PoLar essay on solidarity

Anthropology inside/out

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On solidarity

In this essay I explore the notion of solidarity in relation to anthropology as a critical pedagogical practice. To do so, I draw on my experiences teaching incarcerated men over the past few years. Since 2018 I have had the opportunity to teach Anthropology classes at two men's prisons; one a state-run facility and the other a federal corrections complex. As such, two central questions emerge germane to this essay: what might solidarity mean under such circumstances? and how might teaching anthropology *inside* contribute to a shared understanding of the power and promise of critical pedagogy *inside/out* (Freire 2006, Giroux 2004)

If solidarity is fostered through recognition and respect of difference (Dean 1996), of bearing witness to the ruthless and relentless brutality that distinguishes our current neo-liberal world, how might anthropology be utilized to build spaces of hope through education inside the carceral system. What are the possibilities of a collaboration with people our society has deemed in Zygmunt Bauman's words (2004) as "human waste"; to utilize the tools of anthropological analysis to begin a public engagement within and between communities *inside* and *out.*

My inside students range in age between early 30s to mid 60s. All have earned a GED and some have attended a few semesters of college. Most have received sentences that span decades. By choice I do not know the nature of their convictions. My refusal stems from my desire to know and to work alongside my students as co-participants in an educational project. Likewise, I know little of the outside lives of my undergraduate students at the University.

Criminal, convict, felon….student

Individual accountability is tantamount to reconciliation with oneself and to the larger society if justice is to prevail. Otherwise, shame and trauma continue their hold, often expressed through violence. Yet if the analysis of the actions of those incarcerated stops there then it is not only inaccurate for its silences, but it serves to reinforce the status quo. If we look at the larger systemic issues around criminality and incarceration, then responsibility and accountability take on new dimensions for all of us.

With almost 2 million people locked up in detention facilities, jails and prisons (county, state, federal and private) across the country, the United States has the highest per capita rate of incarcerated people in the world, indexing a 500% increase over the past 40 years (World Prison

Brief 2025.) Today the vast majority of the US incarcerated population are men - 90% [1], 69% are people of color and 46% of those incarcerated in federal prisons are there primarily for drug-related convictions (Sentencing Project, US 2025)

The rate of incarceration in the US rose substantially during the 1980s with the onset of policies and laws now known infamously as mass incarceration; itself a tendril in the Reagan Administration's War on Drugs (Alexander 2010). Yet, since the 1990s the increased rates of incarceration have not been commensurate with a dramatic rise in crimes. In fact, the crime rate has been consistently falling for several decades. Rather, the increase in the incarcerated population is due in large part to changes in sentencing laws and policies (Lynch and Sabol 1997) not to an increase in commission of crimes. Particularly noteworthy, prison sentences in the US are much longer than in other developed nations for similar crimes.

The ripple effects of mass incarceration are multiple; one that extends inside out, from the cell to kin, to community and to the larger society. People inside face the physical and emotional toll of incarceration, that reinforces a sense of dislocation and loss, of social isolation and shame. Moreover, people who are incarcerated are most likely to be divorced, their children's health and well-being are often adversely affected alongside a plunge in their academic performance. 70% of households with an incarcerated family member have difficulty meeting basic needs such as food or shelter (Braman 2007).

Additionally, according to a survey by the Prison Policy Institute (2025), 45 percent of all Americans have had an immediate family member who has been in jail or prison. And if extended families are included in the numbers, a staggering 64% have had some interaction with the carceral state. In that sense, paraphrasing Wolfe (1999) incarceration is not an event but a racial structure (Alexander 2010)

Decades of mass incarceration have also left tens of millions of people who were previously locked up, disenfranchised and bereft, coping with the collateral damage of prison punishment. In most states someone with a felony conviction cannot vote, some cannot get a driver's license, most face substantial barriers to finding employment and housing. The denial of such basic rights, fundamental to survival and resiliency, contributes to recidivism rates that are the highest in the world. Moreover, high recidivism rates - almost 50% in the first 3 years after release- also drive the carceral expansion. Yet, those who take college courses inside even without matriculation, have a 48% lower rate of returning to prison than those who have not (Vera Institute 2025). Moreover, education restores a sense of dignity that you count for something. By dignity I mean a presence in the world that asserts the boundaries of humanness, of fortitude, compassion and that emanate from our vital connections from each other thus facilitating the ability to do the right thing even in the face of adversity. Hope emerges from small acts of kindness and from shared spaces for conceptualizing a future based on collective justice and individual autonomy. In this way hope can stand against pitilessness by forging a humanity that is defiant, that defeats despair.

[1] The rate of incarcerated women in the US has risen steadily with over 500% increase since 1990s. Sentencing Project (Monazzam and Budd 2023).

Education inside

With the passage of the 1965 Higher Education Act, incarcerated people became eligible to receive Pell Grants for post-secondary education while inside. By 1982 there were 350 college in prison programs enrolling over 27,000 students. In the early 1990s the number had risen to over 770 programs. Yet, in 1994 the "tough on crime" political climate took hold, The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act revoked incarcerated peoples access to Pell grants. By 1998 in the absence of Pell grant funds only 8 college -in -prison programs continued to exist. In 2015 Barack Obama initiated a pilot program through the Second Change Pell Initiative that led to funding for over 200 colleges to offer educational opportunities inside. And at last, in 2023 Pell grant eligibility was fully restored to incarcerated students and as of early 2024 a reported 153 colleges offered programs inside.

The program with which I am involved operates on a volunteer basis with several professors per semester offering their time. The resources inside are quite limited; there is no access to an academic library nor JStor. With a small donor grant instructors are able to buy copies of books and articles for their classes. The students receive no college credit. With no access to computers the students write by hand their weekly critical reflections.

