

On the Wednesday before my parole date I overslept for approximately 15 minutes during the noon lunch break and was given a CDC 115 [the official write-up for a disciplinary infraction] for sleeping during work hours. That same day there was another inmate who was caught trying to smuggle a letter out of the ranch and he was just warned. But then, he was a white inmate. They didn't do anything to him. I asked the guard to consider the fact that I had a parole date for the following Monday and that I hadn't had a write-up for 18 months and that I had been down for almost four years. But he wouldn't listen. He felt that he had to show his authority and so he wrote me up. The 115 read: "Inmate _____ has received a disciplinary for being asleep when he should have been on his job and I am sending him in for this."

I appeared before the disciplinary committee the following day, Thursday, at 8:30 A.M. with the associate warden for custody. The hearing lasted about five minutes. The associate warden told me that he was going to cancel my parole date and refer me back to the parole board. The committee also gave me 30 days loss of privileges and five days in the hole which they suspended. That means that I am not going to get out next Monday. The associate warden told me that he would recommend to the board that they give me a new date, but who knows what they'll do. They are making me stay in this place for at least a month just because I overslept for 15 minutes. In Susanville where I had been, they would have never have been that strict. [Account of a young black prisoner; the story was told to me the day after the disciplinary hearing in question.]

I attend night classes and therefore need to have my cell opened for night movement. That has become a real hassle every night. I moved from cell 504 to cell 505 because I wanted to be on the bottom bunk. But the guards' schedule still says to open cell 504 for night movement and not cell 505. I tell them that I moved from one to another, but they won't listen. I have gotten two write-ups so far for not going to classes, but it was because I was locked up. The guards have told me that if I keep arguing with them every

night they will send me to the hole for disrespect of an officer. But if I miss another night of classes, I will get sent to the hole for missing three in a row. They just won't listen. [Account of a white prisoner, late twenties.]

I got locked up on March 31 for agitating. I had nothing to do with any agitating. Everyone knows that. I have been really a loner and haven't got involved in any of the strikes. But some of the guards, especially one lieutenant, dislike me, and that is why I got locked up. They were just waiting for an excuse. I was told it was because I was an agitator and that I had a bad attitude, but I haven't gotten a 115 for anything and there wasn't a hearing or anything. This is wrecking my whole program in school, but there is nothing I can do about it. [Account of a black prisoner, early twenties.]

Incidents such as these were reported by so many prisoners, and I personally witnessed enough examples of arbitrary discipline during disciplinary hearings, that these accounts can be assumed to be reasonably accurate. Most important in the present context, however, is that these accounts reflect the prisoners' general perception of disciplinary procedures which are seen as arbitrary, vindictive, and unjust. What to the prison officials is a necessary and legitimate act to maintain order becomes to the prisoner an oppressive act of brute force.

While the privilege stratification system and the disciplinary procedures are the most important day-to-day instruments of social control within the prison, the indeterminate sentence is the most important long-term mechanism. Most prisoners appear before the Adult Authority once a year, except in cases in which the prisoner's minimum sentence is long. These appearances are experienced with great tension by most prisoners; their freedom hangs in the balance. One prisoner described the Adult Authority: "The people on the board are God and they know it. They have you in their hands. They control your salvation, your heaven and your hell. Once a year you stand before

that God and they decide whether or not you stay in hell for another. And that God is unpredictable. That is the way it is. I just don't know how to get around it. You never really know what they want."

The Adult Authority hearings I attended were held in a large room just inside the main gate of the prison. Two members of the AA and one San Quentin counselor, whose job it was to record the proceedings of the hearings, sat behind a long table in the center of the room. During each hearing, one AA member would interrogate the prisoner while the other member would read the dossier of the next prisoner to appear before the board. Most of the hearings I attended lasted about ten minutes, although one of them went on for nearly half an hour. During the hearing, each prisoner was asked about a wide variety of issues: his goals, his original offense, his attitudes toward the prison, his disciplinary record. Of these, the disciplinary record was generally looked at first, given the most weight, and often discussed at the greatest length. The prisoners are very much aware of this emphasis. One black prisoner told me: "It is hard to know what the board expects of you. How hard you work on your job or in school doesn't seem to matter very much. One disciplinary infraction can wipe out a whole year's good work reports. They see a recent 115 in your jacket and they think that this means you are still a criminal and that you need more time to mend your ways."

Many prisoners see their relationship to the Adult Authority as a deadly serious game in which the AA is trying to keep them locked up and they are trying to convince its members that they are "rehabilitated." The trick is to figure out exactly what you need to do to prove this to them:

Most prisoners at San Quentin spend a lot of time trying to figure out what they have to do to get out of here. Very few people try to change themselves or seriously look at themselves while they are here. They try to outwit the Adult Authority, to make them think that they are making

progress and have reformed. [Account of a white prisoner in his thirties.]

