

Master Status, Stigma, Termination and Beyond

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There is a good deal of truth in the adage “once a con, always a con.” The validity of this observation lies not in its reference to the personality and behavioural traits of the ‘convict’. Prisoners and former prisoners are accustomed to being catapulted, with amazing adaptability, out of one social milieu into another which is culturally and politically different and which is characterized by a completely different set of social rules and practices. Rather, accuracy of the maxim refers to other social actors — that is society in general — who stubbornly respond to the ‘label’ or ‘jacket’ of ‘ex-convict’. It is how people interpret the fact that someone has been in prison that serves to reproduce and perpetuate the perception that the former prisoner will always be a ‘con’.

In the verbiage of social science, the term used to denote such a concept is ‘master status’. Once a master status has been established in the minds of the audience, every act in which that person engages is only understood within the confines of the traits associated with the master status. Sometimes, a master status can be positive in nature. For example, when a priest acts, it is often understood as having something, positive, humanitarian and beneficial associated with it. If a priest visits a prisoner, it is understood as being motivated by his desire to help people in a constructive way, that is, an association is made with the master status of priest. If someone with a dubious past visits a prisoner, then suspicions are aroused and the act of visiting is understood as being something dubious or negative, perhaps to smuggle in contraband. In this example, it may well be the priest who is smuggling contraband and the other individual who is acting upon humanitarian motivations; however, due to the dynamics of a master status and the way in which these specific behaviours are perceived, the conceptions of the audience are erroneous.

When a master status invokes negative connotations, the set of negative perceptions it inspires are called ‘stigma’. Every act in

which the stigmatized individual engages is interpreted within an escalating series of negative terms. For the former prisoner, the stigma of 'ex-convict' moves from suspicion and fear, to contempt and disgust, to hatred and finally to what I call 'termination'. By termination I mean the definitive attempt to destroy that individual with whatever means are available at the time. For some, termination means a return to prison, for others it means transfer to maximum security or to a SHU. For some it means being fired from a job, and for others it means the ultimate in termination — execution. The major difficulty with this process and the logic by which it unfolds is that the more a person attempts to resist it, the more their behaviour is seen as a confirmation of their master status. Thus, if one passively accepts this status, s/he is stigmatized; if one resists it, s/he is stigmatized. If one changes one's behaviour in a positive way, it is seen as a 'con'; if one changes one's behaviour in a negative way, it serves as an affirmation that the master status is correct. Anyone experiencing the stigma of a prison sentence will be more than familiar with this 'double jeopardy' kind of paradox.

A little more than ten years ago I was released from prison for the last time on mandatory supervision after serving 5 1/2 years for armed robbery. I say 'last time' not because I believe I shall not return. Rather, it is because after spending the majority of my adult life in prison, mostly maximum security, I had been released from prison on many occasions, but always to return with another sentence. When I began my last bit at Sask. Pen. in 1976, I took advantage of a University program operating there, and while I had not achieved entry requirements, I was admitted as a 'mature student'. By 1978, I had completed a little more than first year with straight "A's" and was granted full parole to carry on my studies at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S). Within six weeks, I was back in prison, my parole revoked for a \$4.95 attempted fraud associated with a false prescription. The choice was a simple one: give up the names of others involved or return to prison. Not to be destroyed by bad luck and stigma, I continued studies after being returned, and three years later was released on mandatory supervision. With three years of academic credits, immediately I pursued the completion of my degree.

When I graduated in 1981 with an overall average of 88.5% for 4 years of university credits, I was awarded the gold medal for the most distinguished graduate of the university. Such success prompted me to continue my studies, and I completed a masters degree in 1983. I became a commonwealth scholar and was awarded a doctoral fellowship to travel to England in 1983 to commence doctoral study at the London School of Economics (LSE). Here I successfully undertook a large-scale research project which received international attention, and I returned to U of S in 1986 with a faculty appointment at the rank of assistant professor. In 1988, I was offered a position at the same rank at the University of British Columbia (UBC).

During this past ten years, I have been rather busy and productive. I completed an Honours degree with high honours in sociology, a Masters degree with a specialty in criminology and a Doctorate in sociology with a specialization in criminology. I have published 5 books with another 2 currently in press and a third in preparation. I have published numerous articles in academic journals, textbooks and other media. I have been involved in the production of two films, undertaken many funded research projects, written several technical reports and delivered over 40 conference papers, and public lectures. In addition, I am the founding editor of a progressive justice journal, the production editor of this journal and the founding co-editor of a critical criminology international quarterly bulletin.

