PUNISHMENT, PROFIT, AND POLARIZATION: THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE U.S. CARCERAL STATE

by

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This thesis explores the historical and systemic evolution of violence in the United States, arguing that it serves as a primary architect of inequality. Tracing a lineage from slavery and colonization to the modern expansion of the carceral state, this paper examines the different forms violence can take on and how the state weaponizes them to ensure the continuation of an elite class of citizens. Central to this is the rebranding of systemic injustice as issues of individual immorality and criminality. Analyzing the double standards between the criminalization of civilian and state violence reveals how the United States system of carcerality serves the interests of capital and political power rather than being representative of a shared moral code. The influence of violence in American culture has aided in the polarization of civilians based on factors such as race and partisanship, preventing the recognition of shared struggle and oppression by those with economic and political power. Reflecting on how violence and narratives of criminality have been weaponized to hinder our collective capacity to recognize and respond to injustice reveals the need for an urgent reevaluation of the carceral state's role in the American body politic.

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Introduction

The history of the United States is inextricably bound to a legacy of violence that has acted as a primary architect of American culture. The violence that was foundational in the creation of the United States, including colonialism and slavery, is mirrored in the modern expansion of the carceral state. In the United States, violence has been frequently utilized to maintain social hierarchies and facilitate the capital accumulation of a select class of people. The reliance on punitive measures and state sanctioned violence has normalized coercion and force as tools of social management, fragmenting social solidarity by reframing social issues through the lens of criminality. This allows systemic violence to be rebranded as moral failure on the part of the individual, framing basic needs such as housing, food, and healthcare as earned rather than fundamental rights. This pits already vulnerable groups against each other, rather than against those who have profited from the privatization of resources that are essential for life.

Through an analysis of historical events, cultural norms, and social conditions, I aim to demonstrate how a culture of violence has not only developed but become embedded in the American experience. Central to this examination is the way violence has been politicized and used to uphold systems of inequality that allow for immense financial gain for a select set of individuals. I will investigate how certain forms of violence are deemed immoral and punishable by incarceration, while others are legitimized or ignored.

To better understand how the carceral state maintains racial and class-based hierarchies, I will analyze politically motivated tough on crime campaigns and instances of state sanctioned violence that disproportionately target Black and Brown communities. Prisons, as instruments of this selective persecution, reveal the inconsistencies in our legal and moral frameworks. This

raises critical questions about the legitimacy of the standards by which violence is judged and punished. In contrast, I will examine acts of violence perpetrated by the U.S. government against its citizens without legal repercussion. This highlights the double standard in how violence is defined, interpreted, justified, and punished depending on who commits it and for what purpose.

To best understand the different forms that violence can take on, I will be pulling from Slavoj Žižek's theoretical framework of subjective, objective, and divine violence. This highlights how violence can be both physical, such as a street fight, or it can be systemic, such as lack of affordable healthcare. Divine, or revolutionary violence, walks the line between these two types, tying them together and revealing the interplay between physical acts of violence and the upholding of systems of inequality.

I will explore how the carceral system itself is susceptible to influence, particularly through the role of money in the legal system. If laws can be shaped by wealth and political power, to what extent can they truly reflect a democratically representative shared moral code? Finally, I will consider how the politicization of violence has deepened social and political divisions, fueling mistrust and polarization by framing certain groups as threats while legitimizing violence against others. I will conclude by reflecting on how these dynamics shape our collective capacity to recognize and respond to injustice.

Writing about the politicization of violence and the evolution of the carceral state is not only academically significant, as it pulls from a multitude of academic disciplines and schools of thought, but of ethical urgency. In a time of increasing political polarization, narratives of crime, violence, and punishment are frequently weaponized to reinforce ideological divides. This divergence between viewpoints in political discourse reflects deeper tensions regarding who is believed to belong within the American body politic.

Delving into the construction of how some forms of violence are deemed legitimate, and others are criminal, I will situate today's polarization not as an anomaly, but as a continuation of long-standing struggles for power and money.

Conceptualizing Violence: Žižek's Framework in the American Context

Violence, whether it manifests as a physical action or more abstract phenomenon, can be understood as the systematic, psychological, and structural mechanisms of domination and dehumanization that uphold asymmetric power relations. Systematic and structural violence in this regard ensures that groups are managed, not always by overt force, but through systems that seem rational, necessary, and neutral. This sort of impersonal bureaucratic violence renders suffering as an inevitable and normal experience as there is no single person or act that can be blamed, and responsibility can be diffused across faceless institutions. To define violence, I draw from Slavoj Žižek's theoretical framework that divides violence into subjective, objective, and divine forms (Žižek, 2008). By intertwining historical and modern events with this framework, I will illustrate how violence acts as an enforcer of systemic injustice that ensures the persecution of many for the economic and political gain of the few.

Subjective Violence

Žižek's subjective violence is best understood as violence inflicted by clearly identifiable agents, such as domestic violence or a mass shooting. This form of violence is frequently the most visible and obvious manifestation, often perceived as a deviation from the normal flow of day-to-day life. Subjective violence requires human action as this sort of violence is enacted by one person onto another. The physicality of these acts often places them center stage in conversations regarding violence. When delved into deeper, it is revealed that such acts do not occur in a vacuum and are informed by history and systemic realities.

Objective Violence

In contrast to subjective violence, objective violence has no clear perpetrator and is often an overlooked background architect in cases of subjective violence. It is the violence that is inherent to our everyday lives and creates the baseline "non-violence" that subjective forms of violence are judged against. Unlike the physical, subjective violence that is enacted by a school shooter, objective violence can be understood as the structural faults that allow for such an act to occur. Further, objective violence is not just the fault of a system but is reinforced by those in positions of power to maintain structures of inequality. These forms of violence frequently become absorbed into a society's culture, further normalizing systems that dehumanize and disenfranchise certain groups. Objective violence can be further broken into two forms, symbolic and systemic.

Symbolic

Symbolic violence is produced through language, culture, and ideology. It is seen in the subtle internalized norms and beliefs that shape our understanding of the world in ways that sustain imbalances of power. The implicit structures of language hold within them hegemonic standards. One example being the use of male-centered terminology, such as gendered job titles like mailman or actor versus actress, are examples of language as symbolic violence. Although at face value this seems like a harmless and innate aspect of the English language, it utilizes lexical devices that reinforce the male form as the norm and female as secondary. This subtly diminishes the female subject and acts as a linguistic justifier of their oppression.

In the context of carcerality, symbolic violence is enacted through stripping individual identity. This occurs through the replacement of one's name with numerical identification and labels of carceral status such as convict, prisoner, or inmate. Physical symbology such as

uniforms acts as visual markers of criminality while simultaneously removing individuality between incarcerated people. These acts of symbolic violence position the entirety of the incarcerated population as an amorphous entity despite there being a wide range of circumstances and action that lead to one's incarceration.

