Just as I was about to deliver a lecture on violence in war and peace in the auditorium of a large public university in the United States some years ago, the event was interrupted by police responding to a bomb threat. Although police dogs did not sniff out a bomb, the lecture was rescheduled and moved to the palatial home of the dean of undergraduate studies, who lived in a gated community that had grown, my genial host explained, like a solid wall of invading kudzu around his lovely faux–Frank Lloyd Wright home precariously encased in glass. The dean assured me that we would not be stopped or inspected by security guards posted at a kiosk at the gates of his community that evening. On principle my host had refused to pay the membership dues that supported the elaborate security system monitoring the movements of all residents and their guests. A grandfather clause permitted him to do so.

The security apparatus was an absurd performance, he said angrily. The real threat was not from the outsiders, the residents of the surrounding low-income neighborhoods, but rather from inside the gated complex itself. Scattered among the upper-middle-class professionals living there were a handful of unsavory newcomers who had climbed the economic, if not the social, ladder through involvement in the local drug trade. One was the dean’s next door neighbor with whose children my host’s five- and eight-year-old sons and daughter had struck up a casual, after-school friendship. One afternoon, his son came home with the usual stories of “hide and seek” and “cops and robbers,” but boasting the use of real guns owned by the neighbor children’s parents. Complaints were lodged, apologies delivered, and the guns moved to a locked cabinet, but the dean and his family...
remained trapped inside a pistol-packing, gun-loaded, gated community, a good enough metaphor of life in the United States today. I think of this incident each time I go through TSA screening in US airports, some of them staffed by minimum-wage contract employees who might just have a security clearance on par with Aaron Alexis, the thirty-four-year-old Navy reservist who opened fire at a US naval base in Washington, DC, in September 2013, killing twelve people and wounding several others before dying in a shootout with police. He was later found to have been arrested at least twice in previous shooting-related incidents, but he nonetheless passed security clearance to enter the Washington Navy Yard. As Walt Kelly’s Pogo famously said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

It was not the first time I was involved in a lecture that was interrupted by violence; that would be in 1994 at the University of Cape Town, just before the election of Nelson Mandela, when a deadly period of political anarchy resulted in a series of deadly massacres in pubs, schools, worker hostels, churches, and gasoline stations (Scheper-Hughes 1994). The UCT faculty knew how to duck and hide during academic lockdowns, which occurred frequently. One lockdown accompanied a guest lecture by the British literary scholar Terry Eagleton, whom I was charged with introducing. While I reassured Eagleton that the call-and-response between police and angry student protestors was merely performative, being “locked down” in the arts block building surrounded by toyi-toying crowds waving traditional weapons felt as weirdly crazy as being locked down in that suburban gated community.

Then, in 2001, just as I was to give a lecture on organs trafficking at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, a bomb exploded outside the entrance to the Mount Scopus campus. The damage was minor, no one was hurt, and I delivered the lecture on time. Everyone in the lecture hall was relaxed except me. After the talk, an Israeli colleague confided that people were so accustomed to a daily dose of violence that they missed it when nothing happened for a stretch. “It is as if our bodies are wired or primed for the violence and we become bored during the quiet periods.” I replied that some of us in California felt that way when too much time passed without a moderate earthquake or temblor or two.

These vignettes are meant to illustrate the militarization of everyday life in countries accustomed to war, either at home or abroad. Philippe Bourgois and I (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004: 5, 19–22) referred to a “continuum of violence” in which the tactics of war and war crimes gradually seep into domestic civilian life as the new norms, as in the proliferation of “armed” gated communities, the de rigueur house gun or house arsenal,
and passive acquiescence to stop-and-frisk encounters whether at a corner 7–11 store, subway station, or domestic airport. The most egregious militarization of American life, particularly in California, has been the mass incarceration of black and Latino gang members and small-fry drug dealers who usually control no more than an evacuated city block in Philadelphia, South Central Los Angeles, or Detroit. Mass incarcerations have, for the most part, become routine and normalized in the American consciousness. Mass incarcerations have not produced social movements or mass protests.

