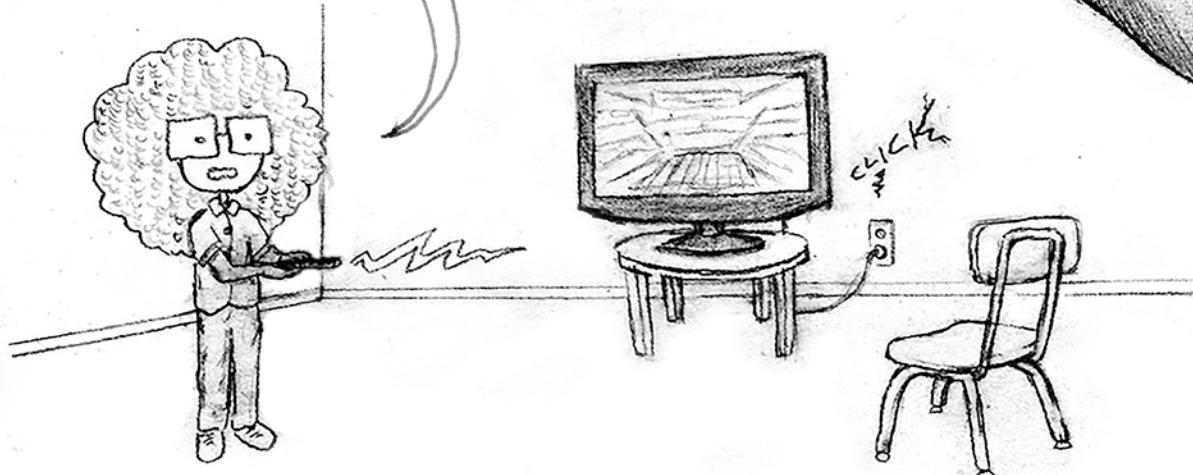


# Racial Capitalism and Prison Abolition

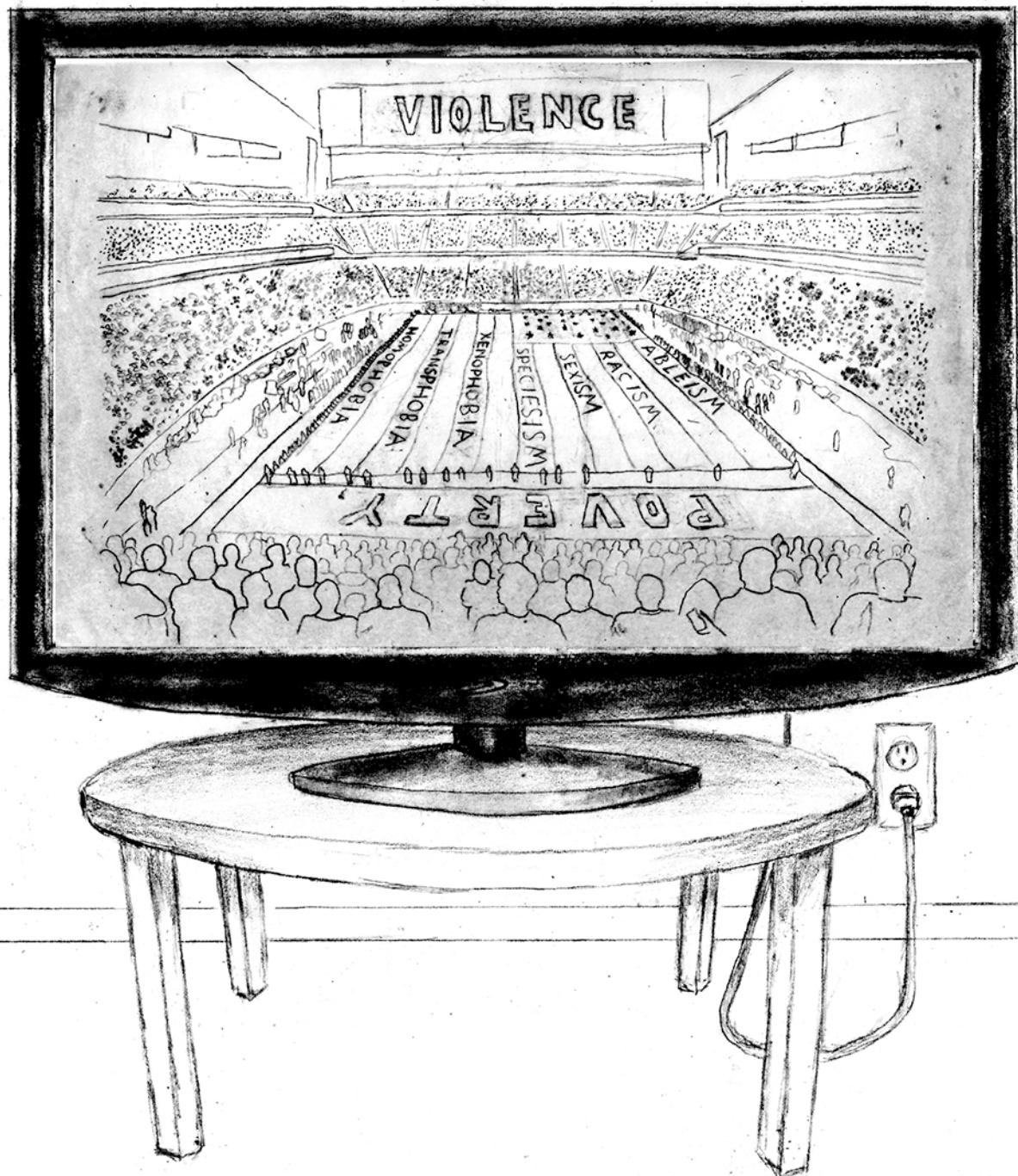
Many of us are taught about social injustices like racism and sexism as discriminatory words and actions that some people inflict on other people.

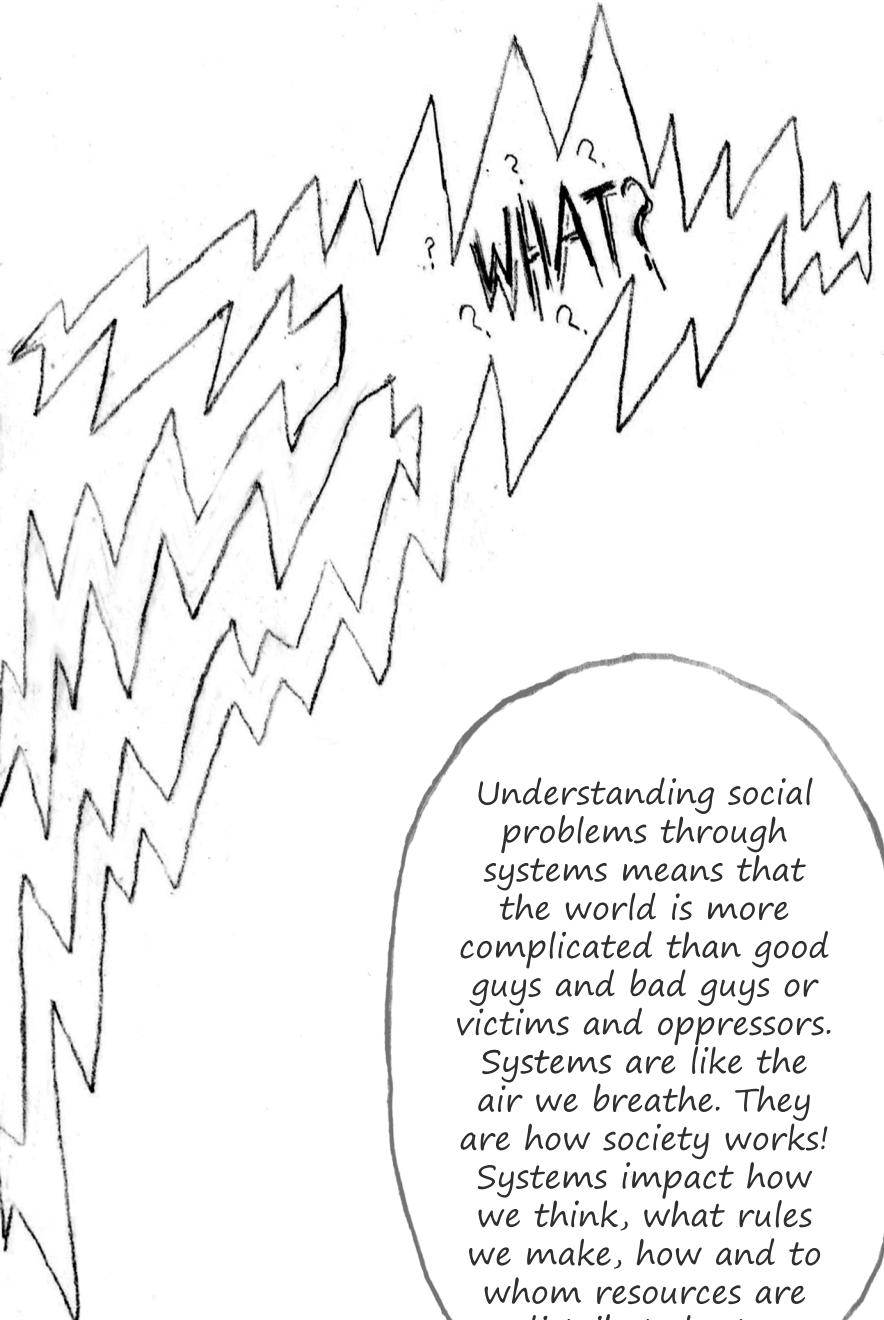


But social injustice is so much bigger than individual people doing or saying mean and harmful things. Social injustices are woven into the fabric of society through systems which produce inequality.



THIS IS THE FABRIC OF SOCIETY





Understanding social problems through systems means that the world is more complicated than good guys and bad guys or victims and oppressors. Systems are like the air we breathe. They are how society works! Systems impact how we think, what rules we make, how and to whom resources are distributed, etc.

In order to understand how mean and discriminatory thoughts, ideas and actions are produced, we must first understand how social inequality is produced *\*materially\** through systems.

Our ideas are heavily influenced by the material world. For example, if a group of people is systemically kept poor, some people may come to see poverty as a quality of that group rather than as the result of an unfair system.



Today, most material inequality is produced by a political and economic system called "capitalism". Capitalism puts most of the world's wealth and resources into the hands of a very small group of people - less than 1% of the human race!



In order to get rich in a capitalist system, you need to sell stuff, or "commodities."

All commodities are made of two main ingredients:

1) Raw Materials and 2) Labor

Raw materials + Labor = Commodity

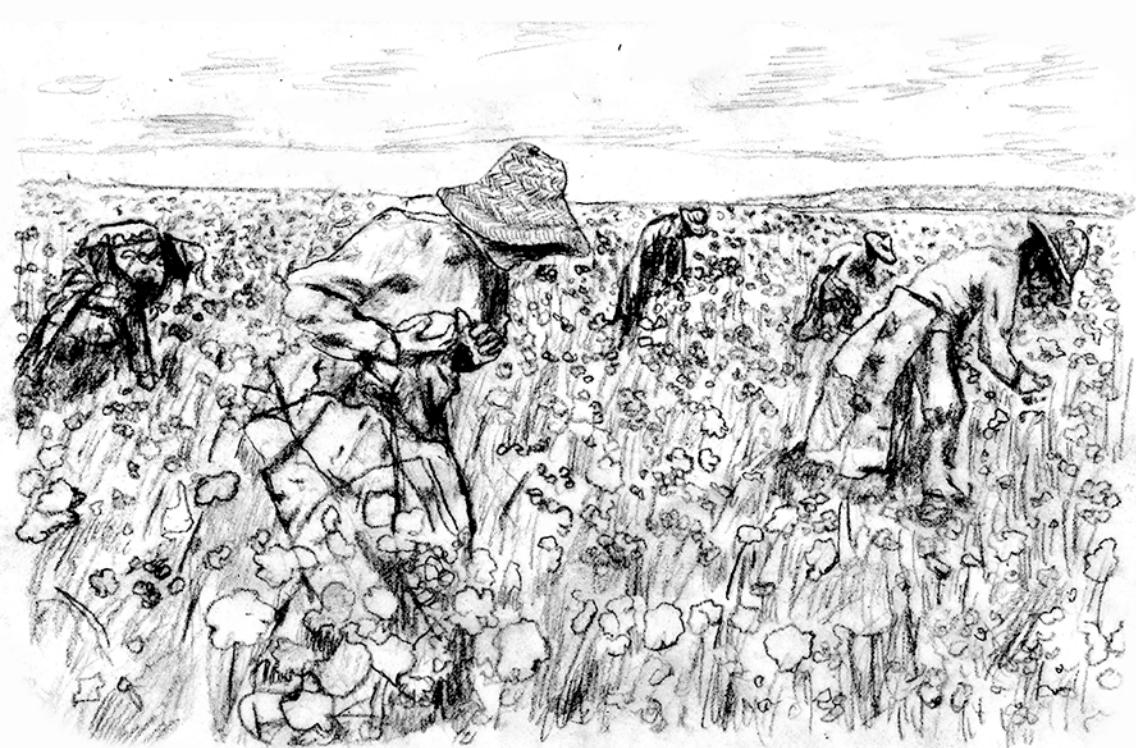
My labor will turn the cotton into a shirt.

