

Two Theories of the United States Prison System

by

Benjamin Thomas Parker

Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Department of Philosophy and Religion
and The Honors College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

May, 2016

Approved by:

Richard Elmore, Ph.D., Thesis Director

Alison Gulley, Ph.D., Second Reader

Laura Ammon, Ph.D., Departmental Honors Director

Ted Zerucha, Ph.D., Interim Director, The Honors College

This project is divided into two parts. The first is a social and historical account of racism and prisons in the United States. It relies on an interpretation of Jacques Derrida's concept of structured center to assert that America cannot exist without a racialized pariah caste. The purpose of "Part 1" is to establish the philosophical importance of prisons and to connect the social notion of invisibility to structural immobility, tracing this through the broader analysis of social, legal, and economic influences which converge in the site of the prison.

"Part 2" argues that prisons can be understood as an inefficient burden of excess energy, one that is not sporadic, but regularized through the emergence of biopolitics in the 20th century. The divisions between race and class which become examples of nebulous biopower are manipulated politically to 'kill' aspects of the citizen, particularly in the case of the prison labeled. This death allows for economic life to replace the missing pieces of the citizen, resurrecting them into the sphere of productivity (i.e. prison labor). These forces combined create a caste of citizen who are 'undead.' That is to say, socially dead, but economically productive.

Part 1

Prisons as America's Center: Slavery in Modernity

"To return to the problem of legal punishments, the prison with all the corrective technology at its disposal is to be resituated at the point... where the universal punishments of the law are applied selectively to certain individuals and always the same ones;... at the point where the law is inverted and passes outside itself..." Michel Foucault - Discipline and Punish pg. 224.

Laws and the display of punishments to enforce them are perhaps the defining expression of political power. That power rests in the marking of divisions between nations, spheres of social life, and subjects. Some subjects are allowed the privilege to alter these divisions and to be empowered by them. Others become marginal, a footnote to the grander novel. Much political philosophy is rooted in this observation. Answering the principle questions of how to order subjects, enforce laws, and punish the criminal are keystones of government and articulate its penal strategy. Without enforcement a law is impotent; without law, government becomes something akin to barbarism. Governments, therefore, require penal strategies in order to be structures of authority, a notion corroborated through reference to French philosopher Jacques Derrida. He writes:

The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a freeplay based on a fundamental ground, a freeplay which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of the freeplay.¹

Government, the 'centered structure,' paradoxically includes and excludes a part of itself, its 'immobilized' center, through exercising various penal methods. The relationship between structure and center is the ontic paradox for this imagining of political anatomy. Structure cannot exist without center, so it immobilizes the center

¹ Derrida, Jacques. "Jacques Derrida, Structure, Sign and Play." *Scribd*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Dec. 2014.

outside itself, preserving and defining itself, but dependant always on the center. A simple example of this is language.

Language is a structure, a system dependant on a set of rules or a center: grammar, syntax, metaphor. Without these rules to bring cohesion to language, sentences would vary in every instance and communication would be impossible. Following Derrida's logic, language therefore immobilizes a centered code of rules, which in turn allow for effective communication. Without too much strain, Derrida's pattern can be applied to nearly any example, but in every case, the structure inflicts immobilization on its center. To be centerless is to become disordered and incomplete; and to change the center is to pivot the entire operation of the structure. This is why Derrida chooses to speak of the center as "immobilized," and why Foucault notes it, in the case of the prison, as the moment when the law "is inverted and passes outside itself."²

Such radical dependence on a center can manifest itself viciously, since the ordering principle of the structure necessarily takes on a certain policing function. It also becomes necessary for the construction of identity. Citizens cohering with a structure's rules gain a certain validity and assurance, whereas those outside of the structure become deviant, queer, or delinquent. This construction of identity echoes the need for "reassuring certitude" which Derrida calls attention to. At the national level, this often leads to a population becoming a pariah group, socially or politically invisible, immobile. The event of immobilizing within populations will show a type of citizen which is erased by inclusion, participating without recognition. Using Derrida's system through a

² Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism." *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1995. 224. Print.

historical and social lens, it will be argued that the United States of America, with an economic, racial motive, immobilizes the currently and previously incarcerated members of its population.

Many scholars have identified an institutional racism within law.³ However, that cannot exist without a racism present in the instinctive behavior of subjects and their discourse in relation to each other. This quiet racism is the framework to its institutional form. Karen and Barbara Fields' sociological study *Racecraft* gives a distinct account of race-relations in the subconscious disposition of the United States, terming this quiet racism, 'racecraft.' 'Racecraft' is used to refer to "... mental terrain and pervasive belief."⁴ Racecraft also "[originates] in human action and imagination. It can exist in no other way."⁵ This explicitly turns us to an understanding of racism that is not only institutional or economic, but a racecraft that will justify the formation of laws and industries with its reflection in them. A key anecdote from their work exposes the implications of this racism.

A young woman, an immigrant from Iran, raises her hand in a class which is examining racial identity by way of a survey. Hers is not included in the survey, prompting her to comment, "I wish I had a race," so that she wouldn't have to fill in 'other.' As the Fields sisters summarize: "For that young woman, not to 'have' a race is to be less than fully American. What can she do but take America's imprisoning social

³ "Resource Bank." PBS. Accessed April 27, 2016. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/index.html>.

⁴ Fields, Karen E., and Barbara Jeanne. Fields. "Introduction." Introduction. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 18. Print.

⁵ Ibid.

forms as she finds them?”⁶ This brief episode accentuates the tendency of American culture to make race synonymous with identity, and the making of ignored identities synonymous with ‘other.’ It shows the power of racial identity in America as not only a marker of identity, but such a potent factor of it that lacking it costs inclusion in the social sphere through a power as simple as representation.

‘Having’ a race is therefore often perceived as superior to having none at all. Even when that race may be objectively prejudiced against, the identity it offers brings with it a degree of inclusion, simply as a lesser citizen. As argued by Michelle Alexander, in her book *The New Jim Crow*, when race is negatively stigmatized the result can be a sort of bitter pride. It may be easier to accept and use a bastardized self-image as armor and security of identity than work against a nation’s expectation. Conversely, when a negative expression of racecraft is experienced by those of the privileged race, such contact is intolerable. This is evidenced in the form of another anecdote in Fields’ work, that of Lyndon B. Johnson’s testimony in support of the Civil Rights Bill.⁷ He gave a short account of himself and his cook, Zephyr.

