

Recall This Book 44

Adaner Usmani (EF, JP)

October, 2020

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. I am John Plotz. Elizabeth Ferry is Elizabeth Ferry.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Hello, indeed I am.

John Plotz:

And our guest today is Adaner Usmani. Hey, Adaner, welcome.

Adaner Usmani:

Hi John, Elizabeth. Thanks for having me.

John Plotz:

So great to have you. So, I will say that you are a Harvard sociologist and co-author of a terrific recent article on the origins of mass incarceration in the...I say academic / activist journal *Catalyst*. I hope that is a good way to put it. We invited him here today to tell us basically about the subtle genealogy that he and his collaborator, John Clegg, proposed in that article. It is one that takes America's systemic racism and structural inequality seriously, but proposes new ways of showing how those systemic forces produced both directly and indirectly, the scourge of mass incarceration and related ill-effects on this country's social fabric, sort of from 1970

on. So, Elizabeth, let's just say, as long as you and I have been alive pretty much.

As always, we will run that conversation through an older text that glows in a new light when we returned to it from 2020. Today, Adaner has brought a sparkling chapter from a century-old book by W. E. B. Du Bois. And then we will turn back to the present to hear Adaner's thoughts about the normative implications of his work. If he and Clegg are correct, then what follows as a program for viable political action or structural change? That is a very small question and I am sure we will just polish that off. No problem, maybe five minutes. And then, as always, we conclude with Recallable Books.

So, Adaner, let's start with your article. We have a link in the show notes, it is called "The Economic Origins of Mass Incarceration." So, maybe you just begin by telling us about it, we will pepper you with sort of pesky questions. You will swat us away and we will see how we go on.

Adaner Usmani:

Excellent. Thanks, John. I think maybe it will help to start where we start in the essay in what was sort of a beginning of the project that John and I are now working on, which is what we perceived as the weakness of the conventional story that is typically told about mass incarceration. And that is where we start in the essay as well. So, maybe what I will do is I will summarize what I see as the weakness of the conventional story, pause, and then we can discuss it and then move on. So, in the essay, we argue that there are basically three weaknesses to this conventional story. And first I should actually outline the conventional story, obviously.

So, the conventional story that is told about why we have mass incarceration and why it started in 1970s is that mass incarceration was a political response to the successes of the civil rights movement and the way in which the great migration had changed the racial order of the United States. It was launched by white

political elites who were seeking to basically capture the South and we are pandering to the racial animus of working-class whites. And they centered that politics around law and order. The punitive policies that were the result of that brand of politicking were basically mass incarceration, more or less. The argument very, very eloquently and famously put in Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* is that the story centers entirely on the war on drugs, basically.

So, I think there are three weaknesses that we can count in that account of why we have mass incarceration. One is that because it centers on the war on drugs, it has very little to say about violence and the rise in violence in the United States. It is a fact that violence rose quite dramatically from the 1960s on, and that only a small minority of people in American prisons are in prison for drug-related offenses. So, that is a first issue.

A second issue is that as I was saying, the key protagonists in that story are white political elites, but increasingly there are some works, probably the most famously, James Foreman Jr.'s recent Pulitzer prize-winning book about Washington D.C. that shows this is not obviously a story simply of white elites as the protagonists.

And then finally a third weakness is that it centers very heavily on elites, the traditional story. But one of the exceptional features of American criminal justice is actually its exceptional level of democracy when analyzed in international context, rather than its exceptional lack of democracy. American criminal justice is democratic in ways that other countries' criminal justice systems are not. So, the focus on elites operating at the federal level, obscures the importance of local and state level democracy in the criminal justice system.

So, those three problems led us to research that became this article and is now the book that we are working on.

John Plotz:

Okay. So, you know, based on the way you are putting it, it does feel like we should start at the top, because you mentioned *The New Jim Crow*, which I think probably, to a lot of our listeners, would be their reference point.

But can I just put a marker down on that final point you make about the widely distributed nature of justice, which you describe as being very democratic? It seems to me, one of the things I loved about your article is that you have a subtle analysis of where problems are solved, whether on the local level, the state level or the national level--and where the authority rests actually has some indirect consequences. So, one of your points was that solving social problems can be very expensive. Whereas ironically, incarceration can seem cheaper than solving a social problem, even though we all know that, in the long run, solving a social problem is cheaper.

