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Historical Revelation for Present-Day Liberation: What the Most Famous Prison Uprising in US History Can Teach Us About Social Change

Dylan Martin Bontrager

What happens in our nation's prisons happens, ultimately, to all of us.
–*Heather Ann Thompson, "Lessons from Attica"*, 2014

The thirteenth of September of 1971 marked the beginning of a reign of terror for the 2,243 men housed at Attica Prison in upstate New York. In the past four days they had rebelled, gained control of much of the prison, taken several of their guards hostage, and negotiated to improve their living conditions in the overcrowded, understaffed, and under-resourced facility. But on that cold, rainy morning, as they tried to stay warm and dry under improvised tents, they heard the low roar of helicopter engines. As the prisoners and their hostages stood defenseless in the yard, the state blanketed them with tear gas and entered the resulting fog with guns blazing, killing 29 prisoners and 10 hostages, and injuring 128 more.[1] In the days and weeks that followed, the prisoners were subjected to a multitude of tortures and dehumanizations: racial slurs, death threats, beatings with clubs and rifle butts, burns with cigarettes and matches, and even forcible penetrations (Thompson, 2014; Thompson, 2016).

Despite the clear historical significance of the event, it took nearly half a century for the truth to come out (Thompson, 2016, p. xiii). After the retaking of the prison, state officials wove tales for the media. They claimed that the prisoners had brutalized and slaughtered the ten dead hostages (Thompson, 2016, pp. 194-95). Coroners were pressured to align their findings with this story (Thompson, 2016, pp. 227-31). When they refused, the state nonsensically blamed the gunshot deaths on "crossfire" (Thompson, 2016, p. 239). The 1972 report of the New York State Special Commission on Attica was redacted, as was the 1976 report of the Meyer Commission (Thompson, 2016, p. xiii). Over the next few decades, files continued to be withheld and FOIA requests continued to be ignored (Thompson, 2016, p. xiii). It is still unclear who ordered this cover-up, but various state and federal agencies were certainly complicit, including the State Police,

[1] With 39 deaths and 128 injuries, the total casualties at Attica number 167. In a time marked by what seems an endless tide of gun deaths, putting these numbers into the context of other mass killings gives an idea of the scope of the tragedy. The deadliest mass shooting at the time of the Attica Uprising was the 1966 University of Texas tower shooting, in which 16 were killed and at least 30 wounded ("Deadliest Mass Shootings in Modern US History Fast Facts"). Of the mass shootings that have recently catalyzed national conversation about gun control, only one—the October 1, 2017 concert shooting in Las Vegas, in which 50 people were killed and 500 wounded—resulted in more casualties than the retaking of Attica Prison. By the standards of both 1971 and 2018, then, Attica is an exceptional tragedy that raises serious questions about the events of those four days.

the Department of Corrections, the federal Justice Department, and the FBI (Thompson, 2016, pp. xiii-xvii). Instead, the people of the State of New York and the United States were left to believe the lies they had been told on that fateful day in September.

Recent scholarship has shown the narrative presented by the state to be utterly false. Heather Ann Thompson's research has been particularly influential in bringing the truth to light. This knowledge production shows the need to involve pedagogy in the process of writing history. To this end, I examine the events surrounding those four days in September through a prison abolitionist lens, presenting the events, aftermath, and legacy of the Attica Uprising[2] through a structure and format inspired by the critical pedagogical methods of Paulo Freire. I conclude with insights on what can be learned from the Attica story with regards to systemic, broad-based social change.

Theoretical Frameworks

Prison Abolitionism

In a conversation with Dylan Rodriguez, Angela Davis (2000) writes that prison abolitionism "propose[s] other paradigms of punishment or…suggest[s] that we need to extricate ourselves from the assumption that punishment must be a necessary response to all violations of the law." In other words, prison abolition entails not only changes in law or structures but in social thought about crime. Such a change cannot happen overnight. It will take years, if not generations, to change the way we think as a society. Davis (2000) remarks:

> "In order to imagine a world without prisons…a new popular vocabulary will have to replace the current language, which articulates crime and punishment in such a way that we cannot think about a society without crime except as a society in which all the criminals are imprisoned."

