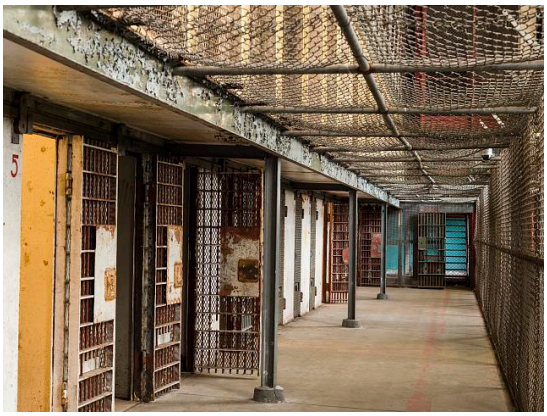
Organizing Prisons in the 1960s and 1970s

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On the 45th anniversary of the Attica Prison rebellion in 1971, *Process* speaks with seven scholars of the carceral state about prisoners' organizing in the 1960s and 1970s and movements protesting mass incarceration today. This is the first of a three-part series, guest edited for *Process* by Jessie Kindig. Check out parts two and three.

Part I: Building Movements

Process: What kinds of demands and visions did activist-prisoners from the 1960s and 1970s propose? What was won, and what goals were not realized?

Heather Ann Thompson: Prisoners have been treated inhumanely throughout American history and in every region of the country and they have always resisted. With increasing determination after World War II, and in conjunction with the rise of the black freedom struggle nationally, prisoners became particularly active in the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand their demands very much mirrored those of activists on city streets—they spoke out against racism, against the violence directed at them by officers of the state, for better living and working conditions, for greater access to education, and for better medical care. On the other hand, as people under the full control of the state, their demands often and most pointedly focused on fundamental human rights—they demanded time and again to be treated like people.

Garrett Felber: The *Ruffin v. Commonwealth* ruling of 1871 established that a prisoner, "as a consequence of his crime, not only forfeited his liberty, but all his personal rights except those which the law in its humanity accords to him. He is for the time being the slave of the State." This meant that nearly a century later prisoners were still denied basic constitutional rights and had little access to the courts. But the demands to basic constitutional rights of the early 1960s expanded dramatically alongside broader transformations within the black freedom struggle by the latter part of the decade. This included anti-colonial critiques of the Vietnam War, labor demands such as unions, a minimum wage, and workmen's compensation for prison labor, as well as intersectional analyses drawn from women of color feminists. Most importantly, the movement asserted prisoners' humanity and demanded dignity. For example, the Attica Liberation Faction ended its manifesto in 1971: "We are firm in our resolve and we demand, as human beings, the dignity and justice that is due to us by our right of birth."

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs: In the first half of the 1970s, prisoners at Louisiana State Penitentiary (Angola)

were primarily pushing for an end to dehumanizing conditions. For example, in 1971, four Black prisoners, Arthur Mitchell, Hayes Williams, Lee Stevenson, and Lazarus Joseph, filed a lawsuit (which became known as "Hayes Williams") against cruel and unusual punishment and civil rights violations at Angola. Their lawsuit charged that Angola was guilty of ongoing racial segregation of Black and white prisoners, religious discrimination against Muslims, woefully inadequate medical care, unsanitary living and dining quarters, censorship of legal mail, over-reliance on solitary confinement, and that prison officials fostered a violent environment through practices such as the use of "trusty guards." The Fifth Circuit ended up finding in favor of the prisoners in 1975 and mandated a slew of reforms to the conditions at Angola.

As the decade wore on the emphasis of prisoner activism shifted from conditions to sentencing and opportunities for release. For many incarcerated people, the goal was never to make prison more comfortable but to get out of the prison all together. As we know, the 1970s was the beginning of the U.S. prison boom. One of the major factors for the growth of the Louisiana prison population, for example, was the lengthening of sentences and curtailment of parole. With scores and scores of prisoners finding themselves unable to attain the freedom they had anticipated, a new wave of jailhouse lawyering emerged. The knowledge gained about the Louisiana legislature and the connections built through fighting for parole laws ended up being important building blocks for later collective prisoner organizing.

Tony Platt: The prison movement of the 1960s–1970s was actually several movements: liberal campaigns to humanize conditions inside and implement the post–World War II "rehabilitative ideal"; civil rights activism and civil disobedience practiced in Southern jails and prisons; left campaigns to "tear down the walls," drastically reduce the prison population, and expose the malevolent abuses of rehabilitation policies; the revolutionary politics of prisoners incarcerated for non-political crimes who followed Malcolm X's example as he transformed himself from a "ghetto-created Negro" to a leader who offered the "black man something worthwhile"; and feminist organizing in women's prisons, carving out a space in the hyper-masculinist world of the struggle inside. One important legacy was the successful effort to make the prison cell into an outpost of a broader agenda for social and economic equality.

Thompson: From the demand for basic necessities such a toilet paper and light to the more abstract demand that they be allowed to organize politically, prisoners more than any other group kept the state in check in this period.

