# Voices of Dissent: Political Prisoners and the Role of the State Susan L. Caulfield

#### INTRODUCTION

When approached by Little Rock Reed to write the response article for this issue, I immediately remarked that I would be more than pleased to participate in a forum where different voices could be heard. My own work tells me that much can be learned from non-mainstream presentations of 'knowledge,' and this journal is one arena in which such learning can occur. What is striking about many of the articles in this issue is that the writing is not abstract by any means. People are writing about their lives and why social change is paramount.

While much of my own work has focused on the role of state agencies, and a redefinition of criminality, I have also been exposing myself to a great deal of work in feminism and peacemaking. Both of these latter perspectives highlight the importance of listening to one's voice, and of addressing methods of social change in order that no voice be silenced. Feminist work clearly shows the horrible consequences of silencing those who have been harmed (e.g., when women are 'silenced' into remaining in abusive relationships). Within a patriarchal structure, such silencing is commonplace for women. Within a capitalist economic structure, those who do not have the resources do not have access to the methods by which information can be easily conveyed. As we know, 'knowledge' is power; those who purport to know the 'truth' use that 'truth' to further divide the population into nonsensical categories of 'good' and 'bad,' 'worthy' and 'unworthy.' Reading the articles in this issue demonstrates the lack of applicability of such categories, and, yet, addresses why such categorization is commonplace.

Numerous issues have been raised in these articles. While my listing is, by no means, exhaustive, it highlights those issues that struck me in some particular fashion.<sup>1</sup> Central to these writings is a discussion of dominant ideology, the belief system that (1) allows certain groups of people to be targeted by social control; (2) allows for arbitrary classification systems to be applied by self-defined 'experts;' and, (3) allows for what can only be seen as cruel forms of punishment, under the auspices of 'necessity,' in the light of expert-defined dangerousness. Many of the contributors to this issue write about the United States Penitentiary at Marion, Illinois, one of the Bureau of Prison's (BOP) 'model' facilities. Those who have examined Marion question the implementation of constitutionally questionable practices, practices that seemingly have, as a goal, 'to demoralize and emasculate the political consciousness, the religious consciousness, and the legal consciousness that the [prisoners] have developed and are trying to develop' (Farries, as cited in Miller 1977: 18).

There is numerous evidence in the United States of state agents working toward the elimination of civil and constitutional rights in the name of 'domestic tranquillity' and 'protection from a communist scourge' (see, e.g., Blackstock 1975; Chomsky 1985a, 1988; Donner 1980; Moyers 1988). As former President Bush has maintained, 'any means necessary' will be used, even if it means killing hundreds of thousands of people, in order to protect liberal democracy under corporate capitalism. Given that kind of explicit agenda, we should not be surprised to find those confined to the prisons of the nation to be treated in horrific ways. What is more at issue is an understanding of the process that allows a 'kinder and gentler' nation to engage in such activities and have those activities defined as beyond incrimination (Kennedy 1970).

## THE PERSONAL TO THE STRUCTURAL: PERSPECTIVES ON THE PURPOSES OF PRISONS

O Lord, breaking false religion Save the blind! Break! O break The altar that is drowned in blood. Let your thunder strike Into the prison of false religion, And bring to this unhappy land The light of Knowledge. (Tagore, 1974:39)<sup>2</sup>

The articles in this issue all struggle with the realization that human beings are used as tools in the context of the BOP (and state 'correctional' administrators, as well) protecting the 'greater good' of society.<sup>3</sup> The stories shared by these writers are saddening, yet powerful. I see them as attempts to shed light on the manipulation and control of people<sup>4</sup> that occurs within the context of US 'corrections.' All of these writers are struggling on a personal level, and their own stories say this much better than anything I can say. I will not repeat their histories. Instead, I choose to discuss some of what I see as the highlights and patterns of their discussions. What I will discuss is essentially structural in nature, and the linkages of the personal to the structural are contained throughout the very personal narratives of these writers. Importantly, as many of these writers attest, it is because of their acute awareness of structural issues that they, and many others, are subjected to the very questionable practices of US prison facilities.

