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**Connecting the Dots:  
How Immigrant Repression and U.S. Incarceration  
Serve Global Capitalist Interests**

**Overview**

As of August 18, 2011, the Obama Administration had deported over one million immigrants, more deportations than under any other president to date (Dinan, 2011; D’Almeida, 2011). Many of those deported spend at least some time being detained in an immigrant detention center, often a for-profit prison. In the face of such inhumane treatment and with families being torn apart, many of us are left asking: why is this happening? In this paper, prepared for Coloradans For Immigrant Rights (CFIR) and the American Friends Service Committee Denver Office, I will explore this question.

More specifically, I will examine who benefits from the deportation of immigrants and incarceration of both immigrants and citizens. CFIR has asked if immigration policy and practices can be related to mass incarceration in the United States? I suggest that yes, these two phenomena are linked, and that understanding the operations of neoliberal capitalist globalization helps us see how. The U.S. government’s failure to legalize the undocumented, the mass detention and deportation of immigrants, and the incarceration of certain segments of U.S. citizenry are parts of a common system.

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In what follows, I draw heavily on the work of sociologist William Robinson, whose theory of globalization offers a robust framework for identifying and linking the various processes that concern us. In the first section, I will lay out some ideas about neoliberal capitalist globalization. What are the attributes of this global system? How did it come about, and whom does it serve? In the second section, I go on to explore the advent of global immigration more closely, understanding immigrants as strategically located in the global workforce to serve particular elite interests. The third section can be understood as the conceptual heart of the argument, pinpointing a fundamental shift in forms of rule under globalization. This is critical to understanding the severe and inhumane measures taken against immigrants in the U.S. as well as the warehousing of low-income people of color in prisons. Finally, I explore the advent of private prisons and deportation processes as part and parcel of the global capitalist system.

### **Neoliberal Capitalist Globalization**

To begin with, let's unpack the idea of globalization. Globalization marks an essential change in how capitalism operates. Looking to the AFSC Globalization and Migration Zine, capitalism is defined as "an economic system in which the means of production and investment tools are privately owned and operated for profit in a market system"(2011: 4). While much has been theorized about capitalism, this is a decent starting point.

Under the globalization of capitalism, workplaces and profit making processes are no longer constrained by national boundaries. We witness what

William Robinson explains as the “decentralization across the globe of complex production processes”(2002a: 33). This means that the companies that make products and sell services become highly mobile and geographically disperse, rather than organized within the nation-state as before. A fictional example of this might be an automobile factory in Detroit, whose tires are made in Japan, brakes in Colombia, and windshield wipers in Malta. Today, global capitalism unleashes production and accumulation processes worldwide.

To complement our understanding of capitalist globalization, it is helpful to understand its historical formation. While there is much disagreement about when capitalism went truly global, we here draw on Robinson again. He argues that globalization “began with the world economic crisis of the 1970s” and marks “the profound restructuring of the system that has been taking place since” (Robinson, 2002b: 211). Understanding the global era of capitalism as arising out of the 1970s economic crisis makes sense as capitalism has faced a series of crises in its history that have required capitalism to restructure.

Moreover, exploring the rise of neoliberalism supports an understanding that capitalist globalization developed out of the 1970s crisis. Referring to this economic depression, Robinson explains that neoliberalism as an ideology and set of practices

“was perfectly functional for transnational capital at the particular historic moment in which the major combines of capital worldwide were transnationalizing and seeking to develop new methods of accumulation and to impose new social relations of production”(Robinson, 2008: 17).

Robinson suggests the uses of neoliberalism to global capitalism can be understood as having two features that empower capital and capitalists (the owners of the

means of production) over workers. First, neoliberalism purports to “[break] down all national barriers to the free movement of capital *between* borders”(Robinson, 2008: 18). Second, neoliberalism eliminates all policies within the nation state that would hinder “the free operation of capital *within* borders”(Robinson, 2008: 18). Neoliberalism has become a dominant paradigm in support of global capitalism.