Systemic

Systemic violence is the violent consequences that are inherent to the functioning of society. Violence in this sense is the result of systems that allow for the exploitation, manipulation, and degradation of cultures, people, and environments to propagate the existence of an elite faction of people. Žižek focuses specifically on the systemic violence created by global capitalism which automatically creates and relies on an excluded, exploitable, and dispensable underclass. For global capitalism to function as 'normal' there must be people experiencing violence, whether that be in the forms of poverty, starvation, or environmental degradation.

Divine and Revolutionary Violence

The final form of violence that Žižek discusses is divine violence described as revolutionary extra-legal acts that break existing law and order. Divine violence is outside of the cycle of law-making and law-preserving violence. It is not about personal revenge or targeted aggression, but about transformation. Divine violence is not violence for violence's sake but an explosive violence that is created by the culmination of wrongs that becomes so large and so unjust that a universal force must lose its neutrality and respond in service to moral justice.

Divine violence in a carceral setting aims to end the category of prisoner itself. Acts of self-mutilation and withdrawal from all actions would fall under this designation because they do not leave room for negotiation. They do not break a specific law but destroy the symbolic space

that prison occupies. Riots and hunger strike with designated demands do not fall under this definition as they aim to reform, not destroy, and thereby serve to reinforce the very existence of the oppressive force. Although, they do fall under the category of revolutionary violence as the oppressed are left with no other option than act in the image of the oppressor.

Žižek's divine violence closely relates to Frantz Fanon's work examining revolutionary violence (Fanon, 1961). Fanon sees violence as an inherent part of decolonization as colonialism is maintained through subjective and objective forms of violence. To reclaim their humanity, which has been stripped away by colonial violence, the colonized people have no other option but to respond with violence. Similar to divine violence, revolutionary violence is not random or enacted for personal means but is a collective and political act necessary to destroy an unjust system.

The history of colonialism and slavery in the United States is inextricably linked to the systems of injustice that exist today. Recognizing the role of revolutionary violence in decolonization aids in the destruction of modern structures of inequality, such as mass incarceration, as their foundations are rooted in slavery and colonialism. It is important to include divine and revolutionary violence within the definition of violence because it allows for moral ambiguity regarding violent action. This provides space to question the validity of punishment and condemnation towards actions that are deemed morally reprehensible due to their violent nature when they pose more of a threat to systems of inequality than to the community at large.

Violence and Action

Hannah Arendt's analysis of action can be used to better understand how subjective violence is inextricably linked to systemic and structural oppression. She emphasizes how a

plurality of subjects is a prerequisite for action (Arendt, 1958). Action cannot be bound between two people as every reaction is itself an action that will be reacted upon. The consequences of any action are boundless as human interrelatedness is boundless. This makes action inherently relational and political because it occurs through human interaction. This same logic applies to the concept of violence as a triangular process, which moves beyond the notion that violence occurs between just two people. Instead of violence occurring solely between the performer and the target, this framework incorporates the view of the observer as well (Beck, 2011). The notion of target, performer, and observer in this sense is not referring to the roles of each actor, but to the different modes by which one can experience violence. Each position is reversible and contingent on both social position and social dynamics.

The role of observer transcends the immediate act and continues to exist as a space for judgement, debate, and collective memory. The observer's position to the performer and target informs how violent action evolves, as observer sympathy and interference can limit the performer's freedom to act. In contrast, a neutral or provoking observer can signal approval of the performer's violence, leading to increased confrontation (Beck, 2011). Viewing violence through this lens highlights how it is a social process and cannot be disentangled from the reactions, interpretations, and meanings constructed by those who witness or experience it, either directly or indirectly. The observer therefore determines its legitimacy, informs its impact, and shapes its political consequences.

In the context of carcerality, violence as a triangular process can be viewed through the interplay between subjective, systemic, and symbolic violence. Subjective violence functions as visible action, such as a physical altercation between a guard and an inmate. This identifiable deviation from normal is made possible by the systemic and symbolic violence that upholds

carceral settings. Systemic violence manifests as overcrowding, lack of adequate medical care, and the legal architecture that renders certain people disposable. Symbolic violence is seen in the dehumanizing language used to refer to incarcerated people and the cultural stigmas placed on them. Together, these legitimize the conditions that lead to outbursts of physical conflict.

The observer in a carceral setting extends beyond just those who witness the action firsthand. Mass media allows the role of observer to expand beyond prison walls and into society at large. The media does not act as a neutral observer and often reports information in ways that reinforce the existence of carceral systems. Focusing the public's attention on acts of subjective violence perpetrated by individuals helps to mask the objective violence that allows acts of subjective violence to occur.

Further, the criminal justice system itself acts as a meta-observer to violence as it actively categorizes what is merely violence and what is justifiable uses of force. This alters the observer's perception of an act by attaching a higher power designation to an action without taking into consideration personal circumstances and outside factors. This allows the justice system to frame itself as a neutral mediator while remaining as a primary architect of structural inequality that produces violence in the first place.

When looking at acts of subjective violence, understanding the positionality of each actor allows for a deeper understanding of the structural and systemic injustices that enabled the violent action to manifest. Race, class, and political power all inform how a person can act, and what consequences they will or will not face for engaging in subjective violence.

Historical Foundations of Violence in the United States

Violence in American culture and politics is deeply rooted in the historical events that built the nation's foundation. Two major events that were essential in the creation of the United States were slavery and colonialism. These two systems of oppression utilized fictitious justifications to deny some people their humanity for the economic gain of another. Violence was a key instrument in enforcing the structures of power that allowed these systems to flourish during the dawn of a country that would soon become a global superpower. Understanding how slavery and colonialism were inextricably linked and fueled by each other's existence is necessary to paint a full picture of the role of violence in America.

Colonization

In Barbara L. Solow's chapter Slavery and Colonization, she discusses the realities regarding economic incentives for early settlers of colonial America. Despite an abundance of land, the small labor supply, no export crop, and lack of long-term capital investment resulted in failed settlements. Those who did find economic prosperity in American exports found it in goods that did not require settlements such as fur and fishing (Solow, 1991). By 1638, those who managed to establish small settlements in New England had killed or enslaved over 1500 Pequot men, women, and children (Green, 2021). Trade of the captured Pequot for kidnapped Africans with the West Indian colonies marked the beginning of New England's participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Furthermore, it provided a solution to the lack of labor supply that had hindered successful widespread settlement thus far.

