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I became aware of the problems within the U.S. prison system in the early 1990s when a friend took me to an event in Washington, D.C. centred on political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. It (and Mumia's case more generally) was a great eye-opener to how the U.S. prison system sits at the intersection of many important issues in our society, particularly race, class, violence, and political repression, but also gender, health care, sexual preference, age discrimination, and much more.

Over the past twenty years I have amassed a large collection of books and publications on the topic of prison. Book covers are a compelling lens through which to look at the ideas and opinions a society has towards social issues at a given point in time. Each book cover is crafted by its culture, and carries a diverse set of understandings about the world. Although publishers and designers carry all the cultural prejudices of their moment, they are often more progressive than the broader public, especially if they publish from the left. At the same time, commercial concerns can compel publishers (and designers) to affirm a representation of a subject that they think will be comprehensible or attractive to the audience. From the consumption side, book covers are often the first visual representation of ideas that a reader will see. A strongly designed cover can create an image that will resonate with a reader for a lifetime, transcending even the book itself.

Early Representations

Book covers about prison prior to the 1970s tend to fall into two categories. First, you have the image of the solitary prisoner, crushed by the scale and size of the prison institution. The 1957 edition of Jack Finney's account of an escape from San Quentin, The House of Numbers [figure 80, p 306], is a good example. A lone prisoner, anonymous in a grey uniform, is in the corner of a cell, pushed deep back by the prominent black bars that fill the

foreground. John Bartlow Martin's Break Down the Walls (1954) [figure 81, p 306] is a variation on the theme, with a small and stark solitary figure against a giant and imposing guard tower. Red and yellow diagonals swoop from left and right, highlighting the shape of the prison wall while illuminating the panopticon-like vision in which the figure is caught. Hugh J. Klare's Anatomy of a Prison (1962) [figure 82, p 306] captures the exact same sense of overarching control, but inside the walls.

The other major trope is the abstraction of the prison edifice as solid and unyielding bars. A 1951 edition of Flemish novelist Ernest Claes's Cel 269 [figure 83, p 307] is one of the best examples of this—the prisoner, represented by a bright yellow sun, is trapped behind stark black shafts. Deitrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison (1962) [figure 84, p 307] is a variation, with the title—and by association, the author—breaking through the bars with words. In each of these covers, the intention is for the reader to identify with the prisoner. The prison is a faceless institution, a set of harsh bars (or a large, otherworldly wall) crushing the radiance of the individual trapped inside.

The Advent of Mass Incarceration

Three events in the 1970s irrevocably changed the direction of these covers: the Attica Rebellion in 1971, the explosion of the U.S. prison population by the mid 1970s, and the publishing industry's expanded use of the diminutive—yet extremely popular—"mass market" paperback, with its bright, full-colour photographic covers. Attica is the daddy of the modern U.S. prison riot, and awoke the American public to the fact that there were serious problems in the prison system. A slew of both academic and sensational writing followed, including a series of reports published in broadly distributed, cheap paperbacks. Gerald Leinwand's Prisons (1972) [Figure 85, p 307] and the Official Report of the New York State Special Commission on Attica (1972) [figure 86, p 308] are exemplary of this trend. Both feature provocative photographs on clean white backgrounds, creating a striking starkness, perhaps as an attempt to suggest the reality—and validity—of their highly charged and sensational content. Leinwand's

cover provokes with a bold setting of “PRISONS” and a grainy photo of ominous (black!) prisoners with their faces covered by T-shirts. For the N.Y. Report, the strong stencil font evokes a sense of militarization, while the photo reinforces a sense of severity and domination. Dozens of men—mostly black and brown—are naked and dehumanized, controlled by a single white guard who plays the same visual role of the prison tower in the previously described cover designs. Yet opinions on Attica and prison expansion were diverse, and my favourite of the Attica-related covers takes a different design approach. On the cover for A Bill of No Rights: Attica and the American Prison System (1972) [figure 87, p 308], simple and powerful red and white typography sits on a black field, and the distortion of the text suggests that the contract between prisoners and society has also been stretched and warped. It is significant that this cover is not found on a mass-market paperback, but on a hardcover. Designers of the initial cloth-bound editions were relieved of many of the restrictions and imperatives that came with designing for the inexpensive paperback formats intended for sale in drug stores and groceries.

