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REVIEW OF *THE PERPETUAL PRISONER MACHINE*

As I finished Joel Dyer's *The Perpetual Prisoner Machine* and was gearing up to write the review, I happened to pick up an old (January 31, 2000) issue of *Time* magazine while sitting in the dentist's office. There was a one-page story on page eight about how a new prison in Salt Lake City was opened to the public before the prisoners arrived. However, unlike that moment in *Roger and Me* where the Flint, MI, social elite have a costume party in the new county jail (complete with a band playing the obligatory "Jailhouse Rock" and women dressing up in riot gear), this open-house at the Salt Lake City Adult Detention Center served a different purpose--Sheriff Aaron Kennard said "with a missionary's zeal that the public needs to 'see what my people are going through,'" the "people" being his officers and civilians who will be in charge of the inmates. The other function this open house performed for its 97 bed-and-breakfast inmates was a dramatization of life inside, personalized for the *Time* readers via the story of fourteen-year-old Matthew Ostler, a teenager with some form of an attention-deficit disorder, and a previous run-in with the law resulting from his attempted theft of a bike. (He was caught and fined \$75.) Matthew was there because his father, frustrated with his inability to control his son, wanted to scare him straight. ("I've grounded him. No TV. No Nintendo," says the burly truck driver with a weary sigh.") The story describes how Matthew was brusquely treated when "booked," and then after a game of checkers with his dad during "free time," one guard, posing that evening as a prisoner, began "shouting in cell 3C06, as if he [was] a convict gone berserk. On cue, four officers in riot gear march[ed] to the door of the cell and shout[ed], "Ready and stop!", before one unleashed a burst of pepper spray. Then they rush[ed] in, pinning the [faux] prisoner to the wall, handcuffing and evacuating him." The story ends with the next paragraph describing a ready-to-go-home Matthew, who says "I don't want to be here." (He certainly understands the art of the understatement, if not how to successfully steal a bicycle.) Beneath this last paragraph is a small photo of Matthew and his father gleefully walking away from the prison in striped uniforms, waving for the camera.

What makes that article so compelling for me is that I find it emblematic of everything Dyer addresses, from the way it espouses and codifies a taken-for-granted utility of imprisonment, to the strange "zeal" of the sheriff. (If he's so eager to show people what it's like to run a prison, why not run tours once the actual convicts arrive?) After reading Dyer's book, I could see nothing in the article itself except its subtextual, normalizing rationale for the rapidly growing "business" of incarceration. But before I say more about the article in *Time*, I should explain how Dyer's book made my response possible. His main claim is that since 1980, the American penal system has been on its way to becoming not only a business that transforms prisoners into commodities, but also a robust and profitable institution which today has matured into a being all its own, no longer controlled by the voters who are ultimately in charge of allocating funds to run it. That is, the prison system has transformed from a non-profit, state-run holding-tank for criminals into a for-profit, corporate-controlled, money-making machine that sucks up new inmates as quick as we can make laws to criminalize them, and which in fact necessitates these laws for its financial well-being.

According to Dyer, this transformation has been materially driven in part by harsher sentencing laws (three-strikes, truth-in-sentencing), and an eradication of community-service and substance-abuse programs for nonviolent offenders, both of which have naturally led to greater numbers of incarcerated prisoners, leading to a prison building boom, and finally to a greater profits for the stockholders who now own prison companies, stockholders who range from the Disney corporation to the California Teacher's Union pension fund. (Dyer says there are currently two million inmates, a number which he expects to double long before the current decade is over--making prison stocks a sound investment, if you're of a mind. Of course, chances are that if you have a pension, a 401K or a mutual fund stashed away for a rainy day, you might already be making a decent return on your investment in our penal-business-system).

The way this has worked out is carefully detailed by Dyer, who has a talent for making the convoluted seem straightforward. The profits from prisons come in a number of ways--from getting states to pay private companies to hold prisoners when overcrowding becomes an issue, to having the public pay back the corporate interests who loaned the funds to build prisons that the constituency didn't want to pay for in the first place--and Dyer carefully outlines them all. Dyer's analysis of the economics of the modern penal system alone would have made this a great read.

However, Dyer goes further than simply describing the bureaucratic and economic practices that enabled government and corporate investors to defraud the public sphere and incarcerate people at an exponential rate, for the penal system itself is only one part of Dyer's "perpetual prisoner machine." The other half operates in and through the news and entertainment media, polling practices and politics. As he reminds us throughout his analysis, what has been driving this shift in the penal system is the public perception that crime is omnipresent, that it is violent, on the rise, and generally perpetrated by poor, young men of color. By tapping into this general fear, politicians have run successful campaigns, and as we've just seen in the presidential race, continue to do so.

