

Four Strategies To Curb Carceral Costs: On Managing Mass Imprisonment In The United States

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After forsaking the Fordist-Keynesian social compact in the mid-1970s and the crumbling of the black ghetto as an instrument of caste control, the United States launched into a unique sociohistorical experiment: the incipient replacement of the welfare regulation of poverty and of the urban disorders spawned by mounting social insecurity and racial strife by its penal management via the police, courts, and correctional system. The stupendous rise of the American penal state over the ensuing three decades, which is the necessary counterpart and complement of the rolling back of the social state, may be briefly characterized along five dimensions:¹

1. Vertical expansion due to carceral hyperinflation: the quadrupling of the inmate population in twenty-five years, fed primarily by the increase in admissions, has made the US the undisputed world champion in imprisonment with two million persons behind bars and 740 inmates per 100,000 residents—six to twelve times the rate of other advanced societies—even as crime remained stagnant and then declined during that period.
2. Horizontal expansion via enlarged probation, restructured parole, and the growth of electronic and genetic databases allowing for increased surveillance at a distance: the result of this “widening” of the penal net is that today a total of 6.5 million Americans are under criminal justice supervision representing one adult male in twenty, one black man in nine, and one young black man (ages 18 to 35) in three; an estimated 55 million criminal “rap sheets” have been

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amassed by the authorities, covering roughly one third of working-class men and are being diffused through the routinization of criminal background checks (e.g., for employment and residential rental).

3. The advent of penal “Big government” just as education, public health, and social welfare outlays shrunk: the disproportionate growth of prison budgets and personnel among public administrations has boosted corrections to the rank of third largest employer in the nation with a staff of 650,000 and operational expenses exceeding \$40 billion. To illustrate, California, which hosts the single biggest prison system in the world, has increased its budget for state corrections from \$200 million in 1975 to \$4.8 billion in 2000 and its correctional staff jumped from 6,000 to 41,000 over the past two decades; since 1994, the funds of the California Department of Corrections have surpassed those allotted to the University of California campuses.
4. The resurgence and frenetic development of a private industry of imprisonment: in a short decade, for-profit operators led by a half-dozen firms lavishly supported by Wall Street have captured seven percent of the “market” or 140,000 inmates (three times the size of the entire carceral population of France or Italy), helping the state further expand its capacity to punish and warehouse the precarious segments of the new proletariat; these firms now offer the complete gamut of carceral activities, at all levels of security, and they are aggressively seeking to expand overseas (they are already present in the United Kingdom, Australia, Morocco, South Africa, Korea, and Thailand).
5. A policy of carceral affirmative action via the differential penal and spatial targetting of ghetto neighborhoods and lower-income urban residents, in particular via the “War on Drugs,” resulting in the unprecedented demographic predominance of African-Americans (they have supplied a majority of new entrants in prison every year since 1989) and deepening racial disparity and hostility among confined populations: black men make up six percent of the

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US population and seven percent of the country's drug users but they supply 35 percent of persons arrested for narcotics offenses and 75 percent of state prisoners sent behind bars after drug convictions.²

But the financial burden of mass incarceration as a queer form of anti-poverty policy and camouflaged racial control is turning out to be exorbitant because of the continuous swelling and rapid aging of the carceral population, as well as the sheer prohibitive unit price of penal confinement. In California for instance, outside of the cost of financing and building penitentiaries, each state prisoner costs \$21,400 per annum, or three times the maximum AFDC benefits paid out to a family of four before the elimination of that program (\$7,229, inclusive of administrative costs).³ To be sure, in most other states, especially those of the South, the expense for incarceration is considerably lower but so are standards of living, state budgets, and levels of public assistance; in Mississippi, for example, the yearly price tag for one prisoner comes to \$13,640 but that sum represents nearly ten times the annual AFDC benefits per family, which averages a princely \$1,400. The uncontrolled growth of the carceral bill now directly and visibly threatens other core government functions, from education to social services to public health, whose further curtailment is likely to stoke voter discontent among the middle classes. To curb it, four strategies have been implemented by the various authorities—aside from the usual ideological *legerdemain* that consists in presenting penal expenditures as “investments” in the “war on crime.”

1. The first consists of lowering the level of services and living standards within penal establishments by limiting or doing away with the various “privileges” and amenities granted to their residents: educational programs, sports, entertainment, and activities aimed at rehabilitation such as job development and counselling. Thus college programs have been virtually shut down by the exclusion of inmates from the federal program of Pell Grants in 1994, even though higher learning had proven highly effective in reducing recidivism and helping to maintain carceral order, on grounds that prisoners were illegitimately draining public finances.⁴ A kindred source of saving has been to cut back on various items of distraction and con-

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sumption: when it reintroduced the use of “chain gangs” in 1996, the Alabama Department of Corrections also suppressed televisions and radios and outlawed the distribution of tobacco, candy, soft drinks and cookies. When the Arizona Department of Corrections took steps to forbid the receipt of special Christmas packages for its 23,000-plus inmates that same year, it justified the measure by invoking security hazards as well as health and sanitation risks, but the clincher was the savings of \$254,000 in overtime pay to examine the 35,000 packages that arrived in its facilities at year’s end: “Our goal is to run safe and efficient penal institutions with a constant eye on the bottom line,” explained its spokesman, “that’s all this is about.”⁵

The Cost of a State Prisoner in California According to the official budget of the California Department of Corrections, the direct cost of confinement of a felon in a state penitentiary—outside of construction—comes to \$21,470 per annum (a figure obtained by dividing the yearly operational budget of the state’s corrections administration by the average daily population behind bars). Of this sum, half goes to remunerate the staff (California guards are by far the best paid in the nation thanks to their powerful and politically well-connected union) and one quarter to the basic maintenance of inmates (food, clothing, health). Activities turned toward rehabilitation and reentry into society, such as education, work, and vocational training, amount to a mere five percent of annual carceral expenses.

