

Power to the Prisoners

By Eve Cary

"We are not animals. We are men," were the words the prisoners repeated over and over during the rebellion at Attica.

The men at Attica were making the same point as many of the other prisoners I have heard from in recent months. The most painful thing about being in prison is not physical brutality but being made to feel that you are not a person. Few any longer question that prisoners are sometimes beaten and tortured. But to dwell on atrocities is to miss the real horror of prison—the dehumanization that is built into the very concept of locking people up.

The first thing that happens to a man when he enters prison is called "processing." All of his possessions are taken from him, he is given a number, his head may be shaved and he is given clothes that may not fit even approximately. From the outset anything that might distinguish him is removed or hidden. This is the classic method of controlling a man by destroying his sense of self.

For example, one man kept fussing to me about a scar across his forehead that he had because a prison doctor had been

careless in sewing up a stab wound inflicted on him by another prisoner. I couldn't understand why he was so self-conscious about his appearance when, it seemed to me, he had so many worse troubles, until I realized that perhaps I wasn't thinking of him as a person either. Why should a man in prison be less concerned about his appearance than anyone else?

Disappointments

Frequently I have visited prisoners who have not mentioned to me that they had been beaten up by guards, although they went into some detail about how bad the food was. When I expressed horror over the beating (to a white, middle-class woman, being hit seems to be about the worst thing that could happen to you), the prisoner often said, "Oh, that happens all the time." The food in prisons is awful from all accounts, but why should uncooked potatoes seem worse than a punch in the stomach? The answer, I think, is that if the one thing you have to look forward to all day is dinner, and dinner turns out to be unpleasant, the pain of that disappoint-

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ment is greater than being hit, especially to men who have been used to rough lives.

Again and again people told me with real anguish of the arbitrary withholding of the few small pleasures, such as the weekly movie or volleyball game, that prisons provide. For men who have little to look forward to, the anxiety of knowing that at any moment a privilege may be withdrawn can be so unbearable that they may choose to stay in their cells rather than suffer the rage and humiliation of having a guard say, "Hey you, stay here."

Arbitrary denials of seemingly small things are a constant feature of prison life. A wife comes to visit on time, but is kept waiting for her husband to be brought from his cell until 10 minutes before the end of the visiting hour. Mail isn't given out on weekends; visits are cancelled on holidays.

Fear of Loss

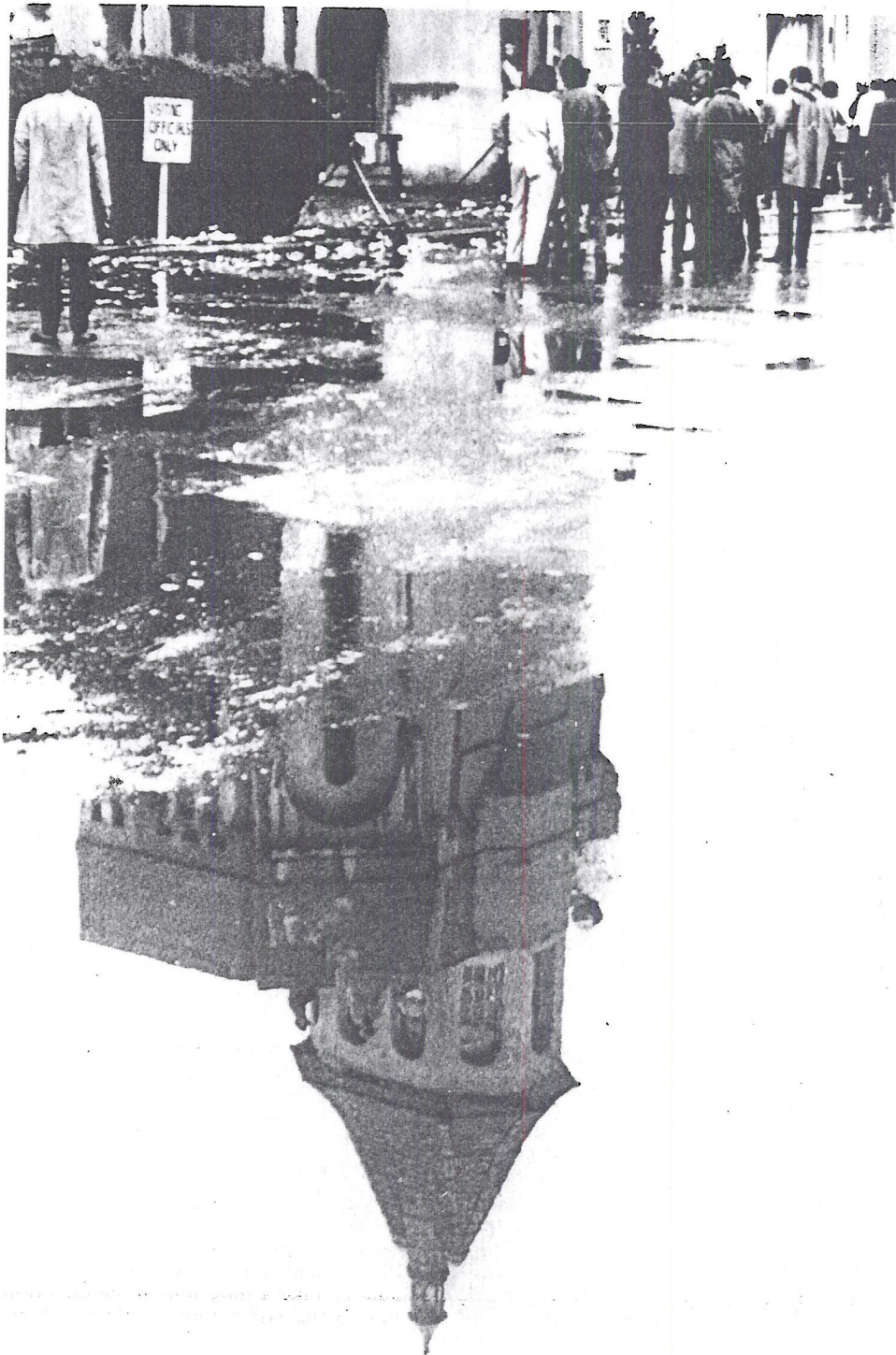
I asked one man whom I came to know well if he wanted any books. He replied that he didn't. I protested that I could easily get them and would like to.

