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EVERY F. GORDON

# Globalism and the prison industrial complex: an interview with Angela Davis

*Angela Y. Davis is Professor of History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz. A prolific speaker and internationally renowned activist, Davis is the author of several books, including **Women, Race & Class** (Vintage, 1983) and **Blues Legacies and Black Feminism** (Pantheon, 1998). For almost thirty years, Angela Davis has been working to radically change the US penal system. During the last ten years, her teaching, writing, speaking and organising efforts have been intensively focused on exposing the prison industrial complex and on working for its abolition. Most recently, these efforts culminated in a large national conference and strategy session, **Critical Resistance: beyond the prison industrial complex**, held on September 24-27, 1998 at the University of California, Berkeley. **Dispossession and Punishment: essays on the prison industrial complex and the new abolitionism**, a forthcoming book, presents Davis's recent research and writing on prisons, some of which is excerpted here. In July, Avery Gordon, author of **Ghostly Matters: haunting and the sociological imagination** (University of Minnesota Press, 1997) and other works, spoke with Angela Davis about the prison industrial complex and its threats.*

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*Avery Gordon: I'd like to begin by asking you to describe what is meant by the 'prison industrial complex'.*

*Angela Davis: Almost two million people are currently locked up in the*

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immense network of US prisons and jails. More than 70 per cent of the imprisoned population are people of colour. Approximately five million people – including those on probation and parole – are directly under the surveillance of the criminal justice system. Three decades ago, the imprisoned population was approximately one-eighth its current size. While women still constitute a relatively small percentage of people behind bars, today the number of incarcerated women in the state of California, where we live, alone is almost twice the entire state and federal women's population of 1970. In fact, the fastest growing group of prisoners are Black women. According to Elliott Currie, '[t]he prison has become a looming presence in our society to an extent unparalleled in our history – or that of any other industrial democracy. Short of major wars, mass incarceration has been the most thoroughly implemented government social programme of our time'.<sup>1</sup>

Penal infrastructures must be created to accommodate this rapidly swelling population of caged people. Goods and people must be provided to keep imprisoned populations alive. Sometimes these populations must be kept busy and at other times – particularly in repressive super-maximum prisons and in Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detention centres – they must be deprived of virtually all meaningful activity. Vast numbers of handcuffed and shackled people are moved across state borders as they are transferred from one state or federal prison to another. All this work, which used to be the primary province of government, is now also performed by private corporations, whose links to government in the field of what is euphemistically called 'corrections' reveal dangerous resonances with the military industrial complex. The dividends that accrue from investment in the punishment industry, like those that accrue from investment in weapons production, only amount to social destruction. Taking into account the structural similarities and profitability of business-government linkages in the realm of military production and public punishment, the expanding penal system can now be characterised as a 'prison industrial complex'.

*That the prison industrial complex produces 'social destruction' is an important point since it challenges the ubiquitous rhetoric of prisons as a necessary solution to what's now – after the US defeat of the 'communist threat' – taken to be the major social problem facing the United States, and that is crime.*

Imprisonment has become the response of first resort to far too many of the social problems that burden people ensconced in poverty. These problems are often veiled by being conveniently grouped together under the category 'crime' and by the automatic attribution of criminal behaviour to people of colour, especially Black and Latino/a men and women. Homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction and illiteracy

are only a few of the problems that disappear from public view when the human beings contending with them are relegated to cages. Prisons thus perform a feat of magic. Or rather the people who continually vote in new prison bonds or tacitly assent to a proliferating network of prisons and jails, have been tricked into believing in the magic of imprisonment. But, as you've suggested elsewhere, prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings and the practice of disappearing vast numbers of people from poor, immigrant and racially marginalised communities literally has become big business.

As prisons take up more and more space on the social landscape, other government programmes that have previously sought to respond to social needs are being squeezed out of existence. In fact, the dismantling of the welfare state and the growth of the prison industrial complex have taken place simultaneously and are intimately related to one another. In the process of implementing this prisonisation of the US social landscape, private capital has become enmeshed in the punishment industry in a variety of ways and, precisely because of their profit potential, prisons are becoming increasingly central to the US economy. If the notion of punishment as a source of potentially stupendous profits is disturbing by itself, then the strategic dependence on racist structures and ideologies to render mass punishment palatable and profitable is even more disturbing.