The Cost of Confinement

Correctional staff, safety	\$10,585	49.3%
Reception, housing, administration	\$3,736	17.4%
Health	\$3,499	16.3%
Food, clothing	\$2,125	9.9%
Education	\$558	2.6%
Vocational training	\$494	2.3%
Work activities	\$344	1.6%
Leisure and religious services	\$129	0.6%
Total	\$21,470	100%

Source: Computed from California Department of Corrections, “The Cost of Housing an Inmate 1997-98” (Sacramento CA: CDC, 1998).

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However, this approach is unlikely to yield sizeable benefits given that these expenses have already been compressed to the meanest share (less than five percent of the budget of the California Department of Corrections is devoted to academic and vocational training) with the generalization of regimes of “penal austerity.”⁶ Also, after decades of utter disregard, the courts now keep a close watch over detention facilities and do not hesitate to fine counties and to place state corrections administrations under judicial restraint to check the degradation of conditions of detention when these blatantly impinge on basic constitutional rights.⁷ In point of fact, most large city jails and dozens of prison systems have for decades been under consent decrees to reduce overcrowding and improve medical services or face severe sanctions.

2. The second strategy is to harness technological innovation in the realms of electronics, informatics, biometry and medicine, among others, to boost the overall productivity of carceral labour so as to confine and secure more convicts with fewer staff members. Technological upgrading can involve such varied items as arranging for jail detainees to appear before a judge via interactive video to avoid transporting them to and from court; using bar-coded badges and wristbands, motion sensors and other fiber-optic devices to track the movements and activities of prisoners and staff throughout a facility and establish instant and automatic “inmate counts;” electrifying perimeter fences (with lethal voltage) to economize on the number of guards manning gun towers; deploying “body-search machines” using back-scatter X-ray to detect contraband in lieu of pat searches and strip searches which are time- and staff-consuming; integrating identification, communication, and data management systems with photo-imaging, voice- and face-recognition software, and using satellite monitoring and remote tracking to locate parolees at large in the community; not to mention non-lethal weapons for behavioural and crowd control such as stun belts, antitraction compounds (“sticky slime”) and “optical munition” (which disorient an assailant by sending a laser beam into his eyes).

The most promising component of this strategy, however, is the remote delivery of medical services via telecommunications, given that health care eats 10 to 20 percent of state

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prison budgets. In 1996-97, the Federal Bureau of Prisons conducted an evaluation study of the use of telemedicine in psychiatry, dermatology and orthopedics at three Pennsylvania facilities which found that remote consultation cuts the cost of care by 30 percent and concluded by recommending that this technology be tested for use in jails.⁸ The National Office of Justice has entered into an agreement with the Defense Department to foster the joint development and sharing of new technologies liable to find both military and penitentiary uses and its Technology and Science Office offers active assistance to states and counties to goad them to adopt these technologies and make “corrections enter into the twenty-first century.”

3. A third strategy for alleviating the financial weight of the policy of penalization of poverty aims to transfer part of the cost of incarceration onto the prisoners and their families. Since the mid-nineties, some twenty states and dozens of urban counties have taken to billing their prisoners for room and board, collecting “processing fees” at intake, charging for meals and imposing a “co-payment” for access to the infirmary as well as supplemental charges for various amenities (uniforms, linens, laundry, electricity, etc.).⁹ Some go so far as to haul their former customers to court to recover the debts that the latter contracted in spite of themselves by sojourning behind bars.

This is the case of Maccomb County, seat of Detroit, Michigan, which boasts the “first and most successful” jail reimbursement program of the nation, according to Lt. Nyovich, who officiates in the jail’s Reimbursement Unit. The county bills inmates on a sliding scale, from \$10 to \$56 per day, based on a financial history form they fill upon entry; it also charges \$15 for medical and dental visits and five dollars for drug prescriptions. If the inmates have monies on their commissary accounts, the sums are directly deducted from it; if they are on work release, they receive an invoice every five weeks. If they do not cover their jail bill, the Reimbursement Unit will take them to court—it initiates over 600 lawsuits a year—or pass the file to a collection agency out of a professed concern for fairness: “We sue them or call a collection agency on them. You can’t just say ‘you’re poor, so I can’t charge you.’ You have to treat everyone the same.” Even though three

