

SHACKLED AND CHAINED: AN INTERVIEW WITH EUGENE PURYEAR

By Joseph E. Green (excerpted from [Dissenting Views II](#))

I first ran across Eugene Puryear in an interview with RT News in 2013 and felt compelled to get into contact with him. Mr. Puryear is only in his late twenties, and yet he's out doing some amazing work, including his new book [Shackled and Chained: Mass Incarceration in Capitalist America](#). The book is a concise and often stunning description of both the institutional racism inherent in the American prison system, the inherent corruption in privatizing punishment, and the atrocious conditions of the prisons themselves. As a society we have to ask ourselves: Does it make sense to create prison conditions that force criminals to adopt psychopathy as a survival mechanism? Are we trying to find solutions to the root causes of crime, or are we trying to send people into a living Hell? How demented is a society that incentivizes mass incarceration? Mr. Puryear kindly agreed to an interview to discuss these issues in detail.

[2016 UPDATE: Mr. Puryear is currently running as the [Vice Presidential candidate for the Socialist party](#). He was also recently interviewed by the Atlantic Monthly, in which he [shared some criticisms of Bernie Sanders](#), while recognizing that Sanders was a far better candidate than the given alternatives.]

GREEN: Mr. Puryear, if you would, let's begin with what drove the writing of your book, *Shackled and Chained*.

EUGENE PURYEAR: Primarily I wanted to situate the whole phenomenon of mass incarceration in the broader social context of capitalism in America. What was going on the late 1970s and early 80s when mass incarceration really took off, first ideologically, then progressing into the 1980s materially, through policy. So the question becomes, how do we explain that in the context of that broader social system? Because things do not happen in a vacuum. They happen in relationship not only to things going on in our society, but because we live in a class-based society, they connect to the broader dynamics of the class system. I really wanted to illuminate that.

Related to that, is there an immediate problem with private prisons making the enforcement of law into a commercial enterprise?

I definitely think [that there is]. What it does is turn what should be an issue of law into an avenue for profit-making. And so obviously CCA and Geo Group and these other companies, they are not going to have in their minds questions like,

“What is the best way to rebuild communities devastated by mass incarceration?”
What is the best way to deal with crimes like possession of drugs – things of that nature. Their only concerns are things like, what is the maximum number of people we can get into a jail?

They will also consistently argue and lobby for anything that will allow them to throw more people in [jail] and to get more contracts. See, right now there is a growing amount of attention being paid to mass incarceration policies. It's interesting, from the point of view of reform, or abolition, or the different perspectives people bring to this issue – there is this element that was not present at the beginning of mass incarceration policies, which is [the existence of] these private prisons. It skews things. They have shifted the arguments from the whole question of imprisoning millions of people and dealing with the underlying social problems that give rise to crime – they know they can't win those arguments – so they've shifted to talking about costs, to being a question of the ability to run a prison more cheaply. It really does skew things away from a focus on people, on humanity and community, to purely focusing on profit.

Now...do you think this is an inevitable outgrowth of monopoly capitalism or is it something more specific? Is it really an extension of imperialism?

I do think it's connected to monopoly capitalism and imperialism, and speaks to the problems that imperialism has always had. Going into the economic crisis of the 1970s, which was a shock because in the post-World War II period, you had these rising standards of living and the expectation – especially after the Civil Rights movements of the 60s – an expectation among black Americans that their lives would improve, but the 1970s really upset the apple cart. The idea of jobs programs, more extensive social problems, all of that went to the chopping block for a variety of reasons, but you also had this other problem – particularly in the black communities, which became the primary targets of mass incarceration – in that they were left outside the social contract, with no prospects for employment or rebuilding the communities that were being devastated. Government policy makers had no desire to help anything other than big business interests and had no desire to deal with these people in a constructive fashion so of course, the issue becomes what do we do with all these people? So that really the mass incarceration “solution” arose out of a surplus population problem. You have a group of people who have been consistently ground down, oppressed, and exploited, and at the same time you need to find a way to deal with them. Just like other forms of what is now called “neoliberalism,” mass incarceration came about as a response to a structural crisis within the capitalist system.