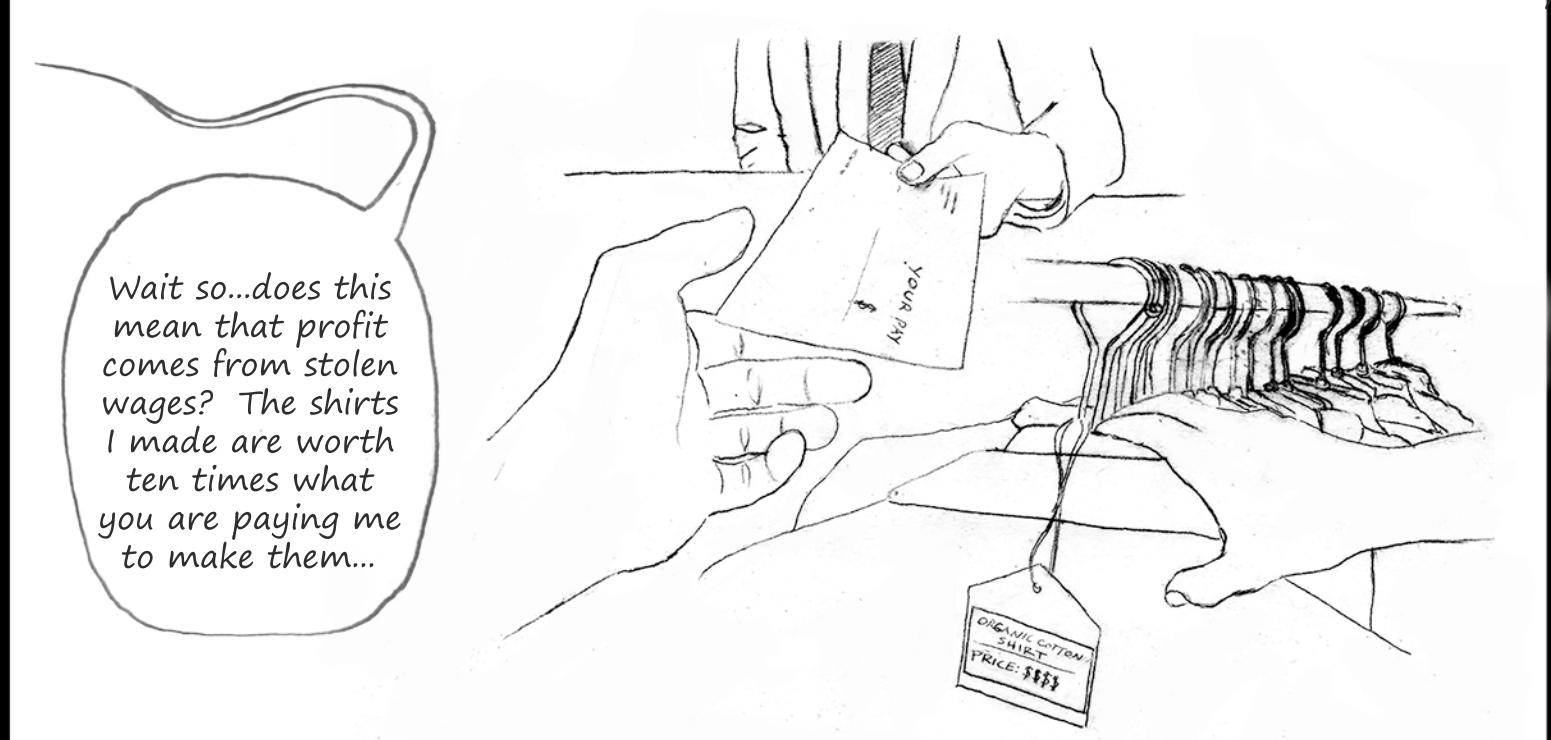
Watch closely! This is where the injustice begins!!

Raw materials come from the environment...



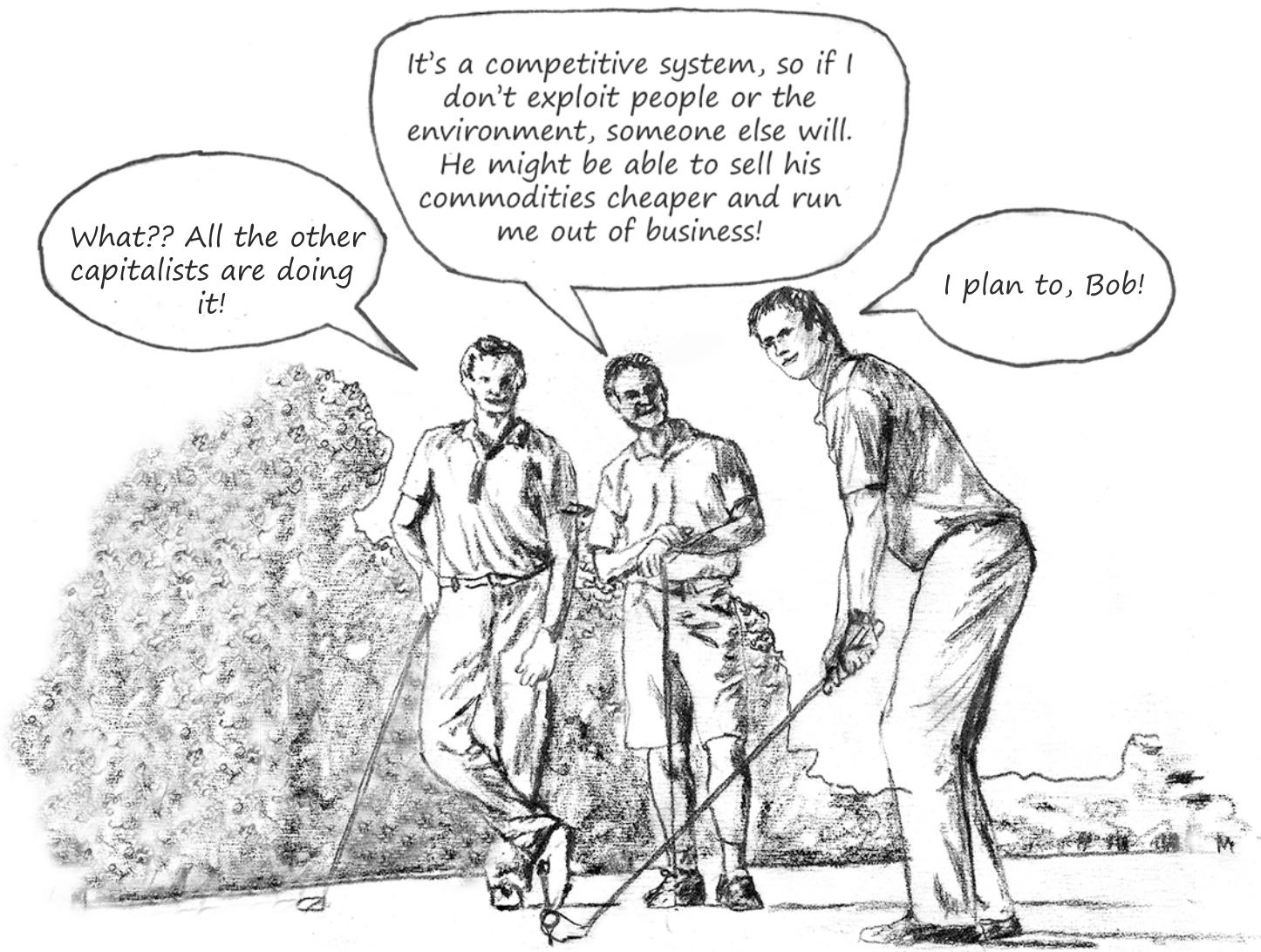
And labor comes from people...





Wait so...does this mean that profit comes from stolen wages? The shirts I made are worth ten times what you are paying me to make them...

In order for capitalists to make the most money, they need to exploit people and the environment as much as possible, and as cheaply as possible.



The laws of the state back up the capitalist in exploiting the land and people. When we talk about the state, we are not just referring to places like "Colorado" or "New York". A "state" is a political institution that holds a "monopoly on violence." That means they get to decide what kind of violence is okay and what kind of "violence" is not okay.

"ILLEGAL"



"ILLEGAL",

A Honduran family crosses the U.S.-Mexico border in 2018. Every year, many thousands of Central Americans flee ongoing economic and social devastation driven by centuries of U.S. imperialism.

"LEGAL"

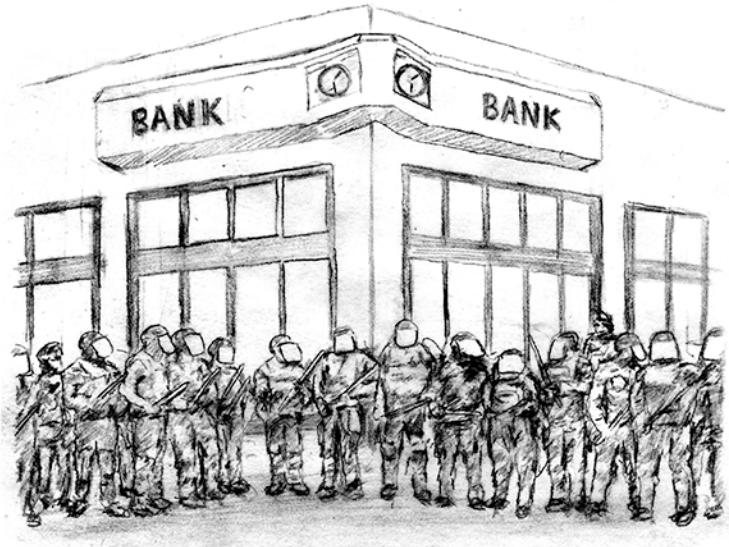


"LEGAL",

In 2008, U.S. soldiers raid a family's home during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Such assaults are common U.S. imperialist practice.

The state's "monopoly on violence" is enforced by the institutions of the police and the military. These institutions answer to the state, and are not accountable to the communities that they patrol.

Capitalism needs the state to make it possible to "own" land, people and things as "private property", and enforce the conditions of inequality.

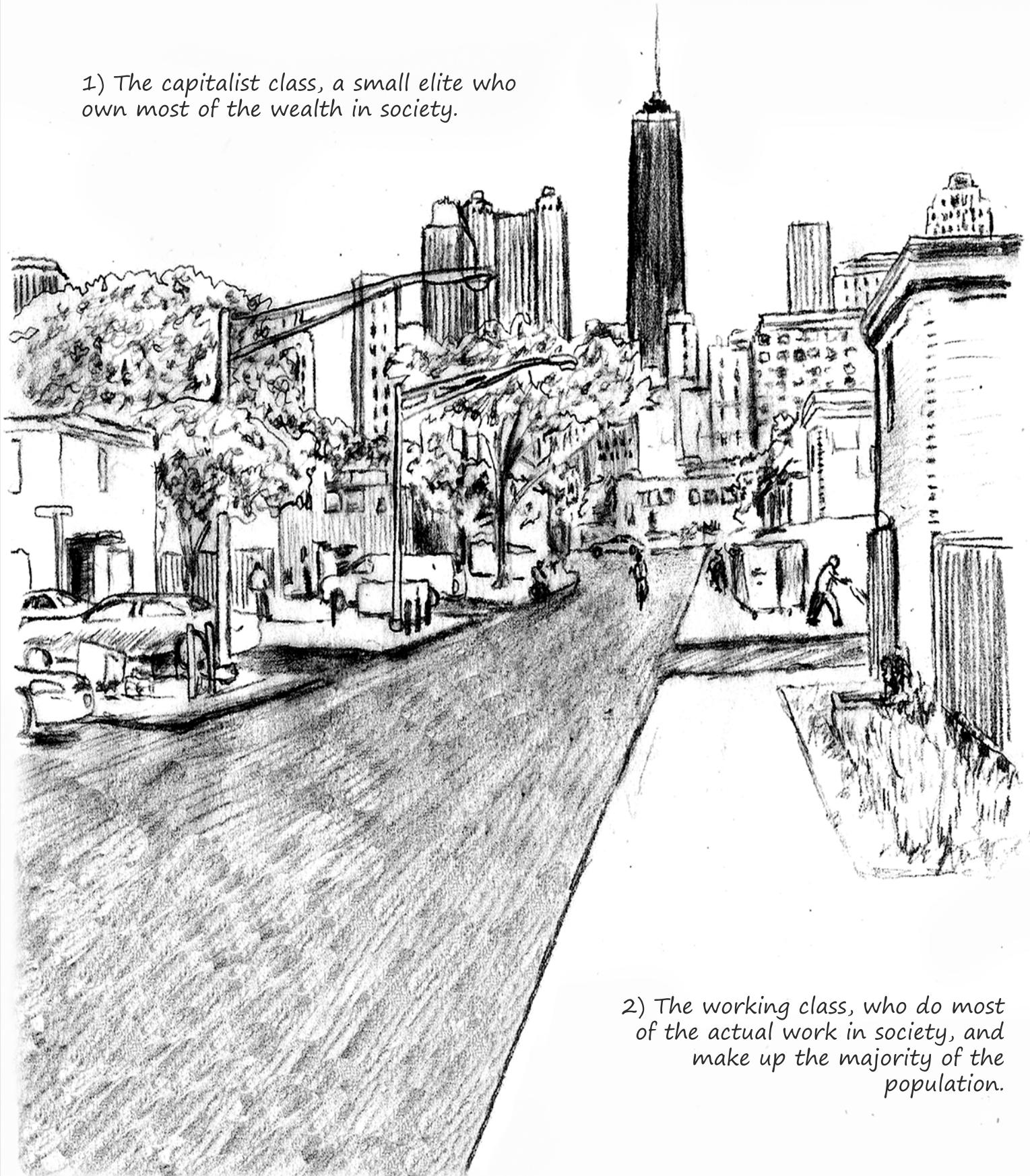


Slave patrols existed in the U.S. from 1704-1877 (173 years). There is a direct lineage between these slave patrol institutions and the police.<sup>[1]</sup>



