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Chasing Likes

"individuals from lower social-class groups try to emulate, both consciously and unconsciously, the consumption practices of their social "superiors" — members of the leisure class."¹

— Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929)

The affliction of poverty is known to emasculate self-esteem in the underserved community, aiding and abetting a culture where "the struggle for status is founded primarily in displays of economic wealth and pecuniary respect."² Prison culture is a derivative of the lower social-class's subculture, in which, African Americans are disproportionately represented in each, and the habitus of escapism through emulating the leisure class is common. Thorsten Veblen's notion

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of pecuniary emulation holds true within New York's prison culture, especially at Sing Sing Correctional Facility which is predominately staffed and populated by African Americans.

When inmates enter the prison system they are stripped of their social identity. They are issued a rule book to influence behavior modification, their hair is cut, they are given an identification number, and a uniform. However, it is not uncommon to see a portion of inmates in designer name-brand apparel whose prices exceed the package room's allowable limit. This symbolic capital maintains a symbiotic relationship with the social identities of the inmates within this particular class who have been conditioned by false needs and consumerism. Even when watching T.V., this demographic is often-times mesmerized more by the clothing on male celebrities and cultural icons than they are of scantily clad women. This

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materialistic enchantment also facilitates entrepreneurship; skilled inmate barbers capitalize off of the latest hairstyle trends, uniform pants are fitted by inmate tailors, and the underground economy certainly favors inmates with enhanced status display. Their social credibility is weaponized against them which encourages them to save face and engage in a wide range of transactions. Even counterfeiters target this niche market by advertising bootleg designer clothing via mail order catalogs. However, the stigma associated with wearing 'knock-offs' certainly endangers one's social status.

Expensive impression management incorporated with an inmate's social status is quite bullish on the prison's cultural stock market. In prison, the emulation of the leisure class is often financed by loved ones, especially materialistic women with disposable income who are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable. The adverse

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childhood experience of an absentee father is what facilitates their projective identification on to these inmates who are emotionally unavailable. Thus, the spending behavior of these women is fueled, in part, by subconsciously seeking daddy's validation. Clearly, this wounded psyche is advantageous to the manipulative inmate boyfriend, or husband, who is high-maintenance and co-dependent. Furthermore, an oedipus complex and/or maternal abandonment is often at the root of an inmate's deceit and exploitation of women. This dysfunctional relational pattern also demonstrates their collusion in an unhealthy transactional relationship which only enlargens the void within.

Correction officers also factor into this culture of emulation, especially the women who have undergone cosmetic surgery to enhance the curvature of their physique — becoming eyecandy not only for their coworkers but for the inmates as

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well. The constraints of a uniform limits their status display, however their seductive weaponry consists of manicures, eyelash extensions, weaves, wigs, and pants that appear to have been painted on. It is also common to hear c.o.s discuss their social media presence, which is exemplified via their critiques and comments on the size of inmates commissary purchase, how often they eat in the messhall, the cost and exclusivity of their wardrobe, and their visit patterns, not excluding the physical appearance of visitors, which all factor into one's ascribed status. Some male officers will even compliment inmates on footwear that they share in common. However, an inmates desire to impress women amongst this cohort harkens back to when Sing Sing was known to have a plethora of female c.o.s who were sexually accomodating. Although this culture of promiscuity and prostitution is alleged to have ceased—which is debatable—there are whispers of clandestine vaginal philanthropists who

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emulate the nymphs that precede them. And plenty of them have been terminated due to sexual misconduct. Moreover, for a c.o. to be invested in prison culture to this extent certainly reveals that they share the same conditioning and void within as these inmates and the women in their lives.

The habitus described is clearly irrational and counterproductive, especially regarding inmates preparation for a successful transition into society as a returning citizen. The prevalence of recidivism is a latent consequence of the mindset that perpetuates prison culture. Additional disadvantages manifest through the cavalier attitudes, and perspectives, which discredits the therapeutic, vocational, and academic programs — including college. Inmates of this class believe that the traditional approach to rehabilitation, expanding one's storehouse of knowledge, and enhancing one's skillset is beneath them since the icons of their emulation have often reached

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financial success in an unorthodox manner. Thus, the words of sociologist Richard Sennett ring true: "The tools of freedom become the sources of indignity."³ In fact, there are inmates who believe they are capable of harnessing innate mental powers that enable them to attract prosperity. Some even indict inmates with educational mobility aspirations for cultural appropriation and racial abandonment. So the availability of 'no-show' jobs, and programs, are much sought after. Therefore, one can maximize their status display by attending the yard as much as possible — reminiscent of 'running the streets.'

Prison culture in Sing Sing typifies the re-creation of the lower social-class's subculture, which is an ideological prison for the inmates and c.o.s who it engulfs. And, the brainsoothing circular reasoning and cognitive distortions that perpetuate this fanatical emulation of the leisure

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class renders one an intellectual casualty in their meaningless egotistical pursuit for clout. Unfortunately, this class is mostly undereducated, and thus, their fashionable presentations are their best psychological attempts to mask their underlying issues.

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Work Cited

- 1 Lusian, Christy and Margaret Parrish. *The Sociology Book: big ideas simply explained*, DK, New York, 2019, p. 218.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.* p. 85.