In this account, Johnson and Lady Bird were traveling and stopped to use a restroom. Shortly thereafter, Zephyr asked if they might pull onto the side of the road so he could use the restroom as well. Johnson candidly demanded, “Why the hell didn’t you do it when Bird and I did?” To which Zephyr replied, “Cause they wouldn’t let me.” Johnson reportedly slammed his fist on the table and proclaimed, “Gentlemen, is that the kind of country you want? It’s not the kind *I* want.” The sisters poignantly remark on this,

⁶ Fields, Karen E., and Barbara Jeanne. Fields. "A Tour of Racecraft. From Racism to Race." *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 44. Print.

⁷ Ibid. pg 26.

“For a brief moment, Johnson had lived Jim Crow as Zephyr did.”⁸ For Johnson, the oppression Zephyr dealt with every day of his life was only truly intolerable when Johnson had to brush up against it. This is no fault, necessarily, of Johnson’s character, more a testimony to the subconscious nature of racecraft in society.

The logic of racecraft accepts the institutional racism of America as unsurprising, or renders it unnoticed entirely. Invisibility in society is a fundamental aspect of political immobilization. It is only when Zephyr’s situation was made visible to Johnson that he reacted. However, Zephyr’s invisibility in that scenario is what allowed for the situation at all. This leads to an interesting understanding of privilege. Invisibility should be understood as twofold. Firstly, specific citizens experience a degree of invisibility in regards to social and political clout. Something like being ‘silenced’ would be synonymous here, because voice that is not heard is parallel to a situation that is not seen. Secondly, the experience of those citizens themselves is invisible to citizens who are unaffected by it. This is a logic that compels so many of privilege to simply not understand, to not see, the message behind phrases like “Black Lives Matter.” The notion of social and political invisibility, which mirrors a certain death of the subject or citizen, is inherently connected to immobilization because the most powerful immobilization is one which is not seen to occur, or is not recognized as legitimate. When this is extrapolated to accommodate the untold thousands of situations wherein an African American’s situation was simply, perhaps even innocently, overlooked, one begins to

⁸ Ibid.

understand how this social invisibility can act powerfully between citizens in immobilizing a population.

Institutional racism, through the legal sphere, is well represented through Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow*. Two integral terms from her work are "undercaste" and "racial caste." Undercaste is defined as "... a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society."⁹ Racial caste, in comparison, is defined as "... a stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom."¹⁰ These terms distinguish between the legal and cultural faces of oppression and, in tandem, they define an identical status to immobilization. And, as the Fields sisters termed them, this is the difference between racism and racecraft, the legal and the cultural. A caste that is both "racial" and "under" is both locked into an inferior position and unable to participate in the laws and customs which lock it. It is both included as member and excluded as citizen. The Civil Rights Bill and related legal initiatives have thus far encouraged a more subtle means of enforcing the American tradition of oppression, making the legal discrimination against African Americans nearly "invisible,"¹¹ as Alexander says. Perhaps though, as in the case of Eric Garner, among other tragedies these past years, more subtlety has been abandoned than the nation is willing to admit.

Alexander argues that the United States enforces a legal web of policies and restrictions, ultimately creating a legally trapped undercaste of persons, the 'prison

⁹ Ibid. pg 13.

¹⁰ Ibid. pg 14.

¹¹ Alexander, Michelle. "Introduction." Introduction. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New, 2012. 4. Print.

labeled.’ To name a few, these restrictions include legal impediments and bans in employment, voting, education, public benefits, housing, and jury service.¹² The population living with these restrictions is substantial. The “land of the free” incarcerates more citizens per capita than any other nation. For this reason, the terms mass incarceration, the carceral state, hyperincarceration, and the ‘prison boom’ all point back to a definitively American conception. Of the rights withheld from prisoners voting is the most important as an immobilizing tactic because of its historical significance to American culture and its defining reflexive property, empowering citizens such that they can change the laws they operate under.

Incarceration is thereby used as a social vise and means of control over the American population, advertising itself as a necessary punitive measure. In punishing the criminal, an unabashedly racist tendency became clear. This is plainly seen in the case of the “War on Drugs.” The official declaration of the ‘war,’ with particular emphasis on cocaine, was made by the Reagan administration in 1982.¹³ Roughly three years later, cocaine became a heavily publicized concern in major cities. Terms such as ‘crack whore’ and ‘crack baby’ became firmly associated with, and even advertised as, a specifically African American deviance from healthy societal expectation,¹⁴ explicitly conceptualizing criminality through racist terms; that is, through a racial identity. Furthermore, this reinforced the public sanctioning of police officers acting with extreme prejudice against, in particular, young inner-city African American men.

¹² Ibid. pg 17.

¹³ Ibid. pg 5.

¹⁴ Ibid.

By 2012, exactly thirty years later, some cities in America showed incarceration rates of African American men as high as eighty percent.¹⁵ Pair this with the ingrained, pioneering American dream of class mobility in which we are all capable of ‘climbing the ladder,’ or ‘manifesting our destinies.’ Those who do not succeed at bettering themselves have, ultimately, only themselves to truly blame for their failure. By incarcerating a targeted race, the United States is able to cage a particular type of citizen into an expectation, a center, that the rest of society can function in relation and opposition to. The population of the United States is even instinctively encouraged to maintain this expectation, not only by more privileged castes who benefit from pariahdom, but by African Americans and other minorities who are demonstrably victimized. The insidious nature of this stigmatization can be argued to actively destroy many African Americans’ image of themselves. Alexander argues that,

The criminalization and demonization of black men has turned the black community against itself, unraveling community and family relationships, decimating networks of mutual support, and intensifying the shame and self-hate experienced by the current pariah caste.¹⁶

This emphasizes the self-image experienced by the racial undercaste of American society and shows how this psychology can augment and perpetuate its own “demonized” status from within. Moreover, the democratic process of voting, which controls the laws governing the United States, begins receiving trivial influence from those it is prejudiced against. Restriction of voting rights not only keeps voices isolated from legal discussion but is also denial of privilege and assertion of inferior character. Laws, by definition, are an aspect of immobilization. Yet the right to vote in their construction, abolishment, and

¹⁵ Ibid. pg 7.

¹⁶ Ibid. pg 17.

evolution has long stood as a fundamental mark of status in America. This is precisely what made women's suffrage an imperative victory in 1920, after eighty years of slow progress. It is frequently the case that even the act of voting is not valued as highly as the right to vote, because of the particular rank the right to vote embodies. To strip voting rights, or to obstruct the act of voting, is not simply to immobilize persons in legal discussion, but a cultural debasement of status and worth as an American.

