



Franklin, H. B. (2000). The American prison in the culture wars. *Workplace*, 6, 9-12.

H. BRUCE FRANKLIN

## THE AMERICAN PRISON IN THE CULTURE WARS

*The following talk was delivered at the 2000 Modern Language Association Convention in Washington, DC, on the panel, "The Imprisonment of American Culture."*

In 1920, when Ho Chi Minh spoke at the founding convention of the French Communist Party, here is the very first example he gave of "the atrocities that the predatory capitalists have inflicted on Indochina": "Prisons outnumber schools and are always overcrowded."<sup>1</sup> Seventy-eight years later, thousands of San Francisco Bay Area high school students staged a series of walkouts, marching from their ancient overcrowded crumbling schools to newly constructed jails and police stations, chanting "Education, not incarceration."

Cut to 1968, just past halfway between these two protests against substituting prisons for schools. First the Tet Offensive shattered Washington's hopes for victory in Vietnam and forced President Lyndon Johnson to abandon his bid for reelection. Then came the assassination of Martin Luther King, who had a year earlier declared that in Vietnam and elsewhere the United States was fighting on "the wrong side of a world revolution." King's murder ignited a week of rebellions in 125 U.S. cities. The same month, students and community activists began their two-month siege of Columbia University. A few weeks later, antiwar candidate Robert Kennedy was assassinated the night he won the California primary. In early August, the Republican convention in Miami Beach nominated Richard Nixon, while a line of tanks sealed off Miami Beach from a Black rebellion in Miami; gunfights, described by a police official as "firefights like in Vietnam," came within a mile of the convention.<sup>2</sup> Later that month, the Democratic convention in Chicago nominated Vice President Hubert Humphrey, although he had won only 2.2 percent of the delegates in the state primaries, which had been swept by antiwar candidates Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy. In November, the day after Nixon was elected president, a five-month strike began at San Francisco State College demanding Black and other ethnic studies programs, and open admissions for Black, Latino, Asian, and other people of color.

In the midst of these events, the culture wars erupted in, of all places, the Modern Language Association convention. Hundreds of professors and graduate students marched from a teach-in on the Vietnam War to a sit-in in the Americana Hotel lobby, while busloads of New York City Tac Squad police in riot gear prepared to attack. The teaching of literature was turned into an open battleground over such issues as the racism and sexism that determined not only which works should be taught but also who should be allowed to teach them, as well as the role of class, race, and gender in determining aesthetic criteria, literary canons, cultural hierarchies, and critical methodologies. By the time the convention ended, the Modern Language Association had condemned the war and the growing repression, this Radical Caucus had emerged, and the battle lines had been drawn for the culture wars on the literary front into the next century.<sup>3</sup>

But the main front in the culture wars was not literary. In April 1969, students sat in at City College of the

City University of New York (CUNY), denouncing the university's discrimination against people of color and the poor in admissions policy. In response, the Board of Higher Education began open admissions for every graduate of a New York City high school. At the time, CUNY was the nation's third largest system of public higher education, behind the University of California and the State University of New York. Never, since its first college was founded in 1847, had CUNY charged tuition. For well over a century, it had thus been a boulevard to success for many tens of thousands of poor and working-class New Yorkers. Now combining open admissions with free tuition, CUNY appeared as the vanguard in the democratization of American higher education.

At this point, a fierce counteroffensive against the progressive campus movements was launched and coordinated by the White House, now occupied by Richard Nixon. In June Nixon delivered a speech in which he equated "drugs, crime, campus revolts, racial discord, [and] draft resistance," expressed horror at the "patterns of deception" in American life stemming from contempt for moral, legal, and intellectual standards, and denounced the campus movement as central to this national crisis: "We have long considered our colleges and universities citadels of freedom, where the rule of reason prevails. Now both the process of freedom and the rule of reason are under attack. At the same time, our colleges are under pressure to collapse their educational standards . . ." <sup>4</sup> Vice President Agnew (not yet indicted for his own criminal activities) was even more explicit. In early 1970, Agnew argued that there was too high a percentage of Black students in college and condemned "the violence emanating from Black student militancy." Declaring that "College, at one time considered a privilege, is considered to be a right today," he singled out open admissions as one of the main ways "by which unqualified students are being swept into college on the wave of the new socialism." <sup>5</sup> Later that year, Roger Freeman—a key educational adviser to Nixon then working for the reelection of California Governor Ronald Reagan—defined quite precisely the target of the conservative counterattack: "We are in danger of producing an educated proletariat. That's dynamite! We have to be selective on who we allow to go through higher education." <sup>6</sup>