But you make a point about how from a local jurisdiction's perspective, it might seem cheaper in the short term to lock people up, rather than to solve the underlying problems that causes a rise in crime. So, maybe can we start with that side?

Adaner Usmani:

Yeah, sure, absolutely. I think that is an important part of the account that we give for why America responded basically to the rise in violence with penal policy rather than social policy. Because I think, backing up, it is important to recognize that States have many, many options for how to deal with crime and violence. And speaking a little simplistically, there are two poles, right? One can fight crime and violence with social policy and social programs and attack the root causes of crime. This is kind of a liberal common sense for decades and decades. Or, a state can fight it by locking people up and throwing police at the problem. Obviously, in some sense what we are arguing is that mass incarceration represents the decision of the United States to take the latter route rather than the former.

But as you are saying, one thing that has to be understood and one thing that we argue in the essay is that that is not a choice between equivalently costly options for a state. And in effect, what has not really been noted, I think in the critical literature, is that mass incarceration [and] policing are remarkably inexpensive “solutions” to the problem of crime. And the reason, basically, is that prisons and police are hyper-targeted interventions in the lives of people who commit crime, whereas social policy--to be politically effective, but just more generally, social policy--is indiscriminate and untargeted. So, social policy goes to all poor people in effect, whereas prisons and police are targeted at that very small, small minority of poor people who end up committing crime.

So, the result is that even in the United States today, which is the, you know, a welfare state laggard and a prison police capital of the world, in some respects, the United States spends more money on social policy, something like 10 times more money on social policy, than it does on penal policy.

John Plotz:

Alright, it is just that it spends less, that ratio is very different in the United States from it is in other countries. Other countries spend way more; their ratio of how much they spend on social programs to how much they spend on incarceration is much higher than ours.

Adaner Usmani:

Exactly. So, we present some of these numbers in the piece. But from memory, the ratio in the United States is around 10:1. And, of course, it depends on exactly how you count social policy. But it is around 10:1, whereas in a country like Denmark, it is 40:1, right?

So, the big ambition of the piece is really to stitch together two literatures on American exceptionalism. One literature on American exceptionalism and punishment, and make the argument that that

literature can be profitably combined with another long-standing literature on social science, which is the literature on the under-development of American social democracy, under-development of the American welfare state.

John Plotz:

Okay. Yeah. That is great. I totally hear you saying that the big picture there is the under-development of our social welfare... that we went from being social welfare leaders back in the gilded age to becoming laggards. We have been for more than a century now, which is an amazing fact in terms of this self-conception of the country, right?

Elizabeth Ferry:

In the article, you distinguish between this approach of looking at the root causes or investing in improving the root causes in order to prevent a violent crime. And then, the other option is a punitive response. But also, there are different kinds of responses, which are not punitive. I guess this is what you are now describing as severity, right? And I mean, we can certainly...this is one of the things that when people ask people like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez about school-to-prison pipelines and stuff, she talks about how in suburban, mostly white communities, teenagers do stuff and they get sent to what's called diversion, right? Which is like, you go and you sit in a room with a social worker and you do whatever, whatever it is you do, right? I am not admitting that any member of my family has ever had to undergo, but I get my information entirely from third-party sources. But anyhow, that is like a third way in a sense. Or, it is another way.

Adaner Usmani:

Yeah. I think it is a really good point. What I would say, I suppose, if you want to think of it as pushing back a little, maybe, is that...Well, I would say two things, actually. One thing that I would

say in response to that is that the way that that point relates to the argument of our essay is that those kinds of interventions, I think, are extremely resource-intensive, right? So, it is, again, part of the broader story of the unwillingness and effect of the United States to actually commit resources to the self-development of poor communities, right? And a lot of these are often funded locally. And so, the paradoxes of American federalism mean rich communities have it, poor communities do not have it.

John Plotz:

Sorry, Adaner.....That is federalism in some sense, but you would even want to specify further cause it is not just about federalism in the sense of state's rights versus country rights. You are also talking about local tax bases. That is actually about the many levels of governmentality.

Adaner Usmani:

Totally. And this actually relates to a point that you were bringing up earlier, John, which I think is very important: which is that one other feature of all of this is that American criminal justice policy is basically delegated to states and localities in the United States. And one issue with that is that states and localities have least power to raise revenue and redistribute from rich to poor.

