

Book Review

Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women

second edition, by Victoria Law. Oakland, California: PM Press, 2012.

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Victoria Law's book *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* is an account of the agency of women prisoners in the United States produced by an abolitionist scholar. *Resistance Behind Bars* compellingly challenges and goes a distance to remedy the frequent failures of prior studies to document or theorize the agencies and resistances of incarcerated women. The information offered in the book about the agency of woman prisoners is valuable in that it provides a window into the under-studied and woefully under-appreciated agency of women prisoners. With sensitivity to issues of race and class, the text documents individual resistance and collective organizing by women in the United States. The book discusses problems faced by women in prison such as sexual abuse, isolation from families and especially children and a lack of opportunities for work and education. The text then uniquely discusses active steps women in prison take to challenge and change their conditions, from the formation by women in prison of peer education groups, the clandestine making of arrangements for children to visit mothers to prison rebellions and uses of the media by woman prisoners in raising public awareness about their lives.

Probably the best thing about this book is that it is such an accessible read. The narrative is personal and engaging in its presentation of thorough research. As such it is likely to be accessible to – and read by – woman prisoners themselves as well as people not specifically trained in law, criminology or any related academic discipline. Clearly, the introduction from the second edition indicates that this has already begun to happen. Providing for these women a context, community and history for their own struggles is invaluable. The great strength of the

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book is the distance it goes to develop for women prisoners “a commonly known history of resistance” (p.6).

The most obvious limitation of this book is its implicit American imperial hegemony. The subtitle of the book is *the struggles of incarcerated women* but there is no reference anywhere to women outside of the United States. The book only discusses conditions in certain states and makes at best passing reference to the possibility that a world outside the US even exists. I find this particularly jarring as a Canadian reader given that much of the research presented comes from New York State and Michigan, which of course border on Canada. Beyond the obvious geographical concerns here, a bigger danger of the book is that in seeking to present the struggles of incarcerated women as a unified resistance against an implicitly unitary prison industrial complex, it may miss the complexities and particularity of individual circumstances even within the systems it does describe.

Further, the very same things that are valuable about the book are also problematic when other audiences are considered. Law’s overarching goal in her writing is to advocate for the abolition of prisons. Law writes that she is working towards the “dismantling rather than reform of the prison system.” (p.ii) The passion and clear political commitment of the text that make it appealing for prisoners and advocates make it less likely to be read by policy-makers. Unfortunately, the expressed political commitment of the text makes it unlikely to be taken seriously, by many whose work impacts significantly on the day-to-day lives of women in prison. Corrections officers, prison psychologists, police, social workers, lawyers and students in those fields, whose present and future agencies have an effect on the day to day lives of woman prisoners – and whose actions can help humanize their conditions – are unlikely to read this book. This is not to say that the book falls short of its goals. Law says she is not advocating for “humanized prisons.” It is therefore no criticism of the work’s quality that the book certainly will not achieve that. I worry though that, instead of “galvanizing outside support for their struggles” (p.17), this text may help galvanize discursive forces that see incarcerated women as dangerous, incorrigible and in need of containment.

That the expressed ambit of the book not to advocate for prison reform is vexing for those of us who see the amelioration of conditions for women in prisons through systemic change as one part of a broader solution of reduced incarceration rates, social change and, yes, prison reform. This is therefore a troublesome and potentially alienating book for those who work in the prison industrial complex and strive to do

what they can as agents within that system. Resistance, after all, is possible and takes place within a range of social positions. Just as the lives of women incarcerated in the prison system are complex and particular, so too are the agencies of those working within the walls. It would be interesting to develop a companion volume to this text that documents the struggles of those agents in the justice system working in solidarity with prisoners, albeit on the other side of the bars, to improve conditions inside.

This book, therefore, achieves well, with the limitation of its American-centrism, its objective of building a discourse about the agency of women in prison. It tells stories about the actions and negotiations of power by people whose lives are woefully under-studied and misrepresented. The book, read by woman prisoners, is no doubt a source of inspiration and encouragement. Read by students and scholars, it can complicate over simplistic understandings of women in prison as victims or villains alone. As such, it makes an important contribution to study of women in prison.

Unfortunately, in my view, this contribution is limited in that rather than sparking a new conversation, it adds fuel to a polarized discourse. In our contemporary neoliberal climate, the political proponents, builders and beneficiaries of the prison-industrial complex are arguably in fact energized by precisely the kind of radical opposition by prison abolitionists offered by this book. Victoria Law succeeds elegantly in making her intended contribution to this discussion and the book is of great potential use for women in prisons themselves, but in my view this is not the primary sort of conversation Canadian policy-makers, and the public in general, need.

Book Review

What is Critical Social Research? Volume 1.

by Babak Fozooni. England: Upfront Publishing Ltd., 2012. \$13.50 US, paper. ISBN: 978-1780352794. Pages: 1-198.

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Babak Fozooni's book provides a genuine, provocative, and insightful opportunity to have in one book a number of previously published articles in the realms of cinema and Iranian social movements; the ideological politics behind encyclopedic discourses on fascism, and Engels; and critical social psychology.

Using such shock-and-awe titles as "Fuck Critical Psychology" and "Sand-Nigger Psychology", Fozooni intentionally disrupts the *status quo* as it relates to academic thought. This book, both amusing and very serious in its critical analysis, provides the reader with an opportunity to see the potential for social science research to contribute to the emancipation of the working classes. In the preface, Fozooni calls for the abolition of the university as a bourgeois institution so as to develop a new academic system that is pro-working class. His criticism of pre-modernist, modernist, and post-modernist theories is embedded within a broader Marxist analytical framework. He uses a variety of critical frameworks, including theorists Mikhail Bakhtin and Lev Vygotsky (p.56, 76), Karl Marx (p.132) and, to a lesser extent, Michel Foucault (p.90).

His article on "The Politics and Parables of Encyclopedias" examines the socio-political perspectives and assumptions between the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *Encyclopedia of Marxism*, and *Wikipedia*. Such an analysis shows how sources of knowledge can be different in their authority and legitimacy, with a surprising conclusion that *Britannica*, due to its positivist epistemology, is the least intellectually trustworthy of the three (p.132). In further elaborating on his examination of the development of progressive social thought, Fozooni looks to the cinematic works of Magnus Hirschfeld and Abbas Kiarostami.

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