

REVOLUTION IN THE PRISONS?

A CHALLENGE TO ANARCHISTS AND THE PRISON MOVEMENT

INTRODUCTION

The history of the revolutionary struggle since the Industrial Revolution has always included active opposition to the steady development of modern penal institutions, and for very good reason. The prisons of the nineteenth and twentieth century have unquestionably been instruments of class coercion and terror, wielded selectively against the poor, the uneducated, the minorities, the people, in short, most systematically victimized already by the structure and operation of economic and social institutions.

In recent years, it has become axiomatic among socialists, anarchists and communists alike, that prisoners represent the "most oppressed", a potential vanguard group of "natural rebels" against class society. The entire spectrum of the left, even those who in theory reject the concepts of vanguards and hierarchies of oppression, have in practice devoted a disproportionately large amount of time, energy and resources to the prison movement, often to the exclusion of issues which more immediately affect their own lives.

The ideological underpinnings, or perhaps more correctly the rhetorical ones, for this devotion to prisoners can be located in the slogans of early twentieth century radicals. Nor are slogans such as Eugene Debs' "as long as there is a soul in prison I'm not free", or the Wobblies' "we're in here for you, and you're out there for us" by their nature untrue.

However, in that era, when huge numbers of poor people who were actively engaged in the social struggle relating to their own oppression were incarcerated, the relation between inside and outside - and the obligations owed by the movement to prisoners - were quite unambiguous. The same can be said of prisoners in Franco's Spain, for example, or of any number of people imprisoned in the U.S. for objecting to the war in Vietnam.

This article is being written, however, because both social conditions and the nature of prison support work have changed in recent years. To put it bluntly, we are writing this because we can no longer silently accept the uncritical idolatry, the slavish devotion, the emotional and physical rape, the insane violence, manipulation and brutality which have come to characterize the prison movement in North America over the past decade.

We are revolted to see thugs, murderers, pimps, rapists, conmen of every sort elevated to the level of anarchist heroes, showered with the attention of outside supporters and given a place among those who for honest political reasons have been imprisoned. We are equally repulsed at seeing prison activists extorted for money, dope, sex and weapons at often unbelievably high risks to themselves and their families, and then terrorized when they say "enough".

We are tired of being threatened and denounced as "counter-revolutionary" when we refuse to drop everything to wait on "political prisoners" whose political practice goes no deeper than writing endless reams of empty rhetoric in their daily missives to the outside.

To be a "political prisoner" requires more than a glib pen and an easy familiarity with the jargon of a particular political tendency. The kind of support people in for political "crimes" deserve may be quite different from the support given to other prisoners. If we are honest with ourselves we must admit that there is a difference between an Alexander Berkman and some perennial stick-up man who gets caught robbing a gas station and then 'converts' to anarchism or some other political tendency while in prison.

At any rate, we think that people doing prison support work need to keep two things in mind. Most prisoners are confused, sick people before they go into prison. But almost all prisoners, regardless of their political stance before, are changed into cons to a greater or lesser extent by the prison experience.

The horror of prison is such that to survive, people lie, cheat, threaten, abuse and betray on a routine basis. To learn the means of survival in the joint is at the same time to be psychologically maimed, to learn forms of behavior toward others, based on exploitation and domination, which are only rarely ever unlearned later. This applies to the self-conscious political prisoner as well as the apolitical 'career' prisoner. The main difference is that the lifetime prisoner is less likely to have any other concept of how to relate to people, and thus is less able to have any perspective on his or her condition.

Prison support people, though they are surrounded by the evidence of prison's destructive capabilities on human integrity, are either ignorant of this effect or deliberately ignore it. They thereby allow themselves to be conned repeatedly into believing everything they hear from inside that sounds 'political'. But every conman knows that the first step to success is to learn the right jargon. To do so changes nothing. Anyone can learn to say all the "right-on" slogans, especially when the benefits are potentially so high, but that doesn't make revolutionaries out of psychopaths, murderers and rapists.

