

Introduction

There's an urgency in the voices you are going to hear coming out of these pages. The young women and men's utterances require our attention – they demand engagement, they demand analysis, they demand change.

The fact that these young people are incarcerated makes them not exceptions. Rather, their experiences reveal a troubling trend in the United States, and increasingly in other parts of the world. Incarceration, as it has in the last thirty years or so, is quickly becoming the preferred solution to social problems. It is more acceptable to put people in cages than to address poverty; it is more acceptable to lock them away than to take a hard look at the ways in which schools and teachers and curricula collaborate to the school-to-prison pipeline; it is more acceptable to incarcerate young, bright men and women than to address their struggles as they transition from childhood to adulthood, than to listen to their anguish, than to offer genuine solidarity and comfort to them, than to learn from them.

Let us not fool ourselves. If these trends to incarcerate continue, what kind of society are we going to inhabit and be an accomplice of in a few years' time? It is well known that, if the incarceration trends recorded in the 1990s continue, by 2020, 2 in every 3 young Black men will be behind bars. We are within a decade of this apocalyptic scenario! I'm reminded of Black Brazilian writer Machado de Assis's 1882 fiction book, *O Alienista*. In it, Dr Simão Bacamarte, a reputed psychiatrist in Spain and Portugal, decides to set up practice in a small Brazilian town, where he ends up confining most of the local population. Dr Bacamarte claimed those under his custody – at one point, 4 out of every 5 persons in the city – were either mentally ill or about to develop an illness. The population eventually revolts, only to later restate Dr Bacamarte in his prominent position.

We live a troubling similar scenario. Yet, when we look at incarceration numbers, as appalling as they are, we hardly get a sense of the day-to-day experience of those incarcerated, of their loved ones, their families, and the communities from which they come. These numbers are unable to grasp the

complex reality that Black and Brown young people have to negotiate simply by virtue of where they are born. The racial segregation they find themselves in is mirrored in the racial composition of the youth “facilities.” There, you will find an overwhelming majority of Brown and Black young women and men, just like you’ll find them overrepresented in the Eastern geographies of Austin — where the worst jobs (and unemployment rates), schools, hospitals, air quality, policing, groceries, and jobs — where the worst quality of life indicators are concentrated. It’s no coincidence. Neighborhood spaces are defined by race; jails, prisons, and “facilities” are defined by race. The geographies of U.S. apartheid are consistent.

As a process that sweeps across generations, genders, and families, mass incarceration accompanies — thus expresses, and thus energizes — a plethora of other related processes that disproportionately affect Black and Brown communities. Young people in “facilities” speak of fathers, mothers, grandparents, lovers, friends, and neighbors who are, were, or will be incarcerated. Often doubting their capacity to not be imprisoned again, they realize the odds are against them, the alternatives too attractive. Too attractive in relation to what? To economic difficulties, to unemployment, to disregard, to discrimination, to the varied types of violence that characterize their lives. So it’s not so much that incarcerated youths choose mindlessly one path of action over the other; rather, their choices are made in contexts where “doing the right thing” is not a viable or attractive option. For example, to study hard and to be a good student and to find a job are difficult to carry out in schools where the teacher are badly trained, the resources are lacking, and whose “education” seldom lifts anyone out of badly paid work or joblessness. And in times of economic depression (that are historically more pronounced in Black and Brown areas), the prospects of work in the formal economy are dim.

The youths’ voices make further connections. They speak of sexually transmitted diseases, of early death by violence and preventable medical causes. Their condition as incarcerated young people allow them to express that imprisonment, as ubiquitous as it is in their lives and in their communities’ lives, is part of a broader constellation of phenomena that affect them disproportionately. Those who are incarcerated are also the ones more vulnerable to AIDS/HIV infection, less likely to have access to adequate medical services, and more likely to die prematurely.

When I listen to the young women and men, several questions to mind. Questions that burn with urgency, questions that require analysis and action. What does it mean to incarcerate teenagers, adolescents? What does it mean to incarcerate young men and women in their teens who often have children of their own? What does it mean that a considerable proportion of the very newest generation in our society is already born to parents who are incarcer-

ated (and whose siblings, friends, parents, grandparents, and relatives are also detained)? Imprisonment as a social policy is a reality that defines not only the historical stage we are at, but also makes an indelible statement about our future. The dystopia of prisons, jails, juvenile facilities, immigrant detention centers — this dystopia defines our current and future realities.

As we sit quietly and watch the rounding up going on, as a group of people we are saying that we acquiesce to it. It's ok as long as it's someone in your neighborhood; it's alright if it's the person next door. What will happen when it's one of your own, in your household, in your family? Here's what Martin Niemöller vividly evoked, at the apogee of the Nazi regime in Germany:

*They came first for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.*

*Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for me
and by that time no one was left to speak up.*

What are we saying, as a collective, as a polity, when we say nothing about the massive rounding up? What are we stating when we naturalize, even by rendering silent, unknown, the over 2.5 million people behind bars in the United States today? If anything, we are affirming, through our inaction, via our silence, that what we consider our good society has no place for “them”; it means that our happiness depends on these young people’s misery. As long as they are locked up, in their detention uniforms, supervised, we are alright.

Of course, when we naturalize the warehousing of people, most of whom are not white, we also refuse to see and overstand beyond what we are presented with. We are constantly presented with the so-called evidence that these youths are in need of control and restraint. We are constantly presented with the argument that our safety and well-being depend on their confinement. Our inaction, our lack of analysis, reaffirm that argument.

The inescapable fact is that those who are rendered the other — the other that is violent, criminal, in need of control, unable to function in society — is just like me and you. Even if our common humanity is challenged by the multi-generational imprisonment that many Brown and Black families experience, the sheer ubiquity of the criminal justice system in the lives of those communities segregated by race makes it so that someone who is close to us, or our own

selves, will become incarcerated. In Washington D.C., for example, if you are a Black male, there is an eighty percent-plus chance that you will be incarcerated at least once in your lifetime.

Dehumanizing the incarcerated is therefore a way of dehumanizing ourselves. The young people whose voice you will hear know it. Their urgent re-claiming of their humanity emerges laced with a necessary utopia. Amid the stories of their neighborhoods, loved ones, daughters and sons to be, parents, grandparents and elders gone but whose spirits live in their wisdom and courage, together with the pain and the struggles, these young people conjure up a better world because they have no other choice but to find that better world. They want to do good, but know full well that the conditions they will be thrown in need to change. (That is why, for those who lost hope, and are unable to conjure up a utopia, the return to the institution is a sure thing.) Just as simply, we, yet-to-be-locked-up, have no other choice but hear them out, engage them, and search, with them, for this better world. There is no other choice.

~ João Costa Vargas

Ed. Note: The youths' initials have been used as per regulations. All other names appearing within poems have been changed.

THE PROCESS / gratitude

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