

LIBERATION DISCOURSE: A PSYCHOANALYSIS OF PRISON CAPTIVITY

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“Inside” is a defining place more separate from the outside world than might be any other space within enclosed perimeters. “Inside” is a high-security prison in a midwestern state that represents the end of a voyage from opened to closed, from self-determination and volition to restraint, from wantonness and profligacy to suppression and shackles. Along the way, the newly captive stops off for assessment and classification, for scrutinizing, pigeon-holing, admonishing, and exhorting. He (and she, too) is examined, cleansed, deodorized, deloused, and debriefed. He is prodded, penalized, and penetrated. He is given an official badge of demonization, and whatever purulency might exude from the open-woundedness of his child times is summarily wiped as one would a baby’s sniffling and grimy face. He is at once made into a monster and a cipher, a ghoulish and ghost. And all the while he fades into a sea of blue as vestiges of uniqueness and distinction are abolished—all desire is muted for governance and control.

The prison inmate is a disreputable rogue, a heinous boil on the face of the community, the incrimination of his society’s disfigurement. Why have we been unable to eradicate the scourge of psychopathy existing despite our many advancements? Why does our world of incarceration and captivity expand despite a technology and intellectual armory that should be liberating us? Why do the causes of social and restorative (truly equalizing and

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balancing) justice pale in the shadow of retribution? From the sheriff who made the jail detainees wear pink to the atrocity of Florida's electric chair, the ritualization of sadism (no less the sadism of ritualization) in the justice system seems a fact of life. But this subjugation is expectable in a world where a we-they distinction must be maintained. The powerful is only acknowledged as such when the subject is firmly and completely subdued, and the subject, whether mad or bad or bad-mad, must be subdued.

To the outsider, the criminal is something different. As Foucault described in 1975, "It is as such that he will belong to a scientific objectification and to the treatment that is correlative to it" (p. 101). We see this happening. The human is broken down into constituent parts and then re-created, I would hold perversely, from the pieces into a "kind." The vanquished of the very powerful are vanquished to pieces and then to flatline. The prisoner is classified, not only by levels of assaultiveness and manageability but also by typologies and brands that are supposed to represent "modern" penology. He or she becomes, for us, a specimen, less than human and not us. We remain on the outside looking in through the meshed barrier of denial. We cannot experience him nor he us.

We might go further and ask, "Who is the outsider?" He is one who has managed to maintain the face of beneficent goodness to the world, the power mogul who can cut off malignancy and deny it as part of the self while evacuating into it all the pieces of malevolence that cannot be borne and maintain the image of sanctity. However, the abomination must be sustained, if not cherished and celebrated, in order for that face to remain unblemished. Our children who are the receptacles of our wrath (a wrath sealed over with social control so that it can become more festered, seething, and twisted as it is kept from the light of day and any transformative experience), the disenfranchised poor, the incarcerated objects of our power who uphold it by their existence, our asylums, and our prisons function in this capacity for us. To have saints, there must be sinners. To maintain strength, there must exist the weak. A country's repugnancy, represented by the "dwellers in yon dungeon dark," is counter-

pointed by the mesmerizing attraction of the chalice within which the bitterness is contained.

As well, we practitioners of mental health objectify the criminal and re-create/subjugate him or her as the object of our study and knowledge while we, in turn, magnify our own power. We “scientists” do not temper the bipolarity and power differential because the prison environment is essentially an instrument and vector of power, and we, despite our shunning the technology of power over the body, are nevertheless functioning as one of its tools (Foucault, 1975) and, as such, are inebriated by it.

Power also seems to have primacy over truth. It is only those in control who have the absolute right and sovereignty in the determination of reality. Still, without acknowledgment, the force behind the truth is feeble. For truth to have the power over the accused man that would give victory and triumph to the subject, it must be validated by the acceptance of responsibility by that object. Because such an acknowledgment, in Kafka-esque style, has an intoxicant effect, it has been sought after with considerable energy (Kafka, 1919). In fact, the admission of guilt has come to take on an inflated sense of worth in the determination of what constitutes “remorse” and, through implication, rehabilitation, because it gives the diagnostician, the parole board member, and society as a whole an enhanced sense of dominance (and safety).

In addition, this forcing the criminal to “accept responsibility” reflects society’s relegation of blame, in general, to that outside of itself, especially in the United States. The most powerful nation and its most powerful citizens have the option of self-absolution and retention of the infantile delusion of omnipotence and entitlement. Delusions of the deranged express the social order, and this narcissistic “specialness” and self-glorification are hypertrophied characteristics among the unspecial, ignominious, and insignificant living in prison.

