

Censorship In Michigan Prisons

By: Lacino Hamilton

Today, another book was rejected. The fifth time in the past two weeks this has happened. All because the book wasn't sent from an "approved vendor." To the uninformed public such a requirement may appear on its face reasonable, the Michigan department of Corrections should control where information prisoners are receiving is coming from, and what that information is. But in practice, its a form of censorship. A policy that proves to be one of many efforts to prevent the flow of information into prisons under the theory that it is easier to control an ignorant population, than one that is informed.

I have made reference to this Orwellian policy in both conversation and writings before, but its important to explain more in depth so people on the outside will understand the importance of joining the struggle to end censorship in U.S. prisons.

Many people who were incarcerated in the 1960s and 1970s in Michigan became politically awoken through books. There was a focus on reading and writing and publishing that was a crucial intervention because it helped lay the groundwork for a prison cultural context where the development of political consciousness could be identified as a personal and political necessity. It promoted dialogue, debate, dialectical exchange, a raising of awareness, and an atmosphere of independent thinking.

What the Michigan Department of Corrections, and many other DOCs throughout the country began to do, was systematically restrict access to a broad range of topics and authors who were often critical of the economic and political superstructure seen as the real reason for the dramatic increase in the prisoner population. While at the same time flooding prisons with books and literature based on the belief that the chief concern of prisoners should be personal responsibility and accountability. Information that reinforced conservative and neo-liberal ideas emphasizing pathology and lack of work-ethic for the reasons for all their woes.

Docility and conformity were the models incarcerated people where invited to embrace. To move away from the notion of self-education and resistance that had been at the core of reading and writing while in prison, to look for the department to provide information that was nine times out of ten required reading and mastering in order to receive a parole, or privileges that significantly reduce the amount of stress and pain experienced during incarceration.

For incarcerated men and women reading isn't just about math and science or occupying time. It's about discovery, and, above all, imagination. Ways to come face to face with ideas, experiences, emotions, and the larger society. Therefore, what may appear to be a reasonable policy actually limits the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills and prevent opportunities to become more socially engaged.

Obviously the many restrictions placed on receiving books and literature does not completely prevent self-development, some incarcerated people manage to do the virtually impossible. But the difficulties are such that self-educated critically thinking incarcerated people are harder to come by today than in times past. And that is exactly the reason why the Michigan department of Corrections makes it so difficult to obtain reading materials.

Its not my aim to suggest specifically what books and literature should be allowed in U.S. jails and prisons, rather that nothing of educational or personal value should be restricted. I stress this because seventy percent of the men and women who enter prison do so without so much as a high school diploma or G.E.D. The percentage is even higher for those entering prison without basic understanding of race, gender, class, sexuality, how the economy works, and other personal identifiers and demographics that are vitally important in so many aspects of everyday life.

While the Michigan Department of Correction's "approved vendor" policy is the most effective tool to date in censoring reading materials, it isn't the only one. The point of this essay is to increase awareness that literacy involves more than just phonics, spelling, vocabulary, and well grooved reading habits. Literacy also requires specific background knowledge about ideas, experiences, and traditions common to us all by virtue of our membership in the human family at a particular moment in history. And it requires access to a broad range of information from a variety of perspectives and political orientations.

- - - - -

Lacino Hamilton, 247310
Thumb Correctional Facility
3225 John Honley Dr.
Lapeer, MI 48446