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# The Ambivalence of Alexander Berkman's Anti-Prison Anarchism

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## Abstract

Alexander Berkman's 1912 *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* is a significant book in the development of American anti-prison politics, not despite, but because of its ambivalent approach to prisons. I trace through Berkman's book and archive an unresolved tension between two approaches to the prison: advocacy for political prisoners, whereby the prison is a state tool for suppressing radical ideas, and advocacy against the politics of prisons, whereby the prison is an "aggravated counterpart" of social structures and a site of struggle. Berkman's ambivalence between these approaches amid his memoirs and activism exemplifies the complex development of U.S. thinking on prisons and enduring tensions in contemporary prison politics.

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"What is a prison?" the anarchist Alexander Berkman (1906) asked during his first public address after his 14 years incarcerated in Pennsylvania. "A prison is the model on the lines of which civilised society is built," he answered. Despite his bombast, Berkman's analyses of incarceration would make him an apt interlocutor among the political scientists, theorists, and activists who study prisons and punishment today. Where Berkman located the modern prison's emergence in the religious, legal, and economic conditions of the United States, political scientists have traced the increase in contemporary sentencing and severity to intersections of race and law (Alexander 2012; Beckett and Francis 2020; Murakawa 2014), the punitiveness of public opinion and culture (Barkow 2019; Enns 2016, 5; Howard 2017), and the "grand social experiment" of penal policy from the mid-twentieth-century onward (Clear and Frost 2014, 48). Where Berkman ("Crime & Prisons" n.d., 3) urged Americans to "take a personal interest" in prisons' political implications, scholars have studied incarceration's impact on participation levels (Walker 2020; Weaver and Lerman 2010), "conceptions

of citizenship” (Gottschalk 2015, 2), or democratic theory (Bennett 2021; Benson 2019; Dilts 2014). Where Berkman (1999, 215, 301–7) witnessed prisoners on strike and working toward reform, political scientists have examined democratic action behind bars (Berk 2018; Gortler 2022) or what David Skarbek (2020) calls the “extralegal governance institutions” whereby imprisoned people maintain order. And where Berkman advocated the end of incarceration altogether, abolitionist academics and activists have argued for a world without prisons or police (Davis 2003; Gilmore 2022; Maher 2022; Vitale 2017).

This article introduces Berkman into these contemporary conversations on prisons through archival materials and with emphasis on his understudied *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (1999). Born amid the clash between populists and tsarists in imperial Russia, Berkman emigrated in 1888 to join the equally volatile contests between industrialists and activists in urban America (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 18–37). After working with several anarchist groups and presses, Berkman became notorious in 1892 for his attempted assassination of the Carnegie steel mill manager during the strike in Homestead, Pennsylvania (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 51–8). He and Emma Goldman hoped that their attempt would provoke workers to revolution—but Berkman failed to kill Henry Clay Frick, and upon his arrest, he served 14 of the 22 years sentenced at Western State Penitentiary and a nearby workhouse (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 73, 95–7, 181). A few years after his release, comrades encouraged Berkman to publish an account of his experiences in prison (Goldman 1970, 471, 483–5).<sup>1</sup> The resulting 1912 *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* offered an extensive study of political violence and incarceration while pointing toward the anarchist politics and theory that Berkman would continue developing over the following years,

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<sup>1</sup> Berkman also received assistance from Voltairine de Cleyre, who had campaigned for his release and later became a close comrade (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 207–10). Berkman (1906) first planned his memoirs with Carl Nold while imprisoned.

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throughout his deportation with Goldman in 1919 for "conspiracy to interfere with the draft" and death in 1936 (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 272, 296, 383). Berkman (2003, 145–8) described his political theory as "Communist Anarchism," a collectivist utopia without the coercions of private property or government, be it American or Soviet. Those who read his memoirs believed the book testament not only to the "mind of an anarchist," as novelist Jack London wrote in an abandoned introduction, but "the unthinkable cruelty and lunatic management of our prisons" (Labor and Leitz 1989, 454). Reviewers bristled or balked at what the *Prison Memoirs* revealed of prison conditions otherwise hidden from the American public.<sup>2</sup> "If people read this book carefully it will tend to do away with prisons," wrote colleague Hutchins Hapgood (1970, x) in its introduction. In 1970, a new introduction urged readers to apply Berkman's analyses to recent developments that we now recognize as a flash point for the rise of mass incarceration (Goodman 1970).

Despite these claims and growing interest in the development of U.S. prison politics, Berkman is rarely studied by political scientists and theorists outside of his work with Goldman (Ferguson 2011; Loizidou 2011). Compared to better-known anarchists and influences Goldman, Mikhail Bakunin, and Peter Kropotkin, those who do write about Berkman describe him as an iterative thinker (Marshall 2008, 393–5; Nowlin 2014, 4; cf. Nocella, Seis, and Shantz 2020). To correct this oversight, I trace Berkman's developing analysis of prisons through careful reading of *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* and the International Institute of Social History's newly digitized archive of notes, essays, letters, and speeches. These resources let us reconstruct an unresolved tension within Berkman's analyses which exemplifies, I claim, a larger tension within U.S. prison politics. As I detail in the first section, early chapters po-

<sup>2</sup> For example, see reviews from *A Stuffed Club* or *Evening Transcript* ("Clippings of Reviews of *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. With an Announcement of a Lecture on the Book by Alexander Berkman" 1912).

sition Berkman as a political prisoner, punished for the anarchist politics motivating his assassination attempt. Inspired by the incarceration of Russian radicals, this “political prisoner” approach treats the prison as a state tool for suppressing radical ideas: political struggle occurs outside carceral institutions, among free people and away from common criminals. In the second section, I diagram Berkman’s shift to a new approach that I call the “politics of prisons”: by this analysis, the prison is an extension and exemplar of broader social structures and injustices, a “model” of modern society, as he told his audience after serving his sentence. Through firsthand accounts, Berkman documents the captivity that characterizes prisons and emancipatory efforts within: intellectual comradeship, organized resistance, and intimacy. According to this approach, the prison is an essential space for political action and solidarity between prisoners, regardless of their offenses—views that would animate Berkman’s activism once he left prison.

Nonetheless find Berkman’s anti-prison anarchism ambivalent toward the end of the book and in his later advocacy, the anarchist alternating between the two approaches without resolving the tension between them. Berkman’s persistent belief that anarchists must liberate the masses from delusion and his messianic rhetoric herald the return of Berkman’s focus on political prisoners. In the decades following the book’s publication, Berkman collaborated with a variety of liberal and leftist movements to advocate for persecuted dissidents in Soviet Russia and the U.S. Rightfully addressing a global increase in political punishment, Berkman’s advocacy also resurrected old discriminations between so-called political and common criminals, distinctions that undermined efforts to articulate an anti-prison anarchism. “Is there any figure in the contemporary world who inspires greater respect than the political prisoner?” Padraic Kenney (2017, 1) asks in his recent study of the concept: and yet with Berkman, we see how that admiration risks relegating structural analyses of the prison and all imprisoned within.

