

I need some help. I'm all over the place.

PROGRAM OF NEOCOLONIALISM TAKING PLACE IN AMERICA TODAY

As prisoners in Michigan and throughout the country begin the grueling process of breathing life back into the prison movement, a process through which prisoners have been slowly moving for the past several years, of utmost importance is a cogent analysis of the situation in which prisoners find themselves. Through this process the larger movement for social justice can review and reassess the asphyxiation of differently situated social activist in our society and in the world.

After nearly a quarter-century of being imprisoned I began to recognize the need for reorientation and reorganization of the prison movement. I concluded that the strategic and tactical shortcomings, and defeats, over the past five decades, were primarily caused by internal weaknesses and only secondarily by the repression of prison authorities, and other objective conditions. For this reason, a "new," sustained, revolutionary phase and movement must begin with conscious and systematic attention to those internal forces that are the basis of change and development.

Many have, and continue to scoff at the mere suggestion that the kind of discussion undertaken by this writing should be among the first steps taken in the process of generating greater social activism, and of building a new prisoner movement. But I believe such a discussion is not only necessary in and of itself, but also a means of dramatizing the sharp reality of conditions and the nature of the contradiction between working class/poor people, the American capitalist system, and America's use of prisons.

One of the paradoxes in attempting to understand the phenomenon of prisons and why America imprisons at the rate it does, is research and statistics seems to obscure rather than clarify the inquiry. Not only because of their unreliability in terms of sources, models of calculations, and definitions, or the extent to which their meanings are contaminated by assumptions and misinformation, but also because research and statistics do not take into consideration that the establishment that rules this country has had great experience in distorting and co-opting social movements, for which prisons have played a major role.

It would seem logical to conclude, as many do, that American citizens are better off than-ever-before in this rapidly technologically advancing and generally open society. But the fact is that in myriad ways many American's situation is deteriorating. For example, people are trained in skills already obsolete; menial jobs and low income has decimated the ranks of the middle classes; tens of thousands of college graduates cannot find work commensurate in their particular field of expertise; personal debt is at an historical high; and despite the best efforts to eliminate oppression based on race, it returns time after time in different guises.

Prisons are presented to the public as necessary institutions designed to incapacitate law breakers and keep society safe, but in reality they function more like storage dumps for those who have no place in the political economy. All the official denials or aspirational rhetoric in the world cannot mask the economic and social reality of the last half century. Millions of Americans have been left out of the swelling prosperity and technological progress of the nation as a whole. Increasing numbers will be forced out of the economy altogether, becoming a permanent underclass. Many of which have and will be imprisoned.

If all these conclusions are valid, then it is precisely this possibility, no, probability, of a permanent underclass being forced into prison that necessitates a form of indirect rule. To operate efficiently prison authorities cannot rely on force and the exercise of total power, alone. Prison authorities must rely on an alliance with the very people they dominate, prisoners.

This reactionary alliance is made in order to minimize the frequency in which the resort to brute force is necessary to preserve control. It requires varying degrees of cooperation and collaboration with prison authorities. Which means there must be an agency in the prisoner class through which this rule is exercised. From this thesis, a working definition and analysis of prisoner facilitators can proceed.

In America today a program of domestic neocolonialism is rapidly advancing. It has largely went unnoticed because it is taking place behind the high walls of American prisons; and because neocolonialism is commonly associated with providing raw materials for people whose origin is in some "mother country," it is not associated with prisons and

prisoners. It was designed to assimilate prisoner leaders and abolition rhetoric into the prison machinery, while subtly transforming the abolition program for social change into a program which in essence buttresses caging people for part or all of their lives.

The Michigan Department of Corrections [MDOC] is constantly faced with a dilemma that preoccupies department of corrections in all 50 States: the bureaucratic management of large blocks of prisoners. Every prisoner must not only jump when told to jump, but ask how high and stay suspended until commanded to come down, or, the prison authorities/prisoner dynamic does not work.

The most effective technique for prison authorities, a numerically small group, to control prisoners, a larger group, is to set up an "elite" within the prisoner group which is willing to champion the ideas, programs, and attitudes of prison authorities. Ideas, programs and attitudes that on their face teach prisoners socially acceptable methods of resolving ordinary personal problems, but are actually designed to perform the same socializing function as do public schools, clergy and faith healers--shaping and programming individuals to fit into predetermined slots at the fringes of society. Such a technique has been very effectively achieved in Michigan prisons through the creation of prisoner facilitators.

As a class, prisoner facilitators gradually appeared in the MDOC in the early 1990s. Mostly older prisoners, often lifers, with significant time served, who have been shaped and coded by chronic anxiety about the consequences of breaking rules. Consequences that range from suspension of privileges, ridicule, vicious ribbing, to moderate and sometimes severe corporeal punishment. This was made necessary by the rise of large-scale prisons with their concomitant requirements of control and protecting the status quo within the prison. In other words, prison authorities efforts to micromanage the daily activities of 45,000 men and women, in a restricted space, with finite resources, is optimally realized when prisoners act, in effect, as the tacit representative of the prison.

Seen as traitors to the best interests of prisoners, often identified as "Uncle Toms," the members of this class consist of, but not limited to, clerks, assignment foremen, warden foreman representatives, program liaisons, religious leaders, and even some gang leaders function as prisoner facilitators. (Their counterparts in society are writers, poets, playwrights, musicians, actors, athletes, politicians, and prophets.) The task of this class of prisoners is to ease the adoption of behavior modification techniques and facilitate programming to that effect. The socialization of all prisoners is assumed to be incomplete, and prisoner facilitators go a long way toward completing the socialization process.