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inmates in four fail to pay anything, the county still collects upwards of one million dollars a year, which are returned to the General County Fund (in previous years, these monies went to buying new guns for officers and building a work-release unit with 200 additional beds). Needless to say, “inmates, they’re not too happy about it” while “the community, they love it! They all have bumper stickers with Sheriff Hackell’s motto: ‘He Makes Prisoners Pay.’ He ran his campaign on this platform and he won.”¹⁰ As their main link to the outside world, phones are the lifeline of inmates but they are also proving to be a cash cow for corrections departments: many of them contract the right to install and operate lines to companies which, instead of bidding down to gain the market, are required to bid up the cost of communication and turn the surcharge over to the prison. In 1997, the state of New York amassed over \$20 million from its exclusive contract with MCI by skimming a price mark-up of 40 percent over regular phone rates; Florida did nearly as well with a markup of 50 percent and a bounty of \$13 million.¹¹

In 1997, Illinois voted legislation that enables its Department of Corrections to charge, and if necessary sue, inmates for the full cost of their incarceration—up to \$16,700 a year. The Department then took legal action against three dozen convicts in an effort to recoup some \$4.6 million, only to discover that most inmates are poor or indigent, with total assets under \$4,000 which cannot be seized under the state constitution. The legal costs of extracting payment out of prisoners ended up outweighing the expected benefits of the operation.¹² This is typical of correctional “reimbursement” programs and explains why in most cases their enforcement is lax, not to mention that such measures are penologically counterproductive: they undermine the work motivation of inmates by confiscating their meager earnings inside (when they are employed) or garnishing their wages after release, which creates added incentives for them to engage in black-market and other unlawful activities.

4. As for the fourth method for reducing the country’s carceral bill, it remains full of promise: it consists of reintroducing deskilled labour en masse inside penal facilities. Now, wage work already exists in some penitentiaries and leading corporations such as Microsoft, TWA, Boeing, Toys R Us, and

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Konica occasionally resort to it on the side—often through subcontractors so as to avoid negative publicity.¹³ But while such private-sector use of inmate labour has been shrilly denounced by prison activists and repeatedly spotlighted by the media, it remains marginal for these companies and, even more so, for the carceral population as a whole. Despite the steady growth of the Private Industry Enhancement Program (PIE), a federal plank launched in 1989 to promote the industrial employment of convicts by commercial firms, and aside from facility support (laundry, food, clerical work, maintenance and repair), in 1998 paid work concerned only one inmate in thirteen and fewer than 2,000 state and federal prisoners were on the payroll of outside companies nationwide owing to the severe legal and practical restrictions that continue to bear on penal employment.

Over the past decade, however, arguments have sprouted, by legal scholars, economists, corrections experts, and politicians in favour of removing these barriers and ending the “state-use” system, which reserves the employ of carceral labour for the production of limited goods (such as license plates, office furniture, uniforms, and comestibles) for a closed public market, to return to the “contract” system which would allow private companies to hire inmates at prevalent wage rates to sell all manner of regular goods on the open market.¹⁴ The earnings of employed prisoners would then be skimmed to offset the cost of their confinement, to compensate victims of crime, and to generate additional public revenues through deductions and taxes.

A widely publicized and commented report released in 1998 by the National Center for Policy Analysis, a “pro-free enterprise” think tank, entitled *Factories Behind Bars*, extolled the economic value and moral virtues of convict labour and proposed as a national goal putting to work one of every four prisoners in the span of a decade and allocating 60 percent of their pay to compensate taxpayers. At five dollars an hour for 40 hours a week during fifty weeks of the year, the annual monies to be generated were estimated at \$2.4 billion, amounting to 10 percent of the operational cost of corrections for the country.¹⁵ Lionizing the “free-market” conditions of the nineteenth century, when three-fourths of inmates toiled, two-thirds of them for private entrepreneurs,

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the report urged the authorities to stop “wasting” the “huge asset” of convict labour and move to “make prisons hum with productive work” by repealing federal and state laws limiting the use of carceral workers and goods, curtailing inmate litigation against prison employment, and financially rewarding wardens for making their facility economically self-sufficient and establishing flexible production and marketing programs—in short, by “running prisons as a business.”¹⁶ Jails would seem to constitute an even more plentiful and readily usable reservoir of cheap industrial labour: unlike prisons, they are implanted within urban counties and are therefore well connected to the local business community; they process twenty times more bodies than prisons do (over 10 million annually); a mere 18 percent of jail detainees are involved in work activities; and implementing innovative employment policies is easier at the local level where corrections expenses are now draining upwards of 15 percent of public budgets. The combination of “location + access + visibility” is bound to make recourse to jailhouse labour an “essential cost-control activity” for counties.¹⁷ In addition to relieving idleness, fostering institutional adjustment and reducing discipline problems, prison employment beckons to bring a “long-term solution to the overcrowding crisis” that perennially plagues the US carceral system by increasing post-release success and thus cutting recidivism.¹⁸

It is not surprising, then, that numerous bills to abolish barriers to inmate employment have recently been put forth in Congress and state legislatures, considering also that, once the obligation to work is imposed on the poor “outside” through workfare, it is logical to impose it also on those poor “inside” who are the inmates. It remains to be seen whether these proposals will be voted and implemented on a large scale to effect the mating of prison and low-wage work they vow to bring. Renewed ideological resolution is not sufficient to surmount the potent countervailing factors represented by the sheer intractability of penal labour (it is largely illiterate, untrained and unstable, and the continual interference of penal variables and imperatives such as safety make it remarkably inflexible), the overall state of the labour market and the resiliency of the principle of “less eligibility” which dictates that the worst-off workers stand a notch above the best-off inmates.¹⁹