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Berkman's political thought and its unresolved tensions offer three major contributions to our contemporary studies of incarceration. First, we should read *Prison Memoirs* as a primary text in the developing canon of penal political thought. Whereas Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont found in American penitentiaries a "model for despotism" (Boesche 1980) or democratic dystopia (Avramenko and Gingerich 2014), Berkman confronted the prison firsthand as an extension of American institutions and an opportunity for resistance. Beyond differences in the authors' aristocratic and anarchist politics, *Prison Memoirs* also represents a distinct development in American prisons. In the decades between the Frenchmen's stop in Pittsburgh and Berkman's years incarcerated, the penitentiary there had fully shifted from the total isolation of the Pennsylvania model toward the Auburn system that permitted congregation between prisoners, representative of a general national trend (Rubin 2021, xxv–vi; Zunz 2022, 89).<sup>3</sup> When it opened in 1826, Angela Davis (2003, 47) observes, Western State Penitentiary was a flawed attempt at Jeremy Bentham's panopticon; but in 1869 the isolation model was formally abandoned, and shortly before Berkman's arrest the penitentiary moved to a new location known as Riverside, described in a later report as overcrowded, "unhealthy and unsanitary" (Barnes 1927, 210–3; see Rubin 2021, 32, 51–2). We should read Berkman alongside theorists like Tocqueville and Beaumont, Bentham, and Davis; he offers a unique analysis of an understudied era in carceral development, and the tensions in Berkman's analysis exemplify the complexity and global scope of prison reform debates in the era.

We should also heed *Prison Memoirs* as a cautionary lesson for our contemporary analyses of incarceration. Berkman's second contribution is to illuminate the ambiguity of the term "political

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<sup>3</sup> Tocqueville noted by letter his intention to visit Pittsburgh where supposedly the "experiment" of a system "of complete solitary confinement without labor" had failed (Tocqueville and Beaumont 2010, 464).

prisoner” in the U.S. from his era to our own, particularly as a pitfall for movements looking to address political persecution without jeopardizing solidarity. As an even broader, third contribution, Berkman’s ambivalence between his two approaches to prisons captures a common problem identified by today’s commentators. Due to the constitutive role that prisons play within American politics, efforts to reform penal institutions, abolish penal practices, or otherwise free imprisoned people often result in a double bind wherein these efforts unintentionally reinforce other carceral logics. Berkman’s advocacy for political prisoners depended upon a distinction between the deserving and undeserving, jeopardizing his broader approach to the politics of prisons. As I summarize in the conclusion, scholars have identified similar binds in today’s prison politics: for example, how attempts to end capital punishment widened the use of life sentences in the 1970s, or how recent campaigns against wrongful convictions risk relegating the guilty as unfit for justice. Though confronting a world far different than ours, Berkman testifies to the ambivalences that thwart our own efforts to create a more just future.

### **“IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE DEED”<sup>4</sup>**

“Clearly every detail of that day is engraved on my mind,” Berkman (1999, 5) begins his *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. Sitting in his New York apartment on July 6, 1892, he is interrupted by Goldman’s news: the strike in Homestead, Pennsylvania had erupted into bloodshed. The conflict began when Henry Clay Frick of the Carnegie Steel Company halted negotiations with the workers’ union (Messer-Kruse 2011). As reported in the newspaper that Goldman handed Berkman, Frick had fortified the mill and called

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<sup>4</sup> Berkman (2011a, 84) quotes this line from Faust in an essay written while imprisoned.

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in private Pinkerton agents to oppose striking workers (Berkman 1999, 6). "The great battle has been fought," Berkman recalls. Now is the time to act. The aspiring assassin would later describe his attempt on Frick's life as the "first aggressive anarchist act in the United States" (60). It was the "first terrorist act in America" (Berkman 2011b, 53).

The first approach to prisons in *Prison Memoirs* positions Berkman as a political prisoner, drawing upon anarchist debates over violence and the anticipation of political persecution that he imported from imperial Russia to industrial America. Berkman's accounts of his arrest, trial, and incarceration in the first part of the book present him as a martyred hero for whom prison is proof of his revolutionary status—but not a site of political action. These early chapters convey an older Berkman's reflections on the failure of his attack and the limits of his initial understanding of prison: that by identifying as a political prisoner, he relegated fellow prisoners as mere criminals or traitors to the cause.

Berkman described his attack as an "attentat," a political assassination intended to propel the working class into revolution. Otherwise known as the "propaganda of the deed," the attentat was a form of direct action debated by anarchists Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Errico Malatesta among others (Ferguson 2011, 41–4). It was enacted upward of fifty times in the late nineteenth-century throughout the United States and predominantly in Eastern and Western Europe. According to Berkman (1999, 7), the attentat would show the masses the ruling class's vulnerability. Filling the memoirs' first pages are paeans for the Homestead strikers as "the People, the workers of America" confronting their oppressors. As Berkman deboards the train in Pittsburgh, he recoils from the city's "industrial glory," an "Inferno of brutalizing toil": it is not the strikers that brought warfare but the factories, capitalism "a country-wide furnace" (24–5, 31). "The People" comprise to Berkman "the universe": "the rest are parasites, who have no right to exist" (10). The revolutionist works separately on the people's

behalf. Although he attributes the “spirit of the heroic past” to the strikers and insists that there is no “heroism” in his plan to kill Frick, the attentater is nonetheless vaunted as “a *man*, a complete MAN” (10–2). On July 23, 1892, after a week of surveying the strike and planning with comrades, Berkman visits Frick’s building a third time, brushing past the receptionist and into the industrialist’s office to shoot and stab him before others subdue the anarchist (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 61–9).

In a later letter, Berkman (2011e, 109) insisted to Goldman that his attempt on Frick’s life was “easy to understand by most people.” This is not his account in the memoirs. There he is struck by others’ rejection of the attentat, an “act of conscience,” as he wrote in prison (2011b, 54).<sup>5</sup> Others in the jail presume that a personal grievance provoked Berkman (1999, 48–52). Waiving a black prisoner’s opinion as that of “a very inferior type of laborer,” he is confident that Jack Tinford—a striker incarcerated for allegedly throwing dynamite at the Pinkertons—is “of the real People” and will understand (53).<sup>6</sup> He does not. Tinford assumes that a “business

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<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere Berkman (2011a, 80–2) argues that deeds are to be measured by purpose and “the moral effect—called propaganda”: this would lead to a “primary *intellectual revolution*,” propagandists also “agitators by word.”

