

Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?

Huey P. Newton, 1970



When a person studies mathematics, he learns that there are many mathematical laws which determine the approach he must take to solving the problems presented to him.

In the study of geometry, one of the first laws a person learns is that "the whole is not greater than the sum of its parts." This means simply that one cannot have a geometrical figure such as a circle or a square which in its totality contains more than it does when broken down into smaller parts. Therefore, if all the smaller parts add up to a certain amount, the entire figure cannot add to a larger amount.

The prison cannot have a victory over the prisoner because those in charge take the same kind of approach to the prisoner and assume if they have the whole body in a cell that they have there all that makes up the person. But a prisoner is not a geometrical figure and an approach which is successful in mathematics is wholly unsuccessful when dealing with human beings.

In the case of the human, we are not dealing only with the single individual, we are also dealing with the ideas and beliefs which have motivated him and which sustains him, even when his body is confined. In the case of humanity, the whole is much greater than its parts, because the whole includes the body which is measurable and confineable, and also the ideas which cannot be measured and which cannot be confined. The ideas are not only within the mind of the prisoner where they cannot be seen nor controlled, the ideas are also within the people. The ideas which can and will sustain our movement for total freedom and dignity of the people cannot be imprisoned for they are found in the people, all the people, wherever they are.

As long as the people live by the ideas of freedom and dignity there will be no prison which can hold our movement down. Ideas move from one person to another in the association of brothers and sisters who recognize that a most evil system of capitalism has set us against each other, when our real enemy is the exploiter who profits from our poverty.

When we realize such an idea then we come to love and appreciate our brothers and sisters who we may have seen as enemies, and those exploiters who we may have seen as friends revealed for what they truly are to all oppressed people. The people are the idea; the respect and dignity of the people, as they move toward their freedom is the sustaining force which reaches into and out of the prison. The walls, the bars, the guns and guards can never encircle or hold down the idea of the people. And the people must always carry forward the idea

which is their dignity and their beauty.

The prison operates with the idea that when it has a person's body it has his [or her] entire being — since the whole cannot be greater than the sum of its parts. They put the body in a cell and seem to get some sense of relief and security from that fact. The idea of prison victory, then, is that when the person in jail begins to act, think, and believe the way they want him [or her] to, then they have won the battle and the person is then “rehabilitated.” But this cannot be the case because those who operate the prisons have failed to understand the types of people they attempt to control. Therefore, even when the prison thinks it has won victory, there is no victory.

There are two types of prisoners. The largest number are those who accept the legitimacy of the assumption upon which the society is based. They wish to acquire the same goals as everybody else; money, power, greed, and conspicuous consumption. In order to do so, however, they adopt techniques and methods which the society has defined as illegitimate. When this is discovered, such people are put in jail.

They may be called “illegitimate capitalists” since their aim is to acquire everything this capitalist society defines as legitimate. The second type of prisoner is the one who rejects the legitimacy of the assumptions upon which the society is based. He argues that the people at the bottom of the society are exploited for the profit and advantage of those at the top. Thus, the oppressed exist, and will always be used to maintain the privileged status of the exploiters. There is no sacredness, there is no dignity in either exploiting or being exploited.

Although this system may make the society function at a high level of technological efficiency, it is an illegitimate system since it rests upon the suffering of humans who are as worthy and as dignified as those who do not suffer. Thus, the second type of prisoner says that the society is corrupt and illegitimate and must be overthrown. This second type of prisoner is the political prisoner. They do not accept the legitimacy of the society and cannot participate in its corrupting exploitation, whether they are in the prison or one the block.

The prison cannot gain a victory over either type of prisoner no matter how hard it tries. The “illegitimate capitalist” recognizes that if he plays the game the prison wants him to play, he will have his time reduced and be released to continue his activities. Therefore, he is willing to go through the prison programs and do the things he is told. He is willing to say the things the prison authorities want to hear.

The prison assumes he is "rehabilitated" and ready for the society. The prisoner has really played the prison's games so that he can be released to resume pursuit of his capitalistic goals. There is no victory, for the prisoner from the beginning accepted the idea of the society. He pretends to accept the idea of the prison as part of the game he has always played.

The prison cannot gain a victory over the political prisoner because he has nothing to be rehabilitated from or to. He refuses to accept the legitimacy of the system and refuses to participate. To participate is to admit that the society is legitimate because of its exploitation of the oppressed. This is the idea which the political prisoner does not accept, this is the idea for which he has been imprisoned, and this is the reason why he cannot cooperate with the system. The political prisoner will, in fact, serve his time just as will the "illegitimate capitalist." Yet the idea which motivated and sustained the political prisoner rests in the people, all the prison has, is a body.

The dignity and beauty of man rests in the human spirit which makes him more than simply a physical being. This spirit must never be suppressed for exploitation by others. As long as the people recognize the beauty of their human spirits and move against suppression and exploitation, they will be carrying out one of the most beautiful ideas of all time. Because the human whole is much greater than the sum of its parts, the ideas will always be among the people. The prison cannot be victorious because walls, bars and guards cannot conquer or hold down an idea.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE:

BLACK POWER TO BLACK PEOPLE,

AND PANTHER POWER TO THE VANGUARD

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