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Soc. 3040

May 20, 2020

Collateral Damage

"Many personal troubles must be understood in terms of public issues."

— C. Wright Mills

Note: The social analysis provided herein relies on a *verstehen* approach coupled with a sociological imagination to examine various social inequalities during this COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict laden social interactions between inmates and correction officers.

New York's Department of Corrections and Community Supervision maintains a multi-ethnic prison population with a disproportionate amount of African American inmates, predominately staffed by white males. However,

Sing Sing — where I'm now housed due to COVID-19's addition to my social status — is the exception; the racial and gender occupational differentiation is exemplified through dual minority groups of correction officers: African Americans and females.

The COVID-19 pandemic has invaded D.O.C.S., altering the social reality of the prison-industrial complex while intensifying the impoverished condition of incarceration. Prior to April 14, 2020, I would normally be ascribed as a healthy 41 year old heterosexual African American male with the achieved status of a college graduate with an A.S. degree and continuing B.S. student, capped with the master status of prison inmate. Due to mild corona virus symptoms, I became the fifth man quarantined in a small four-man medical dormitory filled with six beds at Shawangunk. The other four prisoners — who had severe symptoms — were pending the results of their COVID test and I was tested the following day. Social distancing was impossible

in that shared solitary confinement, so if one of us had it we all had it! Subsequently, all of our test results were positive. The stigma that resulted also served as an informal sanction which impeded our communication with our families. Fortunately, my symptoms were gone within five days, but on the evening of April 21, 2020, we were abruptly transferred to Sing Sing.

Upon arrival at Sing Sing, we were welcomed by prisoners shouting "y'all sick" and "y'all got corona" from their cell windows. We were then quarantined and after being interviewed by medical staff, three members of my five-man cohort were sent to an outside hospital. Then two days of complaining enabled us to finally use the phone, and we were informed that we would return to Shawangunk when our quarantine ended.

On April 29, 2020, we were released into general population, allowed to dispose of the one mask that we had since April 14, 2020. We were deprived of our personal property which

arrived with us, and thus, we still wore the same uniform since the 14th of April when we left Shawangunk. In the next few days, two of the three that were hospitalized returned. We were continuously lied to about our property and when we would return to Shawangunk. Fortunately, the benefits of my 'human capital' influenced me to draw up several complaints threatening Sing Sing's administration with litigation — highlighting the inhumane, discriminatory, cruel and unusual punishment. Needless to say, we received our property a couple of days later on May 5, 2020. (College assignments, including my finals, were placed in my property, in which, this disturbance left me with a week to complete via correspondence.)

On May 6, 2020, lines were taped to the ground where inmates line up to go to recreation to influence social distancing. MASKS were finally given out on May 7, 2020. New MASKS were distributed a week later on the 13th and the inmate population was told that there would be no more. This experience exposes

D.O.C.S.'s oppressive conditions and social injustice.

(The missing cohort member, an elderly white pedophile, had the luxury of being picked up by Shawangunk within seven days of our arrival.)

Sing Sing's culture of social interaction between c.o.s and inmates is full of conflict, and I've witnessed several aggressive 'impression management standoffs' where all parties involved struggled to save face (remember, there's plenty of eyecandy in uniform watching.), and violence was prevented because someone intervened. Even as I'm writing this paper an inmate argued with c.o.s telling them that they will have to kill him if they try him. A few days ago, I witnessed a female c.o. tell an inmate that she could get him 'cut' by gang members. Two prisoners that I know are now a tooth short due to this normalized violence perpetuated by c.o.s. These behavior patterns suggest that the expected social roles have become self-

Fulfilling prophecies, which harkens back to the familiar subculture of the economically disadvantaged urban community. The undereducated prisoner who maintains a false consciousness, in addition to the rebel without a cause mentality contributes to the legitimation of this conflict laden power dynamic.

Sing Sing is the only facility where one can achieve an Associates, a Bachelors, and a Masters degree, however the social neanderthals who equate educational mobility aspirations with racial abandonment further contribute to this system of inequality, immobilizing themselves through their ancillary beliefs, socially constructed identities, and stereotypical characteristics. So the hardcore prisoner whose weaponry solely consists of anger, aggression, and violence is highly disadvantaged and illeguipped to challenge the hegemonic and oppressive social inequalities that engulf their milieu.

D.O.C.S.'s reaction during this

pandemic was extremely inappropriate to say the least. Social distancing was not enforced at Shawangunk while prisoners were testing positive, and Sing Sing's untimely response was no better. In fact, an inmate at Shawangunk died while working in governor Cuomo's hand sanitizer vocational program and it was swept under the rug and immediately dismissed as the result of an underlying heart condition, although prisoners who were sick were still going to work. Moreover, the latent consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic added additional layers of systematic oppression over the prison population, magnifying our powerless social status.