Make no mistake. We are absolutely committed to the abolition of all prisons, to the creation of a society in which prisons, courts, guards and police will have no function. But in such a society, when crimes are committed against one's fellows, they will be dealt with, perhaps not too dissimilarly from the way they were dealt with in primitive societies, in a direct and unmediated way, considered too 'radical' in bourgeois society.

We do support aid to prisoners whose crimes were politically motivated in a clear-cut way (not including shooting into crowds on the freeway or bombing supermarkets full of people trying to get groceries for dinner). We also recognize the possibility that even the worst individual might come to a real political awakening in prison, although this would surely include an understanding of his own crimes and not simply excuses for them framed in political terms. And we think that all prisoners - from shoplifters to murderers - must be treated in the most humane way we can force the state to treat them in its institutions now.

But it is also time to realize that prisoners whose crimes have victims, rather than being "natural rebels", are the types of individuals who in a classless, prison-less society would be exiled at the very least, and more likely put out of their misery by the victims or survivors of their brutality. Nor is this entirely untrue for the perpetrators of 'victimless' or 'revolutionary' crimes. Far too often, for example, "expropriation" of goods has meant also endangering the lives and security of others considered "comrades", without even informing them that they might be at risk.

Putting aside all the liberal romanticism about prisoners as simple victims of class injustice, we must cope with the fact that most prisoners are inside for acts which they did in fact commit. Without for a moment recognizing the legitimacy of the state and its legal system that judges these acts, we must nevertheless recognize that many of the "comrades" who appeal so fervently to our compassion and sense of justice, have never themselves had the slightest concern for the rights, feelings, desires or even lives of others.

In a society where "dog-eat-dog" is elevated to national policy, these "rebels" represent the most abysmally inept yet enthusiastic practitioners of the morality of that order. Thus it is only natural that when they are put in prison, stripped of all power, they naturally seek to regain it by the only means available: imposing their wills on outside supporters.

This article, however, is not intended to focus solely on the role of the prisoners, because by themselves their significance is limited. It is extremely important to examine the psychological relationship of prisoners to authority, since in general it is quite the opposite of the "natural rebel"

mythology. Equally important, though, are the factors which have created the base for the prison movement outside, and the many disturbing factors which have become apparent within it.

ROOTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY PRISON MOVEMENT

The contemporary prison movement has its roots in the civil-rights and anti-war movement and the prison uprisings of the late 1960's. Not only did the civil rights and anti-war movements find many of their numbers behind bars, but it was also predictable that this experience and the generalized social revolt which characterized the era would not leave prisons undisturbed. In addition, the combination of a militant black movement outside (especially the Black Panther Party), which had its roots in the same social milieu which is most highly represented in the prisons, made it natural that much of the leadership and inspiration for prison revolts would come from that quarter. This, combined with the presence of a higher-than-usual number of political types in the prisons, made prison revolts almost inevitable.

The most famous single figure emerging from that period was George Jackson. An undeniable giant of a man, Jackson had a long history of small-time violent crimes for which he was serving an indeterminate one year to life sentence. After ten years in prison, he had become a self-educated "revolutionary theoretician", well-read in a wide variety of revolutionary and guerrilla writings, and brilliantly articulate both on paper and in person. He was also known to be extremely charming and charismatic.

Thanks to the efforts of a group of Bay Area lawyers and Angela Davis (almost all of them Communist Party hacks or sympathizers), George Jackson's reputation spread far and wide, combining what was real with what was legally expeditious, even if totally fictitious. In an article in the March 1981 issue of New West magazine about Fay Stender (one of the main lawyers involved in Jackson's case), some less-well known facts about Jackson were also revealed.

Like almost all of the leaders of the Black Panther Party who ended up in jail, notably Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, Jackson was a gangster supreme (to the extent possible in the joint). According to the authors of the article, Jackson was at the center of drug-dealing, ass-peddling, and all the other rackets of prison life. He also boasted of having killed 12 people inside, a fact which is unprovable but at least highly suggestive of a brutal and authoritarian bent.