<sup>6</sup> Despite the anti-Semitic violence surrounding his upbringing in Russia, Berkman wrote little on race in the U.S. and does not seem to have engaged with the manifold Black movements and activists of his day, many of whom wrote on prison. Though it merits further research, we can say that Berkman addressed race much like Goldman did: as Ferguson (2011, 238) argues, Goldman criticized anti-Semitic and antiblack racism, yet “she did not give racism a history” and “did not understand it as a dynamic vector of power.” In his later text on anarchism, race only appears when Berkman (2003, 207) advocates “organization from the bottom up... irrespective of trade, race, or country.” However, the outline for a second, unwritten autobiography tentatively called *An Enemy of Society* suggests that he intended to analyze racism directly: Berkman enumerates planned sections on “Jews and Gentiles,” “race prejudice and discrimination,” and “the treatment of the black convicts” in the Atlanta penitentiary (Berkman 1932). The 1928 letter with Goldman that I discuss later also demonstrates more refined thinking, as Berkman addresses both the ethnic pogroms of Russia and antiblack lynching

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reinvested prison money in other forms of surveillance, whereas Alex Vitale (2017) and Geo Maher (2022) argue that recent attempts to reform law enforcement have insufficiently interrogated policing's role in society. And on sentencing procedures, Abbe Smith (2010, 320) worries that despite the good work of clinics and organizations like The Innocence Project, a growing focus on wrongful convictions and exoneration through forensic evidence has undermined the assumption that those rightfully convicted deserve legal assistance and a fair trial. In each of these examples we confront a double bind like the imprisoned anarchist did before: we struggle to imagine and effect reform that does not fortify the fundamental role of prisons in modern society. Though Alexander Berkman did not live to see such a future, his life is no less a worthy guide for those of us working toward it.

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misunderstanding” motivated the attack, and upon the anarchist's clarification rebuffs that the strikers are law-abiding (55). Berkman is further humiliated to learn that Frick survived the assault (67–8). Prominent anarchists outside the prison also criticized Berkman. The German émigré and anarchist Johann Most repudiated the attentat, though he was most responsible for popularizing the idea in the U.S. and had hired Berkman to work at his journal *Freiheit* (Berkman 1999, 77; Marshall 2008, 415–7). Individualist anarchist and editor of *Liberty* Benjamin R. Tucker also decried Berkman's act as foolish (Brody 2011, xxxviii–ix). Though Berkman remained open and occasionally an accomplice to political violence throughout his life, scholars have interpreted these chapters as Berkman's retrospective rejection of the attentat (Brody 2011, lix; Ward 1999, xxiii).<sup>7</sup>

Readers have nonetheless missed the portrayal of prison presupposed by the attentat and imported from imperial Russia to industrial America: that the anarchist is a political prisoner, punished for the ideas behind his deed. Before the attack, Berkman interrupts scenes of the strike with childhood memories of his first exposure to radical politics. After populists assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881, Berkman's nihilist uncle Maxim Natanson was exiled and sentenced to death amid widespread political retaliation combined with pogroms against Russian Jews like Berkman's family (Berkman 1999, 14–7).<sup>8</sup> Upon his arrival in Pittsburgh, Berkman registers as “Rakhmetov”: a character from imprisoned intellectual Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *What Is to Be Done?*, whose popular-

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in the U.S. A more capacious study of Berkman on race would also look to the history of Black anarchism (Bagby-Williams and Suekama 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Among other incidents, Berkman would “revisit the idea of attentat” in 1913–14, after the Ludlow massacre and his participation in the failed plot against John D. Rockefeller Jr. (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 226–30).

<sup>8</sup> Natanson was “one of the most celebrated figures in the Russian revolutionary movement,” having engineered Kropotkin's jailbreak years before (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 9–11).

ity inspired earlier attacks on the tsar (Berkman 1999, 44, 38; Verhoeven 2011, 1–3, 39–41).<sup>9</sup> And in describing his assassination attempt, Berkman invokes language from the equally influential nihilist Sergey Nechayev’s *Revolutionary Catechism* of 1869. Writing before his own incarceration, Nechayev (2009) described the revolutionary as “a doomed man”: “he has broken all the bonds which tie him to the social order and the civilized world.” He disavows “personal interests” and “public opinion.” Berkman likewise envisions himself free of society, sentiment “unworthy of the real revolutionist”; he regrets flinching upon the sight of Frick’s blood amid the attack (1999, 38, 73; see Goldman 1970, 46). Although a variety of philosophical, literary, and terrorist movements defined Russian populism in the period, each of these activists was punished for their political views by the autocracy.

The first chapters of Berkman’s *Prison Memoirs* portray his punishment as though he were one of the many iconoclasts incarcerated in the Peter and Paul Fortress, the primary tool of Russian state persecution during the long nineteenth-century. Chernyshevsky, Nechayev, as well as Berkman’s other influences Kropotkin and Bakunin each served time in this St. Petersburg prison (Bujalski 2020, 13). Whereas Western State Penitentiary was modeled around the rehabilitation of moral and criminal deviants, the fortress was created in 1703 as a military fortification and variably used for civic services, religious rites, and the confinement of political dissidents (46–9, 97–107). From his extensive archival study, Nicholas Bujalski (2020, 220; see 2021) demonstrates how nineteenth-century radicals coopted the fortress and made it the “writing desk of the revolution,” publishing many of their most influential political texts while imprisoned. The Peter and Paul Fortress became a symbol of tsarist oppression and revolutionary potential. Inspired by this

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<sup>9</sup> Verhoeven (2011, 61) argues that this is a misreading of Chernyshevsky’s book, which she reads as offering “a radically alternative reading of revolutionary ethics” than what followed.

debates resurfaced among Black radical movements in the U.S. just as Berkman’s memoirs were reissued in 1970. Imprisoned activists Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, and Angela Davis confronted federal and state retaliation and deliberated over an anti-prison politics that could avoid the stratifications that stymied earlier movements, variably attentive to similar tensions over masculinity and respectability politics (Cummins 1994; Hill 2008, 265–314). Writing from the Marin County Jail in 1971, Davis (1971, 31–7) shifted from an exhortation for the “political prisoner” imprisoned for the “persistent challenging” of injustice to the observation that all are political prisoners in a society that punishes by class, race, and gender.

For those of us who hope that our analyses may usher in a less punishing future, the ambivalence of Berkman’s anti-prison anarchism offers one final contribution: a cautionary lesson. The philosopher Renzo Llorente (2016, 260) has argued that the concept of the political prisoner is a problem not simply for social movements but society at large: privileging political prisoners neglects others “who may be no less deserving of our compassion and sympathy.” *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* alerts contemporary readers to this problem among a broader set of unresolved tensions in American prison politics. Efforts to reform or reduce prison’s role in society often unwittingly reinforce other arguments for prison. On sentencing policy, Marie Gottschalk (2015, 165–6) has identified how legislative efforts to lessen the incarceration of “nonviolent, nonserious, and nonsexual offenders... has contributed to the further demonization of people convicted of sex offenses or violent crimes.” On capital punishment, former prosecutors (Capers 2012) and scholars (Bennett 2021; Seeds 2022) have shown that movements to abolish the death penalty catalyzed the rise in life imprisonment since the 1970s: recent court cases limiting juvenile life sentences have in turn reinforced that adults deserve “death by prison.” On defunding prisons and police, Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law (2020, 5–8) have criticized federal laws like the First Step Act that

U.S., Kenney shows how political prisoners “speak truth to power or exercise their human rights and freedoms” while incarcerated (10–1). For all of these reasons, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* should be considered as part of a developing canon of penal political theory that includes frequently studied figures like Tocqueville and Beaumont (Avramenko and Gingerich 2014; Benson 2017; Boesche 1980; Ferkaluk 2018; Harcourt 2014), Michel Foucault (Dumm 1987; Dilts 2014; Terwiel 2020; Zurn and Dilts 2016), and Angela Davis (Chakravarti 2021; Roberts 2021; Terwiel 2020).