European reluctance to immigrate to the Americas lasted well into the 1800's. It is estimated that until 1820, five Africans were brought to the Americas for every one European settler. It was not till 1840, over 60 years after U.S. independence from Britian, that the rate of

European immigration surpassed the number of Africans brought to the country (Solow, 1991). Europe's colonial relationship with the Americas explains the lack of European migration en masse. In a colonial framework, foreign lands are seen as places to extract resources from in order to supply a metropolis with limited natural resources. The colonial economy is based on the export of goods to the colonizing state, maintaining settler allegiance and cultural identity with their country of origin. Further, slavery made it so that even after settlements were established, large scale European migration did not have much economic incentive as their labor only increased production costs.

Colonial forces in the Americas enacted violence through a multitude of physical and nonphysical means. They enacted subjective violence through the dissemination of diseases such as smallpox which spread to Native populations, with millions of deaths occurring in Spanish-American colonies alone (Duffy, 1951). The Mystic Massacre is a prime example of colonial powers utilizing subjective violence against Native people. On May 26, 1637, early in the morning, English troops attacked a fortified Pequot village by surrounding it, lighting it on fire, and firing into it while the villagers slept. Those who managed to escape the flames were either shot or taken prisoner. The attack resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Pequot, with most of the dead being old men, women, and children (Karr, 1998).

Beyond the gruesome and physically violent actions, European colonial forces in the Americas enacted objective violence by stripping Native people of their language, history, traditions, and land. The alienation of the colonized from their identity and the denial of their humanity resulted in both existential and ontological crises (Ndlovu, 2020). This form of violence aimed to remake Indigenous people in the image of the colonizer. Through policies of forced assimilation, missionary education, relocation, and legal disenfranchisement, racial

hierarchies and settler dominance embedded themselves into the foundation of the emerging American state.

Slavery

In tandem with the colonial violence that was being enacted upon Native populations, slavery in the United States created a parallel system of racialized violence against Africans that were brought by force to the Americas. Between 1625 and 1867, over 12.5 million Africans were trafficked to the Americas through the trans-Atlantic slave trade. 1.8 million did not survive the journey (Eltis & Richardson, 2015). While numbers can quantify the scope of harm that was enacted, they do not give insight into the horrors that must have been experienced during the weeks-long journey across the Atlantic.

Testaments from those who survived the journey describe the violence performed on the ships as manifesting "not only through physical combat but also through poisoning, sexual terror, abortion, and the murders of enslaved infants" (Mustakeem, 2017, p.35). Violence towards enslaved individuals functioned as performative spectacles of pain and suffering onto Black bodies to invoke fear and compliance among other enslaved people (Hartman, 1997). Such acts of violence reinforced racial hierarchy and acted as a reminder of the power that White people had over enslaved people. Further, the lack of regard for enslaved people as humans gives insight into their perceived disposability by Europeans. It was "common practice to kill all deemed unsaleable slaves by tying a stone to their necks and drowning them in the river" (Mustakeem, 2017, p.78). The mental gymnastics that must be performed to view another human being solely based on their economic value and be able to murder them if they do not fulfill that perceived value is the same mental framework that justified European conquest and subsequent settler colonialism and chattel slavery.

The construction of groups as less than human based on racialized characteristics legitimized unequal allocation of economic and political resources resulting in diminished rights and privileges of the racialized group. This illuminates the systemic nature of Black oppression. Identifying the ways in which violence was enacted in subjective ways, through overt acts of violence, reveals how objective systems of violence such as the social construction of racial hierarchies were created. The construction of race in colonial America informs contemporary white racial prejudice.

Natal alienation is a concept that describes the estrangement caused by slavery between the enslaved person and their culture, motherland, and familial ties (Patterson, 1982). Orlando Patterson describes the relationship between slavery and natal alienation, proposing that enslaved people were rendered socially dead as they were stripped of lineage, legal and political standing, and self-determination though systemic and symbolic acts of violence (Patterson, 1982). This reveals how slavery was a symbolic and relational system of power as it not only owned a person's labor, but their personhood.

Slave owners and those who wanted to maintain the existence of slavery in the United States fought strongly against any notion of rebellion on the part of those they held under servitude. They perpetuated the notion that "there was not discontent, but rather a 'fine devotion on the part of the majority of slaves'" and that "slave revolts and plots seldom occurred in the United States" (Aptheker, 1945, p.13). This sentiment was both fed by, and reinforced, the idea of Black people as "stupid, obedient, childlike, and brutish" (Aptheker, 1945, p.12). Furthering the notion that enslaved people were fine with their oppression and were not actively fighting their own bondage validated the existence of slavery. Denial of revolutionary violence on the part of enslaved people eased, either consciously or unconsciously, the moral anxieties of those

perpetrating such violence by diminishing the vileness of such acts through rationalizations that deemed enslaved people as neutral or even happy with their enslavement.

Despite the existence of such narratives, this did not negate reality. Rebellion, both group and individual acts, occurred frequently. At the individual level, enslaved people would utilize divine and revolutionary violence as resistance through "sabotage, suicide, self-mutilation, and strikes" (Aptheker, 1945, p.140) though these actions generally resulted in violent punishment. Arson and poison were often utilized to fight directly against slaveowners, at times "being so widespread and collective as to verge on insurrection" (Okihiro et al., 1996, p.16). Collective actions also frequently occurred, such as one described on December 29th, 1774, where "six new negro fellows and four wenches, belonging to Capt. Morris, killed the overseer in the field, after which they went to the house, murdered his wife, and dangerously wounded a carpenter named Wright, also a boy who died the next day; they then proceeded to the house of Angus McIntosh, whom they likewise dangerously wounded" (Okihiro et al., 1996, p.154). The rebellion proceeded to a final location where they were met with gunfire and captured. The men were burned to death, and the women were sent back to the plantation.

Resistance by enslaved people, through both violent and non-violent means, highlights the autonomy and self-determination that could not be taken from them. It also brings to light the role that violence took in both the perpetuation and deconstruction of slavery in the United States. Resistance, whether violent or not, brought violence from the oppressor. Violent responses to oppression resulted from the violent nature of the system, disenfranchising people and giving them little to no other options to resist their condition. Violence therefore cannot be wholly categorized as immoral as it is often a tool of last resort by those already experiencing violence.

Post Slavery

Following the abolishment of slavery, racial hierarchies continued to be enforced. These came in the form of both state-sanctioned and extra-legal means, with violence central to each. The financial motivations for slavery did not dissipate following its abolition, and former slave owners scrambled to guarantee their economic position would not be threatened. Ensuring that Black people in the South were unable to gain economic independence from former slave owners, preventing them from having political representation, and maintaining a backdrop of fear and violence in everyday life, were essential in maintaining the economic goals of the former slave owners. Two primary enforcers were white supremacist organizations and the police. Investigating the historical foundations of these groups reveals how they did not emerge because of abolition but existed far before. Further, it shows how violence perpetrated by those involved was legitimized by the state and continues to be reflected in how we punish crime today.

