

Prison, Prison, Everywhere!

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There is a place in this society where one is perpetually under surveillance, where every movement is monitored and controlled, where everyone is under suspicion except the police and their bosses, where all are assumed to be criminals. I am speaking, of course, of prison..

Within the walls of prison there is no freedom of choice, no illusion of democracy. There is only prison. Daily actions are regulated by strict schedules and enforced by armed guards, the choice of when, where and with whom to spend time completely taken away. Every action is surveilled with suspicion. All individuality, all identity is destroyed and replaced by that of prisoner, of criminal. Prison is the complete realization of this society's need to isolate all of us from any real interactions and force us into predefined roles. So long as the masses are exploited and forced to submit to the laws of the few in power, prison in some form will remain a necessary institution.

Prison exists to enforce the law, a set of regulations we are told represent the values of society. We are forced to adopt these values as our own when in reality they represent the behaviours required to maintain the current social order. Existing laws are expanded and new laws are created, intent to control our actions and gain more power over our lives. If in acting on our desires we come into conflict with the law, we are labelled as criminals.

For those of us struggling to create a different type of world in the face of what this society offers, breaking the law may be a part of our projects, forcing us to become outlaws and rebels.

For individuals who live on the margins of society, breaking the law may be a necessary part of life. Every day people are arrested for stealing, drug dealing, prostitution, sleeping outside and other acts of survival, and this process is intensified in attempts to 'clean up the streets'. These individuals may or may not make a conscious choice to oppose this society, but these illegal acts always put them at odds with those in power.

Whether it is by consciously engaging in actions against the state and capital, acts of survival or both, for an increasing number of us, prison – the place where the outcasts of society are sent – is becoming a reality.

But it's still easy to think of prison as a separate place, something that doesn't affect us when we aren't experiencing it directly. At worst it's a looming threat, something to avoid at all costs. And it's true, prison is a different place, a different kind of existence. I can't pretend to know what prison is like. But in order to ensure that we don't deviate from our prescribed roles, this society must control and monitor our behaviour. Prison is the most obvious and totalitarian form, but it isn't the only one.

The mechanisms of control imposed on us are constantly expanding, and they aren't hard to find. CCTV cameras monitoring public spaces, set hours of operation in public parks, internet sites that collect our personal information to hand over to whoever wants it, and the increase of security and cops are just a few examples of how prisons are expanding outwards, becoming a normal part of society. As control expands, prison in its current physical form becomes less necessary – house arrests and ankle transmitters used to monitor our arrested comrades show that prison is quite capable of moving beyond four walls. In Vancouver, the addition of fare gates and the huge increase of armed cops and security cameras along public transit lines are obvious manifestations of state control extending into our daily lives. The gentrification of Woodward in East Van, the transformation of community space into commercial stores patrolled by security is another example. Everything needs to be monitored or replaced by structures that can be.

This is all said to be for our protection, but in reality it is what protects this society from us. We are all potential criminals in their eyes. Any deviation from the set of social roles that maintain order, any attempt to create our lives on our own terms need to be repressed by this system. So control is expanded, externally in the form of surveillance, data collection and policing, but also internally. When we uphold laws as if they were our own values the state achieves the ultimate form of control. When we have completely internalized the rules of this society, when we don't act on our desires because to do so would cause us to break the law, when we form 'community' watch and policing programs that do the cops' job for them (and when we blatantly snitch on our family and friends with encouragement from the cops, as happened after the Vancouver hockey riots in 2011), we are complicit in the re-creation and expansion of prison in our daily lives. This is why establishing alternative forms of law enforcement and punishment cannot be a part of a radical and revolutionary response to prison. Such institutions will never eradicate prison because they are based on the same fundamental value – control. Even if prison were to be abolished, without overturning the society that necessitates it it would just be prison by another name and only benefit those in power by creating the illusion of a more just society. As the revolutionary group Os Cangaceiros wrote, "*reform is repression by other means.*"

I have chosen to place myself at odds with this society. I attempt, whenever possible, to live my life on my own terms and this involves a rejection of both the state and capital. This has put me in conflict with the current social order and as such, the threat of prison is always a possibility. For those of us who refuse to submit to the rule of law, as well as for the individuals for whom it is not a choice, prison is not just a distant place. It is a necessary condition of this society that we experience every day.

My struggle against prison cannot be separated from my struggle against the totality of this society and the cages that exist all around me.

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