The fact that Jackson was not alone in his duality of roles, hero and rogue, is aptly demonstrated by others who have emerged from prison only to find Jesus and a fast buck, or to return to the streets better equipped than ever to terrorize, exploit and defraud not "the Man" but their neighbors, co-workers and families. The "Alfalfa Sprout Wars" in the Bay Area a few years ago, in which ex-prisoners and prisoner support people shot it out on numerous occasions to see which faction would control local food co-ops, and the Oakland Panthers' involvement in drug-dealing and extortion rackets, are just a few examples of the dubious "politics" of many "revolutionary prisoners".

We believe that Jackson's writings were, in fact, entirely consistent with the view of Jackson as an authoritarian gangster and not as hero of the liberation struggle. He was an avowed Marxist-Leninist, whose heroes were Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh and Guevara. His main revolutionary vision was one of an apocalyptic firestorm of guerrilla battles in the slums, in which blacks and their supporters would be the revolutionary vanguard, putting the Man to death. There was precious little of any vision in his writings of what a new society might consist of. Nor were many of his actions in relation to his

outside supporters inconsistent with his own descriptions of his politics. "Politics is my hustle" was a comment not infrequently repeated to his supporters. Unfortunately, some, like Fay Stender, never took him seriously. Until about 1977 virtually all prison movement ideology was Marxist-Leninist, with its standard baggage of Third World vanguardism and the added component of 'prisoner leadership'. Much of the urban guerrilla movement in the U.S., from the formation of the B.L.A. in the late 60's, through the S.L.A., N.W.L.F., and onto the G.J.B. in the mid-70's, was also based on this basic analysis.

Then, around 1977, when the Marxist-Leninists were drifting into a period of internal dissolution and the urban guerrilla groups were increasingly taking on the characteristics of street gangs, THE OPEN ROAD appeared. For the first time in many years in North America, there was a widely circulated anarchist journal which gave enthusiastic support to prisoners and urban guerrillas. Furthermore, Joe Remiro and Russ Little, who were widely respected by both those inside and outside who were inclined toward the guerrilla solution to prisons, came out as anarchists. So it was only natural that prisoners and the prison movement, sensing that anarchism might be the leftist political tendency on the ascent, began to cultivate "anarchist" ideas and language in order to maintain maximum outside contacts and support.

The underlying Marxist-Leninist, authoritarian and totally vanguardist assumptions did not change in the slightest, however. Only the rhetoric differed. Thus the disgusting spectacle arose of prisoners routinely writing to libertarian papers, advocating the overthrow of the state and the class system, and the establishment of Anarchist Rule!

One other interesting development which gradually occurred during this period had to do with the sexual composition of the prisoner support movement. The prison support movement has always had a high percentage of women, and has worked primarily with mens' prisons. One might expect that the rise of feminism within the left might have led to a decline in the number of women, and/or a change in focus toward working more with women in prison.

Somewhat disturbingly, nothing of the kind has happened. While some women in the prison movement have begun to get involved with women as well as men in prison, the emphasis remains on mens' prisons. Equally disturbing is the fact that so many of the women involved in the prison movement are lesbians. Here is a contradiction so widespread and rationally incomprehensible that it is no surprise that discussion of this dynamic is totally unheard of within the prison movement.

We are not interested in psychoanalyzing the specifics of why women, particularly lesbians, get involved with male prisoners on all the many political and emotional levels prison support work entails. Nor are we suggesting separatism as a viable philosophy. What we are saying is that some of the same factors which play into abused women staying with their abusers, abused children returning to their abusive parents, this inability to sever emotional ties to the abuser even after an intellectual understanding of the fact of abuse is reached, also plays into the relationship between many women and prisoners. Ostensibly, men in prison are "safe". There is a limit to the possibilities of sexual coercion with them, though that limit is not as high as many might assume. And, like the abused wife who returns over and over again to be beaten, it take two to play the game of sadism and masochism which is so common in the prison support movement and prisoner-supporter relationship.