I mean, there are many reasons for this, but probably the simplest way to think about this is: Ferguson, Missouri can never tax San Francisco's billionaires to spend on social programs in Ferguson, Missouri. And so, that also makes criminal justice policy excessively... that also makes the kind of complex of policy that we use to manage violence excessively likely, exceedingly likely, to be punitive and exceedingly likely to be severe rather than certain.

John Plotz:

Yeah. So, Adaner, I know that John [Clegg], to some extent, is the person who does the deep history among the two of you. But can

we, in circling back to the question, the sort of Michelle Alexander question about race and the question of American racism, how it manifests, where the follow-on effects are: can we go to the sort of historical question of America as welfare laggard? So, the American government does not centralize a lot of things that are centralized in Europe is that...or, in other wealthy nations. But also, the American government, historically, was made up of states that had extremely different ideologies about how poor people were treated and also how poor people of different races were treated.

Adaner Usmani:

Totally. Yeah. I mean, I think there are a couple of threads here. The first thing that I would say is that, with regards to this institutional fact that we were just addressing, which is like, you can think of it as the overdevelopment of local and state property rights against the federal government. That, in my mind has everything to do with the history of American slavery.

There's a great book by historian, Robin Einhorn called *American Taxation, American Slavery*, which more or less makes this kind of argument: it says that the underdevelopment of the federal government's ability to sanction property owners at the state and local level is directly traceable to the influence of plantation elites on state development. I think it is exactly in line with what you are arguing, John.

The other thing, though, that I would say is that what's very important to the story we tell is the underdevelopment of American socialism: American social democracy and the weakness of the American working class in effect, the divided nature of the American working class. And that also has everything to do with slavery and the history of American racism. I mean, the reason that the American working-class is divided in a way that European working classes are not is precisely because the nature of American working-class formation is so deformed by American slavery and the

plantation economy. That is something that we also try and argue in the piece.

It is sort of these two consequences that are both consequences of American slavery: the defamation of American economic development and the defamation of American institutional development by slavery. But it is a different story, I think, than the story that someone like Michelle Alexander would tell, where it is there, the causal link between American slavery and mass incarceration is, in effect, through American ideology of white supremacy. And I would distinguish that from the kind of argument that we are trying to make.

John Plotz:

In a second, we should turn to the Du Bois, because I think the Du Bois is actually germane to this. But the footnote I wanted to add is that Adaner, you and I had had a kind of, not a disagreement, but a kind of a working through of how we think about Piketty. And one of the things I would say about Piketty that I really admire is that in this question of where the causality comes from in your explanatory scheme, which are the things that count as explanations, and which are the things that need to be explained. The thing I really appreciate about his new book, which is distinct from the first book--and I think it may also explain why the uptake among social scientists of the second book has not been that great-- is that in the new book, he actually thinks about ideological belief systems as *causative*.

But he is really interested in the change from one...he wants to explain the rise of slavery. And also, the way that slavery morphed into other forms of what he calls "proprietary ideologies," like ideologies that really focus on the ownership of labor or persons or just property, generally.

And Piketty is really open in the new book in saying that once a belief takes on a life of its own, it is causative. So, racism would be a

good example of something which is...I believe Piketty's account, which is that racism is called into being by the nature of slave systems. It is created by the forms of ownership of persons that were necessary for early-modern New World economies to work. But once it is called into being, it is not just that. It is a bunch of other things as well.

Elizabeth Ferry:

But that does not make your project, Adaner (and John Clegg, right?) that does not make your project not an important one; in some ways, it makes it more important. Because it is taking on a life of its own, race is taking on a life of its own. But part of its taking on a life of its own is its capacity to seem like a prime mover or seem like something that you don't need to enquire into further, because either it is the way things are or it is the thing that needs to be taken down.

Adaner Usmani:

Can I add one thing to that before we move on? Is that possible? It is just a mild note of dissent, I suppose, to John, your formulation of it. I think the danger in arguments that race takes on a life of its own is that it gives--and this is going to sound like a classic, materialist rejoinder to your point, which is probably what it is, in some sense. But the danger with those arguments is that, I worry, it gives ideas too much power in social life.

What I mean specifically by that, in the case of racism is...there is a lovely quote from Stokely Carmichael that we have in our piece, where Stokely Carmichael argues that if...the quip is something like...if the white man wants to lynch me, it's no problem. But if the white man has the power to lynch me, that is when it becomes a problem. So, I see those ideas as, in effect, only powerful when they are allied to certain kinds of inequalities that give them.