Interesting. Now what role does the “drug war” play in our present system?

It plays a huge role. Reagan [becomes President] in 1981. One of the first things he did is set up this Attorney General's task force on crime that was chaired by a number of academics and people high up in the government. That report, in the

introduction, says that the biggest issue in crime today is the lack of available prison space. They are already saying this although there is not quite the War on Drugs yet. So the War on Drugs comes along at a fortuitous time when a number of people are pushing for these policies. The Democrats in particular – Joe Biden, Ted Kennedy – had been pushing mandatory minimums since the 70s but they hadn't gotten to really establishing mass incarceration as a policy. The drug war gave them that excuse...quote-end quote “drug crimes” and drug use.

And obviously...you know the numbers, I'm sure, much better than I do...but obviously this is disproportionately affecting young, black males.

Yeah, it's interesting. The federal and state prison population is made up of about 39% black and 23% Latino, so I believe about 62% of people in prison are black or brown people. This is so far away from the proportional representation of those populations...and we know from different studies, for example, that blacks don't use drugs as much as whites, but if a white person and a black person are convicted of the same drug crime, the black person is more likely to be sent to prison for that crime. The disparities shine through.

That isn't the only thing...now facing prison is a horrifying prospect in itself. But what kind of prospects does a person have once they get out of jail?

It's really terrifying. It's almost like you are in prison for the rest of your life. Here in Washington, D.C., where I'm from, there are about 50% of the people with a criminal record who are unemployed. And even the 50% who are employed are consigned to roughly six low-income job categories. So in essence when you come out of prison your job prospects are slim to none and if you do get one, it's most likely to be in the worst-paying, worst-benefits, and in the most precarious section of the economy. It's a stigma on people that makes employers – wrongly – not want to hire these people once they're out of prison. And it results in even more devastation for communities for people who want to come out and just live their life and provide for their families. They're unable to do so because of the opportunities being taken away from them by being incarcerated.

And a lot of these “crimes” are essentially victimless – possession of marijuana and so forth.

It's a huge issue when we talk about crime. The one thing that rarely gets touched on is what we really define as crime. We see, to a large degree, Wall Street bankers have gotten off scot-free when they wrecked the entire world economy. Obviously there's a lot to be said there. There is ample evidence that actual criminal activity has taken place and hasn't been prosecuted – but also, all these terrible, terrible things that have been perpetrated – student loans and things that people find so odious coming from Wall Street and other big businesses are absolutely legal.

But we look at something like marijuana possession, which is defined to be illegal. And we have to ask ourselves, what do we define as crime? Why do we define it as crime? Why is drug use – even hard drug use – considered a criminal issue rather than a public health issue? So a huge issue in dealing with mass incarceration is to ask the question, *what in fact is a crime?* Because if we don't really look at that, we're dancing around the issue to a large degree.

There are a lot of people locked up for – like you said, marijuana possession and things of that nature – there's really no point. I mean, it's just not criminal behavior. It's no worse than things that are considered broadly legal – alcohol use and so on, which have caused a lot of social problems. I'm not saying people shouldn't drink, I'm not a teetotaler or anything like that. But the point is that these are not crimes in the same category as murder or rape, even the use of hard drugs like crack and heroin. Why are we not talking about these things as public health concerns rather than crimes? I think that's a key issue – how we define crime and how we deal with “classical” criminals.

And – just to broaden that point – if I rob a liquor store and shoot somebody, kill somebody – I might get the death penalty for that. But if I run a company that – let's say – deliberately installs defective artificial hearts in a large number of people and kill them that way – that will never be a consideration. I may never even be criminally prosecuted.

Sure.