Such creating and re-creating the prison object depending on the whims of the subject appears to be motivated by a need to maintain a sense of safety and security. She (and he, too) is different from me when she does something detestable (bad), and she is the same insofar as she is naturally inclined to follow

the rule and wishes to do so (good). We do have some evidence from infant observational research that deviance from rule-boundedness may be structurally established as early as 7 months of age and that, once this is continued into post-oedipal, language-dominated development, such a disposition often becomes all but intractable. Psychoanalytic theorists specializing in infant and child development such as Daniel Stern comment on the language-based construction of rationales, fantasies, pseudo-memories, and interpretations for the furtherance of such early inclinations. However, when it is convenient to do so, we operate as if the prisoner is just like us and only needs to “get a life,” denying early child-rearing and structural differences.

The notion that criminality stems from the proverbial “bad seed,” implying a genetic disturbance that is unlikely to be contagious, is a dismissal that is also likely to be quite comforting for those of us who must maintain denial of similarity. Advocacy, which most often functions to suppress rage—one’s own and that of the other—is yet another mechanism for keeping our dogs at bay and settling into complacent smugness that the ill-willed psychopath is not me.

Nevertheless, the ordinary (banal) social pressures that contribute to psychopathic behavior are quite well elucidated in experiments done in the 1960s, and 1970s, specifically the Milgram (1963) studies of obedience and the Zimbardo prisoner-guard research at Stanford University (Zimbardo, Haney, Banks, & Jaffe, 1974). These clearly demonstrated that all (with more or less resilience) are heir to heinous acts of sadism based on situational factors and group pressures. The mere addition of an authority figure can have strong effects on an individual’s judgment, and the demand characteristics of certain situations appear to easily pull the person into a regressed state. In Zimbardo’s experiment, which had “normal” college students taking roles of prisoners or guards, the role-takers *and* the researchers were drawn into a sadomasochistic behavioral pattern and conflict that eschewed any attempts to alter it. Zimbardo says,

The behavior of prisoners and guards in our simulated environment bore a remarkable similarity to patterns found in actual prisons. As we wrote, “Despite the fact that guards and prisoners were essentially free to engage in any form of interaction . . . the

characteristic nature of their encounters tended to be negative, hostile, affrontive and dehumanising.” (cited in Haney et al., 1973, p. 80)

The researchers later recalled, “The outcome of our study was shocking and unexpected to us, our professional colleagues, and the general public” (Haney & Zimbardo, 1998, pp. 1-2). How did it all end? Did the researchers recognize the need for a termination of the experiment?

It was Phil Zimbardo’s fiancé, entering the situation after it had been well underway, who convinced him that it needed to end. The experiment was aborted after only six days. Incredibly, parents and friends, a Catholic priest, a public defender, many professional psychologists, graduate students, secretaries, staff of the psychology department, in all numbering close to 100, participated in or observed the study in some way and registered no objection or discomfort to the abuses they witnessed.

Other studies suggest that the outcome was not an artifact of the experimental nature of the situation. Observations by Cohen in 1953 of the concentration camp experience tend to uphold Zimbardo’s results. Cohen noted that the concentration camp victim was interested in one primary objective: personal survival. Cohen insisted that, in the final analysis, all were corruptible to serve the end of survival of the camp. Cohen noted imitation of the cruelty and hatred of the SS, and in some, a fuller identification of the ego, as Kapos. He found that internees identified themselves with the cruelty in some way, that the process was relatively automatic, and that it could be delayed but not prevented.

Nor is the retrogressive nature of such experiences necessarily confined to the obvious captivity experiences. The depersonalizing nature of institutions has been demonstrated in other “total institutions” (Goffman, 1961) such as monasteries and military units and is suggested in studies that indicate a strong influence of internalized cultural institutions on the unwary psychiatric evaluator who will automatically make judgments on the basis of gender and race (Eker, 1985; Gross, Herbert, Knatterud, & Donner, 1969; Lewis, Shanok, Cohen, Kligfield, & Frisone, 1980; Marcos, Alpert, Urcuya, & Kesselman, 1973) or as a function of the salient characteristics of the situation (Rosenhan, 1973). In

this, such “institutions” function in similar ways to captivate and imprison, to deindividuate.

The regressive pull appears to be associated with several issues. A major one is the dedifferentiation of the personality aggravated by a denial of differences among people. The appreciation of nuances, which are detectable in ambiguous situations by those who can tolerate uncertainty and lack of definitiveness, is wiped away for the purpose of maintaining clear-cut distinctions between one thing and the other. As aforesaid, fear is reduced through a maintenance of absolute hierarchical boundaries that are impermeable and constant. Coincidentally, distinction of age, race, history, and personality is all erased in the interest of maintaining a bifurcated prison mind for those who live and work there, although, for the rest of society, prison employee and prisoner are merged. Because there is no individuality, there is no thought, no word to defy the ever-present reality. Language, a usual creator of individuality, is secondary to behavior and affect, which, rather, create language—obviously through the prison patois, less visibly through the manipulation of the word to pervert the truth and make it the servant of the act. Oftentimes, you will hear the psychopath say when confronted with his or her lie that it is “the same difference,” that is, it makes no difference between truth and lie, between one word and another. The subject and object of sentences can be juxtaposed and verbs can be misplaced, giving a peculiar dispassionate and pretentious characteristic to psychopathic discourse at times.