White Supremacist Organizations

Organized terror groups, most notoriously the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), fought directly against the goals of Reconstruction, using intimidation and violence including extra judicial lynchings to prevent Black people from utilizing their newfound rights. Between the start of Reconstruction and 1871, it was estimated that around 20,000 such murders occurred across the South (Shapiro, 1972). Abolitionist Albion Tourgee wrote that Black Southerners along with white allies were "shot, stabbed, hung, drowned, mutilated . . . tortured beyond Conception" (Shapiro, 1972, p.159). Mass mobilization of White Southerners to engage in widespread violence against those who supported the goals of Reconstruction undermined what little military and policy initiatives were implemented to restore unity and protect Black Americans.

Violence by the KKK and similar groups manifested not only in the loss of life, but disenfranchisement of Black people from participating in the legislative decisions that directly impacted them and decimated Black representation in local, state, and federal office. During the 1876 presidential election, a South Carolina version of the KKK called the Red Shirts, “drove the formerly enslaved from their homes, barred them from voting, and murdered at least 150 of them” (Byman, 2021, Introduction section, para.1). The effects of such violence are reflected in the drastic decline in the number of Black voters in South Carolina from 90,000 in 1876 to less than 3,000 by the end of the century (Byman, 2021).

During Reconstruction Black Americans held 17 seats in Congress, over 600 in state legislatures, and hundreds more in local offices. By the end of the century this figure dropped to include only a few local officeholders. It would not be “until 1967, almost 100 years after Reconstruction ended, did Black Americans return to the Senate” (Byman, 2021, Introduction section, para.3). These examples reveal how violence by white supremacist groups cemented racial inequality into the structural components of the nation's foundation. Further, it shows how subjective violence is utilized to maintain systems of objective violence.

The existence of such acts of violence lends itself, in part, to the failures of the federal government following the end of the Civil War. Instead of committing to the unification of the nation and presenting clear goals for the future, leaders in the federal government lacked condemnation for the violence being committed by groups like the KKK. Federal troops sent to ensure the goals of reconstruction were met lacked congressional oversight and were often sympathetic to the anti-Black rhetoric of White Southerners. Not only did the troops lack the will in many cases, but their presence was not widespread enough to prevent the violence perpetrated onto Black people in the South. As a result, those in power in the South were able to wield

violence to maintain economic disenfranchisement, ensure access to cheap labor, and preserve antebellum social hierarchy.

Slave Patrols and Modern Policing

The origins of policing in the United States, particularly in the South, can be traced back to slave patrols. White people's fear of slave revolts and desire to capture runaway slaves manifested in the creation of publicly funded and staffed slave patrols. In 1873 the Charleston, South Carolina slave patrol had over "100 officers ... and was far larger than any northern city police force at the time" (Brucato, 2020, Introduction section, para.2). Slave patrollers would perform searches of slave lodges for contraband, regulate Black people's movement, enforce slave codes, and capture runaway slaves, actions that closely mirror the role of modern-day police (Durr, 2015). Specific modern iterations of racially targeted policing are practices such as stop and frisk, racial disparities in law enforcement stops, and disproportionately high rates of violent and deadly interactions with police for people of color.

Stop and frisk is a policing practice that allows officers to stop anyone that they deem to have 'reasonable suspicion' of committing a crime and then pat them down in search of weapons (White & Fradella, 2016). This practice has a multitude of issues, with the first being that reasonable suspicion has a lower standard of evidence than probable cause, the legal standard by which searches generally follow. Simply stating that someone was acting suspicious allows law enforcement to stop and pat down the individual. Such an ambiguous definition of 'suspicion' relies on officer discretion. This fails to consider the implicit (and explicit) racial biases of law enforcement officers. Data collected by the ACLU of Pennsylvania following a 2010 lawsuit demonstrates how such biases impact who is targeted by stop and frisk procedure. ACLU-PA found that 76% of stops and 85% of frisks were against minorities, with 43-47% of stops and

45% of frisks done without reasonable suspicion (White & Fradella, 2016). Not only does this show the prevalence of bias in policing in the U.S. but supports the connection between slave patrols and modern policing as instruments of control over the lives and movement of Black people.

While stop and frisk practices are not necessarily overtly violent, the racialized nature of their implementation places people of color at higher risk of economic and legal sanction for actions that would not put a White person under law enforcement scrutiny. This places the practice at the crossroads of subjective and objective violence. Increased proximity to police places people of color at a higher risk of subjective violence at the hands of law enforcement. Tangentially, the role of race acts on the side of objective, systemic violence. Resulting tickets and legal fees extract wealth from already poor communities and alternatively, those unable to bear the financial weight of the legal system are disproportionately incarcerated. As a result, families are torn apart, and children are left without parental support.

Communities become at risk of being tangled into cycles of poverty and incarceration as children with incarcerated parents face decreased educational success and increased risk of mental health struggles and future incarceration (Arditti, 2014). The objective, systemic violence of stop and frisk is inherent to the system that it perpetuates. It is a gear in a much larger machine that maintains the existence of a social and economic underclass, ensuring that power remains unequally distributed.

Modern policing also utilizes racialized subjective violence to reinforce social hierarchies. Data from Mapping Police Violence, a non-profit independent research collaborative, found that 2024 was the deadliest year on record for police violence, and 2025 numbers are on par with that same trajectory (Sinyangwe, 2025). Further, their data shows that

Black people, along with Native Americans and Pacific Islanders, are killed by police at rate 3 times higher than White people. This highlights the continued persecution of peoples that were originally slaughtered and enslaved to establish the United States and its colonies. Looking at the current data on police violence towards Pacific Islanders illuminates how violence has been, and still is, used to spread U.S. hegemony across the globe, reflected in projects like the historical colonization of Hawaii and Guam. Maintaining the oppression of Pacific Islanders in the United States continues to replicate the violence that was necessary to colonize their homeland. Violence as a means of obtaining economic and political power does not end after a physical act but becomes deeply entrenched in a society's collective consciousness.

Policing and the racialized nature of its implementation is directly connected to the system of carcerality in the United States. As a precursor to incarceration, policing and designations of criminality foster the perpetuation and existence of the carceral state.

The Carceral State: Origins, Development, and Function

Built on the historical foundation of colonization, slavery, post-slavery practices, and modern policing, the emergence of the carceral state in the United States has been supported by a plethora of social, political, and economic pressures. From the dissolution of the welfare state to personal political power grabs, racial divides to financial motivations, the carceral state cannot be fully understood without examining the interplay of these factors in its fruition and maintenance.