Second, Madison’s remarks and Berkman’s anti-prison politics exemplify the enduring ambiguity of the term “political prisoner” in the U.S. It is well-documented that American state and federal governments have punished people for their political ideas or affiliations throughout history (Stone 2004). Given that the First Amendment purports to protect political speech, these punishments are often dissimulated through criminal charges and the discretionary power of judges, prosecutors, and wardens. Analyzing those politically persecuted in the twenty-first century, Ward Churchill (2006, 36) attributes much of this ambiguity to recent developments in the American criminal justice system. Thus the ambivalence of Berkman’s anti-prison politics was the result of his own commitments, a rise in political persecution around the globe, as well the very ambivalence of the term “political prisoner” in the United States.

The term may appeal to activists who would claim continuities between political persecution here and abroad, yet the *Prison Memoirs* reveals a second pitfall in how such strategies may undermine structural accounts of incarceration and solidarity among the incarcerated. Other political thinkers and movements have encountered comparable tensions. In addition to similar debates among anarchists Goldman, Kropotkin, and de Cleyre, Marxists before and after Berkman have struggled to define the revolutionary role of the “lumpenproletariat”: a group defined “by its *nonrelation* to economic production” that includes sex workers, the poor, and criminals, Clyde Barrow (2020, 15) writes. These

history, Berkman (1999) initially depicts the Pennsylvania prison as a state tool for suppressing radicalism and a signifier of his revolutionary status. The jail’s warden weaves a conspiracy against Berkman from a professed rejection of anarchism (62). Tinford is a traitor not just for rejecting Berkman but that he denies throwing the dynamite (55). When comrades accused of aiding the attentat Carl Nold and Henry Bauer arrive at Riverside, Berkman consoles himself that their company brings him closer to “the environment of political prisoners in Europe” (174). Portraying himself as though imprisoned not in Pittsburgh but in St. Petersburg, Berkman describes the attentat and prison as but two tools in an ideational struggle between the state and the revolutionist on the people’s behalf.

America in this era certainly had its tools for political persecution. Amid a rising wave of anti-radical hysteria, Berkman was galvanized by the trial of eight anarchists for their involvement in the 1886 riots at Chicago’s Haymarket Square: a trial where the state prosecutor urged the jury that “anarchy is on trial” (Berkman 1999, 60, 119; Lawson 1918, 12, 252). By approaching his incarceration as though he were explicitly persecuted for his ideals, however, Berkman’s first approach is poorly calibrated to the distinct use of legal procedure in the United States. Though his attorneys and allies caution against it, Berkman plans to use his trial “to talk to the People” (1999, 58, 80–1; see 2011b, 53–62). Berkman will circumvent due process to preach his act’s purpose (1999, 58). Refusing to call witnesses at court, Berkman stands to deliver his speech in German—“I address myself to the People”—only to find the interpreter struggling to translate (89–90). “I have the right to be heard,” he urges as the judge cuts him off. Sentenced to the penitentiary, Berkman contemplates suicide or escape as an “opportunity for propaganda,” preferable to prison’s “living death” (110, 120). Just as the attentat failed, Berkman’s recollection of his trial suggests that his appeal as a persecuted idealist was also a weak strategy within the American criminal justice system.

The consequence of Berkman's first approach to prisons is not simply that his attack and attempts at exoneration fail: it is that in treating himself as a political prisoner, the anarchist's attention is drawn from the prison itself and its inhabitants. Just as the attentat discriminates between "the People" and parasites, seizing the status of political prisoner demotes others as traitors to the cause or common criminals. Berkman is Christ, and Tinford is the "Judas-striker" (56–8). Only if Tinford is hanged might he help the "holy Cause." When working through depression, Berkman blanches at the idea that a "passing convict" might greet him: "they are not of my world... they do not belong to the people" (139–40). For the political prisoner Berkman, "the people" are always outside the prison, with only parasites or the politically persecuted inside. It will take much of his *Prison Memoirs* for Berkman to see prison differently.

## THE POLITICS OF PRISONS

Introducing the 1970 reissue of *Prison Memoirs*, Paul Goodman (1970, xix) notes that Berkman "seems to make no distinction at all in his mind between 'political prisoners' and 'common criminals.'" Closer reading reveals that Berkman slowly develops this approach throughout the book. The majority of the text covers Berkman's 13 years at the Riverside location of Western State Penitentiary, where he circulates between spaces typical of the Auburn model popular throughout the U.S. Through these experiences Berkman shifts attention from himself as a political prisoner to the politics of prisons: understood as both a structural accounting of how society imprisons and a strategic accounting of how people resist prison order, both of which advocate solidarity over the stratification of so-called political and common criminals.

Whereas Nechayev defined the revolutionist by his self-denial, Berkman discovers that prison is an institution designed to dehu-

for wildly disparate offenses, and before the charges were dropped against him Madison would have only perhaps passed through the prison that housed Berkman for years, renamed SCI-Pittsburgh before its closure due to budget constraints in 2017 (Worden 2017). Yet the continuities between the two reinforce three major reasons that we should study and teach *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*—not despite but due to its unresolved tensions.

First, Berkman's account of prison politics captures an important period in the development of American prisons and its global connections. Where Tocqueville and Beaumont's *On the Penitentiary System* advocated what Emily Katherine Ferkaluk (2018) characterizes as "moderate penal reform" and envisioned the prison as symbolic of democratic dystopia, Berkman identified an institution that had become entrenched as a constitutive feature of economic and political structures in the industrial U.S. In contrast to the coherence of Tocqueville and Beaumont's proposals, *Prison Memoirs'* complex analysis emerged in 1912 amid a varied landscape of policy, public debate, and political culture: the penal experiments of Zebulon Brockway and Thomas Mott Osborne (Gortler 2022), debates between criminologists and activists over "political crime" and their perpetrators' physiognomy (*The Monist* 1890, 1:336–43, 510–24), and the rising popularity of convict literature (Franklin 1982, 145–8). Where Tocqueville and Beaumont drew lessons for France, these debates and Berkman's contributions confirm how U.S. prison politics also developed within comparative, global contexts. Berkman first struggled to apply the penal logics of imperial Russia to industrial America, and his later advocacy for political prisoners reflected an important shift in global politics. According to Padraic Kenney (2017, 13–4), the "political prisoner" archetype emerged worldwide among conflict points between the prison's development as a "centrally controlled state institution" and "the modern political organization" typified by parties and associations from the mid-nineteenth-century through the early twentieth. Looking to case studies outside the



sulting book he stated confidently that revolution must include the destruction of “jails, police stations... prisoners liberated, legal documents destroyed”—with no prisons to replace them (2003, 196).<sup>19</sup> Counter-revolutionaries will be at most “prisoners in freedom,” free to join in revolution (235–6). Here, perhaps, Berkman glimpsed an anarchist future attentive to both political prisoners and prison politics.<sup>20</sup>

