

## BOOK REVIEW

*INSIDE, PRISON AMERICAN STYLE*, ed. Robert J. Minton Jr., Random House, New York 1971;

*BLACK VOICES FROM PRISON* by Etheridge Knight, Pathfinder Press, New York (paperback) 1970.

*"The hope is that, once these men have been able to tell their stories — stories that are often covered up or lied about by the administrators whose job it is to maintain the status quo — the status quo will change."* Editor's Introduction, *Inside, Prison American Style*.

*"The writings are the product of those . . . who discover that falsehood and violence are not subjective, accidental phenomena, but rather the objective and permanent dimension of the power structure and the false alternatives it presents . . . the struggle for liberty for which the pages of this collection were written, their cost in suffering, would be in vain if we cannot hope that they will be read and pondered by all those who refuse to be accomplices of institutionalized violence."* Editor's Introduction, *Roberto Giammanco, Black Voices From Prison*.

*"The local place to begin any investigation into the problems of California prisons is with our 'pigs are beautiful' Governor Reagan, radical reformer turned reactionary. For a real understanding of the failure of prison policies, it is senseless to continue to study the criminal. All of those who can afford to be honest know that the real victim, that poor, uneducated disorganized man who finds himself a convicted criminal, is simply the end result of a long chain of corruption and mismanagement that starts with people like Reagan and his political appointees in Sacramento."* *George Jackson, Soledad Brother, Bantam Books, New York 1970*.

*"While prison is unfit for human shelter and a cruel mockery of the human condition, it nonetheless provides an ideal atmosphere for revolutionary education. Nowhere in society are the contradictions of the Government's system of justice so glaring as they are in prison. In prison, oppression and brutality are not camouflaged by the subtle trappings of political dissent and social concessions. Even in the wretched Black Colonies of America, where oppression runs rampant, at least the oppressor makes an attempt to cover up his bloody trail. But in prison, the barbaric persecution by the oppressor is raw and naked . . ."* A. H., *California Adjustment Center Inmate, in Maximum Security, Eve Pell, Editor, in press, scheduled for publication January 1972, E. P. Dutton & Co.*

THE REVIEWER'S perspective derives from the experience of working, as friend and attorney, with prisoners in California's prisons, particularly in the maximum security lock-up sections,\* since first meeting George Jackson at Soledad on February 9, 1970. That a progression of ideas emerges from the quotations set forth above seems to be a fact, and a fact having implications as to the source of the political content of that progression.

The two books under review are a good introduction to the world that became the subject of full-fledged analytical

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\*As most readers probably now know, the isolation cells, solitary confinement, e.g. what prisoners from time immemorial have called "the hole," disciplinary and protective custody sections of California prisons are housed in sections called "The Adjustment Cntr." Originally conceived as segregated but treatment-oriented and well-staffed sections, the name ("AC") is still retained for segregation units with little or no program, both short and long-term confinements, and abuses in terms of physical and psychological treatment which have recently been well-documented in the media and in legislative reports. See for example, California State Legislature, Black Caucus Report, "Treatment of Prisoners at California Training Facility, Soledad, July 1970, available from State Senator Mervyn Dymally.

description and political observation in Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, and the collection of California Adjustment Center Inmates' writings entitled *Maximum Security*, to be published shortly.

The Minton book contains some black writers, but appears to be the product mainly of white prisoners in the period immediately preceding the emergence of the black, and later inter-racial prison movement of 1970-71. It contains a wide range of materials — stories, incidents, poetry, formal and well-organized prisoners' grievance documents which, in futile repetition were submitted and re-submitted to deaf authorities, details a series of incredible meetings with the parole board, year after year. The entire collection is from Soledad. The Minton volume has a less focused intensity than the other three books mentioned, but sheds much light on the long-standing nature of the grievances and realities of prisons. It loudly gives the lie to the accusation that outside "radical agitators" were required to inform prisoners of their grievances or to stir up the revolutionary prison movement, or that a few "bad" prisoners are responsible for all of the complaints and trouble of the past two years. Still, it expresses the hope that merely by telling stories of the truth about prisons, the status quo can change, and offers no analysis of causative factors.

