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Comparing Two Different Approaches to the Prison Industrial Complex

The prison industrial complex has created much controversy in our society, ranging from how we may reform it to why we should be rid of the system completely. California specifically has been majorly expanding the prison system and therefore, the power it holds. This system is defined by the advancement of the lucrative prison industry and the criminalization of a broad spectrum of actions, including false labeling of gang activity. In recent years, many academics and activists have started to push for the abolition of the jail system by questioning its usefulness, including Angela Y. Davis and Ruth W. Gilmore

“Are Prisons Obsolete?” by Angela Y. Davis and “Golden Gulag” by Ruth Wilson Gilmore include many similar ideas but provide many different takes on the prison system. While both authors criticize the system, they also maintain different central ideas and explore different issues. Where Davis speaks about how the system is flawed and therefore deems it wholly unnecessary, Gilmore’s approach focuses heavily on how California’s massive prison complex has developed in the United States over the past few decades and how it may be reformed. Both authors end their works with a chapter on alternatives for the prison system but seem to differ in their approaches.

Davis takes a very definitive approach in claiming that the prison system should be abolished in favor of the alternatives provided at the end of the book. In doing so, she uses many techniques and strategies to make her point. While Gilmore similarly argues the problems behind

the prison system, it feels more like an exploration of the political environment rather than the persuasion that Davis aims to provide. Throughout the *Golden Gulag*, Gilmore spends many pages giving thorough geopolitical context and illustrating very colorful stories. This contrasts greatly with Davis' style of writing in which she may provide many individually large quotes, but sticks to a more traditional analysis of information for her persuasive technique. Chapter 5 of "Golden Gulag" provides an in depth history of the Mother's ROC and the many families who were affected by new laws put in place surrounding the contextual issues that made it so hard to advocate for oneself. The story spans around 60 pages and provides many backgrounds and experiences, including Bernice Hatfield and her falsely charged son, Stick. This information is presented in a very storylike way, aiming to provide information that contributes to the larger history of California's oppression.

Where Gilmore spends an entire chapter explaining the history, Davis will provide a few longer quotes that she will pick apart and analyze. For example, Gilmore explains that "Bernice raised her hands over her head and edged down the stairs, trembling as she asked over and over again, "What are you doing here? What do you want?" As it turned out, they wanted to charge Stick with six counts of attempted murder" (Gilmore 212). This style is very reminiscent of a novel and is sustained for the entirety of the chapter, evoking an emotional response. By fleshing out this entire story, it is much easier to provide a full and descriptive history that includes both heartfelt firsthand experiences and economic context. Davis focuses instead on dissecting and surrounding the quotes with explanations. She includes a one paragraph quote that details the experience of a Native American woman, "If you got a problem, they're not going to take care of it. They're going to put you on drugs so they can control you" (Davis 67). Instead of telling an entire story like Gilmore does, Davis uses this quoted experience as a means to back up the

historical evidence she continues to provide. While both quotes explain the abuse that the prison industrial complex employs, the styles of writing are intentionally different. Gilmore tends to focus on exploring stories in order to explain history and grassroots movements where Davis makes a point and uses pieces of a story to support it.

The writing style itself is not the only difference used in order to address their respective topics. Davis tends to use her personal experiences and corroborations more than Gilmore does. As Davis intends to persuade the audience that prisons are obsolete, her use of references are meant to back up her ideas. For example, she says that “I can personally affirm the veracity of their claims. Over thirty years after Bird and Afeni Shakur were released and after I myself spent several months in the Women's House of Detention, this issue of the strip search is still very much on the front burner of women's prison activism” (Davis 63). As someone who has been through the system, Davis is using her experience in tandem with others' firsthand accounts in order to connect two periods in history. This is meant to provide a more credible approach as her experience affirms that she understands the topic that she is exploring on a personal level. It also allows the audience to feel like the topic is being approached from multiple sides so that we are more likely to agree that her main point is plausible as we continue to read the book.

