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Then and now: Above, inmates at the Ohio State Penitentiary during a 1952 riot that started with complaints over food. At right, Attica, 1971.

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Politics Goes To Prison

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JOHN DEWEY once observed that you can put a man in a penitentiary but you cannot make him penitent. The truth of this statement seems to have been validated by the spate of prison uprisings in the United States during the summer and fall of 1971. Its supreme substantiation can be seen in the Attica uprising.

The mere fact of the revolts is considerably less significant than their style and mode. American prisons, traditionally, have not been radical places. Indeed, precisely the opposite phenomenon was observable—that "old cons" were among the most patriotic, system-oriented class of Americans. When the nation was threatened, prison inmates could always be called upon to volunteer for service, donate blood or render other patriotic duties. During the early years of the Vietnam war the Pentagon was besieged by requests from prisoners to enlist in order to fight communism. The hapless political dissenter found guilty of conspiracy or contempt of Congress would find a hostile reception in the federal prisons. In a curious way, all the civic virtues were found in their most extreme form among men barred by law from exercising them in the population at large.

In the days when Wallace Beery, James Cagney and George Raft embodied, in the popular mind, the spirit of the "big house," there were prison riots, to be sure, but these were apolitical affairs without coloration of radicalism. Bad food, brutality and other flaws in the system would have the cons rapping away at the bars with their tin cups and banging their utensils in the dining hall. Stoolies and finks would receive retribution for ratting on the honest cons in some dark corner of the license-plate shop or the mattress plant and rough justice would again prevail.

The Hollywood prison may never have really existed, but in the popular mind it was an authentic institution. Prison was depicted not as a form of social control and a final victimization of the oppressed but as a rough and ready fellowship of basically good guys who happened to run afoul of the law. The black prisoner was invariably the best baritone in the house who would sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," as Cagney or Raft was trundled off to the gas chamber.

A Changed View of Crime

WHAT BECAME of this community of likeable rogues? What caused the change in the public perception of prisons from fraternity houses with bars to seething dens of revolutionary rhetoric and anti-system violence? The forces that have engineered these changes are those which have been at work on American society as a whole. Prisons reflect, after all, the general pathology and could not be long insulated. In some instances, events in prisons actually anticipated those which were later to affect American society.

Perhaps the most important factor in the radicalizing of American prisons was the establishment in many minds of the political and social roots of criminality. Those who have run afoul of the law are not unaware of the environmental conditions which may have contributed to their plight. And it is no small amount of comfort to them to depict themselves as victims of society rather than as aggressors against it. Individual unlawful acts, accordingly, become politicized, for if the origins of criminality can be laid at the feet of an unfeeling and exploitative society, then depredations against that society are raised to the status of armed protest.

"Rape," according to Eldridge Cleaver in "Soul on Ice," "was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values . . . I wanted to send waves of consternation throughout the white race."

Ghetto blacks did not need sociological explanations to recognize that criminal acts by oppressed people have at least the coloration of politics if not its essence. If governments, labor unions, corporations and the entire panoply of organized society conspire to thwart ambition and stunt aspiration, who is to say that attacks upon them are not insurrectionary? And who is to say that once society has condemned the criminal he will not point the accusing finger at society and proclaim himself a political prisoner?

The relationship between social dislocation, economic deprivation and criminality is well established. As the Civil War and its attendant social upheavals created Jesse James and the Depression spawned Pretty Boy Floyd and Bonnie and Clyde, so did the ghetto squalor of modern America give rise to George Jackson.

Depression America understood and, in large measure, identified with the bank robbers who cut a wide swath through the Midwest in the 1930s. A relatively prosperous America of the 1970s finds it harder to place in perspective the 18-year-olds who knock over gas stations and rip off candy stores. Yet there is a depression, every bit as devastating and pervasive as the one in the 1930s, which now affects ghetto communities in America. All the indicators are there—unemployment running to over 14 per cent, business failures, bloated relief rolls and family dislocation. Watts, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Northeast Washington are latter-day microcosms of Depression America. The Bureau of Labor Satistics knows this, economists know it, and above all, the ghetto residents know it, and it provides them with a context into which law-breaking is placed.

Political Staging Areas

JESSE JAMES would probably not, in his wildest dreams, have interpreted his acts in political terms, but contemporary law-breakers find both comfort and justification in doing so, and this is the second important reason for the radicalization of the prison populations. The last decade has seen a politicization of virtually every aspect of American society. The civil rights campaign, the War on Poverty, the assassination of major political figures and a decade of war have served to paint almost every human interaction with political content. Schools have become politicized as have courts and the police, and it should not be surprising that prisons have as well.