This political economy of prisons relies on racialised assumptions of criminality – such as images of Black welfare mothers reproducing criminal children – and on well-documented racist practices in arrest, conviction and sentencing patterns to deliver up bodies destined for profitable punishment. Coloured bodies are the main raw material in this vast experiment to disappear the major social problems of our time. Once the aura of magic is stripped away from the imprisonment solution, however, what is revealed is racism, class bias and the parasitic seduction of capitalist profit within a system that materially and morally impoverishes its inhabitants, while it devours the social wealth needed to address the very problems that have led to spiralling numbers of prisoners.

*You're suggesting, then, that the prison industrial complex accomplishes two interrelated vanishing acts. It disappears ever larger numbers of poor coloured people, especially women and youth, into the shadow society of the prison where they are expected to live behind, as you put it, 'layer and upon layer of razor wire', in a literal state of social dispossession.<sup>2</sup> It also hides from public view the racialised capitalism that underwrites and drives the development of the prison industrial complex.*

Yes. Let me try to connect these two dimensions. Because of the tendency to view it as an abstract site into which all manner of undesirables are deposited, the prison is a perfect site for the simultaneous

production and concealment of racism. The abstract character of the public perception of prisons militates against an engagement with the real issues afflicting the communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers. This is the ideological work that the prison performs; it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of late capitalism, of transnational capitalism. The naturalisation of Black and brown people as criminals also erects ideological barriers to an understanding of the connections between late-twentieth century structural racism and the globalisation of capital.

*Would you elaborate on that connection?*

The vast expansion of the power of capitalist corporations over the lives of people of colour and poor people in general has been accompanied by a waning anti-capitalist consciousness. As capital moves with ease across national borders, legitimised by recent trade and investment agreements such as NAFTA, GATT and MAI, corporations close shop in the United States and transfer manufacturing operations to nations providing cheap labour pools. In fleeing organised labour in the US to avoid paying higher wages and benefits, they leave entire communities in shambles, consigning huge numbers of people to joblessness, leaving them prey to the drug trade, destroying the economic base of these communities and thus affecting the education system, social welfare – and turning the people who live in those communities into perfect candidates for prison. At the same time, they create an economic demand for prisons, which stimulates the economy, providing jobs in the correctional industry for people who often come from the very populations that are criminalised by this process. It is a horrifying and self-reproducing cycle.

*This is a disturbing twist on the notion of dependency and an example of what Helen Quan, in the context of studying neo-imperialism in Brazil, has called 'savage developmentalism'.*

It is more than a twist. Prisons themselves are becoming a source of cheap labour that attracts corporate capitalism in a way that parallels the attraction unorganised labour in Third World countries exerts. Let me read you a statement by Michael Lamar Powell, a prisoner in Capshaw, Alabama:

I cannot go on strike, nor can I unionize. I am not covered by workers' compensation of the Fair Labour Standards Act. I agree to work late-night and weekend shifts. I do just what I am told, no matter what it is. I am hired and fired at will, and I am not even paid minimum wage: I earn one dollar a month. I cannot even voice grievances or complaints, except at the risk of incurring arbitrary discipline of some covert retaliation.

You need not worry about NAFTA or your jobs going to Mexico and other Third World countries. I will have at least five per cent of our jobs by the end of this decade.

I am called prison labour. I am The New American Worker.<sup>3</sup>

This 'new American worker' will be drawn from the ranks of a racialised population whose historical super-exploitation, from the era of slavery to the present, has been legitimised by racism. At the same time, the expansion of convict labour is accompanied in some states by the old paraphernalia of ankle chains that symbolically links convict labour with slave labour. Several states have reinstated the chain gang. Moreover, as Michael Powell so incisively reveals, there is a new dimension to the racism inherent in this process, which structurally links the super-exploitation of prison labour to the globalisation of capital.

