

No books in the cell for Alfredo Cospito

But isn't prison supposed to rehabilitate inmates?

Leonardo Caffo

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Is it 41-bis or A Clockwork Orange?

Alfredo Cospito, the anarchist detained under the 41-bis regime, has been denied the books he legitimately requested. But isn't prison meant to rehabilitate? How, then, can a man be forbidden from reading in his cell? It feels like A Clockwork Orange, yet this is reality. And if even this right is taken away, the State has utterly failed. News from the Italian prison system, especially when it touches the sensitive issue of fundamental rights, struggles not to provoke a certain disgust: is this truly the country of Cesare Beccaria? The latest episode involving Alfredo Cospito, detained under the 41-bis regime, is one that seems straight out of the Ludovico Technique, or at the very least, deeply questions the direction our State is heading. Denying a man—however controversial his profile or past actions may be—the books he duly requested is not just punishment; it is an aberration, further proof that retributive logic has now supplanted any principle of juridical and human civility.

This is not an isolated case, of course, but in this specific instance, the severity is amplified by the context. The 41-bis regime, designed to combat organized crime and prevent contact between inmates and the outside world, here becomes a tool for annihilating the person, even in their most intimate and intellectual dimension. The possibility of reading, studying, and accessing that wealth of ideas—however uncomfortable or critical they may be—is denied, which is the indispensable nourishment for the human mind. The individual is reduced to a body to be controlled, a soul to be extinguished, forgetting that even in a high-security regime, the principle of rehabilitation should remain the guiding light.

Yet, the Italian Constitution is clear. Article 27 states that punishments must not consist of treatments contrary to human dignity and must aim at the rehabilitation of the offender. What is rehabilitative about denying access to culture? Nothing. There is only the intent to break, to humiliate, to silence. This is a deeply dangerous signal, extending far beyond Cospito's individual case. It is a symptom of a broader pathology afflicting our prison system, long ignored or addressed only with superficial measures. President Mattarella's words on the urgency of addressing the prison situation, the ongoing suicides behind bars, the deplorable conditions of overcrowding, the exasperating slowness in approving amnesties or alternative detention regimes—all this paints a bleak picture. We can no longer afford to remain indifferent. Civil society has a duty to question, to raise its voice, to demand a change of course.

Denying books to a prisoner is not just cruelty for its own sake; it is an act that undermines the foundations of a society that claims to be democratic and respectful of human rights. It means abandoning the very idea of rehabilitation, of reintegration, even in extreme cases. It means accepting that punishment is merely vengeance, not also a tool for building a future, however difficult or controversial. This is not about sympathy or lack thereof for Alfredo Cospito. It is a matter of principle, of human dignity. If the State, in its punitive intent, goes so far as to trample the freedom to read, the freedom to think, then it is the State itself that fails in its highest duty: to be the guarantor of rights, especially in contexts of deprivation of liberty. It is time for citizens to mobilize. It is time to demand that prisons once again become places of punishment, yes, but also of possibility, of redemption, of human consideration. Because if we deny even books, we have truly denied everything.

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