In a ten year period, such accomplishments would add up to impressive success for anyone, but for an 'ex-convict', this is almost unheard of. One might suspect that, if anyone has been successful in resisting the master status of 'ex-convict', it is me. Such a suspicion would be incorrect, however. UBC recently denied my reappointment, and after over \$30,000 of legal bills to fight this decision in an internal appeal, I have been 'terminated'. The circumstances of this process will ring familiar to anyone having been through the 'justice system' and prison. I believe that my termination is the result of the process described above: the result of my master status. It seems that few people want an ex-con for a colleague. There are some truly progressive types in the academy. Many academics, however, maintain the

impression that they are leftists; but, when the opportunity arises to demonstrate their self-proclaimed critical consciousness, they behave not unlike the most reactionary prison guard.

While my termination was framed as supposedly not meeting superior teaching standards, the real reason was the stigma of my master status. Let me provide the reader with a few examples of the way in which this was confirmed by the appeal at the UBC 'Warden's Court.' 1.) A student testifies that he was advised against taking my classes by another professor because I was a 'fucking jailbird'. This evidence is ignored. 2.) I was nominated by my students two years in a row for the master teaching award, but this evidence was ruled inadmissible. 3.) Over 50 letters from criminologists around the world testified to my scholarly achievements and their import and impact on critical criminology internationally, but this evidence was ruled inadmissible. 4.) When evaluating my teaching, two colleagues attended my class in my absence to 'interrogate students' about me. They posed the following question: "Dr. MacLean is a big muscular guy who is always wearing a lot of black. Many people find him intimidating. Do you find Dr. MacLean intimidating?" Despite the fact that such a question denigrates the canons of social science and that no self-respecting social science researcher would pose such a leading question, the panel ruled it to be acceptable. 5.) A student in my graduate seminar in criminology works in a prison. To me, this student appears to be more concerned with getting a credential and making that big jump in the prison hierarchy than actually learning anything. This student approaches his/her supervisor in the prison about me. The latter refers to my prison record and tells the student that s/he has reason to fear for her/his life. After receiving a grade of 'B', which s/he deserved, instead of 'A', which s/he desired, the student complains to UBC that s/he fears for his/her life due to my 'violent' past. A subsequent external grade appeal strongly upheld my assigned grade; however, the impugning of my character was not rectified in my own appeal. There is much more I could reiterate, but space does not permit.

The above is sufficient to indicate that the stigma associated with the master status of ex-con is definitely at work. It would

seem to be the faculty, not the students who are afraid of me, and this is the result of the process of stigma, not the result of my behaviour which has remained professional throughout. Even after 10 years of hard work and accomplishment, suspicion turns to fear, which turns to contempt and disgust and finally to hatred and 'termination'. The department was always treating me in a punitive way while continually raising unwarranted suspicions about my honesty and integrity. These responses are not to my behaviour but to my master status. There are many colleagues who, because of my master status, refuse to accept the fact that my scholarly successes have only come as a result of a high level of motivation coupled with an untiring diligence. For these supposedly professional academics, my successes are viewed not as positive 'accomplishments', but as the negative fruits of my ability to 'con'. However unlikely it may be that someone could possibly con their way from a prison cell, to a gold medalist, to a commonwealth scholar, to a doctorate at the LSE, this is how my successes are understood. It is this perception that doubly motivates people in powerful positions to mobilize their resources to terminate me. If I am that successful at conning my way, I am seen as doubly dangerous and the need to terminate is of double importance. Thus by acting in a way which negates the attributes of the master status, even some professional academics interpret those acts in a way which supports the status. This 'deviancy amplification process' leads to an even greater commitment on their part to terminate.

I have purposely, although reluctantly, provided these personal details because I believe they demonstrate the more general process of master status leading to termination. The articles in this double edition of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* provide us with more specific variants of this process and how they have impacted negatively upon the lives of the authors.

Robert Sullivan enjoyed the dubious distinction of not only having the master status of 'ex-con', but also the implications of being gay gave him a master status of 'deviant homosexual'. His letters from death row are to be read not as the letters of a condemned man but as the painful attempts of a stigmatized person to resist the confines of a master status. Sully's letters

are vivid. For anyone who has had to spend time in solitary confinement, the images constructed by these letters are realistic and depressing. We know in reading them that his attempts to obtain justice are futile, and while he is probably cognizant of this fact himself in writing these letters, his optimism continues. We follow him through the triumphs of becoming 'a published author' and of finally contacting his natural mother. The agony of defeat in having every appeal turned down, having his attempts at obtaining justice sabotaged and never really meeting his natural mother is also conveyed. As a plot develops, there is never any resolution, and while the reader may be left wondering "what happened," Sully was terminated with these details remaining undone. His master status ensured that a different set of rules would be applied in his case, justified by the negative perceptions of him as a dangerous man, and he was terminated accordingly. His letters show us that while he met his termination with dignity, his resistance to the process contributed to its reinforcement.

