

CJA Members Meeting and Launch of the Incarceration Nations Network

29 November 2019

Conversation between Dr Baz Dreisinger and Afua Hirsch

Afua: Thank you so much. It's such a real honour to be here, especially in the presence of this woman who I met first in Jamaica.... (Baz interjects: "all roads lead to Jamaica!")... and all roads lead to the Calabash Literary Festival in Jamaica, but who I subsequently discovered is also quite a major celebrity in this country; mainly because Akala mentions her name almost every time he does an interview in the British media, and I can understand why, because your work really is remarkable and unique, and not just here but Globally. I know that you've just arrived from South Africa; tell us how your launch event, in South Africa, went and give us an overview of what you were aiming to do there.

Baz: Sure, so, welcome everyone, and thank you Afua. I feel humble to be on the same stage as you; a super-woman of many, many trades. And thank you to the Criminal Justice Alliance for hosting both of us to have this conversation. So before talking about the launch I'll try just briefly to outline what the Incarceration Nations Network does, what we're about and why we do it. I think the first thing that needs to be mentioned, although, probably, it goes without saying in this room, is that our fundamental premise is that prisons are evil and they don't make us safer, and they are not the path toward building justice and creating safe communities. So, I feel like that's a premise that just needs to be stated as the preliminary reality and the basis on which the work is. So given that prisons are not making us safer and are being used all over the World as, kind of, tools of oppression of certain designated groups, the question then becomes 'OK then what does make us safer, how to we work towards safer communities and how do we think about solutions to this crisis of mass incarceration around the Globe that has incarcerated at least 11 million people, 3 million of which are not convicted of anything?'

So, having worked within prison systems in the US; from an educational perspective for about 15 years, in New York, mostly in New York, I became very interested in a Global context for all of this. Actually the UK was probably the first country that I started being involved with prison working, from an educational perspective, and that, ultimately, led to my writing Incarceration Nations; the book which is about prisons around the World and is about re-thinking what we do when we lock people up and when we treat crime....when we respond to crime, with prisons. And that all led to, and I know I'm doing the brief 'nutshell' summary, but it led to the birth of the Incarceration Nations Network, which is a Global network that is about innovating and is about radical imagination and It's about elevating, amplifying and promoting innovative justice work around the World; and also creating a Global coalition to address the crisis that is the crisis of mass incarceration. So, as part of that and travelling too, we did two big launch events; one was in New York, as was mentioned and we had one of our Network members from the UK Unlocked Graduates was there and we had a big event in the evening, showcasing their work and getting people to re-think this axiomatic assumption that prisons are what make us safer. Then we got into the more nitty-gritty of different organisations and their work and how they do what they do and why they do what they do at John Jay College of Criminal Justice where I teach the next day. And we did a similar event, in South Africa, at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg and then at Wits University the next day where we had individuals coming from Ghana, from Brazil, from the Netherlands, from the Czech Republic, all sharing what their crisis intervention and/or radical solutions are to the management of mass incarceration. So, now we are all here in London talking about this today and into the evening and will be doing the same in Abuja Nigeria in a couple of weeks. So, it's about elevating and amplifying and really thinking about what solutions look like, on a small scale and also on a big scale.

Afua: And since we're here in London and you have this Global perspective, I often feel, when I'm talking to you, say, a prison activist in Nigeria where the problem of the backlog and long bail detention is so severe, that there's more willingness to accept the fundamental premise that there is a problem where, say, in the UK where, actually, it feels, to me, as if the political climate is very regressive when it comes to the Criminal Justice System. What's your observation about the kind of Global trends and thinking and how much engagement with your message and your mission there is, at the moment?