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In the end, none of these four strategies, alone or in combination, can effectively contain the mounting financial costs of mass incarceration as punitive social policy, nor alleviate the long-term social and economic burden placed on the society by its profoundly disruptive impact on poor individuals, families, and communities. Like privatization, whose ideology of commodification they share and extend into the public sphere of corrections, these strategies can create local “breathing room” by temporarily displacing the contradictions activated by the transition from the social-welfare to the penal management of social inequality and insecurity at the bottom of the class and caste structure, but they cannot resolve them. And thus the relentless effort to actualize, via the state, the ruling class fantasy of making the poor pay for the (penal) care of their own kind proves that it is just that, a fantasy, but one with real consequences that partake of what is one of the cruelest experiments in social engineering ever undertaken by a democratic society.

Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of the causes, functions, and modalities of the penalization of poverty in the United States, see Loïc Wacquant, *Les Prisons de la misère* (Paris, Raisons d’agir Editions, 1999; (English trans.) *Prisons of Poverty*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003) and *Punir les pauvres* (Marseilles, Agone, 2002); a broad panorama of the main legal, social and criminological facets of escalating incarceration in the United States can be found in David Garland, (ed.), *Mass Imprisonment: Social Causes and Consequences* (London: Sage, 2001), and Michael Tonry and Joan Petersilia (eds.), *Prisons* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999); for the longer historical backdrop, Thomas L. Dumm, *Democracy and Punishment: Disciplinary Origins of the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), and Scott Christianson, *With Liberty for Some: Five Hundred Years of Imprisonment in America* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998).
2. On the controversial intersection of racial division and penal expansion in the postfordist United States, read Michael Tonry, *Malign Neglect: Race, Crime and Punishment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Jerome G. Miller, *Search and Destroy: African-American Males in the Criminal Justice System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Loïc Wacquant, “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the ‘Race Question’ in the United States,” *New Left Review* 2/13 (February 2002), pp. 40-61.
3. AFDC refers to *Aid to Family with Dependent Children*, the main “welfare” program targeted to poor single mothers and their offspring. Created in 1935, it was abolished by the “welfare reform” legislation promulgated by Clinton and the Republican congress in 1996 and

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- replaced by the well-named TANF (*Temporary Assistance to Needy Families*) designed essentially to cut back public aid budgets and push recipients into the bottom tier of the deregulated labour market (Loïc Wacquant, "Les pauvres en pâture: la nouvelle politique de la misère en Amérique," *Hérodote* 85 (Spring 1997), pp. 21-33).
4. Joshua Page, *Eliminating the Enemy: A Cultural Analysis of the Exclusion of Prisoners from Higher Education* MA Thesis (Berkeley: Department of Sociology, University of California-Berkeley (2001)).
 5. "Arizona Inmates May See Last Special Deliveries," *The Dallas Morning News* (22 December 1996).
 6. The penal philosophy dominant today in the United States can be summed up by this expression widely used by prison officials: "To make prisoners smell like prisoners" (Wesley Johnson et al., "Getting Tough on Prisoners: Results from the National Corrections Executive Survey, 1995," *Crime and Delinquency* 43/1 (January 1997), pp. 25-26). Whence the reintroduction of corporeal punishments and assorted measures designed to humiliate, breaking rocks and cleaning ditches in chain gangs, ankle shackles, striped uniforms, "navy crew" haircuts, the suppression of coffee and cigarettes, and the prohibition of pornographic magazines, weightlifting, personal clothing, etc..
 7. Susan Sturm, "The Legacy and Future of Corrections Litigation," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 142 (1993), pp. 639-738.
 8. Douglas McDonald, Andrea Hassol and Kenneth Carlson, "Can Telemedicine Reduce Spending and Improve Prisoner Health Care?," *National Institute of Justice Journal* (April 1999), pp. 20-28. The next stage will likely be to extend telemedicine from prison to HMOs serving the free population outside.
 9. Michelle Gaseau and Carissa B. Caramanis, "Success of Inmates Fees Increases Their Popularity Among Prisons and Jails," *The Corrections Network*, online journal (October 1998).
 10. Interview with Lt. Nyovich, spokesperson for the Macomb County Jail, conducted in April of 1998 on my behalf by Shelly Malhotra (whom I thank for her diligent assistance with this project).
 11. Reported in the newsletter *Corrections Digest* (16 October 1998). The "collect" calls from various prisons in downstate Illinois I received from my best friend and informant from the South Side of Chicago while he was serving time there were billed by EZ-Com at seventeen times the rate I paid for comparable long-distance calls with regular companies.
 12. "Paying Debt To Society May Add Up For Inmates: State Lawsuits Seek Cash From Prisoners," *Chicago Tribune* (16 March 1998).
 13. Daniel Burton-Rose, Dan Pens, and Paul Wright, (eds.), *The Ceiling of America: An Inside Look at the U.S. Prison Industry* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998), pp. 102-131.
 14. See, among a plethora of articles disseminated in specialized scholarly and trade publications, T.J. Flanagan and K. Maguire, "A Full-Employment Policy for Prisons in the United States: Some Arguments, Estimates, and Implications," *Journal Of Criminal Justice* 21/2 (1993), pp. 117-130; Gwen Smith Ingle, "Inmate Labor: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," *Corrections Today* (February 1996), pp. 25-32; and S.P. Garvey, "Freeing Prisoners' Labor," *Stanford Law Review* 50/2 (January 1998), pp. 339-398.
 15. Morgan Reynolds, *Factories Behind Bars* (Dallas: National Center for Policy Analysis, 1998), mimeo, 30 p., and Matt Grayson, "Inmates, Inc: In Favor of Prison Labor. Benefits of Prison Work Programs,"

