Revisiting "The Prison Industrial Complex and The Global Economy"

AN INTERVIEW WITH EVE GOLDBERG AND LINDA EVANS

In 1997 Eve Goldberg and Linda Evans published "The Prison Industrial Complex and The Global Economy." The piece, which was re-published multiple times and turned into a pamphlet, drew important connections between globalization and the rise of the prison industrial complex (PIC). The piece remains essential reading for people interested in fighting the PIC today, so at the request of *The Abolitionist*, Critical Resistance member Rachel Herzing sat down with Linda and Eve to reflect on how the piece came together and what lessons still hold in today's context.

Rachel Herzing: Can you talk about how the pamphlet came together? How you had the idea to do it?

Eve Goldberg: Linda was getting her BA through New College [while she was in prison] and had written a paper that I was really impressed with about neoliberalism. And I remember that was the beginning for me of learning about globalization and globalization of capital. The WTO stuff was happening during the same time, so this whole thing about the globalization of capital was beginning to be on people's minds. It certainly was on my mind. And there'd be so many times when things would happen in Linda's incarceration. It would be a series of take-aways; a series of repressions. And it would always come out that the reasons were some combination of social control and money making. Somebody was profiting from these changes or it was just another way to tighten the grip on people's humanity. So learning about prisons and globalization, it was how does what's in my face because I'm involved with someone who's in prison, how does that relate to this big global picture?

Linda Evans: There wasn't anything written like this that was trying to put it in the context of what I was learning in college, which I thought was so important in terms of what structural adjustment was doing, to social services here, to education, everything. As far as internationalism goes, our prison movement was just really starting to compare the United States to other countries in terms of what their laws were, how many people were in prison per capita, all kinds of stuff. And there wasn't any analysis out there of the superstructure of the system. So another reason we wrote the pamphlet was to go beyond just the factual comparisons. We decided that we would write something together without really having any specific purpose. We thought maybe we'd get it published somewhere, but that wasn't really the reason we were doing it. It was partly a way to develop our relationship, too. It wasn't just sitting in the visiting room talking with each other. It was actually producing something together so it was a different stage of relating.

RH: The era in which the pamphlet came out is in some ways the last wave of pamphleteering. For some imprisoned people the shift away from print media has been devastating. And there are a lot of institutions that won't let stuff produced off the internet go inside.

EG: We're in the middle of a change taking place around media and the written word. I don't think it's going to go away, but you're so right, we were at the last wave of that. We'd talk about something we wanted to find out and I was still going down to the Oakland Public Library to check things out and find things and take notes. There was a little bit we found on the internet, but very little.

Once we wrote it, the very first thing that happened with it was that Prison Activist Resource Center put it on its website. It was like, "Oh Linda, look! This article we wrote is on the internet." The next thing that happened was the pamphlet came out. Bo Brown took it to AK press and had it come out as a pamphlet. Then Michael Novick printed it in *Turning the Tide* anti-racist action paper. Then it was in a couple more different magazines. Around that time Critical Resistance put it in pamphlets for the first conference. So it had little bits of life in different arenas and I'm thinking now, do those arenas even exist? There are a lot less newspapers, a lot less magazines. People are still reading. Tons. But they're reading it on the internet.

RH: And one of the things that's coming up right now in California where the bulk of *The Abolitionist* papers go, is the prison regime is proposing new regulations around "obscene materials". And that would have a huge impact on something like this project or something like the *Bayview*, because if they codify this idea of "security threat groups", then anything that mentions a person that they validated as being part of a security threat group or has a picture of them or anything, any reference to that can be banned. That could mean we would never get back inside California prisons. Let alone statements from the hunger strike reps getting published or let alone Third World Liberationist statements coming out from imprisoned people. And so while there are so few political papers going inside already, that would be the end. That's a big deal.

LE: I remember how important it was to get anything from the outside and there were so many more underground papers and lots of radical magazines. Even then, when we wrote the pamphlet, there wasn't as much radical media as when I was young in the '60s where we had a huge network nationally, but it was so important to get things that we could read and share with other prisoners. I'm sure it's really important inside still.