The inverse relationship between war crimes and peacetime crimes is also apparent when private and domestic crimes such as rape, homophobia, racism, misogyny, frat house initiation bullying, and child abuse (spankings, “time outs,” and force-feedings) are deployed during wartime, consciously or unconsciously, to humiliate and torture war criminals, as in Abu Ghraib, when nudity, spankings, and homoerotic sexual abuse were used to crush prisoners of war, and in Guantánamo, where force-feedings evoked sadomasochistic fantasies of oral aggressive and invasive perversions of paternal and maternal “care.”

The gross abuses of our presumed enemy combatants in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay come back to haunt us, as war crimes committed elsewhere impact behavior at home during peacetime. The grotesque expansion and deformation of US prison culture—the excessive use of isolation, solitary confinement, and other dehumanizing practices—illustrate the militarization of American society over the past half century of wars abroad that spill over into wars at home. The mimetic recycling of war crimes and peacetime crimes was complete when the force-feeding of hunger strikers at Guantánamo Bay found its parallel in the force-feeding of hunger strikers at Pelican Bay in August 2013. US District Judge Thelton Henderson, long respected and honored in the Bay Area of California as a strong civil rights advocate, educator, and progressive jurist, nonetheless gave the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation permission to force-feed the last 70 of 30,000 hunger strikers at the Crescent City, California, prison. Judge Thelton had also ruled that while long-term solitary confinement in Security Housing Units (SHUs) of California’s supermax prisons “hovers on the bounds of what is humanly tolerable,” it is permissible unless a prisoner’s “loneliness, frustration, depression, or extreme boredom” has crossed over into the realm of “psychological torture” (quoted in Dayan 2013).

In the international human rights community, solitary confinement is defined per se as an instrument of torture, one which California prisons in particular have embraced to the “max” despite a class-action lawsuit against the state by the Center for Constitutional Rights.
The Normalization of the Abnormal: Mass Shootings and Self-Censorship

In Israel, citizens anticipate violence and raise their boys and girls to be brave soldiers. A child learns to be cool when a teenage soldier’s rifle brushes against her in a public bus. In South Africa, the middle classes of all races automatically drive their cars away from the sides of the road and speed quickly under pedestrian overpasses to avoid shellings of large stones by those who don’t own cars and who sometimes have to dart through highway traffic carrying their belongings or merchandise on a cart or wheelbarrow. US citizens are silent about the politics of violence at home and abroad and censor themselves, falling asleep like dormice at the tea table, caving in to the powerful gun lobby and to fundamentalist interpretations of our Constitution, as if it were a fossilized sacred text. Even progressives, even those who know better fall into a pattern of self-censorship, anticipating the worst.

Thus, on the second anniversary of the Arizona mall shoot-out, in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Gabrielle Giffords (2014) speaks frankly about her uphill battle to regain her speech and the use of her right arm and leg after having been shot in the head. Giffords refers to the disappointing failure of Congress to approve a straightforward bill that would increase the use of reasonable background checks on gun owners, while making sure that her readers know that she and her husband are not radicals but “moderates” and “proud gun owners” themselves. The redefinition of normal and moderate Americans is clear in this carefully worded and carefully self-censored piece, one that would not offend Kit Carson or Annie Oakley and that marginalizes and radicalizes those who believe that guns are dangerous and do not want their children playing in homes where guns might not be carefully stored.

The contradiction between the diminished rights resulting from stop-and-frisk laws, racial profiling, and the monitoring of telephone conversations and the robust rights of “proud gun owners” is quite astounding. The path forward is, Giffords suggests, a gradual step-by-step process that would make it “illegal for all stalkers and all domestic abusers to buy guns and to extend mental health resources into schools and communities, so the dangerously mentally ill find it easier to receive treatment than to buy firearms” (Giffords 2014).

We have been here before, déjà vu all over again. What are we willing to do, then, to stop the cycles of violence that are destroying our communities? In the months following the Sandy Hook Elementary massacre, pundits suggested many reasonable strategies to help communities, parents, and professionals identify and respond to the assumed “early warning signs”
capable of predicting a shooting disaster. Most of these strategies were implemented in 1999–2000 following the Columbine disaster that, like Sandy Hook, was another “tipping point.”