Theoretical Foundations of Carcerality

The term carceral state refers to the government's reliance on punishment and confinement as a means of social control as well as the ideology, practices, and structures associated with prisons that operate throughout the rest of society (Gottschalk, 2013). The concept of carcerality was popularized by Michael Foucault and aimed to challenge the notion that punishment for criminality is isolated within prisons. Instead, the logic of control and surveillance as a means of ensuring social compliance has deeply permeated society at large (Foucault, 1977). Formal institutions, such as prisons, courts, policing, and parole, are used by the state as a means of exercising control, surveillance, and discipline on a population, particularly marginalized and racialized groups. Citizens within a carceral state are subjected to surveillance and the threat of punitive action under the guise of safety at the expense of their civil liberties and right to privacy. By default, everyone becomes innately criminalized due to their potential to commit crime, and not because of criminal action itself. This creates a culture where punishment is the default response to harm and prioritizes retribution and incapacitation over rehabilitation and restorative justice.

Historical Evolution of Carcerality in the United States

The creation of the carceral state in the United States is an intricate story about the interplay between racial and social injustice and how they work to the economic benefit of the few. The story begins with the passing of the 13th amendment in 1865 and continues to this day where incarcerated people perform slave-wage labor behind prison walls. Following the abolition of slavery, the need for a large, cheap labor force continued. Legislators utilized the power of language and symbolic violence to place a loophole in the 13th amendment stating, "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (U.S. Constitution 1787, Article IV Section 2). The exception of criminal punishment was the loophole needed to continue the exploitation of Black and Brown people that maintained the United States' global position as an industrial powerhouse and, in turn, birthed the prison industrial complex.

The century-long gap between the re-invention of slavery as prison labor and the beginning of mass incarceration is marked by the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements in the 1960s. The wave of revolutionary momentum that fueled these movements led to substantial gains for minority communities in terms of social, economic, and racial justice. The Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act aimed to dismantle the discriminatory policies that barred Black Americans from gaining the same social and economic status as White Americans. Black people no longer working within the confines of white designations of blackness and instead finding sovereignty outside of whiteness threatened the standing social order.

As a result, the federal government implemented two main strategies to repress Black liberation: violence and criminalization. Violence came in the form of clandestine counterintelligence programs that lead to the false persecution and assassination of leaders and activists (Tibbs, 2012). A less discreet form of state-sanctioned violence was the murder of Black people by police., Between 1971 and 1973, nearly 1000 Black people were killed by law enforcement, a rate higher than during the height of anti-Black lynchings (Tibbs, 2012).

Criminalization of blackness was further reinforced by the Nixon administration. Nixon's campaign disseminated propaganda regarding the war on drugs and violent crime that pushed for tough on crime legislation (Whitford & Yates, 2010). This created a widespread sense of fear in the minds of White, suburban, middle-class Americans and utilized "colorblind" language to veil the anti-Blackness that fueled this rhetoric. Pushing the idea of a post-racial society following the civil rights era rendered racism illegitimate as an experience and indicator of inequality. Generational trauma and the disadvantages experienced by Black and Brown people did not need to be acknowledged and rectified if most Americans were convinced it did not exist.

Legislatively, those in power targeted Black communities by exacerbating historical patterns of racial inequality. One example of this is redlining where the Federal Housing Administration color coded neighborhoods according to their risk level for receiving loans. (McCarthy, 2022). The 'riskiest' neighborhoods, which also happened to have primarily Black populations, were colored red and ineligible to receive federal loans. This funneled people into racially segregated neighborhoods as Black people were not given the same resources to afford houses in the nicer, primarily white neighborhoods and prevented non-White people from accumulating generational wealth through property ownership.

Over time, red lining resulted in racial distributions remaining relatively stagnant allowing Black people to be specifically targeted by increasing police presence in predominantly Black neighborhoods. With more police come more arrests, which gave an overinflated sense of criminality within these neighborhoods, further instilling the association between Blackness and criminality into the minds of the American public. The resulting racial disparities in incarceration reflected how certain groups were unjustly criminalized, and not of criminality itself (McCarthy, 2022). Despite this economic discrimination that underpinned reported crime rates, the sensationalization of crime in the American cultural space by mass media further instilled racial fear and exaggerated perceptions of crime rates in the minds of White Americans. The threat of becoming the victim of a violent crime seemed to loom around every corner, furthering support for tough on crime legislation.

Once people were convicted of a crime, policies such as mandatory minimum sentencing, parole-dependent release, and three strikes laws, caused prison populations to skyrocket (Dyer, 2000). The resulting influx of people entering the prison system could not be handled by the public sector, and for-profit prisons entered the picture. In 2010, “the largest private prison company, Corrections Corporations of America, reported revenues of 1.675 billion dollars” (Dyer, 2000, p. 51). The prison industrial complex circulates around $182 billion per year (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017).

Economic sectors that are seemingly outside of carceral systems, such as food service and telecommunications, profit from prison labor, illuminating the financial motivations that are a cornerstone of the prison industrial complex. The interplay between the violence that propagates the carceral state and the resulting profit reveals that incarceration did not evolve out of an intent

for purely public safety or rehabilitation, but is a calculated, systemic, apparatus that reinforces inequality along the lines of race, class, and access to economic success amongst those in power.

The integration of carceral systems into the economy is best understood through the reconstruction of the welfare state and rise of neoliberal policies. In A Brief History of Neoliberalism, David Harvey examines how beginning in the 1970's U.S. policymakers systematically gutted social safety nets and deregulated markets in the name of capital accumulation (Harvey, 2007). The disregard for collective welfare resulted in a dramatic increase in policing and imprisonment. From this, the carceral state emerged as a mechanism to manage the social fallout resulting from economic inequality.

The economics of the carceral state are inextricably linked to the racialized social order that exists in the United States. Alec Karakatsanis describes how the legal system acts as a 'racialized caste machine', by criminalizing poverty and social differences (Karakatsanis, 2019). Black and Brown communities are disproportionately subjected to this systemic violence because they have historically been excluded from the access to wealth accumulation. Private actors such as predictive policing and biometric surveillance companies economically benefit from racialized criminalization as their technologies are deployed in primarily Black and Brown communities. Together, this perpetuates a cycle of criminalization and poverty that maintains social control over marginalized groups.

The political economy of the carceral state is not solely a system of punishment, but a political and economic project that profits off the racialized control of marginalized populations. This systemic form of violence is foundational to the very existence of the carceral state as it is inherently what enables its perpetuation. Understanding how mass incarceration acts as an economic engine forces us to confront the moral injustice that the system perpetuates.

The Carceral State Today and the Role of Mass Incarceration

The expansion of carceral systems beyond the confines of prison walls permeates into the lives of Americans from all walks of life. In the United States, one in 31 people are under correctional supervision (Hinton, 2016), 70 million people have criminal arrest histories (Stevenson, 2015), and nearly half of all Americans have a family member that have been incarcerated (Enns et al., 2019). This points to the US carceral system reaching beyond the pursuit of justice and acting as a mechanism of social control influencing the lives of everyday citizens. Bail and parole practices ensure that those who have been incarcerated remain economically locked into the system and can be reincarcerated with the slightest misstep. Carceral logic, the notion that punishment, surveillance, and confinement are the default solution to social issues, can be seen throughout the United States collective consciousness and influences our interpersonal relationships and how we judge the actions of others (Gottschalk, 2013). Factors such as race and economic status further alter how carceral logic impacts one's life.