Through near total obedience in action and spirit prisoner facilitators have effectively become appendages of the prison. In the vernacular, model prisoners whom possess an intimate kind of involvement with the formal running of prison. They have adopted the "official" or staff view. Their talents, skills and enthusiasm is at the disposal of prison authorities. In exchange for serving as a model to other prisoners, prisoner facilitators receive a small number of clearly defined rewards and privileges.

When this same process occurs between a major power and an underdeveloped country it is readily recognized as neocolonialism. The term is being used in this writing to describe activities in prison, because these efforts, as should be by now quite evident, are analogous to corporate penetration of an underdeveloped country. The methods and social objectives in both case are identical.

Corporations that penetrate underdeveloped countries need social stability in the countries where they operate or expect to operate. Therefore, corporations will, when necessary, create and/or invest in an indigenous agency to guard their property and repress internal opposition. They will also devote resources to assure a friendly environment and to have a voice, if not the voice, in the government. Thus, they will spend money to bribe officials, influence newspapers, radio, television, and other forms of "public relations" and in general on activities that will sustain friendly governments or get rid of unfriendly ones, i.e., to minimize the frequency in which the resort to brute force is necessary to maintain control.

What is essentially new, however, about domestic neocolonialism, and especially that which is taking place behind the high walls of American prisons, is that this system isn't tied to a specific disposition of territory. Domestic neocolonialism can take a variety of forms, of which prison facilitators is one.

In all fairness, prisoner facilitators are frequently more than the propduct of capitulation, but firm conviction. Many

have faith that if they could "resocialize" themselves, they may better their social position and expedite release. This sounds commendable, but close scrutiny reveals when there is a gross disproportion of power like there is in favor of prison authorities, most, if not all interactions between prison authorities and prisoners will be accessory and gratuitous. Guaranteeing that "resocialization" will be in the interest of prison.

Rehabilitative rhetoric is used to cover up the co-optative nature of this resocializing, which predates the creation of prisoner facilitators. For example, in 1962, at a meeting in Washington, DC, between social scientist and prison wardens, Dr. Edward Schein presented his ideas on controlling prisoner populations. He said that in order to produce mark changes of behavior and/or attitude, it is necessary to weaken, undermine or remove support of old patterns of behavior and attitudes.

Dr. Schein then provided the group of wardens with a list of examples which are ever so present in Michigan prisons today. They are, in part, physical removal of prisoners from those they respect to positively break or seriously weaken close emotional ties; segregation of all natural leaders; use cooperative prisoners as leaders; treat those who are willing to collaborate in far more lenient ways than those who are not; and placing individuals whose will power has been severely weakened or eroded into a living situation with several others who are more advanced in their thought-reform. Whose job it is to reinforce the attitudes and behaviors desired by prison authorities.

Following Dr. Schein's address, then Director of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, James V. Bennet commented that he and the other administrators had a tremendous opportunity to carry on experimentations, and one of the things they could do is more research. That they could manipulate their environment and culture.

With the aid of prisoner facilitators, prison authorities have been able to do just that. They have been able to operate without facing many of the problems which once made intimidation and physical force a necessary expedient. Not only do prisoner facilitators espouse a model of behavior that is at once ideal, that employs a sternness sometimes excelling that of prison authorities, but they tend to be leaders, depriving the prisoner population of needed skills and resources.

In fact, the whole concept of neocolonialism is predicated upon an alliance between the "occupying power" and "indigenous forces" of conservatism and tradition. Vestiges of this can be found in the form of the Black preacher in Black communities. (As a popular colloquialism puts it, it's time to "get real" and articulate contradictions even when candor is upsetting to those who prefer diplomatic dialogue based on tortured interpretations of history.) While it must be said that the Black church has performed an essential function in maintaining social cohesion in Black communities through decades of adversity and suffering, it cannot be denied that the Black preacher speaks a language defiant enough to hold the "high-spirited" among their flock, but neither so inflammatory as to arouse them to battle nor so ominous as to arouse the anger of the ruling establishment. They preach a strategy of patience, of acceptance of authority, regardless if its abusive or not, and a strategy of turn both cheeks.

Prisoners who surrender the habit of thinking independent of the people who imprison them, who acquire the habit of considering behavior from an obedience standpoint and of judging it only in terms of being non-confrontational, can readily be induced to behave in other ways contrary to personal and group interests.

In other words, prisoner facilitators came to past in Michigan not because the MDOC had decided to undergo a partnership with prisoners in pursuit of being agents of their own transformation, but because the domination of prisoners could never work without prisoner collusion. Because having prisoners identify ideologically with behavior modification, confounding prisoner's interests with that of those who hold them captive could now be obtained by more politically acceptable and more effective methods than those thought of by Dr. Schein.

Despite the analysis just made, there will be those who object to the application of a framework of colonialism to the internal structure of American prisons. Their chief argument is that prisoners stand to benefit by gaining status, self-esteem and a new satisfaction of "meaningful" work. It must be admitted that there is arguably some merit to this argument. However, Michigan prisoners are undergoing a process akin to that experienced by many colonial countries. The leaders of these countries believed that they were being granted equality and self-determination, but this has proved not to be the case.