

The Function of Prison

Peter Gelderloos

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In November, 2001, I was arrested protesting at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia. I received a six month sentence the next July, eventually seeing the insides of three Georgia county jails, a federal maximum security transit center, and a minimum security federal prison camp. At my politicized trial, the prosecutor knew I was an anarchist, and it was because of this, and because I openly criticized the judicial system, that I got the maximum sentence despite being a first-time offender.

In modern republics, the function of prison is said to be correction. When individuals break laws that uphold the common good, the conventional wisdom goes, transgressors need to be punished or otherwise taught to be more socially cooperative and generous. In my experience with incarceration, however, the only thing that prison teaches is obedience. A “corrected” citizen is one who internalizes prison bars even on the streets.

Prison serves as a constant threat against all who would oppose what governments and corporations do with our collective resources. A critic might point out that prison is only a threat to dissidents who break the law, but what it comes down to is that there are no legal means to fundamentally change the government.

If what you want is a society that values human and environmental interests over Machiavellian state and corporate interests, and most people do at some level, then you’re out of luck; your government will not represent you. There is no consent of the governed; we were all born subjects, whereas the government is not born out of our initiative or participation. In fact, it functions best without us. If the only option you have is to consent, that’s not consensus; it’s submission.

On the outside, “super-minimum security,” as it should be known, people are trained not to resist, and they are trusted to remain outside of prison so long as they demonstrate they are not a threat to the established order.

Of course, suppression of dissent isn’t the only function of prison, and in the U.S. it actually serves only a minor function because so few Americans engage in dissent. They also function to disempower poor and minority communities by locking away what often amounts to a majority of their youth, and generally, for offenses as harmless as drug possession (which in the U.S. has the potential to bring a life sentence).

Prisons also provide cheap, coerced labor; where inmates work for less than a dollar an hour (often not enough to cover the expenses of prison life), making products for government agencies and the military. The Constitutional amendment that outlawed slavery specifically and intentionally opened a loophole that allowed forced labor in the event of incarceration.

In the time it takes “civilized peoples” to re-learn how to live and interact at a level higher than that of trained dogs, responding only to immediate reward and punishment, I hope we can all extend a greater degree of solidarity and support to the millions of people whose lives are being incrementally eaten away by the world’s prisons.

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