Little Rock Reed begins this issue by noting that a fundamental motive for putting people in prison is control. This may seem obvious, but the control he speaks of is not the control that refers to removal from

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society or control from further misbehavior. Instead, what Reed is concerned with is the more prevalent, and more sinister form of control, that which serves to draw allegiance to a system (the US political economic system) that benefits the few to the exclusion of just about everyone else.<sup>5</sup> Reed's writing covers a broad array of topics which, while disconcerting at times, does help depict the global aspect of the issues that he raises. Importantly, Reed discusses much of the harm that has resulted from corporate misdoing, especially in the name of profit. Given what we know of the connections between politics and economics in this country, it is easy to see who benefits from prevailing practices. As Reed observes, the criminal justice system is one of the tools used to detract attention from such practices. After all, if you can get people to focus on supposedly fearful events (to the exclusion of more harmful, yet non-criminal events), then they probably will not have time to place your own activities under a microscope. This is what Chomsky (1985b) refers to as the 'manufacturing of consent' and what Kennedy (1970) sees as the powerful defining themselves as 'beyond incrimination.' Reed's piece is an important beginning. It is necessary for the reader to become open to the consideration of the roles of justice and equality in this country before s/he can examine the role of institutions such as the Marion Penitentiary. However, if justice and equality are myths and fairy tales, as Reed contends, then how did they become the hallmarks of a country? This is an issue explored in more detail throughout the articles.

Eddie Griffin's piece examines behavior control at the BOP facility in Marion, as do the works of Del Raine, Wilson, Dunne, and Dowker and Good. While Griffin specifically examines the use of behavior modification, I was struck by his discussion of the role of authorities. Those who are the 'authorities' create and define the conditions under which they can intervene in lives. Dowker and Good address this same issue in their discussion of BOP officials defining both the 'problem' and the 'solution.' What occurs in Marion is a microcosm of the activities of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), such as when they harassed the Black Panther Party, CISPES, and numerous others, without evidence of actual harmful behavior on the parts of people in those groups (see, e.g., Blackstock 1975; Zielinski 1988). According to Griffin, the BOP administrators are not above the tactics of the FBI or the CIA; civil and constitutional rights are violated in the name of protecting the 'greater good.'

Importantly, what Griffin notes is that this 'treatment' of men at Marion actually creates an imbalance that is dangerous for the institution. As Griffin notes, 'The small world cannot contain the imbalance.' Violence among the prisoners will flow *from* the violence the BOP directs toward the prisoners. How could one expect otherwise? Research on colonialization is well acquainted with the violence that arises in such conditions (see, e.g., Fanon 1963; also Dunne, and Dowker and Good, elsewhere in this issue). In his poem 'False Religion,' Tagore writes:

They try to cross the river In a bark riddled with holes; And yet, in their anguish, whom do they blame?

Clearly, within the BOP, they blame the prisoners, justifying further cruelty on the part of the BOP administration. Griffin refers to it as 'breaking men's minds.' As Foucault (1977) would tell us, this refers not just to the minds of the prisoners, but to all who must be 'benevolently dominated' in the furtherance of political and economic power.

Ronald Del Raine is also concerned with the mechanisms of control at the Marion Penitentiary, and finds similarity with Orwell's 1984. I really appreciated Del Raine's discussion of 'doublethink,' 'the process of simultaneously recognizing and not recognizing a fact.' Edward Herman often refers to the actions of our political leaders as steeped in 'doublespeak' (a regular feature in Z ). This can easily be seen in the actions of the BOP, and in terms of larger structural issues as well. For example, the President can simultaneously stress the importance of family values and veto a Bill advocating family leave (suggesting, in its stead, tax breaks for businesses!).