Rodriguez responds to Davis that prison abolitionism "does not necessarily advocate a pragmatic 'alternative' or a concrete and immediate 'solution' to what currently exists"; nevertheless, I think it useful to present the alternatives that I favor, both to provide an example and to further clarify my own abolitionist framework. I present four proposals and a caveat. One: basic human needs should be universally provided for; this will eliminate the motive for crimes of need. Two: restorative justice practices—methods and structures used to repair harm—should be used to help convicts understand the impact of their crimes. Three: treatment for any mental illness that causes or contributes to criminal acts should be fully funded by the state. Four: the state should provide comprehensive support services for convicts reentering society. And the caveat: although prison abolitionism stands against the use of

[2] Though violent actions taken by prisoners are usually referred to as 'riots', I do not use it to describe the events that took place at Attica. The word 'riot' connotes unjustifiable, gratuitous, and apolitical violence. Its use is, intentionally or not, politically loaded—it conveys a disapproval of actions taken by oppressed groups to call attention to their struggles. Though I am averse to violence, I also believe that it is equally important to condemn the conditions that prompt it. Rather than conveying an unconditional disapproval for the Attica prisoners' actions, I wish to examine their political and pedagogical dimensions of these actions. I use the word "uprising" because it communicates a violent action taken by a broad group of people when all other means of communicating with the powerful have failed. It connotes a plea for change. This is the light in which I understand Attica and the perspective from which I believe we should view it.

imprisonment as punishment for any crime, I believe it can be used as a means to an end. Involuntary confinement may be justified so long as such confinement is carried out both humanely and solely in the service of restorative justice practices or mental health treatment. It is when confinement becomes an end in and of itself that it becomes dehumanizing: locking someone away deprives them of the autonomy and social connections that make them human. Such a practice can have no logical conclusion other than uprisings like the one at Attica.

Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire's theory of education conceives of a four-part cycle. First, an educator should create a forum for students with marginalized identities to discuss their social condition, helping them to develop and amplify their own authentic voice. Through this process, the students arrive at the second step: critical consciousness, an understanding of the systems of social oppression around them as well as their place in it. From there, the educator turns the conversation towards the third stage: praxis, or principled social actions led by the students that can help to change these systems. Finally, the students reflect on the action to prepare to continue developing their voices, fostering critical consciousness, and planning for more actions. Through it all, the line between teacher and student is blurred, each learning from the experiences and expertise of the other.

Freire used what he called "visual codes", politically provocative illustrations resembling political cartoons, to move his students through the cycle. He would help them find their voice by discussing what they saw in the image without interpretation; when participants were ready to begin developing critical consciousness, he would ask them to begin offering interpretations. In this paper I consider the story of the Attica Uprising to have all the potentialities of a Freirean visual code. The story can be retold (voice), used to unpack the power dynamics inherent in prisons as well as in society as a whole (critical consciousness), and to advise future principled action (praxis). I will conclude with this third section, on the cusp of Freire's third step, in the hopes that it will be helpful to the reader in the actual execution of principled action. The reader may then move to the fourth and final step, critical reflection, and prepare to begin the cycle again. In considering the Attica Uprising through this Freirean model, I reveal ways in which social change can be driven by a continuous cycle of critical examination of official and historical narratives and action based on the results of these examinations.

Retelling the Story

On the eve of the uprising, conditions at Attica were unquestionably inhuman. The prison was overcrowded, housing 2,243 men (Thompson, 2016, p. 6). It was unsanitary—inmates received one jacket, two shirts, and three pairs of underwear, plus one roll of toilet paper and one bar of soap per month (Thompson, 2016, p. 8). The prison also had inadequate medical care, food, and heat, was under heavy censorship, and what few jobs were available to inmates paid slave wages (Thompson, 2014, p. 161). Meanwhile, the prison's staff was undertrained, undersized

and underpaid. On their first day, guards oversaw a company of 40 men. One guard would regularly be assigned to a group of 60 to 70 men, and even as many as 120 at times. Many worked a second job to make ends meet. The result was an exhausted staff that was perpetually on edge. (Thompson, 2016, p. 14-15). Both guards and prisoners relayed their grievances on multiple occasions (Thompson, 2014, p. 162). Guards pushed their union to bargain for higher pay and a larger staff (Thompson, 2016, p. 15); prisoners went so far as to mail a letter of demands to New York Commissioner of Corrections Russell Oswald (New York State Special Commission on Attica [hereafter Attica Commission], 1972, p. 134). But the concerns of both groups went unheeded, and as conditions deteriorated, grievances accumulated.

