Letters

Cambridge 02138

Angela Davis, Bureau of Study Counsel, climate change

CRIME AND INCARCERATION

The article about Elizabeth Hinton (“Color and Incarceration,” by Lydialyle Gibson, September-October, page 40) included an observation by Hinton when she visited a loved one inside a California prison and saw “all these black and brown families.” I work for the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC), dedicated to helping incarcerated men and women successfully transition back into society and reform our criminal justice system.

I have walked into numerous prisons in California, which has one of the world’s largest prison systems. Each time I step into one of these institutions, my breath is taken away by the image of a sea of black and brown bodies in oversized blue prison uniforms, slowly pacing these prison yards in a fog of hopelessness.

I’ve also seen how education can help break through this fog. Sam Lewis, ARC’s executive director, often speaks with me about how education dramatically changed his life during his 24 years of incarceration in a California prison. I applaud and second Hinton’s call for Harvard to invest in prison education. Education is and will continue to be critical in developing the leadership of those most impacted by our justice system. As an alum, I would love to see Harvard lead in this effort.

Bikila Ochoa, Ph.D. ’09
Los Angeles

HINTON’S CRITIQUE of our criminal justice system, and her call for policy reform, are compelling and convincing. But aside from a few casual references, the article ignores an essential dimension of the story: the victims. It is as if none of the incarcerated had committed an offense graver than possession of recreational drugs. Yet in many if not most cases, the victims of crime are from families in these institutions.

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—The Editors

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Helping Hands

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—The Editors
the same disadvantaged socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic groups as the perpetrators. Moreover, victim compensation, sometimes in lieu of incarceration, should be a key element of humane and effective offender rehabilitation.

In portraying the perpetrators as the victims, the author airbrushes the real victims out of the story. Truly, justice is blind.

Andrew Sorokowski, A.M. ’75
Rockville, Md.

The Article was disappointing because it left out an important part of the story. Gibson overlooked James Forman Jr.’s book, Locking Up Our Own, subtitled Crime and Punishment in Black America, which won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction in 2018. I am interested in the topic because I have been a criminal defense lawyer for most of my career, beginning in 1981.

The article sums up Hinton’s book as: [telling] the story of how federal policies—shaped by presidential administrations and endorsed by Congress—ratcheted up surveillance and punishment in black urban neighborhoods from the 1960s through the 1980s, how criminalization was steadily expanded, and how all of this was driven by deeply held assumptions about the cultural and behavioral inferiority of black Americans.

Gibson overlooks the most important point of Locking Up Our Own: that “amid a surge in crime and drug addiction,” black mayors, judges, and police chiefs who took office in the 1970s, “learing that the gains of the civil rights movement were being undermined by lawlessness, embraced tough-on-crime measures, including longer sentences and aggressive police tactics” (as the dust jacket puts it). Those officials responded to the demands of black people to do something about the crime in their neighborhoods.

There were big changes in the late 1980s with the advent of the federal sentencing guidelines. Drug cases, even for small amounts of illegal drugs, were prosecuted in federal court instead of state court to take advantage of long mandatory minimum sentences. While many black people were sentenced to prison for crimes involving crack cocaine in urban areas, white people were imprisoned for methamphetamine offenses in rural areas.

In effect, our country decided to treat illegal drug possession and sales as a criminal-justice problem instead of a public-health challenge. Many public officials, black and white, were making decisions with the best of intentions that resulted in what is now called mass incarceration. Fear of crime motivated all races to do something. I hope Hinton is telling the whole story to her classes about how we got to now.

Patrick Deaton, M.P.A. ’87
St. Louis

The statistics are painfully clear: 50 percent of U.S. murders are committed by 6 percent of our population, black males. A very high violent crime rate in black communities requires police presence to (a) protect potential victims, mostly black, and (b) deter more serious crime. But Hinton concludes that history and white racism are to blame for black crime and imprisonment. Are we to believe that the black community bears no responsibility for its behavior?

Richard Merlo ‘57
Elkin, N.C.

ANGELA DAVIS

Harvard Magazine’s hagiographic paean to Angela Davis (“Revisiting Angela Davis,” the sidebar to “Color and Incarceration,” September-October, page 44) at least does touch on reality by noting a few of the details of her part in a horrible terrorist murder in the 1970s. Too bad the tone about that incident is so forgiving and low key.

However, to then pass off her totalitarian sympathies by simply saying she was a “member” of the Communist Party is an outrageous evasion. She was the vice presidential candidate of the American Communist Party twice, supported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1979 in Moscow. It’s nice that Davis cares, or says she does, about prisoners in this country. However, when Czech dissident Jeri Pelikan publicly called

(please turn to page 6)
Angela Davis is a thoroughly reprehensible extreme leftist and a hypocrite when it comes to prisoners’ rights. It is a shame that such a puff piece on her made it into your pages, and it is a disgrace for Harvard to have anything to do with glorifying or honoring her.

