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From Shackles to Cells: The Perpetuation of Slavery in American Prisons

“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.” Except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted. These few words placed within the thirteenth amendment of the United States Constitution provide a loophole through which unprecedented amounts of Black Americans today remain unfree. Today, black men make up 6.5 percent of the US population, yet 40.2 percent of the US prison population (DuVernay). As displayed in the documentary: *13th*, directed by filmmaker Ava DuVernay, the United States’ criminal justice system acts as an agent to dehumanize African Americans in American society and perpetuates the mass inequality between Black and White racial groups in the country.

One of the most influential forces behind the mass incarceration rates in this country, as displayed in the documentary, is the prison-industrial complex. The privatization of prisons and the rise of a multi-billion dollar prison industry ensures that incarceration rates will remain at their all-time highs, as more prisoners means more money in the hands of shareholders. Privatization of prisons turns every aspect of a prison into a way to turn a profit. The contracting companies that build prisons, the food service providers, the prison healthcare companies; these

are only a few examples of the corporations profiting off of the prison system and the suffering of those within it. Even calling a loved one from prison will cost said prisoner's family a pretty penny.

Not only are there individual corporations that profit from inserting themselves in the world of privatized prisons, but there are massive megacorporations whose entirety revolve around the "corrections industry." The largest of these companies, CoreCivic (formally known as the Corrections Corporation of America or CCA) and GEO Group collectively manage over half of the private prison contracts in the United States and had combined revenues of 3.5 billion dollars in 2015 (Gotsch, para. 10). And there are even bigger players holding the strings determining the fates of hundreds of thousands of people in prison. ALEC, or the American Legislative Exchange Council, is a private club of politicians and corporations in which corporations will propose legislation for politicians to then put into place. In the past, ALEC has worked with members to draft model legislation impacting sentencing policy and prison privatization. These policies promoted and aided in the institution of mandatory minimum sentences, three strikes laws, and in-truth sentencing, all which contribute to higher prison populations. Unsurprisingly, CoreCivic and GEO were both members of ALEC, paying between seven thousand and twenty-five thousand dollars per year as association members before leaving the organization in 2010 (Gotsch, para. 34).

On top of the wide range of companies that profit from the construction and operation of prisons, there are countless more that maximize profits through the use of prison labor. Massive corporations such as Target, Boeing, IBM, Microsoft, AT&T, and Macy's--as well as many

more-- take advantage of prison labor programs that pay inmates mere pennies for their labor. In privately run prisons, inmates can receive as little as seventeen cents per hour for a maximum of six hours a day. That's the equivalent of twenty dollars a month (Peláez para. 16-17). By taking advantage of these incredibly low wage requirements, companies are able to make disproportionate levels of profit. This is completely immoral, exploiting individuals who are trying to make money to send home to their families--but with the capitalistic profit-mongering society in this country that allows for privatized, for-profit prison systems, it is the harsh reality.

The history of prison labor goes all the way back to the post-Civil War era, after the passing of the thirteenth amendment. Slave labor was the driving force behind the economic production system in the South, and the freeing of around four million slaves was catastrophic to Southern industries, leaving the Southern economy in shambles. Remember how the thirteenth amendment states that involuntary servitude, or slavery, is unacceptable--except for in the case of punishment for the conviction of a crime? This loophole gave the Southern economy exactly what it needed. Workers were in desperate demand to rebuild the Southern infrastructure and economy after the Civil War. But the money to pay them wasn't there. Thus began our nation's first prison boom. Blacks were arrested in troves for extremely minor offences such as loitering and vagrancy. As criminals, these black men and boys could now legally be put back to work with no pay, essentially once again becoming slaves. Ever since, countless black men in this country have met this same fate.

Today, there are approximately 2.3 million people currently incarcerated in the United States. Every black man in the country has a one in three chance of going to prison at some point

in his lifetime. Of the current prison population, 40.2 percent is black men, while only 6.5 percent of the country's population is black men. It has been one hundred and fifty-five years since the ratification of the thirteenth amendment, which allegedly freed all African Americans from slavery, yet hundreds of thousands of black individuals remain behind bars today. We may not acknowledge it as such, but it needs to be recognized. Although the shackles have been replaced with cells, slavery is still very much alive in the United States of America.

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