A vigorous national dialogue followed an impassioned speech by President Bill Clinton in the Rose Garden following Columbine in 1999. Then as now, after Sandy Hook, the nation was stunned, and its political, business, and religious leaders were mobilized. Clinton announced a National Campaign against Youth Violence led by a California public interest lawyer, Jeff Bleich, who focused on a guerrilla public service media blitz to raise national consciousness about youth violence. The campaign mobilized business corporations, volunteer organizations, and the media to develop and implement violence reduction programs, including a campaign that recruited youth leaders from inner cities in the United States to respond to violent flare-ups in schoolyards and streets using a then popular street culture slang (“Squash it”) with gang hand signs signaling “cool it!”

The campaign worked with city officials, churches, schools, mental health services, and families in cities and towns across the United States to limit children’s access to guns and exposure to media violence. Bleich negotiated agreements with powerful TV and film media to limit youth access to the most gratuitous representations of violence. The campaign worked with model cities that adopted antiviolence programs, some of them based on Nancy Reagan’s earlier “Just Say No” [to drugs] campaign. The newer version of “Say No to Violence” campaigns mobilized schoolchildren and their teachers and parents—especially those in hard-hit inner cities, to wear purple ribbons memorializing murdered schoolmates—to march against violence and to take pledges against alcohol and drugs associated with violence. In one urban campaign, schoolchildren covered city walls with black-paint handprints accompanied by pleas for cease-fire among marauding gangs. Public schools brought in special counselors to teach schoolchildren techniques of self-management and self-control through meditation and deep breathing. The emphasis was on prevention, on desensitizing “at-risk youth” (inevitably meaning poor black and Latino urban youth) to the risks of subcultures of youth violence in gangs, hate crimes, drugs, and racist and misogynist rap music.

I participated in a Presidential Academic Advisory Board (1999–2001), which was led by anthropologist John Devine and included some of the nation’s leading scholars of urban America and youth violence.1 Over the course of several meetings, we collaborated in the preparation of a detailed report that identified key variables overlooked by the national campaign.

We documented the links between isolated public mass shootings in schools and the broader social and political context of excessively high rates
of youth homicides and suicides, of alienation and isolation of youth from their parents, schools, and communities. Drawing on the expertise of the advisory panel members, we explained the “code of the street” (Anderson 1999) and the “search for respect” (Bourgois 1995) that contributed to homicides and suicides among minority youth. The hypersensitivity and hyper-reactivity to imagined insults were the offspring of a profound sense of shame and low self-esteem resulting from the extreme marginalization of unwanted and despised (even more than disrespected) populations. We described the culture of bullying in elementary schools that was not yet recognized as a trigger in some mass shooting incidents. Finally, we touched upon the lethal association of male honor with physical force and of power and might with deadly weapons, which led us to a critique of gun culture, but this conversation was derailed by those members of the board who labeled gun control a toxic subject, one that had to be carefully finessed.

We established connections between structural violence—the violence of poverty, exclusion, and extreme marginality—and everyday violence in the homes, streets, and schools of America. We described an epidemic of youth violence (Gillen 1997) that we linked to the punitive and carceral state and to the militarization of American society following the Vietnam and the first Iraqi wars. We debated the problems of homelessness and of drug-addicted and traumatized veterans and their impact on children and adolescents. We introduced the concept of youth who were both dangerous and endangered, both victims and perpetrators of violence (Scheper-Hughes 2006).

Few of these concepts were familiar to Americans outside the field of social science and the academy. They did not travel easily or well. Neither did our advocacy on behalf of the unmet needs of America’s youth for decent housing, safe streets, and medical, dental, and mental health services. It was difficult to discuss parental, educational, and even nutritional child abuse and neglect. The idea that we Americans were not as child-centered as we imagine ourselves to be was not a popular message. Under the guidance of Devine (1996), whose book Maximum Security drew analogies between American public schools and US maximum security prisons, the Academic Advisory Panel rejected political proposals to increase technological security systems in schools, video cameras, metal detectors, and the hiring of private security agents to police school corridors and bathrooms.