Del Raine discusses the role of ideology in his discussion of propaganda techniques used to sway people toward particular beliefs. As he notes, 'this technique of peacefully [sic] persuading people to follow your dictates consists of first convincing them that they live in the freest country in the world, that this is indeed the best of all possible worlds.' This is similar to the point being made by Gerald Niles in his discussion of the 'sweet camps' (Niles is in the Florida State Prison). Essentially, the point seems to be that if you (read prisoncrats) can convince people that while things may be bad here, they are a lot worse elsewhere, you will be very effective at discouraging dissent. After all, who wants it worse, when they've already got it pretty bad? The central theme to Nile's piece, and to most of these pieces, is reminiscent of the conservative adage, 'love it or leave it (but, certainly do not question it).' How do you get people to believe that they live in the 'sweet camps?' Referring again to Foucault (1977), one way to do it is to be able to demonstrate the conditions under which others (read prisoners) have it far worse.

One of the more emotionally-moving pieces is that of Standing Deer Wilson, who writes about why he chose to go on a death fast, what he refers to as 'A Warrior's Fast.' As with those who write about other abuses, Wilson addresses what is a similarity between what is occurring with him and the tactics of the FBI. Specifically, Wilson tells us that

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'I will no longer allow the united states [sic] to continue to deny me the right to practice my religion.' This is an instance of prison officials not obeying their own law, specifically, the First Amendment right to freedom of religious practice. Here, the BOP officials break their own law, supposedly for some greater good. But, as Wilson notes, what they seek is access to their pipe, drum, sweat lodge, and spiritual leaders. Where is the threat that leads to such denial and control? Similarly, where is the threat when Gerald Niles requests a vegetarian diet? Not to provide such basic needs is further evidence of the need for the BOP, and others, to control by any means possible – it must be clear who has the power.

Bill Dunne places the practices at Marion within a context most in line with my own work. Dunne clearly sees the effects of violence perpetuated in the prison, and notes that violence is being promoted, even allowed.<sup>6</sup> As he notes, many deaths occurred in the prison prior to those that would be used to justify the permanent lockdown: 'Many prisoners had been killed previously without much official concern at all, let alone the creation of a long or permanent lockdown.' These events can be compared to those of moral panics, especially the latest moral panic that is centered on drugs (for more on moral panics, see Hall et al. 1978). Kids have been dying from drugs in this country for decades, especially in lower-class, urban environments, some of them from drugs imported by agents of the US government. So why would the federal government get so interested in the 'drug problem' in the mid-1980s? As we now know, much of the attention given to drugs during the 1980s (on the domestic level) would be a diversion from attention to foreign issues, such as the Iran-Contra affair. Similar to the desires of BOP officials, the highest level of law enforcement (e.g., Attorney General Meese), long before the 'war on drugs,' had expressed a desire for more controls, such as elimination of the exclusionary rule. The 'sudden' attention to the 'drug problem,' and the concomitant suggestions on how to deal with the problem, were all part of a much larger goal - a means by which more control over the masses could be gained. This is what occurred at Marion as well. The BOP was interested in more control; the BOP would begin plans for the implementation of more control, and then wait for a 'convenient' incident that could be cited as *originating* the need for more control (this evokes remembrances of the Gulf of Tonkin 'incident' and the mining of Nicaraguan harbors). While Reagan and Bush both claim no knowledge of Iran-Contra, just as BOP officials may choose to deny their own history, the chronology of events (especially as documented by Dowker and Good elsewhere in this issue)<sup>7</sup> suggests that such claims are false. The state apparatus has a vested interest in perpetuating existing structural, political, and economic arrangements. In order to do so, plans will be made to deal with perceived threats to those arrangements.

What is clear from Dunne's writing is that if Marion (and other such facilities) are allowed legitimacy, then activities on the part of other agents of social control can only get worse. Even if we accept the premise that those who break the law and are convicted of doing so deserve some form of punishment, do we also accept that any means may be used as long as those in charge define it as legitimate? Is the theft of one's right to dissent a legitimate practice? People fight for freedom of speech across this country, notably on school campuses and within the arts community. The articles in this issue strongly suggest that we examine other arenas in which voices have been silenced, for the implications of such silence are severe.