So what does neoliberalism mean? Neoliberalism refers to a system of social and economic policies in which the market rules with little to no government regulation. In other words, a company that wants to set up shop in a given country would not have to face rules about environmental sustainability or workers rights. In addition, under neoliberalism, the government moves away from investing in social welfare programs and critical infrastructure. Instead, public goods are increasingly privatized, meaning the government contracts with corporations to do things like build highways, run waste removal and, in the case of immigration, build detention centers. In this sense, neoliberalism frees capital to operate as it pleases within the nation-state.

Another major aspect of neoliberalism is the advent of so-called free trade, the way in which capital is freed to move between borders. This can be seen in agreements like the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which claimed to lift barriers to trade between the U.S., Mexico and Canada. However, free trade masks the unequal playing field upon which such trade occurs. While the U.S. as an economic super-power was freely able to subsidize domestic crops like corn, Mexico was required to end all similar subsidies as part of its agreement for financial aid from international economic bodies. Hence, as David Bacon explains,

NAFTA “forced yellow corn, grown by Mexican farmers without subsidies, to compete in Mexico’s own market against subsidized corn from U.S. producers”(Bacon, 2008: 3). Millions of Mexican farmers were forced into bankruptcy, losing their jobs and land. This ultimately led to the migration of rural campesinos into Mexican cities and ultimately north into the United States.

The fact that, under neoliberal globalization, “transnational capital has been able to break free of nation-state constraints to accumulation”(Robinson and Barrera, 2012: 1) has important implications. Since the advent of modern capitalism, the nation-state has traditionally been the foremost structure of governance and economic organization. Under capitalist globalization, this is no longer the case. However, the importance of the nation-state has not been eliminated but changed. As Robinson offers, “the nation-state is neither retaining its primacy nor disappearing but becoming transformed and absorbed into this larger structure”(Robinson, 2002b: 210). Later on, we will see how, through such things as immigration enforcement, the nation-state strategically serves the interests of the global capitalist system.

As a final element in understanding neoliberal capitalist globalization, it is helpful to get a grip on the players. For conceptual ease, theorists such as Robinson and sociologist Leslie Sklair help us see that globalized capitalism, much like nationalized capitalism, requires two broad classes of people: the owners of capital and workers. Today, the minority of the global population, the “transnational capitalist class,” owns capital. Everyone else constitutes a highly stratified global working class.

Robinson explains that the transnational capitalist class “manages global circuits of accumulation that give it an objective class existence and identity spatially and politically in the global system above local territories and polities”(2002b: 215). In other words, the transnational capitalist class is geographically diverse and wields a good degree of control. Sociologist Leslie Sklair adds to our understanding of the transnational capitalist class, identifying them as “the entrepreneurial elite, managers of firms, senior state functionaries, leading politicians, members of the learned professions, and persons of similar standing in all spheres of society”(1995: 62).

In terms of workers, Robinson suggests that “the corollary to an integrated global economy is the rise of a truly global- although highly segmented- labour market”(2006: 81). We cannot dismiss the many ways in which global workers are divided and differentially exploited based on social characteristics such as race and gender. However, in principle, these workers have potentially common interests insofar as they work for a singular capitalist system managed by the global elite.

### **Global Labor and Immigration**

In this next section, we will explore a bit further the new global workforce. This will help in understanding how immigration along with certain basic premises of supposed “immigration control” serve the interests of the transnational capitalist class.

In the age of globalization, the movement of capital and production processes requires that labor is equally mobile. This means that capitalist globalization

depends on worker migration and generates it: “the need to mix labour with capital at diverse points along global production chains induces population movements” (Robinson, 2006: 82). Again, in the NAFTA example, neoliberal capitalist globalization forced Mexicans to migrate to capitalist production sites in urban Mexican areas and ultimately North, where workers are needed.