The exploitation of people for cheap labor divides society into two main classes:

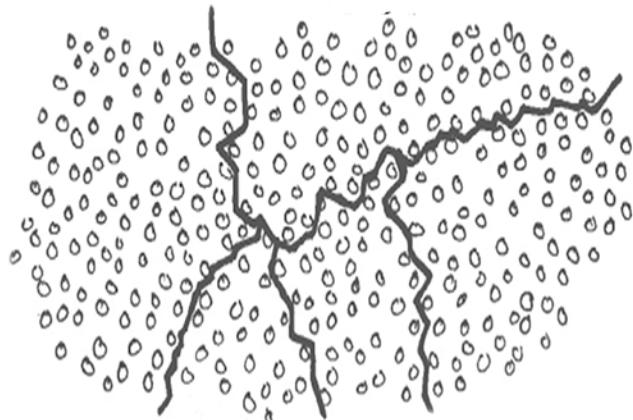
1) The capitalist class, a small elite who own most of the wealth in society.



2) The working class, who do most of the actual work in society, and make up the majority of the population.

A system which divides the world between a handful of billionaires and Literally Everyone Else is inherently unjust. But inequalities exist within the working class as well. Within the working class, there are different races, genders, classes, nationalities, etc. Social categories like "race" and "gender" are crucial to how capitalism works.

### The Working Class



While many of these unequal social categories existed before capitalism, it is capitalism which makes it so hard to get rid of them today. That's because unequal social categories are profitable for capitalism, and therefore reproduced by capitalism.



This zine will review some of the history of the creation of race, as well as 4 key ways that race is used as a tool within capitalism:

1)  
To divide workers.

2)  
To structure labor.

3)  
To shift blame.

4)  
To manage and hide unemployment.



We will expose capitalism as a fundamentally race-based system from the start (some people call this racial capitalism). Lastly, we will explore the framework of prison abolition: a world beyond prisons.



Cedric Robinson



Robin D.G. Kelley

Black Marxist scholars like Cedric Robinson and Robin D.G. Kelley argue that capitalism developed as an inherently racialized system, which uses differences between people (like skin color, for example) to justify exploiting some people over others.<sup>[2]</sup>



But race doesn't always have to be about skin color. At the start of the transatlantic slave trade, for example, most Europeans considered Irish people and Slavic people to be different and inferior races.



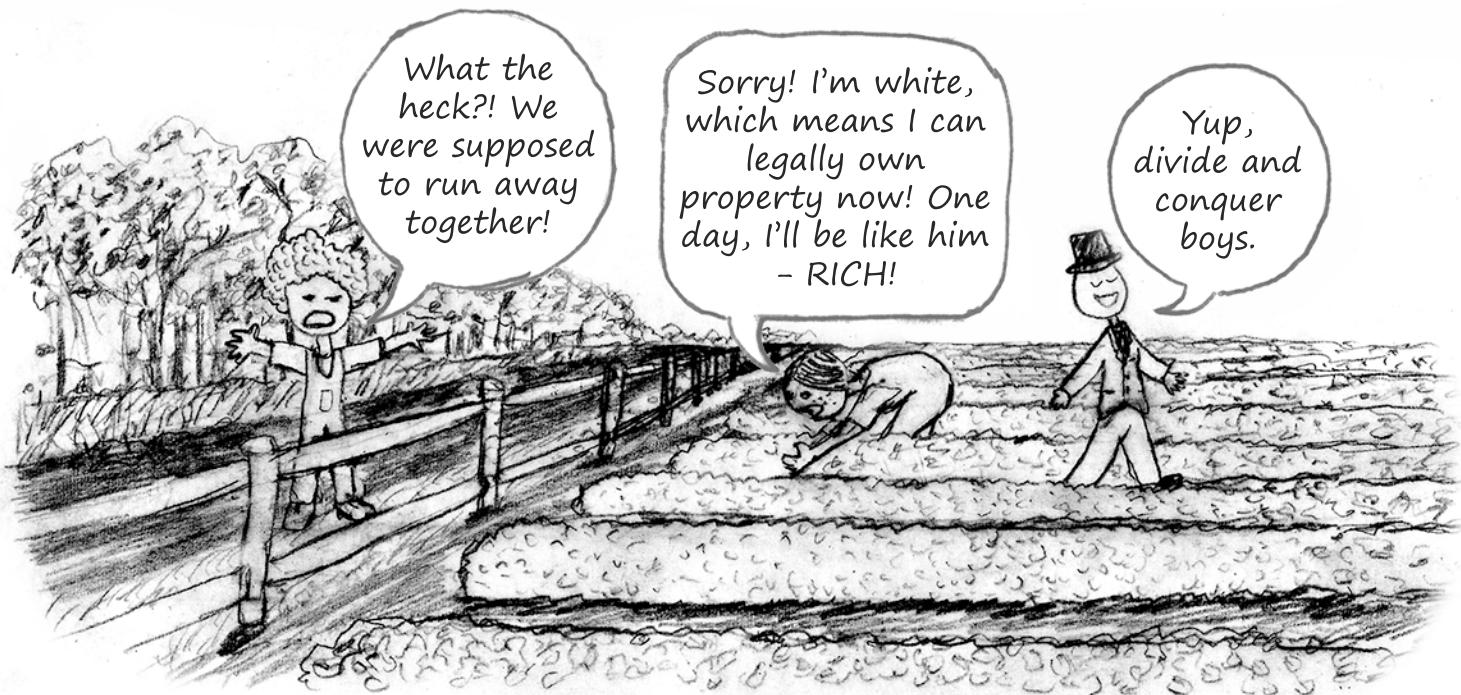
European people who were racialized and discriminated against (like Irish, Jewish, and Slavic people) originally arrived in the Americas as indentured servants, working in horrid conditions with hardly any pay or rights. Many of the first Africans came as indentured servants too, though others were stolen and enslaved.



Problems began when these exploited laborers banded together to resist or escape their masters. For example, indentured Europeans and enslaved Africans would run away together, or join into Indigenous communities.



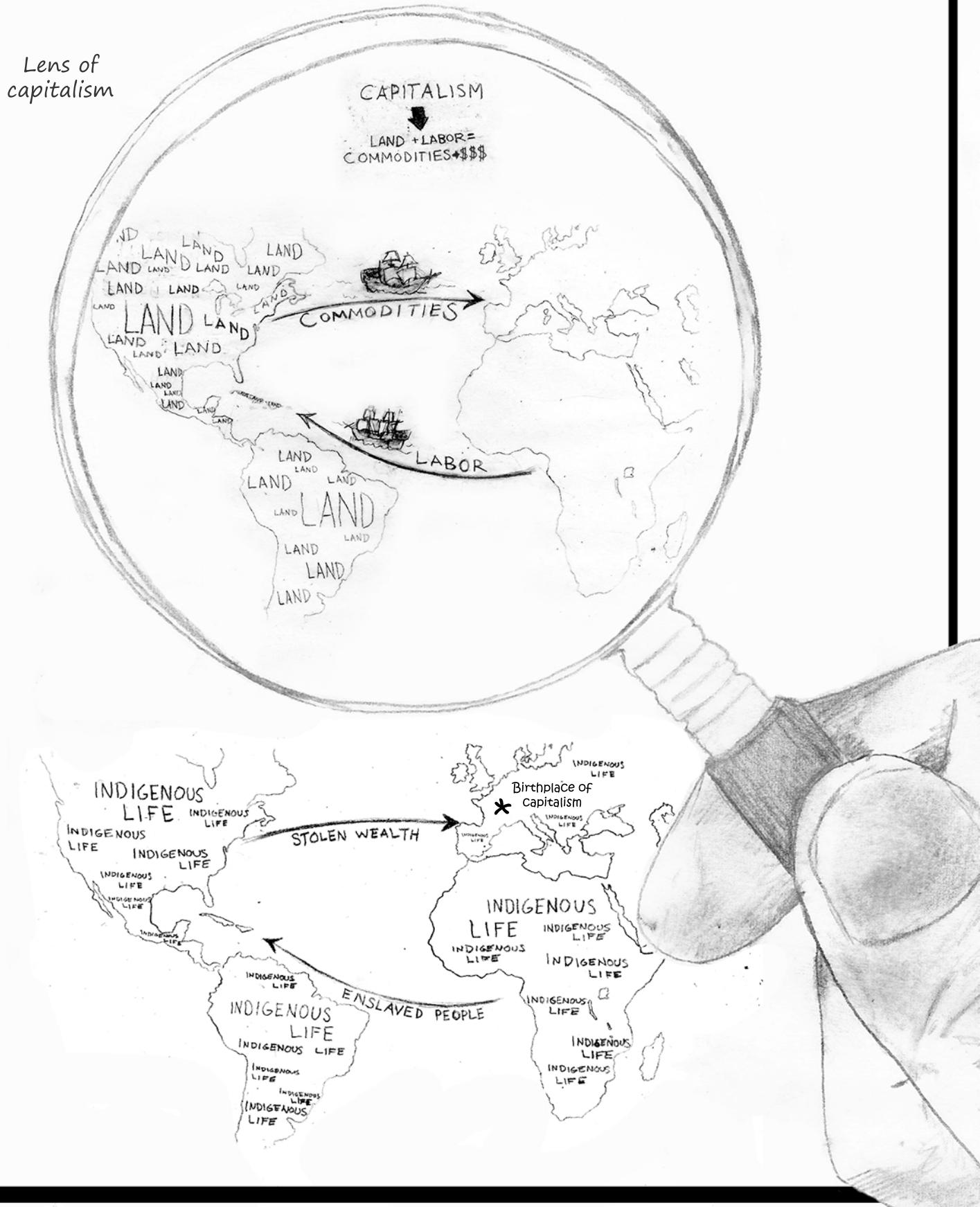
To solve the problem, European landowning elites gave the people who looked more like them, legal advantages over African and Indigenous people, such as the right to own land. They invented the racial categories "white" and "Black" as a divide and conquer strategy to control a resistant, exploited labor force.



The invention of whiteness allowed people who were now labeled as "white" to identify more with the capitalist landowning elite, rather than with other exploited peoples and non-white members of the working class.



At the same time, the invented category of Blackness was used to justify the massive and violent transatlantic slave trade, which provided the labor needed to build the foundation of a powerful capitalist state. These oppressive structures continue today, creating profound material and psychological impacts on Africans and African descendants, particularly in the Americas, Europe, and Western Africa.



Similar systems of domination are not unique to the Americas, and they can't always be boiled down to light-skinned versus dark-skinned races, though they almost always serve to structure the relationships of labor. While the scale of the transatlantic slave trade is unmatched, civilizations including Egyptians, Greeks, the Chinese, Vikings, and West African Kingdoms also enslaved people from other civilizations, and believed those people to be naturally inferior. Racial systems continue throughout the world today.

