

PA D.O.C. IN DISARRAY: A FAILING SYSTEM

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OVERVIEW

Amid the hoopla and general hype over “crime & punishment” in America, some very pertinent elements has gotten drowned out; perhaps the most essential elements, which are:

- (a) Crime is a reflection of the society that creates it.
- (b) Prisons are actually on-going experimentations, and
- (c) It’s all politics, politics, politics.

In traditional African society, for instance, if a person stole something the society didn’t necessarily deem that person the “lone” perpetrator per se, as the entire society would come under scrutiny. For it reasoned that if one was compelled to steal within a society where the tenets of the social order are grounded in communal sharing, then what has the society done, in terms of the distribution of the resources (or neglect of same), to cause one to steal (in the first place). Seems logical enough.

However, the American society doesn’t subscribe to such logic. For it is a society predicated on, at its very foundation, “Slaves & Masters” which has assumed more pabulum variations: “The poor & the privileged,” the haves & the have-nots,” etc. Therefore, it isn’t uncommon to see a group (class) of people having fluent privy to such human necessities as education, medical care, food, clothing and shelter, while another group or class of people doesn’t (within the same society). These are the class contradictions that forms the axis upon which American-style “Law & Order” revolves, with the have-nots being portrayed as **Socially** inept, thus “naturally” precluded from higher (class) ideals, thereby inherently prone to crime or social deviancy in general; a proclivity endemic to that class alone, void of any congenital nexus to its avaricious progenitor. Such is the hypocrisy. And to this warped line of reasoning, an 18th century poet once quipped that:

“The law will punish a man or woman who steals the goose from the hillside, but lets the greater robber loose who steals the hillside from the goose.”

And since the invented racial factor is at the very crux of American-style social inequality, it should be little wonder then why Blacks and other non-Whites comprise the overwhelming majority of America’s prisons and jails, while making up the minority demographic of the entire society.

We often hear so-called social scientists, criminologists/penologists, and the like, engage in a prolix of word semantics, statistical jargon, and other forms of psycho-prattle to lend legitimacy to the mass criminalization of Black and other non-White peoples, which has given rise to the spurious “Bell curve theory” wherein pseudo bio-social science is posited to portray Blacks as having a natural-born propensity toward crime, particularly violent crime; the anodyne for non-

Black public consumption, to absolve themselves of guilt for the “justified” mishandling of non-White peoples.

In fact, anywhere (on the planet) where a group of people are subjugated/ supplanted by another group of people you can rest assured that the dominating group has manufactured a litany of pejorative titles and designations to stigmatize the subject group, thus justifying its eventual demise. Still, that’s only half of it; the other is convincing the subject group that they are who they’ve been (falsely) portrayed/projected to be. The word “NIGGER” and the designation “three-fifths human,” et al, are just a couple of the well known degrading and dehumanizing epithets contrived by whites to legitimize (in their own minds) the enslavement of African peoples. And the fact that , over a hundred years up from plantation/chattel slavery, Blacks’ persistence in referring to one another as nigger = nigga (no matter the variation), the very term used to degrade them, is proof-positive that they believe they are who the slave maker said/says they were/are.

And since the Prison Industrial Complex is most certainly the continuum of slavery, the terms: Criminal, Predator, Violent, Aggressive, Incurable and other related negatives are likewise the necessary “code words” that, when mentioned, invariably connotes non-Whites, thus the (legal) justification to usher Black and other non-White peoples, en masse, into America’s prisons, the neo-slavery (of the 21st Century).

In this vein, it is significant to note that the January 1, 1863, “Emancipation Proclamation” issued by President Lincoln, didn’t mean, as many people believed (and still do), that Blacks were “set free.” Emancipate means etymologically: “Transfer of ownership.” This helps to shed some light on the fact that within the first few years after the Civil War, the percentage of Blacks in prisons went from zero to over 30 percent. An immediate transference from plantations to prisons, with the double-edged 13th amendment clause ratifying slavery within the “crime & punishment” context. And though the civil rights upheavals did yield some “tentative” benefits, it is no secret that American-style racism still prevails upon the society. And the elite are still addicted to slave labor, whether manifested in outsourcing or imprisonment. Prisons are regarded as the new plantations. This fact is becoming more and more obvious as the once touted “rehabilitation” has given way to social engineering, socio-political repression, torture and the like. And while these neo-plantations are springing up throughout the good ol’ U.S. of A, at great economic and political aggrandizement to the elite, we need only examine Pennsylvania’s Department of Corrections (PA D.O.C.) to get an idea of the trends and currents that are on the rise.