Jonathan Burack ’64
East Lansing, Mich.

In “Revisiting Angela Davis,” on the exciting, upcoming exhibit from the papers of Angela Davis recently acquired by the Schlesinger Library, there is a questionable characterization of the “attack on the Marin County Courthouse” in 1970 that resulted in her arrest and trial on multiple charges related to this event.

Often referred to as the August 7 Revolt or Rebellion, the courthouse action was initiated by Jonathan Jackson, the younger brother of George Jackson, who was the most influential of the radical black prisoners referred to as the Soledad Brothers after being accused of the murder of a guard in the California state prison of that name. The sidebar states that the courthouse action was “intended to free the Soledad Brothers but instead left four people dead…,” a claim that was actually used by the prosecution in her trial to support the argument that Davis’s personal relationship with George Jackson was the principal motive for her involvement with the incident. The prosecution could not present definitive evidence for this claim, as detailed in Davis’s Autobiography, describing the cross-examination of chief prosecutor Albert Harris by the defense on that point. The implication that the four deaths resulting from the action were attributable to the brutality of Jackson and three militant prisoners during that incident was also contested in the cross-examination. Jonathan Jackson, prisoners James McClain and William Christ-
mas, and Judge Haley were shot and killed inside a van by San Quentin guards in line with the policy at that time that all escapes must be prevented, even if the killing of hostages might be involved.

Jamaica Plain, Mass.

BUREAU OF STUDY COUNSEL
We are the five living former directors and associate directors of the Bureau of Study Counsel (BSC), representing nearly a half-century (1971-2019) of the BSC’s existence since its founding in the mid 1940s. We are concerned about the characterizations of the bureau offered as justification for its closing (“Bureau of Study Counsel, R.I.P.”; harvard-mag.com/bsc-to-arc-19). We appreciate the magazine’s recognition that something important to students’ educational experience will likely be lost (“A Chill in the Air?” September-October, page 5). In our direct and extensive experiences of the BSC, we know it as an office that is deeply committed to an educational mission and model and that has continuously evolved to support the learning and developmental needs of an ever-changing student population.

The primary mission of the BSC has always been educational. BSC services have helped students sharpen their academic skills (reading, time management, problem-solving) with the broader goal of helping each student develop an independent mind that can, among other things, take thoughtful perspective on sources of knowledge and authority; reckon with complexity and uncertainty; generate and evaluate new possibilities; engage difficult endeavors with rigor and purpose; and weigh choices and consequences against deeply considered values. These capabilities are central to the College’s mission and the aims of a liberal arts and sciences education and are as relevant today as they were in the post-World War II era of the BSC’s founding.

When the College hired a new director in 2005, it expressly reconfirmed the BSC’s mission as an academic support office, not a mental-health service—a clarification that was necessary given that Harvard had moved oversight of the BSC to the University Health Services the previous year (a shift which the BSC counselors at that time cautioned against). In 2015, the staff welcomed the move back to the College as a renewed endorsement of the BSC’s original and continuing focus on learning and development.
During the last few decades, at Harvard and beyond, the term “mental health” has slipped almost unquestioned into everyday parlance and has become overly applied to human experience, including the inherently personal and emotional aspects of education and learning. The best educational/developmental support welcomes the rich complex whole of students’ experience of learning. Although such support—including that offered by the BSC—is appropriately informed by the fields of psychology and neuroscience, it is not mental-health treatment.

Listening closely to students’ experiences of learning has helped the BSC staff identify and bring early attention to emerging educational issues and trends—often long in advance of these becoming College priorities—including diversity, inclusion, and belonging in the University; plagiarism and academic integrity; academic stress and resilience; the role of technology in the college experience; and the value of a holistic approach to learning and development. The BSC has a longstanding record of hiring diverse staff from the fields of education and psychology as well as a history of drawing upon and contributing to evolving models and materials in the field of student learning and development.

For over 70 years the BSC has provided an educational setting in which students from every background have found the practical support, illuminating perspectives, and personal courage needed to engage in transformational learning. We five educators who lived and led two-thirds of the BSC’s long history are grateful to have been a part of such an innovative and inclusive learning service dedicated to promoting the intellectual and ethical development of our students.

SUSANNE RENNA, Ed.D. ’88
Former associate director and former acting director
ANN FLECK-HENDERSON ’64, Ph.D.
Former associate director
JEAN WU, Ed.D. ’84
Former associate director
ABIGAIL LIPSON, Ph.D.
Former director
SHEILA REINDL ’80, Ed.D. ’95
Former associate director

CLIMATE CHANGE

In an essay on “Climate Change” [President Lawrence S. Bacow’s regular letter to readers, September-October, page 3], it is stated that “The scientific consensus is by
Letters

now clear:” Convenient, because there is not a word in the article to support this so-called science. Nor is there any mention that carbon dioxide, a small fraction of one-half of 1 percent of the earth’s atmosphere, is essential for plant life, and so for all life on earth—including us. One shudders to think how long life could “flourish” in this academically ideal “decarbonized future.”