While politicians hardened their stance toward crime by the end of the 1970s, greatly expanding the prison system, a significant parallel movement to reform/abolish prisons was developing—encompassing political activists as well as mainstream social scientists and psychologists who had compiled data to prove that mass incarceration was not going to make society any safer. On the activist wing, the American Friends Service Committee issued a book-length report in 1971 [Figure 88, p 309], which features a heavily reproduced photo of a fist through the bars on a saturated green background. In fact, the image has been reproduced so many times—in movement publications, on Cuban political posters, and in the underground press—that, although the photographer is known (Mark Feinstein), the location of the photo was taken is not. Also, notice the stencil font for the main title, a recurring typographic theme for prison books. The political bent of Eve Pell’s Maximum Security (1972) [figure 89, p 309] is made clear by the cover’s description of Attica as a “Holocaust.” Once again, the designer had more creative freedom and produced a direct and minimalist cover that is striking for its savvy use of political signifiers. The face behind the bars is rendered in flat fields of orange

and black, and makes reference to the design aesthetic of both the Cuban political posters popular at the time and movement artists like Rupert Garcia, who had produced a poster in support of Angela Davis featuring her flattened likeness in a similar colour scheme. To a general audience, the cover represents a sole body locked within a very dark prison system, but to an activist audience, it most certainly also evoked the repression of the movement by the government, and the massive increase of prisoners who were members of the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, or a dozen other political groups. The paperback edition was geared to a much broader audience and is more sensational—its titling and image have much more in common with the Attica paperbacks discussed above than with the hardcover edition.

With the increasing repression of 1960s political movements, prisons largely became an unchallenged reality in the popular imagination throughout the mid-1970s and 1980s. From a social sciences perspective, Janet Harris's Crisis in Corrections (1973) [figure 90, p 310] serves as a great example. At first glance, the cover harkens back to the pre-1970s imagery of a lone figure caged by the inhuman prison; we no longer see abstract bars, but instead a bird's-eye view of the prison as a maze. But here the ghostly figure is both harder to identify and is not simply trapped in the prison but is also part of the prison. John Irwin's Prisons in Turmoil (1980) [figure 91, p 310] carries another ambiguous message. On the cover is a photograph of a brick wall awkwardly cracked open to expose a bright reddish-orange inside. For many, the breaking of the wall shows a system in a dangerous crisis, for others the collapsing of prisons is a symbol of liberation. The return to a more abstract and distanced perspective also implies a neutrality not found in the books published during the initial thrust of prison expansion a decade earlier. This new-found conceptualism in the cover designs might be attributed to a turn towards a more academic approach to the subject.

Birth of a New Prison Activism

By the early 1990s, a nascent movement critical of mass incarceration quickly began spreading across college campuses and activist communities. A new collection of organizers, academics,

and journalists began writing and publishing on prisons again. Many of these authors had some experience working within the growing movement. By 2000, there was an entirely new literature about prisons, with dozens of titles. Books by Rosenblatt and Parenti are good examples of the covers of this period. The design of Criminal Injustice (1996) [figure 92, p 310] attempts to stake out the same new ground as the content by going beyond the usual graphic clichés, but ends up just piling them on top of each other. The U.S. flag, the Statue of Liberty, a dollar bill, and a policeman make up the bars holding a black man in prison. While this is a clear and direct representation of the book's perspective, it is quite didactic. Lockdown America (2008, second edition) [figure 93, p 310] is much more intriguing—the prison literally turned on its side so that the hands protruding from the bars reach upwards—not in fists, but open palms, pleading for help out of the system. To me, the hand gesture has a religious connotation and indirectly references the fanatical aspects of our current criminal justice system that helps keep millions locked in U.S. prisons.