In fact, many corporations that provide us with products we consume on a daily basis have learned that prison labour power can be as profitable as the Third World labour power exploited by US-based global corporations that have relegated formerly unionised labour forces to joblessness and prison. Some of the clients of companies that use prison labour are IBM, Motorola, Compaq, Texas Instruments, Honeywell, Microsoft and Boeing. But it is not only the hi-tech industries that reap the profits of prison labour. Nordstrom department stores sell jeans that are marketed as 'Prison Blues' and t-shirts and jackets made in Oregon prisons. Maryland prisoners inspect glass bottles and jars used by Revlon and Pierre Cardin, and graduation caps and gowns made by South Carolina prisoners are purchased by schools throughout the world. In our own state, the California State University system is required to purchase a variety of furniture and equipment produced by prison labour under the auspices of the Prison Industrial Authority. Work now being performed on prison grounds includes computerised telephone messaging, dental apparatus assembly, computer data entry, plastic parts fabrication, electronic component manufacturing, security glass manufacturing, swine production, oak furniture manufacturing and the production of stainless steel tanks and equipment.

Although prison labour is hugely profitable for the companies that use it, the penal system as a whole does not produce wealth. It devours the social wealth that could be used to subsidise housing for the homeless, to meliorate public education for poor and racially marginalised communities, to open free drug rehabilitation programmes for people who wish to kick their habits, to create a national health care system, to expand programmes to combat HIV and to eradicate domestic abuse, and, in the process, to create well-paying jobs for the unemployed. This amounts to a massive redistribution of social wealth and resources. For example, government contracts to build prisons have

played a major role in bolstering the construction industry and prison design has become a major business 'opportunity' for architects. Technology developed for military use is marketed by companies like Westinghouse for use in law enforcement and punishment. Moreover, corporations that appear to be far removed from the business of punishment are intimately involved in the expansion of the prison industrial complex. For example, prison construction bonds are one of the many sources of profitable investment for leading financiers such as Merrill Lynch.

*So, the rise of private prison companies is only the most visible component of the increasing corporatisation of punishment?*

Prison privatisation is the most obvious instance of capital's current movement toward the prison industry. In March of 1997, the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the largest US private prison company, claimed 54,944 beds in sixty-eight facilities under contract or development in the US, Puerto Rico, the United Kingdom and Australia. In response to the global pattern of subjecting more women to public punishment – although 'private domestic' violence continues<sup>4</sup> – CCA recently opened a women's prison outside Melbourne.

Wackenhut Corrections Corporation (WCC), the second largest US company, claimed contracts and awards to manage forty-six facilities in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia. It claims a total of 30,424 beds as well as contracts for prisoner health services, transportation and security. If these companies divulged statistics by race indicating who has slept in those beds, they would probably reveal an inordinate number of Black and Latino people in the US, Black and Asian people in the United Kingdom and Aboriginal peoples in Australia.

Currently, the stocks of both CCA and WCC are doing extremely well. By the end of last year, CCA's revenues had increased by 58 per cent – from \$293 million in 1996 to \$462 million in 1997. Its net profit grew from \$30.9 million to \$53.9 million. WCC, which is 54 per cent owned by the Wackenhut Corporation (which itself had revenues of over one billion dollars in 1997), increased its revenues from \$138 million in 1996 to \$210 million in 1997, amounting to a net profit increase from \$8.3 million to \$11 million. It hardly needs to be pointed out that such vast profits rely on the employment of non-union labour to operate prisons.

*I'd like to go back to a statement you made earlier that Black people and people of colour in general are the main human raw material with which the expansion of the prison industrial complex is being accomplished. In several articles and in your forthcoming book, you've been excavating the racialised and gendered history of punishment and penalty in the US*

*and you've identified at least four systems of incarceration that link 'confinement, punishment, and race': the reservation system, slavery, the mission system, and the internment camps of the second world war.<sup>5</sup> You've focused especially on the history of slavery and on people of African descent.<sup>6</sup> What are some of the main features of this history that you see as particularly important for understanding the prison crisis today?*

Within the US – and increasingly in postcolonial Europe – the disproportionate presence of people of colour among incarcerated populations has acquired a self-evident character.<sup>7</sup> But, this commonplace is a result of a long history of exploitation and state repression. Historically, people of African descent consigned to slavery in the US were certainly not treated as rights-bearing individuals and therefore were not considered worthy of the moral re-education that was the announced philosophical goal of the penitentiary. Indeed, the slave system had its own forms of punishment, which remained primarily corporeal and of the sort that predated the emergence of incarceration as punishment.