Of course, the “scientific consensus” on the structure of the universe was settled by Ptolemy, creation by the Bible, gravity by Newton—until someone like Galileo, or Darwin, or Einstein, with the imagination and courage to challenge consensus, follow-the-crowd thinking came along. One hopes for something better from a major university. Nullius in verba.

William J. Jones, J.D. ’60
Warren, N.J.

Editor’s note: The nearly universal scientific consensus, worldwide and among Harvard experts, is that increased man-made emissions of heat-trapping gases such as carbon dioxide and methane are accelerating the warming of the planet and climate change—as has been scientifically predicted for decades. No one disputes that plants use carbon dioxide. Decarbonization refers to reducing man-made emissions from combusting fossil fuels, burning forests, and so on—not to changing the natural chemistry of the atmosphere. The magazine’s extensive coverage of these issues is searchable online at www.harvardmagazine.com; the president’s letter is about University affairs from his perspective, not an article or a report summarizing the underlying science.

I read with admiration and sadness the Undergraduate column by Isa Flores-Jones ’19, who writes of the disempowerment she felt as a climate activist trying, in vain, to convince Harvard to divest its holdings from oil and gas companies before her graduation (“Movement Ecology,” September–October, page 35). As Undergraduate columnist from 1985 to 1987, I well remember the “Divest Now” balloon tethered to my and many classmates’ graduation mortar boards—referring not to the University’s fossil-fuel assets, but to holdings in companies doing business with then-apartheid South Africa.

Then, as now, the Overseers made student activists feel they had no agency. As Flores-Jones describes: they listened politely, acknowledged stu-

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LETTERS (continued from page 11)

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Baseball’s Rules
Jacob Sweet’s baseball profile, “All Instincts” (May-June, page 32), states that a batter cannot steal first base. But a batter may attempt to steal first on a wild pitch when there are no on-base runners.

Paul Coran
Rockville, Md.

Jacob Sweet clarifies: This is true in the independent Atlantic League as of July, but not in college baseball or MLB as of press time.

About That Vole
Although I greatly appreciated the article about me (“A New Way of Being in the World,” September-October, page 67), there’s something I would like to clarify. The article ends with a vole who is cornered on my porch by two of my cats. She knows she can’t escape, she believes the end has come, and she covers her eyes with her hands. That part’s okay, but I’ve had some criticism from readers for letting this happen, and the truth (which didn’t appear in the article) is that I didn’t let it happen. I ran toward the cats, shouting at them, they turned to look at me, the vole saw she had a moment to escape, and she dashed away to safety. That’s in the book, and I’d appreciate your publishing this letter so readers won’t think too badly of me.

Elizabeth Marshall Thomas ’54
Peterborough, N.H.

Errata
The fourth paragraph of the Vita on suffragist Adella Hunt Logan (September-October, page 54) contained inaccuracies in dating and other details involving Hunt Logan’s interactions with Susan B. Anthony, which were pointed out by Anthony biographer Lynn Sherr. Details appear at harvardmag.com/vita-logan-19. We regret the errors.

The profile of Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (“A New Way of Being in the World,” September-October, page 67) reported that she had “three dogs and three cats”—but one of those dogs is her son’s.

The report on a collection obtained by Radcliffe’s Schlesinger Library (“Revisiting Angela Davis,” September-October, page 44) indicated that Professor Elizabeth Hinton and two graduate students sorted and organized the materials for an exhibition. In fact, their selections for the exhibition were preceded by processing of the materials by Schlesinger staff archivists Jenny Gotwals, Amber Moore, and Jehan Sinclair.

As published, the letter from Robert H. Goldstein (September-October, page 6) omitted a significant word, rendering “my humorously intended comments incomprehensible,” he notes. The letter should have read: “Among certain ethnic groups, the theological question of when life begins is reputed to be answered, ‘On graduation from law school,’” with the italicized word here restored.

Kudos
Thank you and Nell Porter Brown for the “Explorations and Curiosities” series (Harvard Squared). It’s drawn our attention to all kinds of experiences we would have missed otherwise—just last week we spent a wonderful afternoon at the fascinating Public Health Museum in Tewksbury, which I wouldn’t have known about without Porter Brown’s article in the magazine.

Tara Kelly ’91
Gloucester, Mass.

I enjoyed All in a Day about Worcester (“Purgatory—and Beyond,” Harvard Squared, September-October, page 16N). But I was sorry it did not mention the great Korean restaurant Simjang. The food is outstanding, the staff welcoming; they even hosted a poetry reading where I had a chance to share some of my own dishes of poems about Korea. I hope others discover Simjang, too.

David McCann
Korea Foundation professor of Korean literature emeritus
Watertown, Mass.