Immigration enforcement is not usefully understood as hindering labor migration, per se. As we know, the various forms of U.S. border enforcement, for instance, have not actually reduced undocumented migration but rather made it more perilous. Instead, immigration enforcement, or its threat, can be understood as making the immigrant workforce more vulnerable and unlikely to complain or organize. Robinson explores how this worker disempowerment serves the interests of capital, noting that “central to capitalism is securing a politically and economically suitable labour supply”(2006: 81). Suitability is determined by exploitability. Someone whose very social existence is compromised because of lacking certain legal documents is an ideal worker for capital.

Robinson adds that the legal distinctions around immigration status today render workers docile the world over:

“the division of the global working class into ‘citizen’ and ‘non-citizen’ labour is a major new axis of inequality worldwide, further complicating the well-known gendered and racialised hierarchies among labour, and facilitating new forms of repressive and authoritarian social control over working classes”(2006: 83)

In this way, making and enforcing immigration law, always the role of the nation-state serves the interests of global capitalism. This is a perfect exemplar of how the nation-state becomes refigured in the era of globalization.

Having a legal underclass of workers is not simply detrimental for immigrants, of course. The disempowerment or exploitation of any group of workers affects all workers, creating a downward pressure on wages and working conditions across the board. Immigration enforcement has been used to undercut labor organizing and pit workers against each other. "Union-busting," when employers or the state prevent workers from organizing for their rights, has occurred under the auspices of immigration enforcement. For instance, when they seek to organize undocumented workers have received social security no-match letters and faced I-9 audits that threaten to "out" their undocumented status. Moreover, scapegoating immigrants divides and weakens the working class and distracts from the targets of meaningful resistance. Workers blame each other for low wages and a lack of benefits rather than looking to the corporations and de-unionization efforts that actually threaten them. In this sense, legalizing immigrants and fundamentally altering current border policies would empower the global workforce. Robinson argues, "a *free* flow of labour would exert an equalizing influence on wages across borders" which would, in effect, "strengthen labour worldwide in relation to capital" (2006: 83).

A final way in which global capitalism creates a disempowered workforce is by making too many workers. In their piece on 21<sup>st</sup> century fascism, Robinson and Barrera observe that

"one new structural dimension of 21<sup>st</sup> century global capitalism...is the dramatic expansion of the global superfluous population- that portion marginalized and locked out of productive participation in the capitalist economy and constituting some 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of humanity" (2012: 11).



As capitalism has expanded globally, upsetting other economic alternatives, it has produced too many workers for its production needs. There are not enough jobs in a world globalized by capitalism. This serves capital well. The rise of a mass unemployed and underemployed population means that workers become dispensable because they can be easily replaced. This has an obvious weakening effect on the global working class as a whole.

Robinson and Barrera suggest the multiple ways in which capital manages this surplus so that they do not organize and revolt. They are “alienated from the productive economy, thrown into the margins, and subject to sophisticated systems of social control and to destruction- to a mortal cycle of dispossession-exploitation-exclusion”(Robinson and Barrera, 2012: 2). This strategy of subordination helps explain the rise of incarceration in the U.S. and the fact that prisons disproportionately house U.S. Blacks and a growing number of U.S. Latinos (Wagner, 2005). Due to various racial histories that have led to the disenfranchisement and asset stripping of people of color in the United States, they are prime candidates for prison. However, there is more to be said about the rise of incarceration in general and the rising rate of immigrant detention and deportation.

### **The Transition from Consent to Social Control**

Delving into the advent of mass incarceration and immigrant repression in the United States requires identifying a key shift under global capitalism: the move from rule by consent to rule by coercion. To understand the causes of this change, it is necessary to explore the tenuous relationship between the logic of accumulation

and the human will for social reproduction. These terms are not as daunting as they seem. The logic of accumulation is the undergirding rationale of capitalism. It prioritizes profit accumulation above all other interests, including human well-being, environmental sustainability, and meeting people's various requirements for survival. Social reproduction simply means that a society is able to meet its basic human needs in order to reproduce itself in the form of future generations.

