

**New Boots**  
*James Blau*

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Walk a mile in my shoes, because I sure as hell never intended on wearing them. I may not have known exactly what kind of clodhoppers I'd be sporting at this point in my life, but I never dreamed they would be institutional black oxfords, leather on top, rubber on bottom, and surrounded by miles of razor wire and gun towers.

In 1991, my oxfords were planted in the "back forty" yard of Standish Maximum Prison, as I looked at the two grizzled convicts standing with me. Although I'd had a year of solitary confinement in the county jail to prepare for this day, I still found myself marveling that here I stood, doing time, hanging with old heads. This didn't strike me as a pleasant realization; rather, one of those rare, surreal moments in life when I wondered whether my senses had betrayed me.

I looked at their faces, not pretty to be sure, but not necessarily unusual. No signs of prominent foreheads or protruding brows; just the customary long hair and biker beards. I say customary because there are no Friday night dates for which to trim the locks, and smooth chins imply homosexuality whether the tidy groomer intends it or not. Lines crowded their eyes, signs of the years, over thirty between them, and their conversation - which guard to avoid and which female deputy warden looked best in tight pants - though strained with bitterness, did not seem in any way remarkable.

I do not know what I expected, only that somehow convicts were different. Before getting locked up, I can only remember associating with one ex-con, named Tony, from whom I occasionally bought weed. Although guilty as he in our victimless crime, in his presence I suffered an indefinable discomfort, as if around an unstable or contagious creature, and so made my visits short. And yet only a year later I found myself wearing the same shoes which Tony could probably never get rid of, for some footwear leaves an indelible mark upon one's life.

As I got to know the old convicts and observed the others around me, I began to realize that this stain of being a convict fell upon brothers and fathers, sons and uncles, neighbors and friends. Most of these men, these thousands I have met over the years, lived normal lives but fell from grace in one form or another, a short fall in many cases. Most were not career criminals, topping FBI wanted lists. Most were not masterminds, bogeymen, or imminent threats to society. Due to the whip-cracking "tough on crime" political creed of the 1980s and 1990s, the dim-witted, down and out, and

unemployed found themselves swept into the monolith of the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC). Thirty years ago, three walled prisons held most of Michigan's prisoners, while today approximately 50 facilities do the job. This population explosion behind the walls and fences was not and could not be fueled solely by hard core criminals. The cell-blocks seemed more a dumping ground for - I hate to say it - screw-ups, losers and dumb-asses. This concerned me, as I vaguely remembered some proverb about what your company says about you, though if ever I harbored illusions about whether life was going as planned, the bars and concrete quickly dispelled them.

Through their beards, they schooled me on "The Code", that sacred unwritten creed which separates convicts from inmates. Convicts mind their own business, see nothing, and respond decisively if threatened in any shape or form. Anything less than a violent, or threatened violent response to an untoward overture would be perceived as equivocation, or as pronounced in the cell-blocks - invitation. Inmates, they informed me, consist of snitches and bitches, and generally any other obsequious or mealy-mouthed creature.

I took their advice and lived by the code, for the most part. Having too much time to think - a luxury perhaps for a Tibetan in a saffron robe, but a frustrating thing for a caged American - certain aspects of the code bothered me. How can one ignore the preying on the weak as "not my business"? To become, as convicts sometimes facetiously say, a "Captain Save-a-Ho", certainly is the American ideal, from Lady Liberty to Superman. Unfortunately, from repeated experience, I have learnt that inmates who lack the fortitude to clench their teeth and face fate will generally bend and slither until they've bitten the hand that defends them. Worse, the code had become a Sunday morning religion. Believers generously offered lip service but spent their weeknights in sin. Snitching had become "game" - he who tells first wins. Seeking administrative protection was no longer widely considered cowardice, but "shooting a move".

Ironically, while machismo remains the order of the day, prisoners are the touchiest creatures on God's grey-walled earth. And four out of five times, trials show that prison gossip travels faster than an internet text message, although not quite so accurately. The most trivial slight, when shot through the prison grapevine, becomes an imminent death threat. The incidental bump in the breakfast chow line becomes an attempted murder

by lunch. If rumor-mongering were a sport, convicts would beat journalists and church ladies, hands down.

