Reformation or Obsolete

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Michael Pfaff’s book, “Locked in: The true causes of Mass Incarceration-and How to achieve Real Reform”, probes into the alarmingly high rates of mass incarceration in the United States of America. The author scrutinizes into the failure of the current reform movements and explains how this has become one of the greatest social and political crisis (Jay, 2019). Through his experience of many years as a professor and researcher of criminal law, Pfaff sketched out major points constituting a “standard story” of the reform efforts and analyzed the failure of these efforts to reduce the incarceration statistics (Iglesias, 2017).

The increased incarceration numbers, according to Pfaff, are a result on the failed war against drugs, increased number of private prisons, and significant differences in the prison sentencing. By doing the analysis of multiple secondary data sources and their interpretation, he shows that the current reform narrative will not succeed in reducing the incarceration rates.

For quite some time, this was a space full of people and stories that no one told and cared about. About a quarter of a century ago, people started to bring this into each other’s notice as whole neighborhoods were blighted by incarceration and arrest. The awareness skyrocketed about three years ago when people started videotaping the police use of force on the citizens. The stories from some of the scholars were startling.

The author of this book is of the opinion that different solutions would be needed to the problems of mass incarceration if any difference at all is to be made. This book is the basic framework for the proposed theory of change. There was an unprecedented boom in incarceration in the 2000s, the worst history could witness where 5% of the world population was imprisoned in the corrective facilities of the United States of America. This no more became a bipartisan disagreement and everyone on the county, state, and federal level pondered on what steps might be taken to decrease the prison population.

Pfaff sheds light on three Who’s who are overlooked but play a pivotal role in maintaining the rates of prison population to a high. These include the following:

1. Prosecutor, who is the central figure of the process but is not mentioned in any of the criminal justice reform campaigns
2. The person convicted of Violence, but is barred from reforms because they need to be treated differently
3. Public sector unions, lost in noise over private prisons

In the book, the author advances that data revolves around long sentences, drug cases and private prisons but the real issue is not about these three arcs (Sawyer, 2019). The role of prosecutors was studied from 1994-2008 in Pfaff’s research, as the primary question was about the crime rates going down and the rates of incarceration reaching an all-time high. The main factor contributing to the increase in the prison populations was the rise in felony charges which was entirely governed by the prosecutors. Above all, the prosecutors face no oversight and monitoring of their actions.

Some of the points which attribute to the failure of prison reform movement are mentioned below:

1. The criminal justice system is not uniform in the United States of America
2. The public sector unions lobby for population growth more aggressively than the private prisons.
3. Politicians, who also include the elected prosecutors, to avoid pushback for any one of the “serious” crimes e.g., murder, rape, and arson will allow over-incarceration throughout their terms.

According to the author, prisons are not obsolete in their functional capacity rather the criminal justice system has become a spiraling mess of agencies and institutions which are antagonistic in their perspectives. The key drivers of the increasing incarceration rates include the prosecutor power which is largely unregulated and the political failures which are majorly structural.

The author thinks that prison facilities are a relatively ineffective way to deal with crime rates (Pfaff, 2019).

Pffaf, in the second half of the book suggests some viable but complicated solutions to achieve the reforms in the criminal justice system. The development of plea bargaining guidelines and the adoption of federal assistance for indigent defense is suggested.

Angela Y. Davis, in her book, “Are Prisons Obsolete”, has propounded the case for the abolition of prisons and argues in the favor of “decarceration.” The author maintained that the time for ending the prison as a corrective facility has come (Bing, 2019).

In this book, the author centrally draws the attention towards imagining a society without prisons and with more reformative and rehabilitative measures. Davis centers her thesis on how incarceration perpetuates negative outcomes such as racism and sexism (Forman Jr, 2019). The author also highlights the unwanted role of prisons as channels for making money rather than serving a just purpose. The articulation of these reasons for the abolitions is done pretty well but compared to Pfaff, who defines measures for real reforms, Davis does not suggest alternatives to prisons.

Similarities between the contemporary prison system and slavery in the 18th and 19th century have been coined out in the subsequent chapters. The author thinks that corporate profit is directly linked with the privatization of prisons and the increasing number of inmates. She provides evidence about state governments paying fees to the private companies and resultantly, the private prisons strive to keep their facilities filled.

Notions of the original purpose of prisons and the contemporary shape they have acquired also have been described to be conflicting in the book. There is a lack of rehabilitative services and the prisoners don’t have proper access to healthcare services. According to the author, the environment in most of the facilities is so restricted that inmates’ status has been relegated to one which is lower than animals.

Both the authors have talked about the abuse of power by the prosecutors and highlighted the vested interest of the corporate companies by increasing the prison population. In both the books, the authors think of prisons lacking rehabilitation for the prisoners and blame the facility’s environment to further damage the mental conditions of violent offenders.

There is a difference in approaches towards reforms advocated by the authors. In the last chapters of his book, Pfaff stresses on transformation of the prosecutorial behavior and the examination of any political incentive that the elected prosecutors have. Additionally, the author thinks that reformers need to pay particular attention to the systems and institutions which deal with violent crime.

On the contrary, Davis views prisons in a radical perspective and sets a bold goal of prison abolition in front of the society. Even though the author is righteous on illuminating the detrimental effects of the prison system on the well-being of inmates, she does not provide substitute solutions for imprisonment. Due to the increasing rates of crime and violence, a world without corrective facilities cannot be imagined anytime soon.

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