Obviously, the logic of accumulation and the needs of social reproduction do not fit easily together. However, in previous eras, capitalism has had to ensure social reproduction in order to have enough workers. Before globalization, then, capitalists found a way to ensure social reproduction as part of the economic production process.

The Fordist-Keynesian system of capitalism did just this. Implemented after the 1930s economic depression, Fordist-Keynesianism was a two-fold way to ensure social reproduction under capitalism. Fordism is based on the ideas of the U.S. automaker Henry Ford who realized that his workers were producing more automobiles than people in the U.S. would buy. In order to raise demand for his automobiles and generate more profit, he needed to raise the pay of his workers so that they would be capable of buying cars. He thus implemented higher wages, reasonable working hours, benefits and job stability to generate a consuming class. Of course, not all workers in US society gained these benefits, but many white, male industrialized workers became an upwardly mobile middle class.

Keynesianism refers to the ideas of economist John Maynard Keynes. Keynes observed that the state needed to do a few things to ensure the social reproduction

of workers. First, it should regulate the market. A government that regulates corporations, for example, prevents rampant worker abuse and ensures some well-being for workers. Moreover, the state should provide for essential public well-being and implement a social safety net. Affordable healthcare and education, for instance, ensure that the social reproduction of workers takes place. Thus, under a Fordist-Keynesian approach, workers and the poor saw tangible benefits. However, our analysis allows us to understand how these benefits ensured social reproduction, serving the interests of capitalism.

The globalization of the capitalist economy beginning in the 1970s marked the end of Fordist-Keynesianism. Logistically, the globalization of capital meant that no single state was able to regulate the global system to ensure social reproduction. However, this was of no detriment to the capitalist system as global capital created workers in excess. Thus, it no longer had to ensure the social reproduction of workers. The result of globalization, then, “is the severing of the logic of accumulation from that of social reproduction”(Robinson and Barrera, 2012: 4).

This transition has led to a major political transformation . Rather than rule through consensual domination that existed in previous eras in countries such as the U.S., we have moved to rule through social control. Having robbed much of the global populous of access to basic necessities, globalization has eliminated “the social bases for more stable forms of consensual domination” (Robinson and Barrera, 2012: 5). Under the Fordist-Keynesian model, when capitalist production ensured social reproduction, it was easier to gain consent. This consent was secured by providing an agreeable lifestyle for an empowered contingent of the citizenry, in

the U.S., the white middle-class. However, it is harder to derive consent for a system that forces a majority of the global population to struggle to meet basic survival needs.

The new global order, then, requires a vast machinery of coercive social control to replace the previous consensual model. Such a machinery includes prisons, immigration enforcement and surveillance, various forms of militarism across the globe, and so on. This massive network of repression serves a capitalist system with a surplus of workers: “the system does not even attempt to incorporate this surplus population but rather tries to isolate and neutralize its real or potential rebellion, criminalizing the poor and the dispossessed”(Robinson and Barrera, 2012: 5). Social control mechanisms are necessary to keep a majority of people from pushing for a more just system. These developments are useful to further understanding the increased surveillance, detention and deportation of immigrants as well as the mass incarceration of U.S. Blacks and Latinos.

### **The Fringe Benefits: Privatizing the War on Immigrants**

We have thus far explored the weakening of the global workforce under neoliberal globalization. We have also identified the shift from rule by consent to rule by social control. The confluence of these factors allows us to see immigration enforcement as having a few different aims. It supports capitalist interests for vulnerable workers. It is also part of a larger network of repression to prevent global rebellion. However, relentless immigration enforcement also creates direct benefits for corporate interests. Robinson and Barrera lay out this premise, noting:

“the criminalization of undocumented immigrants and the militarization of their control not only reproduce these conditions of vulnerability but also in themselves generate vast new opportunities for accumulation” (2012: 14).

