James Heintz. I was even more delighted to come across *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix*.

The topic of prisons never fails to elicit passionate debate among my students. Coming from predominantly middle-class and upper-class white families, few of them have personal experience with the U.S. prison system. Thanks to Hollywood and the overabundance of tough-on-crime politicians, however, almost everyone has a strong opinion about prisons. My students are eager and skilled at arguing philosophical questions such as "Why do we have prisons?" and "Is the function of prisons to punish or to rehabilitate?" However, even the skilled debaters in the classroom begin to slow down when faced with even trickier propositions, such as: should a female prisoner wear shackles while giving birth?; should prisons be run as profit-making entities?; do prisoners deserve to be treated with rights and dignity?; should non-violent offenders be treated differently from violent offenders?; and why does the wealthiest country in the world need so many prisons? As these questions enter the conversation, the tone of discussion becomes less abstract and more situated. New voices are heard at this point, perspectives from students who have intimate connections to the prison system through the experiences of friends and family members in prison or on probation or parole. Unfortunately, in privileged classrooms like ours, a teacher

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cannot always count on those voices being present or even willing to speak.

The Real Cost of Prisons Comix brings vivid images of the lives of people incarcerated for nonviolent offenses into the classroom. Published in 2008, the book comes out of almost a decade of research and popular education by anti-prison activists Lois Ahrens and Ellen Miller-Mack with support from the Sentencing Project and the Open Society Institute. Artists Kevin Pyle, Sabrina Jones, and Susan Wilmarth provide the inspired black-and-white artwork to complement powerful stories based on the testimonials of prisoners, prison activists, and research data from sources as varied as the Department of Justice, Women's Prison Association, and Human Rights Watch.

The volume collects three separate comic books: *Prison Town*, which outlines the economic imperatives that drive prison building, *Prisoners of the War on Drugs*, which traces the historical impact of Rockefeller drug sentencing laws on poor urban communities in New York, and *Prisoners of a Hard Life*, which presents the stories of incarcerated women and the impact on their families. The three sections are divided by powerful testimonials from activists inside and outside prison, and educators who have integrated these comics into their educational activities in different ways. Each section includes a glossary and a discussion of alternatives to prevalent incarceration and drug laws. Each of these comics can be downloaded separately and for free from the website www.realcostofprisons.org. More than a hundred thousand copies of the book have been sent out for free. Unfortunately, reprinting as well as the production of additional books has been halted because of the lack of financial support for the

project.

We live in a time where prisons are talked about as "recession proof" and "non-polluting" forms of economic growth. Wall Street investors can count on "prison stocks" as a solid investment. Prisons and jails "rent" or "lease out" prison labor at a pittance to major retailers to manufacture furniture, license plates, and underwear or to provide telephone customer service and sales support (Scott, 2001). Last but not least, for several decades, federal and local governments have chosen to invest massively in police, prisons, and military at the cost of quality education, job training, affordable housing, child care, health care, and other "humane social policies" (Prashad, 2003, p.xvii; Children's Defense Fund 2007).

Prison Town: Paying the Price calls into question the dominant economic logic that has worked to normalize these policy decisions while concealing the hidden and indirect costs of prison. The jobs created by siting a prison in struggling rural towns are offset by costs that include the loss of jobs in prison towns and counties (to prisoners who can work for less or for nothing), a rise in juvenile drug use and violence, water and wastewater management problems, and an increase in debt servicing costs. Throughout the book, we are asked to consider the costs and benefits of prisons in more contextualized ways—who benefits and who pays the cost when seven million children have a parent in prison, on probation, or on parole? Or, why do we incarcerate people with drug addictions when it costs less to provide them with treatment? Or, what is the real cost of punishment when the formerly incarcerated—prisoners who have served their time—are denied access to employment, public housing, student aid,

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and welfare services? Or, who benefits when prisons are operated for profit?

Nowhere is the hidden cost of current sentencing laws clearer than in the case of the War on Drugs. After almost three decades, the War on Drugs has assumed the appearance of a war on poor urban communities of color and poor and indigenous rural communities around the world (Díaz-Cotto in Sudbury, 2005). Our jails and prisons are disproportionately filled with people of color serving time for non-violent drug related offences. Yet drugs are cheaper and more readily available than ever before. *Prisoners of the War on Drugs* illustrates how our government is spending millions of dollars in poor urban communities on policing, jails, and courts. As the book points out, it is not that people of color are more likely to be addicted to drugs, rather that “because they live in areas subject to overpolicing (targeting), they are more likely to be arrested and incarcerated for drug use” (Ramona Willis in *The Real Cost of Prisons Comix*). Poor drug users/offenders are also more likely to be incarcerated than to receive treatment. The punishment continues after they come out of prison. In too many states, individuals with prison records are denied employment, welfare, food stamps, public housing, and the right to vote. At the time of writing this review, the recession had prompted New York state lawmakers to begin to reform the Rockefeller drug laws as a cost-cutting measure. One can only hope that this will become a national trend (Abramsky, 2009).

The stories told in these comics underline the complex linkages between race, poverty, addiction, mental illness, sexual and physical childhood abuse, and over policing that have contributed to the

disproportionate numbers of Black and Latina women in prison. The explosion in the numbers of incarcerated women serving time for nonviolent offences is a global phenomenon; disproportionate numbers of these women are poor or indigenous or queer (Sudbury, 2005). *Prisoners of a Hard Life: Women and Their Children* highlights the race- and class-based contradictions that emerge in our response to the problems of poor mothers and their families. More than half of all women in prison are incarcerated more than 100 miles from their family (Bureau of Justice Statistics in *Prisoners of a Hard Life*). When these women are released, their families have to choose between them and public housing, food stamps, and other social benefits. The cancellation of student loans to persons with criminal records means that they cannot go back to school in order to seek out better forms of employment. Seventy-eight per cent of all incarcerated women have a history of physical or sexual abuse closely linked to drug abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder. Yet, current sentencing policies remain blind to the histories and personal situations of poor women who commit “survival” crimes in order to simply exist in conditions of extreme poverty.

In *Abolition Democracy*, Angela Davis (2005) reminds us that the U.S. prison industrial complex perpetuates institutional practices that maintain social relations built on a history of oppression and injustice. Unfortunately, a political and media culture that thrives on fear and suspicion would rather have us believe that all incarcerated women and men are suffering the natural consequences of violating social norms. This was the place of distance and disconnectedness from which many of my students entered

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the discussion about the prison industrial complex. At the end, few continued to talk about a) nonviolent offenders as social deviants and misfits, or b) our justice system as blind, neutral, or in any other way sacrosanct. One student wrote, "This comic book is one way that the news stories we watch and read about are personified. That is, the political becomes personal."

Prisons, in the physical and metaphorical sense, act as a mirror for our society—as a litmus test, if you will, for our commitments to growing into a society that truly values human dignity, freedom, democracy, and justice. *The Real Cost of Prison Comix* exemplifies the kind of teaching materials needed by resistance educators to help our young people become aware of the connections between apparently divergent realities in our world today, and, in the words of Howard Zinn (2009), "to teach them to be engaged with the world in order to bring about a society we can really be proud of."

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