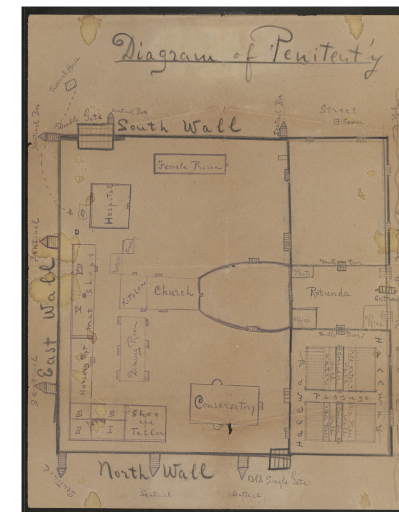
## CONCLUSION: THE UNRESOLVED TENSIONS OF AMERICAN PRISON POLITICS

Over a century after Berkman’s assassination attempt, another anarchist traveled from New York to Pittsburgh. In 2009, Elliot Madison was arrested in his hotel room during protests against the Group of 20 Summit on global finance: he was charged with communicating police movement to protesters through social media and cell phones (Madison and Stolar 2009). In an interview with the outlet *Democracy Now!*, Madison describes how the FBI raided his New York apartment a week later, seizing his political writings and paraphernalia. He notes the contradiction between the state department’s condemning other nations’ crackdown during the “Twitter revolution going on in Iran, in Moldova, in Guatemala” and their silence on his arrest. These two anarchists were arrested

<sup>19</sup> As Kropotkin (1992, 6) wrote, “the first duty of the revolution will be to abolish prisons.”

<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, Berkman contemplated exile as a response to wrongdoing. In an undated “outline of vital problems” reiterating similar questions considered with Goldman, Berkman (n.d.) contemplated “the rights of city or village communes: can they exclude antagonistic members or undesirable elements? Is the social boycott practicable or justifiable?” “In the communist anarchist society... errant behavior would be met with the pressure of social opinion, with sincere attempts at understanding and assistance and only in the very last resort expulsion—never punishment” (Nowlin 2014, 381).

manize those incarcerated—no matter their crime. Before his trial, Berkman bemoans that “life is so remote, so appallingly far away” (1999, 85). At Riverside (Figure 1) he finds a new life of subjugation, “worn in body and soul” (117–8). Albeit excited to receive a job in the workshop, hard labor deteriorates his and others’ health (129). When the warden first sends him to “the dungeon” as punishment, Berkman portrays himself “cast into the stony bowels of the underground” in darkness (212–9). When he is returned to solitary row, the warden withholds his access to books, photographs, exercise, and communication with others. Berkman’s only food is a “Pennsylvania diet”: a daily slice of bread and coffee, with vegetable soup twice a week.



**Figure 1.** Berkman’s Diagram of Western State Penitentiary  
*Note:* Alexander Berkman, “Diagram of [the Western] Penitentiary [of Pennsylvania], Drawing” n.d. Digital image courtesy of Alexander Berkman Papers, International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam).

Three months at Riverside inspire a new approach: prison is not a space separate from society, but an acute example and extension of structural oppression in the U.S.

I had always thought of prison as a place where, in a measure, nature comes into its own: social distinctions are abolished, artificial barriers destroyed; no need of hiding one's thoughts and emotions; one could be his real self, shedding all hypocrisy and artifice at the prison gates. But how different is this life! It is full of deceit, sham, and pharisaism—an aggravated counterpart of the outside world. (Berkman 1999, 151)

Berkman's realization signals a developing view that unites political prisoners with common criminals, whereby prisoner archetypes reflect society's capitalist and state institutions. He classifies the men met at Riverside: Boston Red is a "yegg," an "old-timer tramp," "Lightning Al" is a professional thief convinced "life is a game," others are a "con man" or a "gun" (159–60, 197–9, 242–3, 274–8). Berkman takes up work cleaning cells, which provides "many opportunities for closer contact with the prisoners" (242). Moving toward a new approach, Berkman acknowledges the "inadequacy of my previous notions of 'the criminal.'" His "growing intimacy" reveals "the humanity beneath fibers coarsened by lack of opportunity, and brutalized by misery and fear."

Berkman broadens his analysis to diagram the prison's authority structures and relationship with society. His custodial work puts him "in close contact with the authorities" (270). Prefiguring contemporary studies of prison order (Skarbek 2020), Berkman analyzes the guards' formal and informal training: "daily I behold the machinery at work, grinding and pulverizing, brutalizing the officers, dehumanizing the inmates." Language that earlier described labor conditions is now applied to those working and living in the prison under the "undisputed dominion" of the warden (1999,

in our faith of the future, strong in our position. But the others? It is for them we plead, against the wrongs, the inhumanities committed against those in the prison we left behind" (Berkman and Goldman 1920, 11).<sup>18</sup> Berkman countered that political prisoners' efforts "to regenerate society... makes their lot even harder than that of the average prisoner" (13–4). Though Berkman had shifted his approach to prisons while incarcerated, his advocacy for political prisoners revived old stratifications, focusing attention again on the ideas of those incarcerated rather than the carceral institutions demanding abolition.

Berkman seems to have acknowledged this tension as he returned to the topic of prisons in later writings (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 340–1; Nowlin 2014, 450–3). In 1928, writing across France from Paris to Goldman in Saint-Tropez, Berkman (2011d) confessed lingering frustration over the role of prisons in revolutionary times and in the working argument of *Now and After: The ABC of Communist Anarchism*. "I have come to problems that cannot be solved satisfactorily," he told her. Here Berkman synthesized his experiences with both Russian and American injustices: "What is to be done to active enemies and counter-revolutionists?" What is to be done with "a murderer or raper"? What is to be done were mobs to "make a Pogrom in Russia" or "to lynch a Negro in America"? These hypotheticals might require prison for detention or due process. "But once we begin with prisons, there is no end to it." Goldman (2011, 256–7) responded that "change is bound to be violent": "but while armed defense is inevitable and justifiable, prisons are not, whatever the offense." We must "revalue our conception of human acts," Goldman claimed with foresight to later abolitionist arguments. Berkman seemed satisfied with this response. In the re-

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<sup>18</sup> See also Goldman and Berkman's (1919) circular after release, in which they jointly wrote that political prisoners are sustained by "an ideal... a star of hope and faith." Notice the ambivalence in their combined statement, as they promise to "aid the fellow prisoners we have left behind," these "buried men and women—and especially political and industrial prisoners."