When I first got here I knew that I would serve at least five or six years. I was a three-time loser and had a five-to-life sentence, so I figured that the best I could hope for was five years. So what I did was deliberately get a lot of write-ups during my first two years. I probably spent half of my time in the hole, always for petty things. I'd swipe some extra food from the lunch line or report late for work. So I built up a terrible disciplinary record. Then in my third year here I got only a couple of beefs. And since then I have had a clean record. I figure the Adult Authority will look at this and think that I am "improving," that I have learned my lesson. I go to the board next month with four and a half years down and two years without a 115, so maybe I'll get a date. [A white prisoner.]

Frequently, prisoners feel that whatever they do they will be damned by the board:

I was sent to prison for possession of marijuana. So far I have done two and a half years. The last time I went to the board they asked me if I believed in legalizing marijuana. Now how am I supposed to answer that? If I say "no" they will just assume that I am lying; if I say "yes," they will think that I intend to continue to break the law when I get out and that I am not rehabilitated. I told them that I thought the penalties were too severe but that I didn't know whether it should be legalized or not. They denied me a year. [A white prisoner.]

For three years I was the model prisoner. I had perfect work reports. I graduated from high school and was taking college courses. I didn't have any disciplinary infractions except for one or two very minor things. I stayed away from the militants. I went regularly to therapy programs—group therapy, Alcoholics Anonymous, and even a Yokefellow group. So when I went to the board after three years I felt positive I would get a date. The Adult Authority shot me down a year. They said that they didn't feel I was sincere. They said that I was just con-wise and was playing

a game with them. Now I don't know what to do. If I get any write-ups or stop going to therapy, they will take this as proving that I was faking it before. But if I don't do anything new, they will just say the same thing next year. [A black prisoner.]

One theme pervaded most of the Adult Authority hearings I attended: the members of the board were looking for indications that the prisoner felt remorse for his crime. When one prisoner responded to the question, "Do you regret that you committed the burglary?" by saying, "I didn't do it," the head of the hearing told him: "We are not a court that is going to retry your case. We must assume that you are guilty of the crime. You are only hurting yourself by denying it." After the prisoner left the room, one of the members of the board remarked: "This man obviously doesn't feel the slightest remorse for what he did. He is hostile and bitter towards the prison. It seems to me that he needs more time to think things over."

Prisoners perceive this attitude on the part of the Adult Authority. One prisoner observed: "The Adult Authority doesn't care how many positive things you have done in prison. They don't care if you graduate from high school or learn a trade. What they want is for you to feel guilty for your crime. They want prisoners who are conformists, whose spirits have been broken. What they can't take is a man with pride." George Jackson, in his book *Soledad Brother*, expressed the same feelings to his lawyer:

An individual leaves his individuality and any pride he may have behind these walls. . . . No one walks into the board room with his head up. This just isn't done! Guys lie to each other, but if a man gets a parole from this prison, Fay, it means that he crawled into that room. . . . No black will leave this place if he has any violence in his past until they see that thing in his eyes. And you can't fake it, resignation—defeat, it must be stamped clearly across the face.⁶

6. George Jackson, *Soledad Brother* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970) p. 161.

If a prisoner wants a parole—and virtually all prisoners desperately want to leave prison—he must at some time make his peace with the Adult Authority. He has to decide to play the game according to the rules laid down by the prison, to show the "proper respect" for prison authority, to conform to the demands of prison rules regardless of how arbitrary they may be or how arbitrarily they may be enforced. If he does these things well enough—convincingly enough—he will be rewarded with privileges within the prison and, ultimately, with a parole date from the Adult Authority. If he refuses to accept that role, to conform to those demands, then he will lose those privileges, probably spend a great deal of time in isolation, and be denied a parole year after year.⁷

REHABILITATION

The hallmark of the "enlightened" liberal prison is its rehabilitation programs. Nearly all the prisoners interviewed felt that the rehabilitation programs at San Quentin were almost worthless. One prisoner used exactly the same words as had a counselor to describe the rehabilitation programs in the prison: "Rehabilitation is a farce." A Black Muslim prisoner put it even more strongly: "There is no rehabilitation at San Quentin, just mass slave labor. The only reason for prison is social revenge. When Reagan asks for money for prisons, it is not to make things better, but to lock up more men to make more money for the state through slave labor."

Another prisoner, describing the college program at the prison, stated: "This college thing is a real hoax. It is bullshit that

7. In late 1971 the Adult Authority instituted a new policy granting nearly every prisoner a "contingency parole date." In some cases these are granted as far as three or four years in the future. However, the prison can lift the parole date at any given time if the prisoner commits a disciplinary infraction. In effect, the Adult Authority has given the prison authorities even more direct control over the granting of paroles to inmates, and has thus made the indeterminate sentence an even more effective instrument of social control.

they tell the public. They don't tell the public that the program is so crowded that you can only take one course at a time. The only thing I can take this summer is Health Education because everything else is filled up. The industries program is also a hoax because most of the skills are way outdated. It is nothing, nothing whatsoever."⁸ "How," one prisoner asked, "can the prison hope to rehabilitate people by hitting them over the head? How can we benefit from an educational program when we are told not to think?"

