



Zinc Etching by P. Sovak

Lessons: From Attica to Soledad

By ANGELA Y. DAVIS

SAN FRANCISCO—By almost any standard the American prison betrays itself as a system striving toward unmitigated totalitarianism. The logic of totalitarianism defines the prison's internal processes as well as its relationship to the world without.

The eternally repetitive routine, the imposed anonymity and the rigid atomization of numbers and cages are just a few of the dehumanizing, desocializing mechanisms. As for the relationship of prisoners to life outside, it is supposed to be virtually nonexistent. In this respect, the impenetrable concrete, the barbed wire and the armed keepers, ostensibly there to deter escape-bound captives, also suggest something further: prisoners must be guarded from the Ingressions of a moving, developing world outside. Disengaged from normal social life, its revelations and influences, they must finally be robbed of their humanity. Yet human beings cannot be willed and molded into nonexistence. In real-

ity the facts of prison life have begun in recent years to bespeak the irrationality of its goals. Even the most drastic repressive measures have not obstruct the progressive ascent of captive men and women to new heights of social consciousness. This has been especially intense among black and brown prisoners.

Prisons have recently witnessed an accelerated influx of militant political activists. In utter disregard of the institutions' totalitarian aspirations, the passions and theories of black revolution and Social revolution have penetrated the wall. Outstanding political leaders have sprung up to enlighten their captive companions and initiate them into struggle. Years before George Jackson achieved a public presence, he was loved, respected and acknowledged as a political leader throughout the California prison system.

The combined effect has been a conscious thrust among many prison populations toward new and arduously wrought collective life. Political in its general contours, this collective life is organically bound up with the dynamics of the liberation struggle in America and across the globe. Prisoners have recognized that their immediate objective must be to challenge the oppression which finds concrete expression in the penal system.

It was precisely this new thrust which determined the content of the Attica prison revolt. Pervading their demands—which articulated their determination to end the barbarous conditions of their surroundings—was an astute political grasp of their own status. Their collective consciousness as *political* prisoners emerged with indisputable clarity.

Much attention has been concentrated on the demand for passage to a nonimperialist country for those who desired it. In isolation, however, this cannot exhaustively define the political dimensions of the revolt. Consider, for instance, the demand for amnesty. This was generally interpreted as an intent

to avoid responsibility for their stand. Yet, precisely because their collective action was neither criminal in form nor criminal in motivations, they felt entitled to amnesty from criminal prosecution. What unfolded inside Attica was an intensely political confrontation with the totalitarian prison hierarchy and its chiefs in Government.

The prisoners insisted that meaningful transformation of their status would be contingent upon recognition of their right to school themselves in radical political theory without fear of administrative reprisals.

Many observers were incredulous at the impressive organization and remarkable ability of the prisoners to forge a highly effective unity in action. Indeed, the revolt furnished irrefutable evidence of the colossal failure of the prison system in its totalitarianism. The prisoners' spirits will not be defeated by physical repression and psychological abuse. They would not be insulated from the passions and aspirations animating their communities. Thus the impact of the new consciousness became a pivotal factor in a dialectical inversion. A barren, atemporal, repressive world fostering alienation and inner hostility was transfigured into a closely knit brotherhood.

For those who question the reality of this process, George Jackson's incisive "Letters from Prison" might prove more persuasive.

Attica before the massacre afforded us a sleeping but graphic glimpse of the monumental feats attainable by men and women moving along a revolutionary course. The brothers at Attica could not have carried out the revolt without first surmounting formidable obstacles. Racism, for example, had to be internally conquered. Moreover, all this unfolded where dehumanizing efforts and racist practices are most severely and most deliberately at work.

For those of us who are committed revolutionaries, the days preceding the massacre offered gratifying and invigorating experience. In a figurative sense, it evoked visions of the Paris Communes, the liberated areas of pre-revolutionary Cuba, free territories of Mozambique. The revolt was particularly edifying in that it burst forth as if to demonstrate that the brutal killing of George Jackson fell dismally short of its repressive aim. It was a very real affirmation that George's example, his principles and his mission live on.

But at the top of the hierarchy from New York to Washington, the revolt was an unambiguous affirmation of the potential powerlessness of ruling circles. Alarms were dispatched to every major prison in the country. Preparations were made to unleash massive violence. It could have been predicted that the senseless murder of countless men—captives and hostages alike—would ineluctably follow.

In the aftermath, officials would resort to equivocation, untruths and myriad efforts to shift the blame onto the prisoners. But these maneuvers of deception might have been considered prior to the assault as not entirely

inconceivable. In any event, plans to suppress the real story must have gone awry somewhere.

The damage has been done. Scores of men are dead; and unknown numbers of wounded. By now, it would seem, more people should realize that such explosive acts of repression are not minor aberrations in a society not terribly disturbing in other respects. We have witnessed Birmingham, Orangeburg, Jackson State, Kent State, Mylai, San Quentin, Aug. 21, 1970—the list is unending. None emerged *ex nihilo*; rather all crystallized and attested to profound and extensive social infirmity.

Perhaps, though, the events at Attica finally awakened greater numbers of people from their socially inflicted slumber. If this be true, they must recognize that their duty is twofold: to subject governments and prison bureaucracies to unqualified criticism and to acknowledge the rational and human kernel of the struggles unfolding behind prison walls through forthright supportive action.

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Angela Y. Davis, a former philosophy instructor at U.C.L.A., is held in Marin County jail on charges of murder, kidnapping and criminal conspiracy. She is accused of having bought the guns used in a bizarre courtroom kidnapping attempt in August 1970.