So there's an inherent imbalance there. Is white-collar crime somehow more acceptable?

I think it is systemic, and I believe it is considered more “acceptable.” Crime in the pursuit of profit-making. There is nothing more lionized in America today than profit making – the cult of the entrepreneur. It's almost considered a little more natural that these things will happen in this pursuit and it isn't necessarily bad in the same way that, say, drug dealing is considered to be. Ultimately it shows a bias in the system toward – well, not that drug-dealing isn't a capitalist occupation –

Yeah. (laughs)

It certainly shows a bias toward the largest sections of big business that are legalized in capitalism, not only because they get define in large part what is legal and illegal in the system, but because they get to shape perception in their favor. For example, on a consistent basis rap stars [are criticized for] always promoting reckless materialism and it's ruining their communities, and so on – and okay, fine, that's legitimate and we can definitely have a conversation about the content of a lot of rap music – but people aren't talking about Wall Street

bankers who have the most extravagant lifestyles, prey upon society, and are lionized for it. The upper crust. Instead it's look at this Vanity Fair spread about their lives in the Hamptons, which often shows the worst sides of this type of behavior, and yet it's never put into the same conversation. I think it's a perfect example of defining perception. It's a double standard that exists.

I read something that you wrote that struck me: "Bourgeois elections have always played a critical role in channeling dissent into acceptable avenues." Could you expand on that a bit?

Sure. Whenever there is a large upset in society, we always see politicians on either side attempt to speak to that. They try to channel that energy. For example, during the Vietnam War time, during the campaign in 1968 and later with McGovern in 1972, we see this in a number of political movements – the two political parties aren't total inertial dinosaurs. They can see the political waves shifting – and the anti-war movement is a great example in 2006 and 2008 – the Democratic dissent about the Bush war regime was a major issue in the elections, but then we see what happened when [the Democrats] took power. They went forward with what's been happening with the NSA and the drone war and continuing to broaden the "national security," War on Terror imperialist drive around the world. So even though the election was able to suck in large numbers of people interested in opposing these terrible policies, [the elections] ultimately played the role of demobilizing the independent movements.

That's what these electoral campaigns do – they take people out of opposition based on principle and funnel them into opposition based on party and it plays a very key role in making sure there is always an outlet. Because if there's no outlet...I mean, imagine if George Bush had just declared himself Emperor in 2006. People who were already radicalized would have continued their opposition. So if there were no Barack Obama, how would American capitalism have continued to move forward?

That's what this system does.

Right on. Related to that, how do you feel when people call Obama a socialist?

(Laughs) I can only chuckle a little bit. It's so outlandish. But it speaks to the mentality of the far right that the only way they feel they can mobilize is to set up Barack Obama this way. In fact, similar to how the liberals set up Bush – it was all about Bush, not about the system. So now it's all about Obama trying to destroy Americanism with this new brand of creeping socialism. Not only does it set up Obama as a boogeyman but it also reinforces this notion that somehow socialism is worse than capitalism. In a way it makes me chuckle because it's so absurd, but it is an important device the far right is using to delegitimize, for a

large section of the population, the danger of looking to socialism. It also [has worked] to resurrect the idea of a full free-market fundamentalist capitalism.

And doesn't it serve perhaps to define boundaries – to say that Obama is the furthest one could imagine on the left, when in fact he isn't on the left at all?

Totally. And it also associates socialism with Obama rather than an independent opposition. It justifies them. People who might otherwise be interested in what you have to say in terms of socialist politics, attaching it to Obama serves to delegitimize in advance and set up those redlines for people not to accept socialist or more progressive ideas. The messenger compromises the message, as it were.

Yeah. Now just from my perspective, I feel like over the last fifty years, the word "liberal" has ceased to mean anything anymore in terms of actual content. It's been so debased.