Trevor Noah told this story about growing up in South Africa under apartheid:



Apartheid, for all its power, had fatal flaws baked in, starting with the fact that it never made any sense. Racism is not logical. Consider this: Chinese people were classified as black in South Africa. I don't mean they were running around acting black. They were still Chinese. But, unlike Indians, there weren't enough Chinese people to warrant devising a whole separate classification. Apartheid, despite its intricacies and precision, didn't know what to do with them, so the government said, "Eh, we'll just call 'em black. It's simpler that way."

Interestingly, at the same time, Japanese people were labeled as white. The reason for this was that the South African government wanted to establish good relations with the Japanese in order to import their fancy cars and electronics. So Japanese people were given honorary "white status" while Chinese people stayed black. I always like to imagine being a South African policeman who likely couldn't tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese but whose job was to make sure that people of the wrong color weren't doing the wrong thing. If he saw an Asian person sitting on a whites-only bench, what would he say?

"Hey, get off that bench, you Chinaman!"

"Excuse me. I'm Japanese."

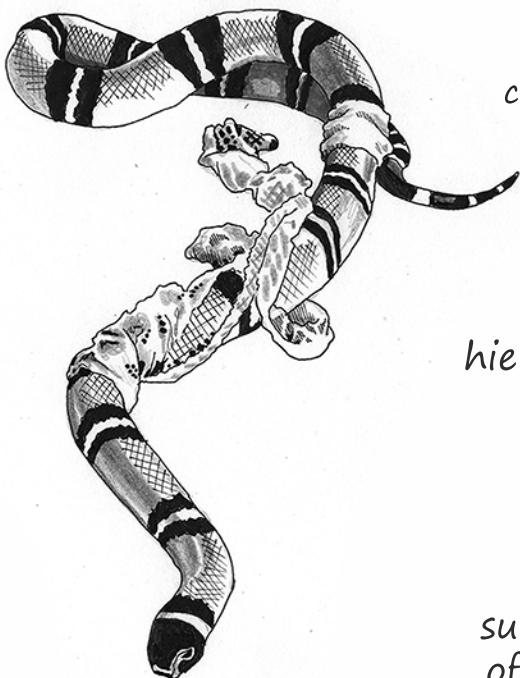
"Oh, I apologize, sir. I didn't mean to be racist. Have a lovely afternoon."<sup>[3]</sup>

As another example, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to Kerala India in 1959 to connect with people's movements abroad. King shared that when he was introduced at a school, the Principle said, "I would like to present to you a fellow untouchable\* from the United States of America."

And for the moment, I was peeved, I was shocked, that I would be introduced as an untouchable. But pretty soon, my mind ran back across to America, and I started thinking about the fact that there were so many places that I couldn't go because of the color of my skin [...] And I had to say to myself, I am an untouchable, and every Negro in the United States is an untouchable.



Reverend  
Martin Luther King Jr.

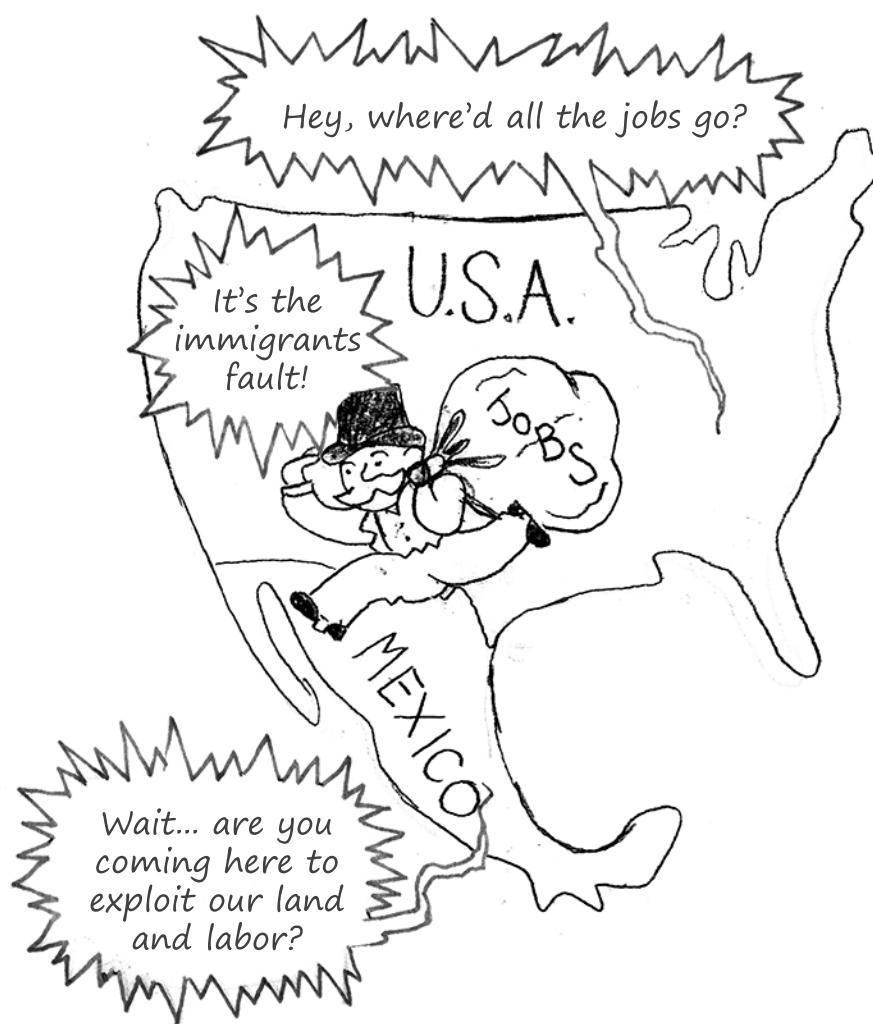
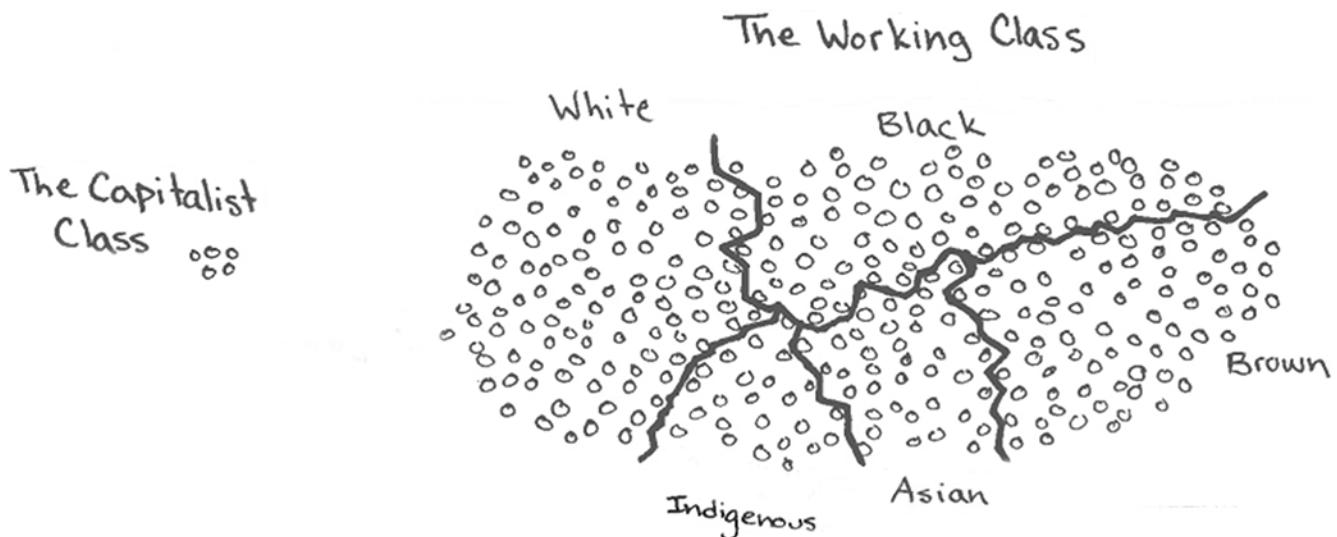


\* "Untouchable" refers to the lowest of the fixed social classes in the caste system of India. Caste is determined by birth, and cannot be changed.

Journalist Isabel Wilkerson argues that racial hierarchies in the United States should be thought of as a caste system similar to that in India. She describes,

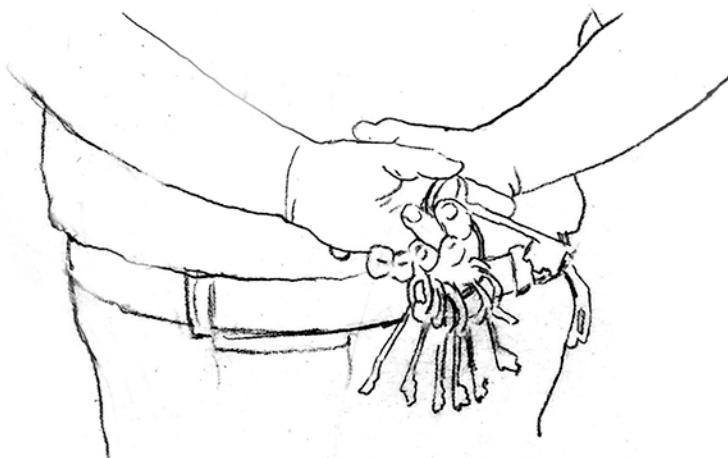
"Caste is the bones, race is the skin. ... Caste is fixed and rigid. Race is fluid and superficial, subject to periodic redefinition to meet the needs of the dominant caste in what is now the United States."<sup>[4]</sup>

Racism not only justifies different levels of capitalist exploitation, but it also serves to divide the working class, making it harder for people to unite and overthrow the capitalist class.

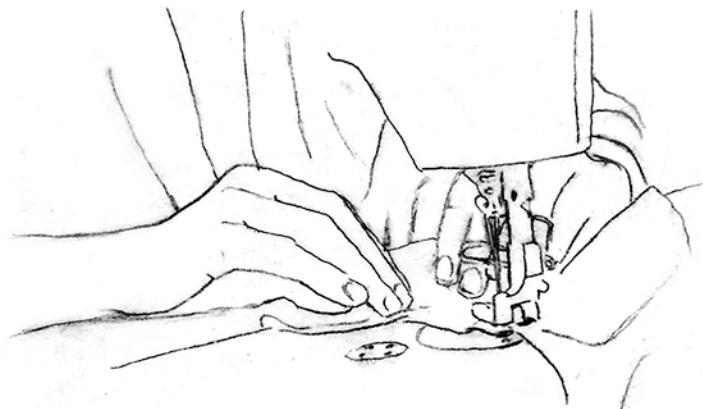


Race is also used as a tool to shift blame away from the capitalist system and towards individuals. For example, when people in the U.S. become unemployed due to corporations moving overseas (to exploit cheaper laborers), they are told "immigrants are stealing their jobs."

Additionally, race is used as a way to structure labor, separating people into different types of labor and levels of exploitation. Race serves as a way to make these structures seem “natural,” as if people of certain races were just born to do certain jobs! Often the most difficult, exhausting, and dangerous jobs are underpaid and racialized (as well as gendered).