It is possible, as Dunne suggests, that if we stay on the present path (political and economic), the criminal justice system will surely approach the 'Iron Fist' model of control (see, Platt and Takagi 1982). As Dunne puts it, "Final solutions" always start with the use of special repression like "concentration models" against small and particularly vilified minorities that are usually billed as something like "useless eaters," "the worst of the worst," or "rotten apples." But they never end there.' The increased reliance on control units has serious implications not only for those subjected to them, but for those on the outside as well. Reliance on control units is part of a larger political platform that wishes to implement more death-penalty-eligible offenses, harsher punishments, more prisons, and fewer services. The current structure cannot, since it operates on the profit principle, afford to generate the services and materials necessary to do something substantive about crime and about helping those who have become involved in crime. Instead, with profit as the motive, it is easier to warehouse people. Such warehousing will surely increase. As Dowker and Good note, the development of more control units 'lead us to interpret the proliferation of control units in the United States as an attempt to suppress the increased likelihood of protests and dissent.' Reed concurs: 'The increasing masses, domestically and abroad, who are homeless and starving as a result of the "established political and economic order" will increasingly express their dissent. The construction of more and more control unit prisons is one means of controlling those masses.'

The conditions at Marion are similar to those practiced in other control units, like the unit for women at Lexington, Kentucky. Many of the methods of behavior modification that are practiced at Marion were later denounced by at least one of the people who helped create them (see, e.g., Richard Korn in *Through the Wire*). The practices are viewed as dangerous and as violative of international guidelines on the proper treatment of prisoners. However, the practices at Marion, and elsewhere, are exactly in line with the desires of those who hold power in the United States. Marion is heralded as the *model* for future prisons; it is considered a litmus test. The purpose of the Marion facility is clear: 'To control revolutionary *attitudes* in the prison system and in the society at large' (Whitman, as cited by Dowker and Good this volume, emphasis added). The support of control units, and the plans to create more such units is part of a larger scheme. One way in which such a scheme can be examined is through the use of subcultural methodology.

#### **ROLE OF SUBCULTURES**

As Dowker and Good note elsewhere in this issue, 'Imprisoning large numbers of people in order to stop crime has been a spectacular and massively expensive failure.' Given that our imprisonment rate is the highest in the 'free' world, and given that nothing substantive has been done about the 'problem of crime,' it must be that someone, or something, benefits from such failure (for more on this issue, see Reiman 1990). This failure must be a success, if expressed in terms other than those put forth by agents of corrections or, specifically, agents of the BOP. The articles contained in this issue are quite clear as to who benefits from such arrangements – those who wish to maintain the current economic and political arrangements and, importantly, quash any dissenters who question the legitimacy of such arrangements.

The issue of dissent and, specifically, work by state agencies to smash dissent (even if it means breaking the law), is no stranger to this writer (see, e.g., Caulfield 1991a). What differs herein are the voices of those who suffer at the hands of such practices. As work in feminism tells us, if we wish to know harm, we should listen to the voices of those who say they have been or are being harmed (Stanley and Wise 1983). The articles in this issue move from the personal to the structural in their analysis of actions on the part of the BOP (and state-level 'correctional' authorities), and the consequences for those whom the BOP considers less worthy, due to the attachment of a criminal conviction and all stigma that goes with it.

I have written about subcultures, especially the identification of 'subcultures' as a tool used by state agents to win support for intensive law-and-order efforts (Caulfield 1991b). My analysis of subcultures indicates that the methodology has been co-opted by those in positions of power in order to win (or continue) support for a dominant ideology, an ideology that uses 'criminology' to present and support the image that 'crime' is predominantly the work of the poor. This is the same ideology that seeks world sanctions against the acts of 'communists' and Sandanistas, yet views the acts of US agencies (e.g., FBI, CIA, Reagan Administration) as being *beyond incrimination* (see, e.g., Kennedy 1970; Chomsky 1985a). The works that detail such operations on the part of the US government are numerous and need not be reviewed here. Importantly, what they highlight is the inherent bias of law in this country, not only in terms of what is defined as criminal, but in defining acceptable conditions of confinement, such as the use of *administrative* sanctions that sidestep issues of due process (see, e.g., Dowker and Good, this volume). The actions behind COINTELPRO demonstrated the importance of being wary of governmental definitions. The FBI, referencing 'subversive' activity, justified illegal intervention into countless lives. Blackstock (1975: viii) warns us of the impact of such actions: 'The notion that some ideas are "subversive" is dangerous for anyone who disagrees with an administration in power, or who may in the future. If the tag "subversive," and the harassment that follows, can be applied to some ideas today, they will be applied to *other* ideas tomorrow – that's been proven by many months of revelations of FBI abuses.'