Toussaint Losier: It's striking to look back and see the variety of demands that the prison movement put forward nearly a half century ago. At the most basic level, prison organizers wanted to be considered citizens, with the freedom to observe their religion, organize themselves, and hold controversial political beliefs as well as to enjoy the freedom from physical torture and sexual violence. They sought due process of law, a standardization of policies, access to the public, the courts, and the press. They wanted adequate medical care, fair compensation for their labor and worker's compensation, as well as humane living and working conditions.

Beyond this, they had a more expansive vision, calling for prisoners to educate themselves politically, to organize themselves into labor unions, and exert control over their own lives. They called for more democracy in prison management and an end to the reliance on racism and patriarchy to manage prisons. At their most imaginative, organizers believed they could build genuine solidarity amongst prisoners and that as comrades, prisoners could contribute to the construction of a socialist society, particularly one that did not compulsively rely on putting people in cages.

Dan Berger: Someone like George Jackson, a California prisoner who was arguably the intellectual

figurehead of prisoner activism in the 1970s, cared less about prison reform and more about socialist revolution—a goal far from realized.

Change did come, though. As a result of lawsuits, strikes, exposés, and rebellions, the prison movement changed several things about American prisons. Prisons outlawed formal racial segregation, hired more black and Latino/a officers, provided more First Amendment protections in what prisoners sent and received through the mail, safeguarded religious expressions and diet, made it easier for prisoners to seek redress for grievances, secured equal programming across women's and men's facilities, and ended some egregious forms of abuse.

Alan Eladio Gómez: The demands and visions of imprisoned people imagined new worlds, different social institutions and economic policies, and a transformation of people's relationship to the state. The prison rebellion years were a total re-imagination of what was possible in society.

Inspired by and taking the lead from imprisoned activists organizing strikes and legal challenges, study groups and newspapers, prisoner support organizations, family members, lawyers, academics, psychologists, psychiatrists, and journalists contributed to these movements in a variety of ways. Progressive legal organizations developed prison legal projects; universities organized law clinics; psychologists and "street lawyers" intervened in the use of prisons' Behavior Modification programs; journalists investigated wardens, litigated with institutions, and exposed the violences behind prison walls.

Berger: However, the situation on balance remains rather bleak. Prison activists often lost even when they won: in California, for instance, activists won an end to indeterminate sentencing, but the state responded with mandatory minimums and increasingly tough, if determinate, sentences. Other victories were stripped away by the 1996 Prison Litigation Reform Act, which limited a prisoner's ability to sue the state, or the conservatism of the Rehnquist court. And as prisons grew more modern and technologically sophisticated, they became more atomized and restrictive. The widespread use of solitary confinement, among other things, has limited prisoners' ability to organize. And the most far-reaching demands, a total reorganization of the criminal justice system, remain unheeded.

Losier: Very little of what prisoners sought was attained, and over the past several decades, much of what was attained has been lost. True, few prisoners today live in the almost medieval circumstances that were prevalent a half-century ago. Not only have living and working conditions entered the twentieth century, but most prisoners also have greater access to their loved ones and the public in general. In a sense, prisoners won a limited legal standing and a modicum of procedural justice. Yet even these gains have been rolled back with laws that have significantly limited their access to the courts and channeled their concerns into a dead-end complaint process. One could even say that officials have turned the benefits of limited procedural justice against them, demonstrated by the elaborate set of rules governing how a prisoner transferred to long-term solitary confinement might be released from conditions properly defined as torture. In the worst instance, however, the most significant loss has been the disciplining of the movement's imaginative vision, of prison organizers' horizon of possibility.

Platt: Forty years later, we are trying to figure out what went so wrong, what it will take to revitalize the movements.

Process: How would you describe the historical trajectory of prison organizing in the 1960s and 70s? Is it best understood as a history of dramatic moments or as a slow

transformation wrought through everyday organizing?

Thompson: It is both. Every day of every decade saw acts of organizing and resistance and periodically those coalesced and became a historic or iconic act of collective activism. The misunderstanding that many scholars have about prisoner rights is that the times between the iconic uprisings were, somehow, apolitical or quiescent. The other misunderstanding is that acts of prisoner resistance—either episodic or iconic—either moved prisons, inevitably, to become more humane, or always touched off backlash. The outcome of these rebellions was always mixed. In key instances, the prisoner activism of the 1960s and 1970s brought fundamental improvements to institutions of punishment around the country, and in other respects they indeed fueled a hostility that served to net them even more unconscionable abuse. To write the history of this period fully, scholars must wade into this complexity.

Felber: The Attica rebellion in 1971 is the most dramatic moment in the history of the prisoners' rights movement, one which ushered in significant transformations in prison conditions. As such, it is one of the most important stories. But accounts of prison uprisings cannot alone explain the prisoners' rights movement. We cannot hope to understand a social movement through only its most visible and violent manifestations.

As scholars have importantly pointed out, one of the central obstacles to the prisoners' rights movement was visibility. While prison uprisings such as Attica certainly publicized prison conditions, there were also much slower labors which brought about greater visibility, such as prison litigation. So-called "jailhouse lawyers," who prepared writs to be copied by other prisoners and signed under their own names, flooded the courts and brought prison conditions under the auspices of the judicial branch. We also have records of smaller, everyday acts of political resistance that I describe in my work, such as refusing to shave or submit to rectal examinations, or throwing away pork and speaking in Arabic. All of these make up the larger mosaic of prisoners' activism which inflect and inform a dramatic moment such as the Attica rebellion.