Immobilization occurs through social interactions and certainly in laws, but these are not material, satisfying examples. How can we adequately discuss something as mercurial as thought, ideology, and instinct, hoping to exact meaningful change? The prison is an example of literal immobilization. The United States has always had tangible, physical locations and structures which have exemplified the immobilization of, and delineation between, its subjects. It has docked ships designed explicitly for the inhuman transport of human cargo, cleared plantations so that thousands of whip-scarred persons can be displayed, chained men together on railroad crews, labeled bathrooms, restaurants, and water fountains all in an overt effort to make acceptable placement clear.

Hopefully, none argue against the fact that in American history there existed racism and the social/legal marginalization of racial castes. Admitting and exposing its existence now, however, is an uncomfortable task. We point to the abolishment of slavery, the Civil Rights Act, Title IX, the Nineteenth Amendment, and even the recent legalization of same sex marriage all as ways to mark distance and progress from our demonstrably prejudiced history. These achievements have caused a peculiar change in America's oppressions, be they racism, sexism, or homophobia, forcing them to hide

from plain sight. This is again why Alexander calls the legal discriminations still at work in America “invisible” and this is physically mirrored in where immobilized persons are gathered. Prisons are the perfect example of where immobilized persons are literally trapped.

They are within walls, instead of a sprawling plantation, and prisons are, usually, away from populated areas, making them easy to forget. This contributes to the idea of invisibility and also to general lack of large-scale public concern over America’s prison situation. Contrast this with the trope of a dungeon. Rather than a sprawling complex with scores of chained ne’er-do-wells and a monster or two, the dungeons of antiquity were generally built to house a handful of special offenders, or political prisoners, and were typically attached to the palace or castle of the ruler where the prisoners could not truly be forgotten. This is because the economic feasibility of holding large numbers of prisoners for extended periods of time was not realistic for most governments until roughly the 19th century. In America today, the annual cost of incarcerating a person in a federal or state facility is around thirty thousand dollars.¹⁷ The peak cost of maintaining America’s prison population occurred in 2008 when an estimated 74 billion dollars were spent.¹⁸ In fact, extended incarceration was rarely a law anywhere on Earth until the late 18th century and then only by wealthy countries and never in the sheer number of incarcerated we see today.¹⁹ We often consider prisons to have always existed whereas in

¹⁷Samuels, Charles E., Jr. "Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform 282 in the Last Year." Federal Register. March 6, 2015. Accessed April 27, 2016.
<https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2015/03/09/2015-05437/annual-determination-of-average-cost-of-incarceration>.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ "History of the Prison System." - The Howard League for Penal Reform. Accessed April 27, 2016.
<http://www.howardleague.org/history-of-prison-system/>.

reality, prisons are a definitively modern construction, a radical, wondrous success of biopolitical control.

When every action can be measured economically, it seems like the exorbitant cost of maintaining inmates cannot make fiscal sense. It does not, for the government. Some of this inefficiency is forced by mandatory sentencing, a byproduct of the War on Drugs, but much of it is encouraged by privatization and married to the prison industry. If sentencing goes down, the demand for prison space also drops. Prisons are one of America's most emblematic physical bastions of prejudice. The correlation, therefore, of increasing social justice awareness and hard-won legal progress while prisons grew larger and more numerous is no surprise. As the noose has tightened on various spheres of institutionalized racism, the prisons have been largely ignored and have grown because of it.

Angela Davis' book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, specifically the pages dedicated to "The Prison Industrial Complex,"²⁰ exposes the growing trend in America to privatize and exploit prison space and labor. The United States comprises roughly five percent of the global population, but contains around twenty-five percent of the entire world's prisoners.²¹ In 2008, slightly more than one percent of American adults were incarcerated.²² Through media and cultural tropes it can be surmised that inmate's spend inordinate amounts of time working out, reading, finding Jesus, and taking classes provided by various federal, state, and private institutions. The reality is somewhat

²⁰ Davis, Angela Y. "The Prison Industrial Complex." *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories, 2003. 84-104. Print.

²¹ http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/wpp1_10.pdf

²² Ibid.

bleaker. Davis quotes a powerful section from Linda Evans and Eve Goldberg. They write:

For private business prison labor is like a pot of gold. No strikes. No union organizing. No health benefits, unemployment insurance, or workers' compensation to pay. No language barriers, as in foreign countries. New leviathan prisons are being built on thousands of eerie acres with factories inside the walls. Prisoners do data entry for Chevron, make telephone reservations for TWA, raise hogs, shovel manure, and make circuit boards, limousines, waterbeds, and lingerie for Victoria's Secret, all at a fraction of the cost of 'free labor.'²³

The discussion of a prison industry was born in response to the outlandish notion that crime could have possibly increased to mirror the rate of incarceration demonstrated in the United States. In a twenty-five year period since the passing of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, the United States' incarcerated, jailed, and paroled population grew from roughly three hundred thousand to nearly two and a half million people.²⁴ One of the largest capitalist entities tied to the prison industry is the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA). The CCA, which has grown by over 500 percent in the last two decades, has approached 48 states with offers to buy and then facilitate the operation of their prisons.²⁵ A clause in these proposals includes an occupancy mandate which forces the state to keep the prisons at least 90 percent full, "regardless of whether crime was rising or falling."²⁶ Some states, such as Arizona, have occupancy mandates requiring that 100 percent of prisons' beds be filled.²⁷ In 2011 the CCA recorded 1.7 billion dollars in gross

²³ Davis, Angela Y. "The Prison Industrial Complex." *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories, 2003. 84. Print.

²⁴ http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/wpp1_10.pdf

²⁵ Kroll, Andy. "This Is How Private Prison Corporations Make Millions Even When Crime Goes down." *Mother Jones*. N.p., 19 Sept. 2013. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.

<<http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2013/09/private-prisons-occupancy-quota-cca-crime>>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

revenue from its mere 66 privately owned and operated facilities.²⁸ That boils down to roughly twenty-six million dollars in annual profit per prison they operate.