Prisoners' reaction to a series of arbitrary punishments finally sparked the Attica Uprising. Though the Attica Commission (1972) characterizes these punishments as legally legitimate, prisoners' fatigue of and anger towards these brutal conditions finally boiled over. 5 company, which contained a particularly high number of radical prisoners, was approached by an officer who intended to explain why they were to be sent back to their cells rather than allowed to enter the yard as usual. Before the guard could speak, however, the prisoners knocked him unconscious. They were joined by more inmates who had seen the altercation, assaulted other officers in the adjacent yard, and brought sporting equipment and other materials as makeshift weapons. The group then breached the faulty door of their wing of the prison, entered the other wings, and ultimately took control of almost all of the prison and more than 40 prison staff as hostages (Attica Commission, 1972).

Upon first taking control of the prison, all was chaos, but order was restored relatively quickly as the prisoners organized themselves to continue their takeover and negotiate for a return to normalcy. A group of Black Muslims surrounded the hostages, protecting them from other prisoners; a respected jailhouse lawyer picked up a megaphone and called on his fellow prisoners to unite for their common cause. They did as he asked, and within hours of the original outbreak of violence, the prisoners had organized themselves, arranged for a media presence, and called upon several well-known political figures to come and form an Observers' Committee to mediate negotiations between themselves and the state. Faced with such an organized and publicized front, the state had no choice but to agree to these negotiations (Thompson, 2016, pp. 65-67; Thompson, 2014, p. 163-64).

The prisoners wasted no time in presenting their demands to the state through the newly formed Attica Observers' Committee and the media. These demands ranged from an end to the prison's unfair labor practices to guarantees of the protections enshrined in the First Amendment (Thompson, 2016). Though Commissioner Oswald at first seemed amenable to the list presented to him by the prisoners (Thompson, 2016), it quickly became clear that the state would not agree to any form of amnesty for actions taken by prisoners over the course of the uprising (Thompson, 2014, p. 164). As the

state's forces amassed outside the prison, preparing for an all-out assault on the unarmed men congregated in D yard, the Observers' Committee pleaded with Governor Nelson Rockefeller to come to the prison in the hopes that his presence could stay the violence that seemed increasingly inevitable (Thompson, 2014, p. 164).

Finally, on the morning of Monday, September 13th, 1971, the New York State Police, in conjunction with local police officers from nine nearby counties and a nearby state park who had been sent to assist by their respective departments, retook the prison by force. Though "officials from the Governor on down expressed concern that the force employed be only the minimum necessary to restore order," wrote the Attica Commission, "that concern was not translated into effective restraints" (1972). These words were a massive understatement; over the course of ten minutes, two thousand rounds were fired blindly through the clouds of tear gas (Attica Commission, 1972; Thompson, 2014). In the midst of this unmitigated carnage, a voice boomed through a megaphone, telling prisoners that if they would only surrender with their hands up they would be unharmed (Thompson, 2014). One in every 10 of the people in the yard were shot, and a quarter of the hostages were killed.

The aftermath of the uprising was perhaps the most sickening part of the whole affair. Though the state surely knew exactly what the result of such excessive force would be, no preparations had been made beforehand for medical attention for the injured—the only medical personnel on site were the prison's usual staff, including only two medical doctors (Thompson, 2016, p. 205). These two, despised by prisoners, showed how much they deserved their reputations, refusing treatment and medication for some prisoners, and engaging in the abuse of others. When more medical personnel did arrive, state officials interfered with their work. State troopers' minor injuries were prioritized over prisoners' life-threatening ones. Doctors were barred from entering, intimidated once inside, and not allowed to remove prisoners to hospitals.

Racial hostility and arbitrary power fueled a multitude of verbal abuses and physical tortures, including rapes, beatings, and other tactics. Guards and troopers hurled racial slurs at black prisoners and berated white ones as "n□ lovers". When state legislators toured the facility, one black assemblyman was yelled at to "get his n□ ass out of here" (Thompson, 2016, p. 212). Every prisoner was made to strip under the guise of searches, One prisoner was knocked out cold with a kick to the head; another's neck was stepped on when he begged a trooper for medical attention. A third was anally raped with a broken bottle. Prisoner Frank "Big Black" Smith, recounted that guards

> ...beat me in my testicles and they burned me with cigarettes and they dropped hot shells on me. And they put a football up under my throat and they kept telling me that if it would drop, they was going to kill me. And I really felt, you know, after seeing so many people shot for no apparent reason,

> that they really were going to do this. (as quoted in Thompson, 2014, p. 167)

These many tortures, even if considered as punishment for the uprising, were almost certainly illegal at every level. State and federal constitutional mandates of due process and prohibitions on cruel and unusual punishment, as well as international human rights treaties to the same effects, were blatantly ignored. No trials, nor any other actions remotely resembling due process, occurred before the brutality. Even if it had, the brutal beatings would surely have been found to be cruel and unusual by any court. Indeed, prisoners filed and, after decades of delay on the part of the state, won a class-action lawsuit to that effect (Thompson, 2016. pp. 498-500).