We have reached a point where it appears that the tide might be turning. Politicians are having to make hard decisions about whether to build more prisons or keep schools and libraries open, and increasing numbers of people are pushing for the latter.⁻¹ I suspect a new round of books will emerge, and it will be interesting to see how publishers and designers choose to represent this nascent reality.

Figures

↓ Mass Incarceration and the Book Cover, pp 289–293 ↓

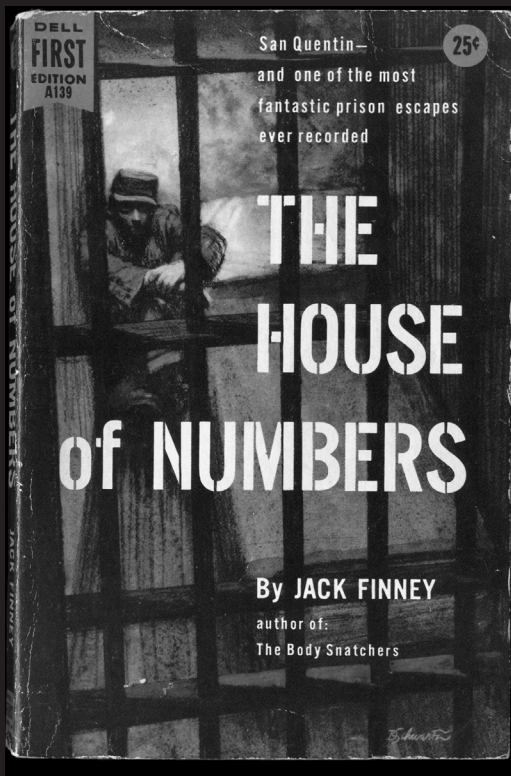


Figure 80

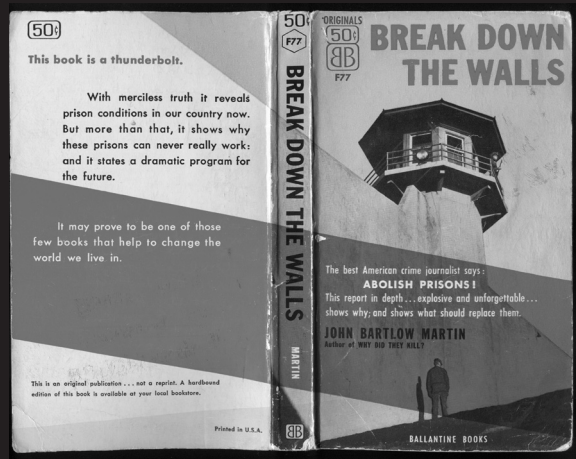


Figure 81

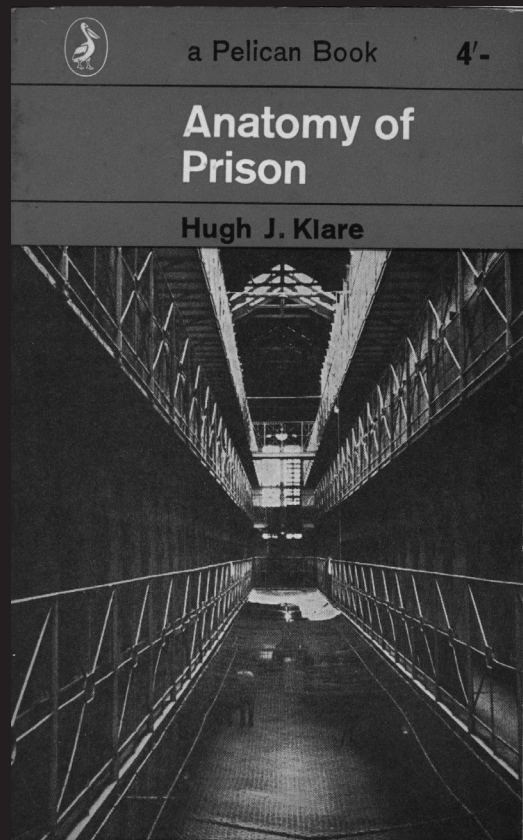


Figure 82

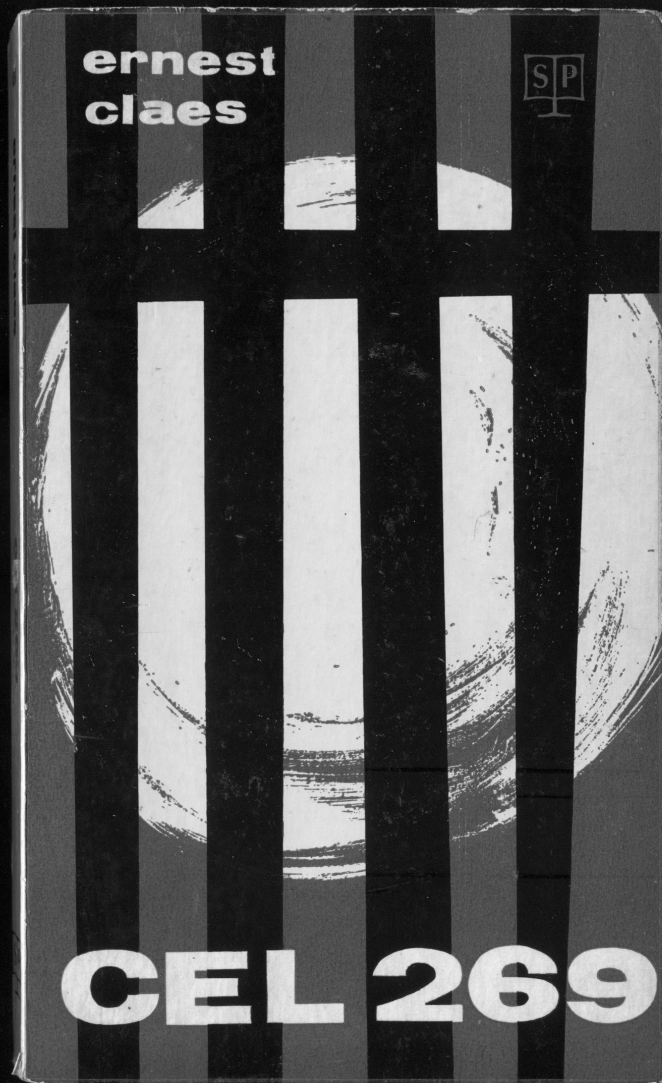


Figure 83

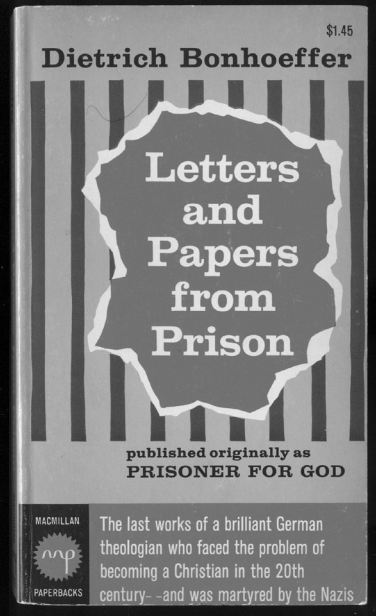


Figure 84