Many statistics are imprecise. Lobbying can allow for loopholes in reported data and prison size versus prison occupancy can also obscure information. And, while the number of privately owned prisons is not impressive, the space leased from federal and state facilities is not always represented. There is no dispute, however, that there is a legitimate demand for prison real estate and the labor and profit tied to filling that space; that there is massive revenue achieved by doing so; that substantial quantities of money (roughly 20 million dollars over ten years of lobbying)²⁹ flow back into state politics; and that privatization of prisons is a growing industry. As reported by Vicky Pelaez for Global Research in 2008, “Ten years ago there were only five private prisons in the country, with a population of 2,000 inmates; now, there are 100, with 62,000 inmates. It is expected that by the coming decade, the number will hit 360,000.”³⁰ The CCA, in addition to having its own political action committee (PAC), raised nearly \$60,000 in the 2012 presidential election through their own PAC for Republican candidates and donated well over \$100,000 to various other right-wing PACs.³¹ Crime, and the racial scapegoat of crime, is the guise under which corporations, in tandem with political agents, have

²⁸ Lee, Suevon. "By the Numbers: The U.S.'s Growing For-Profit Detention Industry." *Top Stories RSS*. ProPublica, 20 June 2012. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.

<<http://www.propublica.org/article/by-the-numbers-the-u.s.s-growing-for-profit-detention-industry>>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Pelaez, Vicky. "The Prison Industry in the United States: Big Business or a New Form of Slavery?" *The Prison Industry in The United States: Big Business or a New Form of Slavery?* Global Research, 10 Mar. 2008. Web. 09 Nov. 2015.

<<http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-prison-industry-in-the-united-states-big-business-or-a-new-form-of-slavery/8289>>.

³¹ Petrella, Christopher. "Private Prisons and Presidential Politics." *NationofChange*. N.p., 19 Oct. 2012. Web. 26 Jan. 2016. <<http://www.nationofchange.org/private-prisons-and-presidential-politics-1350654639>>.

nurtured prisons into a considerable economic and political force. This goes to show, definitively, that prisons did not grow as a result of exponentially increasing crime. Profit seems a larger motive than a racial vendetta, yet institutional racism has always been an economic issue. Slavery has always been an economic issue. And, in the footsteps of slavery, the structure of American prisons is dependent on being profitable. The prison industry's economic incentive is exacerbated by privatization, which philosopher Jason Read slyly refers to as, "neoliberalism's strategy for dealing with the public sector."³²

Capitalism, and the ideology it facilitates, cannot be separated from discussions of the prison industry, nor from immobilization, in the United States. The raw materials of the American prison industry are bodies, preferably African American bodies. One out of every three African American men in the United states will be incarcerated at some point in their lives.³³ This means they will be brought to the brink of political death, exploited for profit while incarcerated, and all but forced to return once their inequitable sentence is up. This is clearly represented in the Bureau of Justice report released in 2002, which showed recidivism rates at roughly 70 percent within three years of inmates' release.³⁴ A report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 2013 wrote that, in the United States, "even when cases were controlled for the severity of the offense, the defendant's

³² Read, Jason. "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity." N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Dec. 2014.

<[http%3A%2F%2Ffrauli.cbs.dk%2Findex.php%2Ffoucault-studies%2Farticle%2FviewFile%2F2465%2F2463](http://3A%2F%2Ffrauli.cbs.dk%2Findex.php%2Ffoucault-studies%2Farticle%2FviewFile%2F2465%2F2463)>.

³³ "Statistics of Incarcerated African-American Males." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Jan. 2015. Web. 11 Feb. 2015.

³⁴ The United States of America. Department of Justice. Office of Justice Programs. *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*. By Patrick A. Langan and David J. Levin. N.p.: n.p., n.d. *U.S. Department of Justice*. Web. 9 Nov. 2015. <<http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/rpr94.pdf>>.

prior criminal history, and the specific district court's sentencing tendencies, blacks received sentences 5.5 months longer than whites"³⁵

Hence, a bald truth of the United States as a structure is clear: an economic racism is America's center. It is included, ignored, and has always been a necessary component for the identity and fiscal productivity of the structure as a whole. Racialized social control can be found throughout the entire history of the United States, such that one could reasonably claim it as the nation's thumb print. And without racism, the United States would cease to function as we recognize it now. In modernity, prisons are an epitomizing vessel of immobilization. And although some claim America has reached a post-racial age, the bodies once carried in ships are now chained instead within fortresses of concrete and steel. For the United States to continue existing as it has and as we know it now, a post-racial age is impossible.

³⁵ *Race And The Criminal Justice System In The United States*. Rep. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Research and Advocacy for Reform. *The Sentencing Project*. Web. 29 Nov. 2015.

Part 2

Prisons as an Inefficient Burden of Excess Energy: The Intersection of General Economy, Biopolitics, and Zombies

“The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life.” Georges Bataille - The Accursed Share Vol. 1 pg. 33

The site of the prison, particularly in the United States, enjoys a salient condition in philosophical inquiry. It holds relevance in studies of political methodology, criminal procedure, race relations, ethics, and myriad areas of economic and structural theory. As argued previously, prisons create a labeled caste of citizen which functions as a reassuring center of American national identity and as an evolution of slavery. Prisons will now be examined through methods less expository and more theoretical, less particular and more abstract. The purpose of this is to step back from the historical and economic research which show how prisons in the United States are problematic in order to generalize the problem back towards its roots. Prescriptions follow diagnoses and, just so, this is an effort to re-diagnose America’s prison situation in hopes that superior understanding will yield superior solutions.

The project begins by striving to understand the fundamental forces at play across the globe, which surface to create points of interest like war, art, reproduction, industry, and the prisons of the United States. Through examining the patterns of general economy the burden of the prison industry will be made clear. A selection of resources on biopolitics will show the emergence of a new political power, which forms a new kind of

citizen. And finally, the combined effect of these theories, the creation of an undead caste of citizen, will be validated through the literary analysis of monster theory.

To begin, the French novelist and philosopher Georges Bataille's theory of general economy exhumes an interpretation of mass incarceration in the United States as a social/political phenomenon, by reversing the basic suppositions of economic activity. To understand Bataille's theory, an abstract conceptualization of energy must be established. It must be understood as coexistent with, and encompassing of, life, while exerting itself through more and less efficient outlets.

Bataille outlines four basic features of energy, understood through General Economy. The first is a simple observation that the study of operations, such as economics, tends to be that of an "isolatable system of operation."³⁶ It is a study which we can clearly define the limits of. However, once the limits have been established, it still relies fundamentally back onto the circulation of other operations around the Earth, to systems grander than it and from which it is not truly isolated.³⁷ That is, while we can isolate systems out from their 'meta' connections they always depend back onto a global network of operation. This is a simple and intuitive claim, but also critical because Bataille recognizes the tendency for societies to treat connected operations as if they were largely or entirely isolated. Once a system has been isolated in practice, it is natural to act as if it had always been isolated. Bataille claims that we can never act upon one thing without causing reactions to an immense network of operations. For example, the draining of an abscess or plowing of a vineyard are 'easy' and 'limited' operations,

³⁶ Bataille, Georges, and Robert Hurley. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. New York: Zone, 1988. Print. pg 19.

