

Driven to Silence

As much as the prison system needs to be reformed, and few would contest the need, little reform, if any at all, will be achieved until and unless the prisoners themselves resolve to become involved and engaged in the effort. The status quo will be steadfastly maintained so long as the prisoner population allows itself to be continually seduced into silence by such token comforts as the prison institution allows.

Commissary, preferred housing and work assignments, and the underground market are offered, encouraged, promoted, or merely tolerated and allowed to flourish for one reason only: to silence the voice of the prisoners. These concessions serve to demotivate the prisoners from either speaking or acting against the establishment.

Prison is a microcosm of the free world. Financial support from beyond the walls, depending on its level, provides for the various degrees of the wealthy class. Craftsmen, artisans and those providing skilled labor establish the middle class; and those providing either no or unskilled labor (e.g., washing clothes, cleaning floors, etc.) and unsupported from the outside form the various degrees of the impoverished class.

It is from this foundation that the prison builds its control. Stamps provide prison's paper currency and the value of them, as with all paper currencies, is subject to the ebbs and tides of the economy. During periods of inflation, when the value of stamps is weak, the prison economy shifts largely to a food-stuffs based bartering system. Here we have the prison economy's supporting currencies and the institution's most powerful weapon. It is from this steel that the remainder of the prison's weapons are forged.

Through commissary purchases those prisoners with outside support gain what those without that support lack: substance, power and influence. The prison workers (through theft and remarketing) provide to the economy what is not available through the commissary channel (e.g., food from the kitchen; clothing, bed linens, a variety of cleaning supplies and more from the laundry; and a sundry of other items misappropriated from other sources) and completes the supply chain.

This provides for prison's black market through what is affectionately known as 'trafficking and trading', a violation of written policy which is regularly stimulated through other policies. Clever, huh? Preferred housing and work assignments, then, provide the means (i.e., freedom of movement) to more effectively market and transport product and payment.

Loss of commissary privileges, preferred housing and work assignments, and other restrictions on movement are constant threats, sometimes spoken, and sometimes not. Herewith silence and cooperation is secured.