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Prison Culture

Erving Goffman¹ defines a complete institution as “[a] basic social arrangement in modern society in that the individual tends to sleep, play, and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities, and without an over-all plan. In addition, the central feature of total institutions is they involve breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life.”² Prison, governed by the administrators who oversee its denizens, fits Goffman’s definition collectively as well as individually. Prison is, as Goffman defines, “places where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life”.³ Prisons are a microcosm of larger society, which suffers from the same infirmities that greater society has but in concentrated form.

As prisoners, we adopt the culture of prison – willingly or unwillingly in order to survive the experience. “The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particularized standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs”⁴ As I became immersed in the prison culture and built social

¹ Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums, Essays on Social Situations of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

² Goffman, Id. 1961:5-6

³ Goffman 1961:xiii

⁴ Mead, George H. 1965. *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press. P. 138

relationships with the people around me I began to experience change, because the social relationships I was building were different than the ones I had in the free world. My perceptions of myself began to change. I began to question old values and ideas. "*Am I right?*" "*How can I fit this person or experience into old understandings or new understandings of the world my world?*" I absorbed and adapted the environment into my thinking. Within the prison environment, the emotional support received from fellow prisoners generally isn't anything that constitutes a socially positive role because the support group – such as a gang – might be the very force that causes you to choose to act out and misbehave. It's not that I was somehow more violent or more disruptive, but was acting within a cultural environment that has been defined not only by the attitudes of society at large but also by the administrative institution that fosters the culture.

In *Belly of the Beast* Norman Mailer wrote about Jack Abbott, saying:

It was his belief that men who had been in prison as much as five years still knew next to nothing on the subject. It probably took a decade behind bars for any real perception on the matter to permeate your psychology and your flesh.⁵

There is a deep truth in those words. I experience prison through my own window on the world. New to the prison environment at such a young age it would take me decades to really understand what the prison culture was capable of and what it was doing to my core. But as Jack Abbot said:

That is how prison is tearing me up inside. It hurts every day. Every day it takes me further from my life. And I am not even conscious of how my dissolution is coming about. Therefore I cannot stop it.⁶

⁵ Abbot, ix

⁶ Abbot Id. p. 4-5

In *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*⁷, Gloria Anzaldúa wrote in the section titled *Cultural Tyranny*:

“Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallenged, are transmitted to us through the culture.”⁸

Anzaldúa’s words reminded me of a study I once read by social psychologist Erik Erikson⁹ that can be applied to prison culture and in particular solitary confinement. Erikson pointed out that many changes occurred throughout a person’s adult life that shapes a person’s sense of self and ability to perform social roles successfully. This is important because it demonstrates that even throughout our adult lives our identities can change by our experiences. Erikson demonstrated, for example, that soldiers combat experiences could produce damages identities. It changed how they see themselves and the world. Prison is similar to the combat experience in many ways. Erikson postured that self-identity takes center stage in the social process whereby the individual chooses other people as reference group/models and attempts to imitate their behavior in particular roles. Erikson showed every phase of life requires additional socialization to resolve new conflicts presented to them at each phase of their adult lives. This can be true if someone is a soldier, prisoner or an average citizen.

Now, if you take a 19-year-old, for example, and place him in prison confinement for years on end, through the critical growing phases of his adult life, he will quickly lose the sense of self and ability to grow and adapt. His reference models become other

⁷ Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

⁸ Anzaldúa, Id. 38

⁹ Erikson, E. *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton (1963).

broken men and sometimes abusive guards. This becomes a perceived "normal". When that same person is steeped in this constant threat of violence, a witness to murders, stabbing, rapes, assaults, threats, and/or placed in solitary confinement it is internalized. It is the reference point in which you judge the world.

During my incarceration I have been housed in more than 17 jails and prisons, including six (6) "supermax" units, in Oregon, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Florida. My time in prison has changed me inside and out. I have been in prison over 26 years. Of that, I have spent a total of 22.5 years in prison and solitary confinement. I've lived more of my life in solitary than I spent on the street. My whole life has been reduced to decades of confinement in a cell the size of most people's bathroom. When I sleep at night my old dreams, the dreams of an unrestrained life, filled with all the wonders of a free world; the intimate touch of a woman, walking in the woods, or even strange dreams of breathing under water have all faded away and been replaced by images of prison. Dreams where violence and anger wake me. It's as if any sense of that world outside these walls is gone, no longer capable of forming in my stunted imagination. I talk about that long gone free world and I imagine old places I had been. In reality it's become a place I have no real memory of. I can't remember the feel of desert sand on my feet. I long forgot the smell of fresh sage. I can't remember the sound of a river; a breeze flowing through a window; its all a distant misty past.