Russia and in exile. Among other contributions, he helped to locate political prisoners and facilitate the publication of essays and testimonials through bulletins as well as the International Committee for Political Prisoners' *Letters from Russian Prisons* (Alexander Berkman Social Club 2010, viii–ix; Avrich and Avrich 2012, 319–23; see Berkman 1925b; 2010).<sup>17</sup>

This was valuable work against the injustices widespread from America's first Red Scare to Russia's Kronstadt Rebellion. Yet a common strategy of those contesting state persecution was to distinguish between political and common criminals. With Berkman as one of its founding members, the League for the Amnesty of Political Prisoners publicized as their first goal "to educate the public to the fundamental distinction between political offenses and ordinary crime" ("Documents Relating to the League for the Amnesty of Political Prisoners" 1918; see Ferguson 2017). Thus Berkman's advocacy for political prisoners threatened the solidarity developed throughout the *Prison Memoirs*. In a letter to Henry Alsberg (with whom Berkman had collaborated on the *Letters from Russian Prisons*) around 1928, Berkman (n.d.) claimed that the "so-called criminal is SOCIOLOGICALLY a superior type to the average man" for his nonconformity: of the criminal, "heros [*sic*] are made, great explorers, discoverers, men of daring and initiative." And yet "THE POLITICAL" is something distinct: a political prisoner seeks not freedom but revolutionary and human "DIGNITY." "In short," he told Alsberg, "you cannot offhand compare political with common prisoners." He insisted upon these distinctions with his closest comrades. In a 1919 pamphlet, Goldman and Berkman shared their respective experiences imprisoned in Missouri and Georgia. "How rich in comparison [to fellow prisoners] are we political prisoners!" Goldman proclaimed: "Rich in the love of our dear comrades, rich

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<sup>17</sup> The Committee also publicized information about political prisoners worldwide, including Berkman himself when facing deportation in France (International Committee for Political Prisoners 1931).

343). When Berkman's anarchist principles appear in these passages they are not ideals that distinguish him as a persecuted dissident but abstractions to be substantiated and challenged by others' experiences. As Kropotkin (1992, 2) wrote before, "the prison kills all the qualities in a man which make him best adapted to community life"; Erving Goffmann (1961, 21) wrote later of prison's "mortification of the self." Berkman goes further to address the institution's liminal connection to society, recognizing before later activists and academics how correctional facilities conceal their conditions from the outside. For a scholar, it would be "almost impossible to learn the true conditions in the American prisons" (1999, 298–9).<sup>10</sup>

By this approach, prison is not merely a tool of state persecution: it is an institutional extension of capitalism, the state, and other modern authorities. Struggle does not stop at the gates, political prisoners silenced among the refuse. Instead, Berkman discovers the people's political potential behind bars. Three forms of resistance fill the memoirs: the first is intellectual comradeship. Shortly after Nold and Bauer arrive, fellow prisoner "Horsethief Bob" helps Berkman and the two exchange notes (176–80). The three expand their *sub rosa* writings into a magazinelet called *Zuchthausblüthen* (German for "prison blossoms") and welcome a broader cast of editors and contributors, switching to English (182–3). Even as men rotate throughout cells, they widen their audience and authors and work toward publishing beyond the prison (282–5). The result is a collection of testimonies, philosophical debate and literary experimentation, memoir, and humor, reflective of a rich history of the prison press in America (Drummond 2020).

A second source of imprisoned activism is organized resistance. Workers in the hosiery department strike after a "wagon-load of bad meat" shows up for supper (Berkman 1999, 215). A later in-

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Gottschalk (2015, 1) notes that till recently "mass imprisonment was largely an invisible issue in the United States."

investigation of New York's facilities inspires a similar movement among Berkman's fellow prisoners: he offers to testify before an investigation committee, gathering and concealing evidence of abuse (301–7). When authorities whitewash the investigation, Berkman works with others inside and out to publicize the prison's brutality (334–5). Compare this willingness to work with fellow prisoners and within legal and legislative procedures to Berkman's failed attempt to speak past the judge at his own trial.

The final source of political potential in prison is intimacy. Terence Kissack (2008, 100) writes that Berkman "presents love between inmates as a form of resistance," whereas earlier anarchists joined prison authorities to depict queerness as one of prison's corruptions. Berkman's intimacy with men swells throughout the *Prison Memoirs*. In the book's first half, he yearns for "sympathy and affection," emotions tethered to memories before prison and fleeting relationships therein (1999, 239). The anarchist bemoans the rotation of men in and out: "with some I merely touched hands as they passed in the darkness and disappeared" (236). As Kissack (2008, 107–8) observes, Berkman is initially repulsed by Boston Red's model of coerced sexuality as a "kid man": an older man with a subordinate, younger male lover.

In the dungeon, punished for his participation in the official investigation, Berkman finds more just queer intimacy: "love's dungeon flower" (1999, 317). In a chapter by that name, he describes the warmth kindled with his neighbor Johnny Davis (320–4). "With a glow of pleasure, I become aware of the note of tenderness in his voice" as the two converse and exchange nicknames for one another. Though they cannot touch, they grow "openly tender and affectionate," confessing that they would kiss were they free. Later Berkman forms a similar relationship with Russell, a young man who becomes caught up in Berkman's escape attempt (372–3, 389–91). Isolated in a dark cell, "his face floats before me, casting the spell of a friendly presence, his strong features softened by sorrow, his eyes grown large with the same sweet sadness" of Johnny be-

Billings and Mooney, Margaret Sanger, Goldman, the Magón brothers, and Carlo Tresca, its pages peppered with advertisements for the *Prison Memoirs* yet with little about incarceration itself.



**Figure 3.** Cover of *The Blast*, March 15, 1917

Note: Digital image courtesy of The Kate Sharpley Library (<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net>).

Global events and globetrotting expanded Berkman's advocacy for political prisoners in the following decades. Looking back at his deportation from the U.S., Berkman wrote in 1925's *The Bolshevik Myth* that "we are prisoners" aboard the boat leaving Ellis Island: "political" prisoners, he clarifies (1925a, 14, 17). That book was one of many efforts to publicize Berkman's disillusionment with the Soviet Union (which he visited from 1919 to 1922) and its government's persecution of radicals (Alexander Berkman Social Club 2010, vii). Through a variety of liberal and leftist organizations, Berkman dedicated considerable support for political prisoners in

As summarized earlier, Berkman did continue writing and lecturing on the politics of prisons after his release. In the winter of 1913, he delivered his “confession of a convict” at the Twilight Club in New York, rehearsing how through “close association with criminals during fourteen years” the anarchist “dispelled the fiction” of classifications “beloved by our prison reformists and criminologists” (1913, 5–6). There may be distinctions between prisoners, but the “prison in the last analysis is the mirror of society at large, the perfect model of our social arrangement whose cornerstone is hypocrisy, deceit, oppression and injustice” (7). And so “the first step in reforming the criminal is to reform ourselves” (8). In an undated draft for another speech, Berkman asserted that all Americans “support and uphold the institutions of Crime + Prisons” despite their vulnerability to arrest and “the dangers of prison” (“Crime & Prisons” n.d.). With that understood, “is the criminal really a different being from us?” “It is high time that the public get a look into the inside working of our penal institutions,” Berkman (1919, 7) wrote upon leaving the Atlanta prison in 1919.