Employees also have difficulty integrating the various pictures that emerge of the prisoners. The criminal behavior, even the most gruesome, is relegated to the report and the file, and the person sitting in front of one is often completely separated from the behavior that brought him or her to the current environment. He or she is a “case,” devoid of the historical data that make us human. Perhaps only presaging what is to come for all, as Foucault (1975) suggests, “The turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection” (p. 192). The human as criminal human goes as far back as the crime and stops there or is frozen in the here-and-now as the figure in the prison

garb. There is only a tacit acknowledgment of the future. As in the past, that is given to a different entity, not the one we see before us now. So there is the fragmentation. Affective involvement is drained away. Behavioral indicators are kept in check. Language is an artificial “spin” and repeated monotonously at best and, at worst, an insistent, twisted perversion of truth. And that is us.

In prison, we confront the approaching reality of a heavily populated world in a test tube, because this is a world of discipline and control where, as in *Brave New World*, individualism is renegade. Citing Foucault (1975):

In a system of discipline, the child is more individualized than the adult, the patient more than the healthy man, the madman and the delinquent more than the normal and the non-delinquent . . . and when one wishes to individualize the healthy, normal and law-abiding adult, it is always by asking him how much of the child he has in him, what secret madness lies within him, what fundamental crime he has dreamt of committing. (p. 193)

This is more than the mere lip service of “empathy,” or putting oneself in the shoes of another, the process of true rehumanization or putting oneself in the shoes of oneself. In prison, one is only more obviously captive, but trading the individuality of “the memorable man” for the expediency of “the calculable man” (p. 193) is a common theme that disturbs anchorage in the classic tradition and discredits *all* of us as humans.

A decided injunction to group, to mass produce, to homogenize and dissolve all differences and distinctions and to re-create them perversely as classified types (or, in Foucault’s view, to distinguish in order to amalgamate) furthers the cause of annihilation. Mutilation of meaningfulness orchestrates so-called rehabilitation so that the individual is mass-produced. The rage welling within the psychologist is a signal that he or she, too, is impinged on to become an assembly line product of the prison digestive system. The institution becomes a prototypical mother-infant merger that lulls to sleep and, serving denial, does not notice the real threats to security in a lack of ability to differentiate and identify the specialness of the unique. We-they is reproduced in myriad ways between a prisoner and a guard, between a guard and a supervisor, between a superordinate and a subor-

dinate. The prison machine is a dichotomy that must be black or white, good or bad, right or wrong, but always extremely so. All other distinctions must melt and bow to the two poles. Those who view themselves as numbered among the elect maintain their position, and the rest be damned.

In prison, time and space are structures of enhanced importance that are concretized and function, similarly, to allay anxiety. There is the ever-present "now," the "infantile omnipresent" or unidimensional time (Landau, 1976; Sabbadini, 1989). It is punctuated only by the "outdate" or "retirement." Past and future take on a characteristic unreality. Present is negative and the future is an ideal. Time and space are hypercathected and invested with significance that evaporates outside the prison environment. One lives by the clock and feels time's pressures. Space as well, always a premium in prison, cannot be assumed. It is both too much and too little. While physical distance is maintained through "no touching" rules, housing is cramped. Like any icons, time and space are revered and cannot ever be tamed or owned. Time and space are of the idealized other and not part of the self. They cannot be apprehended. They are constantly wooed and never won. A prisoner and a staff "do time" and often have a stronger attachment to this nonhuman object than to human ones. The oft-repeated statement, "Just another day in paradise," bespeaks the timelessness, the unchangeability of the prison, and the infinite emotional space between individuals never knowing or telling who they are.

Although individuals are packed together, there is a yawning emptiness. An indifference abides just below enthusiastic repartee, and the mindlessness and cynical void are counterpointed (perhaps defensively) by manic-hyperexcitement. Experiences of helplessness over both the outside and inside states of being are hidden behind the superficial demonstrations of power, control, and behavioral restraint. Jessica Saunders (2000), working in a women's prison in Great Britain, points out that prison functions as a holding environment:

For many prisoners being a wanted criminal may be a defence against having been an unwanted child whose experiences of deprivation have left him with a desolate inner landscape, and who become intoxicated by danger and risk which adds colour to an

otherwise grey picture and gives an edge to life that without it is experienced as depressing, if not lifeless. (p. 145)

In such worlds as give birth to future incarcerated, power and authority are frequently used to transgress and violate so that prison's concrete structures are adhered to with desperation lest any disturbance in their sharply defined lines forecast a potential ravishment and annihilation. The employee also loses the ability to choose as he or she goes about applying senseless rules to situations that have long since proved their senselessness. The diffuse rage that permeates the staff, whether professional or custodial, is an identification with the helplessness of the prisoner population. Similarly, an adherence to concrete structures provides for reassurance in the face of powerful experiences of projective identification destroying the creative resources otherwise available to them.