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- Spectrum: The Journal Of State Government* 70/2 (Spring 1997), pp. 2-5. Based in Dallas, Texas, the National Center for Policy Analysis is a neoconservative policy institute "funded exclusively by private contributions" that advocates market-based solutions for every possible social problem. Morgan Reynolds is a Professor of Economics at Texas A&M University and a NCPA Senior Fellow, the author of a book by the self-explicating title *Making America Poorer: The Cost of Labor Law*, as well as an "adjunct scholar" at the Cato Institute.
16. Reynolds, *Factories Behind Bars*, pp. 4, 24-25.
 17. Rod Miller, "Jails and Inmate Labor: Location, Location, Location," *Corrections Today* 61/6 (October 1999), p. 107.
 18. Kerry L. Pyle, "Prison Employment: A Long-term Solution to the Overcrowding Crisis," *Boston University Law Review* 77/1 (February 1997), pp. 151-180.
 19. In 1985 already, the late Chief Justice Warren Burger advocated repeal of all legal strictures on the private use of prison labour to reach the goal of putting to work half of the inmate population of the country in a decade. Although they were widely discussed at the time, nothing came of his propositions (Warren E. Burger, "Prison Industries: Turning Warehouses into Factories with Fences," *Public Administration Review* (November 1985), pp. 754-757).

Against the Policy of Depoliticization¹

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Everything contained in the descriptive and normative term “globalization” is the effect not of economic inevitability but of a conscious and deliberate policy, if a policy more often than not unaware of its consequences. That policy is quite paradoxical in that it is a policy of depoliticization. Drawing shamelessly on the lexicon of liberty, liberalism, and deregulation, it aims to grant economic determinisms a fatal stranglehold by liberating them from all controls, and to obtain the submission of citizens and governments to the economic and social forces thus “liberated.” Incubated in the meetings of great international institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the European Commission, or within the “networks” of multinational corporations, this policy has imposed itself through the most varied means, especially juridical, on the liberal—or even social-democratic—governments of a set of economically advanced countries, leading them gradually to divest themselves of the power to control economic forces.

Against this policy of depoliticization, our aim must be to restore politics, that is, political thinking and action, and to find the correct point of application for that action which now lies beyond the borders of the nation-state, as well as the appropriate means, which can no longer be reduced to political and trade union struggles within national states. We must admit that the task is extremely difficult for many reasons. First, the political agencies to be combatted are very remote, and not just in geographical terms, and they are not at all like the institutions which traditional social struggles used to confront, either in their methods or the agents concerned. Second, the power of the agents and mechanisms that dominate the economic and social world today rests on an extraordinary concentration of all the species of capital—economic, political,

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military, cultural, scientific, and technological—as the foundation of a symbolic domination without precedent, wielded in particular via the stranglehold of the media, themselves manipulated, most often unbeknownst to themselves, by the major international communications companies and by the logic of competition that sets them against one another.

It remains that some of the objectives of an efficacious political action are located at the European level, insofar at least as European firms and organizations form a decisive element among the dominant forces at the global level. It follows that the construction of a unified, Europe-wide social movement, capable of gathering together the various movements that are presently divided, both nationally and internationally, presents itself as a reasoned objective for all those who intend to resist with efficacy the dominant forces.

An Open-Ended Coordination No matter how diverse they are in their origins, aims and objectives, contemporary social movements all have a set of common features that creates a family resemblance among them. First, because they often originate in a refusal of traditional forms of political mobilization—especially those forms that perpetuate the tradition of Soviet-type parties—they are inclined to exclude any kind of monopolization by minorities and to promote instead the direct participation of all concerned (thanks in part to the emergence of leaders of a new type, endowed with a political culture superior to that of traditional officials and capable of perceiving and expressing new kinds of social aspirations). They are close to the libertarian tradition in that they are attached to forms of organization inspired by theories of self-management, characterized by a reduced role for the apparatus and enabling agents to recapture their role as active subjects—particularly from the political parties whose monopoly over civic intervention they contest. A second common feature is that they invent, or reinvent, forms of action that are original in both ends and means and have a high symbolic content. They orient themselves toward precise, concrete objectives that are important in social life, such as housing, employment, health, legal status for illegal immigrants, etc., and strive for direct and practical solutions. And they ensure that both their proposals and their refusals are concretized in exemplary actions, directly linked to the particu-