These criticisms by prisoners of the rehabilitation programs do not mean that they gain nothing at all from them. Many prisoners do in fact get high school diplomas, some prisoners learn a trade they continue to use on the outside, and a few prisoners undoubtedly benefit from the therapy programs. The overwhelming majority of prisoners I spoke with, however, feel that the rehabilitation programs are of little value and that the overall setting of the prison negates the value of even the better programs.

Yet, even if the impact of prison does not come through any of the formal rehabilitative programs, it can sometimes be positive in terms of the individual's development. George Jackson put it this way: "[Prison] brings out the best in brothers—or it destroys them entirely. But none are unaffected. None who leaves here is normal. If I leave here alive, I'll leave nothing behind. They'll never count me among the broken men."⁹

A number of prisoners expressed the feeling that before they went to prison they had never had time to stop and look at themselves, to evaluate their lives and the world around them:

I guess I have gotten something out of prison. Prison has given me a chance to pause and reflect. Outside I didn't have time. I was always on the run. In here I have time to

8. As has already been pointed out in Chapter 4, this observation on the lack of value of the industries program was strongly confirmed by a study made by the California Assembly Office of Research.

9. *Soledad Brother*, p. 32.

think. That's something at least. [Account of a white prisoner, early twenties.]

The only positive time here is when you are lying alone on your bunk, reminiscing and thinking about yourself and what is happening to you. When your head is on your pillow is the only constructive time here. That is the only time you can really be sincere with yourself. All the rest of the time you have to play games. A man has a lot of thinking time in a penitentiary, and if there is anything good that comes out of this, it is because of that. But you don't have to be treated this miserably to think. [Account of a black prisoner, early thirties.]

Nearly every prisoner asks himself in some way: "Why is this happening to me?" The prison has a ready-made answer, which some prisoners accept: "This is happening to you because you are sick, because you are weak, impulsive, unable to act responsibly. We are here to help you." Many—perhaps most—prisoners reject this simple answer. Some chalk up imprisonment to bad luck: "I am here because I got caught. I had a bad break." Some answer the question by becoming deeply depressed in prison, by withdrawing into fantasies and shutting out, as best they can, the painful reality about them. Others never really answer the question at all and take each day in prison as it comes without trying to comprehend the meaning of the experience. An increasing number of prisoners, however, are answering this question in political terms. At San Quentin, this is particularly true of black prisoners, but a surprising number of whites and Chicanos as well are seeing their imprisonment as the result of an unjust and oppressive society.

This view was clearly expressed by Eldridge Cleaver in 1965 and by George Jackson in 1970:

One thing that the judges, policemen and administrators of prisons seem never to have understood, and for which they certainly do not make allowances, is that Negro convicts, basically, rather than see themselves as criminals and perpetrators of misdeeds, look upon themselves as prison-

ers of war. . . . Rather than owing and paying a debt to society Negro prisoners feel that they are being abused, that their imprisonment is simply another form of the oppression which they have known all their lives. Negro inmates feel that they are being robbed, that it is "society" that owes them, that should be paying them, a debt.¹⁰

Very few men imprisoned for economic crimes or even crimes of passion against the oppressor feel that they are really guilty. Most of today's black convicts have come to understand that they are the most abused victims of an unrighteous order.¹¹

For many prisoners the experience of prison is one of utter defeat and despair, and they leave prison, in Jackson's words, "more damaged physically and mentally than when they entered." But for some, the time they spent in prison was crucial in the development of their self-awareness as members of an oppressed class. Some of these—like George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X—emerge from the experience of prison strengthened, with a new sense of purpose and dignity. They have been "rehabilitated" in a radical sense; it is unlikely that they would have become the men they did without the experience of prison.

MILITANTS AT SAN QUENTIN

It is very difficult to judge how prevalent radicalism is among prisoners in San Quentin. Relatively few openly declare that they are radicals. At San Quentin, in 1971, some 30 black prisoners publically proclaimed that they were Black Panthers. That is a small proportion of the black prison population, and the prison administration took this number as an indication that very few prisoners are militant. However, a far larger proportion of the prison population is sympathetic to the militant,

10. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 58.

11. *Soledad Brother*, p. 30.

radical position than are willing to openly express their views. The militant prisoners would like to think that they have the large majority of the prisoners behind them. While that may be wishful thinking, the least that can be said is that, contrary to the official line, more than a small minority of prisoners are sympathetic to the prison radicals.