As Gramsci (1971) among others have noted western education is most often used as a mode of domination in support of the status quo. Yet it can also be a site of empowerment and potential liberation. In that sense, as the Brazilian scholar Paolo Freire so aptly demonstrated, literacy can also be a radical construct, a site of individual and collective agency. The benefits of creativity, critical enquiry and independent thought are key to the development of public intellectuals whether or not they have received an advanced degree and whether or not they are incarcerated (Freire 2006).[2]

Anthropology as praxis

Socio-cultural anthropologists have a long history of engagement with the larger public. Louis Henry Morgan, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, Zora Neale Hurston, Bronislaw Malinowski, Mary Douglas and Claude Levi Strauss to name but a few of earlier prominent figures who have conveyed important, yet traditional anthropological insights to a wide public audience. The Against the Vietnam War teach-ins spearheaded by Eric Wolf, Sydney Mintz, Morton Fried and Marshall Sahlins at University of Michigan in the 1960s took a more controversial and radical stance in which the imperative of a public anthropology was to contribute critically to the debates of the time. By the 1970s and 80s Black Feminist radicals like Faye Harrison and Leigh Mullings were leaving their mark both inside and outside the academy. Despite the diversity of

[2] Perhaps as the killing of hundred, perhaps thousands of Catholic nuns, priests and lay catechists, practitioners of liberation theology in mid 20th century Latin America, attests to the "dangers" of teaching critical analyses of the world lie in its challenges to injustice and the imagining a more equitable future.

perspectives, a basic definition of a public anthropology prevailed; one in which anthropologists bear witness to lives lived beyond the purview of many in the larger society. Yet, within the context of the dangerous world in which we now live, the role of Anthropology necessitates a more radical stance; to make visible that which is hidden in plain sight. Thus, a public anthropology that does not simply reinforce the status quo, requires an engagement with politics and ethics.

My students and I have had multiple discussions about what might be the value and utility of anthropological research, its ethics and the production of knowledge. During one class I asked the students from their perspective "does anthropology matter?".
One of my students best captured the prevailing sentiment; "Anthropology: now I know how to interpret the bullshit".

Within the confines of the carceral system, this educational project offers spaces for a critical reading of the world in which one can begin to make good sense[3] of our experiences within the larger context of lived histories. As such we explore not only the pressing question of "what needs to be done", but the imperative of "what shall we do". In the hopes of forging a radical perspective based on the ethical imperatives of justice, dignity and hope, I have tried to cultivate Johnetta Cole's (1996/2010) notion of an anthropological "doublesightness" that invokes the double consciousness of WEB Dubois (1903:47) 'of always looking at one's self through the eyes of the others" and them to translate those insights into building a radical pedagogy. The challenge, as Ignacio Martin-Baro (1996:23) notes"… is to reflect back to people their knowledge and experience, their history and their suffering. An account that takes into consideration not only what was done, but what needs to be done".

Over several months of classroom readings and discussions what became increasingly apparent is that there are large swarths of the American public who have seemingly little understanding of the everyday realities of life behind bars. Moreover, as the students noted this is true for many of their own family members, despite the fact that they are directly affected by the carceral system. With an engagement grant awarded by the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research we have sought to create generative spaces for a critical praxis to emerge (Giroux 2008). There was overwhelming consensus in response to my query: "What single word would capture what you want to convey to people *outside"*? "Our humanity", they all agreed. It is within this milieu that we have sought to fuse theory and action that offers commentary on the intersections of identity, culture and power relations within institutions of confinement to interrogate embodied experiences from the *inside out.*

The research project seeks to understand and to challenge prevailing public perceptions of who is incarcerated, why and under what circumstances. The focus of the work is the student researchers' experiences of everyday life behind bars. To do so the research team utilized critical auto-ethnography as both a data collection tool and an analytical framework for exploring the dynamic relationship between lived experiences on the inside and the larger social structures and processes of the criminal legal system that define them (Salameh 2023).

In their preface to *Against Charity*, Daniel Raventós and Julie Wark (2017) remind us that reciprocity, engagement and kindness are crucial elements in an engaged anthropology, one that

[3] Good sense is constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day.

moves beyond "do no harm" to one of equality, fraternity and respect. Combined with insights from critical autoethnography this project puts theory into action through dramatic storytelling. Autoethnography is particularly well-suited for such efforts within a carceral space that is tightly circumscribed. This project challenges the larger (*outside*) public to understand the subjective experiences of life behind bars, where violence in its many guises is a way of life.

A crucial component of the project is the use of dramatic theatre performance as a platform from which to communicate to a larger public the lived experiences and legacies of mass incarceration. Like anthropology, dramatic theatre shares the possibility of recognizing our own humanity in solidarity with the humanity of others (Stephens 2010). Recently, some social science researchers with a focus on reflexivity and intersubjectivity, have engaged with the actual practice of dramatic theatre-making in ways in which the participants are active in the ethical processes of knowledge production. In this sense theatre has the potential to humanize that which prison dehumanizes and to use dramatic performance as an experience of self-reflection to gain knowledge of one's social reality from a critical lens.

For the past several years I have asked students in all my classes - graduate and undergraduate – inside and out - to write a final essay, answering the question "what do we owe each other" And it is from their many and varied responses where my hope lies.

The words of the public intellectual Mike Davis (2022) capture well some of those possibilities.

"I have always been influenced by the poems Brecht wrote in the late 1930s, during the Second World War, after everything had been incinerated, all the dreams and values of an entire generation destroyed and Brecht said '*well, it's a new dark age…. How do people resist in the dark ages'?* What keeps us going, ultimately, is our love for each other, and our refusal to bow our heads, to accept the verdict, however all powerful it seems. It's what ordinary people have to do. You have to love each other, you have to defend each other, you have to fight."

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