³⁷ Ibid.

whereas the automobile industry in the United States is not.³⁸ Yet we treat the automobile industry too similarly as to how we treat the management of limited operations. He writes, “Production and consumption are linked together, but, considered jointly, it does not seem difficult to study them as one might study an elementary operation relatively independent of that which it is not.”³⁹

In economic calculation, the global consequence of industry is not a factor. It may be anticipated, avoided, or even incited, but what Bataille argues is that there is a lack of representation for the connectedness of industries to political and social consequence, in the calculus itself. For example, the purported success of industries fail to account for the totality of their impact. A United Nations study exposed that without displacing or externalizing costs onto the environment, “essentially none of the industries were actually making a profit.”⁴⁰ It specifically marks BP as guilty, but largely focuses on the region-sector industries of Coal Power Generation (in Eastern Asia), Cattle Ranching and Farming (in South America), Coal Power Generation (in North America), Wheat Farming (in Southern Asia), and Rice Farming (in Southern Asia).⁴¹ This is a perfect example of the interconnectedness of operations not being factored into an isolated system’s operation and the large-scale calculation of its profit.

The second basic function of general economy is the necessity of losing, wasting, or unleashing that energy that cannot be used for a system’s growth.⁴² A simple analogy to understand this is the operation of an automobile. In this example, because the car

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Thomas, Michael. "New UN Report Finds Almost No Industry Profitable If Environmental Costs Were Included." *Exposing The Truth*. 2015. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bataille, Georges, and Robert Hurley. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. New York: Zone Books, 1988. Pg 20.

cannot 'grow,' it must unleash the surplus energy through movement. The act of movement requires a superabundance of energy, in this case fuel and the force released from an internal combustion engine. This movement, however, through the abundance required for it, is by definition an expenditure of energy, a waste of energy. The movement itself is a luxury. A perfectly efficient car would, within Bataille's theory, never move, and therefore never spend energy inefficiently. Luxurious actions can not be separated from inefficiency, so if it moves it must have some degree of inefficiency. Energy, and life, is therefore not about efficiency. It is about methods of inefficiency.

In the act of moving, the car produces a waste and a loss of energy. Bataille's example is of "coffee thrown into the sea" simply because there was an excess of it which could not be 'harnessed for the system's growth' and was therefore wasted.⁴³ Bataille is concerned with the energy used to propel the vehicle and the superabundance of energy, but soon focuses on the danger of accumulated energy. The situation wherein a system's growth is contained and pressure is allowed to concentrate within its limits, whether physical or entirely intangible, are sites through which energy can be released catastrophically. Bataille's explanation of this section goes as such,

The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.⁴⁴

This is perhaps the most intuitive of Bataille's basic features of general economy, so he moves briskly into the third section, entitled, "The Poverty of Organisms or Limited

⁴³ Ibid. Pg. 22.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Pg. 21.

Systems and the Excess Wealth of Living Nature.”⁴⁵ This section is devoted to positing two claims. The first, in regards to the poverty of organisms, shows that,

... energy, which constitutes wealth, must ultimately be spent lavishly (without return), and that a series of profitable operations has absolutely no other effect than the squandering of profits.⁴⁶

The poverty of organisms is Bataille’s way of noting what nearly every existentialist posits in their own way: the futility, absurdity, or meaninglessness of life and action. For Bataille, the ‘totality of productive wealth’ is always only about how to waste it, lose it, or unleash it catastrophically. This spirals precariously towards a conclusion inferring that then, if the only outlet of production is waste, is not the very act of producing a waste itself, a cosmically bitter irony? Bataille flirts with this notion in his preface, noting the absurdity of him spending so much time and energy to produce a book about the imminent futility of his own, and all other, expenditures of time and energy.

More interestingly, this is a Bataillean understanding of privilege. One who controls how their productive wealth is lavishly squandered is privileged above one without that control. The poverty of organisms points to the cyclical futility of production and consumption (or, more accurately, of production and waste). And, importantly, the excess wealth of living nature differentiates between living matter and dead matter. For Bataille, it is a fact of living nature to embody an energy, imminently in excess. After all, living things need to grow, eat, reproduce, etc. The account of human nature then, or at least a fact of its existence, is not only to have projects be fundamentally about their own

⁴⁵ Ibid. Pg 22.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

wasting, but to have no choice while alive but to pursue such operations. Bataille clarifies, in regards to a fact of human existence, writing that,

The general movement of exudation (of waste) of living matter impels him, and he cannot stop it; moreover, being at the summit, his sovereignty in the living world identifies him with this movement; it destines him, in a privileged way, to that glorious operation, to useless consumption.⁴⁷

The final basic quality that Bataille offers as an aid to understand his project at large is an example of the potential consequence from a “catastrophic expenditure of excess energy” - war. Bataille’s work, like many 20th century philosophers and writers through the rise of modern existentialism, is largely influenced by the World Wars. Many interpretations of his work view it as a means to explain how it happened and to make sense of the massive destructive power unleashed across the globe. For Bataille’s theory of general economy, war is entirely explainable as a mismanaged release of energy. For him, such releases are inevitable, but can be harnessed responsibly to produce art, monuments, technological advancements, and philosophical books about the futility of effort.

In the case of the World Wars, the global industry, population, and overall measures of potential productivity, which determines the theoretical limit of accrued energy, had reached a status of intensity that the world had never experienced before. Imagine a sphere which, over time and for various biological/technological/economic reasons becomes filled with an ephemeral energy. Once the limits of the sphere are reached, the limits must then be expanded (in biology as growth and reproduction, in politics as expansions of industry and territory), or else the energy is wasted, lost, or

⁴⁷ Bataille, Georges, and Robert Hurley. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. New York: Zone Books, 1988.

violently discharged in grenade-like fashion. The world wars, understood through Bataille's theory, are simply a misallocation and mismanagement of massive, global energies. It is no accident that history shows years of brinkmanship preceding the wars, as the various nations' energies pushed to their extremities, spewing finally into bloody conflict. In this regard, Bataille writes that,

We can express the hope of avoiding a war that already threatens. But in order to do so we must divert the surplus production, either into the rational extension of a difficult industrial growth, or into unproductive works that will dissipate an energy that cannot be accumulated in any case.⁴⁸

As mentioned previously, Bataille considers the purpose of art and the creation of monuments, the Colossus of Rhodes and the pyramids are ideal examples, as necessary means of distracting and directing energy through less catastrophic operations than war. It is here that Bataille's theory is explicitly relevant to discussions of the prison industry in the United States. Directly in the transition from the Vietnam War, which ended in 1973,⁴⁹ is the rapid expansion of the prison industrial complex in the United States. Exponential growth of facilities and inmates began, a few years later, in the early 80's, possibly as a result of large numbers of poor, drafted men returning home from the war. And while America has often had a relatively high percentage of its population either in jail, prison, or on parole, it is at the point in history that America's energies as a nation became funneled away from land wars in Asia, away from an arms race with Russia and technologies dedicated to the Space Race, and towards one of its own 'difficult industrial growths.'