RH: Linda, in your bio for the piece it describes you as a North American anti-imperialist political prisoner. I wonder what your perspective is on anti-imperialist struggle in this period and what that would mean today.

LE: I think the main place that it has a real meaning currently is probably in the anti-war movements—the movements for peace and to stop US intervention and wars in

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different places around the world. I think US imperialism has changed a lot because now it's moving primarily in coalition and it isn't just doing a US invasion of Costa Rica or the Dominican Republic, or Panama. They tend to be working in these pretend coalitions that are brought together by the US so that they can intervene in these countries but they have the cover of the nominal participation of some of their allies.

I've changed a lot since then. My analysis of US imperialism domestically has been tempered by current conditions. I used to believe that there were internal colonized nations and I didn't adequately incorporate the class question into my analysis. Having been out now all these years and changing from the perspective that I had before, I feel the way imperialism has developed is more complex. Obviously the question of people being oppressed because of race has unifying characteristics that may be part of what defines a nation, but there has not been effective leadership or effective struggle around national liberation movements within this country, except for Puerto Rico. That may be because there's not a structural basis for a national liberation struggle, actually. So my view of imperialism has changed a lot. That's part of what led to me to help start All of Us or None as an organization that unites people across racial lines; recognizing that the analysis that we bring to our organizing has to be more complex than I was capable of understanding at that earlier point in my life.

When Eve and I wrote this, although I don't think my personal analysis was dominant in the pamphlet, we know where I was coming from and that was a struggle that we had. Eve has a much more class-based analysis.

RH: In the piece you talk about the war on drugs as one of the conduits through which US interventionism around the world gets played out domestically. What you just raised about the security state is interesting in how the technicians that you just described, but also the technologies, the strategies, the tactics that get used in foreign wars are increasingly being used in what we call the wars at home, whether that's policing, or imprisonment.

LE: And increased surveillance as an industry. And that's a globalized phenomenon, at least in the developed countries. That has industrial and economic effects because of the manufacturing of all that equipment. And where is it being manufactured? Probably in the Third World, with the profits directed into increasingly large multinational corporations. So that's another element that goes into an economic analysis of what has changed. And there's plenty of other war-time technology that's been developed so that's just something else that's different.

EG: Back then in the Clinton years, the sectors of the ruling class that were ascendant were the high tech, let's get our money through "less violent" means when possible, through market expansion, and then, oops, Bush and the oil people are like, no let's just put in the guns and get our oil. So there was a shift.

LE: Part of it is the war on terrorism, too, and how that has been concocted, used, and implemented. I think the "international war on terror" has been one of the things that has made US intervention in other countries acceptable to the US public. It's the excuse they're using to do the same kind of interventions they've always done, either unilaterally or in coalitions like NATO. Permission for US military operations in other countries wouldn't have been accepted as part of diplomatic agreements before 9/11. But now they are. So, I think that's related to the ongoing wars and the change in direction. And because so much of it is directed against Muslim countries, I think there's been an increase in the targeting of Muslim communities here as well, and so that has impacted who's being locked up in US prisons, too.

RH: Linda, one of the things that you and I have worked on together that is related to the "war on terror" is the increased use of gang validation and profiling and what they're calling domestic terrorists. But that's probably an evolution of the war on drugs.

LE: And the fact that in California all the gang validation is against people of color. The Aryan Brotherhood is the only prison gang that is a white gang. So, they can use that label very obviously to impose a police state, that's what the gang injunctions certainly were. Just impose a gang injunction on a certain section—which is usually a neighborhood of people of color and suddenly it's a police state for young people because they can just be pulled over if they have a hooded sweatshirt on. So I think that's another thing that has changed in those years is using gang labeling to increase budgets and jail capacity. The sheriffs get extra money for every arrest they label a gang-related arrest or a gang-related conviction or a gang-related validation. So, it's become

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an easy way for them to line their pockets and to continue the expansion of the prison-industrial complex. It's a very fertile sector for them to oppress.

