Not Worker, But Chattel

Ivan Kilgore
power that can be unleashed in the domino effect of the revolting slave. This is how Black political consciousness is formed—from the everyday to the extraordinary, in the anti-dialectic between master and slave, we continue to build the grounds upon which the former’s disintegration becomes imperative. The chattel convict is thus from the moment of arrest positioned in such a way as to develop Black politics, as imprisoned people are all subjected to the gratuitous terror of the state. We are not workers for the most part. We are enslaved. Captive. Captured. Property of the U.S. nation state. The raw materials disappeared to give shape to white democracy’s freedom. Free world abolitionists will you join in the dance with social death?

Endnotes


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BY IVAN KILGORE 2019

Whereas the positionality of the worker (whether a factory worker demanding a monetary wage, an immigrant, or a white woman demanding a social wage) gestures toward the reconfiguration of civil society, the positionality of the Black subject (whether a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting) gestures toward the disconfiguration of civil society. From the coherence of civil society, the Black subject beckons with the incoherence of civil war, a war that reclaims Blackness not as a positive value, but as a politically enabling site, to quote Fanon, of “absolute dereliction.” It is a “scandal” that rends civil society asunder. Civil war, then, becomes the unthought, but never forgotten, understudy of hegemony. It is a Black specter waiting in the wings, an endless antagonism that cannot be satisfied (via reform or reparation), but must nonetheless be pursued to the death.

—Frank B. Wilderson III

One of the most overlooked contradictions that imprisoned abolitionists face today is not merely the issue of our resistance meeting a master’s repression, nor is it a matter of fending off the Democratic Party’s attempt to co-opt—to steal and covertly misdirect—our efforts into the legal machine of Civil Rights reform. What we prison slaves and millions of other “prison-slaves-in-waiting” have yet to comprehend is the extent to which an internal ideological struggle must be waged among ourselves, within a segregated prison population, as well as in our neighborhoods and communities, if we are ever to realize our potential as revolutionary class.

What I convey in the following essay is a particular lesson regarding what Hortense J. Spillers calls “the intramural,”** derived from my experience organizing side-by-side with fellow U.S. prison slaves. It is a story about the white supremacist state’s use of deprivation, terror, seduction, and organized treachery as tactics to
The possibility of capture is so great, in the public mind, it is inevitable that the media will try to provide coverage. The public is often unable to distinguish the differences between the various positions, and it is difficult to determine which are the most important. This is why it is important to have a clear understanding of the positions and their implications. Without a clear understanding of the positions, it is impossible to make informed decisions. In addition, it is important to consider the potential consequences of taking a particular position. This is why it is important to have a clear understanding of the positions and their implications. Without a clear understanding of the positions, it is impossible to make informed decisions. In addition, it is important to consider the potential consequences of taking a particular position.
To my dismay, I had to explain to them that the hunger strikes were a gradualist reform movement, not a militant abolitionist movement; that they had nothing to do with abolishing prison slavery or genocide more generally; that the majority of prisoners in California would view a general strike as counter-productive to their own selfish reasons for working in a prison setting, and like prisoners anywhere many simply lacked the necessary vision, discipline, knowledge, and willingness to sacrifice those crumbs for the bigger picture.

Having said that, I’ve noticed a slight change of disposition amongst many prisoners in California. Before and during the hunger strikes, many were doubtful, if not pessimistic, as to our ability to bring about change and abolish many of the oppressive and inhumane aspects of prison. However, after the hunger strikes lead to the 2013 settlement in “Ashker v. Brown,” which supposedly abolished indefinite SHU terms, the conversation on the yard has been somewhat optimistic. That said, the most significant result of the hunger strikes was not forcing CDCR to reform its bogus gang validation process and indeterminate SHU scheme, rather it was the cultivation of faith that we as prisoners—as a collective and enslaved political body—have the power to dismantle the oppressive and inhumane circumstances we find ourselves in.

In essence, the hunger strikes exemplified what abolitionist Ruthie Gilmore describes as the mobilization of the forms of dual power already latent in colonized and oppressed communities; the disruptive potential of organizing ourselves as rebel slaves. She explains:

*Power is not a thing but rather a capacity composed of active and changing relationships enabling a person, group, or institution to compel others to do things they would not do on their own (such as be happy, or pay taxes, or go to war). Ordinarily, activists focus on taking power, as though the entire political setup were really a matter of ‘it’ (structure) versus ‘us’ (agency). But if the structure-agency opposition isn’t actually how things really work, then perhaps politics is more...*
This sort of sight...
of prison administrators, the intent remains to maintain oppressive conditions that, in effect, aim to keep us impoverished, dependent and, thus, powerless. Consequently, this has given life to the culture that we subscribe to where, for example, pushing a broom on the tier for 20 years with little to no compensation is accepted as a norm so long as we may entertain the illusion of a “come up.”