⁴⁸ Bataille, Georges, and Robert Hurley. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. New York: Zone Books, 1988.

⁴⁹ Hickman, Kennedy. "Last Days of the Vietnam War & the Paris Peace Accords." About.com Education. September 10, 2015. Accessed April 26, 2016. <http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/vietnamwar/a/VietnamEnd.htm>.

The exponential increase of prisoners, and the potential labor from them, was indeed a ‘difficult industrial growth.’ Occurring just decades after the Civil Rights Movement, many activists became alarmed at the backsliding social progress reflected through the rates of incarceration, and the targeted race of African Americans. And, ignoring the social/ethical backlash, the pragmatic cost of building and operating the facilities (although factories may be a more suitable term here) is staggering, as reported in the preceding article.

It is possible to understand Bataille’s theory as simply pertaining to instances of pure wastes of energy, of global excrement. With the earlier example of the World Wars, the waste was practically immeasurable. The loss of life is the loss of future productive power, the loss of ‘biopower.’ Through this mismanaged waste, however, there fostered a subset of industries which leached from the wasted energy, subverted it, and capitalized on it. To phrase it more simply, some companies, by selling arms and supplies, profited, and continue to profit today, from war, a mismanagement of energy.

This logic is reflected in countless venues. Disaster capitalism is an excellent representation of this pattern. Bataille frames it through reproduction. He writes,

Neither growth nor reproduction would be possible if plants and animals did not normally dispose of an excess. The very principle of living matter requires that the chemical operations of life, which demand an expenditure of energy, be gainful, productive of surpluses.⁵⁰

Simple farming strategies then, such as the castration of calves to preserve fat, and the harvesting of milk rather than allowing cattle to reproduce, are basic strategies to take preexisting excesses and turn them to economic advantage. Being ‘business savvy’

⁵⁰ Bataille, Georges, and Robert Hurley. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*. New York: Zone Books, 1988.

is simply a signifier for being able to find ways of capitalizing on preexisting excesses, rather than creating one's own operation. Startups are harder than takeovers.

It is reasonable to suggest that when the term 'industrial complex' is added to something, Bataille's theory of general economy is a useful tool for understanding its operation. The Military Industrial Complex, Food Industrial Complex, Big Pharma, and the Prison Industrial Complex are possibly America's most burdensome excesses of energy today. They partially fail, however, to follow Bataille's theory - they are not sporadic. Whereas many excesses of energy erupt at seemingly spontaneous moments which later, in retrospect, are explainable, these four have lasted beyond thirty years. They have been fortified and made into constantly spewing abscesses of society.

By appealing to Michel Foucault's essays on biopolitics, such regularizations of excess can be drawn as parallel to the function of biopolitics itself. Biopolitics is, among many of its features identified by Foucault,

... not a matter of taking the individual at the level of individuality but, on the contrary, of using overall mechanisms and acting in such a way as to achieve overall states of equilibration or regularity; it is, in a word, a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined, but regularized.⁵¹

It is no accident that the military, the food, the medical, and the criminal, perhaps the four universal pillars of social and political concern, became four regularized instances of the biopolitical world that we see today. As Bataille noted the pattern of general economy in the natural and social world, Foucault noticed its reflection in the later half of the 20th century through political behavior. While generally the topic of

⁵¹ Campbell, Timothy C., and Adam Sitze. *Biopolitics: A Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

biopolitics is concerned more with exercises of sovereign power, and the relationship this has on the types of subjects contained in societies, the general setting of biopolitics has fundamentally changed how philosophy addresses issues of society and of politics. Biopolitics opened the floodgates to realizing politics as not protecting individuals, but as protecting ratios like reproduction, incarceration, etc.

As the human population on Earth and within nations surpassed the limits of what could be controlled specifically, politics became about controlling the human as species, not as individual. Docile bodies became docile populations, docile aggregates. What Bataille would identify as a mismanaged energy can be seen as an exertion of power, such that it regulates life in a sphere where what *would* be unproductive is instead still presented as fuel for productivity and utility. It achieves this by not splitting between species, but by splitting within species, by manipulating divisions such as race and class. It makes subjects live a certain way, along boundaries that are cultural, racial, sexual, or economic. In the case of prison labor, the economic productivity that prisoners make possible is due to the divisions internal to the nation along these topics.

Biopolitics is a way to speak about a politics that is less hierarchical, more nebulous. It is difficult to trace a chain of command in a biopolitical setting and, for exactly this reason, war is an example of bad biopolitics, just as it is an example of poorly released energy. War is too disciplined to be an example of biopolitics. Racism, however, is a perfect example of biopolitical power in everyday life. It is impossible to trace a single culprit or moment where racism became a force in societies and racism therefore escapes any serious analysis as a disciplinary social force. Wars which drag on

indefinitely without a clear sense of purpose may be examples of war trying to adapt into a new global politic. Industrial complexes are not only an achievement within biopolitics, but a highly successful and efficient use of excess energy within Bataille's theory.

By using racial and class distinctions to 'kill' aspects of citizenship, biopolitics allows for extreme productivity. Foucault notes that this new power no longer "brought death into play in the field of sovereignty" but rather became adept at distributing "the living in the domain of value and utility."⁵² This shift is catalyzed by the concept of human capital. Foucault notes the influence of numerous social processes in a grander, global emergence of what he terms, 'biopower.' The "making live"⁵³ that Foucault writes of is a parallel occurrence to fortified operations of excess energy. In the political, it occurs as a stripping of the right to die, exemplified through the taboo of suicide and the extensions of life sentencing over the death penalty. In the theoretical, it occurs as excesses which cease to be sporadic and rather become permanently integrated. What has occurred, then, is at the same moments that biopolitics became an observable political change, Bataille's theory of general economy adjusted to become compatible with the new global bearing.

