“More militancy!” is an oft-heard demand of the left. It is the subject of position papers and propaganda, of academic study and debate. We lament militancy of days past: the wildcat strikes, the mass demonstrations, the fighting movements. But we must not forget that the militancy of yesteryear was not without casualties. In particular, we have inherited the legacy of militants of the recent past. We have our martyrs: some, like Black Panthers George Jackson and Fred
Hampton, were killed. Many others, from a diverse range of movements, completed and continue to serve long prison sentences. Dan Berger’s *The Struggle Within* is an overview of these militants and the movements from which they came.

*The Struggle Within* serves as an excellent primer on United States political prisoners and the relationship of various left movements to the carceral system. Despite his own claim that the book represents only an “introductory and incomplete sketch,” Berger demonstrates an expansive and comprehensive knowledge of US revolutionary movements, covering the New Left, Anti-War, Anti-Imperialist, Black Power, Indigenous liberation, Chicano, Puerto Rican Independence, and Environmentalist movements. While mostly focusing on prisoners of struggles past, in particular those from the 1960s and 1970s, Berger links these to contemporary struggles in a critical chapter on the Patriot Act and repression in the post 9/11 era. This is key, since objectively weaker contemporary movements face increasingly sophisticated state repression, fortified by innovations in surveillance techniques and technologies and backed by new repressive laws.

The slim volume is made up of four chapters: North American Freedom Struggles; Anti-imperialism, Anti-authoritarianism, and Revolutionary non-violence; Earth and Animal Liberation; and Déjà Vu and the Patriot Act, covering the post 9/11 period. Berger moves through each section by chronicling the organizations and movements that produced prominent political prisoners, with special focus on those still locked up. In doing so, he attempts to illustrate the interconnections between the various individuals, organizations and movements he discusses. Some of these connections are easy to demonstrate, such as the (admittedly oftentimes troubled) affinity between white New Leftists and the Black Power movement. Other cases are less clear, although connections can still be identified. For example, Berger links militant environmentalism to the broader left through the figure of Judi Bari, a labor organizer and member of Earth First!, who was car bombed and subject to an attempted frame-up by the FBI. Overall Berger emphasizes that the common thread throughout the diverse movements covered is the experience of state violence, arguing that the “ubiquity of state repression affords an opportunity to forge solidarity be-
between multiple revolutionary movements,” while going on to note that this should not simply trump “contradictions” between and within movements (81). However, without a more robust framework expounding the character of state power, and some exploration of what it is that counts as ‘our’ movements (for example, the Tea Party has also faced state repression), it is unclear at times what exactly the miscellaneous movements of the book share in common.

Perhaps the most significant theoretical claim Berger argues is that mass incarceration in the US is not merely the result of the War on Drugs or premised upon a system of socio-economic repression and cleansing. He argues it is also significantly in response to political and social movements that have, at times, challenged state power. This is an interesting thesis that should be expanded upon, and raises several immediate questions. What does this mean given the current weak position of oppositional movements in relation to the state and capital? Are the institutions of state power expanding to successfully repress increasingly marginal oppositional movements? And if these movements are indeed increasingly marginal, what explains the expansion of state repression (since it cannot be said to be exerted in response to powerful social movements)? This, however, is the book at its most abstract. It also contains helpful and concrete resources. In addition to a relatively robust and systematically organized bibliography, Berger provides a glossary of on-the-ground organizational resources—a refreshing attempt to root the ideas put forward in the book in practice by providing a number of ways for readers to plug in as activists.

Like many thin volumes, the book suffers at times from its brevity. Most critically, readers would benefit from a more in-depth discussion of the categorization of ‘political prisoner’. Berger rightly rejects liberal definitions of ‘prisoners of conscience’—those imprisoned for their beliefs and not necessarily their actions—and asserts that the “state uses the imprisonment of political leaders and rank-and-file activists as a bludgeon against movement victories” (2). We are told that no one in a democracy is tried for his or her political beliefs, only for specific crimes. The fact that those who struggle against power structures are criminalized is erased from the discourse completely. As Berger explains, “Thus the central issue for thinking
about political prisoners is not whether they ‘did it’ but what movements did they come from and what are the broader circumstances surrounding their arrests” (2). This however, is not fully fleshed out. While Berger asserts that “political prisoners serve collective prison time for all those who participated in the movement from which they emerged” (2), it is also true that the militant organizations from which many political prisoners came did not necessarily arise organically from mass movements, but emerged from them as splits. Berger explains that, “time after time, frustration at the limited possibilities of available (i.e., legal) remedies to such entrenched injustice led many activists to seek—and many more support—alternatives options to resistance” (3). These alternatives were some variation of armed struggle or ‘armed propaganda.’ Berger does acknowledge this tension to some degree: “upping the ante through militant, often clandestine, tactics was not intended to stand in for organizing a mass movement (although sectarianism and different strategic priorities have often yielded this in effect if not in intent)” (3). Just as movements can and must reject those who turn on them (such as those who turn state witness), it is also true that successful movements must be able to have principled critique of strategy and tactics of those individuals and groups that comprise them. This is an issue that those working to free political prisoners and those fighting broadly for social change will have to continue to develop.

Despite the book’s title, Berger does not say much about the struggles within prisons, mentioning only briefly that political and politicized prisoners continue to contribute to political movements especially notably “through writing, mentoring younger activists, conducting peer education with other prisoners, and fighting AIDS, misogyny and homophobia” (81). This is especially unfortunate given that Berger has specifically written on the topic elsewhere. In an article entitled “Social Movements and Mass Incarceration,” Berger discusses various parenting programs developed by prisoners in Virginia and New York State. He also emphasizes the critical role of political and politicized prisoners in pioneering peer-based HIV/AIDS programming early in the AIDS crisis. 

Rejecting the prevailing homophobia that led to terrible criminal neglect throughout the United States, these political prisoners saw
the leading campaigns in the gay community. The political prisoners’ orientation towards grassroots organizing and bottom-up mobilization fit perfectly with the peer education and support method, later proven to be the only effective approach among prisoners. (2013, 11)

Likewise one could add the struggles of prisoners to better living and working conditions, from the National Prisoners Reform Association in Massachusetts, to the California Prisoners’ Union or the North Carolina Labor Unions and more. This may be corrected with the publication of Berger’s forthcoming book, Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era (2014).

Overall, The Struggle Within is a contribution to a movement for social change that is aware of its own past and history of repression. Prisons have always been a fact of working class life, and will continue to be institutions that those who fight for a better world cannot ignore. Victims of the class struggle will continue to be locked up just as individuals, organizations, and movements will continue to fight. As Berger thoroughly proves, you can’t jail an idea.

REFERENCES