Baz: So, I think one of the most striking changes that, often, many countries think that their problem is unique. And, the reality is there is nowhere that I've been where the problem isn't almost the same, to varying degrees and, also, impacting different people; particular peoples. And, the reason for that is actually quite simple. Which is that, this idea of the whole modern prison system is really a cut-and-paste model of justice that was formulated in Europe and acted in the US and then foisted on the World through colonialism and globalisation. And so the idea of responding to crime by warehousing away human beings is this cut and paste model of justice. It is just a matter of, kind of, to what degree, how bad is the backlog of cases awaiting trial because of these old Colonial legal systems that do not fit where they are imposed and who with the group of others that you, as a society, have designated to be particularly targeted, mass criminalised and then mass incarcerated by the system. So, obviously in the US we are talking about African Americans, and also light Latinos. We are also talking about; currently in the UK the population of black and middle-eastern people in prison is, per-capita, higher now than...somebody's out-done the US. Actually there's another country; Aboriginal and Indigenous people in New Zealand and Australia also out-do the US, in terms of per-capita. So, whether we are talking about poor people throughout the global South in a post-colonial context, Aboriginal people, there's a targeted population everywhere. So, and the reason for that is the same in that these are products of slavery, of colonialism of this cut and paste model of justice, where there's this absurd notion that, given how many varieties of cultures and ways of thinking there are throughout the World, that justice should look the same, basically everywhere, which is justice should look like a prison cell.

Afua: I was doing an event with Malcolm Gladwell on Monday, about his book, which is totally not related to this, but it was interesting that it just came out, in conversation, that this is something that he feels strongly about, and he was saying that this is probably the only aspect of public policy which has been unchanged in two or three thousand years. It's crazy. I find that there is, almost, among progressive people this consensus. But, when you look at the media narrative; the mainstream media narrative, it could not be further away. How much is this media narrative about needing to lock people up and throw away the key, one of the problems that you have to target with your work?

Baz: The media narrative is probably, if not the biggest, one of the biggest because, and I am very intrigued to hear that you say Malcolm Gladwell sees it this way and I'm not surprised because Malcolm is very interested in innovation and in up-ending our assumptions. The biggest problem is that there is a knee-jerk reaction that everyone just assumes 'do the crime - do the time', that prisons are just...prisons have always been around; that we've just always locked people up. Prisons have always existed as an institution, but mainly as an institution that was a path to justice; some place where you held people while you determine what justice was suppose to look like. The idea of creating these sentences and locking people up as an exclusive response to crime is a relatively recent invention. But the public, speaking generally, doesn't know that, so they just assume there's no other way to do things. They've never been shown that there's other ways to do things. Not only that, but, you have everywhere there's a really sensationalised portrait of the people inside and, again, people of colour, people who are coming from historically marginalised populations and so there's an invested effort in keeping them there by way of these narratives. And so, you end up with media representation that only further solidifies the approach that this is the only way to go. And, that these people are so awful that it's a good thing that we are warehousing them away. And so, changing the

narrative and changing the discourse; getting people to talk differently and think differently by all mediums. And that's why the work that I do...I'm a writer, like you, so, of course, writing is my first medium, but I also have an Art instillation and collaboration with Hank Willis Thomas, whose an African-American artist, where we took writing by people in prison all around the World and collectively created a massive walk-through instillation that just debuted on the High Line Park in New York City, which I'd love to bring to London. We're taking it on tour in the US and also globally. And all it does is present to you the humanity of the people who have been warehoused away; which is a pretty radical notion, even in the US where this is a particular topic, let alone in other places in the world where no-one wants to address this and take this on at all.

Afua: So one of the ways of changing people's perspective is to show them there is an alternative. Can you just give us an outline of some of the innovative alternatives you've seen from your work, travelling the World? What are the best examples that stand out?

Baz: So there are....I should say that the Incarceration Nations Network is a platform in the literal and metaphorical sense. We're a platform...we elevate people. We also, on the website have Incarceration Nations Network .com. I spent the past year, and change, building a website that showcases and elevates strong work. It's called The Platform, you can see it on the website and we elevate 82 particular programmes; I'm now going to be expanding it in the next year too, with a focus on alternatives to incarceration programmes and also harm reduction programmes as an alternative to the war on drugs. So, you can learn about some of the specific initiative there. We also have the data base of almost 800 programmes around the worlds that are in this space at all. But, when it comes to really strong programmes, it's been a privilege to travel around and see the work that people are doing in very hostile environments, especially. And so I think first, of course, about restorative justice programmes the fundamentals of any way forward out of this mess has to be a restorative approach; where we are focusing on the needs of the people who've been harmed, and truly allowing for a system that revolves around them. And so, I think about the work of Impact Justice and Common Justice in the US who are radical restorative justice programmes, even taking on instances of violence and sexual violence; that are allowing for restorative conferencing in lieu of incarceration, and I emphasise 'in lieu of', it's not in addition to. So, really incredible and also the National Restorative Justice programme of Costa Rica had a judge at our launch in New York. They actually institute it's only a couple of years old but it's a National Government Restorative Justice programme that sits in their courts, so they're diverting people out of the system.