The prisoners I interviewed at San Quentin broke down into four general categories in their attitudes toward militants: (1) some prisoners strongly supported the radical outlook of prison militants and their willingness to actively oppose the prison system from within; (2) some prisoners supported the general ideals of the radicals and the radical critique of the prison, but felt that it was foolish for a prisoner to attack the prison; (3) some prisoners were opposed to the ideals of the radicals; and (4) a few prisoners had no opinions at all about radicalism inside or outside the prison.¹²

The most militant inmates did not generally have any illusions about the possibilities of radically changing the prisons simply by staging a revolution within the walls. But they did feel strongly that revolutionary organization and action within the prison had a place in a broader revolutionary struggle. One black prisoner, who openly said that he was a Panther and was later transferred to Folsom prison, expressed his feelings this way:

Attacking militant blacks here in prison and outside is just another way of putting fear in other blacks. That is their divide-and-conquer mentality. We call it "mental genocide." The great majority of the brothers on the yard are for us. The prison persecutes us because they know that the brothers respond to fear more than the desire to help

12. While I feel that most of the prisoners with whom I talked were fairly open in expressing their attitudes, many were undoubtedly somewhat suspicious of me. A prisoner would be taking a risk to openly endorse revolutionary activities, even to a volunteer student chaplain. Some of the prisoners who expressed criticism of militancy may have in fact been more sympathetic to prison radicals than they were willing to tell me.

their people. But we will continue to struggle because we know that we are right. But it won't be easy: they have all the guns. But we are willing to die for our cause and the pigs are not, and that gives us an advantage. When we come here, we don't expect to get out. We know that. We are just tired of always getting fucked over, so we are going to fight. Once you decide that, it doesn't matter so much whether you fight here or on the streets. If you fight on the streets, you'll end up back here anyway. We can't wait on the courts any more. If the shit does start, we will blow the top off. There will be a blood bath. If I got to be sacrificed to get action for my people, we'll do it.

Another young black inmate wrote an essay expressing the same feelings:

Being put in prison and having the pigs get on your case (and your head) you soon realize that if you stand up you are dead and if you tom you are a living dead man, so it is up to you to get yourself together and play the game, but with the idea that as you are playing you change the rules as the game progresses, and every chance that you get you change the game, and if you get caught then that's just tough shit, you knew what the hell would happen if you fight the system! That's why it's so important to never let your mind be locked up with your body; if you have a mind that is free then you are free—they have my body locked up, but my mind is free. The system will hold men for an eternity and let the toms and the shoe shuffer hit the bricks with this idea in mind that he is harmless and a damn fool, but the pig feels that if men with the ability to think for themselves were given the freedom that is rightfully ours, that we would take him and all like him straight to hell, because we have proven that we don't give a damn for the system. . . . I have a cause and if given an opportunity I will DIE; if that is what it takes to get FREEDOM for my Brothers and Sisters. Like I was afraid to come to this [San Quentin], but I have learned not to be afraid. The hell with death!, that is if it is for a cause. To die without reason or without taking care of business is no way for a man to die; he really died and went to hell for nothing. . . .

A white prisoner who had been transferred to San Quentin following the Susanville strike expressed similar views, but in a somewhat moderated form:

On the outside I was very close friends with a lot of Hell's Angels. I wasn't actually a member, but I ran around with a lot of them. When I was in Susanville, I began to realize that you had to get political or else you would get screwed over. That is what I told my friends who were Angels, but a lot of them couldn't care less about politics. That is also why I participated in the Susanville strike. I got shipped out because of that. . . . I've been poor always. That is all there is in prison—poor people. I am beginning to realize that there is not a war on poverty in this country; there is a war on poor people. There is not much fanfare about it, but it is true. Poor people have to start fighting back. That is why they have prisons, and I guess that makes us all prisoners of war. People aren't buying this so much any more. We know we have to get together and fight back. . . . I had a parole date before the strike. After the strike I was asked why I got involved, since I had a parole date already set. I told them that I got involved because it was necessary. I wasn't threatened or anything. I chose to get involved. Sometimes you have to make personal sacrifices. It was absolutely necessary. I doubt if it will change anything up there, but I still had to be a part of the strike.

Relatively few prisoners I spoke with shared this militant a view. Many prisoners were willing to use radical rhetoric in criticizing the prison, but only a few were willing to openly support militant action within the prison and to say that they would participate or had already participated in such action. The most frequent attitude toward radicalism within the prison was that radical ideas made a lot of sense but it was pointless to be a militant in prison:

You can be a militant here, but you really only hurt yourself. You can't change the system from the inside. The changes can only come from the outside. Once you know the way things function here, you only hurt yourself by

fighting things. Like, I have this little mustache here. If an officer comes up to me and tells me to take it off, I could say to him: "Fuck you, you are just a pig trying to control my life," and so on. I would be right, but what would happen? I would get a write-up and end up in the hole. So instead, I smile and am polite and say that I just forgot and that I will do it the next time I am in my cell. Then I forget again. You have to act that way here. [A black prisoner, mid-thirties.]

This place is a breeding place of revolutionaries. That is true, that is really true. Right now the blacks are predominant in this, but they are not really ready for it—they are going to try to kick off the revolution before people on the outside are ready for it, and so they will all get snuffed out. That doesn't make any sense. You can't change things in prison by fighting back; they can just lock you up and forget about you. [A white prisoner, early forties.]