The report’s conclusions went against the grain and, not surprisingly, it was contested and subjected to agonizing edits of passages dealing with the dangers of readily available weapons in American homes. Proposals to buy back weapons from gang leaders were deleted altogether. It was a noble struggle but censorship and self-censorship ruled the day. Advisory board
members deferred to those members dedicated to real politic. In the end, the report, delivered to President Clinton and his staff, was shelved. Today, one can barely find it online hidden in digitalized government archives. It was effectively, bureaucratically “disappeared.”

After a brief respite, mass shootings in US schools and other public venues resumed with a vengeance at an almost predictable rate. Americans failed to go deep enough inside our collective national unconscious. We continue to resist the fact that our nation is alone in the industrialized democratic world in tolerating subcultures of violence to form in our cities, towns, and suburbs. No other mature democratic nation allows its private citizens to assemble military arsenals in their homes, practices that endanger the lives of all not only in our suffering postindustrial cities but also in our increasingly armed and dangerous suburbs, movie theaters, and picturesque New England towns.

Today, when a shooting is announced on CNN young people do not take much notice. In my seminar “Violence and Human Rights in War and Peace,” taught to graduating seniors and public policy interns at the University of California’s Washington Center in the fall of 2013, the students were blasé. The day after the Navy Yard shooting, which took place not far from our building, I asked students to talk about their thoughts and feelings concerning the violence that was almost next door. It was not an issue, I was told. They were far more preoccupied with the threatened government shutdown that would interrupt many of their internships.

The public response to the shootings has focused on the mentally ill rather than on inadequate regulation of semiautomatic rifles and large-capacity ammunition magazines. At least Giffords’s proposals highlight the problem of domestic violence and the correlation between private suicides and homicides and the family pistol in a sock drawer, the rifle under the bed, the gun in the closet.

In her postapartheid novel The House Gun, Nadine Gordimer (1998) chillingly describes an unpremeditated murder by a young white man, Duncan, twenty-seven, living in a gated community in Pretoria with three other young men. Coming home late one evening Duncan finds his girlfriend in flagrante delicto with his former male lover and roommate, who makes light of the incident as a mere peccadillo. Duncan, in an act of blind rage, locates the house gun and kills his rival point blank. Duncan is arrested, pleads guilty, but reveals nothing about his motives. Duncan’s white liberal parents, Claudia and Harald, are utterly confused and shaken to the roots.
In *The House Gun* Gordimer describes private acts of domestic violence that are linked to the postapartheid situation of white South Africans who appear to be sleepwalkers in a society that recently replaced a violent racist and militarized state with an imperfect democratic one. Their only defense against the constant fear and threat of attacks by intruders, by young skollies and gangsters from surrounding poor African townships, is the trusty house gun, cast as a warm fuzzy object, something like the house cat, both indispensable to a sense of well-being.

Gordimer wrote her novel amid political debates in South Africa about the death penalty and gun control, when there was an alarming increase in violence against middle-class white South Africans who were once protected by the apartheid terrorist machine. Whites today perceive themselves as potential victims of black rage or, if liberals, victims of poor South Africans’ unmet basic needs. Under threats they can only imagine, they fall back on private resources—hired guards, razor wire, and electronic security systems. And, when all else fails, they rely on the house gun, failing to realize that more guns in private homes do not mean less crime, a lesson for both American and South African readers.2

The situation Gordimer describes is not dissimilar from life in America today. Both countries are coming out from under violent histories and violent struggles, and both are extremely violent and militant societies, with legacies of native genocides, slavery, reservations, homelands, civil wars, and foreign or cross-border wars. Both countries have populations that are extremely well armed.

