

The Challenge Accepted

Comments on Prisons & Prisoners

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In response to "A Challenge to the Prison Movement," FE #307, November 19, 1981.

"Prisons are part of the central model for social control."

Sylvie Kashdan, Seattle

In its mirror image negation of some positions of the prisoner support movement, the anonymous article highlights weaknesses of such single-issue politics. In focusing so completely on this one institution (the prisons), it becomes impossible for people to imagine its elimination.

They are unable to actually reject prisons as such. The writers of the article seem to share the assumption with many political prisoner supporters that (at least for the time being) prisons are useful for dealing with anti-social elements, who may "deserve" the treatment dealt out there; or at least don't deserve as good treatment as "political" people.

But I believe that the distinction between "political" and "non-political" is not so definitive in a certain sense. And not so definitive or indicative as they make it out to be. Some "crimes," such as those against property, are creations of the present order and therefore those who commit them are political in a certain sense. And some "political" acts, such as killing members of rival groups or bombing supermarkets during busy hours, are as anti-social as any.

Then, far from everyone in prison has actually committed the "crimes" of which they are accused. The writers of the article seem to forget that the criminal justice system is neither infallible nor unprejudiced, and many people are railroaded. Also, some prisoners who have committed anti-social acts during one phase of their lives, can conceivably grow beyond that and change for the better. After all, most of us weren't born libertarians and certainly weren't encouraged by the general social milieu to become that way. Prison life might be less conducive than the average to changes for the better, but it's unfair to rule such changes out. Given all these variables, why do some people deserve any worse treatment than those declared "political" prisoners?

Prisons are part of the central model for social control and discipline in our society. As part of the system of social control, prisons oppress all "politically." That is precisely why we'd like to see them eliminated. But, the writers of the anonymous article seem to share the opinion of many people in the "political" prisoner support movement that, for some people, under some circumstances, social control of some sort is a solution...I'm not denying that many prisoners are thugs, and I don't have any easy answers as to how such people can become more social, less

authoritarian and more egalitarian in their behavior, but I strongly believe that people have to stop thinking of social control (benevolent or otherwise, temporary or otherwise) as a real solution. Neither prisons nor therapy have proven themselves thus far. And whatever admirable tendencies any of us have, we've only developed in defiance of social controls, not because of them. There has to be another way or no real social change is possible...

Political prisoners have been idolized and glorified while their real ideas and actions have been glossed over. The same thing has happened with political personalities on the outside. If we are against the latter, we must be against the former glorification as well. But all-out condemnation is no better...

Obviously, we are all, to one degree or another, subject to the hierarchical prejudices and stereotypes of this society, but many political people have assumed that these can be done away with simply by turning them inside out. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. To simply negate that of which you are critical doesn't deal with the basic roots of the problem. The anonymous article's position to abandon the prison support movement is of this sort. Because they are critical of it, they are unable ultimately to recognize the necessity for those of us on the outside to show some sort of solidarity with people on the inside. I think that there are more than two alternatives: to uncritically support prisoners or to abandon them.

I think it is necessary to "depoliticize" it in the strictest sense, to enable supporters, friends, family and sympathizers to relate to those who need help as human beings with good and bad aspects, with problems and possibilities. What is necessary is that they stop regarding prisoners as political gurus who have proven themselves through suffering and/or violent actions, and who therefore have the correct line and cannot be questioned or criticized. I think that it's necessary to go beyond "politics" in all our relationships, inside and outside of prisons, in every phase of life and everywhere. My experience has been that to the degree that politics dominate relationships they are alienated, mechanized, hierarchical and abstract, outside as well as inside. All of us, including those directly involved in the prison support movement, have to go beyond the segmentation of life into fragmented issues, ideologies, and labels. Insofar as people don't they're bound to keep falling into the same old pitfalls.

"Prisoners are thugs, we are the innocents."

David Brown, Left Bank Books, Seattle

There is little doubt in my mind over the question of the tendency within the prison support movement toward romanticism, idolatry, idealizing and glossing over the cold realities. Though I have not been involved personally in anything more than a minimal way, I have heard from acquaintances often enough about the cases of strong-arming, shootings, and other sorts of violence. That many prisoners are little more than thugs hardly comes as revelation either.

Emotional reaction is certainly valid—there is no disputing that. One can sympathize and understand the source of its excesses. But there seems little excuse to me to use that as a rationalization for the excesses or failures which the authors of this article display...

The fact is people are in jail desperate for help and support in varying ways, but this article would deny them everything with lip service to a series of declarations and slogans and appeals disguised as "anarchism." Their attempts to outline or separate out who qualifies as "worthy" of support, and to determine at what point one is "genuine" or authentic and more deserving is a mess. It is ignorant naivete to cite Alexander Berkman in the same breath with all this: Berkman wouldn't qualify for their list (except in historical retrospect).