I think about, of course I am...education....I come first and foremost as an educator. Always I think about education programmes that are doing lots of strong work; University and Prison partnerships, as exist here in the UK. We have a representative from the Pentonville...the programme happening at Pentonville and Westminster. Articolo3, who came in from Italy, who facilitates access to education, higher education, University level education for people in prison in Milan who are able to leave prison for the day and go to University and then come back. That kind of.... anything that is an open fluid, borderless; in terms of a barbed wire type of arrangement, is something I support because it's so unlike a prison as to not even be worthy of the name Prison, where you're actually integrating people into communities. The New Zealand Youth Justice System is founded on a Maori principle and is entirely restoratively run and again it takes people out of the traditional system, of locking people up, and allows them to confront those that they've harmed and then make amends and go on and make reparation. The last one I'll mention, and it's hard to pick because there is actually so much good happening and strong elevating work happening, but justice reinvestment...the Justice Reinvestment Movement that I've seen in parts of the US, but, in Australia, Just Reinvest is a partner based in Sydney and what they're doing is pushing for taking the funds and the money that's being funnelled in to building more prisons, which are not making us safer, which are further damaging communities and a cycle of harm, and, instead investing that into communities and community led initiatives. Because I think the most important thing that needs to be

said is that this is not about....in fact I am a minority in the movement in the US currently; being a white person who has not been in prison and who hasn't had family members who have been in prison. Much of the movement is being led by those who are directly impacted. So, that means not only people who have lived prison but also people who come from communities that are over incarcerated at mass rates. So, the Justice Reinvestment Movement is about turning to communities and saying 'what do you want and what makes you safer?', not we're going to impose this on you in a talk-down fashion, but let's talk about what they'll say for communities together.

Afua: I know that the Criminal Justice Alliance report you all have on your chairs is about change from within and that the power of harnessing people who have lived experience of the Criminal Justice System to really be the force for change. But, I just want to develop that thought about restorative justice a bit further. I think a lot of people don't realise that restorative justice reduces re-offending. How, what would it look like to scale up restorative justice work so that it does become an alternative to incarceration?

Baz: So, that, I think, is currently happening right now; which is that, I should say, that, number one, there are remarkably few large...there are no large scale restoratives. Even the Costa Rica office, which is a National office, is still very small and still taking on relatively smaller offences. The most restorative justice programmes that exist, globally speaking, that I've seen, and it is part of the I.N.N's mission, going forward, is to investigate this further, are still fairly small. But, I don't think that's a bad thing. Boutique and small and focused is part of what we need. So, when I think about scaling up restorative justice, I think about a lot of very intensive community-centred, tailor-made approaches. As opposed to building, you know, what we want to avoid is this mass of prisons which was made from the cut-and-paste model of just here's the one thing again, top down impose it. But, rather, how do we think about what are the needs of the communities, and what are the needs of people who are harmed. We know, overall, that it's not only through restorative justice are they more successful in reducing re-offending rates but, most importantly, study after study has shown us that they are actually more successful in making people who have been harmed feel satisfied with the justice system. And isn't that what the justice system is supposed to be first and foremost about; giving what the people who've been harmed what they need and ensuring that they are safe and that we are all safe. So, I think, going forward, and that can never be tailor-made...rather that always has to be tailor-made, it can never be cut-and-paste and cookie-cutter. So, I think it's about scaling-up in that fashion; using the already powerful models that exist.

Afua: It's a metaphor really, isn't it, for the general legacy of Colonialism which is take basically Victorian ideas, Victorian English ideas and impose them on the rest of the World. And that is just as relevant to education and employment and healthcare. Is this a kind-of Trojan-Horse; if you can get people to get this and tap into their authentic cultural approaches, their pre-colonial ideas that could see a wider social transformation of public policy?