Gilmore's strategy really tends to focus on longer stories from other people instead, but the fact that she is using such extensive pieces makes the experience feel emotional in a way that Davis does not fully utilize. Within one such story, Gilmore provides a very heartfelt message from Barbara Meredith, president of Mother's ROC, “I believed we had to start taking care of our children. The police would not think they could get away with shooting our children down in cold blood if we took better care of them” (Gilmore 198). The connection between the quote and the story feels very personal in a way that is different from Davis. The words of a mother

lamenting the pain that her child will inevitably go through is very impactful. The sentiment adds to the history that Gilmore aims to dissect because it prevents the audience from viewing the topic as something that simply “happened” but rather something that genuinely affected people. The specific story that she is using also contributes to her larger point that the prison complex is deeply racialized and has obvious roots in communities of color historically.

Another strategy that the authors use takes two completely different forms instead. When talking about the prison system, bringing in numbers and statistics to explain certain factors can be very beneficial. Ranging from increasing incarceration rates to disproportionately affected communities, statistics provide inarguable facts to jointly defend certain ideas. Davis makes note of specific numbers, but does not tend to use them often as she “hesitate[s] to make unmediated use of such statistical evidence because it can discourage the very critical thinking that ought to be elicited by an understanding of the prison industrial complex” (Davis 92). Her belief seems to be that using statistics may feel like an end-all that prevents people from thinking critically about the circumstances surrounding the numbers. However, she does continue to cite statistics in order to explain how bizarre it was that “the Nation's prison population grew 1.1 %” when the reports expressed “the extent to which incarceration rates are slowing down” (Davis 93). Both her criticism and extremely specific use of statistics are meant to contribute to her point that the prison system is obsolete due to the ignorance surrounding the population rates. The fact that incarceration rates were slowing down yet STILL increasing by 1.1% nationally at a time when crime rates were plummeting is enough to explain how the system intentionally seeks out more prisoners and should no longer be allowed to prosper.

Gilmore’s decisions regarding statistics differ greatly. She makes use of statistics more often, however, including a multitude of graphs in most chapters. As the authors have two

different purposes of writing, Gilmore's graphic statistical evidence tends to relate more toward explaining that the contributing factors of the prison boom are economic and political- not simply criminal. For instance, Table 7 "Overview Of Kings County Agriculture" (Gilmore 144) describes the economic trends within Kings County and the crisis years that erupted. Gilmore explains that in a time where economic trends were so dysfunctional "...the CDC promoted the economic development features of a prison" (Gilmore 149). Her usage of statistics relates to her focus on the reasons behind prison booms, one of which includes the promise of economic advancement for citizens who were desperate.

Dissimilarly to their statistical usage, they tend to both use isolated quotes as introductions. Davis does this much more than Gilmore at the start of every chapter, but Gilmore utilizes it for subtopics as well. Both authors seem to provide the quotes as a means to introduce the information provided. As Davis spends her focus on analysis more than entire stories, the quotes do well at supplying her work with a little bit of a narrative approach. The quotes stand as their own little "stories" that connect with the basis of her argument. She utilizes large quotes in order to reveal the following content of the chapter so that you are able to identify her beliefs before even reading her own words. At the beginning of Chapter 3, Davis quotes Michel Foucault, "[Reform] does not even seem to have originated in a recognition of failure. Prison 'reform' is virtually contemporary with the prison itself: it constitutes, as it were, its programme" (Davis 40). By doing this, Davis is stating that the prison is constantly in a state of reform, yet never seems to truly succeed. This connects to her chapter on "Abolitionist Alternatives" in which she states that we cannot reform the prison system, it must be abolished. The introductory quote works well to support her persuasive argument as the reader is able to immediately

examine her opinion through another person's words, thus allowing the reader to decide whether her central point holds up later on.

In a similar fashion, Gilmore's aim to discuss California's prison boom is easily held up as her introductory quote in Chapter 3 summarizes the content that follows: "I thought, all these guys were in there for something, you know, that they had done something... More than half the guys, they were in for drugs, for possession. I mean, for nothing" (Gilmore 87). This quote effectively introduces the chapter as Gilmore continues to explore the way that incarceration rates shot up due to new "tough on crime" campaigns that targeted the economically inferior without properly addressing the structural inequalities that lead to mass incarceration. Comparably to Davis, the use of a summarizing quote right at the beginning of the chapter allows the reader to begin to identify whether the chapter and book's purpose is being properly supported.

