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Black Prisoners Finding New View Of Themselves as Political Prisoners

By C. GERALD FRASER

As long as there have been no place to be somebody.

Inmates have shouted for centuries that prison food is bad, guards are brutal and innocent men are jailed.

Though prison complaints have changed little, a new element has appeared in the prison equation—the black “political” prisoner.

One view of the new black prisoner was expressed by New York City’s deputy commissioner of correction, Ben Malcolm, the department’s highest-ranking black man.

The black prisoner, Mr. Malcolm said, “has been led to believe by a lot of people, a lot of so-called liberals, that he has been victimized by the society and he is more difficult to handle, he is more difficult to deal with.”

“He will commit a crime against his peers in the community and feel a certain amount of justification,” Mr. Malcolm said.

Another view was expressed by a former prisoner Clifford Rollins, who left California’s Soledad Prison last January after serving 10 years for armed robbery and murder:

“No longer do black prisoners play the sycophant’s game of ‘pleasing the powers,’” he said. “They are in tune with contemporary social and political scenes in the free world; they take an interest in elevating their perception, have principles and are morally and ethically alive.”

An inmate in California’s Tehachapi Prison, Wendell Wade—who is awaiting his second trial stemming from the 1968 Oakland police-Black Panther shootout in which a Panther was killed—offered this view:

“The majority (of black prisoners) realize that they were merely trying to survive, in the ways that they were able to when captured.

“They don’t feel guilty; indeed, in their minds they are not guilty. Many are willing to move for freedom if the opportunity presents itself.”

Both men were writing in separate articles in the April-May 1971 issue of the Black Scholar magazine, a San Francisco-based journal of black studies and research. The magazine devoted the entire issue to the subject of black prisoners.

New Attitude Developed

Some black prisoners, as well as black people in general, began to develop new attitudes about themselves in the nineteen-sixties as a consequence of the civil rights movement.

That movement produced the expression, “black is beautiful,” and an awareness of the need for black self-determination.

Malcolm X, the slain Black Muslim leader and a former prison inmate, voiced the idea that all America is a prison and that jails are just prisons within a prison. He tied this to his belief that black men can neither get nor expect justice in a “white man’s system.”

Since then, the concept that black prisoners are political prisoners has won adherents in and out of jails across the country.

Another element in the prison situation is that the jails hold increasing numbers of black men and women.

For example, at the Correctional Institutional for Men on Rikers Island here, when the hundreds of inmates file into the cafeteria, the dominant colors are the dark green and tan prisoners’ uniforms and the black faces.

This city’s major penal institutions—the Correctional Institutions for Men and Women, the Women’s House of Detention, the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn and Manhattan Houses of Detention—house a predominantly black population.

This is true also of New York state’s penal institutions—the Attica Correctional Facility as well as others.

Politically Conscious

And an increasing number of these black prisoners are politically conscious.

In interviews with The New York Times, many black correction officials and psychiatrists, former inmates and lawyers associated with penology stressed that black people were not more criminally inclined than white people, but that black men and women were, for various reasons, more likely to be in prison than white men and women in numbers exceeding the ratio in community population.

The black correction officials interviewed—Ken Hardy, director of the Department of Correction in Washington; Bennett Cooper, Ohio State Correction Commissioner; Ralph Williams, warden of the Maryland House of Correction; and Mr. Malcolm—point out that there is no question but that many black prisoners are guilty of the crimes for which they were imprisoned.

Some of these officials noted that many of these were crimes that created emotional reactions in society: crimes against both white persons and black—muggings, robberies, assaults.

The Black Scholar’s editor, Prof. Robert Chrisman of San Francisco State College, wrote in the magazine:

“It is of course obvious that mugging, theft, pimping and shooting dope are not themselves political actions, particularly when the victims are most often other black people.

“To maintain that all black offenders are, by their actions, politically correct, is a dangerous romanticism.

“Black antisocial behavior must be seen in and of its own terms and corrected for enhancement of the black community.”

But, he said, there is a political aspect.

“All black prisoners are therefore political prisoners,” he asserted, “for their condition derives from the political inequity of black people in America. A black prisoner’s crime may or may not have been a political action against the state, but the state’s action against him is always political.”

Most offenses by black people, Professor Chrisman said, “have their roots in the political and economic deprivation of black Americans by the Anglo-American state, and these are the primary causes and conditions of black crime.”

Mr. Cooper, the nation’s only black state commissioner, said: “Our criminal justice system is selective in whom it selects to go to prison.

“If we look in prisons and see whom we have, the largest group is the poor. The second largest group is black. If you are poor and black, you can see what happens.

“There are other factors.”

Another category is the unskilled, and another the uneducated. And so, if you're poor black, unskilled and uneducated—well, you can see what the probability is."

Some lawyers have said that poor black defendants often have inadequate legal aid and, when convicted, receive harsher sentences than white well-to-do defendants.

City correction officials here said that on a recent day, among their 13,735 inmates, there were "70 per cent black, 20 per cent Puerto Rican and 10 per cent white."

The State's Department of Correctional Services reported that in 1970 they detained 12,477 men and women. Of these, 51.6 per cent were black, 12.8 per cent Puerto Rican, 35.2 per cent white and 0.4 per cent "other."

In the Federal prison system last year, there were 20,000 inmates, and 24.5 per cent of these were black.

And of the total number of persons under sentence of death, according to Douglas Lyons of the Citizens Against Legalized Murder, there were 320 blacks, 284 whites and 49 others.

Psychiatrist Offers Views

Dr. James R. Ralph, a Maryland psychiatrist who has worked in a Maryland juvenile institution, said "White kids who are wealthy get shipped to high class mental hospitals. They get psychiatric care. And for the same offense, blacks get punitive, custodial care."

Aggressive young white males, Dr. Ralph said, are viewed as on their way to manhood. Aggressive young black males are viewed as "threatening." Aggression is not accepted in a black youth, he declared.

There are in prison a growing number of aggressive, assertive black males, many of whom are viewed as trying to understand more about their situation.

"A great majority in prison see that education and books are the best way to spend their time," said John Burton, a former inmate who is now deputy director of Project Manhood Foundation, a group located at 290 Lenox Avenue, that helps discharged inmates move back into society.

"The man takes a book," Mr. Burton said, "and reads slowly, page by page. And he analyzes. He passes the book on to a fellow inmate even after he has read just four or five pages.

"And then they compare notes. 'What did you see? What did you get out of this? What did you get out of that?' They are steadily in the library and ordering books from outside."

Reading ^{s.} Or Censorship

And it is alleged by prison officials that some of this reading is partly responsible for prison disruptions, and it is to those that attempts to censor prisoners' reading matter is attributed.

In New York State institutions, inmates' reading material should not, the regulations say, be pornographic, incite ethnic hatred, advocated violence, lawlessness or hatred of policemen or correction officials, or depict the manufacture of handguns.

Another view of the political-prisoner concept was expressed by Herbert O. Reid, a law professor at Howard University and staff director of the Commission of Inquiry into the Black Panther Party and Law Enforcement Officials. The commission is a group of prominent citizens formed to investigate the Chicago shootout in which a Black Panther leader, Fred Hampton, was killed by the police.

"I'm afraid," Professor Reid said, "certainly for blacks, that as for any notion of prison and punishment being a stigma, we are losing that because of the number of black prisoners. We're beginning to think that if you haven't been [in prison] there's something wrong with you. Going is no big thing."

One reaction to the militancy of black prisoners, he said, is the attitude among police and social institutions that people in jail "ought to stay there."

Prison and correctional people, he said, "because of criticism and what have you, are afraid to let them back into society."