I think that's probably true. You see a lot of liberals casting about. People who previously called themselves liberals now want to be called progressive, because of the pejorative connotation...but I think it just speaks to the broader reality of the American social system where the basis for the liberal system in the past was, as I mentioned, following World War II, a dedication to rising living standards and a strong labor movement. The idea of a reformed capitalism has sort of gone by the wayside. It's really cut out the social base of liberalism. These were traditionally based in the rights of unions, the rights of African Americans, so on and so forth, which has been eviscerated in this right wing assault of the last 30 or so years. Liberals have been adrift and trying to re-orient themselves.

Now there is also – and we touched upon this a bit before – but there is a moral dimension to this as well in which, in this country, poverty is automatically equated with low morality while wealth is equated with respect.

I totally agree. People in poverty are consistently derided as being lazy, or having some sort of personal or cultural defect that prevents them from succeeding, whereas wealthy people are highly motivated, genius individuals whose entire existence is what others should copy. This ignores the fact that no one in this country ever makes it on their own. A lot of these people were born into wealthy families but even if they weren't, they benefited from broader social programs such as public universities, all these sorts of things.

There is a high morality placed on those achievements that help the system, whereas if you are in a class of people whose existence shows how it doesn't work, the only way to deal with those people is to demonize them as welfare cheats or something similar.

So what we're really talking about is a propaganda state.

There's no doubt that capitalism couldn't exist if every day, the fallout of capitalism were shown. It could not withstand that kind of sustained critique on its own. These are ingrained biases – they don't even have to be conscious most of the time. If you are just the average person writing for the media who goes through school, does an internship, you don't need a censor to show up in your office or cubicle. You will, by and large, (which is not to indict all journalists), but by and large you will reflect the biases of these institutions which only exist to serve privilege and capitalism in the broadest sense. There is – broadly – a selection bias that exists in the media and politics and so on. They only accept a parameter of ideas that are palatable to the larger social system.

Now I mentioned my affiliation with the Coalition on Political Assassinations, so I've got one last question for you. What do you think about assassination as a tool of politics? Is it an accident that Dr. King, the Kennedys, Brother Malcolm, Little Bobby Hutton, Fred Hampton, these are people trying actively to make a change and are assassinated, whereas other people are not?

I think it is a tool of power, and nothing teaches that more clearly than the drone war. They are attempting to legalize the ability to essentially kill anyone they please. I think ultimately you are correct, and the attempts over the years to kill people in this country have been tools, in addition to all other forms of attack and attempts to delegitimize or stop these movements. They feel that without those leaders, they can either scare others away or hurt the internal infrastructure of these movements.

I don't think it's a coincidence that anytime there is a vast uprising against capitalism or imperialism that political assassinations start to increase and take place among those in the camp of opposition. Now certainly, there is no political equation between the heroes of the 1960s and Al-Qaeda, which is an odious force and I don't want to suggest that at all –

Oh, of course not –

But definitely political assassinations can be a tool of power.

So given this is the situation we are in, what are the best avenues for pursuing real change?

I think that lies in independent mass movements. What we need to do is replace the capitalist system with a whole different system, but how do we get from point A to point B? It's been about organizing around basic principles, whether it's free health care, or working against racism, or mass incarceration, but ultimately

movements that push these ideas independently of the major political parties. If reforms come, then reforms come; I don't think we should be opposed to reform and demand revolution right away. The most important thing is for people to get active in movements that speak to progressive principles and not compromise those principles *vis-à-vis* politicians who want to water them down to make them more palatable to their big time donors. And we've seen with these kinds of movements – civil rights, the labor movement – that independent militant action can truly change society. I think that's the route we have to go.

Great. Now if someone wants specifically to help you out, or the organization you belong to, what should they do?

Sure. My book's website is <http://www.shackledandchained.com>. You can also go to <http://www.liberationnews.org>. It lists some of the things we do, the struggles we're involved in, and it enables people to connect with us.

Right on. Fantastic. Thanks so much for the interview.

Thank you so much, I appreciate it.