In the weeks, months, and years afterwards, the Attica prisoners were also attacked in the media. Immediately after retaking the prison, state officials made false statements to the many reporters gathered there. They claimed that the ten dead hostages had died when prisoners slit their throats. Furthermore, 62 inmates were indicted (Thompson, 2016, p. 313), despite District Attorney Louis James's promise to prisoners that he would "prosecute only when…there is substantial evidence to link a specific individual with the commission of a specific crime" (as quoted in Thompson, 2016, p. 119).

After the Attica Uprising, the State of New York began what could be charitably described as a disinformation campaign against the Attica prisoners. It more or less controlled the narrative, casting prisoners as monsters, hostages as victims, and agents of the state as heroes. But by retelling the story, control of the narrative can be wrested from the state. Depending instead on the testimonies of prisoners and observers in addition to those of prison officials and state troopers shows a broader—and deeply troubling—picture. This is why Freire insists that the oppressed must develop their voices: official narratives are skewed, if not outright false. With a more comprehensive picture of what happened and what effect it had, moral and ethical questions begin to arise. From these it is possible to begin the development of the critical consciousness that must undergird any liberatory social change.

Unpacking the Power Dynamics

The conditions that preceded the uprising showcased the state's arbitrary power over prisoners. For instance, Thompson (2016) describes insufficiently heated cells as well as a ban on improvised space heaters. She also mentions a ban on talking during the walk from cell blocks to the mess hall as well as in cell blocks after 8:00 PM. The penalty for breaking these no-talking rules was "keeplock", or indefinite 24 hour confinement to a small cell. As if these rules were not arbitrary enough in and of themselves, they were enforced selectively: "for the most part [the improvised heaters] were tolerated" (Thompson, 2016, p. 10), while only some guards enforced the no-talking rules. These conditions were a major catalyst for the uprising; unfortunately, they did not change in the wake of the hail of bullets unleashed that 13th of September.

In the aftermath of the Attica Uprising, the actions of state officials demonstrated exactly how little the lives of the prisoners meant to the state. According to Thompson, when officials falsely stated that the prisoners had killed the hostages, "state officials had won a crucial victory over prisoners by suggesting to the nation that any sympathy it might have for the plight of America's incarcerated was seriously misplaced" (2014, p. 167). Officials intimated that these supposed murders showed the prisoners to be subhuman and capable only of violence. They implied that convicts did not deserve a decent living situation and that it was absurd that Commissioner Oswald had even considered a single one of their demands. According to the tales spun by these officials, the state had been right to retake the prison—in doing so, they were preventing the convicts from committing more of these fictitious murders.

The criminal charges against prisoners served to further dehumanize them. Though only eight of the 62 men charged were actually convicted, the charges constituted a further attack on men who had already suffered not only the inhumane conditions of Attica Prison but the cold-blooded massacre of their comrades. The charges risked extending the length of time that the men would be subjected to these miserable conditions. And since the uprising was the final desperate act of a group of men whose pleas had gone unheeded, the charges were a punishment for speaking up. In sum, these charges were a clear message to the prisoners: to the state, your lives are worthless and disposable.

The state's flagrant abuse of power and the lack of consequences for its crimes also evidence an authoritarian streak in US governance. For instance, Governor Nelson Rockefeller rejected point-blank prisoners' demand for amnesty for their actions during the uprising. This rejection was somewhat uncharacteristic of Rockefeller; he had developed a reputation as a rather liberal Republican. However, he had ambitions for the Presidency, and saw retaking Attica as a chance to tap into the tough-on-crime rhetoric that has sustained Republican electoral victories for two generations since.

But the crimes committed by agents of the state were not the sole responsibility of the Governor. Superintendent Vincent Mancusi had hoped to retake the prison by force right away, first planning to do so with only his own men, and then with the help of the nearby New York State Police Troop A (Thompson, 2016, p. 61). Troop A's commander, Major John Monahan, also favored retaking the prison right away, believing that the negotiations were only legitimizing the inmates' control of the prison (Thompson, 2016, p. 139). Monahan and Mancusi did ultimately lead the retaking (Thompson, 2016, p. 156); the latter, again in control of the prison, turned a blind eye to the torture of prisoners (Thompson, 2016, p. 293). In the final analysis, the unmitigated violence and bloodshed of that day and the torture in the days and weeks that followed were the results of Monahan and Mancusi's leadership.