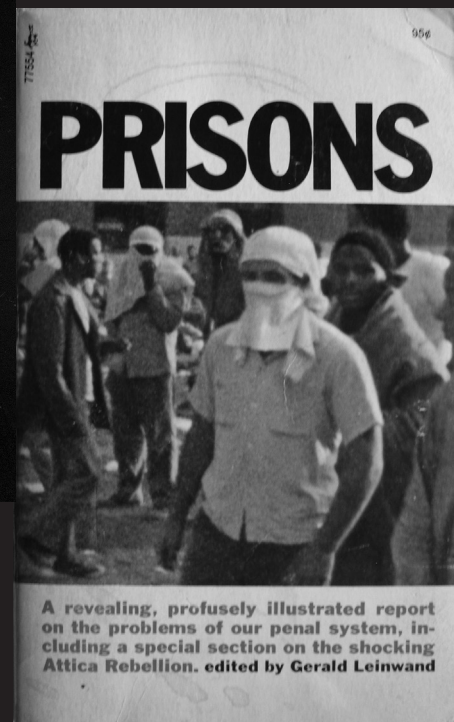


Figure 85

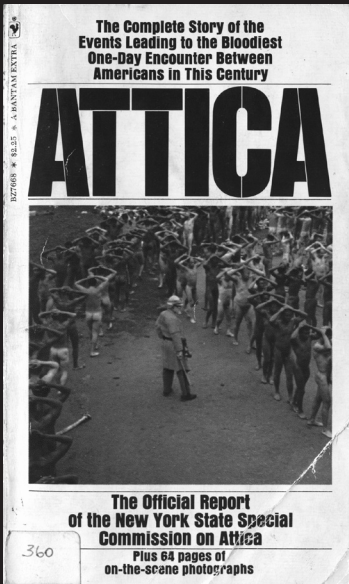


Figure 86

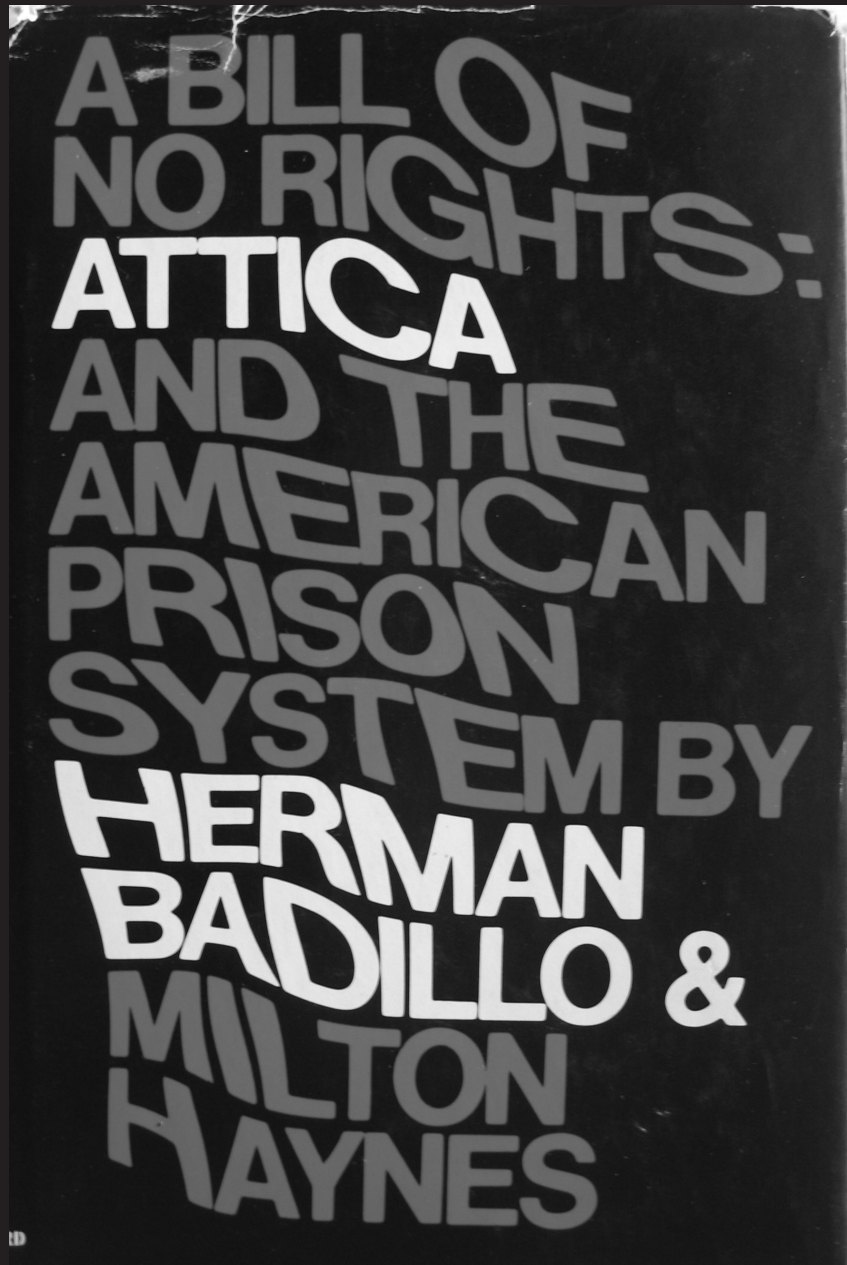


Figure 87

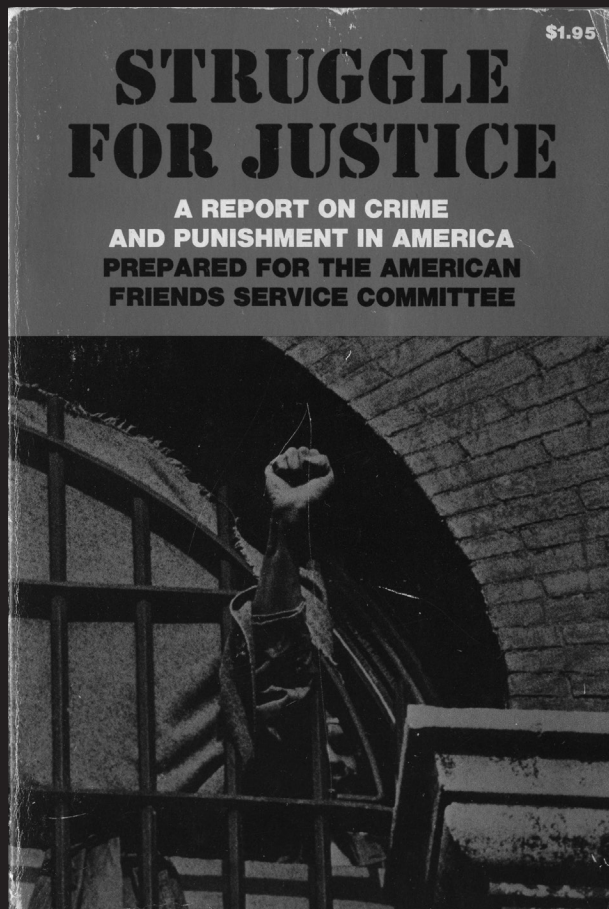


Figure 88

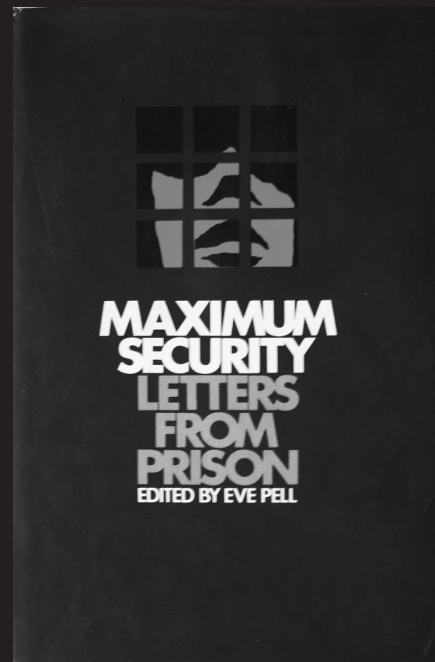