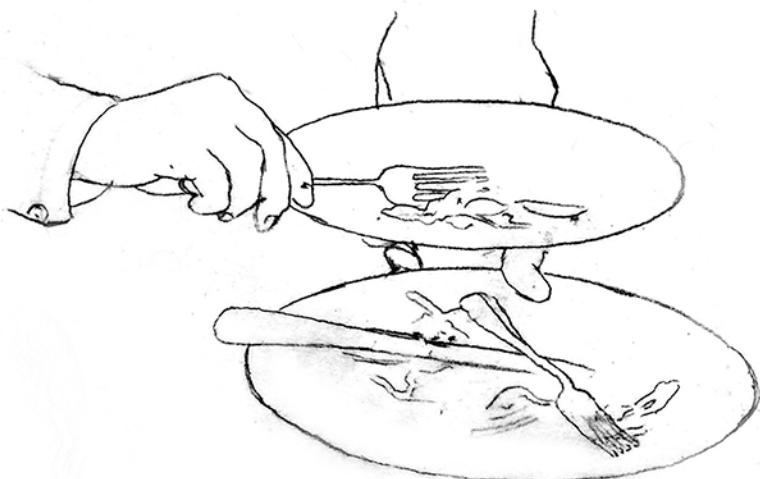
Black people working security



Chinese and Southeast Asian women being garment workers

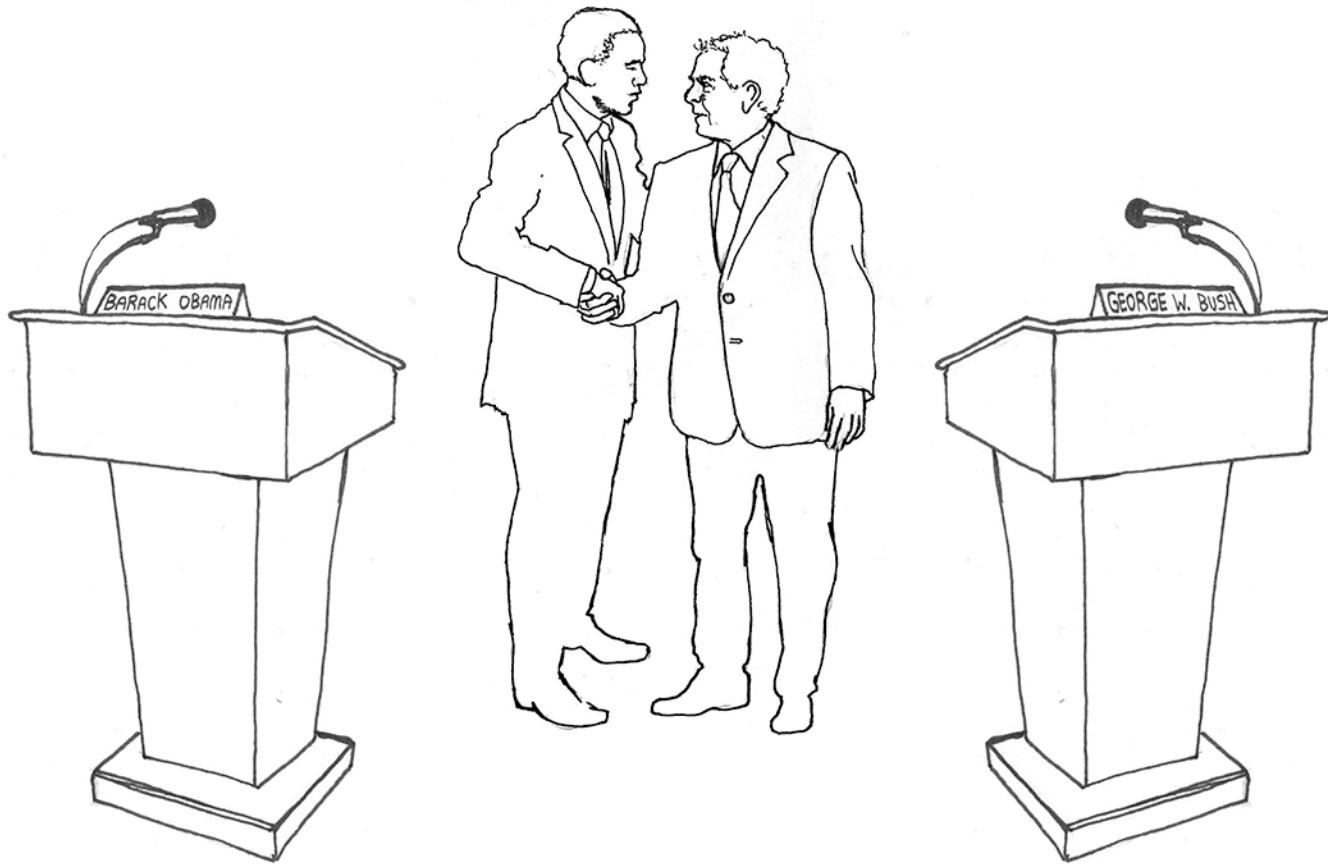


Latinx and Black women house cleaning and doing childcare



Latinx people working in slaughterhouses, agricultural fields, or behind the scenes in restaurants

A few people are an exception to the rule. Their stories are often used to hide the fact that there is a racially structured society.



"See, racism is over, anyone can be President now!"



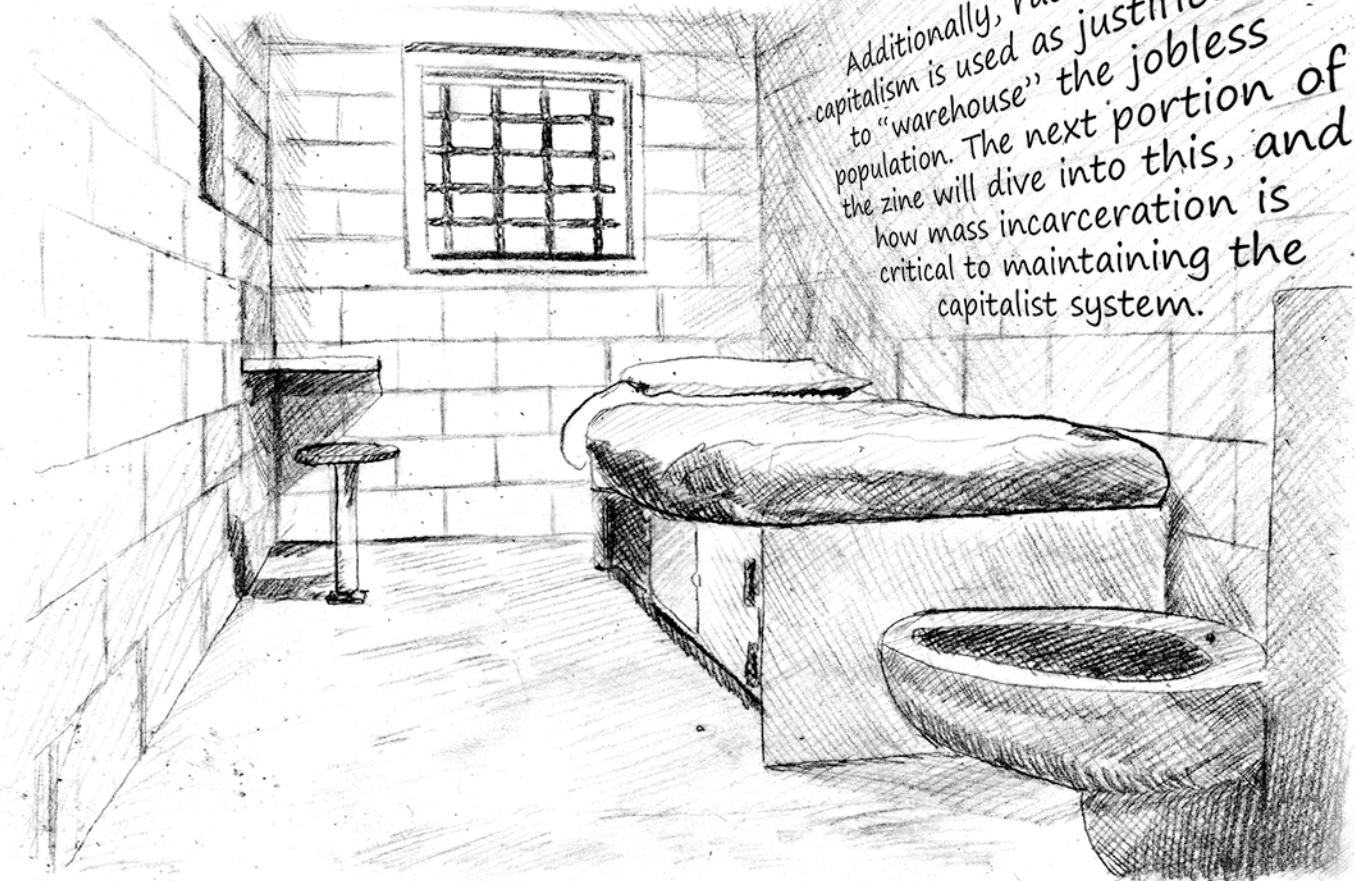
The racial structuring of labor serves the purpose of fueling race-based divisions within the working class.



My friend Nachis migrated from Honduras and was imprisoned in a U.S. detention center for 7 months. Nachis said that the majority of the security guards at the center were Black, employed to monitor the migrant prisoners. Meanwhile, Nachis talked about the strong anti-Black stereotypes that many in their Latinx community held.



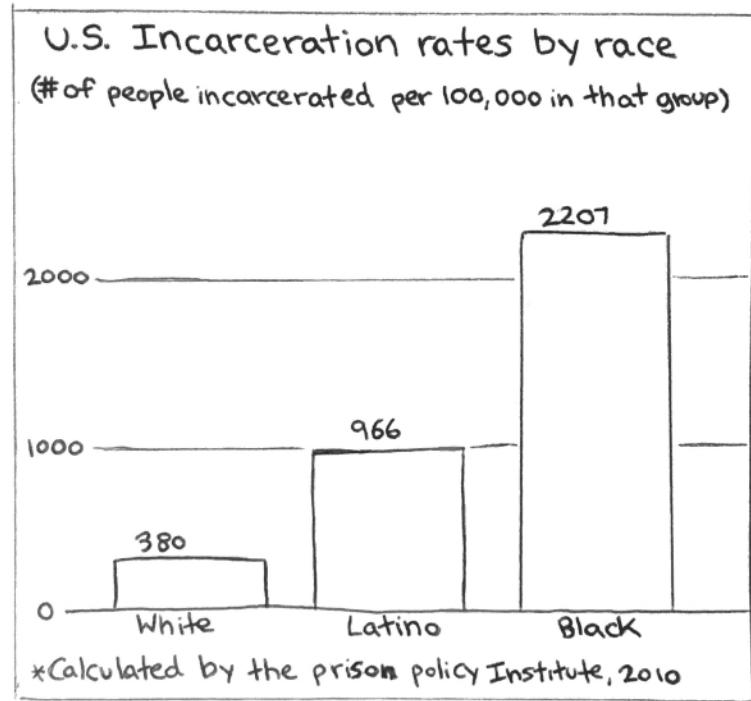
This is one example of how the racialized structure of labor can cause race-based divisions between people who are exploited under capitalism.



Additionally, race under capitalism is used as justification to "warehouse" the jobless population. The next portion of the zine will dive into this, and how mass incarceration is critical to maintaining the capitalist system.

# MASS INCARCERATION

“Mass incarceration” refers to the imprisonment of an extreme amount of people. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Even though the US accounts for just 5% of the planet’s population, it confines almost 25% of the world’s prisoners.<sup>[5]</sup> The vast majority of these prisoners are low-income and people of color.

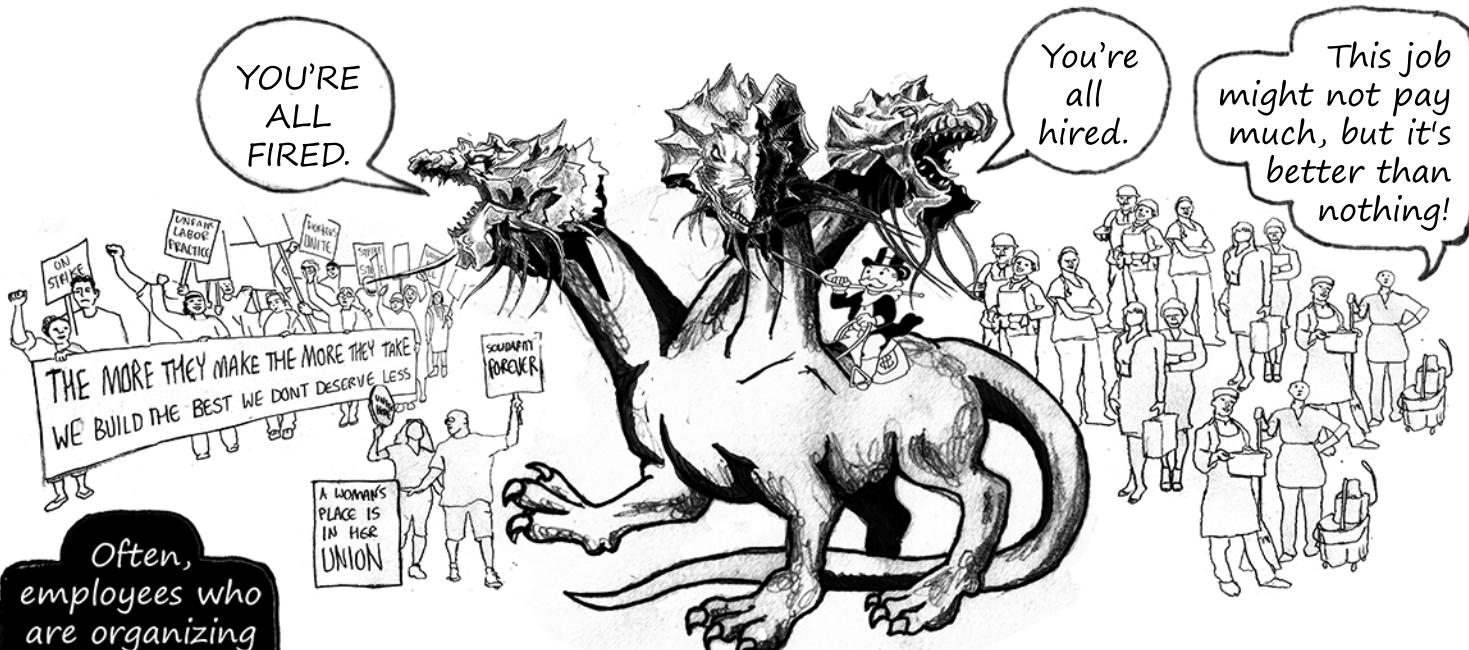


In order to understand the driving forces behind mass incarceration, we must first understand something called “the reserve army of labor.” The reserve army of labor is another way of saying “unemployed people.” For the capitalist system to function, there must be a pool of people who can work and are willing to work—but do not have a job.