Romanticism seems to be the other major factor in the relationship, particularly between male prisoners and female supporters. Who but a prisoner can give such total and undivided attention in a relationship, what other relationship can be constantly at such an unbelievably high level of emotional intensity? Men on the outside have jobs, other friends, and so on. But the prison romance is different. Each look, each stolen touch, each request, each call is charged with significance. The "heavier" the prisoner, the greater the significance. After all, any guard could destroy the delicate situation at any time. And what better opportunity for self-sacrifice (how traditionally womanly) is there? Who needs to be rescued and nurtured more than some poor guy behind bars, who is effusive in his appreciation for the smallest favor? And what greater risks can one take than to risk all one's security and life on the outside by providing him with dope, or other contraband?

Who is conning whom in this "political struggle"? How empty does one's life on the outside have to be to create such a need for such intensity at such high costs? And why is it that women, even lesbians, continue to play out these roles of rescuer and victim, goddess and slave? The prison support movement needs to look at itself with a newly-critical eye in the face of Fay Stender's death, and the deaths of other women less well-known and even more gullible.

It is safe to say, then, that the prison movement, whatever its political pretensions, has been a movement largely dominated by illusion and authoritarian ideology and practice, led by male authority figures and to an ever-greater extent supported by women on the outside. One could say that in that sense, it reflects the development of the rest of the left and of the structure of modern society, except in many ways the psychopathology which repeatedly surfaces within the movement must be seen as extreme even within the context of an utterly decadent society such as the one in which we live.

PRISONS AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE PRISONER

This section is written not in the sense of a treatise by an academic, but rather on the basis of personal observations by us gained from considerable exposure to the products of the institutional experience, adults as well as juveniles well on the road to the "revolving door".

One of the romantic illusions of the movement is that prisons are the 'breeding grounds for revolutionaries'. The prisoner, ground down by life and subjected to the absolute oppression and degradation possible in class society, is thus forged into a tough, unbreakable rebel, who has learned contempt for bourgeois morality and can thereby be counted upon to oppose it at every turn. So the myth goes.

Unfortunately, this is not supported at all by reality. Prison is the most oppressive and authoritarian institution in this society, and its main function is to create authoritarian personalities. That's why fascists make not only the best guards, but also the best prisoners.

It is hardly new that the authoritarian personality contains two mirror-images within it, both almost invariably present within a single person. The often-quoted aphorism that "there is only one thing in the world more wicked than the desire to command, and that is the will to obey", is misleading, in the sense that within this personality structure both desires are constantly present, and in tension with each other, each taking dominance to varying degrees at different times. With the "commanders", this dynamic results in phenomena like the constant search among the rich and powerful for forms of sexual encounter which will result in bondage, submission or degradation under the leather boot of the prostitute.

In the prisoner, the quintessential "obeyer", the dynamic plays itself out in inverse. Forced to submit to a situation of routinized absolute powerlessness, total submission on the most mundane levels of existence, the prisoner learns the techniques of manipulation which are the only recourse of the powerless. To lie, to cheat, to swindle, to use guilt, phony sincerity, any trick at all to relieve the burden of omnipresent subjugation, becomes the natural behavior of the prisoner in order to survive on the inside. Naturally this is increased a thousand-fold when a person's entire life involves institutions, the streets, parental abuse and neglect, and all the horrors which constitute the lives of many prisoners for whom the joint is the most secure and best-known home.

The institutional model of command and obey at some point becomes internalized on the deepest levels. As a result, the prisoner seeks continuously for the opportunity to play out the other side of the duality, to experience control and authority over others. Charlie Manson is the prototype of the authoritarian personality created by prisons. Sadly enough, many of the past and present "leaders" of the prison movement inside the prisons are of the same variety. But they are the more dangerous because they disguise their megalomania with revolutionary slogans, using this hustle to gain support where none would otherwise be forthcoming.