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lar problem concerned and requiring a high level of personal commitment on the part of activists and leaders, most of whom have mastered the art of creating events, of dramatizing a condition so as to focus media—and consequently, political—attention on them, thanks to a firm grasp of the functioning of the journalistic world. This does not mean that these movements are mere artefacts, created from scratch by a small minority with the support of the media. In fact, the realistic use of the media has been combined with activist work which, carried on over a long period on the fringes of the “traditional” movements (parties and trade unions), and sometimes with the collaboration and support of a fraction, itself marginal and minor, of these movements, has found in various conjunctures the opportunity to become more visible and thus to expand its social base, at least temporarily. The most remarkable fact about these new movements is that they have immediately assumed an international form, partly by virtue of their exemplary character and partly because new forms of action have been invented simultaneously in different countries (as in the case of campaigns over housing).

(The specificity of these new forms of struggle lies, nonetheless, in the fact that they feed on the publicity given to them, sometimes reluctantly, by the media and that the number of people involved in a protest is now less important than the amount of media coverage and political impact achieved by a demonstration or action. But media visibility is by definition partial as well as hardly impartial and, above all, ephemeral. The spokespersons are interviewed, a few emotion-laden reports are broadcast, but the demands of the movements are seldom taken seriously in public debate, as a consequence of the media’s limited understanding. This is why it is essential to sustain activist work and an effort at theoretical elaboration over the long term, irrespective of opportunities for media exposure).

A third characteristic typical of these movements is that they reject neo-liberal policies aimed at imposing the will of the big institutional investors and multinationals. A fourth feature is that they are, to varying degrees, international and internationalist. This is particularly visible in the case of the movement of the unemployed or the movement led by José Bové’s Confédération paysanne, where there is both a concern

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and a resolve to defend not only small farmers in France but also the landless peasants of South America and other parts of the world. All these movements are both particularistic and internationalist: they do not defend an insular, isolated Europe, but through Europe, they defend a certain type of social management of the economy which clearly must be achieved by establishing a liaison with other countries—with Korea, for example, where many have great expectations of what can be achieved by transcontinental solidarity. As a final distinctive, shared characteristic, these movements extol solidarity which is the tacit principle of most of their struggles, and they strive to implement it in their action (by including all the “-less” within their ambit—the jobless, homeless, paperless, etc.) and in the encompassing form of organization they adopt.

Such a kinship of ends and means among these political struggles demands that we seek if not to unify all the scattered movements, as is often clamoured for by activists, especially the youngest among them who are struck by the degree of overlap and convergence, then at least to establish *a coordination of the claims and actions while excluding attempts of any kind to take them over*. Such coordination should take the form of a *network* capable of bringing individuals and groups together under such conditions that no one can dominate or cut down the others and such that the resources linked to the diversity of experience, standpoints and programs is preserved. The main function of such a network would be to prevent the actions of social movements from becoming fragmented and dispersed—being absorbed by the particularism of local initiatives—and to enable them to overcome the sporadic character of their action or an alternation between moments of intense mobilization and periods of latency. This must be done, however, without leading to a concentration of power in bureaucratic structures.

There are currently many connections between movements and many shared undertakings, but these remain extremely dispersed within each country and even more so *between* countries. For example, there exist a great many critical newspapers, weeklies, or magazines in each country, not to mention Internet sites, which are full of analyses, suggestions, and proposals for the future of Europe and the world, but all this work is fragmented and no one reads it all. Those who produce these

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works are often in competition with one another; they criticize each other when their contributions are complementary and can be cumulated. The dominant in our society travel; they have money; they are polyglot; and they are linked together by affinities of culture and lifestyle. Ranged against them are people who are dispersed geographically and separated by linguistic or social barriers. Bringing all these people together is at once very necessary and very difficult. There are numerous obstacles, for many progressive forces and structures of resistance, starting with the trade unions, are linked to the national state. And this is true not just of institutional but also of mental structures. People are used to thinking and waging struggles at the national level. The question is whether the new structures of transnational mobilization will succeed in bringing the traditional structures, which are national, along with them. What is certain is that this new social movement will have to rely on the state while changing the state, to rely on the trade unions while changing the trade unions, and this entails massive work, much of it intellectual. One of the functions of researchers could (ideally) be to play the role of organizational advisors to the social movements by helping the various groups to overcome their disagreements.

This coordination, flexible and permanent, should set itself two distinct objectives: on the one hand, to organize campaigns of short-term action with precise objectives, through "one-off" ad hoc meetings; on the other, to submit issues of general interest for discussion and to work on elaborating longer term research programs by periodically bringing together representative of all the groups concerned. The aim would in effect be to discover and work out general objectives to which all can subscribe, at the point where the concerns of all the different groups intersect and on which all can collaborate by contributing their own skills and methods. It is not too much to hope that democratic confrontation amongst individuals and groups with shared assumptions may gradually produce a set of coherent and meaningful responses to basic problems for which neither trade unions nor parties can provide any overall solution.

