

CRITICAL TIMES

Interventions in Global Critical Theory

CALL FOR PAPERS IMPRISONING POLITICS

According to the US State Department, political imprisonment is what happens elsewhere, “enabled by Orwellian legal systems designed to target peaceful protestors or government critics.” That the US would deny its participation in these processes comes as no surprise. Critics of empire and the carceral state often note that the US does in fact target protestors and imprison opponents, such that the “Orwellian” is everywhere. These critics have also put pressure on the distinction between political prisoners and “common criminals,” arguing that this distinction abjects the members of criminalized populations, whom it relegates to a place outside politics. Without denying the importance of either of these arguments, we seek to approach the problem of political imprisonment from another perspective. We take seriously the *de jure*, though not the *de facto*, nonexistence of political prisoners in contemporary states in order to consider the different accounts of politics that emerge as a result.

In legal systems that do gesture toward the political prisoner’s existence, if only through appeals to national security, how has the figure of this prisoner come into being? What other designations—including terrorist, dissident, and anti-national—mark its appearance? What purposes has it served, and what state and anti-state projects has it been summoned to advance? What contradictions does this figure contain or cover up? If the political prisoner is imprisoned on account of her politics, then the state’s effort is to imprison—to partition and police—politics itself. This constitutes an acknowledgment that, as many prisoners have argued, the prison is a political institution. For their part, self-described liberal democracies loudly disavow this fact even while remaining carceral. What does their disavowal achieve? What forms of political mobilization and response does it work to foreclose? How would our accounts of liberal politics and government change if, rather than dismissing this disavowal as a mere hypocritical ruse, we were to study its operations? Might these accounts take us beyond the distinction between liberal and non-liberal states, which often organizes understandings of the relationship between the West and the non-West, or the Global North and the Global South? Might they highlight grammars of governing that traverse these ostensible divides?

This special issue of *Critical Times* seeks to address two complementary sets of questions, then, cutting across the West and the non-West, the Global North and the Global South: (1) What can the workings of political imprisonment under non-liberal legal regimes disclose about the construction and maintenance of carceral states, both under these regimes and elsewhere? (2) If the figure of the political prisoner is absent, disavowed, or erased in liberal democracies, what are the consequences of this figure’s disappearance? Where do its traces remain, and with what effects? What, if any, are its implications for the project of prison abolition? Our aim is to complicate descriptive accounts of political imprisonment in order to examine the modern emergence and performative force of the category itself. We welcome contributions in various forms, from interviews to academic essays, and we encourage submissions written from a range of critical and political perspectives.

Full submissions are due by **June 1, 2023**. For author guidelines and to make a submission, please visit <https://ctjournal.org/submissions>. For inquiries, please contact criticaltimes@berkeley.edu.

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