Foucault wrote that,

... we have become so good at keeping people alive that we've succeeded in keeping them alive when, in biological terms, they should have been dead long ago. And so the man who had exercised the absolute power of life and death... fell under the influence of a power that managed life so well, that took so little heed of death, and he didn't even realize that he was dead and being kept alive after his death. I think that this minor but joyous event symbolizes the clash between two systems of power: that of

⁵² Foucault, Michel. "Chapter 1." *Right of Death and Power over Life*. 44. Print.

⁵³ Foucault, Michel, Mauro Bertani, Alessandro Fontana, François Ewald, and David Macey. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76*. New York: Picador, 2003. Pg. 241.

sovereignty over death, and that of the regularization of life.⁵⁴

This is perhaps the most concise definition of biopolitics that exists, a system of power that seeks to regularize life. For power to be sovereign over death, it must force life. It must make live, avoiding and delaying death, attempting to control it by regulating life. Not only does this occur biologically, it occurs through a making live in particular way. It might take, for example, a population that has experienced widespread social death but reanimate it, bringing it back into the sphere of productive life. It might take prisoners and make them 'live' for the purposes of being economically profitable. Instances, therefore, of social death within a species but not of individual death ultimately create a caste 'under,' and racial by convenience, but truly, undead. This is the similarity between Bataille's notion of capitalizing on wasted energy and Foucault's observations of biopolitics.

Death holds critical relevance in biopolitical discussion, as a tool of shattering subjectivity, of escaping sovereign and social power. To Bataille, death is the limit of energy and the definition of it. Moments, then, of sexual action (in French, an orgasm is termed *la petit mort*, or, 'a small death') give moments of dissociative luxury akin to, or perhaps sublimely identical with, death. To clarify, as the claim that death is a matter of luxury most likely rings dissonantly, any action or method of energy which does not arise out of necessity is a 'luxury.' Death is indeed a luxury because, as Bataille argues,

... death is not necessary. The simple forms of life are immortal: The birth of an organism born through scissiparity is lost in the mists of time... It is not a new space, and if one considers life as a whole, there is not really growth but a maintenance of volume in general. In other words, the possible growth is reduced to a compensation for the destructions that are brought about.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 69.

This highlights the overarching theme of Bataille's work, that the history of life on Earth is dominated by stories of growth, which is luxury, which is inefficiency. In the reproduction of a species, the growth is one which exceeds the balance of replacing that which must be destroyed through the existence of entropy. The human race, having so quickly surpassed the terrestrial limits as they were set, is now at point of such massive populations, that it has begun a kind of cannibalization. War, industrial complexes, and other intentional means of making inefficient lives become even more burdensome are the effects of this pressure upon humanity.

Biopolitics is about the regularization of life, much as Bataille's theory shows the efforts undertaken to regulate energy. However, biopolitics takes what can be considered biologically, socially, or politically dead and brings it back into line, back into productivity. It is about taking an exclusion and making it work. This occurs biologically through the desperate measures taken to keep people alive in medical facilities. And it occurs socially and politically when a pariah caste, such as the prison labeled, is stripped of value and rank but remains included and is expected to function as if the label attached to them was no impairment at all. The prison labeled, in a biopolitical world, are a caste of citizens who are dead, but kept alive. Biopolitics creates a caste of undead.

General economy is an abstract, quasi-mystical account of terrestrial energy. It seems applicable, but should something be critically presented based on its intuitive appeal alone? How are these topics validated as methods of explanation? Biopolitics mirrors buzzwords in academia like 'neoliberalism,' but is similarly difficult to define and to prove as a real force at play in modernity. If, therefore, there is an intersection of

general economy and biopolitics, an observable account and global subconscious should mirror their accounts of what is. There is a tradition for such reflections of society and an academic venue for such analysis, such validation - monster theory.

Monster theory is a broad term for studies in religion, literature, history, and folklore which generally espouses the belief that the monsters birthed from within cultures strongly correlate to nascent fears, anxieties, and statuses of that culture as an aggregate.⁵⁵ For example, the early ‘atomic age’ science fiction movies depicted monsters which were horrendously powerful and disfigured because humankind had meddled with nuclear energy. This reflects a basic societal fear that science, paralleling the tale of Icarus, will allow humankind to reach too far, resulting in disaster. Around the same time, the Red Scare influenced books, comics, magazines and movies to the point that ‘The Red Scare’ was an actual supervillain, reflecting the widespread societal fear of Russia and of communism.⁵⁶

This pattern extends as far back as the earliest tales, wherein monsters existed on the edge of society, both included and excluded, congenitally aberrant and fundamentally similar. For example, creatures such as Frankenstein’s monster, Dracula, lycanthropes, and, in modernity, zombies, exist in the border between society and the unknown. Dracula embodies an intelligent, sublimely erotic creature. Even in instances when characters have their instincts screaming at them that something is amiss, Dracula’s immense power of manipulation corrodes the human will. A quality of vampirism which has been realized fully in modernity is their ineffable sexual appeal, in spite of repulsion.

⁵⁵ Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

⁵⁶ Vine, Comic. "The Red Scare." (Character) The Red Scare. Accessed April 16, 2016.
<http://comicvine.gamespot.com/the-red-scare/4005-49172/>.

In a scene from Jonathan Harkin's diary, where he is visited at night by three female vampires in Dracula's castle,

All three had brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips.⁵⁷

A monster with this power of seduction reflects the common fear of being manipulated or taken advantage of through the allure of sexual reprieve. This is particularly shocking in the tale where, even more so than today, the act of sex was traditionally fetishized as a vulnerable, sacred activity. There is a reversal of this fear also, a subverting attempt to control the monster by controlling it sexually. Perhaps this is the appeal of phenomena like *The Twilight Saga*.

Victor Frankenstein's monster is emblematic of a far more existential fear: that we are fundamentally alone, created without any say in it ourselves, and cast, abandoned, into the world. Not only does Frankenstein's monster develop through learning human language, reading, speaking, and debating intelligently, but it comes to reflect his creator's fear as well. Victor Frankenstein's fear, and his crippling guilt, is fundamentally that of a parent who has brought a child into a world which finds that child monstrous. As a result, in part, of this social reaction to his creation, Frankenstein utterly fails to be an effective parental figure, ultimately catalyzing his creation's destructive power. Finally, Frankenstein experiences a fear that all creators have. He fears, and knows, that not only will his creation survive him, but it will succeed him and no longer need him. This parallels the Nietzschean reversal of God's creation of humanity, wherein humanity

⁵⁷ Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Dover Thrift Editions ed. Mineola: Dover Publications, 2000. Print. Pg 31.

surpasses the need for God, for divine morality, kills God, and becomes God themselves in its place.