Figure 89

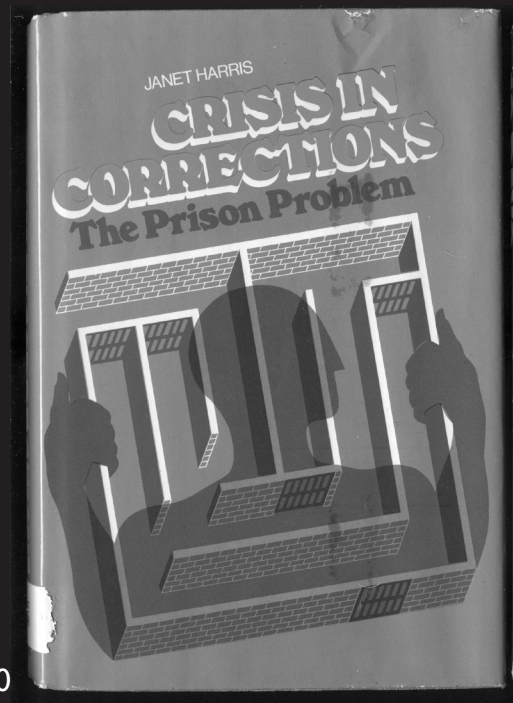


Figure 90

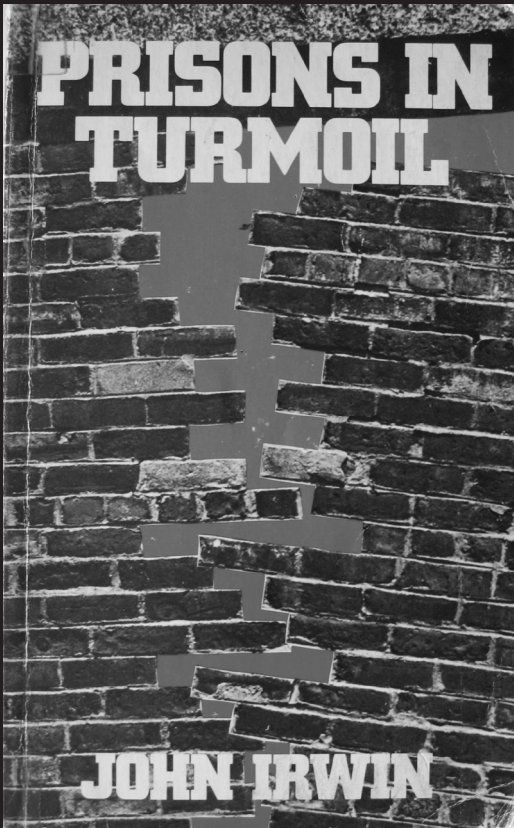


Figure 91

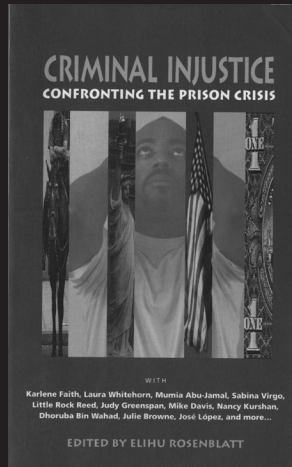


Figure 92

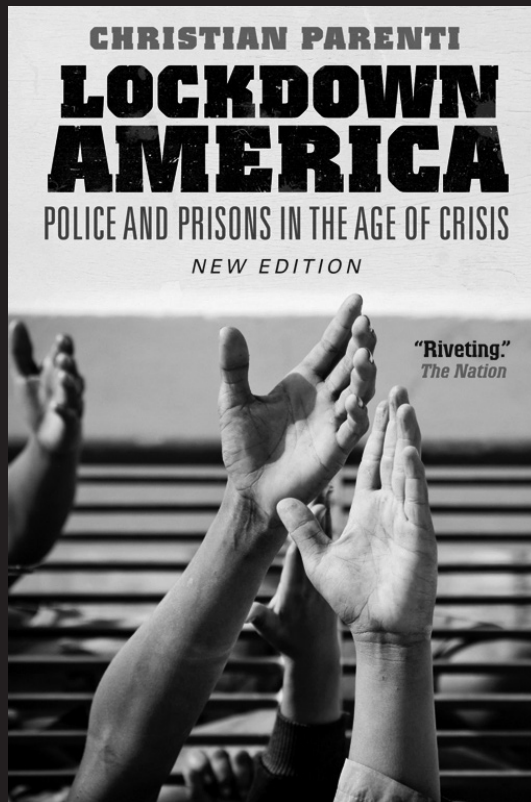


Figure 93