John Plotz:

Okay. So, Adaner, I do not think we are disagreeing on this. But it is interesting because normally my role in this podcast is to thunder against identitarian thinking, and I am still against identitarian thinking...fundamentally, we are in agreement.

But, if you think about a book like Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law*, which is a book about how the suburbs were called into being (and it is kind of a correction of the *Crabgrass Frontier* in that it says race is much more explicitly part of people's thinking). The Stokely Carmichael point is it is the mobilization of those institutions that creates the problem, not the original animus. But you do not get the institutions mobilized that way....

Elizabeth Ferry:

But I think he is saying that you do, sometimes, right?...

Adaner Usmani:

I am, I am.

Elizabeth Ferry:

In response to what you were saying. The institutions are in part set up because of these ideas, right? But is not the argument in the *Catalyst* article, not saying that that has no role, but looking at all the other kinds of ways in which, um, the racism of the institution is kind of a byproduct.

Is that too strong? Maybe not a byproduct?

Adaner Usmani:

Yeah, and I think what the other way of putting it, which is maybe an equivalent, is what gives those institutions the power to determine social life in the way that they do? I mean, why is it that say, for instance, the Home-owner's Loan Corporation had so much power to shape American life in the way that it did in the 20th

century or whatever else. And that is what I take Stokely Carmichael to be saying is that the underlying issue here is the inequality and power, which basically makes prejudice something more. And that relates directly to the Du Bois essay.

John Plotz:

Yeah, I was just going to say that is a perfect connection to Du Bois. I think one of the points of this podcast in general is not so much to show how wise our 2020 hindsight is, but also to be mindful of where the formulations we have expanded antecedents actually where people a century ago, we're seeing things in similar ways. So yeah, in that light, Adaner, why don't you talk to us about Du Bois.

Adaner Usmani:

Yeah. So, the reason that I thought that this essay would be a nice essay to revisit is because I...

John Plotz:

Can you just tell us what the essay is?

Adaner Usmani:

Yeah, so, this is published in the collection, *Darkwater*, it is the fourth chapter called "Of Work and Wealth." The essay is an attempt to explain working-class disunity. This is how I read it, working class disunity in East St. Louis. And his argument is very similar to the argument that we try and develop in the *Catalyst* piece, which is to say that he is arguing in effect that American proletarianization was odd and different from European proletarianization in the sense that America--I am not sure if he says this explicitly, but this is in the backdrop--America is industrializing with Europe's peasantry rather than its own, in effect, in during the industrial boom.

It is in effect, then, white ethnics who take the first jobs of America's industrial revolution and African Americans are stuck in

the plantation economy and the Jim Crow South. When they start to finally move to cities and to come North, jobs are starting to disappear. Jobs are both becoming as a consequence scarce, labor markets are becoming tighter. And then also the character of American institutions means that they are competing for scarce public goods with white ethnics, with established white ethnics.

And I think, for me, the message of Du Bois's essay, is basically out of that powder-keg, there was just no chance that you were going to get a powerful united working-class movement. And in fact, that those fundamental structural divisions within the working class gave white business owners the ability to divide the working class with all manner of racism...

Elizabeth Ferry:

...And key decisions on the part of labor unions.

Adaner Usmani:

Exactly. Yeah, absolutely. And so, as a consequence, the American labor movement basically formed along these racial lines; these ways that had extremely profound long-term consequences for its development.

John Plotz:

We can go back to that question of the Michelle Alexander, sort of fatal taint or hidden flaw. Can you talk us through...what is your conception of...the United States becoming a welfare laggard around the time of the Gilded Age? Do you see that as already baked into structural differences between the American way of thinking through these issues versus Europe? Or, is there a contingent quality to them? Because we have these stories, if you think about the rise of the New Deal or something, we have this story of America as being immensely adaptive with its wealth...

Adaner Usmani:

I think the story of America's divergence is...The way to start to tell that story is to understand *when* it happens. And when it happens, John, as you are saying, is basically between 1890 and 1930. In 1890, America is not laggard. I mean, this is a world with not very much redistribution from rich to poor, but America is not a laggard in 1890. And the way that I think about this is that 1890 to 1930 is a period in which American politics and political economy is marked by the kinds of things that Du Bois is describing in this essay, right? Whereas 1890 to 1930 in Europe is marked by revolutionary tumult, strikes and the formation of the first working-class parties, agitating for redistribution from rich to poor. And that is all you need, almost, for the contrast, right? The contrast between, as a consequence, the future of American political development and the feature of European political development is, to me, set in that period. There is a very good book that came out recently called...