The content of this politicization is as important as its very fact. For the prisons, rather than becoming agents for modifying behavior along more socially acceptable lines and devices for the re-integration of offenders, have, instead, become staging areas for anti-system behavior. This is accomplished by both direct and indirect means.

Indirectly, the very brutality and rigor of the prisons serves as a device to inculcate in prisoners the idea that society, as embodied in the prison officialdom, demands penitence, contrition and resignation. The premium is placed on punishment rather than rehabilitation. A society enraged by soaring crime rates demands that prisons exact retribution, and they do so with a vengeance. Very often this retribution is exacted by the inmates from the inmates; by the hardened criminals on the first offenders; by the old on the young; and by the hardened and by the unreconstructed on the uninitiated. Brutality, acts of homosexual submission, and extortion all take place under the supervision of prison guards.

But the hands-off policy has other and more direct consequences. Left to their own devices and saddled with the responsibility for their own rehabilitation, prisoners become willing converts to all manner of doctrines, ideologies and beliefs that purport to show that society is wrong and they are its victims. Those interpretations are self-consciously political in nature. They bespeak the prisoner's craving for self-esteem and hammer away at the injustices levied on inmates by society.

The Black Muslims

UNQUESTIONABLY, the most effective and long-standing of these ideologies which have found a fertile medium in the prisons are the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. The ideology of the Black Muslims fits in neatly with prison life. Self-abnegation, puritanical morals, indictments of the iniquities of white-dominated society, invocations of pride in race—all of these have an electric effect on the corrupted, the unworthy, the dispossessed and the victimized.

The effect on Malcolm Little, former pimp and hustler and inmate of Norfolk Prison Colony, was galvanic. In late 1948, prompted by a letter from his brother Reginald, a convert to Islam, Malcolm wrote to Elijah Muhammad. The leader of the Black Muslims wrote back, enclosing a $5 bill and telling Malcolm that "the black prisoner symbolized white society's crime of keeping black men oppressed and deprived and ignorant, and unable to get decent jobs, turning them into criminals." This was all that was required for the conversion of the man who was to assume the name Malcolm X.

The effect of the teachings of Elijah Muhammad has been equally great on other young blacks languishing in prison—a call for pride in self and people, an invocation of self-esteem, and the creation of a system of belief. The impact of the Muslims on the Attica uprising was considerable—both in terms of the formulation of issues and the preponderant role of Muslims in the leadership of the rebellion.

Malcolm X, in his turn, became not only a bearer of the gospel of Islam but a revered figure in his own right, holding forth the promise of redemption to other black prisoners. One of those who saw in Malcolm's conversion a model for himself was Eldridge Cleaver, who wrote in "Soul on Ice":

"Malcolm X had a special meaning for black convicts, he had risen from the lowest depths to the greatest

heights. For this reason he was a symbol of hope, a model for thousands of black convicts who found themselves in the vicious PPP cycle: prison-parole-prison. One thing that the judges, policemen and administrators of prisons seem never to have understood, and for which they do not make any allowances, is that Negro convicts, basically, rather than see themselves as criminals and perpetrators of misdeeds, look upon themselves as prisoners of war, the victims of a vicious, dog-eat-dog social system that is so heinous as to cancel out their own malefactions: in the jungle there is no right and wrong."

Here was cogent justification of one's transgression—a theory by which the sinner is converted to the one who is sinned against. If, after all, society in its transcendent evil created barriers to survival too insurmountable that crime becomes an acceptable way of life, who is at fault? Black men, languishing in prison could seize upon this interpretation, judge their own acts by it, and experience a spiritual vindication.

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Leaders of the Attica prison revolt confer with New York State Corrections Commissioner Russell G. Oswald, at bottom left.

The Panther Program

BUT THERE WERE limitations in the teaching of Elijah Muhammad that both Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver were to discover—that personal redemption through faith, dietary restrictions, piety and commitment to racial regeneration were not sufficient to pierce the web of social, legal, and economic snares that had entrapped them and other ghetto blacks. Politically based oppression demanded politically centered answers. Malcolm was moving in the direction of a comprehensive social theory when he was killed. Cleaver did carry it further and became the most intellectually respected figure in the Black Panther Party, exceeding both Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in his competence as an ideologue.

It is not surprising, then, that the Panthers should have developed a strong following among black inmates. For here was a group which not only condemned the American system of justice directly, through its 10-point program, but began to actively organize the jails in a political rather than in a merely cultural and ethical fashion.

The very heart of the Panther program dealt directly with the grievances of the black prison population. Article 8 of the program calls for "freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails . . . because they have not received a fair and impartial trial." The Panthers do not say that all black men are innocent of crimes but rather that improperly selected juries composed of people who do not appreciate ghetto conditions are unqualified to convict blacks. This unquestionably struck a responsive chord in the minds of many black prison inmates.