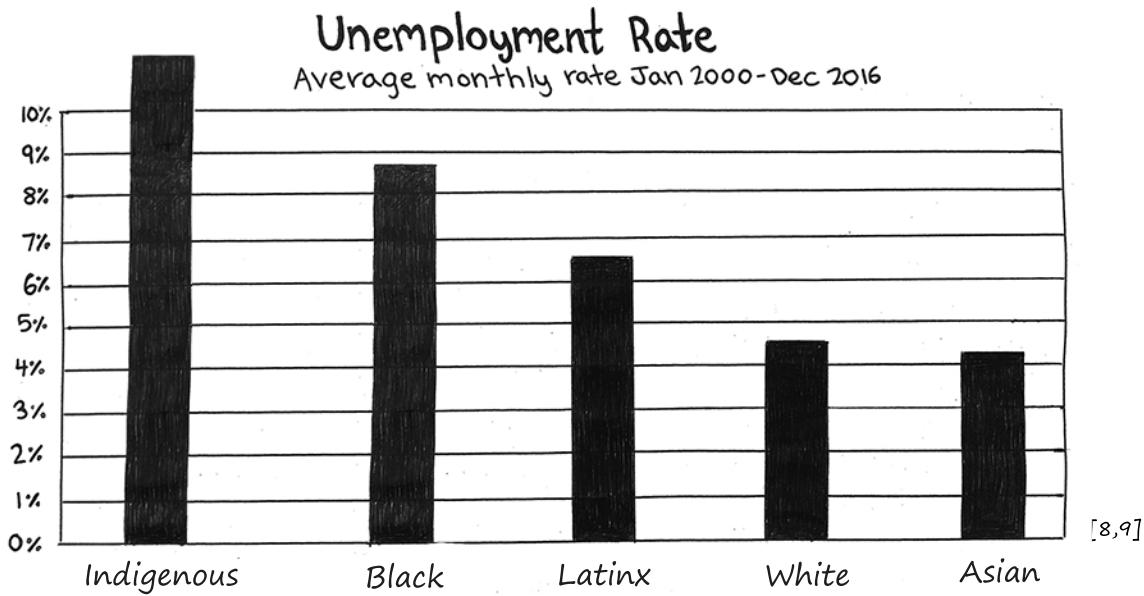
Unemployment is necessary for capitalism because it ensures that all of the employed workers are easily replaceable.

If workers are replaceable, then they will be scared to demand higher wages, safer conditions, and better benefits, because their boss could fire them and hire one of the unemployed people to take their place.



If there weren't any extra unemployed workers, then bosses couldn't fire anyone because there would be no one to replace them. Workers could demand better conditions without fear, and capitalists couldn't demand such cheap labor.

But if we look closer, we'll see that in the capitalist system, the reserve army of labor is based on race. In the US, for example, Latinx people are unemployed more than white people, and the difference is even greater for Black and Indigenous people.

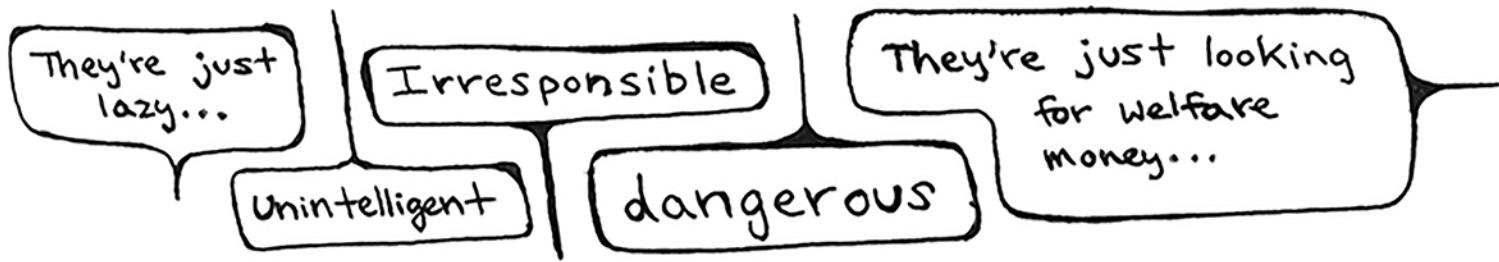


These patterns are reproduced through racialized housing and education systems which funnel youth of color from poor neighborhoods to underfunded schools to low paid jobs or **UNEMPLOYMENT**.



Often the infrastructure and quality of life can be completely different for people living within 10 miles of each other. You can see this if you walk from the Upper East Side of Manhattan to East Harlem, or from Berkeley to Richmond California, or Chicago's North Side to the South Side.

As mentioned earlier, the racialized nature of the system makes it seem like unemployment is a natural trait of the groups of people who are unemployed rather than a natural part of the capitalist system.

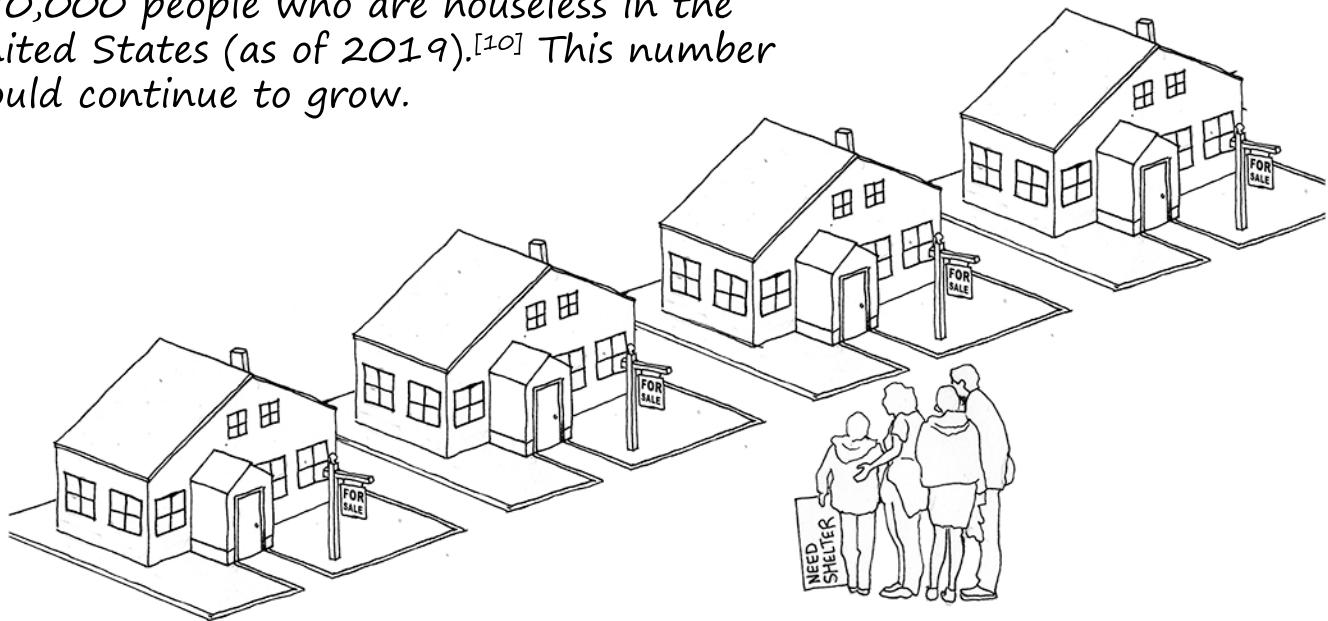


This structure serves to make people of color, particularly black and Indigenous people, more disposable in the eyes of the capitalist system and the state - all while making the capitalist system look like it's fair for everyone.

But the system can run into some problems... What happens if there are too many unemployed people, (the reserve army of labor is too large)? The state may have to start providing more social services than they have money set aside for.



However, if the government simply denies social services to unemployed people, it will be even more obvious that the capitalist system values profit over life. There are already about 570,000 people who are houseless in the United States (as of 2019).<sup>[10]</sup> This number would continue to grow.



The state needs to make it seem like capitalism is working for the people, but it can't do that if there are huge numbers of poor folks exposing the injustices of the system.



If enough people are struggling to survive under capitalism because they are unable to find work, they will question the fairness of capitalism and could rise up to overthrow it. For this reason the Black Panthers believed that it would be unemployed people who would lead a revolution to overthrow capitalism.



Huey P. Newton

\* "Lumpen" is short for lumpenproletariat, which is a word for unemployed people.

The students focus their rebellions on the campuses, And the Working Class focuses its rebellions on the factories and picket lines. But the Lumpen\* finds itself in the peculiar position of being unable to find a job and therefore is unable to attend the Universities. The Lumpen has no choice but to manifest its rebellion in the University of the streets. [11]

To maintain order, the state criminalizes poverty.

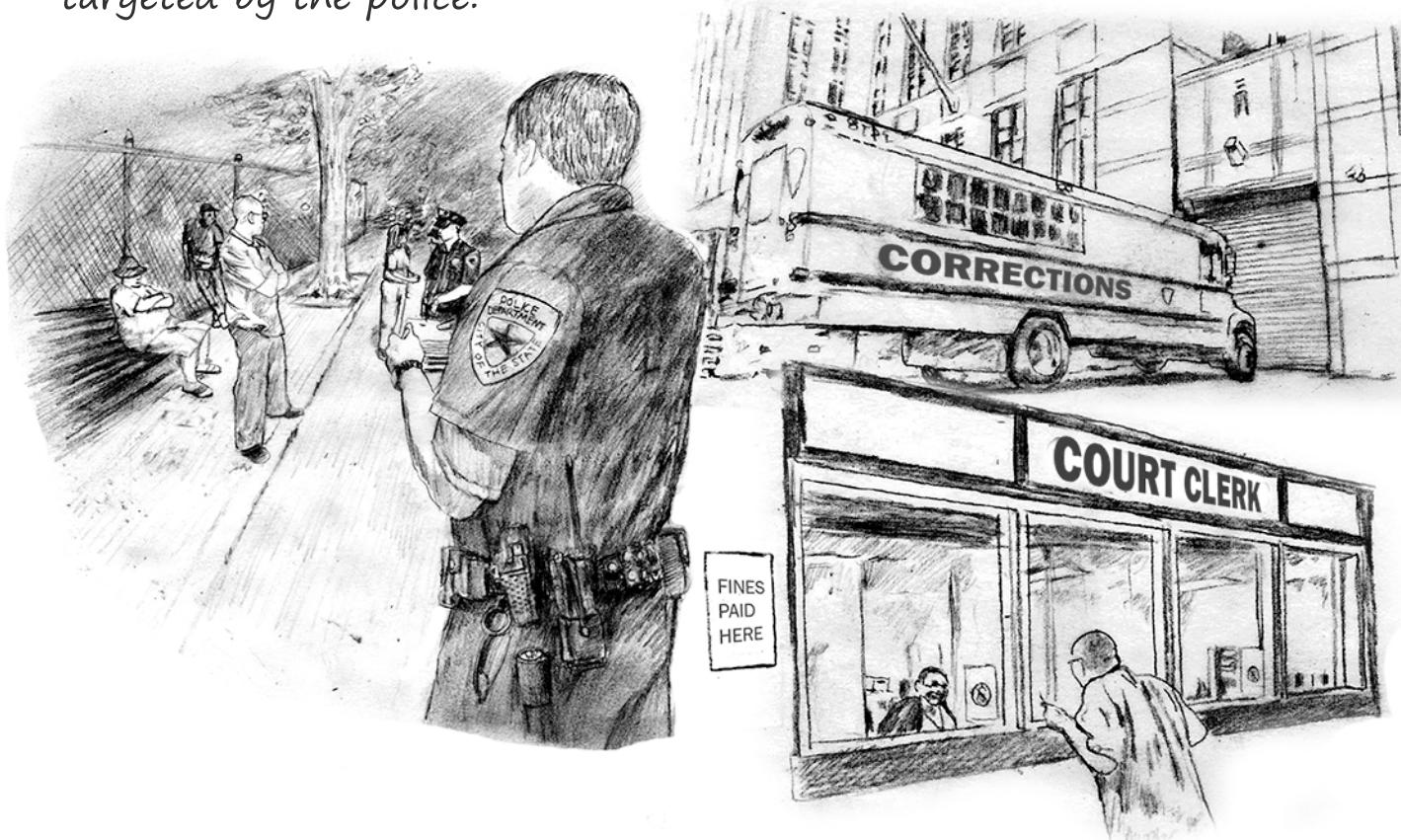
NO LOITERING      NO PEEING IN PUBLIC      NO FARE EVASION  
NO SLEEPING IN THE PARK      NO SHOPLIFTING

At the same time that capitalism creates poverty, it criminalizes the condition of being poor. Race-based narratives are used to distract from the systems creating poverty and instead blame poor people and people of color for their life circumstances.