Within the institution of slavery, itself a form of incarceration, racialised forms of punishment developed alongside the emergence of the prison system within, and as a negative affirmation of, the 'free world', from which slavery was twice removed. Even if the forms of punishment inherent in and associated with slavery had been entirely revoked with the abolition of slavery, the persistent second-class citizenship status to which former slaves were relegated would have had an implicit impact on punishment practices. However, an explicit linkage between slavery and punishment was written into the US Constitution precisely at the moment of the abolition of slavery. In fact, there was no reference to imprisonment in the Constitution until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment declared chattel slavery unconstitutional. The Thirteenth Amendment read: 'Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction'. The abolition of slavery thus corresponded to the authorisation of slavery as punishment. In actual practice, both Emancipation and the authorisation of penal servitude combined to create an immense Black presence within southern prisons and to transform the character of punishment into a means of managing former slaves.

In constructing prisoners as human beings who deserved subjection to slavery, the Constitution allowed for a further, more elusive linkage of prison and slavery, namely the criminalisation of former slaves. This criminalisation process became evident in the rapid transformation of prison populations in the southern states, where a majority of Black



Americans resided. Prior to Emancipation, prisoners were primarily white, but as Milifred Fierce pointed out, during the post Civil War period, the percentage of Black convicts in relation to white was often higher than 90 per cent.

The swift racial transformation of imprisoned southern populations was largely due to the passage of Black Codes which criminalised such behaviour as vagrancy, breach of job contracts, absence from work and insulting gestures or acts. Theft and escape, for example, long considered effective forms of resistance to slavery became defined as crimes. What during slavery had been the particular repressive power of the master became the far more devastating universal power of the state as Black people were divested of their status as slaves in order to be accorded a new status as criminals. The criminal justice system, then, played a significant role in constructing the new social status of former slaves as human beings whose citizenship status was acknowledged precisely in order to be denied.

Southern prison populations not only became predominantly Black in the aftermath of slavery, penitentiaries were either replaced by convict leasing or they were restricted to white convicts. This racialisation of punishment practices determined that Black people were to be socially defined in large part by recreated conditions of slavery. In fact, as historian David Oshinsky has documented, convict leasing in institutions like Mississippi's Parchman Farm created conditions 'worse than slavery'.<sup>8</sup>

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, southern criminal justice systems were profoundly transformed by their role as a totalitarian means of controlling Black labour in the post Emancipation era. Because so many of the particular crimes with which Black people were charged served more as pretexts than as causal factors for arrest, these punishment strategies were explicitly directed at Black communities and eventually informed the history of imprisonment outside the South as well.

#### *And today?*

Today, the emergent prison industrial complex recalls the early efforts to create a profitable punishment based on the new supply of 'free' Black male labourers in the aftermath of the Civil War. As Steven Donziger has argued: 'the criminal justice system need[s] sufficient quantities of raw materials to guarantee long-term growth... In the criminal justice field, *the raw material is prisoners*... For the supply of prisoners to grow, criminal justice policies must ensure a sufficient number of incarcerated Americans regardless of whether crime is rising or the incarceration is necessary.'<sup>9</sup> Just as newly freed Black men, along with a significant number of Black women, constituted a virtually endless supply of raw material for the embryonic southern punishment industry (as well as

providing much-needed labour for the economies of the southern states as they attempted to recover from the devastating impact of the Civil War) so, in the contemporary era, do unemployed Black men, along with increasing numbers of women, constitute an unending supply of raw material for the present day prison industrial complex.

By 1997, African Americans were the majority of state and federal prisoners. As the rate of increase in the incarceration of Black prisoners continues to rise, the racial composition of the incarcerated population is approaching the proportion of Black prisoners to white during the era of the southern convict lease and county chain gang systems. Whether this human raw material is used for purposes of labour or as the forced consumers of commodities provided by a rising number of corporations directly implicated in the prison industrial complex, it is clear that Black bodies are considered dispensable within the 'free world' and that they are a major source of profit in the prison world. This relationship recapitulates in complicated new ways the era of convict leasing.