The two most menacing institutional sources of the danger described by Freeman were obviously those two great public university systems charging no tuition: the University of California and the City University of New York. Governor Reagan was able to wipe out free tuition at the University of California in 1970, leaving CUNY as the lone threat. The vital task of crippling CUNY was to go on for six more years, outlasting Nixon and falling to his appointed successor, Gerald Ford. <sup>7</sup> In 1975, President Ford announced that he would withhold federal aid from New York City, then in a financial crisis, until it eliminated open admissions and free tuition at CUNY. To be financially responsible, Ford declared, New York must no longer be a city that "operates one of the largest universities in the world, free of tuition for any high school graduate, rich or poor, who wants to attend." <sup>8</sup> Or, as the President's press secretary explained, New York City had become like "a wayward daughter hooked on heroin": "you don't give her \$100 a day to support her habit. You make her go cold turkey to break her habit." <sup>9</sup> Finally in 1976, the assault on public education succeeded in terminating the City University's 129-year policy of not charging tuition, thus wiping out the last U.S. stronghold of free public higher education. The university then fired hundreds of young faculty members hired to implement the open admissions program. <sup>10</sup>

In the decades since then, with free tuition looking like a relic of some ancient past or a dream of some utopian future, tuition and other charges have kept rising at public colleges and universities across the nation. Combined with reduced budgets for scholarships, these escalating costs have made it ever more difficult for poor and working-class students to obtain higher education, a trend accelerated in the 1990s by open attacks on affirmative action and remedial education. <sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, just as the state and federal governments were taking away the funds that could open up the universities, they were beginning to spend far greater sums to build alternative institutions for the poor, with exceptionally easy entrance requirements and lengthy enrollments for people of color. From 1976, the year when free higher education was eradicated, until the end of the century, on average a new prison

was constructed in America every week. The prison population went from under 200,000 in 1971 to two million in 2000 as America became the prison capital of the world. The states of California and Texas now run the second and third largest prison systems in the world. By the late 1990s, many states had followed California's lead in spending more money for prisons than for higher education, and across the country far more young black men were in prison than in college.<sup>12</sup> Not just coincidentally, the amount removed from public higher education in New York equalled the amount added to the budget for the state's prisons. Felony convictions had stripped the vote from 4.1 million American citizens.<sup>13</sup> This proved to be decisive in determining who would soon sit in the White House, for in Florida one-third of African-American men—as many as 204,000 potential Black voters—were disenfranchised.<sup>14</sup> The Voting Rights Act of 1965 has been effectively repealed by the criminalization of the poor, especially people of color, through the so-called war on drugs, racial profiling, unleashed police, and felony disenfranchisement. Grotesque experiments in dehumanization are being conducted in the form of "supermax" prisons. This has been culture war with a vengeance—and with a very effective strategy.

Make no mistake about it. The prison-industrial complex is a major component of a strategy in the culture wars. While disintegrating Black and Latin communities, it attracts the white working class with a carrot—prison-related jobs—and a stick—fear of people of color, imaged as a criminal underclass. This strategy developed from the tactical use of the prison as an overt weapon against the urban rebellions and social movements of the 1960s. But during that period, the imprisonment of activists and rebels helped turn the prison into a cultural matrix that generated political leadership and an explosion of prison literature. Unlike earlier periods when reformers and even revolutionaries viewed prisoners mainly as victims to be rescued by progressive social movements, parts of the movement viewed prisoners as a potential revolutionary vanguard. The Black Panther Party, for example, deeply influenced by Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X—who had shown how prison could be transformed into school—saw what they called the lumpenproletariat as the truly revolutionary class, and their leaders included ex-convicts such as Eldridge Cleaver, as well as George Jackson, the main spokesman of the movement inside the prison. Meanwhile, many convicts and ex-convicts were becoming radicalized, as exemplified by authors as disparate as Etheridge Knight, Iceberg Slim, Piri Thomas, Jack Abbott, and Donald Goines.