Americans in particular attribute magical powers to their guns. In many times and places people under siege have armed themselves with magical clothing or salves or incantations. From the Ghost Dance cult of the Plains Indians to Joseph Kony’s child soldiers, people have maintained a mystical belief in their own invulnerability to silver bullets. National Rifle Association chief Wayne LaPierre’s call for armed guards to be stationed in all schools to prevent further gun massacres is a contemporary expression of the Ghost Dance, the belief in magical efficacy and invulnerability. The real danger is guns stockpiled in the house next door. Cars are not weapons, but insofar as cars pose a threat to public security they are registered, and car owners are held responsible for any accidents, injuries, or road deaths, including those committed by one’s children or friends whom one allows to drive them. Guns are weapons, and because it is people who kill, those who own guns should be held accountable for the misuse of their weapons by those who are given access to them.
The Two Specters

After the Columbine shoot-out the national focus was on black youth, the “ghetto,” and black rage and resentment. Black youth were readily turned into sacrificial scapegoats, the arbitrary objects of white middle-class fears and perceptions. The fact that the Columbine killers were, like most other school shooters, white and middle class had no bearing on the public discourse on youth violence, which was coded black. White children are not youth; they are adolescents, or young people. Youth refers to minority children, the children of the other. Michael Greenberg and David Schneider (1994) aptly named the problem in “Violence in American Cities: Young Black Males Is the Answer, but What Was the Question?” In the article they contest the then-prevailing view that young black men are the cause of violence in US cities. Their comparative study of urban violence in three relatively poor middle-sized cities of New Jersey—Camden, Trenton, and Newark—reveals that violence is distributed among young and old, male and female, black, white, and Latino. They identify the real causes of urban violence as deindustrialization, unemployment, urban deserts, undesirable land uses, and the political and social abandonment of unwanted people: poor working-class whites as well as blacks. According to Greenberg and Schneider, violence and premature violent deaths (homicides, suicides, accidents) are caused by extreme marginalization, ghettos, and segregation.

After Newtown (Sandy Hook) there were more than sixteen mass shootings in 2013 of which the Navy Yard shooting on September 16 was the most deadly, with twelve fatalities (Huffington Post 2013). The blame has since fallen squarely on the shoulders of another scapegoat, the mentally ill and the specter of the “deranged” mass murderer. Not only the media pundits but also psychiatrists, educators, government officials, and the president of the United States have concluded that the buck stops with the mentally ill. In early January 2014 the president released two new executive actions to bolster the federal background-check system with regard to the purchase of firearms. Two categories were carefully defined as exceptions to the right to bear arms: (1) people “committed to a mental institution,” which was expanded to include involuntary psychiatric outpatients, and (2) “mental defectives,” defined as those deemed incompetent to stand trial or not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect, or those lacking mental responsibility or deemed insane regardless of whether these are determined by a state, local, federal, or military court. Anticipating the critics, Kathleen Sebelius declared that the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) does not prevent courts and justice systems from sharing mental
health information with the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS).

The other policy prescriptions are just that—earlier intervention and treatment with powerful psychotropic drugs. But to take the most examined case, Newtown shooter and suicide victim Adam Lanza died without a formal medical diagnosis, although he was reported to be taking antipsychotic medications of the sort that advocates of psychiatric medication support. But the long-awaited report of the Connecticut state attorney on the shootings at Sandy Hook (Sedensky 2013) is ambiguous about the links between Lanza’s mental health and the shootings. While confirming that Lanza suffered from “significant mental health issues,” that he was given a diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome, and that he had “obsessional and anxious traits” affecting “his ability to live a normal life and to interact with others,” the report states that it is unknown how these conditions contributed to the Sandy Hook shootings.

The robust statistics show that the mentally ill are less dangerous (except to themselves) than those who are not diagnosed with a serious mental condition, as defined in the new executive orders released by the president. Neither Lanza nor his mother who coached her unhappy son at a local shooting range and kept an arsenal of guns in her suburban home would fall under the new executive orders. The criminalization of mental illness for most of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, returning today in a new form and rationale, is a gross social injustice our nation should never seek to repeat.