PENNSYLVANIA’S PERFIDIOUS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

Over the last 10-15 years, not only has Pennsylvania constructed and immediately filled, with great rapidity, a whole host of prisons, but the term “correctional facility,” though originally replacing “penitentiary,” for more mainstream public acclimation - has become a gross misnomer, a hyperbole even - given the raw and wanton antagonistic posture of today’s prison officials, starting at the top administrative levels, under the auspices of PA D.O.C. Secretary

Jeffrey A. Beard, who no doubt inherited a system pushed into decline by former Governor Tom Ridge, with the reverberations of his "tough-on-crime," anti-prisoner crusade still being felt under current Governor Rendell's administration.

There isn't even a semblance of "corrective" measures being promoted. It is ostensibly about profits and power. So much so that more brutal and inhumane "rules and regulations" are being implemented to force prisoner compliance. Toward this end, PA prisons are increasingly becoming, behind their whitewashed facade, torture chambers, insane asylums, sensory-deprivation control units and what have you, all rolled into one. The general sentiment is: "Work (for the State) or be locked down."

In recent years, the state has pretty much streamlined its lucrative operations. It is literally profiting off the misery and misfortune of the poor; with the commissary-store being centralized, and contracted with reputed prison-profiteer Keefee, who offers low grade products at marked up prices - a complete rip-off (by majority prisoner consensus). The same with the sale of radios, TV's, watches, boots, sneakers, etc. There was a time when such mundane items could be purchased from (approved) outside vendors. Not anymore. The PA D.O.C. has cornered the market. Even the local repair shops for the maintenance of said items are reported to be owned by family members of prison officials at each respective prison; in some cases owned by officials themselves.

The cable company is purported to be owned by the Bush family, offering the most basic services for marked up prices. The telephone companies operate in the same vein, with its exorbitant prices. Charging the (poor) families of prisoners excessively for the acceptance of collect calls. Even the calling-cards offered in the prison commissary-store is a rip-off. Yet prisoners are rendered voiceless; with their families, friends and loved ones being pulled into this systematic sham. I guess crime really does pay!

THE PLOT THICKENS

In what many believe to be a deliberate plot to further attenuate the already tenuous ties between prisoners and their loved ones, prisoners are routinely placed in prisons in remote, rural areas, far removed from the urban centers from which they are extracted. And these prisons (especially in the western Pennsylvania region) are invariably staffed and run by racist whites, from the general area. Incidentally, this bears a strange irony worth mentioning here - because about fifteen or so years ago, rural whites would strongly oppose and protest the building of prisons in their little towns; with the rationale being that they simply didn't want "nigger," "spies" and the general "criminal element" in their (peaceful) towns. They reasoned "what if they get loose."

But, once they caught on to the economic opportunities of it all, especially in the wake of the closing down of the local coal mines, steel mills, etc. they had a change of heart. Now they bid and sign petitions to have them build in their towns. They in effect become, unwittingly, and in

some cases, knowingly, local agents of the broader “social engineering” project that’s being implemented, for ultimate social control. All is required is a high school diploma/GED, and any tobacco chewing white racist can sign up. They comprise the bulk of the guards, culinary personnel, medical staff, construction contractors, maintenance crew, contracted vendors and other related profiteers.

Another related element worth mentioning is (in this Post 9/11 climate) a lot of the “corrections” officers are military men (and women) who routinely rotate from active duty to their “regular jobs” at the states’ prisons. And since a lot of them have been in combat in African, Middle Eastern and Latin American countries - and as a result, have a built-in bias, a hostility even, the ethnic discrimination and subsequent abuses of Latinos, Blacks (a lot of whom happen to be Muslims) and other non-Whites, are increasingly on the rise. The abuse that was exposed at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, at the hands of American soldiers, a large number of whom are prison guards and other related prison personnel back in the US, with one of the main perpetrators (Grainer) being a prison guard at the ultra racist and repressive Greene County State prison (in western Pennsylvania), may have shocked and awed the general Public, but to the millions trapped in America’s prisons, it wasn’t surprising in the least, as it is a daily experience within the United States’ (invisible) sub-societies. Again, “Corrections” or “rehabilitation” has been effectively replaced by pure, unmitigated antagonistic hatred. This is especially evinced in the sham of a grievance system (with no oversight), the biased Prisoner Litigation Reform Act (PLRA), and even the small-town court houses in the jurisdictions of the respective regions of the many State prisons, who seem to be in cahoots with prison hierarchy.

HATRED BEGETS HATRED

Within the prison environment, much like the (American) society (at large), events and behaviors are erroneously projected as being disconnected from their respective social settings; as if human behavior occurs in a vacuum or out of thin air, devoid of any reciprocal rendering. Yet, such a myopic view, although denoting not only an ignorance but an (acquired) arrogance as well, is the prevailing mindset; especially among those in authority (over others). That is to say - for example, if a person (in authority) spits in the face of another person (deemed under authority) and the latter returns the same, the latter is insidiously regarded as the “lone” aggressor, as the former’s actions are somehow absolved by virtue of his position (of power) within the dynamic, leaving the latter holding the full blame, thus the full brunt of the penalty.