Social Position and Carcerality

Social position is highly indicative of how one experiences carcerality. This is starkly apparent when investigating bail statistics. As of 2025, there are approximately 1,974,000 people confined within prisons and jails in the United States. Of those, 457,000, or 23%, have not been convicted of a crime (Sawyer & Wagner, 2025). These people were either denied bail by a judge or could not afford bail and therefore remain incarcerated without being convicted of a crime. The consequences of pretrial incarceration are significant. Individuals who are denied or cannot afford bail are more likely to lose their job, housing, and/or custody of their children because of their pretrial incarceration (Heaton et al., 2017). As a result, even if one is found innocent, their

entire life can be upended. In contrast, those in the upper economic echelon who can afford to pay bail avoid experiencing the fallout associated with pretrial incarceration.

Carceral Technology and Post-Incarceration Monitoring

Carceral technology and surveillance continue to impact a person even once they have left the confines of prison walls. The responsibility for post-incarceration monitoring and surveillance is frequently outsourced from the state to private for-profit companies. This entangles financial motivations with the continuation of the carceral state. One example is the use of ankle monitoring, a market that is projected to reach a value of $2.1 billion by 2026, for those on probation, parole, and bail (Kilgour, 2025). Ankle monitoring devices utilize Global Positioning System (GPS) monitoring to confine an individual to a certain area, and if they leave that perimeter, law enforcement will be notified.

One quarter of prison admissions are due to technical parole violations, such as a missed curfew or moving outside of designated zones, violations that can be tracked through ankle monitoring (CSG Justice Center Staff, 2019). Technical parole violations fail to consider the potential for unpredictability in one's life, such as a late bus or a loved one's medical emergency that necessitates leaving the confines of an electronic border. Technological problems resulting from faulty batteries and satellite connection issues due to weather can also appear as a violation.

Beyond technicalities, technology tightens the restrictions and rules for those on parole and bail. Prior to widespread GPS monitoring and cell phone usage, one would meet with their parole officer periodically and have the occasional surprise home visit (Kilgore, 2012). Not only did this allow for relative freedom, but it began to remove people from the carceral systems they were subjected to inside institutions. The expansion of our surveillance capabilities has resulted in the entrapment of individuals in carceral systems because we can now punish people for

violating rules that previously would not have been able to be monitored. Additional punishment due to violations separate from the original offense, that in any other context would be perfectly legal, does not contribute to greater public safety.

The justification for additional punishment therefore exists on the notion that violating a law is morally corrupt, and not that the action itself is unethical. This takes the genesis of law creation that was intended to be a culmination of society's collective moral compass and instead warps it into something that more closely reflects the economic interest of corporations.

States spend over 9 billion dollars on incarcerating individuals based on technical violations alone (CSG Justice Center Staff, 2019). This money could go towards investing in universal healthcare, ensuring everyone has food on their table, that all children can have a good education, and other actions that prevent individuals from ending up in prison. Instead, this money goes directly into the pockets of those who provide the services needed to run prisons.

Proliferation of Surveillance Technology in Society

The expansion of the carceral state into everyday life is seen in the government monitoring of phone and email data, mandatory drug tests and background checks by employers, and widespread use of security cameras in public spaces. The proliferation of surveillance systems aims to maintain order, monitor behavior, and ensure compliance with institutional norms. This creates a broader culture of monitoring, control, and discipline. These systems act within the frameworks of racial and ethnic prejudice that already exist within American culture, further perpetuating and enacting violence across these lines.

Smart policing is the "implementation of statistical methods and other technology [such as widespread video surveillance in public spaces and facial recognition] to identify likely targets for police intervention" (Tulumello & Iapaolo, 2022, Introduction). These technological

advancements sell the notion that technology rises above human bias and is thus a morally superior way of policing, disregarding the fact that the data they are fed has been produced in tandem with decades of exclusion and discrimination. Furthermore, it has been found that the resulting algorithmic calculations favor social, economic, and political elites while disciplining and categorizing the rest as threatening and risky, perpetuating preexisting privileges (Tulumello & Iapaolo, 2022). The power that inherently comes with ownership of technology that polices an entire society poses another risk when it comes to the widespread use of smart policing. The desires, political, economic, and social, of a very select few people cannot be ignored as they have access to the technology that works to maintain order and compliance within society.

The expansion of carceral logic into society at large alters the ways in which criminality is viewed in the minds of citizens. By reinforcing notions of immorality based on carceral status, divisions can be more easily sowed through the perpetuation of fear of those outside of one's own circumstance. Further, it is often used to justify the enactment of unequal treatment and violence on individuals. This fractures the solidarity held between those of similar economic or social position by dehumanizing the subject and placing fault on the individual rather than the ways in which the government has failed its citizens.

A Culture of Violence and the Deepening of Social and Political Divisions

Violence was an essential factor in the creation of the United States and has informed many of the systems that currently exist within it. This has fundamentally altered the ways in which we interact with each other and have contributed to a culture that values personal gain over collective growth, financial success over intellectual development, and cruelty over kindness. Of course, this did not happen all at once nor does it encapsulate the entirety of American culture, but it deeply impacts and informs how social and political divisions are sowed. Examining who society deems threats and what forms of violence are legitimized and justified provides insight into how social and political divisions continue to grow. The role of the media in the proliferation and spread of these ideas is essential in understanding how such divisions became deeply sowed in society's collective consciousness.

Construction of Enemies and Threats

Looking at what violence is determined to be legitimate and what actions are used to stigmatize certain groups reveals how the framing of violence can be utilized to deepen social and political divisions by taking complex systemic issues and warping them into narratives of inherent criminality and existential threat. The selective labeling of certain acts as 'terrorism' and 'lawless' while others are described as 'self-defense' or 'patriotic' allows political elites and the media to dehumanize marginalized groups and political opponents. This creates a moral exclusion that places these groups outside the boundary of moral concern and thus strips them of their legitimacy and humanity. Not only does this justify the use of state repression against such groups but also places vigilante justice in the position of being a moral necessity to preserve a certain way of life. This serves to deepen social and political polarization, replacing social collaboration and civic engagement with cycles of fear and violence.

Elijah Anderson's book, Code of the Street, discusses how the aesthetics, language, and social norms of disadvantaged groups are formed as a reaction to structural neglect. Anderson defines 'the Code' as the informal rules that govern interpersonal public behavior, particularly regarding violence within a street subculture, specifically Black inner-city communities (Anderson, 2006). In places where the police are predatory or unreliable in defending against harm, maintaining a reputation for violence can serve as a defensive shield. The alienation from mainstream society that comes from living in poverty leads some to conform and learn this code to survive.