*Black Voices* contains a variety of writings by black prisoners in Indiana, and a profoundly revealing dialogue between an "older" prisoner — who came to maturity in the black pre-revolutionary culture — a pragmatist, a poet, now a teacher outside, — and younger black revolutionaries.

*Soledad Brother* presents, of course, the revolutionary self-portrait and political analysis of the late George Jackson. *Maximum Security* collects black, brown, and white prisoners' descriptions, demands, political analyses and constitutes a triumph of intelligence, humanity and revolutionary discipline over the cages, lock-ups, and "holes," even over the "Adjustment Centers" of California.

Perhaps there could be no greater realization of the ironies and total perversities of the 1984-style world than the usage of the term "Adjustment Center." It is a reality which in fact contains, physically and psychologically: metal and concrete tiers of cells stripped of everything but walls — even of windows, natural light and clean air. It is here that all persons not amenable to the prison system of arbitrary authority, demeaning orders, required political and personal passivity are confined, without any constraints, restraints or review of the authorities' actions; without any of the accoutrements of what the lawyers call "due process" (e.g. right to present evidence, confront accusers, establish the facts upon which the punitive action is based, to have counsel or even a representative, to have written notice of charges, of decision, of the grounds for decision, of the right to appeal, or to judicial review).

The authors of all four books have failed "to adjust." The reader of all these books can clearly trace the inevitable development of the present revolutionary ideology from the earlier factual descriptions and perceptions of the older pre-revolutionary prisoners. It is instructive to compare Clarence Harris' "Testament" (*Black Voices*) with a recent remark of Associate Warden James Park at San Quentin.

Thus, Harris, describing an incident in his childhood in Memphis:

"A white man, speeding through our street, ran over my dog. I screamed and the man stopped. My dad came out of the house to calm me down and to talk to the man, and that's when I discovered that men were different because of their skin color. The white man told my father: 'Nigger, it should have been that little nigger there instead of the dog. You should've kept them both out of the street. And don't you ask me nothing about that dog!' My father shivered, and retreated with me into the house. We never mentioned the incident again. But from that time on I was taught that the white man was king and was to be catered to, and also to be emulated as much as

possible without stepping out of your place."

Mr. Park complained, in August of 1971, that George Jackson had a "whole goddam army of lawyers."\* But there has been a change from Harris to Jackson, and a change in the writings collected in the Minton book to those in *Maximum Security*. Whereas the Minton writings describe efforts at convict unity, publication of the uncensored, underground newspaper, *The Outlaw*, at San Quentin, and presentations to the Assembly Criminal Justice Committee (despite Warden Nelson's efforts to prevent a written convict report to the delegation that visited the prison), the prisoners' grievances were not linked to ideas on the nature and source of power, nor do these writings contain any systematic political analysis.

The Knight volume is more political, perhaps simply because all of the authors are black; and as is clearly perceived and described by all of the authors, to be black in America is to be in a political relation to society and prison. Yet with few exceptions the political analysis in the Knight book is abstract in philosophy, descriptive of reality rather than attempting to place the facts of that reality in any programmatic or ideological political perspective. Nevertheless, the clear forerunners of today's revolutionary prisoners and prison ideology may be seen in the Interview of Charles W. Baker (*Black Voices*):

"And also, there are those who are trying to pacify . . . like Martin Luther King, who says that he will love the white man into submission. And . . . this is something that is a waste of time. We got to do the same thing the white man has done — we got to take. The white man came to this country and killed millions and millions of Indians; he went on the continent of Africa and stole millions and millions of black men and brought them over here for slavery. He killed, robbed, stole, and so this country was established upon this violence. I know one thing — I recognize one thing: that anytime a person is a master within a certain field that this is the field that you cannot fight him in; and so, we must . . . recognize the

white man as being a militant type of individual, and not meet him with his own type of militancy, but with a type that will equalize this power . . . I was reading about the Turks . . . at one time they were great warriors who kept the white man on the continent of Europe for thousands and thousands of years; and today . . . I look at the Turks as being farmers . . . time creates the individual, and I think that the black man, through the conditions that he has lived under, is being created into a race of warriors. In fact, I look at the black man as being a warrior now because time creates, conditions create . . . the same way as the white man was created to invade other countries because of his location, because of his poor income in Europe, and the beginning of his factories. It was a means of survival, a means of convenience, and a particular something in time, that caused the white man to attack other countries and invade them. The circumstances and conditions created him into what he is. And this is the same thing that this society has done to the black man."