In Pennsylvania’s prisons, this [ill] logic is pervasive. A mere cursory review of most of the misconduct reports that are responsible for a large majority of the men (and women) being locked down in the state’s super max dungeons for ad infinitum, could easily lead one to believe that these men (and women) just up and performed “senseless acts” minus any precipitation what so ever; that they are “naturally” inclined to the most vile behavior. However, what is almost always omitted is the often vile and despotic behavior that’s initiated by certain rogue prison officials which, more often than not, have racial implications. So, while it has become an unchallenged (and often unchallengeable) custom of prison officials to point to prisoners’

“aggression” or “hatred,” the initiating hatred and aggression (by prison officials) is invariably left out of the equation; thus creating a culture of “us-against-them,” whereby “Rehabilitation,” “Reform” or what have you, becomes the consequent casualty.

And it is within this context that prisoners can be assaulted, starved, tortured and even outright murdered. This is what happened at Greene County, with the perpetrators merely being shifted to other prisons in the region, mainly SCI Forest, Fayette and Somerset, where, not surprisingly, the same violent abuses are on the rise. In fact, Greene County, Forest and Fayette are referred to, by prisoners, as the “triangle of terror.” It should also be pointed out that S.C.I. Albion has recently joined the fray, with the recent appointment of Raymond Sobina as that prison’s warden, who came from Forest.

Of greater significance, however, is the fact that the entire Department of Corrections, headed by Secretary Beard, has become a climate of fear, hatred, abuses and the like. It is rumored that Beard is quite fond of his infamous “Restricted Release List,” a D.O.C. policy that gives him sole discretion (power) to keep prisoners locked on solitary confinement for as long as he deems “necessary” which, as it stands now, means forever - since he has had men (and women) locked down for many years - without any clear criteria or System by which prisoners can work their way back to general population. What is equally ambiguous is the fact that a fabricated story concocted by a prison guard (especially by a prison’s respective security department), can arbitrarily land a prisoner on said “list” (for the rest of his or her life) without any independent oversight committee; and consistent with the trend of racial inequality, “the list” is disproportionately laden with Black and other non-White prisoners.

Many of the officials within Secretary Beard’s own administration have, admittedly, become disillusioned. And this disillusionment is spurred by many factors - ranging from the course the whole PA D.O.C. has taken, in terms of the mounting disorder, wrought by utter derelict of duty and, quite frankly, the open racial & religious discrimination within the prison system - to the increasing recidivism rate - the cycle of hatred that is perpetuated by the wanton unprofessionalism of prison officials (with no accountability), the implementation of draconian rules & regulations used solely for punitive purposes minus any rehabilitative functioning. One high ranking official who wishes to remain anonymous revealed that “race, politics and the bottom -line” which amounts to profits & power, “is the unspoken theme.”

The well being of the men and women warehoused in these new-age plantations, and the fact that many will (eventually) return to their communities just as - if not more - damaged than when they entered, has been pushed into the peripheral. Therefore, the PA D.O.C.’s professed mission statement of: “Our mission is to protect the public by confining persons committed to our custody in safe, secured facilities, and to provide opportunities for inmates to acquire the skills and values necessary to become productive, law-abiding citizens; while respecting the rights of crime victims.” is merely an empty rhetorical proclamation, for public appearances only; far removed from the reality of the standing practices within the (invisible) sub-societies we call prisons.

A tour through many of the state's prisons, on any given day, will undoubtedly reveal the despair and hopelessness among the real, living, breathing men and women who are often spoken of in stoic, statistical language which tends to depict them as a non-people, which in-turn makes these prisons the perfect playground for neo-nazi types, skin-heads and ilk, to come and unmask their hatred for Blacks and non-Whites, without any public notice. And, ironically, complaints of racially motivated abuses made by prisoners are pretty much always dismissed as absurd; even in the face of the discovery of the telling photographs of Greene County guards posing (in the prison's security office) with swastikas, confederate flags and other racist paraphernalia; or the racially motivated beatings of Black and Latino prisoners at Fayette's now defunct Long-Term Segregation Unit (LTSU.); or Camp Hill's notorious Secured Management Unit (S.M.U.); or the "quiet as kept" sexual assault of a Black prisoner's wife by four White S.C.I. Somerset guards, while she was staying at a local motel during her visiting weekend; or Albion's racially slanted medical experimentations and general sham of a healthcare service, as applied to treating Black and non-White prisoners. The list goes on.