Attica also represents the beginning of the present era of mass incarceration. In its wake, narratives of prisoners as violent, irredeemable, and subhuman have driven

policy. Private prisons have flourished (Thompson, 2014, p. 170). Governor Rockefeller himself proposed the first of the harsh drug laws that have since been enacted across the country (Thompson, 2014, p. 170). States built the first super-maximum prisons—facilities composed solely of isolation units, designed expressly to keep radicalism out of general prison populations (Thompson, 2014, p. 169). These markers of the wave of prisonization of the last 40 years all flowed out of the narratives promulgated by state officials in the immediate aftermath of the Attica Uprising.

Through retelling the story of the Attica Uprising, we began to hear the voices of the prisoners involved. In examining the ways that political and governmental structures were involved in the violence of the Attica uprising, a troubling truth comes to light: there are social, political, and economic systems and structures set up to keep certain groups of people at the bottom of the societal ladder. Though the weight of this knowledge, which Freire calls critical consciousness, can be crushing, it is a necessary step towards social change. It brings a sense of urgency and moral necessity to social actions. Having developed critical consciousness, it is an ethical imperative to act in a principled way.

Advising Future Principled Action

The lessons of the Attica Uprising for prison abolition are several. Heather Ann Thompson writes that "what happens in our nation's prisons happens, ultimately, to all of us" (2014, p. 171). In this post-Attica age of mass incarceration, the destructive and dehumanizing impacts of prisons are more well-known than ever before. When record numbers of people are incarcerated, record numbers have been affected by the incarceration of a loved one. This presents an opportunity for the kind of shift in societies' beliefs about crime that Davis and Rodriguez discuss (2000). A mass movement can be built in resistance to the narratives of crime as an "individual pathology" that pose crime simplistically as a failing of individuals rather than as a complex social phenomenon (Davis and Rodriguez, 2000, p. 215). Such a movement would reject the tough-on-crime rhetoric that logically results from the individual pathology paradigm. Instead it might favor a rhetoric of rehabilitation, improved socialization, or economic justice, any and all of which would be preferable.

Such a movement can be helped along by educators and academics. The knowledge production of the last several years that has changed the Attica story shows this possibility. These recent corrections show how a new telling of history can change the conclusions that society draws. Thompson's writings have transformed the Attica story from one of prisoners gone mad to one of overbearing state power, showing that society's stories about crime and prisoners are not fixed. If this change is possible, certainly the transformation that Davis and Rodriguez describe can also take place. Scholars and educators following a Freirean model can use the resources at their disposal to generate knowledge through action research in partnership with prisoners as well as other marginalized communities and mass movements. In partnership, academics can contribute to the body of knowledge upon

which movements can found themselves. They can also amplify the voices of the unheard, while taking great care never to speak over them. Academics can thus embody a commitment to liberation in not only teaching, scholarship, or activism, but in a union of all three.

The Attica story showcases the capabilities of these movements to foster solidarity. Though it occurred in an era marked by racial tensions, ethnic nationalism, and militancy, the Attica Uprising involved white, black, and Latino men standing in solidarity against the horrific conditions under which they all lived. The Attica Uprising constituted a broad-based, multi-racial, anti-totalitarian, anti-authoritarian mass movement. Despite its violent suppression by the state, it proves that such an action is possible.

Arbitrary state power, like that which was on display throughout the Attica Uprising, provides an opportunity for building racial solidarity. Despite their racial differences, all of the prisoners were subject to arbitrary treatment. This provided an opportunity for disparate communities to rise up together against a shared experience of oppression at the hands of the state. Similar situations exist in the criminal justice system today. People across a variety of racial backgrounds are treated unjustly by agents of the state. They are stopped for driving while Black, Latino, or Asian; they are jailed for being too poor to pay a fine. The opportunities for interracial solidarity show themselves to be more and more numerous the more one looks: a rigged economy; a broken healthcare system; an underfunded public education system.

Perhaps most heartening of all is that these efforts are already happening all around us. In the past several years, concerns about income inequality and healthcare have been advanced by well-known political figures. As I write, teachers are striking to demand more funding for education. Even prisonization itself is becoming an object of widespread critique. Contemporary rhetoric around these issues often leaves something to be desired, of course; there are problems surrounding whose voices are being heard as well as the substance of the critiques. Nevertheless, they provide an opportunity for liberatory policies and practices to become more and more integrated into mainstream societal and political processes.

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