

Prison/Detention Industrial Complex and CST

By Karen Ross, PhD

What is an “Industrial Complex”?

An Industrial Complex is a system in which businesses profit from the existence and perpetuation of social and political institutions

- Examples of Industrial Complexes include: the Military Industrial Complex (coined by Dwight D. Eisenhower), the Medical Industrial Complex, the Prison Industrial Complex, and the Detention Industrial Complex.

What is the “Prison Industrial Complex” and how does it work?

The term Prison Industrial Complex was first coined by scholar and activist Angela Davis to describe the ways in which the overlapping interests of government and industry use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems. (from <http://www.criticalresistance.org>)

- From <http://www.criticalresistance.org>:

“There are many ways this power is collected and maintained through the PIC, including creating mass media images that keep alive stereotypes of people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, youth, and other oppressed communities as criminal, delinquent, or deviant. This power is also maintained by earning huge profits for private companies that deal with prisons and police forces; helping earn political gains for “tough on crime” politicians; increasing the influence of prison guard and police unions; and eliminating social and political dissent by oppressed communities that make demands for self-determination and reorganization of power in the US.”

What is the “Detention Industrial Complex” and how does it work?

Similar to the Prison Industrial Complex, corporations profit off of the existence and growth of detention centers for immigrants.

- According to an article from <http://www.npr.org>, currently about 52,000 migrants are held in ICE custody. A majority of them- about 71% according to the National Immigrant Justice Center- are housed in facilities operated by private prison companies that subcontract other private firms (from food to medical care) to help run the facilities.

When private corporations rely upon the existence of governmental and social systems to earn a profit, it is in their best interest to maintain and grow the industries.

Companies that Profit from Immigrant Detention:



So What does Catholic Social Teaching Have to Say About Industrial Complexes?

Since the first Catholic Social Teaching Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum: On the Condition of Labor*, CST has consistently and firmly condemned the use of people as objects of production and advocated for practices that put **people over profit**.

CST Teachings about Unjust Profit from Past to Present:

“It is shameful and inhumane to use humans as things for gain and to put no more value on them than what they are worth in muscle and in energy [...] The oppressed, above all, ought to be liberated from the savagery of greedy [humans], who inordinately use human beings as things for gain.” Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum: On the Condition of Labor* (1891), no. 31, 59

“The function of the rulers of the state is to watch over the community and its parts; but in protecting individuals in their rights, chief consideration must be given to the weak and the poor.” Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), no. 25

“[New societal concepts] present profit as the chief spur to economic progress, free competition as the guiding norm of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right, having no limits nor concomitant social obligations [...] Such improper manipulations of economic forces can never be condemned enough; economics is supposed to be in the service of [humanity].” Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), no. 26

“It is the task of the state to provide for the defense and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environment, which cannot be safeguarded by market forces.” Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), no. 40

“This happens today: If the investments in the banks fall slightly...a tragedy...what can be done? But, if people die of hunger, if they have nothing to eat, if they have poor health, it does not matter! This is our crisis today!” Pope Francis, *Address at the Vigil of Pentecost* (May 18, 2014)

When we think about these large systems of oppression, it is not just about economic injustice, it's about race, gender, national origin and many other systems of power. Therefore, it is necessary for advocates of justice to look at the issue ***intersectionally***. **Intersectionality**, first coined by sociologist Kimberly Crenshaw, is the belief that oppressions are interlinked and cannot be solved alone.

As black feminist Audre Lorde stated, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

Cage of Oppression reflection from feminist philosopher Marilyn Frye:

"If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere...It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment."

~Marilyn Frye, 1983

Reflection Questions:

What are some ways that we can respond to these Industrial Complexes as individuals? As a community? As a Church?

How can we better view these systems as they work intersectionally?