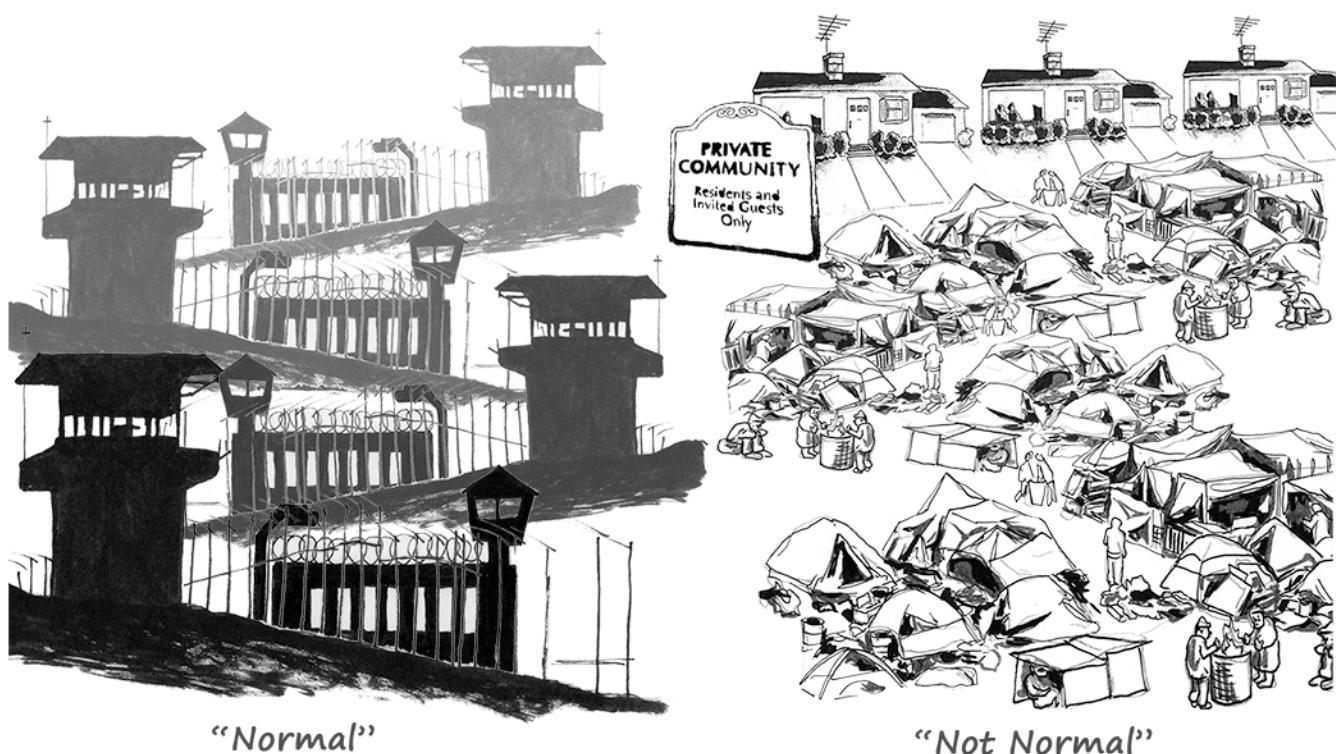


This creates the illusion that capitalist society is functioning well, except for a category of people who are "disturbing the peace."

Many actions people take to survive poverty are arrestable and jailable "crimes". This means that poor and unemployed people are particularly targeted by the police.



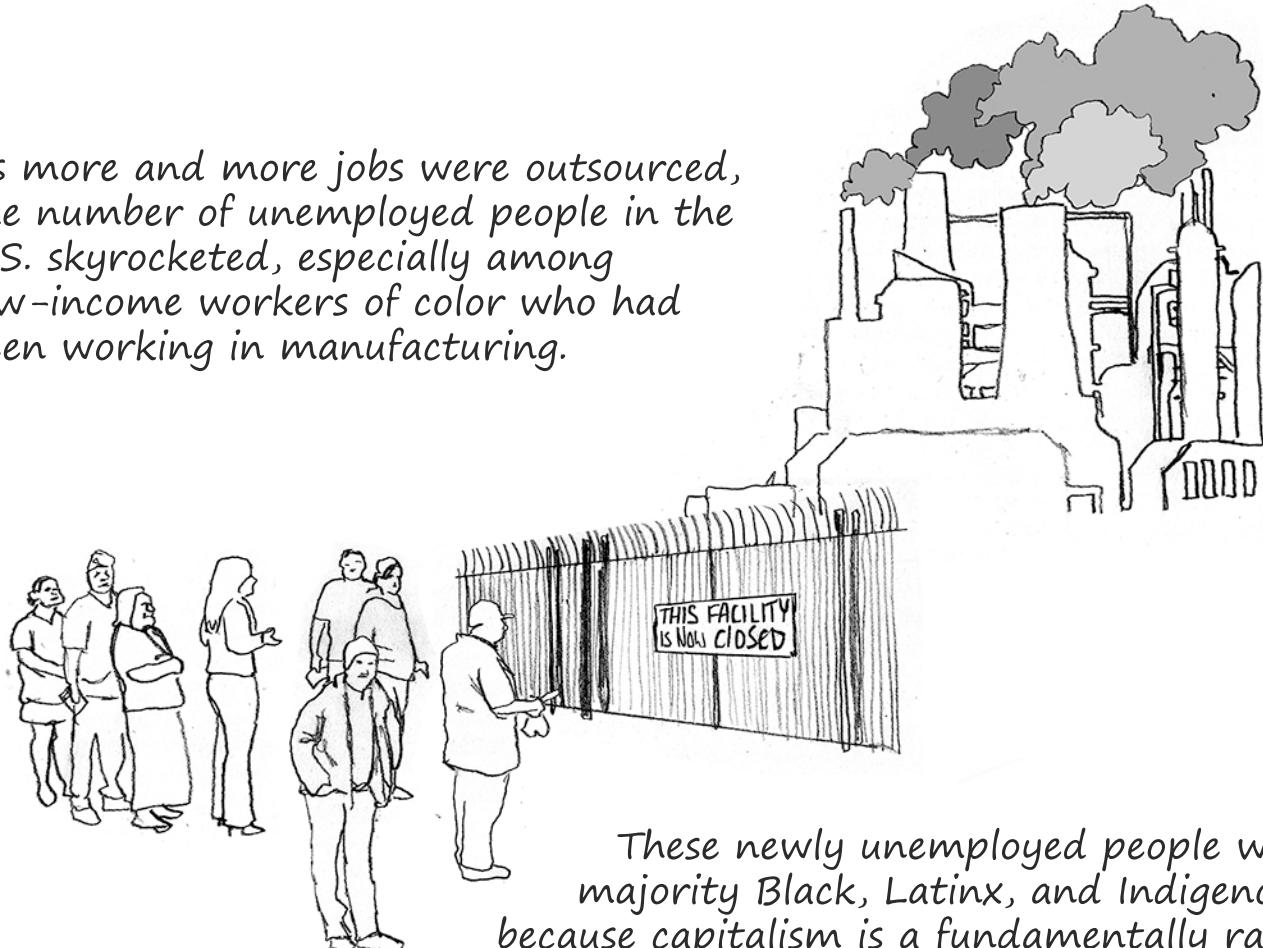
People are put behind bars for doing what they must to survive poverty, and the scale of systemic poverty is hidden behind the bars of prisons. Imagine if the 2.3 million people who are currently imprisoned in the U.S. were instead unsheltered on the streets - it would be even more apparent that capitalism is not serving the needs of the people.<sup>[12]</sup>



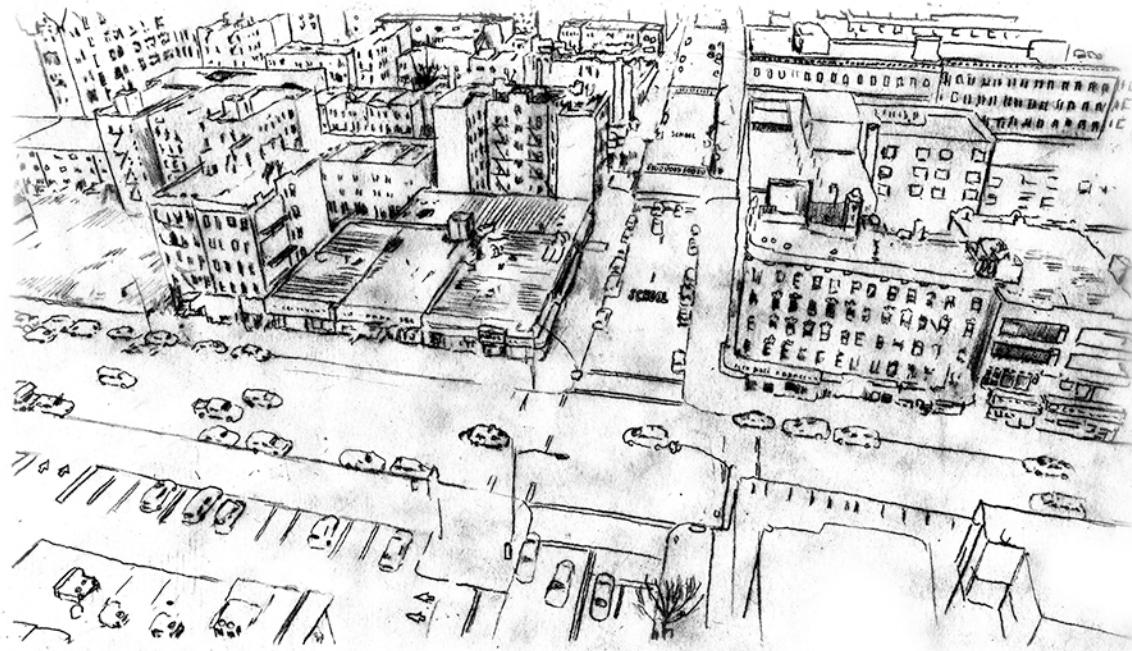
Black Marxist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore has studied and theorized this relationship deeply. She explains that the 1970's was the first time in U.S. history that U.S. corporations began moving their factories to other countries in order to exploit workers at a cheaper cost and increase their profits.<sup>[13]</sup>



As more and more jobs were outsourced, the number of unemployed people in the U.S. skyrocketed, especially among low-income workers of color who had been working in manufacturing.

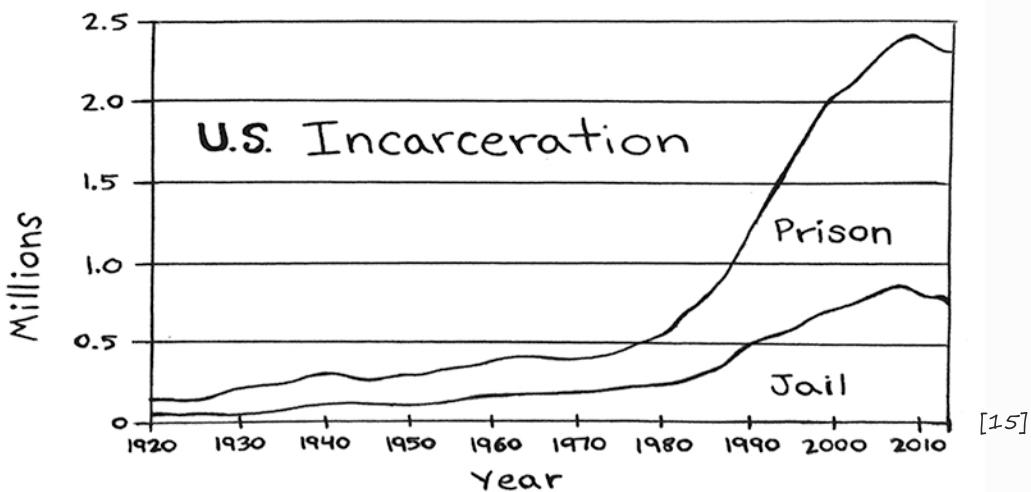


These newly unemployed people were majority Black, Latinx, and Indigenous, because capitalism is a fundamentally racial system in which these populations are more likely to hold low-wage, easily outsourced jobs.



But what would become of these newly unemployed people? Would the government provide them with social support? Would new jobs be created for them?