These new opportunities for accumulation include corporate-owned, or “privatized,” detention centers and deportation processes.

Tanya Golash-Boza helps us understand the privatization of detention and deportation processes to be part of “the immigration industrial complex.” She explains that “the immigration industrial complex is the confluence of public and private sector interests in the criminalization of undocumented migration, immigration law enforcement, and the promotion of ‘anti-illegal’ rhetoric”(Golash-Boza, 2009: abstract). Here, the public sector is government, which we typically think of as making immigration laws and being responsible for enforcing them. The private sector is the companies that benefit from those immigration laws. We can understand the immigration industrial complex to be an immediate way in which corporations profit from immigration enforcement.

Journalist Tom Barry demonstrates that the relationship between the private prison industry and immigration enforcement is actually not new, though it does come about during the era of globalization we have outlined. He explains that “immigrant detention jumpstarted the two largest prison companies—Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and GEO Group—in the prison industry.” He goes on to explain that Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) contracted with private prison companies as early as the 1980s. Moreover, “these INS immigrant detention centers were among the first private prisons in the United States”(Barry, 2009). In addition to immigrant detention, Barry suggests that the private prison

industry lobbied heavily for many of the harsh and illogical criminal sentencing laws of the 1980s and 90s that disproportionately targeted U.S. Blacks and Latinos.

Today, the private-prison industry has become a strong if hidden lobby for anti-immigrant legislation. In the fall of 2010, investigative reporter Laura Sullivan of National Public Radio uncovered the “behind-the-scenes effort to help draft and pass Arizona Senate Bill 1070” by Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). SB 1070 was arguably one of the harshest (and likely illegal) state laws that claims to target immigrants. It demands that law enforcement arrest those whom individual officers believe to be undocumented. CCA has been traced to being present in multiple closed-door meetings with SB 1070 author, state senator Russell Pearce. During the year leading up to SB 1070’s introduction, CCA is on record as “[expecting] to bring in ‘a significant portion of our revenues’ from Immigration and Customs Enforcement”(Sullivan, 2010).

The transportation of deported immigrants to their home countries is another profitable industry for some members of the global elite. In the spring of 2010, journalist Jeffrey Kaye revealed that Republican primary candidate for New Mexico’s governor, Allen Weh, renowned for his anti-immigrant stance, was “owner and chief executive officer of CSI Aviation Services, Inc. a New Mexico-based company that has become the federal government’s largest provider of deportation flights.” The enforcement-only legislation Weh planned to pass if elected would have directly filled his wallet.

The profit-drive for detaining and deporting immigrants poses a formidable opposition for those of us seeking immigrant justice. It also shows what those

seeking an improvement in workers' rights globally confront. William Andrews, chairman of the Corrections Corporation of America, has warned his stockholders that company solvency depends on a policy environment of social control. In 2007, he stated,

"The demand for our facilities and services could be adversely affected by the relaxation of enforcement efforts ... or through the decriminalization of certain activities that are currently proscribed by our criminal laws." (Barry, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Using an analysis of capitalist globalization and the interests it serves, I have suggested that the U.S. attack on immigrants and incarceration of U.S. Blacks and Latinos can and should be connected analytically. Capitalism engages in immigrant repression and the warehousing of low-income people of color to make global labor a more exploitable class; to prevent organizing and rebellion by the subordinated; and to provide itself with additional profit-making ventures. Of course, there is much that this review has not accomplished that bears further investigation. Racism and various global constructions of "otherness" manifest throughout the issues of immigration and incarceration. Global ordering processes also depend profoundly on gender constructions, which in turn inform immigration and incarceration patterns. What we do have here, however, is a way of understanding that the oppression of any worker is fundamentally linked to our own well-being. We also have a sketch of global processes and state repression that opens up the impetus for broad coalition building.

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