

# AMERICA'S PRIVATIZED REPRESSION

Corey Robin has an important post on America's privatized repression. He starts by describing how, after watching a panel on Occupy Wall Street in which she appeared, the freelancer who got arrested while she was covering the Brooklyn Bridge arrests lost her relationship with the NYT.

Two Fridays ago, I attended an excellent panel discussion on Occupy Wall Street sponsored by Jacobin magazine. It featured Doug Henwood and Jodi Dean—representing a more state-centered, socialist-style left—and Malcolm Harris and Natasha Lennard, representing a more anarchist-inflected left.

Lennard is a freelance writer who's been covering the OWS story for the *New York Times*. After a video of the panel was brought to the *Times*'s attention, the paper reviewed it as well as Lennard's reporting and decided to take her off the OWS beat. Despite the fact, according to a spokeswoman for the *Times*, that "we have reviewed the past stories to which she contributed and have not found any reasons for concern over that reporting."

Even more troubling, Lennard may not be hired by the *Times* again at all. Says the spokeswoman: "This freelancer, Natasha Lennard, has not been involved in our coverage of Occupy Wall Street in recent days, and we have no plans to use her for future coverage."

Robin goes on to note that this kind of repression—and not outright government repression—is really the core of social control in this country.

Such political motivated firings fit into a much broader pattern in American history that— in my first book *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*—I call “Fear, American Style.” While people on the left and the right often focus on state repression—coercion and intimidation that comes from and is wielded by the government (politically driven prosecution and punishment, police violence, and the like)—the fact is that a great deal of political repression happens in civil society, outside the state. More specifically, in the workplace.

Think about McCarthyism. We all remember the McCarthy hearings in the Senate, the Rosenbergs, HUAC, and so on. All of these incidents involve the state. But guess how many people ever went to prison for their political beliefs during the McCarthy era? Less than 200 people. In the grand scheme of things, not a lot. Guess how many workers were investigated or subjected to surveillance for their beliefs? One to two out of every five. And while we don’t have exact statistics on how many of those workers were fired, it was somewhere between 10 and 15 thousand.

There’s a reason so much of American repression is executed not by the state but by the private sector: the government is subject to constitutional and legal restraints, however imperfect and patchy they may be. But an employer is not.

Now Robin lays out this argument in the context of frustrations that anarchists and libertarians don’t get this.

In the last few months, I’ve had a fair number of arguments with both libertarians and anarchists about the

state. What neither crew seems to get is what our most acute observers have long understood about the American scene: however much coercive power the state wields—and it's considerable—it's not, in the end, where and how many, perhaps even most, people in the United States have historically experienced the raw end of politically repressive power. Even force and violence: just think of black slaves and their descendants, confronting slaveholders, overseers, slave catchers, Klansmen, chain gangs, and more; or women confronting the violence of their husbands and supervisors; or workers confronting the Pinkertons and other private armies of capital.

It's an important point, particularly as you distinguish between the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street. The former, because it emphasizes the oppression of government power, will tend to increase oppression in this country as it ultimately helps the Koch brothers accrue more power. Which is undoubtedly why big corporations have funded it. Whereas the latter—to the extent that it focuses on bankers—points to the real source of power in this country.

But Robin's point is important for another reason.

Private repression—as opposed to force, the actual physical violence Robin describes at the end—depends on integration into the system. Not only does it depend on the plausibility that someone can get a job in this economy—which, for some people, is not plausible. But it increasingly depends on integration in some dominant areas of the economy, banking with Bank of America, for example, as opposed to a local bank that has itself been screwed by the government's determination to help the big banks at the expense of the local banks.

Because the concentrated centers of power in

this country have gotten so removed from any accountability to the people they're looting, it increases the possibility that people can opt out of the system that is key to enforcing their compliance.