

## Prisoner Solidarity - Analysis

Prisoner solidarity is often mythical. It is more mythical today and the fond glances backwards to better days, when prisoners stood shoulder to shoulder to resist oppression, are equally suspect. It was not always so and it need not be in future.

Prison landings comprise a society like any other. Often the only commonality is the State-inflicted status of 'prisoner'. This may appear to have a latent potency; after all, don't all prisoners labour under a common oppression and share common concerns?

Yes - and no. The prison inflicts the weight of imprisonment unequally, both according to the dictates of personal staff prejudice and official policy. Prisoners may share the whims of popular prejudice, but aside from that we are a fractured body of captives. There are remand prisoners and convicted prisoners. Male cons, female cons. Young prisoners and adult prisoners. Employed and unemployed, Enhanced, Standard and Basic privileges. Those with family and friends to support them, those without. Some with money, many with little. Smokers, dopers and smackheads.

You can divide and recategorise the prisoner community a thousand ways. Staff do it; lifers tend to be viewed as more socially stable, and traditionally have the best privileges. Sex offenders are dismissed and treated as a sub-species of the sub-human collective of crims. Some cons get along with staff, some don't. Those that do, get treated differently. These are the unofficial ways in which prisoners are treated.

Many official categorisations have existed for decades, and we have endured them. Convicted, or not, differences in security categorisation, in sentence length - all are established criteria for differential treatment in none respect or another. Despite this deliberate fragmentation of the prisoner community, though, prisoners shared their daily concerns and often forged bonds in the heat of a common adversity.

In recent years, though, these fractures have been increased massively by the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme - the IEPS. This affords the prison system the official mechanisms to intervene deeply and insidiously into the daily lives of prisoners and is arguably the cause of the greatest atomisation of the community of prisoners in decades.

The IEPS was an invention of Tory Home Secretary Michael Howard during his "prison works" period of populism. The basic concept is to link privileges with behavioural standards - the more compliant the prisoner, the greater the amount and scope of privileges he or she is permitted.

Of course, "privileges" in the prison sense are, for the free-dwelling humanity, the perfectly normal and reasonable accretments of daily life. Access to the telephone, clothing, jam, family visits, music, tv, coffee, associating with others...privileges comprise the minutiae that takes us through each day, from one minute to the next. They are what free people

call the reasonable necessities of life.

The availability of these privileges is earned through achieving various levels of behavioural standards. Enhanced is at the top, falling through Standard, down to Basic. The facilities available to cons on the Basic level are such that staff are reminded that they must provide the legal minimum of necessities.

Alongside the IEPS came other formal manifestations of control and managerialism. There are Sentence Planning Boards, Offending Behaviour Courses, targets and milestones that are set and must be completed for progress to be made. These are further intrusions into prisoners' lives, determining their daily activities on an individual level.

The accumulated effects of these changes are that prisoners serve, in a real sense, different sentences. Whilst we always served our own individual time, the prisoner experience was often a shared one. Now, though, although it may appear that the experience is still shared, thanks to the IEPS and Sentence Planning each prisoner becomes focused upon his own concerns - those pressed onto him by these new tools of control.

There was a time, lasting decades, when any group of prisoners could sit and bemoan their situation - and it was a collective groan of shared experiences and concerns. The allocation of privileges and expectations at the individual level, however, has fractured that bond. Any group of prisoners sitting together today will be a disparate collection, each focused upon their own individual targets and privileges. All we may believe that we share now is the passage of time.

This is an insidious form of control, a sly and penetrating attempt to fracture the bonds between prisoners. It forces us to look inwards, to lower our eyes from the common condition to become consumed by our own concerns. Many, if not most, prisoners have been led astray into this endless preoccupation on the self.

The power of understanding the collective repression has become obscured. For whilst we may, as individuals, be subject to the vagaries of the IEPS, the whims of Sentence Planning and the absurdities of Offending Behaviour Programmes we seem to have overlooked the obvious - that whilst the effects of these policies is highly individualised, they are actually a shared bond. Each and every prisoner is subjected to them.

And each and every prisoner can resist them. The nature of these policy jackboots means that we must resist them individually, not as a collective. But that does not mean we must struggle alone. Each of us can support the other, repeat the act of resistance, until what appears to be a lone voice becomes a chorus of resistance.

Each time a prisoner appears before a psychologist armed with their Code of Ethics, a minor blow for sanity is struck. Each time a family member is invited to a Sentence Plan Board, an ear is lent to listen for the false note of officialdom. As individuals, we can act. As a self-aware body of individuals we

can magnify and repeat each act until the pressure of outrage against oppression becomes manifest.

Prisoners need to lift their eyes from the contemplation of their own, tailor-made oppression and realise that each man standing around him is also suffering from the deprivations inflicted by the same mechanisms, being ground down by the same policy machine. Recognising the shared injustice and oppression becomes the first step, the smallest yet most vital step, in a new movement that can be called - proudly - prisoner solidarity.

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