Yet, what makes the convict? Labels for prisoners abound. The MDOC designated us “clients” a few years ago, unfortunately without the corresponding maxim that the “client is always right”. This label makes a limited amount of sense when one understands that under Michigan’s constitution all state agencies are “bodies corporate”. As clients, prisoners provide the means for the MDOC corporation to harvest money from the state coffers. Thus, for obvious reasons, the billion dollar corrections industry has every incentive to keep its clients for as long as possible and to lobby for more at every opportunity.

Society brands prisoners criminals, which is fair, since the cause of incarceration is conviction of a crime, breaking one of the rules to which we tacitly agree while living in civilization. Granted, society needs protection from some predators. But regarding most of the lawbreakers around me, I wonder at the virtue of caging them for years and decades, often for non-violent offenses. Is the man who steals laptops off the back of a truck more reprehensible than the politician who accepts “contributions” to send thousands of American jobs overseas? Is a “weed” dealer more despicable than a corporate raider who legally sends thousands to the unemployment lines? As a convict, I certainly cannot make the call, but the majority of Michigan convicts have not put people out of jobs, started any wars, nor physically injured anyone.

Not to say we are angels. As recent MDOC paperwork reminds me, I am an “offender”. This label has a malicious tone to it, so I looked it up. The dictionary defined it as a sinner, or transgressor, which I suppose I can live with even if I do not appreciate the MDOC making a scarlet letter out of it. Now, every time I carry a pass with “OFFENDER” emblazoned across it I feel like a pack of musket-wielding Puritans are stalking me. Nothing like wearing your sin on your sleeve.

Despite the labels, in more than twenty transfers I have marveled at the fact that only two rows of fences, topped with razor wire, surround most facilities. Inside the fences, garbage, supply, and maintenance trucks, each capable of cutting through the fences like a shank into a soft belly, scoot in and out throughout the week. Code or no code, I had serious doubts about a breed of “dangerous felons” who, 1,500 strong, would not choose simply

to wash over the 50 or so corrections staff members like a wave and pour through the gates and fences like a hurricane storm surge.

The sheep-like qualities do not end there. My incarcerated brethren have watched idly as MDOC ripped out the college programs, squeezed the life out of visits and phone calls, and eliminated jobs while increasing store prices, serving rotten meat, and continually keeping over 15,000 prisoners years past their outdates. Society's dreaded nemesis, *the convict class*, steadfastly refuses to bust a grape on its own behalf. After my first few years, I honed my rants on willing ears on yard, but most forgot them when they got back to their cells with Little Debbies and cable television. Undaunted, I published a provocative newsletter for a couple of years, but instead of using the information and network as a catalyst for positive change, prisoners saw it as a bone over which to scratch and snarl. Were I dramatic, I would have cried, "Et tu, Convicts?!"

But in this furnace, if I have met dross, I have also met the gold. I have made friends with courageous men who would face extensive MDOC punishment or even death at the hands of violent gangs, rather than surrender their personal values. I have bunked with men who viewed adversity as the anvil upon which to forge their spirit. I have walked the yards with men who have served decades like true convicts yet without ever going to the hole, while I have gone too many times to count. I have watched a man race across several hundred yards of back forty to help a friend under attack, and have been the grateful recipient of unexpected aid while tossing slobber knockers with several unfriendlies in a very crowded cell.

Where the somber walls break some men's spirits, the restrictions trigger creativity in others. Convicts devise, engineer, and construct an unbelievable array of artistic expressions, cooking devices, weapons, tools, and enough communication forms to baffle an English spy. The same pressure that crushes, forms diamonds; the same fire that devours, forges the finest steel.

What a long, strange trip it has been, to coin a hippie expression. The state oxfords still sit under my bunk, aligned neatly with the institutional footlockers, and outside my cage struggle and dwell the good, bad and ugly. Which I am, I'm not sure; probably a good dose of each. As I recall those first days in the big house, I wonder how others will see me when I hit the streets; if I will ever rid myself of the stain of these shoes. Having weathered the tempest this long, I think I'll just smile and buy some good boots.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**James Blau** has contributed to the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* on two previous occasions with “Heat” (2001, Volume 11) and “Guilty” (2003, Volume 12).

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