Berkman's attentat on Frick was the act of an outsider that ended with devastating setbacks for the Homestead strikers themselves, his ass in jail for years, and another act in the annals of history that was not understood by the people he went to prison with (they figured he must of had a personal grudge or something of this sort) nor the larger society. What these authors forget, or do not know, is that Berkman's act was denounced by the anarchist movement at that time—and if they had been there, they too would have left him to the wolves. So too would all the support Emma Goldman gave Leon Czolgosz, who shot President McKinley, have been for naught; he too was denounced, since he was not an anarchist, but merely another thug.

And so what have we? In the name of criticizing "blind" support for prisoners we have a call for its blind opposition. All potential prisoners are sick and confused, or will soon be after their taste of the jail-house. It does

not appear to them (since their lights are apparently out) so obvious that the problems they generalize about applies no less to all of us in some degree: The horror of prison is the horror of capitalist/hierarchical society. To survive people must lie, cheat, threaten, abuse and betray routinely. To learn means of survival outside the joint means to be psychologically maimed: to learn forms of behaviour totally infused with the ethos of exploitation and domination—rarely unlearned.

Since when is this insight new? It is exactly what Reich was fighting most of his life, the character structure which continuously and insidiously reproduces itself. Prison is not some “other place;” it is a microcosm, intensified, of the society we live in. When we are not slaves to commodities we can always be commodities for slaves: prisons—and all their support apparatus passing itself off as a justice system—is, after all, big biz. Here, but for the sake of a little luck, a few connections, etc. might we be occupying a cell...

Nowhere in this article is there a genuine attempt to outline the real problems of support work: nowhere do the authors discuss what is meant by support work or what kind of support is being asked or is needed by those on the inside. There are in fact a multitude of needs and help being asked. Often it is of little more than the basic kinds of day-to-day need: contact, money, reading materials, legal work; etc.

All of this is capped by the authors with a total disavowal of the ability of people to change. And if people in prison are incapable of change, then I doubt there is little reason to suppose that people anywhere can change and little reason to resist the forces that be. All of the anarchist literature, including your FE, are useless gestures. And if anyone should actually begin to take some of the ideas advocated in this literature seriously, certainly we can refer them to this article which will put them straight...

Finally, the article fails to come to grips with the responsibility of those in the prison support movement who submit uncritically to authoritarianism, domination, manipulation and wackiness. Their role in producing these Frankensteins is conveniently not a part of the article: prisoners are thugs; we are the innocents burned and abused.

Easier I suspect to point the wagging finger and then bug out than to insist on the destruction of all myths. Easier to give oneself up to another sort of myth than to force the issue. Domination and manipulation must be fought everywhere, and in terms of the prison movement, it should be fought in both directions, inside and out. To give up one part of the terrain is to give up the whole terrain.

“Sure, we need criticism. Shit, we need help.”

Ron Reed, Solidarity Committee, C.P. 2, Succ. La Cite, Montreal, Quebec, H2W 2M9 Canada

The article says that the left has devoted a disproportionately large amount of time and energy to the prison movement. I only wish it were true. In fact, only a small number of people and groups are active.

It then goes on to say that the prison movement is characterized by “uncritical idolatry, slavish devotion emotional and physical rape, and insane violence...” These are exaggerated experiences that myself and other anti-prison activists I know of have never had. Look, maybe the author is referring to the Bay Area some years back (I’m not familiar with it), but it’s fallacious to make such outrageous generalizations.

Sure, we need criticism. Shit, we need help! We readily admit that the anti-prison struggle is difficult and unpopular despite all the lip service given to it.

So we get a vicious cycle. Outsiders will avoid the prison struggle because they don’t see a glorious organized prisoner resistance to work with because such prisoner resistance is impossible without effective outside support protecting them from retaliatory action by the State.

Anti-prison work often demands emotional support to those inside—something the left, especially men, fear. It deals with people in our own society—not in the Third World—whose reality is too weird for many of us to face. So, they are left in the grip of the State.

Some prisoners are real creeps, but ruling class conditioning paints all prisoners with the same brush. This conditioning says prisoners are violent beasts, but, in fact, 80% are doing time for non-violent crimes. The article reinforces this myth.

...I want to conclude by pointing out the bankruptcy of the anti-authoritarian intellectuals and media. What I'm getting at is the widening schism between those who analyze and publish, and those who act. Literature and jive talk must be the opiates of the left.

The contemporary anti-authoritarian "movement" has an extremely large number of spectators who analyze situations, but won't act in them; who criticize activists, yet aren't activists; and reaching the lowest level of absurdity, develop ultra-pure theory without any practice to validate it.

The effects of this hypocrisy is betrayal...It's betrayal is that those who are active find themselves fighting alone. For instance, comrades in the Northwest knew about the contract on Carl Harp several weeks before it was carried out. Except for a few people, everyone else upon receiving this information did sweet fuck all to help save his life...

The tragedy is that for most people who are political, the murder of a jailhouse revolutionary will just be another event to read and chit-chat about.

I'm not advocating us to abandon our media. Yet no struggle for radical change was ever advanced by radicals who avoided direct involvement as much as our movement does. Discussion and media becomes a dead end when it occupies the time needed for action.

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