Thus we have, for example, Carl Harp, the latest "anarchist" hero in the international prison movement. For several years now, Harp has been cranking out volumes of letters to anarchist and libertarian organizations all over the world, telling of a "government conspiracy" to keep him in prison because of his righteous political stance. Recently his diaries and ramblings were published under the title Love & Rage, which is receiving critical acclaim by a wide variety of groups whose unifying bond is that none of them have had any direct contact with the man, or even know why he's in prison.

In western Washington, from which he was receiving most of his direct support while at Walla Walla, Harp has managed to totally isolate and alienate himself from virtually every group and individual who ever supported him since his 'conversion' to anarchism. Before that, no one paid any attention, because he was simply a rapist with an arm-long record of two-bit violent and sexual crimes, and the Bellevue Sniper, who killed one man and crippled another in a random shooting spree set off when an idiotic bank extortion scheme flopped.

Nor has he been "cleansed" of his past deeds by his exemplary deeds in prison. Groups who were not willing to correspond with him or get involved in his support work have received repeated denunciations couched in Maoist (not anarchist) rhetoric, accused of counter-revolutionary attitudes, and so on. And how naive or willingly ignorant do people have to be when they read yet another of his endless pamphlets (this published by a Canadian prison support group) in which he enthusiastically uses a quote from Richard Wagner (which Hitler no doubt also used to spur people to political action) and yet can't recognize the transparency of this conversion?

In an interview after his conviction for the Bellevue Sniper case, Harp admitted to having raped two women (he held a pistol to their heads) who were enjoying an afternoon hike in the woods. He said, "I'm not sorry I did it, but I'm sorry it occurred." He also talked of his plans to become a noted writer, or artist, or cartoonist, and he talked of his belief in god. There was not the slightest sign of contrition, but there was abundant evidence of

an intention to get people to pay attention to him, by whatever scam would prove to be most effective. Clearly, anarchism turned out to be the right choice.

That Carl Harp is a very victimized individual, who has had a rotten life and has felt the full force of this deadly society, is without a doubt true. That Carl Harp has even in his limited way tried to absorb some libertarian notions and put them into practice inside is possible and certainly to his credit. But the idea of Carl Harp as an authentic anarchist resistance hero, whose case should become an international cause celebre, is an idea that makes us physically ill, and makes us doubt the sanity of some of our comrades.

What is most disturbing about this case is the fact that it is not the exception, but the rule as far as the relationship of prisoners and supporters is concerned. Over and over again, the prison movement readily jumps to the support of prisoners and makes heroes of them merely because the prisoner is spouting a convincing line of right-on rhetoric. Where is the case of a prison "revolutionary" who can articulate any positive vision of a revolutionary society, or who comes out of prison and leads a life which doesn't victimize his family, friends, and neighbors, let alone which involves struggle for a more meaningful life or a different society? Amazingly enough, against all odds we believe there probably are some such individuals, but one doubts they are counted among the "heavies" of the prison movement.

Clearly, there is something unhealthy about the idealization of prisoners which pervades the prison movement. How many times can a person see "revolutionary prisoners" hit the streets (whether through jailbreak or legal break) only to end up in the joint in a month for robbing a liquor store or killing a girl friend, before the ideal fades? How long can a person bar reality with a political line before the illusions are destroyed? And how many times can a person be ripped-off, guilt-tripped, used, threatened with violence, and see one's friends and comrades getting shot down by "prison revolutionaries" before saying the hell with it?

Fay Stender was one of the people who said the hell with it, after many years at the service of the "greats" in the prison revolutionary set. As she watched these "revolutionaries" get back on the streets, where they reverted to gangland activities, got recycled back into prison, or shot each other, she gave it up and turned her attention elsewhere.

In May 1979, an ex-con with a long record and an urge for a "heavy rep" broke into her apartment in the middle of the night. After forcing her to write a "confession" of her "betrayal" of George Jackson and the prison movement (the nature of which betrayal was apparently as nebulous to the assailant as to Fay Stender), he gunned her down, leaving her permanently crippled. A year later she killed herself, rather than living out a life ridden with fear and dismay over her own past and threatened future.

