

EXILED IN PURGATORY : SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IS PHYSICAL
STARVATION BY ANOTHER NAME

An individual can remain solitary even in the presence of others, as every school teacher knows.

Dr. Erik Berne

George Orwell wrote, "[p]olitical speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements Political language... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."¹

Prisoners are placed in cells smaller than those legally required for animals in a zoo, deprived of all human contact and sensory stimulation to a degree that they mentally and physically deteriorate: this is called solitary confinement. Solitary Confinement, however, is

physical starvation by another name.

In 1945 Dr. R. Spitz, a psychiatrist, found that infants deprived of handling over extended periods of time tended to sink into irreversible decline physically and mentally.² Dr. Spitz's observations gave rise to the idea of "stimulus-hunger".

A well documented example of stimulus-hunger can be seen in the study of "Genie".³ Genie was born to a highly dependent blind mother and mentally ill father. For the first 11 years of Genie's life she was kept in a single room by her parents isolated.

By the time Genie was removed from the home she was significantly impaired. She was disabled in her individual and social skills lacking basic communication skills. While she improved over the years, she never mastered social language.

In 1964 Dr. Erik Berne, a psychiatrist, stated stimulus-hunger had "an allied phenomenon [] seen in grown-ups subject to sensory deprivation."⁴ Dr. Berne pointed out that sensory deprivation in adults had been experimentally shown to "call forth a transient psychosis, or at least give rise to temporary mental disturbances. In past, social and sensory deprivation noted to have similar effects in individuals condemned to long periods of solitary imprisonment."⁵

Dr. Berne pointed to studies done as early as the 1930's showing that "solitary confinement is one of the punishments most dreaded even by prisoners hardened to physical brutality, and is now a notorious procedure for inducing political compliance."⁶ Something that continues to be true today.

Dr. Berne argued, "[O]n the biological side, it is probable that emotional and sensory deprivation tends to bring about or encourage organic changes" in the brain.⁷ Specifically, he pointed out "[I]f the reticular activating system of the brain stem is not sufficiently stimulated, degenerative changes in the nerve cells may follow, at least indirectly... In this sense, stimulus-hunger has the same relationship to survival of the human organism as food-hunger."⁸

In other words, sensory deprivation (or "stimulus-starvation") has the same effects as actual food-hunger on the body. It's not just a mental ailment but a physical one. "[S]timulus-hunger in many ways parallels the hunger for food."⁹ Terms such as malnutrition" are easily transferred from the field of nutrition to the field of sensation."¹⁰ In that sense, "[s]tructural-hunger has the same survival value as stimulus-hunger^{***} both of which lead to biological deterioration."¹¹

Simply put, those being subject to solitary confinement and sensory deprivation are being subject to physical starvation.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Orwell, George. Shooting an Elephant and other Essays. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1950). Print. pp. 136, 140.

(2) Spitz, R. Hospitalism: Genesis of Psychiatric Conditions in Early Childhood. Psychoanalytic Study of the Child. 1: 53-74 (1945)

(3) See Malson, L. Wolf Children and the Problem of human nature. (E. Fawcett, P. Ayrton, & J. White, Trans.). New York: Monthly Review Press (1972);
 Curtiss, S. Genie: A psycholinguistic study of a modern-day "wild child". New York: Academic Press (1977);
 Rymer, R. A Silent Childhood. New Yorker (1992a, April 13) pp. 41-53; Rymer, R. A Silent Childhood, part II. New Yorker (1992b, April 20) pp. 43-47.

(4) Berne, Eric. Games People Play. New York: Ballantine Books (1964). Print. p. 13-14

(5) Berne, Ed p. 13-14

(6) Berne, Ed p. 13-14 (citing Belbenoit, René. Dry Guillotine. E. P. Dutton & Company: New York (1938); and Seaton, G. J. Isle of the Damned. New York: Popular Library (1952))

(7) Berne, Ed p. 13-14

(8) Berne, Ed p. 13-14

(9) Berne, Ed p. 14

(10) Berne, Ed p. 14

(11) Berne, Ed p. 18