

Duplicate

To Determine How People Will Behave Once They Enter Prison,
It Is Of First Importance To Know Something About Administrators And Guards

By: Lacino Hamilton

One of the unforeseen, and certainly unintended consequence of recent discussions of mass incarceration, prison profiteering, restorative justice as an alternative to incapacitation being the center piece of justice is, some critics have come to question the people who operate and staff prisons. Could they have anything to do with why many people leave prison more damaged than when they entered?

Prison administrators and guards have, until recently, been spared the sort of aggressive criticism that prisoners routinely receive. Critics of prison generally ignore this class of tyrants. This ignorance smoothes the path for neglect, abuse, and emotional and psychological trauma experienced by those unfortunate enough to show up on a prison roll call sheet. Indeed, what administrators and guards do in the name of corrections is most vicious when it is invisible. When it is simply part of the given. When it is what is taken for granted.

For most of the history of prison, prison has meant prisoners, not the people who operate and staff them. The collapse of the meaning of prison into prisoner has lead to a myriad of social and moral blind spots. Not only in the narrow conceptualization of what it means to be a prisoner, but in the severe lack of attention paid to how administrators and guards are a source of crime and punishment. Yes, if anyone thinks that the varied expressions of containing, controlling, micro managing the lives of prisoners down to when they can use the bathroom, when they can talk, and what they can talk about, is not a crime, they too have lost at least a part of what makes them human.

A friend who was aware that I was going to bring attention to people whose profession it is to dominate other human being, advised me not to call into question the humanity of the reader, "stick to making the point about administrators and guards, you do not want to lose readers." I give you the reader more credit than that. If most people are honest, they probably can admit that they take prison for granted. And in doing so, never consider the special talents it takes for someone to control every aspect of another human being's life. Besides, good journalism does more than just inform, it challenges. Sometimes it is suppose to make the reader feel uncomfortable, push the reader toward higher levels of self-discovery. In this case discover the infamy of a situation produced and reproduced in their names e.g., The State of Michigan vs 45,000 men, women and children; or The State of California vs 130,000 men, women and children, and so on.

The logical place to begin a critical look into prison is not with the poor, uneducated, disorganized man or woman that finds him or herself the property of The State, but with The State and its representatives. "All other line of inquiry," the late George Jackson said, "would be like walking backwards: you will never see what is in front of you." We must begin with the director on down to guard.

To be sure, administrators and guards as tyrants have many faces, though the body of beliefs they don share profound similarities: a wage over people; a wage over the safety and health of people; a wage over communities, and sometimes entire cities. Of course prison attracts and employs sadist, people who enjoys inflicting physical or mental suffering on another person. But most people who work in prisons ultimate allegiance is to the wage. Farmers who became tenants, who were eventually forced from the land altogether. Factory workers who flocked to prison when the factories turned the lights out for the last time. Most of which lacked marketable skills in an economy that continues to go digital, and global. Men and women returning from the deserts of Iraq and mountains of Afghanistan only to discover that with the exception of police force, or security guard, prison is the only place their fighting power and capabilities could be put to use.

When it is food, clothes, shelter, something for the children vs "them," prison is able to impose its particular perspective as normative. Therefore, justice equals punishment, and more punishment must mean more justice. The public is fed a few stereotype images of exaggerated threats posed by prisoners, prisoners as super predators and violent drug selling gangs (even though majority of prisoners have been convicted of nonviolent offenses), and a presumptive right to violate the very rights police and courts allege to be upholding, is established.

Although I favor a more detailed critique of administrators and guards, without the space to fully present such a critique, or the resources to investigate the historical context, ideological justifications, and organization reasons for why the people who operate and staff prisons believe prisoners have no rights they have to respect, the outcome will not be the sort of balanced perspective for which myself and many others have called. But hopefully this can serve as a beginning to learn more about why 30,000 California prisoners have been on food, work and hunger strikes for the past 2½ years, off and on. Or why five prisons in Georgia, thousands of miles away, have done the same. Or why Michigan, experiencing many of the same indignities as California, Georgia, and other human beings locked out of the economy and into a sophisticated system of population control, has responded by working harder, longer, and faster.

In the end, we cannot pretend that significant barriers have not been erected to prevent

the public from knowing how a relatively small guard force dominates a population of 2.4 million prisoners who you can reasonable assume, does not want to be dominated. Or how administrators prevent coalition and cooperation between prisoners and society, especially the mainstream. Only when we engage in honest dialogue about pitting administrators and guards against prisoners, a tragedy where both groups are dehumanized, accompanied by constructive changes in our overall social practices, will we be able to move in the direction of eliminating prisons, which actually could operate no other way.

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