Nor was Fay Stender's story unusual. The Bay Area for years has had a bizarre series of plots involving its "urban guerrillas", the prison movement, the left, the gangsters both black and white. The incidence of dead radicals, whose bullet-riddled bodies turn up in the morgue there with disturbing frequency, might be understandable if they were dying in pitched battles with the police, as happens elsewhere. But they don't. They fall victim to their own "Revolutionary Forces", "Peoples' Justice", and all the other lame labels with which they disguise their gangsterism and insane, unfocused rage.

The "crimes" for which people die are always the same. Extremely decent and committed people, who have often devoted many years of their lives to prisoners and the prison movement, finally make the decision to leave prison work and put their energies elsewhere. Betrayal! Or perhaps they call "bullshit" on some prisoner's egomaniacal demands for utter devotion from outside supporters. Betrayal! Put them to Death!

And these demands for support on political grounds keep coming from the most absurd places. One prisoner in Washington was busted after gunning down a border guard in Blaine, who (not surprisingly) had noticed that the i.d. was phony. The prisoner's defense was based on the premise that he was a "trained mercenary" of the revolution, who shot without thinking whenever he felt threatened. The revolution for which we are struggling does not include "trained mercenaries" with these amoral instincts.

This same prisoner shortly after staged a mass jailbreak from the King County jail, bringing with him a group of prisoners apparently chosen at random. Included was one man who was in jail for a week-end spree, which included multiple murders, rapes, assaults and mugging over a 3-day period!

Not that every situation is this extreme. In a recent case in Vancouver, B.C., a man with a long history of offenses was apprehended. He had been recently 'hanging out' in the anarchist-prison support community there. When the police searched his apartment after finding suggestive notes in his pockets, they found volumes of notes and notebooks in his hand-writing, detailing various "revolutionary" crimes he intended to or had committed. Alongside and interspersed in the notes were the names and addresses of many people in the anarchist movement which it appeared were willing to cooperate on these actions with him, at least in the realm of his fantasies. All of course are now suspect as far as the police are concerned.

It is clear from these and the potentially endless other cases one could cite that the question is not whether people should get out of the prison movement. After all, Fay Stender did. Nor is it useful to ask whether they should have gotten into it in the first place. For many people that is now a moot point. The real question is, when people get out how can they protect themselves, and how many more Fay Stenders do they have to see, before they take seriously the fact that thugs make no exceptions for their 'friends' or 'supporters' or 'comrades', when those people "betray them".

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

We've said enough. We fully expect many people will say, as leftist romantics are so wont to, "objectively racist, classist, sexist, anti-prisoner", "inaccurate, slanderous, counter-revolutionary", "police provocation", blah, blah, blah. And no doubt they'll go on giving their innocent and naive support to whichever prisoner talks fastest and loudest with the most rhetorical political bullshit.

For us, though, we're tired of it. There are few enough opportunities in this society to begin building a healthy alternative, to struggle for a world that is more able to satisfy real human desires and needs. We are not interested in spending our energy nurturing and rescuing hoodlums only to have them turn on us. If even one person who reads this article begins to examine why he or she is active in the prison movement, and honestly questions how this is "revolutionary", and perhaps finds some constructive and joyous activity which offers the possibility of creating something positive toward a revolutionary future, this article will have served its purpose.

The prison movement is a dead end. We don't deny prisoners the right to any support they can get, but that is not a solution to the problems of this society and the revolution that is necessary to solve them.

It is time for those of us on the outside to look at the society in which we live and work. Indeed, if we do have an obligation to prisoners, it is to stop playing servant or wife to them, and instead seek revolutionary changes in the outside world that can bring the prison walls down once and for all, and thereby prevent yet another generation of these cripples, the broken refuse of this sick society. All else is reformism, the abandonment of our own dreams in favor of the twisted and tormented nightmares of the imprisoned.

We must seek our solutions elsewhere.