Berger: Here too I think the prison movement is not unlike other social movements, including the other social movements it formed through and alongside. The modern black freedom struggle is unimaginable without the 1963 March on Washington, the passage of landmark civil rights legislation between 1964 and 1968, or the urban rebellions in those years. Yet each of those phenomena took a lot of patient organizing to make possible, and produced a lot of grassroots endeavors in response. Looking at any of them in isolation misses the larger social field of how they happened and what they produced. There are times when history moves faster—generating massive demonstrations or uprisings—and times when only the slow-and-steady organizing creates change.

Losier: Rather than one or the other, it might be best to understand this history as a product of the tension between the two. When we look at the sources, it is clear that this was a period in which prison activists labored to build radical organizations behind bars. They struggled to do so in spite of the conditions of their confinement, from the hostility of the guards and treatment staff to the deprivations of triple-celling and repeated lockdowns. And in doing so, they also had to prepare for and respond to rebellions that occurred spontaneously and attempt to bend them to their advantage. It's important to remember that in the histories of San Quentin and the Tombs, Leavenworth and Marion, Stateville and Pontiac, Attica and Walpole, a regular theme is that while prison organizers might have laid the foundation for a revolt to break out, they did not dictate how this might occur and had to contend with the dramatic moments as they unfolded.

Pelot-Hobbs: At Angola, prison organizing during the seventies could be best characterized as a collectivizing process. Prisoners had long been fighting for their freedom through individual legal cases, escapes, and the occasional protest. However, during the 1970s as prisoners were

increasingly confronting the combination of dehumanizing conditions and long sentences, they began to utilize the prison club system to ask questions about how they ended up in this predicament to begin with and, in the words of formerly incarcerated activist Norris Henderson, "what we can do to change not necessarily our conditions, but our circumstances" of being incarcerated. These conversations and the leadership that developed proved to be important building blocks for significant organizing campaigns in the 1980s.

Berger: The scores of labor strikes and uprisings that took place in prisons during the 1960s and 1970s did a lot to focus attention on the abusive conditions of prisons. Yet those rebellions were only possible as a result of a number of steady organizing initiatives. Rebellions and other forms of activism often concretized multiracial solidarity within the notoriously divided landscape of prison, which proved necessary in surviving the typically brutal reprisals people faced for participating in dramatic conflicts. At the same time, it is important to remember the crowded field of political activity: prisoners, prison guard and police unions, prison officials, prosecutors, and politicians were all pursuing competing and contradictory approaches to criminal justice issues. Prisons were being dramatically transformed throughout (and since) the 1970s, but reforms were hardly going in one cogent direction.

Platt: Organizing of any kind is usually a slow, steady, un-dramatic process, much like preparing and planting a field. And then, if you're lucky, a spark will light a prairie fire: Martin Luther King's letter from Birmingham jail, the murder of Fred Hampton in Chicago, the death of George Jackson, the trial of Angela Davis, and the Attica rebellion in 1971 (so well known that we only have to say *Attica* to evoke the historical moment). And then, after the fire is extinguished, it's back to the everyday work of unglamorous organizing, while hoping that a hunger strike by prisoners in solitary or local Black Lives Matters protests will reignite the movement.

Participants:

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Alan Eladio Gómez is an Associate Professor in the School of Justice and Social Inquiry at Arizona State University. He is the author of *The Revolutionary Imaginations of Greater Mexico: Chicana/o Radicalism, Solidarity Politics, and Social Movements in Latin America in the 1970s* (University of Texas Press, 2016), and *'With Dignity Intact': Cycles of Struggle in the Post-WWII U.S. Federal Prison System* (University of Nebraska Press).

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Lydia Pelot-Hobbs is a doctoral candidate in Geography at the The Graduate Center, CUNY where she is writing her dissertation on the dialectical relationship between the formation and contestation of the Louisiana carceral state from the 1970s to the present. Her writing has been published in academic and activist venues including *The Abolitionist, Southern Spaces, Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, and in the anthology *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas.*

Tony Platt is a Distinguished Affiliated Scholar at the Center for the Study of Law and Society, UC Berkeley, and a founding member of the journal *Social Justice*. He is currently working on a book for St. Martin's Press, tentatively titled *Something That Has A History To It: A Genealogy of American Injustice.*

Heather Ann Thompson is a historian at the University of Michigan in the Departments of African American Studies, the Residential College, and the Department of History. She has written on the history and impact of mass incarceration for *The New York Times*, *Time*, *The Atlantic*, *Salon*, *Dissent*, *New Labor Forum*, and *The Huffington Post*. She served on a National Academy of Sciences blue-ribbon panel that studied the causes and consequences of mass incarceration in the United States and has given Congressional staff briefings on this subject. Her latest book is *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and its Legacy* (Pantheon). Thompson is also the author of *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* and editor of *Speaking Out: Activism and Protest in the 1960s and 1970s*.

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