More persistent throughout Berkman’s later activism was his advocacy for political prisoners, support that resurrected the distinction between common criminals and persecuted dissidents. The March 15, 1917 issue of his journal *The Blast* featured articles on the trials of Warren K. Billings and Thomas J. Mooney for their alleged involvement with a bombing at a pro-war parade in San Francisco (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 255–66; Berkman 2005, 219–26). Featuring a drawing by American artist George Bellows, the cover (Figure 3) depicts a downtrodden political prisoner with text alongside reading: “this man subjected himself to imprisonment and probably to being shot or hanged under the new Espionage Bill” (Berkman 2005, 219). His “incendiary statements”? “Thou shalt not kill and Peace on earth good will to men.” The man in ball, chains, and stripes bears a crown of thorns—again, Christian imagery idolizes the political prisoner but ignores the prison or other prisoners. The short run of *The Blast* focused on the legal persecution facing

fore him (406). Once a medical accident dooms Russell, Berkman maims his hand as a pretense to see the man before he dies in the ward, Russell’s last words “Good bye, Aleck” (412). Johnny too had passed away: Berkman wishes that “a rosebud will timidly burst and flower” from his “convict grave” (353).

These resistive relationships—intellectual, insurrectionary, intimate—often overlap, as the *Prison Blossoms* and love’s flower intertwine.<sup>11</sup> Earlier in the book Berkman shifts from memories of romancing women and revolution in “The Urge of Sex” to the camaraderie of fellow laborers and family (206). The first chapters coupled the attentat with anecdotes of Russian political persecution, but in these later memories “the Tsar is far away.” When Nold and Bauer leave the penitentiary, Berkman yearns “to touch hands, even in silence” (336). His decision to confide in another man his escape plan draws from their growing “intimate,” as he learns “the story of his life” (361). In a pivotal conversation between Berkman and inmate George, these political connections interweave again. The two reflect on modern sexuality before they confess their changing views and experiences with men. “I think it is a very beautiful emotion. Just as beautiful as love for a woman,” Berkman concludes (445).<sup>12</sup> George holds out his hand, and the chapter ends. This exchange elevates intimacy above the dehumanization of the attentat and incarceration alike. As Kissack (2008, 119–21) documents, Berkman would lecture on topics like “Homosexuality and Sex Life in Prison” following his release.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Shortly before the end of his sentence, friends bring Berkman a rose to commemorate his 10 years incarcerated: “these men—they are the shame Society hides within the gray walls” (1999, 454).

<sup>12</sup> Kissack (2008, 113–7) argues that George is likely a fictional character, given the unlikelihood of his biography.

<sup>13</sup> Despite his advocacy, note that Berkman did occasionally describe homosexuality as “PRISON PLAGUE” and one among other “perversions” in later letters (“Henry G. Alsberg” n.d.). Rachel Hui-Chi Hsu (2021, 179) argues that Berkman’s views on queerness were overall progressive, yet he did not see “homosexuality as a powerful disruptive force against the authorities outside of prison.” We

With these experiences, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* transforms from an attentat's autobiography to a book about doomed men, prefiguring our contemporary interest in the politics of prisons. Prison is no holding pen for political prisoners and criminals: it is an extension of American institutions and activism (Figure 2). Sitting in solitary below Johnny, Berkman derides the "machinery of government... concentrated to crush this unfortunate atom" (1999, 225–6). His "prison-house environment" is but another "manifestation of the Midas-hand" of capitalism. Staff still retaliate against Berkman for his anarchism (210–1, 286–7, 292, 298), and he remains skeptical of the legal process as a "sacrifice of principle" (288–9): but Berkman's narrative increasingly elevates experiences shared among the imprisoned. When he learns that radical Gaetano Bresci has assassinated the Italian king, Berkman's mind is on a cellmate who bled to death: "Here, all around me, a thousand unfortunates daily suffer... They bleed and struggle and suicide, with the desperate cry for a little sunshine and life. How shall they be helped? How helped amid the injustice and brutality of a society whose chief monuments are prisons?" (1999, 403; see Avrich and Avrich 2012, 149). As Berkman's understanding of the prison develops, so too do his plans for freedom. "The submerged moan in the dark," Berkman writes in one of the final chapters: "I will echo their agony to the ears of the world" (1999, 458).

This "politics of prisons" approach is evident throughout Berkman's works while incarcerated and after: the *Prison Memoirs* is only the most definitive account of its development. In an essay from the *Prison Blossoms* circulated in 1896 and revised for Goldman's journal *Mother Earth*, Berkman (2011c, 159) theorized punishment as a "modern form of 'civilized' revenge" that produces of the criminal an "enemy of society." Thus "no amount of punishment can obviate crime so long as existing social conditions drive man to

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could also read Berkman's remarks as reflecting a similar ambivalence to his later resurrection of the political prisoner approach.

Messiah" to save the people in an "hour of redemption" (226, 228). At the workhouse he is "in the midst of the social refuse," those who "were the blessed of the Nazarene; these a Christian world breaks on the wheel"—and yet he preaches again that "they, too, are within the scope of my mission" (486–7). Berkman's use of Abrahamic imagery was not unique among anarchists, Nowlin (2014, 385–92) argues, yet it contrasts with Berkman's critiques of Christianity.