As I have analyzed elsewhere (Caulfield 1991a), the actions of the FBI COINTELPRO program should be seen as criminal. Specifically, the legitimacy of dissent in this country, as guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution, was stolen by the FBI. The Bill of Rights provides that people cannot be discriminated against for political action when such action only involves speech (Wasserman 1988). However, as COINTELPRO would teach us, once ideas are viewed as dangerous, they are suppressed, even if it means through illegal tactics employed by agents of the state.

Agents of the state remove themselves further from the possibility of incrimination when their target population is one believed to be 'less than' the 'normal' population. As is well documented in these articles, the BOP is given fiat to do whatever is necessary to control its population.<sup>8</sup> Of course, dominant ideology presents the image that 'inmates' are more problematic, less controllable, thus giving almost unbridled discretion to BOP officials and agents. Stereotypical images of prisoners abound – the creation of such images are necessary for support of the structural and political arrangements.

### CONCLUSION

There has been much discussion in the past as to whether there are political prisoners in the United States. Rothschild (1989) reviews the distinctions between those who are prosecuted for their thoughts, those who are framed on non-political charges, those who commit nonviolent 'symbolic' acts, and those who commit politically-motivated violent acts. However, it is possible that the 'political' question can be framed in a different light. While earlier work, such as that of Turk (1982), used the term 'political crime' for action taken by dissenters against the state, there is a growing literature which argues that political crime also refers to crimes committed *by* the state (see, e.g., Barak 1991; Michalowski 1985). As Caulfield and Wonders (1992) note, 'Central to this broader understanding of political crime is a recognition that

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individuals within the state, or the state itself, may commit socially injurious actions in order "to enhance or preserve political institutions and economic organizations" (Michalowski 1985: 379) within society.' If the state is engaging in criminal activity in its pursuit of certain peoples, then those who are encaged due to actions by the state are, in fact, political prisoners.<sup>9</sup>

Political prisoners, when used for the furtherance of state goals (read accumulation and domination here), fit the definition of subculture that I have developed elsewhere. Once so defined, new restrictions easily apply. Lack of access to services, media, family – all of these restrictions (denials) are due to acceptance of the subcultural label. This is similar to the way in which the 'war on drugs' has resulted in the creation of a drug subculture, a subculture that strikes fear with white middle-class America, mostly because white middle-class America is not defined as part of this group. Instead, a new classification is devised, one that focuses on particular groups and particular drugs. As Dowker and Good discuss, crack is more likely to be used by African-Americans in this country, mostly due to it being cheaper. Cocaine, on the other hand, is more likely to be used by whites. While both drugs can have deadly effects, crack generally carries a stiffer penalty (in terms of its value), and is more the focus of the current 'war on drugs.'

Similarly, as Reiman (1990) and others have documented extensively, some behaviors result in more harm than others, and yet not only are the former not punished as severely, often they are not even addressed in the criminal law. Corporate giants can rob from the poor (from everyone actually) in the name of good business, and not be subject to criminal prosecution. Those who hail primarily from the lower economic classes can rob, and be subject to twenty to thirty years in prison. The definition of crime lends support to the creation of a subculture – it helps define who it is that the public should be afraid of, who they should want to see locked away.

In spite of all the evidence that 'correctional' facilities do not correct, and in spite of all the evidence that prisons often create more harm than good, alternatives to prisons as punishment have not been supported in this country. Part of the prevailing ideology is that convicted criminals are too dangerous to be placed within a community setting. In addition, with the advent of positivism and the scientific method, Americans have been all too keen to hand over all accountability and responsibility to the 'experts.' Hence, you end up with facilities like Marion, where the public wants no knowledge of what occurs, as long as they feel protected, and the public relies on the experts to make sure that such protection is forthcoming.