My main interest is to get back to my wife and daughter. She is three now. If I stay here five years, she will be going on nine. I will miss the best part of her childhood. Some guys say to the board that they are revolutionaries. What good does that do? Sometimes you just have to lie, that's all. What difference does it make if you are a revolutionary and in here? You know the story of the oak and the weed: in the storm the oak is blown over, but the weed just bends. I just have to be a weed while I am here. I dig embracing the struggle, but there is nothing to embrace in here. [A black prisoner, early twenties.]

Most prisoners try very hard to do what is necessary to get out of prison, and they see militancy as hurting their chances for a parole. One black prisoner stressed this point:

When I first came here, I only knew two or three other people. They told me about various organizations in the prison. They said that you cannot afford to be a loner because if you are you'll get stuck. They told me that you needed a group to defend you. That is when I learned about the Panthers, the Nazis, and the other organizations

on the yard. I dig a lot of what the Panthers talk about, but I always try to avoid those kinds of groups because I always try to think how the people who count will look at it. Here that means the Adult Authority. If they know you are with the militants, they'll just let you sit here.

In spite of this hesitancy on the part of most prisoners to become involved in radical politics within the prison, there are situations in which the militants can mobilize considerable support for their demands. In the San Quentin strike of August, 1970, some 800 prisoners sat down in the prison yard. Not all of those prisoners knew what the strike was about; some joined in because a friend was involved. But the fact that 25 percent of the prison population was willing to sit down certainly indicates that the militants are not an isolated group with no support from the general prison population.

Some prisoners, of course, are extremely hostile to the whole radical position. One white prisoner, who identified with the prison Nazis, expressed particular venom at the black militants (see p. 120 for his comments on blacks in general):

The black militants use a lot of high-sounding rhetoric, but they really have only one aim, to kill off all of the whites in this country. They attack the country so that people will lose faith in it and thus it will be easier for them to take over. The blacks live off of the backs of the whites in this country, and yet they attack it as oppressing them. That is just a lot of horse shit.

Most prisoners who were critical of radical ideology did not express themselves in such racist terms. The most common rejection of radicalism was that it was a form of self-deception, a way of blaming others for one's own faults:

So many people here at San Quentin refuse to see themselves as responsible. They blame the police, the courts, the prison for their condition, but they won't face themselves and see that they are really to blame. There is tre-

mendous bitterness here, especially among the radicals, it seems. They feel bitter at the prison because they deny their own guilt. I'm not bitter. I did wrong. I broke the law. I did about as low a thing as you could do. But I'm not bitter, because I needed the punishment. I have had the chance to look into myself and grow as a result. [A white prisoner, mid-thirties.]

A man goes to prison because God punishes him for his sins. Every man in here is a sinner, every one. Some prisoners say that prison is wrong or that society is to blame for them being here. They blame everything they can except themselves. God would not send a man here unless he had sinned. [A black prisoner, early forties.]

Finally, there were a few prisoners who either had no opinions about radicals whatsoever or were unwilling to discuss them. When asked what his feelings were about prisoners who called themselves revolutionaries, one white prisoner replied: "I don't know nothing about that. I keep to myself and I don't want any trouble." Such views were rare.

Whatever the actual strength of the radicals in the prison, one thing seems clear: their support is growing, their sophistication is increasing, and they are likely to be more active and "troublesome" as time goes on. On this last point both prisoners and prison staff seem to agree. Where they differ is in their notions of the causes of this unrest and the implications it has for prison policies. The prisoners see the causes lying in the fundamental injustice and oppressiveness of the criminal justice system and the society at large. From the militant prisoners' perspective, the implication for policy is that the prison and the society must fundamentally change their priorities or else there will be, in the words of one black prisoner, "a blood bath." The prison officials, on the other hand, generally see the causes lying in the impulsiveness and irresponsibility of prisoners and in agitation from the outside. The implication for policy, in their eyes, is that prison discipline has to be tightened.

THE MODUS VIVENDI BETWEEN GUARDS AND PRISONERS

The militants in prison may be growing in number and importance, but they are still a minority, even if they have many silent sympathizers. Most prisoners, most of the time, cooperate, at least passively, with prison officials. They may feel much resentment and bitterness, and it may take constant reminders of the force at the disposal of the prison to keep them in line, but most prisoners try to do their time with a minimum of conflict with the prison establishment and a minimum of friction with other prisoners.

An important element in the *modus vivendi* of the prison system centers on the relationship of the prison population to the guards. The power of the prison is embodied in the guards. They are the agents who lock and unlock the cells, who fire the guns and tear gas, who write the disciplinary infractions, and who, in the end, have the greatest direct influence on the lives of prisoners. It is thus of crucial importance to the functioning of the prison what kind of unofficial relationships emerge between guards and prisoners.