These examples are a basic exposition to the logic of monster theory and its valuable relation to real-world discussions of social issues. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, a leading scholar of monster theory, wrote an essay entitled “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” for a larger work, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* in 1996. The first of Cohen’s thesis is the simple assertion: “The Monster’s Body Is a Cultural Body.”⁵⁸ He writes that,

Vampires, burial, death: inter the corpse where the road forks, so that when it springs from the grave, it will not know which path to follow. Drive a stake through its heart: it will be stuck to the ground at the fork, it will haunt that place that leads to many other places, that point of indecision. Behead the corpse so that, acephalic, it will not know itself as subject, only as pure body.⁵⁹

This mirrors the previous exposition of the monstrous body, but rather than showing the monster’s ability to comment insightfully on cultural conditions this points out that even in combating the monster, we reveal its significance. The methodologies undertaken to limit and control the operations of a vampire, as Cohen describes above, are all fundamentally efforts to immobilize its faculties, both physically and as an intelligent entity. Rather than seeking an actual death for the creature, the response to the undead is a series of efforts to disorient, shock, and otherwise render impotent the destructive power of the monster, not to kill it.

The efforts undertaken to shock and disorient the vampire are eerily similar to the social, legal, and economic hurdles inflicted upon America’s prison labeled. Restriction

⁵⁸ Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Pg 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

of rights, social marginalization, and lack of economic stability are all way to paralyze a certain subject, just as the vampire is left, acephalic, at the point of indecision.

Undeath, through such examples as vampires, zombies, and mummies, has always had a place, particularly in religious folklore, as an objectively evil mockery of life. Is it not therefore odd that the AMC TV series, *The Walking Dead*, beginning in season four, consistently dominates screens across America? As reported by the New York Times,

The premiere was seen by 16.1 million viewers, far surpassing the show's previous record for cable entertainment programs, which was 12.4 million viewers. (By contrast the finale of "Breaking Bad" reached 10.3 million.) "Dead" attracted 10.4 million viewers in that 18-to-49 group — an enormous total even surpassing any N.F.L. game this season... Before Sunday night, every top-rated show this season had been an N.F.L. game. Now zombies are apparently more appealing than quarterbacks.⁶⁰

There is something curious about the massive appeal to Americans of a grueling survival horror tale of zombies slowly claiming the lives of an intrepid, straggling troupe. The answer may be obvious. The undead are America's monstrous reflection in modernity.

As asserted by Cohen, these instances of consistent fascination with undead creatures have pertinent insights to America as a whole. Its monstrous body, the undead, "... quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy..."⁶¹ hinting to the common paradox that there may be something fundamentally appealing, familiar, about the monster, despite its terrible power. The grotesque may be the most telling part of a structure. It is reasonable to assert that the prison labeled of America represent the

⁶⁰ Carter, Bill. "'Walking Dead' Premiere Is Highest Rated Show of TV Season." The New York Times. 2013. Accessed April 18, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/15/business/media/walking-dead-premiere-is-highest-rated-show-of-tv-season.html?_r=0.

⁶¹ Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Pg 4.

nascent anxiety of separation and loss of community in American culture. The immobilized, invisible population displays an eerie similarity to the conclusion of neoliberalist, individualizing logic. After all,

The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns,’ a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement...⁶²

The third of Cohen’s theses, “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis,” is a twofold claim of monstrous identity.⁶³ Firstly, what makes a creature, event, or species monstrous is that it “refuses easy categorization.”⁶⁴ It can also be interpreted strictly scientifically. If one thinks back on monsters appearing in the media, often it is difficult, or even impossible, to confidently assert what the creature *is*, using standard terminology. Cohen’s example is perfect: the alien from Ridley Scott’s classic science fiction adventure horror film series, *Alien*.

It is a Linnean nightmare, defying every natural law of evolution; by turns bivalve, crustacean, reptilian, and humanoid. It seems capable of lying dormant within its egg indefinitely. It sheds its skin like a snake, its carapace like an arthropod. It deposits its young into other species like a wasp... it responds according to Lamarckian *and* Darwinian principles.⁶⁵

Not only does the monster defy easy categorization, it threatens to destroy categorization itself. Its existence threatens to tear down and radically de-compartmentalize normality, boundary, and the semblance of a coherent epistemological system.

The monster is in this way the living embodiment of the phenomenon Derrida had famously labeled the “supplement”... it breaks apart bifurcating, “either/or” syllogistic

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Pg 6.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

logic with a kind of reasoning closer to “and/or,” introducing what Barbara Johnson has called “a revolution in the very logic of meaning.”⁶⁶

This thesis again reflects onto the case of America’s prison labeled, but at the crisis of citizenship. The prisoner becomes an oddity, a third type of citizen. Prisoners are neither fully included or excluded, but function and exist at the crossroads.

Cohen’s fourth thesis, “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference,” is a parallel assertion to his previous thesis, and echoes his project at large, but is a more direct acknowledgement of Derrida’s work in post-structuralism and, fittingly, Cohen uses this thesis to flaunt a surprising level of philosophical alacrity, referencing the Greek myth of Phaëton, Hegel, and the writings of René Girard. Cohen uses this thesis to pay special attention to terminology, to rhetoric, and how language plays a crucial role in identifying the monstrous. There is a certain vocabulary throughout history that has indicated the monstrous. For example, “barbaric,” “savage,” “heathen,” and countless others have signified the ‘other’ in everyday discourse. In modernity, the violence inflicted towards African Americans and the social violence of being incarcerated is generally excused through the affliction of a ‘criminal’ identity, which is marked by similar words, phrases, and slang. There are countless other examples, used from Biblical times to the Middle Ages, to westward expansion, into modernity. “Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual.”⁶⁷

Cohen’s final thesis, “The Monster Stands at the Threshold of Becoming,” is a reminder that all the power granted to the monster, all the time spent at the border, and all

⁶⁶ Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Pg 7.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

the threat to epistemological security it represents is easily undone. The monster stands at the border of exclusion, but therefore also of inclusion. The monster is bastard and heir, alien and kin, alive and yet dead. The prison labeled of America, the undead caste, through stripping of rights, social marginalization, and economic exploitation have become a category of citizen existing at the border, threatening to destroy the distinction between citizen and noncitizen. By existing as socially dead and economically virile, the millions of people incarcerated in America function as a workforce of mute, expendable, laborers, an undead slave class. And, as all monsters eventually do, “They ask us why we have created them.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Pg 20.