A Renewed Trade Unionism A European social movement is inconceivable without the participation of renewed trade

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unions, capable of surmounting the external and internal obstacles, on a European scale, to unification and reinforcement. It is only an apparent paradox to regard the decline of trade unionism as an indirect and delayed effect of its triumph: many of the demands which motivated trade union battles in the past are now inscribed in institutions which, being henceforth the foundation of obligations and rights pertaining to social protection, have become stakes of struggles between the unions themselves. Transformed into parastate bodies, often subsidized by the state, the trade union bureaucrats partake in the redistribution of wealth and safeguard the social compromise by avoiding ruptures and clashes. And when trade union officials become converted into administrators, removed from the preoccupations of those whom they represent, they can be led by competition between or within trade union "machines" to defend their own interests rather than the interests of those whom they are supposed to be defending. This cannot but have contributed in part to distancing wage earners from the trade unions and to deterring trade union members themselves from active participation in the organization.

But these internal causes cannot alone explain why trade union members are ever less numerous and active. Neoliberal policy also contributes to the weakening of the unions. The flexibility and, above all, casualization of an increasing number of wage earners and the ensuing transformation of working conditions and labour standards contribute to making difficult any united action. Even the work of keeping wage earners informed is made difficult as the remnants of public aid continue to protect only a fraction of wage earners. This shows how essential and difficult it is to renovate trade union action, which would require rotation of positions and calling into question the model of unconditional delegation, as well as the invention of new techniques needed to mobilize fragmented, casualized workers.

This organization of an entirely new type that has to be created must be capable of overcoming fragmentation on grounds of goals and nations, as well as the division into movements and trade unions, by escaping both the hazards of monopolization (or, more precisely, the temptation and attempts at appropriation that haunt all social movements)

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and the immobilism often generated by the quasi-neurotic fear of such hazards. The existence of a stable and efficacious international network of trade unions and movements, energized by mutual confrontation within forums for negotiation and discussion, such as the *Estates General of the European social movement* should make it possible to develop an international campaign which would be altogether different from the activities of the official bodies in which some trade unions are represented (such as the European Trade Union Confederation). It would also consolidate the actions of all the movements constantly grappling with specific—and hence limited—situations.

Bringing Together Researchers and Activists The work required to overcome the divisions between social movements and thereby to bring together all the available forces arrayed against the dominant forces, themselves consciously and methodically coordinated, must also be directed against another, equally fateful division: that between researchers and activists. Given an economic and political balance of forces in which the economic powers that be are in a position to enlist unprecedented scientific, technical, and cultural resources at their behest, the work of academic researchers is indispensable to disclose and dismantle the strategies incubated and implemented by the big multinationals and the international bodies, which, like the World Trade Organization, produce and impose putatively universal regulations capable of gradually turning the neo-liberal utopia of generalized deregulation into reality. The social obstacles to such rapprochement are no less great than those that stand between the different movements, or between the movements and the trade unions. Though they are different in their training and social trajectories, researchers engaged in activist work and activists interested in research must learn to work together, overcoming all the prejudices they may harbour about one another. They must endeavour to cast off the routines and presuppositions associated with membership in universes governed by different laws and logics, by establishing modes of communication and discussion of a new type. This is one of the preconditions for the collective invention, in and through the critical confrontation of

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experiences and competencies, of a set of responses which will draw their political force from being both systematic and rooted in common aspirations and convictions.

Only a European social movement, strong of all the forces accumulated in the different organizations of the different countries and with the instruments of information and critique elaborated in common forums of discussion such as the Estates General, will be capable of resisting the forces, at once economic and intellectual, of the large international corporations and of their armies of consultants, experts, and lawyers massed in their public relations agencies, think tanks and lobbying agencies. Such a movement will be able also to replace the aims cynically imposed by bodies guided by the pursuit of maximum, short-term profit with the economically and politically democratic objectives of a European social state, equipped with the political, juridical, and financial instruments required to curb the brute—and brutal—force of narrowly economic interests. The call for an Estates General of the European Social Movement is in line with such a vision (see the Web site: www.samizdat.net/mse). It does not in any way aim to represent the whole of the European social movement, still less to monopolize it in the tradition of “democratic centralism” dear to the erstwhile servants of Sovietism, but purports to contribute practically to making it happen by working ceaselessly for a gathering of all the forces of social resistance, on a par with the economic and cultural forces currently mobilized in the service of the policy of “globalization.”

Ambiguous Europe: Reasons to Act at the European Level

Europe is fundamentally ambiguous, of an ambiguity that tends to dissipate when one views it in a dynamic perspective. There is, on the one hand, a Europe autonomous from the dominant economic and political forces and capable, as such, of playing a political role on a world scale. On the other, there is the Europe bound by a kind of customs union to the United States and condemned, as a result, to a fate similar to that of Canada, that is to say, to be gradually dispossessed of any economic and cultural independence from the dominant power. In fact, truly European Europe functions as a decoy, concealing the Euro-American Europe that is on the horizon and which it fosters by winning over the support of those who

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expect of Europe the very opposite of what it is doing and of what it is becoming.