So what's new, right? Well, Dyer makes the claim that because violence sells, and since televised news is now run for profit, the viewing public is fed an entertaining diet of violent crime (on both a sensational national level, such as the O.J. trial, as well as local coverage of violent crime). That is, since the news programs have to turn a profit to satisfy stockholders, they need to sell advertising space, which evidently sells best when the news "reports on" violent crime. Since Dyer himself has done time as a television journalist, he speaks knowledgeably about what this has done to the news, and convincingly argues that the 4th estate has ceased to exist in any significant fashion. And since violence sells everything, Dyer also calls attention to the entertainment industry, which he suggests has become more violent in an effort to increase revenues, thus creating a general atmosphere in which images of violent crime circulate at a rate far beyond their actual occurrence.

For Dyer, this adds up in a refreshing way--rather than establishing a correlation between real and media-portrayed violence (the violent-images-create-violent-crime argument), he links the general anxiety we have about violent crime to this circulation of images, ultimately arguing that the voting practices of the American public, and campaign tactics which both construct and respond to them, are caught up in a cycle that affirms these fears by generating new tough-on-crime laws, which in turn establish the tough-on-crime stance taken by politicians. Thus, the three-strikes law was passed in California, not because violent crime was on the rise stemming from "soft-on-crime" measures, but rather because of the synergistic media frenzy which formed around the murder of Polly Klass by Richard Allen Davis, a ex-convict who kidnapped the 14-year-old from her home, and killed her. Dyer points out that this law had been rejected by then-Governor of California, Pete Wilson once before, but with the weight of the continuous media coverage of the murder and trial looming large in Wilson's state,

nearly every candidate running for a major California office, regardless of party affiliation, had endorsed [Mike] Reynold's three-strikes initiative. And why not? Due to the massive media exposure in the Klass

case, polls showed that California voters believed that crime was the state's single biggest problem and that they were now in favor of the three-strikes initiative by an astounding margin of eight to one--and 88-percent support for anything is the kind of poll results that get the attention of politicians and their consultants. (158)

Thus, the "perpetual prisoner machine" is not simply the prison system and the institutionalized practices which it gives rise to and necessitates, but is also the profit-driven news media, voting and polling practices, and our individual fear of violent crime itself. Dyer's analysis of the passing of California's Proposition 184 (the three-strikes law) is also well-grounded in the economics of lobbying that surrounded that specific law--he points out that the two biggest contributors to this campaign for Prop. 184 were the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (the union of prison guards), and the N.R.A. The union itself spent just about one million dollars to make this proposition pass, and for good reason--since its passage, their union membership has grown from 4,000 to 24,000, and the average guard's salary has doubled from \$24,000 to \$55,000, thus increasing the total dues of the union by a significant amount. So don't get the idea that Dyer's analysis rests too firmly on any one aspect of the total process he works hard to fully describe--his "machine" runs on all the contingent parts, each one gaining steam from the other. And in this regard, Dyer's analysis of the media works well in the context he establishes for its application.

Of course, Dyer's book raises some disturbing questions when taken in its totality. Does exponential incarceration stem from our entertainment? Are news programs shaping our understanding of the world in a negative manner, as opposed to informing us so that we can make rational decisions based on our experience of the world beyond the TV set? Are racial and class-based antagonisms reproduced in such a manner that the increase in our nation's prison population is the result of institutional, profit-driven mass-marketed media violence? Absolutely, according to Dyer, and frankly, after reading this book, I'm convinced he's right. Granted, I was most of the way there already, but what impressed me was the manner in which Dyer goes out of his way to ground these assertions in research, making a compelling analysis that is as far-reaching in its claims as it is in its research.

And so to return to the article from *Time* magazine, we see that Dyer's assertions seem to be right on the money. To begin with, that article suggests that prison, or even the threat of it, deters crime. Witness young Matthew's desire to leave the prison--while this sentiment is true of anyone who spends time in jail, here we are allowed to establish a connotative relationship between a father's (successful) tough-love ploy to control his son with the state's tough-love (three-strikes) approach to incarceration. Naturally, this is one of the biggest myths about putting people behind bars used by anyone who campaigns on a tough-on-crime platform, and Dyer does a fine job of showing how the threat of incarceration is never a deterrent to crime, and that prisons work in just the opposite manner, making people into hardened criminals who stand an excellent chance of becoming prisoners again. Secondly, the episode of the guard-cum-berserker-inmate suggests to readers that criminals are violent, crazy, and necessitate extremely violent measures to keep them under control (the prison itself is not enough--we need four guards for every one prisoner to do a good job of it), a mentality which is perfectly naturalized by this staged performance of criminality.

So--in this one page article, we are told (in not so many words) that the newly-built prison is a sound use of public funds (\$135 million worth) because prisons 1) act as deterrents to crime, 2) are the only logical place for criminals who need the state's tough-love to get straight, and 3) anyway, all criminals are all violent if not downright crazy to begin with. What makes this article so appropriate for thinking about Dyer's book is that it appears in an issue whose cover story was (aptly) titled "The Mad Dash--Inside the race for President." If it's not a perfect rendition of the complex of forces Dyer spends the better part of 300 pages working out, it doesn't do too bad, either.

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