Both guards and prisoners have the power to make each other's lives intolerable. If guards fully enforced prison rules, stamped out all illegal activity of prisoners, and cut off the supply of illegal goods within the prison (drugs, alcohol, grilled cheese sandwiches), prison life would become much harder to cope with for many prisoners. On the other hand, if prisoners resisted all of the orders of the guards, if they sabotaged the running of the prison, they would make the guards' job much more strenuous than it already is. As the captain of the custodial officials remarked: "We could not possibly control this place unless the large majority of inmates were on our side. If the inmates wanted to, they could take this place over in five minutes." It is in response to this shared desire to avoid unre-

strained mutual harassment that the *modus vivendi* between guards and prisoners has evolved.¹³

An important element of this mutual accommodation is the complicity of guards in various underground prisoner activities. Several prisoners described this unofficial (often illegal) cooperation of guards and prisoners:

People make wine here to make money. You have to live somehow in here. Some bulls see you doing it and leave you alone; they forget about it because they understand. They say, "It's OK; just don't front me off with it." When that kind of bull comes on, we treat him nice. But some are bad. They really fuck over the inmates, write them up for petty things all the time, take their I.D.'s. So we give them trouble in return. They don't understand the pressures on us and so they harass us all the time. With a good guard, nobody gets hassled at all. But with a dog, there is real tension all of the time. If there weren't a few guards who always looked the other way, this place would blow up. [A Chicano prisoner, mid-twenties.]

For a year I worked in the gym. There were two guards there who were runners. They brought all sorts of stuff into the prison. One did it because he was a good guy; the other did it for money. He was eventually caught and busted for it. . . . When guys make pruno [prison-made wine] sometimes there is connivance by the cops. The other day I saw a cop with some inmates drinking pruno. It is pretty rare that it goes that far. Usually when they find the stuff they

13. Gresham Sykes, in *The Society of Captives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1958), presents a good discussion of the mutual accommodation patterns between guards and inmates. He concludes by saying, "The custodians . . . are under strong pressure to compromise with their captives, for it is a paradox that they can insure their dominance only by allowing it to be corrupted. Only by tolerating violations of 'minor' rules and regulations can the guard secure compliance in the 'major' areas of the custodial regime" (p. 58). Although Sykes sees that such accommodation is necessary for the stability of the power structure within the prison, he never explicitly states that the compromises themselves are predicated upon the essential totalitarianism of that power structure.

just dump it out and don't make a commotion about it. They bust people just often enough to show who runs things here, but not so often as to stop the stuff getting made. [A white prisoner with more than 10 years in San Quentin.]

Guards must cooperate with some prisoners making pruno because it is so easy to tell that it is being made. There are a lot of infractions of the rules which they just ignore. If they sent everyone to the hole for every infraction, there wouldn't be anyone left on mainline. When you get busted it is because they want to bust you. [A black prisoner, mid-twenties.]

The prison administration does not deny that such complicity by guards in illegal activities goes on. But the administration tends to regard this complicity as the result of prisoners' blackmailing guards and as a weakness in the functioning of the prison, rather than as part of the necessary accommodations of guards and inmates. One black prisoner explained the system of mutual accommodation in this way:

Guards can make life miserable for prisoners, and prisoners can make life miserable for guards. They both know this. Most people want things to go more or less smoothly, so each side makes concessions to the other. If a guard does a favor for me, then life will go easier for him; if I am discreet and don't cause him trouble, then life will be easier for me. That's how it works.

In most cases when guards take mail out for inmates it is a free act, a favor. It is not blackmail. Carrying letters out is their way of absolving themselves of guilt over what happens here. That is especially true of some of the black guards. They know what goes on here and they don't like it. They stay on because they feel that they can do something to help the brothers in prison. Some black guards are really pigs. One in particular is a superpig—worse than almost any of the most racist white guards. Some of the white guards also recognize what really goes on here and try to deal reasonably with you. Most guards don't want a

lot of hassle, and that means that they are willing to make concessions to at least some prisoners. Only a few treat you really decently, however. Most of them still treat us like inferiors, like animals.

The result of this pattern of mutual accommodation is that, although prisoners who openly oppose the system are dealt with very harshly, inmates who make the appropriate concessions to the prison establishment are often tacitly allowed to engage in many semilegal or illegal activities. One young white prisoner told me:

The prisoners really run this place except for custody. You can get anything you want as long as you pay for it. You can even get into the North Block, the honor block, if you have a friend who is a clerk in the right office or if you bribe the clerk who handles the paperwork for the block. The clerk will either operate around the officer in charge of the block, or through him. At any rate, for a few cartons of cigarettes you can get into the honor block.

A black prisoner with six years San Quentin residence explained:

Everything in the prison is a big racket. Cigarettes are the money in prison. Everything is bought and sold with cigarettes. Some guys make grilled cheese sandwiches on the tiers and if you want one you have to buy it with cigarettes. You can even get someone killed if you want for a few cigarettes.

Just as most prisoners passively cooperate with the operation of the prison power structure, most guards generally passively cooperate with the operation of the inmate power structure. The problem is that this modus vivendi is not very stable. On the guard's side, there are always some guards who are extremely strict and who will give any prisoner a write-up for any infraction, and other guards who may be lenient with a few prisoners, but who are very harsh with others. If certain guards

do not respect the tacit accommodation between prisoners and guards, it is more difficult for other guards to function according to the mutual concessions.

