

San Quentin's Civil War

NEW YORK — With George Jackson's death, and an attempted escape from San Quentin, there will doubtless be an effort to make a martyr of him for the cause of black Marxist revolution. If there is, it will be a continuation — after his death — of the movement in his lifetime to use his name and fate for propaganda.

"They set up to kill him and they killed him," said his mother. And his lawyer, John Thorne, said "I cannot conceive of him trying to escape." Yet Jackson had told Tad Szulc, interviewing him in April for the New York Times magazine, "The whole truth is that I would hope to escape."

THE STORY of his attempt, of his obtaining a gun (very shortly after a visit from a young white lawyer), of his killing by a guard as he ran to a courtyard wall, of the three guards and two prisoners found with their throats slashed; that story has not been wholly reconstructed. When it is we shall see in it, I am convinced, one of the saddest stories of our violent time.

George Jackson was a victim, yes, but not of a framed escape and a calculated shooting. He was the victim of a long history of discrimination against blacks, not yet entirely overcome despite the principled effort in many areas to overcome it. He was the victim of the resulting black rage, channeled into a fruitless and self-destructive philosophy of violent revolution and of an inevitable white counter-rage.

The five white men, with their throats slashed, were also victims of this civil war of contending rages, which is deadly wherever it happens and even deadlier within the walls of a prison.

George Jackson was a talented mind, who had made himself into a writer of great force. Self-taught, plowing the classics of revolutionary philosophy in prison, including Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao Tse-tung, he grew obsessed with the idea of the blacks as the carriers of the Marxist revolution of our time. His anger channeled and distorted his thinking, so that he lost most of the subtle philosophy of Marx,

and his early humanism, and what was left was the lifeless abstractions and the crude myths.

This becomes clear if you study the answer he wrote out to four questions which Szulc sent him after the interview, to follow up on Jackson's contention that blacks are imprisoned because they are blacks, not because they are criminals — that crimes by blacks "can clearly be traced to politico-economic causes." Szulc later put his additional question: "Aren't any black people guilty of crimes in American society?" He instances rapes and killings of blacks by blacks. And then he adds, "Are you really saying that all criminals are victims of society?"

Jackson's reply was expectedly the doctrinaire one — that the original crime was to exclude blacks from American society, and to leave the defining of criminality to the economic oppressors. As for blacks committing crimes against blacks, that is violence "turning inward when the oppressed can find no externalization." And finally, "All criminals are victims of the attempt to maintain hierarchy."

Right or wrong as this may be, one must grieve over the tragic sequence of events that led to the snuffing-out of such talent, of this vessel of thought, rage and power.

Yet I feel Jackson was wrong on two scores — on his belief that a crime springing from the economic circumstance of the blacks is therefore no crime, and on his belief that because all crimes involve a breaking of law and authority ("hierarchy") there are therefore no crimes.

LET US BY ALL MEANS give content to the administration of true justice. But the truly radical idea — far more so than those Jackson used in "radicalizing" his fellow prisoners — is the idea of law itself. "Human nature," said Marx, "is the true community of man." And in that community neither whites nor blacks can fulfill themselves without law. But the law cannot function unless the dialogue between blacks and whites is built anew.

William F. Buckley, Jr. is on vacation.