

Introduction

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I am very excited about this edition of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*. Any chance to hear from marginalized groups is important. Their observations, which are often unsettling, make visible and remind us of things many never dare or want to think of or even consider. In this issue we will hear from political prisoners from around the world. Former political prisoners like Sami Al-Kilani, a Palestinian university lecturer who served time in an Israeli prison. Al-Kilani writes about his time in Ansar 3 prison and of his life in the larger prison of the Palestinian territories. We will hear from Brenda Murphy, a former Irish Republican POW. Her narrative about giving birth while in prison elucidates the often-invisible gendered aspects of incarceration. Former Black Panther and journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal will offer his thoughts on race and the American legal system. He argues those draped in the black robes of objectivity (judges) make their way up the career ladder by showing how conservative they can be in the adjudications of black defendants.

Two years ago, when the world was confronted with the awful photographs of American soldiers abusing and playing out sexualized fantasies on detainees at Abu Ghriab prison in Iraq, the veil, which cloaked U.S. prisoner abuses, was removed. To many people around the world and to many American citizens this came as a shock. However, for prisoners there was little if any surprise. In his essay, Roger Buehl asks “What did you Expect?” For Buehl, the tactics of torture were home grown and simply exported abroad. Similarly, Charles Huckleberry argues that the U.S. government in their treatment of “terror suspects” are fanning the flames and hardening Muslim sentiments. At the core of both of their essays is this question of political incarceration. The hardliner position to “protect” U.S. interests at all costs, has justified the unwarranted detention of numerous Arabs.

The essays mentioned above are important because they tap into the central theme expressed in this collection: the relationship between politics and prison. To many in the West, the existence of political incarceration is thought to be something that is outside of or antithetical to its domestic policy. Political incarceration is considered a throwback to another political moment, a tool of despotic totalitarian governments. The authors presented in this issue will challenge this notion. Students of history know this is not at all a new phenomenon.

For centuries, governments have employed the tool of political detention. From Socrates to Nelson Mandela, all the way to Angela Davis and Leonard Peltier, political detention has been a critical function of state power. Though always contested, it has historically been used to silence, disrupt, discredit, and remove from sight those that the state deems dangerous. Over one hundred and forty years ago, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky was incarcerated for his association with political radicals. He served time in the most notorious Russian gulags in Siberia. In his fictionalized narrative about his time in prison he wrote, “[t]he degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons”.

For Dostoevsky, prison was not simply a space for banishment; it was a signifier, an indicator. Those who are in prison tell us about the broader society. The residents tell us about how race and class are operating throughout the society, and what the political climate is like.

This edition of JPP will attempt, if only metaphorically to enter the prison. My hope is for us to use Dostoevsky’s words as a starting point, an entryway into what I hope is a useful and politically relevant conversation. Ultimately this conversation will be about political incarceration. This debate will take place over tens of thousands of miles and across geo-political sites. From the occupied Palestinian territories, to Northern Ireland and on to the United States, we will enter into a discussion with former and current prisoners about punishment, the politics of incarceration, racism and democracy, and detention in the post-9-11 era. We will talk about the relationship to Abu Ghriab, Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay and U.S. prisons. We will talk about the Special Handling Units (SHU), motherhood, prison privatization, and the Three Strikes laws in California. Our purpose in this edition is simply to allow you, the reader, the teacher, and the student to pass on these valuable and unique insights of prisons.

When I first read the essays, what became abundantly clear was the extent to which the post-9-11 world affected the lives of all prisoners. This affect was immense. In this new, but yet age old political constellation, any action or law that suggests it is in the interest and security of the state is justified: even if the measures call for bombing, unwarranted incarceration, or torture. Like other moments throughout history, detention and confinement are critical to the political exercise of power. We need only look to the headlines: the reports from Guantanamo Bay, the pictures from Iraq’s infamous Abu-Ghriab, not to mention the dubious “black sites” scattered across the world.¹

What does this suggest? How should we think about this? Moreover, what should be done?

I will not pretend to have the answer for any of these questions. However, the authors of this edition do have something important to say about them. Collectively their writings bring new insights to an age-old problem. It is our hope, that the reader will “enter the prison”.

ENDNOTE

- ¹ The New York Times reported that the United Nations anti-torture body told the U.S. government that any secret prisons it ran were illegal. It also recommended Guantanamo Bay be closed (http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/news/news-rights-usa-torture.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)

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