Where Davis and Gilmore have presented multiple similar and contrasting writing strategies throughout the book, both authors end in a chapter regarding how to act going forward. Not unlike the rest of their chapters, we see another difference in their style of writing and their proposals. Davis has been making concrete claims for the entirety of the book and continues to do so in Chapter 6, "Abolitionist Alternatives". She proposes many alternatives to the prison system and how to abolish it realistically. Foremost, Davis states that we need to "let go of the desire to discover one single alternative system of punishment that would occupy the same footprint as the prison system" (106). This is a very important distinction to make because many anti-abolitionists believe that abolitionists simply want to get rid of prisons, allowing crime to run rampant. Instead, she favors multiple efforts to enhance communities such as investing in education and healthcare. Davis very simply explains that "[by including] job and living wage

programs, alternatives to the disestablished welfare program, community-based recreation... these alternatives are attempting to reverse the impact of the prison industrial complex on our world [because] they contest racism and other networks of social domination” (111). Simply put, these alternatives would help to reverse problematic institutions already put in place while making a continued effort to support communities as we aim to decarcerate. Davis is providing a very straightforward and multi-faceted solution, giving a very clear idea of what she wants to see happen.

While Davis goes straight into her ideas for change, Gilmore is more concerned with ideology and a change in perspective. Davis makes it very clear that she wants to implement specific programs and foundations, but Gilmore expresses her ideas in the form of theses- less to do with actual solutions but rather, where we should look to start creating change. In Chapter 6, “What Is To Be Done?” she explains that the theses presented “suggest themes for amplifying the work— are a modest attempt to propel us to a different scale...where activism can take root and flourish and the potential for connecting those sites into something bigger” (242). In saying this, Gilmore is merely presenting the problems she sees and where they need to be reformed, but not necessarily and explicitly how to reform them. This is heavily informed by the fact that Gilmore’s approach is more analytical of the political economy rather than providing a how-to like Davis. However, she does emphasize the necessity of grassroots movements and community-based activism in order to bring about change, even if not stating exactly how to bring it. She does this in multiple theses, such as by stating “These rollbacks demand attention to... the possibility of activism,” (245) and her explicit support of Mother’s ROC both within a specific chapter and the 10 theses.

Overall, there is a clear distinction between both solution chapters in terms of how and why they were written the way that they were. This is largely due to the purpose of both books and how the audiences are meant to digest them. It makes sense that Gilmore and Davis would employ different styles of writing to make their points when considering their different audiences. Davis has a simpler way of writing, one where anyone could pick up the book and learn about the context of the industrial prison complex through her explanations. Gilmore's writing is a bit more difficult to simply dive into because it is full of such complex economic and political accounts. Davis's style implies that there is no specific audience as long as she can inform and persuade them about abuse within the prison system. This may include academics, policymakers and general readers. Of course, it would also be targeted at "reformers" in order to persuade them of complete abolition. Gilmore's style implies a more specific target audience—one that can utilize the economic and political data she provides, such as political scientists, those in a criminal justice field, and especially geographers. It makes sense that her information would be more extensive and dense so that it can be analyzed or used for research. The emotional storytelling aspects of her writing may also be useful for historians and criminal justice workers in order to build up pathos for their respective assignments.

Angela Y. Davis and Ruth W. Gilmore take different approaches to the prison industrial complex in their respective works "Are Prisons Obsolete?" and "Golden Gulag." While both authors criticize the prison system, Davis takes a definitive approach in advocating for the abolition of the system, while Gilmore focuses on the development of California's massive prison complex and how it can be reformed. The writing styles of the two authors differ in many ways, with Gilmore using storytelling and geopolitical context to examine the developments contributing to California's prison boom, while Davis uses analysis to support her arguments.

Additionally, Davis draws on her personal experiences and corroborations to provide a more credible approach, while Gilmore focuses on extremely lengthy accounts to evoke emotions in the reader. Despite their differences, both authors provide alternatives to the prison system in their works, albeit in distinctly different formats to appeal to their audiences.

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