"I don't want you to get them," he said "because sometime they'll take them away from me."

"Well, don't worry about that," I said. "I'll just get paperbacks. If they take them away from you, we'll get you some more."

He got angry with me: "Can't you understand? I have nothing, and if you give me books I'll treasure them and then they'll take them away from me and I couldn't stand it. I'd rather not have anything in the first place."

Destruction of prisoners' property occurs casually all the time. A man is moved from one cell to another and some of his things get left behind. He is transferred from one prison to another and his things get lost en route. After the Attica rebellion prisoners' belongings were systematically destroyed. Courts occasionally frown on the destruction of legal materials but don't care much about the loss of a snapshot of a prisoner's family or his special drinking cup.



Uprooting

Men themselves are also casually moved from one place to another with no feeling at all by prison authorities that it is very hard on a man to be moved abruptly from one place, where he has relationships with people and knows the routine, to another totally strange place where he must learn again who is who and make a place for himself. As my friend avoided possessions, others avoid friendships, and for the same reason.

I often wondered how people could stand being in prison until I realized that many of them don't. They may stay alive, but they are too damaged to be said to have survived the experience. Some men do time better than others. Different men find different ways of surviving. One man always gave me magazines and candy when I went to see him. I kept feeling it was I who should have been bringing him things but soon caught on that it was more important to him to be able to give something to another person, which he was rarely able to do in his totally dependent situation. For survival, some men get very involved in the small squabbles and intrigues that inevitably arise among people who are confined in close quarters. Others concentrate all their energy on appealing their cases, writing endless writs and petitions to the courts and hoping to get out. Some just try to be left alone.

Reading the stacks of prison mail has always been one of the worst jobs in public service law offices. The New York City office of the New York CLU, for example, gets 15 or 20 letters a day from prisoners in city and state "correctional facilities."

"The way I shall survive: (1) Since I must carve my own life, I must start at once with the tools at hand. (2) Happy is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed."—from a letter to Miss Cary from Walter Brown at New York City Tombs, October, 1971.

(In one such institution you can clearly see on the front wall where the words "state prison" were removed.) The letters are immediately recognizable. They are written on lined white paper, visible through windows in envelopes bearing nondescript addresses—Box 149, Attica, N.Y.; Drawer B, Stormville, N.Y.—and a name and number written in, often as not in pencil.

Humility

Not only do the letters all look alike, but until recently they all said the same thing and were equally depressing. "I am innocent. I have been sentenced to 10 years in jail. I never got to talk to my lawyer and the judge wouldn't listen to me. I have a wife and child. I never did anything wrong. Please help me. I don't have any money to pay you now, but if I get out I promise I will pay you later." The letter would then end with oriental rituals of thanks for taking up your valuable time, away from your important work and busy life to read the letter of a poor and ignorant man who didn't get any justice and hopes that the letter finds you in the best of health.

It used to be that I never got a letter from a man who wasn't innocent or a letter that mentioned prison conditions. Perhaps poor people and black people felt they were "bad" and thus deserved whatever was meted out to them. Perhaps prisoners felt no organization would listen to a man who was guilty. But the letters were all humble, pleading for someone to listen. The only hope of escape was to be proven innocent and to get out.