On the prisoner's side, the modus vivendi breaks down because the prison underground itself generates considerable violence. Many of the stabbings within the prison are the result of unpaid debts for drugs or gambling losses. Competition for power between different Mafioso-type groups sometimes erupts in violence. Even if the guards were willing to tolerate a certain amount of violence among prisoners, the prison administration, for political reasons, cannot, and whenever violence erupts, the administration comes down very hard on the prisoner population.

More fundamentally, the mutual accommodation between prisoners and guards is unstable because many prisoners know it is sham. It is "mutual" only in a very limited sense: the guards tacitly agree not to make life for the prisoners totally miserable if the prisoners agree not to cause the guards too much trouble. But the prisoners are still prisoners, and the "freedom" created by the modus vivendi in the prison is, to most prisoners, totally empty. An increasing number of prisoners see the "mutual" accommodation as another technique of pacifying the prison population, of manipulating the prisoner's condition so that he accepts it and won't fight back. They see the modus vivendi—like racism, privileges, disciplinary procedures, and the indeterminate sentence—as a device to keep prisoners from resisting their own oppression. With that realization, the modus vivendi within the prison becomes increasingly precarious.

THE MEANING OF PRISON IN THE LIVES OF PRISONERS

The essential reality of prison for virtually all prisoners is the absence of freedom. This means many different things: you

cannot have sexual intercourse with a woman; you cannot eat what you want; you cannot wear what you want; and above all, you cannot go where you want. The loss of freedom means that you are divested of responsibility for your life—everything is done for you, all decisions of importance are outside your control. You are utterly powerless, subject to the arbitrary will of others. The loss of freedom in prison means regimentation: eating at a certain time, getting up at a certain time, locking up at a certain time. The prisoner is constantly reminded of his total lack of freedom, and the awareness of his subjugation becomes a central motif in his life:

Freedom is the only meaningful thing to a human. Without freedom things lose meaning. The whole system in prison is designed to degenerate a human being, to break him as a man. They take away all of his freedom, his freedom to express himself and his feelings. How can you be human if you can't express yourself? The indeterminate sentence gives the authorities tremendous control over a man's freedom: you are at their mercy and are really impotent to do anything about it. [A black prisoner, early thirties.]

The worst thing here is the way your life is regulated, always regulated, day in and day out. They tell you what to do almost every moment of the day. You become a robot just following instructions. They do this, they say, so that you can learn to be free on the outside. [A white prisoner, early twenties.]

Prisoners view their deprivation in very different ways. Some regard it as a personal cataclysm. They see their entrance into prison as marking a total rupture in their lives; prison and the "outside" are seen as two totally different worlds:

Life here becomes a dichotomy, a dichotomy between the inside and the outside. The outside is "real life"; the inside is unreal. But after a while this place gradually becomes reality and the outside becomes unreal. And eventually you get lost. . . . I'm a twenty-seven-year-old

man, I'm tired; I'm righteous tired. I've been in here seven and a half years now, and I'm just tired to the bone of it. [A black prisoner.]

When you come in here, your life stops for you. This is not life; it is a void in life. But life continues on the outside, and the longer you are in here, the bigger is the change on the outside. When you get out you feel like you have to live twice as much to make up for the time lost in here. But there is no way that you can make up for this daily death. No way. [A white prisoner, early forties, who has spent a total of 15 years in prison.]

Other prisoners feel that the difference between prison and the "free" world is one of degree, not of quality. They see the oppressiveness of prison and the powerlessness of the inmates as a magnification of similar conditions in the society at large:

Prison isn't any big experience. A lot of guys here think that it is and make themselves miserable in here. But if you have lived in the jungle on the outside, you know that this is just a different part of the jungle. The same things is happening on the streets as in here. The same things happen in classrooms as happen in prison. The only difference is that in the so-called free world it is more undercover. There is more illusion. It is like polishing an old shoe: you can put polish on a broken-down pair of shoes and make them shine, but it is still the same old pair of shoes. The outside has lots of shine, but it is really the same old pair of worthless shoes as prison.

In the free world there is so much trickeration that your mind becomes really confused. You begin to think you are free. They tell you that you are free so often that most people begin to think that it must be true. Everything moves so fast that you can't think straight. It is like being on a merry-go-round where you think you are going somewhere, but you really keep coming back to the same spot. The merry-go-round may be really fancy, it may have lots of glitter and cost a fortune, but you still come back to the same spot. It never really goes anywhere. On the outside the merry-go-round goes so fast that you get dizzy and

can't see anything. In here it slows down and things become clearer. You know, most people really don't have any more freedom or power on the outside than here. They just think they do because they can have a fuck or a steak when they want to. But that isn't freedom. [A black prisoner, early twenties, in San Quentin for "kidnapping with intent to commit robbery" with a sentence of life without possibility of parole.]