The use of powerful antipsychotic and antidepressive medications are already overprescribed, in large part due to the influence of the pharmaceutical industry and its lobbyists. The call for earlier intervention means that even more schoolchildren will be plied with Ritalin for ADHD, and increased diagnoses of the new diseases de jour, bipolar disorder and bipolar masked depression, come with prescriptions of powerful antipsychotic drugs that are toxic. Some have paradoxical side effects, especially on youth and young adults: irritability, aggression, and suicide. Suicide, not homicide, is the most predictable outcome of these side effects. David Healy, a professor of psychiatry in Wales and an expert in modern psychopharmacology, has published with his colleagues a cohort study of mortality among schizophrenics hospitalized one hundred years ago and a contemporary cohort (Healy et al. 2006). While both groups died prematurely, the early cohort, primarily felled by tuberculosis in asylums, the contemporary cohort die prematurely from suicides that may, the authors suggest, have been linked to the side effects of the new drugs.
The Manufacture of Madness

If we nonetheless accept that certain forms of mental illness can be a contributing factor to acts of violence from individual homicides to mass shootings—paranoid schizophrenia, for one, and PTSD, for another—two institutions bear some responsibility in their florid eruptions: US military involvement in unresolved warfare and multiple deployments of traumatized young men and women into uncertain and life-threatening situations; and high-security prisons with solitary confinement. When Thomas Szasz (1997) wrote about the “manufacture of madness,” he was referring to the inquisitional approach of psychiatrists and their manufactured labels (that might as well have been diagnoses of witchcraft for the damage they did) and the failure to capture the existential experiences of human life and human suffering. When I refer, here, to the “manufacture of mental illness,” I am referring to the actual production of madness in wartime deployments in dangerous and even useless wars and among prisoners in solitary confinement.

I have been inside many prisons, madhouses, and reform schools, orphanages that were international baby adoption supermarkets and Dickensian poorhouses and homeless shelters over my forty-year career as a medical-psychiatric anthropologist. But the first time I saw humans locked up in animal cages was at the beginning of the new millennium. The first time was in Argentina in January 2000 during an Organs Watch investigation of the national asylum for the mentally deficient. The second time was in the spring of 2000, when I was a member of a Critical Resistance to Prisons working group at the University of California’s Humanities Center led by Theo Goldberg and Angela Davis. Every week we visited one California’s high- and medium-security prisons.

Like Argentina during and after the dirty war, California in 2000 and in the years since has been mired in another kind of dirty war, a war on drugs, gangs, and drug cartels, against the backdrop of a decade and a half of unresolved warfare in the Middle East. Our team’s weekly visits to California’s high- and maximum-security prisons—from Pelican Bay, Tehachapi, the High Desert Prison in Susanville, the California Substance Abuse Treatment Facility in Corcoran, the Central California Women’s Facility in Chochilla, and the California Medical Facility Prison in Vacaville—were unforgettable. Regularly visiting the inside of US prisons should be a civil requirement of a system that requires jury duty. But one has to travel into isolated areas of the state, into deserts and high plateaus, tucked away in heavily forested areas.

The shock of seeing solitary confinement prisoners being rolled out of the hole in individual cages on wheels, like a ferocious circus tiger, to defend
themselves before a prison board of review or appeal remains fresh in my memory. I sat through a few of these kangaroo court hearings held in the inner sanctum of California state prisons and in full view of surrounding shelves of prison cells filled with angry men yelling and banging their cell doors to get the attention of the prison guards assembled around the table below. It could have been the eighteenth century. On one occasion I sat next to a clinical social worker already scribbling notes into the thick case record of a young male prisoner who was wheeled into the public space in his portable rolling cage, his legs in shackles as he tried to speak quickly and loudly to defend himself, begging to be released from months of solitary confinement, which, he said, quite understandably, was driving him mad. He had not meant, he said, to throw the contents of his chamber pot into the face of the prison guard who had come to check him out. It was “automatic,” a “reflex,” he said, nothing personal about it. He said that he had lost whatever self-control he once had. He was sure that he could behave reasonably if he were allowed back to a “normal cell,” with other people nearby. “That would be very comforting,” he said. But no one at the table was listening, least of all the psychiatric social worker who had already drawn his conclusions before the inmate was allowed to speak. He whispered to me from time to time saying that it was so loud in there, he couldn’t hear a word of what the prisoner was saying anyway. The prisoner’s petition was denied, and he was returned to stew in solitary confinement, to go mad, to lose his tentative hold on the world outside the cage or the hole.