As with many subcultures, those who abide by 'the Code' take on certain aesthetic and linguistic characteristics which Anderson argues "conditions others' perception, expectations, and assumptions about race, place, and belonging" allowing politicians and the media to stigmatize the entire community, justifying increased police presence and force (Fader & León, 2024, pg. 21). Simply taking on the fashion and slang of a subculture increases ones assumed criminality in the eyes of the state. Rather than being seen as victims of economic exploitation, poor communities of color are framed as a moral and physical threat. Citizens are therefore further pitted against each other rather than the structural inequalities that lead to the creation of such subcultures.

Partisan Animosity and American Individualism

Since 1994, partisan animosity has nearly doubled regarding those who hold a highly negative view of the opposing party, with the majority believing that "the opposing party's policies "are so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being" (Geiger, 2014, para.3). Opinions of fellow citizens on opposite sides of the political spectrum go beyond policy disagreements and have turned to identity-based animosity. Democrats and Republicans

increasingly describe each other as being more closedminded, immoral, lazy, unpatriotic, and unintelligent (Atske, 2019). This had direct social implications as viewing each other through lenses of moral contempt erodes social trust and cooperation. This was further illuminated from data collected in a paper about lethal mass partisanship which found that "15 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats agreed that the country would be better off if large numbers of opposing partisans in the public today 'just died,'" (Kalmoe & Mason, 2019, p. 22). This reinforces the idea of violence against, and the dehumanization of others based on political identity, and inhibits bipartisan cooperation on issues of public consensus as collaboration and compromise are often seen as 'surrender' to an enemy. This ensures that populist issues like lack of affordable healthcare, education, and food remain unaddressed. Citizens, disregarding political identity, are harmed as elite interests benefit from preventing economic and social reform that would threaten their ability to continue unchecked capital accumulation.

Emphasis on economic success and personal gain has created a culture of competitive individualism in the United States. This perpetuates 'us versus them' dynamics that restrict empathy and desensitize one to the suffering of those outside of one's own group. Systemic injustice is therefore often perceived as personal inconvenience. For example, homelessness is seen as an aesthetic disruption to a city rather than the policy failures resulting in gentrification and lack of social resources. Unless there is a personal threat to one's status, there is little incentive to act. This mindset acts as a barrier to social mobilization as collective responses require personal sacrifice. In a culture that prioritizes the self, responses to injustice become reactionary and short lived as the bonds needed for large scale social movements lack the strength and commitment required for durable change.

American individualism is unique because of its internal contradictions. Results of cross-national polling suggest that "Americans are likelier than other Westerners to understand the world in terms of independent, self-reliant individuals" (Fischer, 2008, p.365). Further, Americans had higher rates of perceived freedom and felt that they have high levels of control over the way their life turns out. Consistent with these beliefs, Americans were "considerably more likely than other Westerners to attribute poverty to poor people's traits or will and are considerably less likely to endorse government intervention in economic inequality" (Fischer, 2008, p.365). Despite results showing a perceived high level of value in the individual, Americans were "the least or among the least likely to side with the individual [over the state or corporate interests]" (Fischer, 2008, p.366). The results of the polls reveal how despite parroting rhetoric that is highly individualistic, when it comes down to defending the rights of an individual action is seldom taken.

Individualism in American culture is based more on in-group loyalty rather than the individual. The group one belongs to is seen as representing the individual rather than as a reflection of the people that comprise it. Acting outside of group norms is looked down upon, and if there was value truly placed on individualism, that should be praised. Violence in the United States has historically been enacted along racial and ethnic lines, reinforcing group membership to these categorizations rather than class.

Role of Media and Political Rhetoric in Polarization

The manner in which the media represents violence combined with calculated political rhetoric alters how both victims and perpetrators of violence are perceived. The media plays a key role in the dissemination of information in our society, and which information is spread to the masses versus which information is left out has direct social and political implications. The

selective framing of information and fact contributes to the amplification of fear, mistrust, and social fragmentation that ensures the continued division of the American people. Understanding how those who own and control the media can wield power to ensure that the narratives being presented are in their own interest gives us a better insight into why certain narratives are amplified while others are pushed to the side.

Modern media corporations are not neutral observers that simply relay information but are profit motivated businesses that rely on high engagement and views to sell advertisement slots. The news that is platformed and promoted is based on what will receive the most user interaction, not necessarily which information is relevant to the world at large. Studies regarding media coverage during the War on Drugs era revealed that "sensational violent crimes [were] the ones ... found to increase ratings and revenues the most" (Dyer, 2000, p.63). This mirrors what content dominated media, with the prevalence of violent scenes jumping 74% in a three-year period and "violent content [taking up] more time on the evening news than educational, political, and social reporting combined" (Dyer, 2000, p.55).

The constant stream of violent content perpetuated the notion that crime was out of control, leading "80% of the public [to believe] crime [was] one of the biggest problems confronting America" (Dyer, 2000, p.3-4). Politicians ran with this, and 'hard-on-crime' rhetoric dominated the political playing field. Promises of legislative changes to increase sentences for violent and drug related crimes turned to reality and resulted in exploding prison populations. The increase in violence shown in media resulted in enhanced public paranoia and fear despite declining crime rates. Politicians utilized public fears to justify increased support for mass incarceration. Together, media and political elites manipulated the public into consenting to

actions that do not better society and instead benefit the economic and political desires of those in power.

The selective media framing of crack cocaine versus powdered cocaine during the Reagan era War on Drugs is a prime example of how coverage and language drives public perception. Crack cocaine was presented by the media as a drug used primarily by Black people, using coded language such as urban and inner city to denote blackness and villainize users. Rather than being seen as a public health crisis, the crack epidemic was met with increased police presence in communities of color along with harsh prison sentencing.

Policy responses to crack cocaine compared to powered cocaine further illuminate how Black and Latino crack users were demonized during the War on Drugs, while white powder cocaine users went relatively unpunished. Crack possession held harsh minimum sentencing while the amount of powder cocaine needed to trigger U.S. federal criminal penalties was set at a disparity of 100:1, even though crack and powder cocaine have essentially the same chemical composition (Larkin, 2013).

The dehumanization and lack of empathy present in media coverage of addiction to crack cocaine allowed for state repression under a new system of racial control to go unchecked. Criminalizing crack use in communities of color while ignoring the prolific use of powder cocaine in white communities resulted in neither sect of the public receiving quality care and aid from their government. Neither ignorance nor criminalization worked to better communities and have instead instilled further social, economic, and political divides in American society. Not only does this illuminate how racial prejudice and dehumanization of people of color is perpetuated by the media, but also how it prevents the government from being held accountable

as an agent of public service and betterment. Those in positions of power in the government can instead push policy that aids in their own personal agendas and economic gain.