From its very inception, the Black Panther Party undertook a program of establishing cadres in prisons, publicizing *causes celebres* (such as the Soledad Brothers) and providing social services for the families of inmates.

Chapters of the Panthers were set up last winter at San Quentin Prison and the Vacaville facility in California. The Black Panther, the newspaper of the party, began a series of exposes of prison conditions. The paper charges brutality at the Patuxent Institution in Maryland, San Quentin, Vacaville and Baltimore City Jail while demanding the release of New Haven defendant Ericka Huggins, Angela Davis, and the Soledad Brothers.

The party also began providing free bus service to prisons for the families of prisoners. A notice in the Aug. 21, 1971, issue of The Black Panther announced that, "We have regularly scheduled trips to Statesville, Joliet, Vandalia, Menard, Dwight Women's Reformatory, Pontiac, and Vienna State Penitentiaries." By involving themselves in a kind of social welfare function, the Panthers have made themselves highly visible both "on the yard" and outside as well.

The black prison population is a constituency that is simply not served by predominantly middle-class black organizations, and the Panthers, with their recruitment emphasis aimed squarely at the *lumpenproletariat* — a Marxian designation for the lowest elements in society—have introduced, at the very least, a racial idiom to the protest of black prisoners.

White Radicals Too

BUT IT IS CLEARLY not only the black inmate who has been radicalized but the white prisoner as well. It is much harder to assess the impact on the white inmate, but there is strong evidence that he too is being changed by the radicalization of the prison population. At least part of the reason for this is the relatively large influx, in recent years, of middle-class, politically aware whites who have run afoul of the narcotics laws, the draft laws, and those jailed for various radical "actions" such as demonstrations, bombings, riots and destruction of government and private property. For these people, the prisons represent a

continuation of their radical activities by other means. Their effect has already been felt.

The Berrigan brothers have made their mark on the federal prison at Danbury, Conn., and Sam Melville, killed during the Attica uprising, was said to have had a profound effect on other prisoners with his political astuteness and calculated disobedience. Dana Beal of the Yippies and John Sinclair of the White Panthers are not likely to be any less political for their incarceration, nor would any of the long list of political fugitives still at large.

A cursory glance at the FBI wanted posters provides the names of the following people, any one of whom could cause a warden to lose sleep: Katherine Power, a former Brandeis undergraduate wanted for murder and theft of government property; Leo Burt, David Fine and Karleton Armstrong, wanted for sabotage in connection with the blast at the University of Wisconsin Mathematics Center; Eldridge Cleaver, wanted for assault with intent to commit murder and now in Algeria; Bernardine Dohrn and Kathy Boudin of the Weather Underground, wanted for mob action, riot and conspiracy; Bill Ayers, Jeff Jones, Howie Machtinger, John Jacobs and Mark Rudd, also of the Weather Underground, wanted for riot and conspiracy charges, to name just a few. One can only imagine the impact of several of these activists in a prison population.

What is the answer to the problem of placing highly vocal, politically aware and unquestionably unrepentant young radicals within the confines of a prison subculture which is increasingly restive, rebellious and favorably disposed to having their grievances couched in broader political terms? For even with only a minuscule percentage of the prison population being composed of "political prisoners," radicalization is already proceeding apace. Prison conditions are so brutal and punitive that only the merest scraps on political kindling can set off insurrections.

Special facilities for "incorrigibles" (meaning radicals) have been proposed by Vice President Agnew, Governor Reagan, the prison chaplain at Attica, and Leo Zeferretti, head of the New York Correctional Affairs Benevolent Association, among others. Perhaps this might solve the problem if we wished to get into the business of establishing political prisons, but even if we did, what assurances would there be that oppressive prison conditions would not create new "incorrigibles"? What guarantees would there be that the political context of criminality had not proceeded so far in the minds of ghetto dwellers that the segregation of the politically inclined prisoner would not be an impossible task?

For we have begun to see already in the ghettos of America a new moral interpretation of crime as not an aberration but a norm—a behavioral adaptation to oppression. This is a tacitly political viewpoint and the jails and prisons of America cannot be insulated from it. For every overt, committed radical sent to jail there are 10 others who are ready to explain and justify their crimes in political terms after the fact. Prison conditions do not inhibit the growth of this tendency, they accentuate it.

American prisons may well be supplanting the campuses as the most radical institutions in America. In the "hole" and "on the yard" may come the most decisive link-up between the ideas of the New Left and the community of the oppressed. At Attica we may have seen only its first manifestations.