In his years working as a psychiatric therapist in California prisons, Terry Kupers has argued many cases on behalf of inmates driven to delusion and delirium in solitary confinement. In his essay “How to Create Madness in Prison” (2006), Kupers describes how such isolation can produce psychiatric symptoms, even in prisoners who were previously healthy:

A prisoner may feel overwhelmed by a strange sense of anxiety. The walls may seem to be moving in on him. . . . He may begin to suffer from panic attacks wherein he cannot breathe and he thinks his heart is beating so fast he is going to die. Almost all prisoners in supermaximum security units tell me that they have trouble focusing on any task, their memory is poor, they have trouble sleeping, they get very anxious, and they fear they will not be able to control their rage. The prisoner may find himself disobeying an order or inexplicably screaming at an officer, when really all he wants is for the officer to stop and interact with him. . . . Eventually, and often rather quickly, a prisoner’s psychiatric condition deteriorates to the point where he inexplicably refuses to return his food tray, cuts himself or pastes paper over
the small window in his solid metal cell door, causing security staff to trigger an emergency “take-down” or “cell extraction.” In many cases where I have interviewed the prisoner after the extraction, he confides that voices he was hearing at the time commanded him . . . .

Today, Kupers is working on a class action suit to reduce maximum time in social isolation to fifteen years. Why fifteen years rather than ten or five years, or no more than several months of solitary confinement, conforming more closely to international human rights guidelines? It was a statistical, utilitarian calculation that the psychiatrist believed could have the greatest benefit for the greatest number (Terry Kupers, pers. comm.).

If eighteen months of solitary confinement could turn Winnie Mandela, an educated, talented social worker and political leader, into a seemingly wildly irrational and uncontrolled commander of a youth death squad, disowned by her husband and his political advisors, imagine what thousands of uneducated, drug-dependent prisoners of California’s gulag are experiencing through not just months but years, even twenty or more years of life in the hole. In an interview granted to a South African reporter in the summer of 2013, Winnie Mandela, the seventy-year-old mother of two adult daughters, said that she would never forget the day the police came for her at night and tore her away from her children crying for their mama. She was thrown into a cell, naked, without even sanitary pads, so that her monthly blood coagulated on her thighs. Accused of terrorism, she believed she would spend the rest of her life there. The sound of her crying babies was with her day and night. When she was released, Winnie was a changed person. Even her daughters say that she suffered ever after from PTSD. Her detractors say that Winnie was weak and all too easily broken.

Before the advent of deinstitutionalization and decarceration in the 1970s, the mentally ill were housed in state mental hospitals. Today, in California the majority of state-treated mentally ill persons are in California’s prison system. In a recent telephone conversation, Governor Jerry Brown told me that the bulk of state funds in mental health care was diverted to mentally ill prisoners. When I suggested that there was a correlation between solitary confinement and mental illness, the governor spoke of the realities of violence in prisons among rival gangs, rival races, and ethnic groups, along with the threat of suicides, all of which required lockdowns and administrative segregation to manage the institutions.

Today there are 33,000 diagnosed severely mentally ill people in California prisons, 12,000 of whom are in solitary confinement. The state of California continues to battle the Supreme Court and class action lawsuits regarding overcrowding, access to medical and psychiatric care, and solitary
confinement. No one knows exactly how many prisoners are in solitary confinement because the state does not acknowledge the term, which would be self-incriminating. The numbers are distributed among those in single-unit cells, those in Administrative Segregation Units (ASUs), and those in SHUs. Meanwhile, every 120 days California correctional officers are required to “extract” people from their solitary cells in rolling cages to go through a hearing that will determine whether they can be reintegrated into the prison proper. Some prisoners are brought to the table in chains. Some are hallucinating, others are jiggling their feet and legs, some are begging, some are crying. Others are trying to clear their heads while clearing their throats to speak. There is fear in their eyes.