II.

"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

—13th Amendment of the United States Constitution

"Prison slavery" over the past decade has gained traction as a keyword in activist vocabularies and progressive popular culture. Some people use the term to describe the conditions of cheap or literal indentured labor that I discuss above. Yet over time, it has taken on a new and more adequate meaning referring to the generalized condition of a prisoner’s social death. Slavery in this theoretical context is the legally-sanctioned and state-condoned project of containing and disappearing certain targeted and criminalized populations—the social condition that animates the machinery of the U.S. Prison-Industrial Complex; a white supremacist regime with its own separate drives that exceed the demands of wealth accumulation. Of course, punishment has been industrialized as a means to manage various (criminalized) surplus populations, those deemed unqualified or ineligible for even the most exploitative of waged occupation. Yet at its core modern prison slavery is also predicated on a distinctly white supremacist logic of extermination.

The Thirteenth Amendment, according to this argument, is a legal technology that has anchored U.S. geopolitical power in a foundation of Black genocide. This mass of white supremacist violence is not confined only to the physical site of the prison/jail itself, but is

Of course, the trustees (i.e. slaves with “work privileges”) were allowed to watch TV, listen to radio, and use the soda machine upstairs in the courthouse. Every now and then, the jailor would also allow one of them to go across the street to the Dollar General to purchase candy, underwear, deodorant, or some other miscellaneous item that seemed to make life in that shit-hole that much more tolerable. (In case you’re wondering, the only clothing the jail provided were the oversized, bright orange jumpsuits; no coats, underwear, etc.). They also were allowed a hug and kiss from their visitors and, on the weekends, they worked maintenance on the courtyard.

As for the rest of us, we were allowed nothing. No commissary, no TV, no outside cell activity. Nothing. Old cornbread, wrapped in some toilet paper wrapper, was the only thing we had to eat that kept our stomachs from growling at night. Man, how I wished to be a “trustee” during those days. The “perks” alone made it to where nobody in that situation, including myself, cared that we were in fact being paid nothing for our labor.

For twenty-three months, I was forced to live under the foregoing conditions, wanting nothing besides freedom, and willing to slave just to get a small taste of it. Yet because I was charged with a M1 (i.e., 1st-degree-murder-charge) and would later face a death penalty trial, there would be no listening to country music or enjoying the silver of mobility awarded to a trustee.

Looking back on that situation today, I cannot help but think of how unfreedom and “gut” starvation conditioned me. I internalized so much stress, fear, and anger that it tempered my spirit. I failed to even realize how profoundly it suspended my reluctance to work in a carceral setting. Essentially, I was disciplined to withstand the taunting effects of my incarceration which prompt so many of us slaves to relent to the illusory “perks” associated with prison labor and a life of hard scrabble.

Eventually, I was able to place those so-called perks in their proper perspective: They were but a distraction, misplaced values and desires I had yet to conquer; things that I had been manipulated to hold in esteem that, with exception of food and exercise, were not
became better acquainted with one another, I eventually pointed out to him that neither the "perks" of anything he had hustled for in the past 20 years of being incarcerated, nor the purchase of his freedom, or the creation of any kind of financial stability, would make him better. I explained that hustling in prison was no more than hustling on the outside, except that the objects were different: Instead of hustling on the streets, he was hustling among the other inmates, and instead of making money off of their vice, he was making money off of their vices.

Yet because I could not value the privileges that did not exist for me, I was not able to make sense of the power Dynamic Power. I realized at the time how much I had been blinded to the fact that hustling in prison was no different than hustling on the streets. I would have to learn, again, how to see my situation for what it truly was—no more or less than hustling. And I knew that I would have to learn how to see the world for what it truly was—no more or less than hustling on the streets.

In short, I TURNED UP!

Food was thrown at the jailers and trustees, and yet the inmates never stopped demanding more. Mattresses were burned, and the power-products were distributed. I learned how to exercise my discretion and avoid the consequences of my actions.

In time, I discovered that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation was not the only organization that set the agenda for our lives. The Seminole County Detention Center, by contrast, was a place where the inmates were the ones calling the shots. Yet, many years later, when I was committed to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, I found that many cells were still as dark and empty as before.

The perks were not just limited to the inmates. The prison staff also profited from the system. The perks, which were given to the staff as a reward for good behavior, were typically clustered and were usually given for work that did not have a significant impact on the overall functioning of the institution.

However, as he explained all of this, I could not help but think that while he meant no harm with his advice, he was thinking about the advantages of his situation. And what he was saying was not wrong, but it was not what I needed to hear.

That's why, as I continue to hustling in prison, I have come to believe that, in order to succeed, one must be able to see the world for what it truly is: a place where hustling is no different than hustling on the streets.