Everything leads one to believe that, barring a thoroughly improbable rupture, the tendencies leading Europe to submit to transatlantic powers, symbolized and materialized by the Transatlantic Business Dialogue, an umbrella organization of the 150 largest European firms, which is working to abolish barriers to world trade and investment, will triumph. Due to the fact that it concentrates at the highest level all the species of capital, the United States is in a position to dominate the global field of the economy. And it can do so thanks to such juridical-political mechanisms as the General Agreement on Trade in Services, a set of evolving regulations aimed at limiting obstacles to “free movement” and stipulated provisions, drafted in the greatest secrecy, functioning with lagged effects, in the manner of computer viruses, by destroying juridical defense systems, which prepare the advent of a sort of *invisible world government* in the service of the dominant economic powers which is the exact opposite of the Kantian idea of the universal state.

Contrary to the widespread idea that the policy of “globalization” tends to foster their withering away, states in fact continue to play a crucial role in the service of the politics that weakens them. It is remarkable that the policies aimed at disarming states to the benefit of the financial markets have been decreed by states—and, moreover, in many cases, states governed by socialists. This means that states, particularly those led by social democrats, are contributing to the triumph of neoliberalism, not only by working for the destruction of the social state (most notably, the destruction of workers’ and women’s rights, which depend directly on the “left hand” of the state) but also by concealing the powers for which they act as relays. And they also function as decoys: they draw the attention of citizens to fictitious targets (strictly national debates, whose prototype is everything having to do in France with “cohabitation”) kept alive by a whole range of factors, such as the absence of a European public space and the strictly national character of political, trade union, and media structures. One would need here to demonstrate how the desire to boost circulation inclines newspapers to confine themselves ever more to national politics, if not national politicking,

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which remains profoundly rooted in national institutional structures, such as families, churches, schools or trade unions.

All this means that politics is continually moving farther away from ordinary citizens, shifting from the national (or local) to the international level, from an immediate concrete reality to a distant abstraction, from the visible to the invisible. And that the individual, or, to use Sartre's term, "serial" actions invoked by those who never stop talking of democracy and "citizen control," count for little in the face of the ruling economic powers and the lobbies they hire at their service. It follows that one of the most important and difficult questions is to know at what level to carry on political action—the local, national, European, or world? In fact, scientific imperatives are in agreement with political necessities here and require that we travel along the chain of causality back to the most general cause, that is, to the locus, now most often global, where the fundamental determinants of the phenomenon concerned reside, which is the appropriate point of application for action aimed at effecting genuine change. Thus, for instance, if we take immigration, it is clear that at the national level we only grasp factors such as the policy of the national state that, aside from fluctuating to meet the interests of the dominant social forces, leave untouched the root of the matter, namely, the effects of neoliberal policies or, to be more precise, of so-called "structural adjustment" policies and especially of privatization. In many countries these policies lead to economic collapse, followed by massive layoffs which foster mass movement of forced emigration and the formation of a global reserve army of labour, which bear with all its weight on the national workforce and on its collective claims. This is happening at a time when ruling bodies are expressing openly, most notably in the texts of the WTO, their nostalgia for old-style emigration, that is, an emigration composed of disposable, temporary, single workers with no families and no social protection (like the French *sans papiers*) ideally suited to providing the overworked executives of the dominant economy with the cheap and largely feminine services they need. One could make a similar argument in relation to women and the gender inequalities visited upon them insofar as women's fate is inextricably linked to the "left hand" of the state, both for work (they are particularly represented in the health, education and cultural sectors) and for the services they need in the present

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state of the sexual division of labour (nurseries, hospitals, social services etc.), they are the prime victims of the dismantling of the social state. The same could also be said of dominated ethnic groups, such as blacks in the United States who, as Loïc Wacquant has pointed out, suffer directly from the downsizing of public employment insofar as the Afro-American bourgeoisie, which grew after the Civil Rights Movement, rests essentially on government jobs at the local, state and federal levels. As for political action, if it wishes to avoid going after decoys and deluding itself with inefficient intervention, it too must track back to the actual causes. Having said this, those actions, which, like those deployed in Seattle, are targeted at the highest level, i.e., against the bodies that make up the invisible world government, are the most difficult to organize and also the most ephemeral—all the more so as, even if they base themselves on networks and organizations, they are mainly the product of an aggregation of autonomous forces.

This is why it seems to me, first, that it is at the European level that actions which purport to produce effects can and must be targeted. Second, if they are to go beyond mere “happenings,” symbolically efficacious but temporary and discontinuous, these actions must be based on a concentration of already concentrated social forces, that is, on a confluence of social movements that already exist throughout Europe. Informed by theoretical work aimed at formulating realistic political and social objectives for a genuine social Europe (such as the replacement of the European Commission by a genuine executive responsible to a parliament elected by universal suffrage), these collective actions, carried out through the coordination of collective, must work to constitute a credible counterpower. They must, that is, work to create a European social movement (“unified” or “coordinated,” thus the singular), capable, by its mere existence, of bringing into existence a European political space that currently does not exist.

Written by Pierre Bourdieu (Paris: July 2000-January 2001).

Translated by Loïc Wacquant, February 2002.

Notes

1. Translated by Loïc Wacquant from “Contre le politique de dépolitisation” which appeared in *Contrefeux 2*, Paris, Raisons d’agir Editions, 2001, by kind permission from Jérôme Bourdieu.