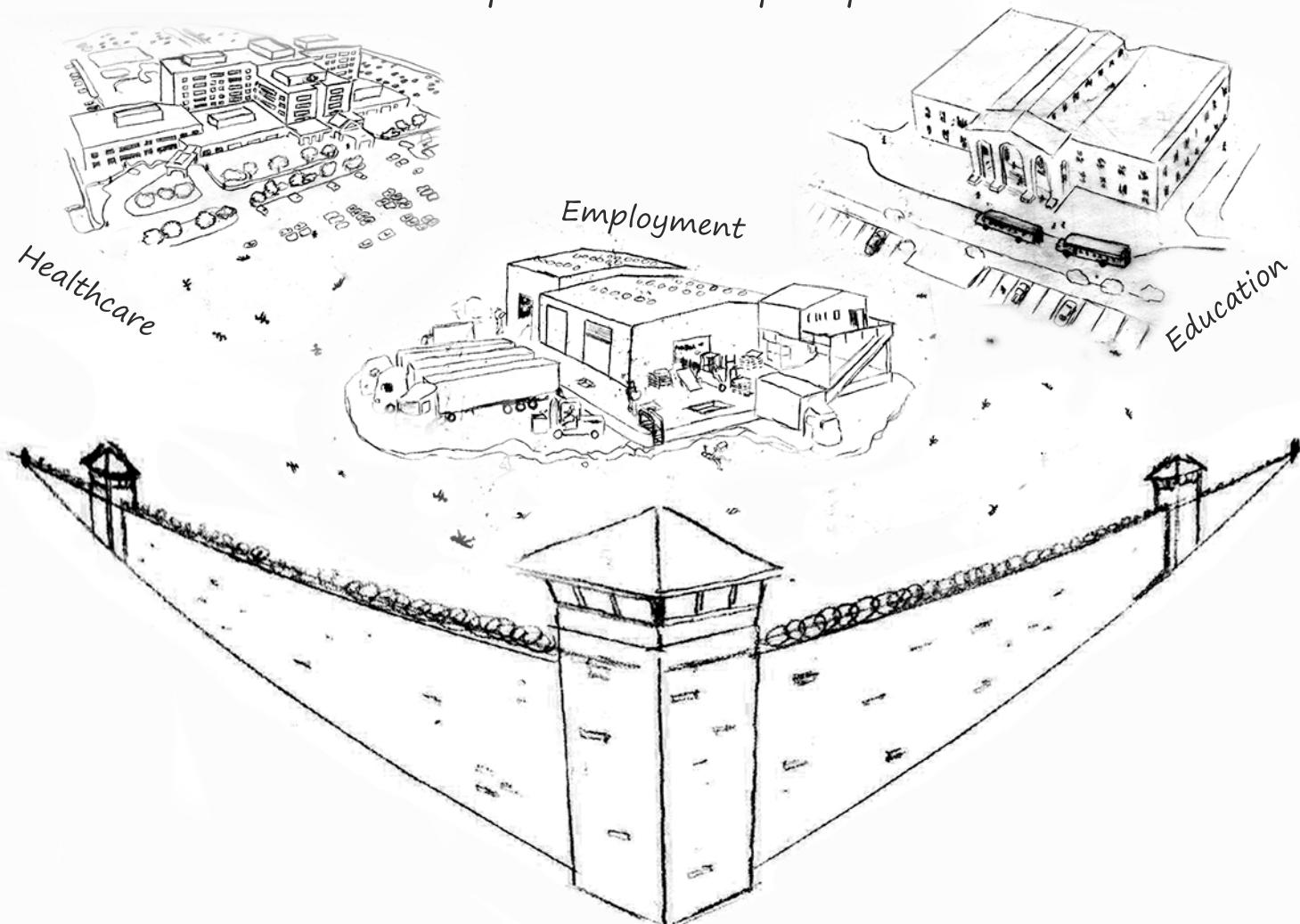
The graph below provides the answer. In response to the increase in unemployment of these communities, the incarceration rate increased by 700% between 1970 and 2020.<sup>[14]</sup>



Millions of these newly unemployed people were criminalized, moving them off the streets and into the prisons.

[15]

Through this context, we can understand the prison as a WAREHOUSE for unemployed people, who are overwhelmingly Black and Brown. Incarceration gets them off the streets, reduces the risk of a mass uprising of the unemployed, and replaces state-funded social services like food stamps, unemployment benefits, and low-income housing with prison as a cheaper option.



The state justifies the prisons by calling the unemployed people inside them "criminals." The racialized narrative of the "dangerous criminal" is reinforced through mainstream media, pop culture, books, and movies.



The racial structures of society reproduce race-based ideas about groups of people. At the same time, the ideas reproduce the racial structures.

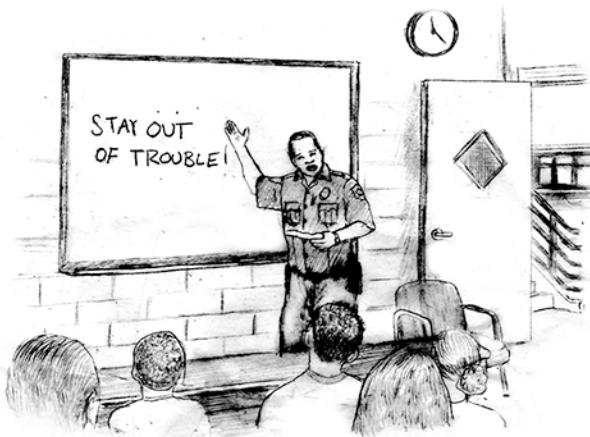


Police harass and criminalize low-income Black and Brown communities, often targeting people who are walking, sitting or sleeping in public, therefore disproportionately arresting unemployed people of color.



The state is then able to justify funding police surveillance and increased criminalization of these same communities.

As we are categorized to be associated with "crime," people of color become less likely to get employment, housing, loans, adequate health care, a good education, and other necessities, because the conditions we live in are racialized.



When people of color are denied access to the necessities of life, our conditions and responses are blamed on ideas of culture or race, rather than the capitalist system, which benefits from unemployment and incarceration.



While most people would agree that this cycle of criminalization and mass incarceration is unjust, many are left wondering, "If we get rid of prisons, what do we do about murderers and sex offenders?"

But what do we do about murderers and sex offenders?

Activist scholars like Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Mariame Kaba propose a framework to grapple with this question and others, called Prison Abolition. Prison Abolitionists ask the question, "How do we make prisons unnecessary?" In other words, how do we transform society to meet people's needs (instead of using their labor for profit and criminalizing poverty)? How do we raise youth so that they know how to resolve conflict with love (instead of resorting to violence)? How do we teach young people to respect their bodies and the bodies of others (instead of viewing them as sexual objects)? How does our current society create the conditions for the very behaviors it criminalizes?



Ruth Wilson Gilmore

Mariame Kaba

Some societies around the world are already working towards a vision of prison abolition. For example, in The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (also known as Rojava) — an anti-capitalist, feminist, ecological, multi-ethnic society — conflicts and social harms are addressed by community-based Peace and Consensus Committees.<sup>[16]</sup>



These committees do not focus on punishment or blame, but instead work to come to a consensus between conflicting parties. Many cases in the committees are resolved through dialogue and consensus among all parties and the committee members.

In cases of an individual hurting other people, the committee will often seek to understand the conditions that led a person to harm others. They are guided by the question, "How can we eliminate the conditions causing this person to harm?" instead of "How can we now harm this person who harmed others?"



The Peace and Consensus Committee may require the individual to address their harm by doing community work, including working for the people who were hurt by their actions. Other requirements could be a fine, working in a cooperative or doing public service, or in extreme cases, relocation to another community.<sup>[17]</sup>

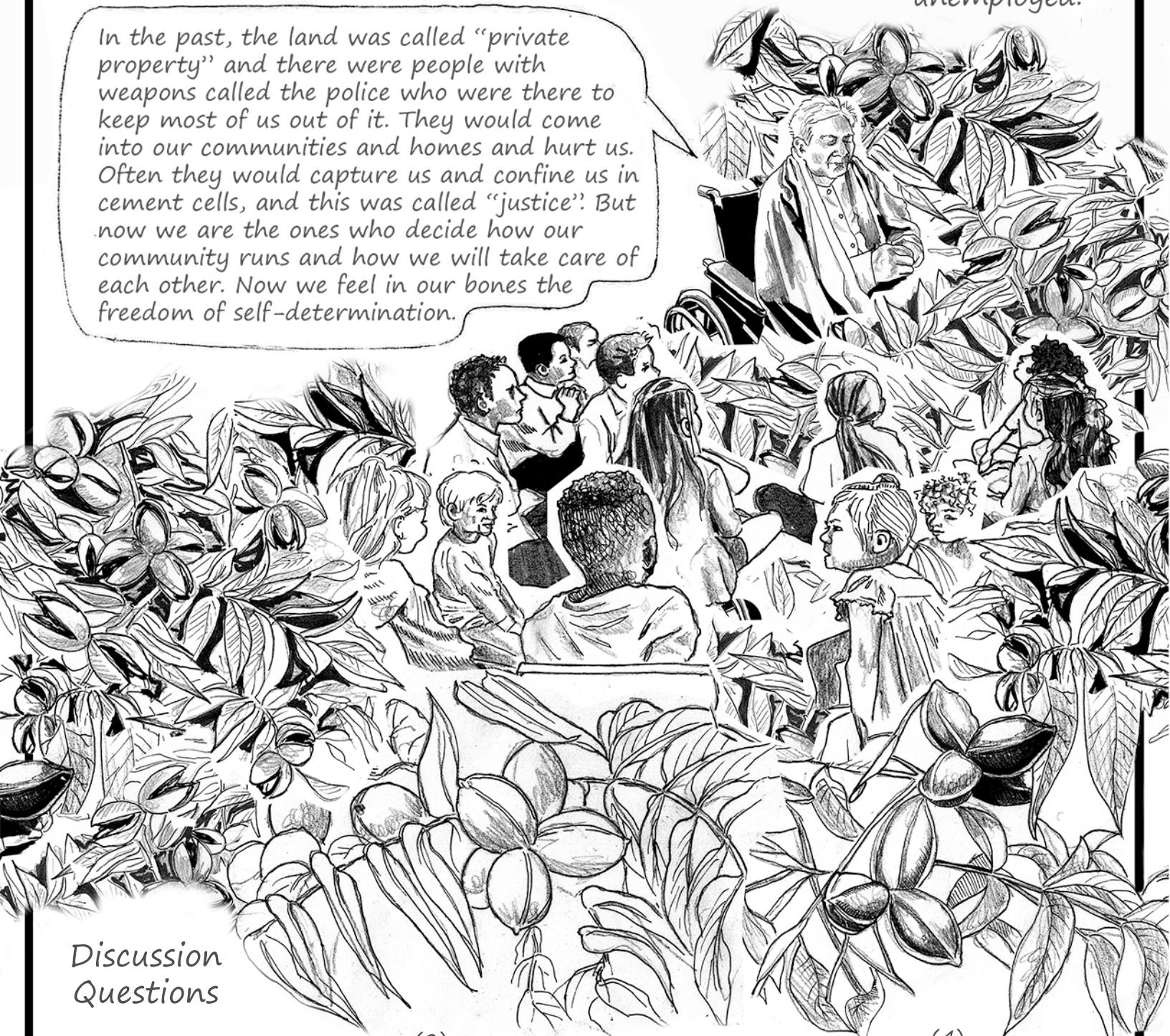


As another example, Portugal decriminalized all drugs in 2001, treating drug addiction as a medical issue instead of a crime. Their drug-induced death rate is now 5x lower than the European average, and the country spends significantly less on drug misuse <sup>[18]</sup>



These and other examples show that prison abolition is within reach, so long as we are willing to build societies designed to meet people's needs and address root causes of harm. This means ending the system of capitalism which requires race and mass incarceration as a means of structuring labor, shifting blame, dividing people, and hiding away the unemployed.

In the past, the land was called "private property" and there were people with weapons called the police who were there to keep most of us out of it. They would come into our communities and homes and hurt us. Often they would capture us and confine us in cement cells, and this was called "justice". But now we are the ones who decide how our community runs and how we will take care of each other. Now we feel in our bones the freedom of self-determination.



## Discussion Questions

(1) What are examples of racial capitalism at work in our society?

(2) How do the categories of race change depending on whatever capitalism requires at the time?

(3) How would you imagine a world without prisons?

(4) In your interpersonal relationships, how can you imagine holding people accountable without "throwing them away"?

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[1] Hadden, Sally E. *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*. Harvard University Press, 2003.

[2] What Is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter? Presented by Robin D. G. Kelley. KODX Seattle. November 18, 2017. Accessed December 6, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--gim7W\\_jQQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--gim7W_jQQ)

[3] Noah, Trevor. *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, an Imprint of Random House, 2019.

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