About two years ago the tone of the mail began to change. Among the protestations of innocence and inquiries after my health were letters protesting prison conditions. The major complaint at first was that prisoners were not being allowed to receive books and magazines that they wanted because prison authorities felt that they were "inflammatory." Other letters complained of mail censorship, denials of various privileges, lack of medical treatment, bad food, low wages, racial discrimination, and unfair disciplinary and parole hearings.

Prisoners demanded their rights to free speech, religion and due process of law. They stopped finding it necessary to maintain that they had never committed a crime in their entire lives.

Many writers boasted of being black, and filled their letters with "power to the people" rhetoric, which I found inspiring after the dismal, oppressed tone of the old mail. Affirming their identity, prisoners demanded the right to wear Afros, took Muslim names, which prison personnel carefully refuse to use. (When I wrote down both the English and Muslim names of one man on my visitor's slip, the guard crossed out the latter, explaining that as far as the prison was concerned the English name was the real one.)

Like Other Groups

The movement in prisons today parallels the movement outside prisons among other oppressed groups. These movements always begin with the self-affirmation of the members of the group, who have been viewed as something less than human by those in power. Dehumanization of prisoners is only a more emphatic example of what has been done to many other groups in our society.

Outside agitators were blamed for Attica. This is familiar reasoning, and it works no better in prisons than it does in universities or the Army. It is not possible entirely to isolate prisoners. Current ideas and movements are bound to seep in. But even if this were not the case, if prison authorities confiscated every book and broke up every meeting, sooner or later oppressed peoples seem to come to the same kinds of conclusions about themselves and their situations.

In the old days prison was supposed to give a man time to reflect on what led him to a life of crime, to see the error of his ways and to repent. Many men are reflecting in prisons today, but rather than concluding that it was their own evil ways that got them where they are, they are developing a political thesis which explains their condition as a result of their oppression by the society, and thus they perceive

of themselves as political prisoners. This does not mean that they necessarily justify the crimes they committed. In a certain way they are facing up to guilt for some crimes better than did the old prisoner, who tried to convince himself and everybody else that he was innocent, even though all the other convicts might be guilty. Militant prisoners admit to crimes, understand the society that drove them to crime and see themselves as part of a political movement on the outside to change that society.

Sign of Life

Fanon talked of the process by which revolution can change men who are crushed with the burden of their own insignificance into featured players in a great drama. Militancy is the healthiest sign there is in prison because it is the only sign of life, of continuing life in face of all odds to the contrary. I asked one man after a number of mysterious "suicides" in the prison if he was afraid of being killed. "No," he replied, "I'm just scared of dying without ever having lived."

And prisoner militancy is the one thing that may bring about change in prisons, for the question is not one of prisoners' rights so much as it is of prisoners' power to demand their rights and then see to it that their rights are scrupulously respected. Conditions change only when the people affected by them develop their own leaders and force the people in power to turn over some of it to them, to give them greater control over their own lives.

Prisoners now have a new way of doing time. One courageous man said to his lawyer, just after he had been sent up for seven years, "It doesn't make any difference. I can organize on the inside as well as the outside."

One of the assumptions in prison "rehabilitation" is the weird idea that men can be taught to adjust to society by being totally isolated from it. They are not only stuck behind walls. But the prisons themselves are usually far away from cities (which is where most prisoners come from). A trip to Clinton, N.Y., 15 minutes away from the Canadian border, cost me \$100. The cost is not only absolutely prohibitive of visits by almost all prisoners' families and friends; but not even lawyers can visit often. The prisoners and the world are kept from each other.

Society

However, militant prisoners, in developing their militant society, recognize the need for a social contract. They are more disciplined; their relationships with each other are more honest. Fighting and stealing, chronic prison problems, are rare among them. Those who violate the social contract are censured. The humanity and sophistication of the social organization in the yard during the Attica rebellion attested to this.

The result of Attica so far has been neanderthal threats of more repression from the right, and the appointment of a dozen commissions, which, no doubt, will conclude that conditions at Attica were very bad, just as the prisoners said. So what?

NYCLU has brought lawsuits to allow newspapermen to visit prisoners. In New York City this is allowed. However, when there isn't a rebellion going on, journalists, like assemblymen, don't want to visit prisoners. Wrongs are righted not when they are exposed but when the wronged party has the power to make them right. As the saying goes, rights exist among equals. If prisoners can gain power only by holding hostages, then they will seize hostages. If society doesn't want hostages seized, it must provide another mechanism for the prisoners to exercise power, for example, collective bargaining through a prisoners' union where one side does not have the right to come in and shoot the other side when negotiations bog down.

It is desperation that turns militant political action to violence. Remove the causes of desperation, and militance can only be constructive—"rehabilitative" in the true sense. For it is healthy for human beings to insist on their humanity.

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