

California is closing two prisons in 2021, and two more are set to close in 2022. With over 30 prisons and more prisoners than any other state — more than most other countries! — shutting down a few of these meat-lockers must be a good thing, right? Well, that has to depend on why they are being closed, and in this case I believe we need to hold our applause. As a person who condemns all prisons and desires the complete abolition of punishment and imprisonment, I hate to say it, but no, I can't be on board with these closures. For two main reasons, I think we should be very skeptical.

Reason #1 — Closing these two, and eventually more, prisons is not the "step in the right direction" that many anti-prison advocates assume it is. If anything, it may be more of a misdirection, a play that ultimately ~~re~~-legitimizes and re-invigorates the punishment system of the world's 6th largest economy (California), which has been under fire and taking hits for over ten years now. The recent history helps put all this into context. It's no secret that California's sprawling punishment machine has been a bloated embarrassment — little more than a massive slop trough where pensioned pigs gorge themselves on human bodies and the countless millions of dollars those bodies extract from the state budget. This porcine bacchanalia persisted, until recently, through the manipulated largesse of socially engineered crime panics, the whole scheme being so psychologically and economically entrenched over a century that even the slightest erosion ~~could~~ ^{ultimately} took both a historic financial catastrophe (the Great Recession) AND a court-acknowledged humanitarian crisis (the grossly inadequate mental and physical healthcare for roughly 140,000 people crushed into cages designed for maybe 60,000 bodies), both finally commanding action around 2010. Simply put, the horror show had become unsustainable, ~~both~~ ^{in terms} of both money and morality, and so it had to shrink. So it shrank, from an ignominious all time high of about 140,000 to the "mere" 99,000 hostages the state holds today. Combine this gradual and mostly court-mandated trickle of releases to the growing anti-cop sensibilities from 2015 to 2020, and for the first time in state history we see the political will to shut down a handful of human warehouses. Seems great, but just look a little closer and see what closing a couple of prisons really accomplishes. Above all, it saves the state a ton of money while letting its leaders soak up the glory of appearing "woke" in the country's most progressive state. Bonus points for the power structure!

The fact is, only a micro-minority of Californians actually support eliminating prison, and these moves aren't being made for us. In the least cynical interpretation (though perhaps not the most plausible one), prison

closures are done for reformers who hope for a "better" prison system, not no prisons. Ha, they may as well advocate for better cancer, rather than none at all. Nothing about this closing of a few expensive, dilapidated old prisons offers hope for abolitionist goals. Rather, the system has simply ejected (or relocated) about 29% of its victims, and ~~closed~~ ^{now it moves} to close some prisons to underline its "success". Of course, almost all the releases are of "non-violent" prisoners; a basically symbolic reform that in reality just makes it much, much harder to get anyone out who has used violence or who is especially stigmatized and thus politically unpalatable. Far from abolition, our newly slimmed, trimmed, and "humane" system is strengthened as more people see it as the perfect place to keep these "dangerous ~~prisoners~~ ^{criminals}", and this alone is a great reason for abolitionists to NOT celebrate these closings.

But wait; there's more.

Reason #2 — As a prisoner in California myself, I know that closed prisons mean the re-crowding of ~~prisoners~~ ^{people} still stuck in the open ones. Let the sardine-packing begin... again. But this re-crowding has a much more nefarious consequence than just prisoner discomfort. It's easy to see how once a string of closures packs the remaining prisons full again, the argument almost makes itself that we need some shiny new dungeons, more economical, efficient, "safer" dungeons, to accommodate the "crime uptick"*, and (in a masterful stroke of cynical manipulation) to "ensure adequate conditions and healthcare" for a newly re-overcrowded population. Plus, of course, there's the perennial selling point of boosted economies and "good jobs" from the expansion of the prison-industrial complex. Everyone's a winner! (Except, you know, the losers.)

And thus, the carceral state of California grows more firmly entrenched than ever.

I have a suggestion... if you are abolition-minded, don't let yourself be moved by the closing of old, expensive prisons that can no longer be justified after prisoners have already been released for entirely other reasons. Instead, never forget that the goal is to create the pressure to close still full prisons, with the consequence that prisoners must then be released.

Anything else is just political theater. Now... please share your take on this with me, ok?

(* This idea of an "uptick" in crime drives me absolutely bonkers. I'll put together a separate blog on that one soon. When I do, it will represent an "uptick" in my posting. "