I'm not sure how to describe my prison experience in any coherent terms that anyone who hasn't lived it will understand. While I have heard many prisoners describe it as a living death I'm not sure that gives life to the experience of prison in any meaningful way. Death is finality. A release from life and a release from suffering. With

prison there is no release from life and suffering weighs on every inch of your body and soul like a steamroller slowly crushing you. It drains your sanity without you realizing your mind and ability to rationally interact with the world slips away like water swirling down a drain. Before you know it you are looking into the bottom the empty sink of your mind.

Prison is a half death, a withering of the soul where the core of your humanity is reduced by the state as a matter of law and policy; my otherness and worth defined not only by my overseers but measured by my adherence to the “convict code”, a “cultural tyranny”, imposed by my fellow prisoners, which was in turn imposed on them. On one hand I am an object of the state, property that is told when it can speak and act, and on the other I am a man who has a desire to find value in his life in a culture that isn't mine at its core and which doesn't want me. A borderland – not one, but both

In solitary every experience is felt with every breath and there is no genuine hope that it will end. It's not a death. It is something worse than a half death. Something deeper that cuts your very consciousness and fractures your mind. And it's not just the solitude. It is all the insanity that you are soaked in like a sponge around you. I have personally seen a men attempt to cut off their testicles. Not just one man, but three different men. Two of which attempted it with fingernail clippers. I have watched men have their eyes slashed with razor blades and the blood and ooze pour from their face. I have watched men beaten senseless, their heads crushed with locks. I have seen men hang themselves, cut their wrists, and attempt suicide in a whole variety of ways, including overdosing on pills and drinking toxic chemicals used to clean floors. I have lain in my cell at night to be shocked awake by the screams of a man screaming out as he was being raped by his

cellie. Every act I witnessed has soaked into my very being and become the only reality I know with certainty. All of it a normal part of the culture of the prison or system I was held captive in – a norm that wasn't unique to my experience but was a shared experience of every man that was there. Each one absorbing it and vomiting it out in their own actions and thoughts.

Every hope pulled from my body leaving me empty, angry and reactionary, deprived of rational and meaningful social interaction and trapped in my own mind and individuality, my identity was challenged and began to evaporate as my world was drowned in the new culture of prison life. Your mind physically feels as if it is melting and numbing as it releases memories of stimuli you no longer receive and replace it with illusion. Anxiety, fatigue, confusion, paranoia, depression, and anger consume your mind as reality falls away to give birth to a fantasy you create in your head to survive in an environment that promotes the fantasy. These experiences are magnified for youth who come to prison before their minds have even had a chance to fully form and mature.

In prison immediate social relationships were based on power and fear – whether it was a guard's power over my body or prisoner's power over my social environment – and who had the power to resist or manipulate either of those elements, drove every person every day and consumed my own thoughts. It wasn't just life it was a culture built for generations and accepted without challenge by everyone within its bounds. Sometimes people questioned its rationale, but no one challenged it. No one, not even the administrators who compounded and complicated it by poking at you, trying to break you into small manageable pieces to “rehabilitate” and “control”, as long as it's in a cost effective and controlled way, and never really replacing the pieces they break off with

something meaningfully tried to change the prison culture.

I was being indoctrinated by the prison culture with my world broken into a non-reality reality complicated by an environment in which called for an “us vs. them” mentality – whether that is guard vs. prisoner or race vs. race or personality vs. personality – where I walk the line of breaking my captors rules, the convict code, or some obscure racial dictated I do. I was surrounded by forced choices which I didn’t want to make but felt obligated to in order to not only *feel* something but to feel I had something tangible worth living for and because my inside culture, my prison culture, my adopted culture dictates so. Choices forced by the culture that had developed long ago around me and later consumed me like a snake eating a rat. I chose to be a convict, to absorb and live the culture I was told I belong to. For years I walked down that illusionary road farther into the depths of criminal thinking.

But that wasn’t the beginning or end of my story. I eventually found a way out of solitary. I was able to reach down into my core and find a piece of sanity and rebel. When Anzaldúa wrote that she felt “perfectly free to rebel and to rail against [her] culture”¹⁰, I could relate to that feeling of being free to rebel and rail against the inside culture that had defined me but also held me down. By design prisons aren’t built to rehabilitate people and turn them back out into society better than when they came in. If that were the case there would be a plethora of TV shows dedicated to all the wonderful rehabilitation programs in prisons and not shows dedicated to the endless revolving door of recidivism and culture of violence. Moreover, its also not the prisoners alone that create the negative environments that have become a staple of drama for TV and movies but the structures in

¹⁰ Anzaldúa, 43

the system that reinforce the violence and recidivism and refuses to rehabilitate and reform itself with the same enthusiasm it claims to want prisoners to rehabilitate and reform.

Someone once asked me if, after spending decade in prison I would still have contact with people in prison if released. My answer is always a solid and sure "yes". Some people don't understand why I would do that after so long in a box. They often say if it were them they would try to get as far away from everything prison as possible. Because they have never had my experiences they can never understand why I feel the way I do.