

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

- Topic: "Incarceration: A Case Study of the Challenges of White Privilege to U.S. Catholic Social Teaching"
- Convener: Bryan Massingale, Marquette University
- Moderator: Kristin Heyer, Loyola Marymount University
- Presenters: Alex Mikulich, Saint Joseph College
Laurie Cassidy, Marywood University
Margaret Pfeil, University of Notre Dame

Alex Mikulich began the panel's consideration of the relationship between mass incarceration and racial injustice with his "Invisibility of Whiteness in U.S. Incarceration." He opened by naming the reality of white privilege as it functions in the links between the ever-swelling and racially disproportionately populated prison system and the material geography of U.S. cities. The drastic statistics he presented on U.S. incarceration rates, in general, and racial and gender disparities in the makeup of the prison population and sentencing practices, in particular, set the stage for his analysis of the ways the courts legitimize the unconscious racism that drives such practices. Mikulich emphasized the manner in which minority men are simultaneously stigmatized by the prison system and made invisible by the labor market. He traced evidence of legally enshrined white privilege in the labor market and the social psychology of white employers. Here he noted how prisons mask race disparities in employment and wage figures by excluding inmates from such determinations, and how the associations between crime and race among employers have remained fixed over time. He concluded by underscoring the ways in which prisons and urban ghettos increasingly mirror one another, with socially and economically isolated urban neighborhoods undergoing intensive police surveillance, on the one hand, and with the prison system's mass incarceration of impoverished minorities replicating and reproducing the trauma inflicted on the street within prison walls, on the other hand. This "deadly symbiosis" institutionalizes a historical pattern of associating blackness with criminality and a culture of white dominance.

Next, in "Rap and Representation: The Social Ethical Implications for Understanding the Systemic Injustice of the United States Prison Industrial Complex," Laurie Cassidy argued that the racist image of black men as criminal enacted by contemporary hip hop obfuscates the systemic nature of imprisonment in the U.S. Cassidy first traced the historical genealogy of the image of the black male in the white American imagination, with particular attention to the legacy of the image of Nat Turner. In light of the manner in which the conflation of Turner with all ante-bellum black males legitimized the evil of chattel slavery, Cassidy argued that the "bestly and dangerous" stereotype has persisted through U.S. history, justifying more recent social and legal disciplines like lynching and profiling. She then linked this history with the ways in which the development of gangster rap from hip hop has ultimately served to reinscribe the myth of the dangerous black male within the white imagination and normalize hegemonic

ideologies. She lamented the manner in which commodified, mainstream hip hop has blunted the subversive force of a genre that gave voice to the gangster as an indictment of the stereotype of black male criminality, thereby disrupting the concept of white superiority. She closed by connecting this reification of such stereotypes to the concealment of a prison industrial complex that incarcerates a scandalous number of black men.

As a response to the realities articulated in the first two presentations, Margaret Pfeil reflected on the spiritual practices mass incarceration and white privilege invite in “The Arc of the Moral Universe: A Spirituality of Nonviolence and the Reality of Mass Incarceration.” Drawing upon the work of Martin Luther King, she connected the institutionalized violence of mass incarceration to the multivalent structural violence projected by U.S. global dominance and linked the dangerous tepidity of the contemporary “white moderate” to the perpetuation of the prison epidemic. She characterized this manifestation of white privilege as a denial of the Incarnation, calling for a spiritual askesis of nonviolence in response. Discussing the ways in which the neo-slavery of mass incarceration not only socially excludes, but also imprisons those who benefit, she proposed voluntary incarceration (including its requisite spiritual preparation) as nonviolent resistance. Pfeil concluded by outlining additional Christian practices to name and transform the structures of white privilege *vis à vis* the prison system: noncooperation with the prison system in general and drug sentencing in particular via work slowdowns or stoppages by court personnel; restorative justice measures including faith-based efforts to support returning prisoners and the development of economic alternatives in communities where prisons have become the main economic engine; and more widespread, communal practices of nonviolence to incarnate faith and put believers’ bodies in the way of structures of white privilege.

During the discussion that followed, Bryan Massingale questioned whether the tools of traditional moral theology are themselves adequate to the challenges posed, including the social psychology at play amid the complex dynamics of unconscious racism and privilege.

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