Prison is a microcosm of the whole society. There is racism outside and there is racism inside. In both cases it keeps the people divided. There are special privileges on the outside and special privileges on the inside. They both serve to make people think that they have something to lose by fighting the system. The courts on the outside may be fair if you are rich, but for most people they are about the same as the disciplinary hearings in here. Workers on the outside have no more say in how their factories are run than the slaves in the prison. So what's the big difference? Still, I'd rather be on the outside. [A white prisoner, early thirties.]

At different times during his imprisonment, a prisoner moves from one to the other of these general perspectives. A number of prisoners expressed the feeling that when they first came to prison they experienced the loss of freedom as a gigantic break with their past, but that gradually they began to realize that much of what went on in prison was present on the outside as well. Still, the majority of prisoners see their personal predicament as categorically worse than life on the outside, and most want desperately to get out.

Time and again prisoners expressed the feeling that the loss of freedom itself would not be so terrible if they were treated decently by prison officials:

Some people say that we are treated like animals here. But what farmer would ever keep an animal locked up in a dirty box four feet wide? We are treated worse than animals. Animals have the SPCA to protect them; who gives a damn about prisoners? [A white prisoner, early twenties.]

I think that there is a need for punishment in society, but not this, not years and years behind bars. And not being treated like dirt. A man is still a man, whatever he done to get locked up. This place is righteously unjust. After a while, it doesn't matter what you did; this is unjust. [A black prisoner, early thirties.]

Many prisoners felt that one of the worst things about prison life was the constant tension, the atmosphere of fear and intimidation that pervades the institution. Physical conditions at San Quentin contribute a great deal to this tension. George Jackson wrote in several letters from San Quentin:

I suffer a constant bombardment of nonsense from all sides. There is no rest from it even at night. Twenty-four hours a day my senses must endure the shock of this attack from the lunatic fringe. So I insert my ear plugs and bury myself in my thoughts and work. . . . (October 17, 1967)

This is Saturday: there is so much noise on the tier that even my ear plugs are useless. Grown men are acting like high school girls. The guards have some kind of sports on the radio. Everyone is happy, emotion-filled cries of joy come from every cell. They are trying to forget their problems or pretend that they have none. . . . (December 23, 1967)

It's 5:40 A.M. All the noisemakers are asleep; they've worn themselves out through the night making merry, laughing, singing, pretending. . . . They are afraid, confused and confounded by a world they know that they did not make, that they feel they cannot change, so they make these loud noises so they won't hear what their mind is trying to tell them. . . . Confinement in this small area all day causes a build up of tension. The unavoidable consequence is stupidity, a return to childish behavior, overreaction. (January 1, 1968)¹⁴

Or, in the words of one black prisoner: "San Quentin is just a madhouse. This place would just drive you crazy if you let it."

14. *Soledad Brother*, pp. 110, 118-119.

You can never really be alone in prison; you can never escape the noise, the commotion, the guns, the walls, the dirt. You are constantly surrounded by the physical reality that defines your wretchedness.

The physical conditions of San Quentin, however, are only one cause of stress within the prison. Considerable tension stems from the inmate society itself:

At San Quentin there is a terribly hostile atmosphere. You have to adapt yourself. Everyone puts up a front that they are strong. If you are weak, people know that you won't fight back and you will be used. You will be forced into homosexual relations and be forced to buy dope. When you first arrive you are tested. We call that "getting your face." The first month I was here I had to physically defend myself. I didn't want to fight—I wanted to just do my number, but I had to fight in order to show that I couldn't be pushed around, and once I had shown that, I was left pretty much alone. There is a really strong protection racket here: if you let yourself be pushed around and don't defend yourself, you can get forced to pay for your own protection. [Account of white prisoner in early twenties.]

In March and April of 1971 more than twenty stabbings occurred in the prison, three of which resulted in deaths. Some of those stabbings were probably over drug debts, but more of them appear to have been racial retaliations in which the victim was more or less randomly selected. Many prisoners during this period felt that it was unsafe to be out on the tiers alone. As one white prisoner put it: "There is more tension here than anywhere else I have ever been. You never know when you are going to be hit. The only time you can relax is when you are in your cell and the door is locked." Eldridge Cleaver made the same observation five years earlier: "Once inside my cell I feel safe: I don't have to watch the other convicts any more or the guards in the gun towers."¹⁵

15. *Soul on Ice*, p. 42.

Part of this aggression of prisoner against prisoner is undoubtedly the result of the kinds of men who are sent to San Quentin. Many prisoners come from backgrounds in which there is a premium on toughness and willingness to respond violently to certain situations. But a great deal of the aggression is directly and indirectly the result of prison conditions. As has already been discussed, a considerable amount of violence stems from racism within the prison, which is often tacitly (and sometimes overtly) encouraged by prison staff. Even more fundamentally, when men are caged, when their legitimate aspirations and desires are constantly frustrated, it can be expected that they will respond aggressively. Since it is extremely dangerous for prisoners to vent aggression directly against the prison establishment, they often displace it against each other. While most acts of violence between prisoners have some specific precipitating incident—an unpaid debt, a racial insult, an ostensible doublecross of some sort—the overriding cause of violence is the high level of frustration and tension created by the prison.