Baz: I would love to think that. I mean, I think prisons definitely are it all. Certainly it is all integrated, when we think about education, when we think about....I always say that one day I'll write a book on hospitals, prisons, schools. Because in many ways the problems that afflict them all, and which stem from this idea of a cookie-cutter approach and yes, this legacy of a Colonialism and, certainly in the US, slavery and that legacy as well. But, I think it's that we have to think on an integrated level about all of these things, and we have to think how we move past that. The image that comes to mind, when I think about how colonialism has impacted justice in the World, is the image in the court rooms of so many countries in Africa, and in the Caribbean, where there are Judges wearing the wigs and the Washington Post did a nice little piece about this, like two years ago. But, just that very image says it all. It's a sweltering courtroom, here's this African Judge, wearing this wig, sweating; it doesn't fit. It doesn't fit and this is true about legal systems. The whole legal system, the approach throughout the post-colonial World just does not fit.

Even when I think about the United States and forms of indigenous justice, this is starting to be a big topic of conversation in Canada, around why are we persisting in this when it was imposed and when there are other forms of justice had pre-seeded it, that, in many ways, were a better fit.

Afua: You mentioned your work on higher education as well. Can you tell us a bit more about your 'Prison to College Pipeline' project in New York and why the focus on higher education, why is that the particular area that you feel is a strategic way of changing people's lives?

Baz: Good question. So the 'Prison to College Pipeline' is a programme that I started a decade ago in New York that is, as the name implies, I know we in the US have been talking for some time and I know it's a topic here as well; the school to prison pipeline which is the way that our system is criminalising, in particular in the US young African American's and Latinos, young people of colour and just funnelling them directly into the criminal justice system. And so the idea of the 'Prison to College Pipeline' is to reverse that flow, and to send people from prison to University. So what we do is offer...we are (A) a University programme in prison, in New York, but we also guarantee a place for people when they come home from prison...in University, when they come home so we work with them as a re-entry programme and the idea is to make education the centre-piece of their time in prison but then also their time after prison, upon release. Of course it's founded on the idea that education is transformative. It changes people. It changes not only what they know intellectually but who they are and how they approach life and how they think about their place in the World. And, of course, the premise of it is that, and I feel very strongly about this when it comes to all work related to prison; nothing that we do in prison, should not continue when a person comes home from prison; because otherwise our efforts are in vain and we need to support people on all ends of this continuum. And, why higher education is that, it's so ...now, I'm an advocate of all education, so bring it all on and on all levels. It happens that I am a University Professor but more importantly I think it's also about setting the bar high, in terms of people inside. A lot of people imagine that, and I've been in many countries, we've also collaborated in other countries to bring versions of the 'Prison to College Pipeline', appropriate, fitting versions to South Africa, and, I've had a lot of conversations that the programme at Pentonville is inspired, but very much its own. And, in Jamaica and in Trinidad and always, and then Brazil I've heard these comments made 'what do you mean giving them a University education? They need to learn how to read.' Because, there's this assumption, that all these people inside don't even have the skills, when, in fact, that's totally not the case. So, what 'Prison to College Pipeline' and other kinds of University partnerships are about, is saying this is not just about number one, we need to recognise the brilliance that we've warehoused away and we need to offer that brilliance access, that it was denied, which is probably what got them into prison in the first place, and so I think of it as a Civil Rights issue. In terms, not even a criminal justice one, it's about giving people first-chances at education and access, which they should have had to begin with and are owed, to begin with. And, it's also about saying we don't just want people to come out of prison and not re-offend; we want people to come out of prison and....well, for one, we don't want people to go in the first place, but should they go and come out, they should have the opportunity to be the great person that they were meant to be had not systemic racism and oppression gotten in the way of that happening. So, we set the bar high. People ask me often do your students go back to prison and some of them have. It's very, very hard and that's the biggest understatement of the day. When you came out of prison there's every obstacle. But, the key is not just about...that's setting the bar really low, saying 'oh they didn't go back to prison.' What are they doing? What are their brilliant achievements? How have they attained happiness and fulfilment and the purpose that they were denied, as a result of legacies of oppression and racism?