The privatisation characteristic of convict leasing also has its contemporary parallels, as companies like CCA and Wackenhut literally run prisons for profit. Private prisons have multiplied at four times the rate of expansion of public prisons. It is now estimated that there will be three times as many private facilities by the turn of the century and that their revenues will be more than one billion dollars. In arrangements reminiscent of the convict lease system, federal, state and county governments pay private companies a fee for each inmate, which means that private companies have a stake in retaining prisoners as long as possible, and in keeping their facilities filled.

*African American men, in particular, are also vastly over-represented in state and federal super-maximum security prisons, of which there are an increasing number. You see these supermax prisons as exemplary of the increased repression characteristic of US society in general and also as part of the longer history you've been describing.*

The danger of supermax prisons resides not only in the systematically brutal treatment of the prisoners confined there, but also in the way they establish standards for the treatment of all prisoners. They solidify the move away from rehabilitative strategies and they do so largely on the backs of Black men. Moreover, as prisons become more repressive and as this repression becomes more remote from, and by default accepted within, the 'free world', they promote retrograde tendencies in educational institutions that serve the populations most likely to move from schools into prisons. These educational institutions begin to resemble prisons more than schools and are fast becoming prep schools for prison, moulding Black children into raw material for punishment and coerced labour.

The extent to which Black men today function as the main human

raw material for the prison industrial complex only highlights the many ways in which the prison system in the US in general resembles and recapitulates some of the most abhorrent characteristics of the slavery and convict lease systems of the late nineteenth century. In fact, the rampant exploitation of prison labour in an increasingly privatised context *is* a modern-day form of convict leasing. And while Black men are not the only population vulnerable to this exploitation, the overwhelming numbers of Black men imprisoned in the US make them by far the most threatened members of our society when it comes to the new form of enslavement being implemented through the prison system.

That we can so easily draw these connections between latter twentieth-century imprisonment practices in the US and various systems and practices that were in place a century ago is, in large part, a result of the racism that consistently has been interwoven into the history of the prison system in this country. The ultimate manifestation of this phenomenon can be found in the supermax prison, whose main function is to subdue and control 'problematic' imprisoned populations – again, comprised largely of Black men – who, having been locked away in the most remote and invisible of spaces, are basically no longer thought of as human. The absolute authority that is exercised over these disappeared populations by supermax administrators and staff – and the lack of accountability on the part of private corporations that are in the prison business and/or benefit from prison labour – is reminiscent of the impunity with which slave owners, overseers and, later, patrons of the convict lease system, routinely disregarded the humanity connected with the Black bodies they systematically abused.

In this sense, the supermax draws upon, even as it also serves to feed, the perpetuation of racism at every level of our society. This is true, in fact, of the entire prison system. The continued practice of throwing away entire populations depends upon those populations being constructed and perceived – fixed, really – within the popular imagination as public enemies. It is precisely this relationship between racism and imprisonment that necessitates coalitional work between anti-racist activists and prison activists. On the eve of the twenty-first century, these two movements are inseparable.

*Let's move, then, by way of concluding, to discuss resistance to the prison industrial complex and the call for a new abolitionism. Would you begin by addressing the particular challenge that the geographical isolation of prisons and the social invisibility of prisoners issues?*

How many of us have stood outside a prison, let alone been inside one? This is a question that quickly separates people of colour, and particularly Black people, from whites, and the poor from the affluent. Most people in the US do not have direct knowledge of the penal system, although the prison has inhabited the personal and political

histories of Black and poor people continually. Most people have not pondered the razor wire nor imagined concretely what, or who, exists behind it. Instead, public perceptions about prisons and prisoners are shaped largely by media (mis)representations, including the grossly sensationalised genre of Hollywood prison films. On a recent visit to Cuba, during which I interviewed three dozen women in prison there, I was only half-surprised to learn that many of the women's preconceived notions about what prison would be like were based on portrayals they had seen in Hollywood films.