The presence of political prisoners is not 'seen' by US society, and dissent is not a touted virtue of the society. Self-proclaimed political

prisoners, if seen at all, are viewed as criminals 'looking for an easy way out.' US citizens cannot see them for what they are; after all, political prisoners can be found in 'communist' regimes, but not in the 'land of the free.' The reality of who we imprison, and why, is hidden from the public view. As Dowker and Good note (also see Rocawich 1989), control unit prisons are 'located in isolated, economically depressed, rural areas.' This serves a number of purposes: 'the ardent support of local people, who rely on the prison for desperately-needed jobs, is secured and prisoners are isolated from their family and friends.' Those who need the jobs will not question the nature of their employment. The isolation distances the prisoners from those who might listen to them and seek to change the arrangements of their confinement.

The tools of economics and isolation are old friends of those in power. As conditions worsen in the United States, economic 'gifts' will be further controlled. The US government will continue to bail out the Savings and Loan, and other corporate disasters, yet allow the unemployment and food-kitchen lines to lengthen. Many of those who work from a critical perspective recognize that the actions of those in power are *not* morally distinct from acts defined in criminal law. The articles of this issue highlight another aspect of state criminality. As usual, the acts of the powerful are defined as beyond incrimination. In addition, those who speak out against such acts are punished. Change within the prison system cannot wait until change occurs at the structural level. Dissenters must be heard, and the powerful must be called upon to answer for the atrocities they perpetuate. As the poem Who Killed McDuffie' illustrates, we can no longer allow 'nobody' to be responsible. All around us, people suffer at the hands of profit and greed. The voices herein are powerful calls to action.

#### NOTES

- 1 With the issue of silencing being central to my approach, it is important to highlight that my interpretation is mine alone. I do not purport to speak for anyone, only to share my thoughts and considerations on some of the issues that have been raised herein.
- 2 From the poem 'False Religion.' Ronald Del Raine, in his piece comparing Marion with Orwell's 1984, also references the work of Tagore. He inspired me to include some other passages.
- 3 According to Dunne (this volume), the BOP 'contended that prisoners and staff were safer as a result' of the lockdown. This sounds like some Skinnerian scheme, whereby people are safer, and better off, if they are subjected to more controls. Chomsky (1973) would probably contend that this is totalitarianism hiding behind the mask of 'safety.'
- 4 While the writers focus on facilities for men, others have documented similar tactics in facilities for women (see, e.g., Rothschild 1989; *Through the Wire* 1989).
- 5 Griffin (this volume) sees Marion as a control mechanism for the entire prison system. This can be expanded to society-at-large. Griffin sees it as: 'The utilizing of prisoners as couriers of the techniques back into the community.'
- 6 As a matter of fact, the perpetuation of violence is a crucial part of the moral panic

process. Moral panics require the *perception* that violence is escalating, at the hands of the subversive minority that those in power wish to be rid of.

- 7 As Dowker and Good note: 'The entire population at Marion was collectively, severely, and permanently punished in a *calculated* move by the BOP' (emphasis added).
- 8 See, e.g., Dowker and Good, and their discussion of BOP policy and its broad (and ambiguous) definitions of behavior warranting more stringent control. For example, BOP allows transfer of a prisoner 'whose behavior seriously disrupted the orderly operation of an institution.' Gerald Niles also discusses this issue in his analysis of the 'sweet camps;' as does Del Raine, when he refers to the number of different official reasons given for his confinement in segregation.
- 9 As Dowker and Good note: 'Many prisoners are sent there [Security Housing Unit] for filing grievances or lawsuits or for otherwise opposing prison injustices.' Dowker and Good further note examples of people sent to Marion for political purposes, not because of any demonstrated violent activity. Administration of control units 'will target prisoners who are most likely to be challenging the prison system.' The Director of the BOP has admitted that political beliefs are a legitimate basis for assignment.

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