By the late 1970s, prison literature was becoming a powerful force in the culture wars. Then came the repression that was to build during the 1980s and 1990s. Educational opportunities, including creative writing courses, in prison were defunded. Congress eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners. By 1984, every literary journal devoted to publishing poetry and stories by prisoners was wiped out. "Son of Sam" laws made it illegal for convicts to collect money from their writings.<sup>15</sup> And while prison literature was being outlawed by the state, it was being delegitimized by fashionable critical theories that, like New Criticism, revered coterie literature brimming with complexity, indeterminacy, and ambiguity, while disdaining socially purposeful works accessible to a mass audience.

Today, amid the growing consciousness of the magnitude and effects of the prison-industrial complex, the literature of the American prison—past and present—is being rediscovered. The American Studies Association has made a major effort to spotlight the prison-industrial complex as a fundamental institution of American society, leading to the development of a variety of exciting new courses centering on the American prison. The 2000 MLA convention itself suggests that something similar could be emerging in literary studies. Besides this panel, there is the Black American Literature and Culture Division session on "Criminality and Incarceration." As I argued there, just as we now assume that one cannot intelligently teach nineteenth-century American literature without recognizing slavery as context, one cannot responsibly teach contemporary American literature without recognizing the American prison system as context. For we are beginning to become aware that, in the words of Ho Chi Minh eighty years ago, one of the great "atrocities" of the "predatory capitalists" is substituting prisons for schools.

**Notes: The American Prison in the Culture Wars**

1. Ho Chi Minh, Speech at the Eighteenth National Congress of the French Socialist Party, Tours, France, 1920.
2. *The New York Times*, August 9, 1968.
3. Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter, eds., *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English* (New York: Random House, 1972). The Introduction to this volume includes an invaluable account of the events at the MLA convention and their role in the cultural battles and transformations then emerging.
4. Richard M. Nixon, speech delivered at General Beadle State College, South Dakota, June 3, 1969, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1969* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 429.
5. Spiro Agnew, "Threat to Educational Standards," speech at Republican fund-raising dinner, Des Moines, Iowa, April 14, 1970, in Immanuel Wallerstein and Paul Starr, eds., *The University Crisis Reader: The Liberal University Under Attack* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 320.
6. "Professor Sees Peril in Education," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 30, 1970.
7. Two excellent analyses of the fight over free tuition and open admissions at CUNY are: Michael Harrington, "Keep Open Admissions Open," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 2, 1975, pp. 16-17, 94-102; Deborah Davis, "Free Tuition Is Dead—And Who Killed It," *The Village Voice*, December 8, 1975, p. 13.
8. Speech by Gerald Ford to the National Press Club, October 29, 1975, as reported in *The New York Times*, October 30, 1975.
9. Ron Nessen, statement to the press, October 17, 1975.
10. Ira Shor, *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration, 1969-1984* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 7.
11. Brent Staples, "The Politics of Remedial Education at CUNY," *The New York Times*, September 7, 1998. On November 24, 1999, the New York State Board of Regents approved a plan to phase out remedial courses at CUNY by the year 2001.
12. See Elihu Rosenblatt, ed., *Criminal Injustice: Confronting the Prison Crisis* (Boston: South End Press, 1996); Elliott Currie, *Crime and Punishment in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); Daniel Burton-Rose, Dan Pens, and Paul Wright, eds., *The Celling of America* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1998); Scott Christianson, *With Liberty for Some* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998); Eric Schlosser, "The Prison-Industrial Complex," *Atlantic Monthly* 282 (December 1998), pp. 51-77.
13. As demonstrated by Andrew L. Shapiro in "Challenging Criminal Disenfranchisement Under the Voting Rights Act: A New Strategy," *Yale Law Journal* 103 (November 1993), 537-566, the explicit purpose of most of the state laws that stripped the vote from convicted felons was to disenfranchise the black electorate. Many of these laws were bundled in legislation mandating poll taxes, literacy tests, and other devices to curtail or eliminate black voting, and their framers sometimes declared that criminal disenfranchisement would be the only one to resist constitutional challenges.
14. Marc Mauer, Sentencing Project, telephone interview, December 1, 2000.
15. Joseph Bruchac, "The Decline and Fall of Prison Literature," *Small Press* (January/February 1987), 28-32; Scott Christianson, "Corrections Law Developments: Barring the Convict from the Proceeds of His Story," *Criminal Law Bulletin* 16 (May-June 1980), 279-287.

*H. Bruce Franklin, Rutgers University, Newark*