EG: And remember that debate, it's so quaint now, but I remember growing up as a teenager: what do we think the future will really be like, will it be more *1984* or more *Brave New World?* Will it be more guns in your face and rats chewing at your skin in your cell, *1984*, or will it be nice little drugs and TV and shit to just zone you out so that you're just half a person. That's quaint. It's both. And it's heavy duty both!

LE: There was that [Rolling Stones] song, "Mother's Little Helper," you know, but I think a lot of people are addicted to prescription drugs and really suffering behind it.

EG: It's all related whether you get it from the street pusher or from the medical pusher. Some of it's illegal they can throw you in jail for, and some of it's not.

RH: It's illegal to have Oxycontin without a prescription for example, but it's the number one thing that they push on everybody, even knowing that it's super dependency forming. So of course you're going to want it even when they stop writing you a scrip.

LE: Prison doctors prescribe a lot of psychotropic drugs to people in prison, too – a lot of people are taking addictive psychotropic drugs inside, and are drug-dependent when they come back into the community.

EG: Making something illegal is only a way to control it. And punish around it. It's not a way to stop it. So, the war on drugs continues. When we wrote the pamphlet, there were 1.8 million people in prison in this country. Now it's 2.3 million. There are fewer jobs, there's more unemployment and there are more people in prisons.

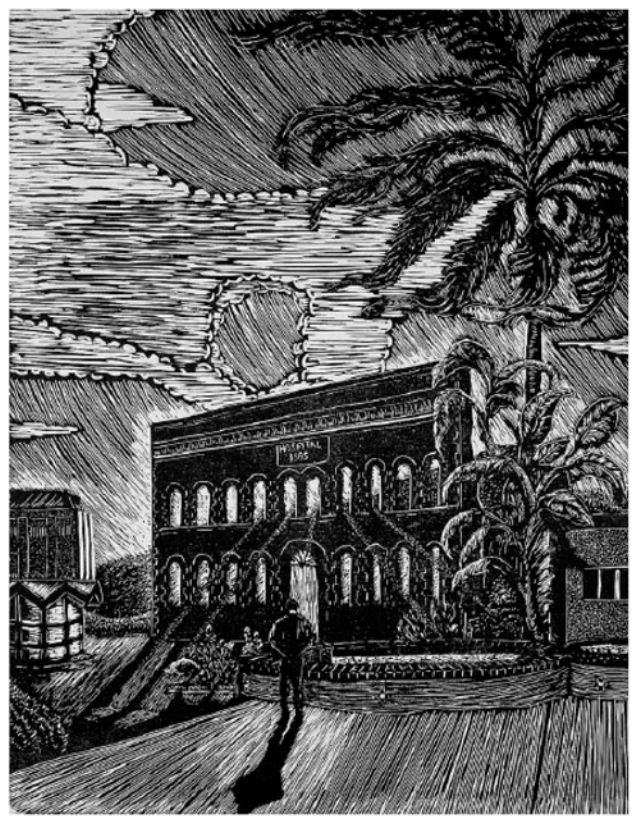
LE: There is also the whole question of jobs and how far people have to travel to get to their jobs and then how little they pay. All these minimum wage jobs don't pay you enough to live, so you have to have more than one job. What does that do to the whole question of people having time? To have a family life, to be an activist, and really be serious about accomplishing some changes whether they're revolutionary or reformist? People don't have that kind of time and I think also the whole income gap has made a big difference too. I know a lot of All of Us or None members, people that have been in prison, don't have gas money to attend a meeting; to drive as far as they have to, to a central place and really come together with other people. And public transportation is expensive. So, what happens? Everybody's isolated and on their phone or electronic device—if they have one. So, I don't know, I think the conditions for organizing dissent have also been impacted by technology and that's made a difference.

RH: Will you comment on the value of doing projects across prison walls—whether they're written projects or other kinds of projects to build analysis, to be in contact with each other?