The Media, State, and Revolutionary Violence

The media has played a pivotal role in how violence, enacted by both the state and civilians, is interpreted and understood throughout society. Investigating how acts of revolutionary violence such as the Watts rebellion were covered by the media reveals how allegiances between the mass media and the state manufactured public consent for the birth of mass incarceration. Biased reporting resulted in the manipulation of public opinion against collective cooperation by framing social issues such as poverty and lack of education as personal failures. Further, it reduced empathy for fellow citizens, alienating us from our communities, and rendering us ethically incompetent towards the recognition of injustice.

Evidence of collusion between the state and mainstream media was shown in leaked files on COINTELPRO's clandestine operations against the Black Liberation Movement. They detailed how the FBI aimed to limit the influence of radical discourse by leaking defaming information to allies in the mass media (Drabble, 2008). State and mass media control in the dissemination of information did not serve to inform the people and instead were working in the interest of the powerful.

The impact of media reporting and consequent public opinion is especially evident in the media coverage of the Watts Rebellion, an uprising that occurred in the Watts district of Los Angeles following the arrest and subsequent assault of Marquette Frye by a white police officer in 1965. Whispers of police brutality drew a crowd, and growing tensions overflowed into conflict between the residents of Watts and the California Highway Patrol, Los Angeles Police Department, and county police. The rebellion lasted five days with tens of thousands of residents

participating, over 4000 people arrested, and 34 people killed (McCone, 1965). Media coverage following the rebellion focused heavily on property damage and looting, publishing pictures of burning buildings and Black 'rioters', to frame the incident as violent for violences sake. This disregarded the state-imposed violence of systemic police brutality and economic exclusion of Watts residents that led to the rebellion.

Media coverage of the Watts rebellion and that of similar uprisings provided the political capital necessary for the passing of the Law Enforcement Assistance Act of 1965 (Dyer, 2000). Reporting echoed police narratives of outside agitators and radicals perpetuating the violence, delegitimizing the actual grievances of the participants. The narrative created by the media allowed the government to frame the solution to the rebellion as a matter of policing rather than policy, ignoring the findings of the McCone commission that cited poor housing, job opportunities, and education as motivating factors (McCone, 1965). This reimagined police as a necessary domestic military force to contain a threatening population rather than civil servants, paving the way for mass incarceration through manufactured fear.

What the media and state deemed riots can also be interpreted as examples of collective political acts that aim to break an unjust system. As noted by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "a riot is the language of the unheard" (King, 1968, para.6). Marginalization of Black communities has been built on centuries of state repression, going back to slavery and the creation of the United States. Fighting back with acts of violence allows oppressed people to break the monopoly of force previously held by the state. Rebellions such as what occurred in Watts can be seen as acts of revolutionary or divine violence, as they reclaim agency in an unjust system through acts that aim to dismantle the structures that uphold them (Fanon, 1961). Because the state had already abandoned the social contract with Black citizens by denying them equal treatment and ignored

peaceful protests, the remaining options were limited. Violent actions including rioting and looting acted as a medium to communicate a refusal to be governed by those who perpetuated the destruction of minority communities. Rebelling against the rules of the oppressor diminished the power it has previously held over them.

Ultimately, the Watts rebellion took on two forms; one showing unification of a community against state oppression, contrasted with a more sinister revelation, that "the vicious backlash by the state ... anticipated the rise of mass incarceration and the expansion of the modern carceral state" (Murch, 2012, p.38). By understanding the Watts rebellion in relation to revolutionary violence, we can revisit past interpretations that frame it as unjustified and violence for violences sake rather than a response to systemic oppression and no alternative paths forward. Viewing rebellion as a legitimate form of protest recognizes the transformative nature of violent action as a reasoned choice of oppressed people. Further, it reveals how objective violence and the criminalization of subjective acts of violence can mask the true aim of revolutionary violence, making it easier for such acts to be demonized.

Conclusion

The rise of the United States as a global economic and military superpower would not have been possible without the subjective and objective acts of violence that have run throughout the history of this country. Violence has been present from the beginning, with the genocidal colonial project that stole land from Native peoples and the enslavement of Africans to perform the physical labor necessary to build the nation's economy. Violence by the state remained an essential tool in the prevention of Black liberation after the abolition of slavery, continued throughout the 1960's and remains true today.

Violence ensured the incarceration of Black people and continues to impact the racial distribution within prisons today. Colonialism, enslavement, and incarceration, while each distinct in the tactics used and their impact upon society, reflect the ongoing evolution of state and economic control that ensure the interests of the socially, politically, and economically powerful are maintained.

The carceral state's facade as a social protector and arbiter of justice has aided in the unchecked expansion of carcerality into society at large. Rather than invest in community aid and preventative measures to incarceration, the state has diverted financial backing from welfare into the prison industrial complex. The chronic presence of subjective violence in society has dampened our ability to recognize the deeper structures of objective violence that lead to these physical outbursts. Collaboration among the mass media and the state led to the dissemination of fear mongering content that curated social consent for tough on crime legislation. The influence of money and power in the carceral systems within the United States perpetuates the existence of punitive institutions as the economic interests of corporations are placed over the needs of citizens.

In the process of ensuring such power is isolated to a small sector of society, individuals have also begun to isolate from one another. The rise of individualism and partisan animosity has diverted attention away from the sources of inequality and led to competition among those in society that have much more in common with each other than differences. Subjective violent attacks towards fellow citizens benefit those in control by diverting attention away from acts of objective violence such as housing insecurity, poor education, lack of childcare, and the rising cost of food and basic necessities.

Change requires a fundamental shift away from a culture of punishment and towards one of community care and transformative justice. Economic motivations have been at the core of the mechanisms of control throughout this country's existence. We must divest from the institutional machinery that produces reliance on policing and imprisonment and reinvest into projects that target the root cause of systemic injustice. Programs that focus on non-carceral models of community betterment such as mutual aid organizations, community-led crisis networks, and other transformative-justice based models aim to resolve conflict outside of state legal systems. On the legislative front, prioritizing pre-arrest diversion programs and ending finance-based bail are examples of policy changes to shrink the influence of the carceral state.

Injustices such as economic, racial, and social inequality often feel too large and deeply rooted for an individual to have an impact on ending them. Addressing the aforementioned challenges requires the intentional cultivation of community spaces where engagement and empathy are celebrated. Rebuilding the country on a foundation centered on a true version of justice for all requires the dismantling of institutions that have served only a small segment of the population. We must take it on ourselves to serve and build bonds with those who we may not have commonalities with is one of the places where anyone can start to make a difference.

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