Mr. Baker's Interview ends:

"Some kind of way, I believe that I will become a part of it. I will play my part in helping to obtain what rightfully belongs to the black man: freedom. And I'll probably die doing this, but it don't matter. Cause I'm already dead in here."

George Jackson is also dead. The authors of *Maximum Security* may spend extra years in the Adjustment Center because of their identification as political inmates, a choice they consciously made. But there has been a shift of thinking, a wave of consciousness sweeping through the prisons of this country. Those in the house of the dead are no longer dead, inside.

This movement can be viewed as an illegitimate, and bloody threat; or, the essential humanity embodied in it can be

\*San Francisco Chronicle, August 25, 1971. Mr. Park, who was, until recently relieved of those duties, information officer at San Quentin as well as an associate warden, is usually more subtle than pure custody men. A former Soledad captain of the guards, relieved of those duties after threatening a prosecution witness in the Soledad 7 case with a gun, on the Soledad grounds, stated, shortly after arresting Jackson, Drumgo and Clutchette, for the alleged murder of a correctional officer January 16, 1970, "I've got me three niggers and I'm going to get me three more." (Affidavit of a Caucasian inmate who was in O wing, Soledad, week of January 16, 1970.)

acknowledged and dealt with. The reviewer does not hold much hope for California's response, but there are signs that in some other places, for example, the State of Washington, views of prisoners other than California's repressive and punitive ones are presently prevailing in prison administration. There are also stirrings in the United States Congress, some of whose members have now visited Soledad and San Quentin, preceding official hearings on prisoners' rights and prison reform.

As lawyers, legislators, law students, and those in Corrections ponder the implications of the descriptions of grievances — to this day, not redressed — in the Minton book, through Brothers Harris, Baker, Knight and others in *Black Voices*, pausing to remember that *Soledad Brother* is now in print in six languages, they might well wonder why it is that persons such as the author of the following lines (from *Maximum Security*) find themselves locked into the small cages of the Adjustment Center:

"Sister it is almost unbelievable to contemplate the rapport between the different ethnic or racial groups that exists here in this Adjustment Center. The change in thought processes that necessarily preceded this rapport are equally unbelievable when viewed in the context of the racial and clique animosities that were existent just a year ago when I first arrived here. The animosity has dissipated to no more than a murmur in the background. That is not to say that there is total racial or clique acceptance, but the

people here have awakened to the fact that the pigs have been using race as a *weapon* in a carefully calculated and systematic scheme to continue to oppress and suppress *all* in these tombs. Political dialectics are the common topics of conversation, replacing pimping, robbing, and hustling as the main interest. Frantz Fanon, Mao Tse-Tung, Regis Debray, Che and Marx have replaced Louis La'mour, Max Brand . . . There are those of us here who just a year ago had truly what could be called criminal minds and outlooks, and to whom acts of rape, murder, homosexual assaults, robbery, and general violence — against the people — were less than nothing and were common conduct. *All of that* has even changed. There are these, who just last year had the above criminal mentality and disposition and callous disregard for the lives and/or persons of the people, who would today lay down their lives for the people and for the good of the movement. The harmony here is real and is of an enduring nature. There will undoubtedly be instances of racial incidents between individuals; human beings are human beings and will act according to impulse, etc. and no accord will ever be totally unmarred. But the unity is real and it grows stronger everyday. All Power to the People."\*

\*The inmate author wrote this in Folsom's Adjustment Center. The reviewer has felt that it is more important for the analyses of the prisoners to reach the reader in their own words, than to assay extended commentary upon smaller quotations from the inmates' writings. The amount of talent, intelligence, constructive political thought, and love for people locked up in California's Adjustment Centers and medium security prisons could probably be channeled into a new humanistic culture, rather than continuing to be a testament to suffering almost beyond the capacity of the non-prisoner classes to understand, if the myths perpetuated by California's prison administration and some politicians were thoroughly examined.