János Szabó continues with a different slant on the death row experience. Rather than resisting the master status of 'murderer' which he readily accepts, he attempts to resist the stigma associated with it. He pleads with us to accept the fact that despite his sentence, he is still a person with humanitarian qualities, hopes, dreams, and a driving passion to do well while trying to rectify his previous wrong-doing. Despite these pleas, his master status will lead to termination.

Mumia Abu-Jamal is a truly remarkable individual. With the master status of 'political revolutionary', Abu-Jamal's legal audience has neglected the fact that, as journalist, his weapon was a deadly ball-point pen, his ammunition eloquent words. Instead, they associate his political ideology with violent behavioural actions, and while Abu-Jamal's writings and actions show the contrary, his master status has again ensured that a different set of rules are to be applied in his case. The rules of proper evidence and appeal of judicial decisions are relaxed in his case. These are justified by the fear inspired by his master status and the insatiable appetite for his termination. Yet, Abu-Jamal faces this stigma with the dignity of a progressive intellectual. He does not write of his situation while asking for a

helping audience. Rather, he inspires us to consider the negative logic of the process of master status leading to termination in the hope that we will recognize that the violent actor is a product of this process. Socially constructed by this process are the few Ted Bundy's who, by statistical properties alone, are driven to achieve a negative master status. The humanitarian concerns of Abu-Jamal are not only painfully evident in his article, but they defy the unfair perceptions of him, a product of his master status.

John Morris continues with the social constructionist argument advanced by Abu-Jamal. Indeed, termination in this article means the removal from society and assignment to the maximum Pelican Bay State Prison. Here we are sensitized to the fact that prisons are not only a violent and volatile society, but they serve to violate the humanity of the individuals sent there. Anyone who has had the opportunity to spend time in such an institution knows intuitively that their own humanity is violated while their violent reaction to this development is encouraged. For those who have not spent time in these institutions, however, their limited understanding leads them to fear anyone who has served time in one. Stringfellow articulates this idea in his article. When he speaks of "society's rejection of the incarcerated" he refers to the stigma associated with the master status of 'ex-con'. Stringfellow not only points out that it is unfair for one to continue paying for their transgressions long after their sentence is up, but he also alludes to the fact that, once the master status of ex-con has successfully been applied, the audience interpreting this label follow a logic which leads them to demand to terminate or 'reject' persons so labelled.

If the reader has been sensitized this far to the 'doom and gloom' of the incarcerated and the pessimism in the analysis of a negative master status and the process of stigmatization, it is because it is pessimistic. Realistically speaking, prisoners and former prisoners have no hope of casting aside their 'jacket' and transcending their master status. My own case amply illustrates the futility of trying to overcome the negative depths to which society has relegated us. The more we resist, the more we encourage termination. The more we passively accept, the more we will be dumped upon. This pessimistic perception is further

enhanced by the recognition that it is not our own behaviour, but the behaviour of the audience that is in need of drastic change. It is the collective audience which needs to be rehabilitated.

There is a second message within the pages of this volume, however, one which is not so pessimistic. And this is the sub-theme of prison justice day. Robert Bryden provides us with an eloquent experiential account of the meaning of National Prison Justice Day in Canada. He reminds us that there are atrocities carried out in prison under the banner of justice to which we can respond by remembering the good in our fellow comrades.

Bob Gaucher provides us with a more historical account of the emergence of National Prison Justice Day as a product of the struggles of some dedicated prisoners to resist repressive forms of carceral power and its abuse in this country. He also reminds us that this form of resistance contributed to the construction of another master status for the individuals involved, 'rebel', which in turn contributed to their own termination — whether in the form of involuntary transfers or worse in some instances.

If there is an optimistic quality to this sub-theme, it lies in the recognition that Prison Justice Day is more than commemorating those who have died in prison, and more than resistance to penal oppression inside the walls. Prison Justice Day is also a symbolic consciousness-raising event which sensitizes all of us to the fact that penal oppression reaches far beyond the confines of the prison. It follows each and every one of us through the remainder of our lives, both in terms of memories which we cannot simply carve out of our consciousness in order to proceed with our lives, and in terms of the process of master status, stigma and termination — the once a con always a con syndrome. Prison Justice Day reminds us that we must not only resist the practices of penal regimes, but also the perceptions of prisoners and former prisoners inspired by the master status these practices construct. We probably cannot change such a pervasive process as stigma — it is too general a phenomenon. However, we can change the material circumstances in which the master status of ex-con gets constructed. Prison Justice Day functions to remind us that there will be no justice until every prison in this country is turned into a parking lot.