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The Function of Prison

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In modern republics, the function of prison is said to be correction. When individuals break laws that uphold the common good, the conventional wisdom goes, they need to be punished or otherwise taught to be more socially cooperative and generous. In my experience with incarceration, however, the only thing that prison teaches is obedience. A “corrected” citizen is one who internalizes prison bars even on the streets.

Prison serves as a constant threat against all who would oppose what governments and corporations do with our collective resources. A critic might point out that prison is only a threat to dissidents who break the law, but what it comes down to is that there are no legal means to fundamentally change the government. Elections are simply a Darwinian means of weeding out representatives (of the elite) whose populist rhetoric is less convincing. If all you want from your government is some new gun law or corporate accountability standard, you may find your democracy fulfilling (provided you can muster about a hundred thousand person-hours of volunteer work, two hundred thousand dollars of donations, and provided the corporations or resident religious fundamentalists in the government don't put up too much of a fight, and also provided you don't mind that these new rules will be bent occasionally for the rich and powerful). But if what you want is a society that values human and environmental interests over Machiavellian state and corporate interests, and most people do at some level, then you're out of luck; your government will not represent you. There is no consent of the governed; we were all born subjects, whereas the government is not born out of our initiative or participation. In fact, it functions best without us. If the only option you have is to consent, that's not consensus: it's submission.

Our hypothetical critic might also mention that we have freedom of speech, and that is all we need to ensure we can make an impact on our society. Leaving aside the particulars of the fact that respect for free speech in this country is arbitrary and subject to restriction, I would prefer to relate an observation I made while incarcerated. Locked away in a maximum security cell, I had more “freedom of speech” than I did while in minimum security prison, and I could certainly criticize, even cuss at, my guards more than I could get

away with against police or other officials on the outside. What it comes down to is that words cannot bring down the walls of power; in “the hole” you can yell all you want. It is most instructive that as inmates descend the security levels as they get closer to release, they are trained increasingly not to speak out. On the outside, “super-minimum security” as it should be known, people are trained not to resist, and they are trusted to remain outside of prison so long as they demonstrate they are not a threat to the established order.

Of course, suppression of dissent isn't the only function of a prison, and in the U.S. it's actually a minor function because so few Americans engage in dissent. At least in the middle class, there is almost no concern for such intangibles as freedom, as long as gas is cheap and luxurious cars plentiful. Being the most consumerist, U.S. citizens are more inclined towards fascism and totalitarianism than any other people I know. Americans will buy anything, whether it's the latest politician's lie or the newest bit of cheap plastic crap from Wal-Mart. One lie that has been bought for much too long is that prisons perform a service for society, when in reality they serve to disempower black, latino, and indigenous communities by locking away what often amounts to a majority of certain age groups from these communities, and generally for offenses as harmless as drug possession (which in the U.S. has the potential to bring a life sentence). Prisons also provide cheap, coerced labour; for less than a dollar an hour (often not enough to cover the expenses of prison life), prisoners work making products for government agencies and the military. In fact, the Constitutional amendment that outlawed slavery specifically and intentionally opened a loophole that allowed forced labour in the event of incarceration.

In the time it takes the world's “civilized peoples” to relearn how to live and interact at a level higher than that of trained dogs, responding only to immediate reward and punishment, I hope we can all extend a greater degree of solidarity and support to the millions of people whose lives are being incrementally eaten by the world's prisons.