In the US, the growth of the punishment industry occurs against the backdrop of a ubiquitous reluctance on the part of most people on the outside to engage in critical discussions about jails and prison beyond the oversimplified and fatally inaccurate equation of prison expansion with the elimination of crime. Media and law enforcement agencies collude to create an increasingly crime-saturated atmosphere in which those who are least likely to be victims of crime are the very individuals most vocally supportive of harsher sentencing practices and prison expansion as means of curtailing crime. In the public imagination, as fantastical notions of 'the criminal' translate into fears of a Black male stranger who lurks in dark corners waiting to beat, rob, rape, or murder an unsuspecting victim, the resulting 'lock-'em-up-and-throw-away-the-key' attitude (exemplified at the legislative level by three- and, in some states, two-strike laws) renders more and more invisible those who are imprisoned. The continued demonisation of welfare mothers, particularly Black single mothers, and the dismantling of programmes that assist poor women and their children, is carving out new gendered paths toward imprisonment.

Challenging the invisibility of incarcerated populations, and especially the hypervisibility of women prisoners who are twice-marginalised – invisible in the 'free world' by virtue of their incarceration and largely overlooked even by prison activists by virtue of their gender – is central to resisting the social dispossession wrought by the prison industrial complex. It is also necessary to expose that magic trick I mentioned earlier.

The great majority of people have been tricked into believing in the efficacy of imprisonment, even though the historical record clearly demonstrates that prisons do not work. They have never really worked and they never will. The economic and social factors that lead certain individuals to commit offences that are likely to land them in prison (as well as the criminalisation process itself, which dictates what segments of the population become the objects of the widespread fear of crime) go unaffected by the number of prisons that are built in the US each year. Systemic social problems such as poverty, homelessness, illiteracy and child abuse – each of which renders its victims more likely to become entangled in the penal system – require aggressive and inno-

vative solutions that bear no relationship whatsoever to incarceration. Yet these simple and rather obvious realities are obscure to most people for whom penal institutions are remote. For this reason, it is vital that those of us who are active around prison issues promote as much firsthand exchange as possible between the members of the 'free world' and members of the imprisoned world. It is difficult to step inside a jail or prison, to talk with the people whose lives are confined to these facilities, without being deeply moved. In fact, I'm always struck by the profound contrast between the self-possession of so many prisoners and the social dispossession to which they are subjected, individually and collectively, as wards of the penal system. In the news and especially during elections, we constantly hear descriptions of prisoners as 'animals' and prisons as 'zoos', but to really hear the stories of incarcerated women and men is to recognise that little more than the luck of the draw – or, rather, of one's socioeconomic birthright – separates 'us' from 'them'.

Today, the deepening influence of racism is largely responsible for the failure of a popular critical discourse to contest the ideological trickery that posits imprisonment as a stop-gap measure at a time when the focus of state policy is rapidly shifting from social welfare to social control. The emergence of a US prison industrial complex within a generalised context of cascading conservatism marks a new historical moment, whose dangers are unprecedented. At the same time, we need not succumb to the sense of powerlessness that ideological evocations of crime waves and the creation of new prisons tend to encourage. Considering the impressive number of grassroots projects that continue to resist the expansion of the punishment industry, it ought to be possible to bring these efforts together to create radical and internationally visible movements that can legitimise anti-capitalist critiques of the prison industrial complex.

*Is the aim of this critique ultimately the abolition of the prison system as we know it?*

Yes. Raising the possibility of abolishing jails and prisons as the institutionalised and normalised means of addressing social problems in an era of migrating corporations, unemployment and homelessness and collapsing public services, from health care to education, can help to interrupt the current law-and-order discourse that has such a grip on the collective imagination, facilitated as it is by deep and hidden influences of racism. This late twentieth-century abolitionism, with its nineteenth-century resonances, may also lead to a historical recontextualisation of the practice of imprisonment. With the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, slavery was abolished for all except convicts – and, in a sense, the exclusion from citizenship accomplished by the slave system has persisted within the US prison system. Only three states

allow prisoners to vote, and approximately 4 million people are denied the right to vote because of their present or past incarceration. A radical strategy to abolish jails and prisons as the normal way of dealing with the social problems of late capitalism is not a strategy for abstract abolition. It is designed to force a rethinking of the increasingly repressive role of the state during this era of late capitalism and to carve out a space for resistance.

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