Elizabeth Ferry:

Before you go further Adaner, can I propose...I just want to ask you a question about that. If we are telling a story, a parallel story, about Europe and the United States...but we already just talked about how it is the peasantry of Europe that populated the industrialization. Are those stories connected? I mean, as part of the issue that there is a pressure valve for Europe, because all these people are leaving to go to the US in order to get jobs?

Adaner Usmani:

Yeah, that is a good point. I do not know what the empirical literature suggests about that. Presumably, there would be a way to look at it. But it is really plausible on its face, right? That European labor markets are getting tighter, just at the same time as American labor markets are getting inundated by new immigrants....and, sort of, European labor movements might find it easier in effect to organize it.

Elizabeth Ferry:

If in both places, there is a kind of surplus of former agricultural workers into an industrializing context...but if in one of those places, there was an out?

Adaner Usmani:

Exactly. So, what I was about to mention was this new book that came out a couple of years ago by Ira Katznelson who had previously written *When Affirmative Action Was White*, which was about the New Deal and its white bias. He and some coauthors have written a book called *Southern Nation*, which is basically an analysis of what Congress was like in this period (and particularly during the Progressive Era), which argues in effect that the Southern plantation elite and Southern Democrats had massive power to shape federal legislation, not just during the New Deal, which was the focus of his other book, but over this entire period.

And in some ways that is sort of, for me, that is not contingent but structural explanation for why America falls behind. It is a story of the power of the plantation elite to throttle American political development in a way that has no parallel on the European continent, where, in fact, the opposite is happening. Europe is erupting in revolution.

John Plotz:

That is fascinating. There is this small-scale version of that in the color of law. There is this analysis of Southern Democrats subcommittees about housing policy. So, you see that enacted in that local level, but it makes sense that that would be a larger...

Adaner Usmani:

I think this goes back to the disagreement, I suppose, that we were having a little bit about, the color of law and the role of racism as idea versus the role of racism as power relation. I mean, I see very

much what is happening in the New...one way of interpreting what is happening in the New Deal is that the New Deal is biased towards whites and against African Americans, because of white racism.

And in one sense, that is true. But why racism, the way to explain it--the reason that it has such hold-- is because the Southern Democrats have such hold over the Democratic party. And the South, what is further back is that South has such power over American politics. They deformed the New Deal. I mean, it is in order to win the votes of Southern Democrats that Democrats exempt the agricultural labor force and exempt the South, basically, from huge chunks of the New Deal. So, I see it again as a story of power rather than ideas.

John Plotz:

This might be a good moment to pivot to Recallable Books. And as long-time listeners will know, this is a moment where we pick out books. If you enjoyed this conversation, you would also find worth thinking about...Adaner, you have actually given us a ton already between *Racecraft* and *Southern Nation* and a few other recommendations that we will post for our readers. But do you have a particular book or piece of writing you want to single out now?

Adaner Usmani:

Yeah, sure. A book that I would recommend, which I re-read this summer and I was thinking a lot about, is the collected writings of Bayard Rustin collected in a title, I think, *Time on Two Crosses*. The reason that I was thinking about this book this summer is because this is Rustin writing during the Civil Rights movement. And he is struggling with...or, actually during and right after the Civil Rights movement. And he is struggling with the question of how you take the civil rights movement and make it a national movement.

And the big challenge here obviously is how do you build a civil-rights movement in a country with a white majority? How do

you build a political majority in a country in which you are a minority? And, and that to me, was very resonant with the challenges that groups like Black Lives Matter face today. How do you build a movement for change that is more than just symbolic in a country where white racism in a white majority are enormous obstacles.

John Plotz:

Okay. So, we will just end by saying that Recall This Book is hosted by John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. We are sponsored by the Mandel Humanities Center. Music comes from Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Sound editing is by Claire Ogden. Website design and social media, this semester, comes from our newest RTB graduate intern, Nai Kim from the English department. And we always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. You can email us directly or contact us via social media and our website.

If you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcast. You may be interested in checking out recent conversations on bias and policing in America and in Turkey, as well as our Books in Dark Times Series, which includes conversations with the Sci-Fi novelist Kim Stanley Robinson, the poet Elizabeth Bradfield, and a long conversation about Du Bois with the medievalist Seeta Chaganti.

So, Adaner, thank you so much. It was great conversation. And thank you all for listening.