

PARADOX of Their and US: by Erik Maloney

"The world we live in deals with a paradox. On the one hand, it considers social freedoms as sacred, but on the other hand we see man abuse his freedom for the sake of benefitting himself. But, not only do we see man abuse his own freedoms, but at the same time infringe on the freedoms of others."

(unknown author)

The above quote hangs on the locker in my cell. It appealed to me because I have been aware of such paradox for quite some time. Though I cannot say this absurdity is one that I personally experienced. No, it attracted me because it points out what I have personally witnessed throughout this country. The fact is, I have never felt socially free in this country, and the same holds true for most people I know. The feeling of sacredness, with regards to "freedom", is quite foreign to those I know. We have peacefully demonstrated to experience such freedoms. Although some progress has been made, we are all too familiar with the continued infringement on the limited freedoms we do have. The feeling of anger, resentment and frustration plagues many of us from generations of having to witness the people who have the very freedoms we so desperately covet abuse them.

On January 6, 2021, an angry mob staged a deadly insurrection and stormed our nations capital. The violence resulted in the deaths of four people, including a police officer. The treasonous rioters proclaimed themselves "patriots" and felt as though it was their constitutional right to destroy

and plunder the seat of the very democracy they claim to love. They chanted and screamed, "U.S.A.!" as they beat police officers, whose job it is to protect the capital, with the flag of the country they profess their "devotion." The world watched in shock and horror as it happened on live television.

Once the violence was over and the angry mob dispersed, the media began to elicit reactions from prominent individuals. Various politicians and pundits alike condemned the actions, but some also explained why the anarchic rioters were so angry. "They feel like they are not being listened to," one person said. "They feel marginalized," another explained. They attributed these reasons for the anger as having led to the deadly riotous behavior with such understanding.

While most were surprised by the violence of the predominantly white mob, it did NOT come as a complete shock to a segment of this country's population. I come from poverty. For generations, those like me have experienced this country's double standard. We have watched as constitutional rights have been handed to some but denied to us. It is not lost upon us that the framers of such sacred document looked like those who stormed the nation's capital. The fact that the recipients of the Constitution's favor have such sense of entitlement that it caused them to feel justified in taking what they feel they were denied should not be shocking to anyone given the history of this country - it definitely is not to us as it is merely a continuation of what has always been.

This country was founded by violent means. Its history is replete with brutality. In each instance, the brutes looked like the framers of the Constitution, and their brutish behavior was almost always aimed at those who did not look like them. They did as they liked and took what they wanted without repercussion. It was their right to behave in such a manner. The reinforcement of this mentality throughout the annals of this country have only emboldened some, and the violent insurrection was a product of the anger generated by the entitled after finally experiencing what it is like to not get their way just once.

The impoverished have never gotten our way. We have only experienced watching them have their way and feeling hopeless in our pursuit of equality. This country has only ever demonstrated that the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness was never really meant for us. This is reinforced by the complex measures seemingly put in place as barriers designed to hinder our progress.

The acts of government hinderance and citizen entitlement are too numerous throughout this countries history to report here. Most notable, and contributor to the current system of mass-incarceration, was the flooding of low income neighborhoods with drugs to fund covert wars, then declaring war on those very drugs. This further fractured our already broken communities. For some, they began using drugs to cope with the feeling of hopelessness. For others, drugs provided a means to make money in the absence of work. The rise of gangs attempting to corner and capitalize off of a new market

was the resulting effect. The ensuing violence cost many lives and traumatized countless others.

The government's "war on drugs" is the sanctioning of their war on poor people. Despite the fact that research has proven "the entitled" use drugs at equal rates, some even say at higher rates, as poor people, soldiers have unleashed in our neighborhoods under the guise of law enforcement. Their ability to operate with impunity by harassing, beating and killing us, without consequence, emboldens their entitlement while adding anger and frustration to our sense of hopelessness.

The judicial system is set up to favor "the entitled." We see the bias in the bail system. Those with money are able to post bail and go home to await their day in court, while those without money must languish in jail to await ours. We are aware of the disparities with the rates "the entitled" are being released from jail on their own recognizance compared to us. It is not lost upon us that if one can afford an attorney, the chances of a conviction are significantly decreased. We see the judicial system for what it truly is. It is a business, and we are its product.

Laws have been passed that implicitly target poor people. Some have allowed "the entitled" to receive less harsh sentences than us based upon their drug of choice. Others have ensured that we receive overly harsh sentences based upon types of prior convictions. The worst of the laws was passed by Congress in 1996. The Antiterrorism Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) placed unreasonable time limits, of one year, on

a prisoner's ability to raise Constitutional violations that occurred in our cases, resulting in convictions, to the Federal Courts, once state appeals have been exhausted. This effectively meant that without money for an attorney, or the ability to learn the law within that year to live up to the complex rules in bringing a claim, these significant violations were less likely to meet the standard of the court to even be considered. The state of Arizona removed law libraries from their prisons, and, in doing so, they dramatically decreased the probability of prisoner's chances of ever having their Constitutional violation claims ever being heard. As a result, Constitution rights are barely recognized in Arizona courts when it comes to poor people. And this has led to countless wrongful convictions being upheld.

Prisons are big business. Like any business, keeping operating costs at a minimum and maximising overall capital is key. As a result, prisoners are warehoused in close proximity to bring in more money. To save money, jobs are scarce and education is minimal. Mental health treatment is lacking, and healthcare is inadequate while rehabilitative measures are practically nonexistent. Prisoners are typically left idle, on top of one another and made to deal with our personal development and past traumas on our own. On top of that, harsh treatment by staff and deprivation of basic human rights only adds to our frustration and anger.

Violence is born from anger and frustration. The treasonous rioters were angry because they did not get their way,

one time. These are a people who have had every advantage this country has to offer. Yet, prisoners are typically made up of poor people who have had none of the advantages and countless barriers. The anger and frustration we feel stems from generations of being marginalized and never having been listened to. Most do not even realize these are the reasons why we are so angry. The difference between us and the entitled? We have never had a President we felt was for us, and history has taught us we dare not export our anger from our communities.

Why is there violence in prisons? The violence at the Capital is a perfect example of what happens when angry people are placed in close proximity to one another. Only, our violence is aimed at one another and accentuated by the divisions created by the rise of gangs stemming from the Flood of drugs placed in our communities - thanks to our government.

Prisoners are not all evil people. We have been stigmatized and demonized by "the entitled" for their own benefit, while they abuse the very freedoms we covet, our rights and freedoms will continue to be infringed upon. As long as society continues to allow "the entitled" to portray us as bogeymen, then the rest of their atrocities will continue to go unnoticed or be downplayed. And the voiceless of this country will remain unheard.

Famed Criminologist, Dr. Shadd Maruna, once said: "The creation of bogeymen may serve a distinct social

purpose. IF there is no common enemy, no Them, perhaps there can be no Us... IF crime is something wicked people do, we need not worry that our own behavior is wrong."

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