Psychoanalysis thrives in freedom and authenticity. It is perhaps for this reason that the sheathe of regimentation typifying a prison or a military unit is not an hospitable home for many psychoanalytically informed. It is rather a place better suited to those who can reduce human complexity to a few pat exhortations, classes, levels, conclusions, treatments, procedures, processes. While many of these artifacts of institutional control function as a quick fix antianxiety potion for both staff and inmate, the mindful absorption of character, the taking in of another through understanding, and the arrangement of the prison theatre to charm the interned into character alteration is lacking. Attacks on meaning and meaningful structure are an adequate substitute for targeting individuals, both prisoner and guard. Instead of evacuating his or her rage onto a prison employee, the inmate evacuates into a written "grievance," a temporizing structure that is intended to offput the physical assault but, in fact, only delays it until a more opportune time. Ordinarily, it does nothing to diminish the intensity of rage or to mindfully connect it with mentalized images from the past—the structure that contains the real culprits.

The artificial and temporary and sometimes arbitrary structures for the expedient handling of the prisoner do not serve to adequately sustain characterological or even behavioral change for any substantial length of time. The structures themselves are

rather flimsy and are often viewed as only poor imitations of buffering agents. On the other hand, they are indicators of the need for some other within the area of the prisoner and guard, the subject and object.

In 1934 Richard Sterba proposed the notion of dissociation to explain the dissolution of the transference in the analytic encounter. In actual practice, Sterba wrote, dissociation involves the patient's taking the perspective of the analyst in the encounter and "the subject's consciousness shifts from the centre of affective experience to that of intellectual contemplation" (p. 65). The idea of perspective taking outside the direct experience between the analyst and the patient (which itself is a container of the residuals of past relationships) was developed further, and the notion of "the third" has come to mean anything that could provide for a triangular arrangement and the provision of a space for intellectual work and future potentialities (Brickman, 1993; Kernberg, 1997; Ogden, 1999; Winnicott, 1951).

The two-person psychology of the analyst and patient, outsider/insider, keeper/kept, guard/prisoner (mother and infant) lends itself to greater emphasis on unmodulated affect, unreasoned interaction, role exchange, and topsy-turviness or inversional states of mind: Truth is lie, lie is truth; reality is perversion, perversion is reality; male is female and female is male; child is adult and adult is child; if I feel something, you must feel the same; no boundary, no individuation. Into this state of affairs steps the third—the other parent, culture, the world at large. Modeled after the father heralding the onset of language and an ordered, sensible world; in the best of situations it exemplifies the use of imagination, symbolization, and creativity to "have your cake and eat it too."

Somewhat automatically, the prison system uses all types of third elements: the rules, the group, time-and-space structures, procedures, education, activities, televisions, grievances, "kites" (messages)—all to interlope between the dynamic, regressive relationship that naturally develops between the keeper and the kept. However, the function of these elements is only partly understood as such and, due to the intense concretization and desperation with which they are imbued as well as their hypertrophy and enshrinement, these elements do not enhance authentic creativity

that results in personality formation and growth. Both employee and inmate are overcome with primitive emotions regardless.

Rather, the third is better represented by the celebration of differences, the presentation of research that subverts and compromises conflict-intensifying positioning, the engaging inquiry that induces wonder and stimulates fascination, the use of time and space for mentalization. The third is also represented in the psychologist who, although fully immersed, remains slightly aloof from the poles and who may only then bring reality from the outside.

The taking of the perspective of the third through the continual questioning of denial that seeks to wipe out all the differences, and through the handling of dedifferentiating pulls in the prison system as material for inquiry, for analysis, for wonderment, can contribute to the integration of reality and provide the space within which one mentalizes and heals the self. Language can be used as a meaningful mediator rather than for the purpose of mystifying, confusing, or trivializing daily experience. Most of all, the third can be an acknowledgment that psychopathy is a human condition that all are heir to and that all must wrestle with. Anais Nin (1967) says it succinctly:

I felt I had not shared in the hatreds, angers, and love of destruction, but that I would share in the punishment. But I knew the origin of war, which was in each of us, and I knew that our concept of the hero was outdated, that the modern hero was the one who would master his own neurosis so that it would not become universal, who would struggle with his myths, who would know that he himself created them, who would enter the labyrinth and fight the monster. This monster who sleeps at the bottom of his own brain. (p. 347)

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