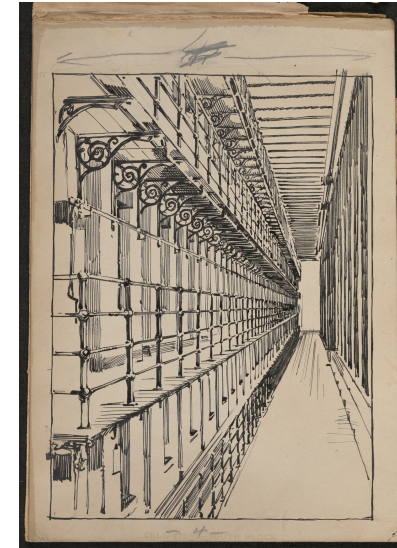
Most striking is the language of resurrection, further evidence of Berkman's ambivalence. "I feel as if I am being resurrected," Berkman writes upon learning of the commutation law that shortened his sentence (1999, 415). In the memoirs' final part—"The Resurrection"—Berkman describes his difficulty reentering society, traumatized by the smallest of interactions (491). "He saved himself," Hutchins Hapgood (1970, x) writes in the memoirs' introduction: "Society tried to destroy him, but failed." Resurrection again evokes the attentat's messianism. "The day of my resurrection is approaching, and I will devote my new life to the service of my fellow-sufferers," Berkman writes (1999, 458). Back in society, Berkman bears witness to others' challenges. In the Bower he meets a man who cleaned cells with Berkman, now unemployed: "What is he to do but commit another crime and be returned to prison?" (502–3). He looks toward Sing Sing prison with guilt, that "men groan and suffer there" while he stands idly as a "useless cog." In some passages, Berkman describes other men's reentry like that of Nold and Bauer as a resurrection: he exclaims that "resurrection trembles within" other imprisoned friends whom he once described as "parasites, almost devoid of humanity" (335, 398). Are these resurrections proof that the people are their own messiah, not Berkman? Or are they another of the anarchist's miracles, as Christ resurrected Lazarus? What is to happen to the "living dead" left behind (350)? *The Prison Memoirs* concludes with the political role of prisons and prisoners unclear.

prison as an extension of society he laments that “the People” do not realize “the depths of their degradation” nor “embrace Anarchy” (1999, 227). Berkman (2003, 143) accused readers of a later book: “You submit to the domination of boss, judge, and government because of their power to deprive you of work, to ruin your business, to put you in prison.” We can infer similar commitments from his disagreement with Goldman over Leon Czolgosz’s assassination of William McKinley (Berkman 1999, 423–24). Though killing an autocrat might be effective in Russia, Berkman writes, the U.S. President is merely “representative of our modern slavery” and not “a direct and immediate enemy of the people.” More insidious is a “real despotism” brought on by “the popular delusion of self-government and independence”: delusion that “cannot be reached with a bullet.” Because war is to be waged in the “economic rather than the political field,” Berkman feels that his attack on industrialist Frick was “significant and educational.” This exchange disturbed Goldman (1970, 322–5), and for the *Prison Memoirs*’ readers, it conflicts with the author’s developing views. Although Berkman praises both his and Goldman’s new views of humanity—that they would care for the wounded McKinley—he attributes these views to the solitude found in prison, not solidarity (1999, 420). “In the long years of isolation I have looked deeply into my heart,” he writes.<sup>16</sup> And though Berkman tepidly defends his attack on Frick, he echoes the language of transcendence that underwrote the attentat and his identification as a political prisoner.

Messianic rhetoric in the *Prison Memoirs* similarly suggests Berkman’s commitment to a political prisoner approach. Within one chapter he decries how “religion weaves the spell of awe” in modern society and yet declares his hope for “the revolutionary

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<sup>16</sup> That Berkman recounts his frustration with this exchange and efforts to discuss the matter with others in the prison suggests that perhaps he too was uncertain of his opinion (1999, 425–35).



**Figure 2.** Berkman’s Sketch of Penitentiary Cells  
*Note:* Alexander Berkman, “Drawings and Prints of the Penitentiary and of an Advertisement for the ‘Union Broom’ Made by the Prisoners” n.d. Digital image courtesy of Alexander Berkman Papers, International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam).

it” (163). Years later, Berkman served time at a federal penitentiary in Atlanta as he awaited his 1919 deportation (Avrich and Avrich 2012, 281–6). In a pamphlet on his time there, Berkman proposed another book on “the sources and the psychology of crime” (Berkman and Goldman 1920, 4): an outline drafted just before his death reiterated Berkman’s promise to elaborate the types surveyed in his memoirs, “CRIMINALS I HAVE KNOWN” (1930). With these works, Berkman drew from his revised approach and ongoing debates, particularly those around criminologist Cesare Lombroso’s argument that the criminal “is an atavistic phenomenon reproducing a type of the past” (Parmelee 1911, xiv). Long before Lombroso turned his attention to “the social causes of crime,” radical thinkers had offered structural accounts of criminality (Parmelee 1911, xii). Kropotkin (1992, 6; see 1887, 114) argued that capitalism creates the conditions for crime and isolates people through private property and laws that support an “egoistic individualism.” Berkman’s comrade Voltairine de Cleyre (1914, 192) stated in a 1903 lecture, “The reason men steal is because their rights are stolen from them before they are born” (See Avrich 2018, 178–80). The *Prison Memoirs* certify Berkman’s contributions to these debates. “What work is accomplished by Prisons?” he asked in an undated draft for a speech called “Crime & Prisons” (n.d.). “Even if the Lombroso myth that the criminal is born were true,” Berkman mused elsewhere, “what good would it do to punish him?” (Berkman and Goldman 1920, 3).<sup>14</sup> These questions convey Berkman’s confidence that prison is an object of analysis and an opportunity for activism. These conversations’ global reach also exemplifies how Berkman maintained a comparative orientation to prisons—but one far more complex than his initial conflation of Russian and American punishment.

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<sup>14</sup> See also Kropotkin’s (1887, 108) engagement with these ideas: “We cannot consider society as entitled to exterminate all people having defective structure of brain, and still less to imprison those who have long arms.” See also de Cleyre (1914, 187).

## RESURRECTING THE POLITICAL PRISONER

After 13 years at Western State Penitentiary and ten months at the workhouse, Berkman emerged on May 18, 1906, with a new perspective. “What is this so-called civilised society of ours but a large prison, a capitalistic hell as wide as the world,” the anarchist asked in his first public speech, assailing the prison as an aggravated counterpart to the society he was reentering (1906). Yet Berkman also expressed gratitude to be away from the “select circle of thieves” that included prisoners and guards, back with “honest laboring men.” These remarks represent the unresolved tension between the political prisoner and politics of prisons approaches that remained in Berkman’s activism. Though disabused of the attempt’s effectiveness and newly appreciative of prisoners’ experiences, Berkman continued to suggest that anarchists must liberate the masses from the ideas of capitalism, religion, and law. “Has persecution ever stifled the voice of truth?” he told his audience after leaving the workhouse: “Has imprisonment ever conquered the genius of justice?”<sup>15</sup> According to Bill Nowlin (2014, 329–33), Berkman believed that “ideas provided the foundation on which any society or social institution rested”: and “anarchism was such a liberating idea for Berkman and his comrades.” This commitment and a global increase in political persecution in the early twentieth-century help to explain Berkman’s ambivalence between activism on behalf of all prisoners and advocacy for the heroic few, evident in the end of the *Prison Memoirs* and pronounced in the final decades of his life.

Throughout the memoirs and later writings lingers Berkman’s conviction that the masses remain asleep. Even upon perceiving

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<sup>15</sup> See similar remarks upon leaving the Atlanta prison (“Ideals cannot be imprisoned”) and when resisting France’s attempts to deport him (“Persecution has never yet succeeded in killing an ideal or a great popular movement”) (Berkman 1919, 4; 1931).