LE: I remember the project that Marilyn Buck did with Miranda Bergman and another artist. That was actually done in the visiting room, but then there was a production part that happened outside. One of them would draw a picture on a third of the page and the next person would draw another picture in the middle and then fold it under so that you didn't ever see the other artist's work. Then they put those pictures in one of her chapbooks of poetry. It's wonderful to have that back and forth with somebody that's actually out in the world. Eve was doing a lot of the research and the running around to find facts and things like that, but the fact that her analysis and her experiences were being brought into something I was working on made a tremendous difference in terms of relevance to me and feeling like it would have relevance to others.

EG: Me too. I'm always saying since then, we should do another thing like that pamphlet together. It's good for relationships in general I think. Doing things together is a deep way of relating. That's what social change is, people coming together and doing something together. It was a good example of collaboration. I don't think either one of us would have or could have done it without the other one. It was really two people coming together to make something that wouldn't have happened without a coming together.

IT'S BECOME SUCH A STRUGGLE JUST TO SURVIVE THAT MANY PEOPLE DON'T HAVE THE TIME, ENERGY, OR RESOURCES TO GET INVOLVED IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS. BUT ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, CHANGE HAPPENS. MOVEMENTS ALL OVER THE WORLD GROW EVEN UNDER THE MOST DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES.



ART: "THE RUINS OF SAN QUENTIN HOSPITAL" BY RONNIE GOODMAN

LE: I remember the Prisoners Fight AIDS walkathons, too. Those were tremendous collaborations. Not resulting in a written product, but resulting in tremendous consciousness changes for people inside. There was huge consciousness change for the volunteers from the outside that came in to help set it up and distribute the money. Big social giving, too. In prison, it's illegal to give anybody anything. Suddenly we were able to give to people with AIDS. That was very big. Out of our little commissary money and money from their prison jobs, women would make donations, in addition to the financial donations we got from the outside. But prison programs generally, and collaboration with community groups – that environment of potential collaboration and bringing people in from the outside – are getting decimated. There are more and more and more restrictions even in places like San Quentin, which has a history of volunteers coming in, and it's very difficult to start those programs anymore. I know in the federal system no inmate clubs are allowed anymore. That's been for many years.

RH: Do you think our movement is stronger since you've been out of prison?

LE: I now have a clearer picture of the two forces kind of developing off of each other and how they relate. Good things have happened. In the New York State system, they say they're going to have higher education in all the prisons. That would be fantastic. The fact that the Governor signed an executive order ordering that is a big deal IF they implement it. At the same time that that might happen in one state, you have all these other places that are shutting those programs down. And at the same time that we're able to stop a prison from being built, we have AB900 and all the county jail expansion stuff going on. I'm really impressed with the fact that we have built a movement. Like always, there's fragmentation and in-fighting and it tears us apart. It's difficult to build broad coalitions to meet new challenges like abolishing solitary confinement, because people haven't worked together. And there aren't always clear agreements so people can unite with mutual respect, and with a clear purpose, where everybody feels like they're respected and moving forward together.

RH: I think the material conditions we're trying to organize in create levels of competition that are necessary for capitalism to do its thing and fuel some of that. I don't know that it's the singular factor, but it does strike me that the decimation of our movements and the leadership of our movements coupled with a continual drive to be in competition and to mistrust each other poses serious challenges to making change.

EG: I agree. I don't think we've ever recovered from the vacuum in leadership that was created with the murder and incarceration of the Black Panthers, Malcolm X, etc. in the 1960s and 70s. And another factor making it difficult today to create mass movements for social change is the increasing impoverishment of the American working class. The lack of jobs. And the lack of jobs that pay a decent wage. It's become such a struggle just to survive that many people don't have the time, energy, or resources to get involved in social movements. But on the bright side, change happens. Movements all over the world grow even under the most difficult circumstances. So, you never know.

***Eve Goldberg** is an activist, writer, and filmmaker who lives in Northern California. She is the partner of Linda Evans.*

***Linda Evans** was an anti-imperialist political prisoner for 16 years, and currently is active in All of Us or None, a grassroots civil rights organization of formerly-incarcerated people and our families.*