Erving Goffman (1961) and Michel Foucault (1961) reminded us that prisons, like mental hospitals, are almost impossible to dismantle; they remain in place to recycle one stigmatized and despised population after another. Decarceration, as Andy Skull (1984) described it, existed as a policy for a few decades. But with the advent of a crack epidemic, crime and violence in the 'hood, the pileup of distressed returned war veterans, the eyesore of the mentally ill homeless, gentrification, and conservative politics, the state of California retrenched and began to build one of the world’s largest and densely populated prison complex, a Siberian gulag in the deserts and valleys and the redwood forests that Woody Guthrie memorialized. Janet Napolitano, the newly installed president of UCOP, the University of California, recently addressed representatives of the Academic Senate at a UC campus in which she summed up the present dilemma. Public policy and public spending in California were determined by a rule of thumb: “Educate, Medicate, or Incarcerate,” with incarcerate the default winner.

Elsewhere, changes have begun. Human rights reports filed in Argentina about the criminal abuse of the mentally challenged resulted in a vigorous reform of the national mental colony for the “mentally deficient,” Colonia Montes de Oca. Since 2008, the cages that were used for the naked “crawlers,” gatosos (those who urinate like cats wherever they please), and the “feces throwers” have been dismantled. A few of the former caged captives have been transferred to a day hospital on the grounds of the old asylum, some employed in turning the dissembled bar into rabbit cages. “Cages are for animals,” one of the formerly caged inmates told me during a visit to the reformed institution. He showed off his dandified new clothes, his new shirt and pants, and a red silk scarf tied rakishly around his neck as he continued to carpenter the rabbit hutch.

Since the end of apartheid the new South African constitution has banned the death penalty, and more recently, in the 1998 Correctional Services
Act the state sought to incorporate the values embedded in the Bill of Rights to the prison population. The South African Constitutional Court has upheld the principle that a prisoner retains his personal rights including the protection of human dignity, the equality of all people, and protection against cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment. The state must provide prisoners with adequate accommodation, including adequate space for daily exercise, nutritious meals, access to books and other reading materials, and medical treatment.

Nelson Mandela’s last prison home at Victor Verster penitentiary in Paarl, the Western Cape, is one showcase of prison reform. All new prisoners enter the gate greeted by a larger-than-life-size statue of Mandela striding out of the prison, his fist raised in victory and a broad smile on his face. Prison warden Manfred Jacobs said that prisoners are also released through the same gate, “so that they can leave the prison with pride and hope” (pers. comm., August 2013).

What, then, is the solution to the current impasse in the United States? Ultimately we have to accept that our national commitments to interminable wars abroad, to dysfunctional wars on drugs and drug cartels along our borderlands with Mexico have consequences at home. The consequences of these wars spill over into our private lives, into our homes, schools, shopping malls, and other public institutions. We have to accept that our nation’s growing isolation and arrogance toward the cultural norms that guide other mature democratic nations is hurting us. Above all we have to resist the forces of censorship and self-censorship that have discouraged an open debate on militarization, incarceration, and public surveillance versus public security and a contemporary assessment of the right to bear arms in the context of late modern society.

Notes

1 The participants in the Presidential Academic Advisory Board included Elijah Anderson, Sissila Bok, Philippe Bourgois, William Damon, Kenneth Dodge, Richard Freeman, James Garbarino, James Gibbons, James Gillian, David Kennedy, Alan J. Lipton, William Pollack, Nancy Schepers-Hughes, James Short, Joel Wallman, and Frank Zimring, among others.

2 Today (April 11 2014), virtually all South Africans are riveted to their television screens to observe the murder trial of Reeva Steenkamp, the girlfriend of Oscar Pistorius, a national hero and symbol of triumph over physical adversity. Pistorius is charged with having shot his girlfriend multiple times with his 9 mm, the most common house gun in white middle-class South Africa. Pistorius testifies to having shot his girlfriend in error, having mistaken her for an intruder.
References