Afua: How much is educating people about those legacies of racism and oppression a necessary step towards building a movement behind this work?

Baz: It is the most crucial step, especially in relation to what we were talking about earlier, as far as educating the public. People need to understand the historical context of this, and not just for a history lesson. But, because it is impossible to understand where this comes from without understanding....I mean, in the UK, colonialism and the history of Windrush and the legacies of oppression and racism here and what caused people....essentially funnelled people directly into the criminal justice system.

Afua: These are all the things that we are least good at explaining and talking about in this country.

Baz: And in the US in the context of slavery. We've had help, and I was just saying this earlier today, when I started doing this work in the US it was very unpopular and in the last number of years that's shifted but we still have a load of work to do with the World's largest jailor, and I'm not always confident that we are moving in the right direction. But, at the very least, it's popular. It's an 'in' topic, it's talked about. And we've had help from brilliant writers like Michelle Alexander in 'The New Jim Crow' and film makers like Ava DuVernay with the documentary film '13th' and if anyone hasn't seen 13th you should see 13th. What that did was to break this down for people in a way that it was just undeniable to recognise that the people in prison cells are direct descendants of slavery and 'Jim Crow', and it's not some conspiracy theory that's out there it's just fact, reality. And I was saying today I level the challenge, because I know in the UK there will be a version of 13th. I don't even want to call it a version of 13th, it's the UK's narrative around those things. Things that will break this down in a way that people will understand. And when people understand history then it becomes a lot harder just to look away and say they're criminals. They're not criminals they are products of a deliberate system. (Applause from audience)

Afua: So apart from...and this is a challenge to everyone in this room, including maybe me; making the British version of the 13th, for our context, what can we, in this room, and members of the Criminal Justice Alliance and people who care about this subject in the UK; what can we do to support your work and what is next for the Incarceration Nations Network?

Baz: That's quite a tongue twister, I should have thought about that when I called it that! We just say I.N.N. So, what people can do...I mean I think number one, I always say... it's so corny, but, 'each one teach one'. The discourse is part of it and you have to talk about this stuff and you have to talk in settings where it's unpopular, like those cocktail parties where nobody want to hear about it. And, when people use language that's inappropriate like 'offender' and 'criminal', language that takes the humanity out of people, as opposed to talking whatever language you want to hear...I mean, I'm not imposing what we talk about 'formally incarcerated' and 'incarcerated' people but we're terming citizens whatever it is using a language of humanity and not be afraid to correct others when they don't. And not being afraid to just engage with people on this stuff, even though it's not, you know, so sexy in a conversation and it might make people uncomfortable. So what! Justice shouldn't make people uncomfortable. So I think that's critical. And, another thing, on a totally practical level, I know this is true in the US, its true here, there are people who've come out of prison looking for jobs everywhere. If you have a company, if you know of someone who has a company, however big or small. Be in touch with the organisations. I mean the Criminal Justice Alliance is also a network of change-makers, be in touch with them and say 'Hey, is anybody hiring?' 'How can I help somebody get a job?' I'm always out there begging jobs; every talk I do I say is anybody hiring because I have a student who needs a job. I'm shameless about asking for that. So, I think that's another thing that people can do. Of course financial support to organisations doing the work, again whether it's in the UK. On I.N.N. you can look at our platform. If you are from or have roots in another country you want to know about an organisation in Brazil that's doing strong work. We can put you in touch with that organisation so that you can support

them in whatever way and get their message out. And I think, as far as what's next for I.N.N we're expanding the platform, and I'm really focussing on alternatives to incarceration as this systemic change, and I hate that term because alternatives to incarceration implies that incarceration is the main event and everything else are these little alternatives when, in fact, incarceration is the absolute last resort; in the world that I live in and my mind and that I'm working towards, and I think we all are. So, by focussing on how we approach this from a really radical systemic perspective and how we build correctional facilities that actually correct and don't warehouse. So, I'll be doing that and then more events that are raising awareness, that are bringing people together doing this work so that they can collaborate and share strong practices and learn from each other and be sustained by doing this work in more places around the World.

Afua: Everyone in this room has something they can contribute, even if it's just spreading the word.

Baz: 100%