Many of the D.O.C. officials, not excluding some of high rank, are convicts themselves. In another twist of irony, it has become common to see homosexuality both promoted and facilitated, while prisoner's spouses, girlfriends, etc. are routinely harassed when visiting, to dissuade even the most rudiment modicum of civilized family interaction.

Moreover, in the sole interest of accommodating the influx of the already overcrowded state prisons, which has grown to almost thirty in under twenty years, prisoners are forced to live - slave ship-style - in tiny little cells barely fit for one person, and other similar living quarters, with other prisoners; Some who are HIV/AIDS and/or Hepatitis-C positive, mental patients, etc. - jeopardizing the health and safety of the prison populations, thus the community at large. This, among other related factors, have compelled many prisoners to resort to desperate behavior just to qualify for one man cell status. Some even spend years in solitary confinement, just to be alone, as there isn't any viable recourse of system by which prisoners can resolve such matters.

In fact, prisoners have uniformly iterated that such matters are rarely dealt with (amicably), as the notion of simply covering things up has become the primary course of action taken; the apt preamble to the inevitable and eventual descent into full-on entropy! In a more broader view, though seldom (openly) acknowledged, the cultural polarities between Whites and non-Whites is the bane of the age-old chasm, with white supremacy, in its many manifestations, being the most aggressive and prevalent social construct. And the laws, police, courts, media and prison opportunities, etc., though "categorically" and "unequivocally" denied, are the DNA of said (racist) construct. Therefore, cloaked, albeit in its many euphemisms, Blacks are - especially in the so-called "criminal" context, still the bete noire. This is the essence of the: "America, Black-White, separate & unequal" axiom which accurately denotes this sad reality - which is none more evident than in its prison system. White Supremacy isn't concerned with RIGHT & WRONG. It is primarily concerned with power; thus the ability to define RIGHT & WRONG at its own (biased) discretion.

And until this fact is openly and fully acknowledged by the masses, primarily Black and other non-Whites, said group will continue to be not only victimized but complicit/compliant in their own victimization, even guised in incarceration /neo-enslavement, thereby subject to the on-going experimentation one prisoner termed "cell-ing America's soul."

Let's face it, on the American socio-political landscape, the biased and iniquitous imprisonment binge, is the proverbial "elephant in the room." And while the myriad prisoner advocacy groups and related organizations, e.g., Human Rights Coalition (HRC), NAACP, ACLU, National Black Legatee Assoc. (N-BLA), Red Heart Society, Prison Society, Amnesty International, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and a throng of others, not excluding the aunts & uncles, wives & girlfriends, grandparents & parents, friends & comrades, etc., have been at the forefront of the burgeoning PA prison reform movement, it has been argued that the prisoners themselves haven't necessarily been on par or as committed as those fighting on their behalf. For, within the prison environment prisoners have, in significant measure, been sucked into the asinine prison politics, relegated to squabbling over jail-house trinkets, sport & play and the like; often getting involved in the struggle (for their own survival), and a more general humane existence, belatedly - after the most flagrant human rights violations have occurred - as opposed to taking a more productive posture. This has to change!

It has become obvious, even to the casual on-looker, that the system is content with its current course, at the ostensible peril of the (growing) prison population. Therefore, within the scope of plain ol' logic - it is up to the prisoners to create and ultimately usher in more viable alternatives. Because as it stands now - in Pennsylvania - a LIFE SENTENCE is tantamount to death, as more prisoners, over the last twenty years, has died while serving LIFE than those actually sentenced to DEATH. Moreover, at the rate post DNA testing is exonerating (falsely) convicted Death Row prisoners around the country, The People should demand a moratorium on capital punishment altogether!

And finally - it has to be said that, for all the men and women trapped in the wretched crime & punishment" morass, especially in Pennsylvania's prison system, you have to determine your fate. The society (at large) is beginning to awaken from the slumber that the racist propaganda has put them in, in terms of the inhuman stigma and overall demonization of prisoners. The many progressive grassroots organizations are poised to further the agenda of not only prison reform but prisoner-reform, as applied to preparing them for re-entry into society, etc.

It is said that wherever you see slavery or any similitude of such, you're witnessing a conspiracy (of strange sorts), in that - in order for a master to be a holder of a slave the slave has to be complicit, by compliance. The moment the so-called slave decides to not comply with his/her enslavement, the master ceases to be such and the relationship is dissolved!

Also, in this vein, it is of paramount significance to realize that the CHANGE ticket President Obama rode in on extends to every level of society - even to its (estranged) sub-societies (prisons). However, and most important of all, the real question remains: What are the prisoners going to do? For therein is where the solution lies! The time is now!

