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SOC 146

Hunger as an Anti-Carceral Tool

Decolonial struggle often comes face to face with carceralism, as it is one of the main tools used by colonial powers in their quest for subjugation and control of marginalized populations. The physical and psychological damage inflicted on those who are placed behind bars, isolated from society, serves to place the prisoner in a hollowed out state of mind and being or in Giorgio Agamben's words, a state of 'bare life'. Colonial projects utilize this to target and control any potential decolonial resistance or movements that may threaten their hegemony. The film *Hunger*, directed by Steve Mcqueen, documents the experiences of IRA prisoners in the Maze Prison amidst the period of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, focusing on events such as the dirty protest, eventually leading to a second hunger strike in 1981. The film is very visually descriptive and uses images to capture the carceral conditions inside of the prison and its brutally bare nature. The prisoners are central to the film, whether it is being displayed through their interactions with prison guards, their families, or fellow inmates. The IRA members were fighting to regain their status of political prisoners and they did this through acts of protest atypical from usual forms of protest, such as hunger strikes and refusal of cleanliness. The film demonstrates how the colonized and carceralized subject can resist the necropolitical landscape of the prison through unique forms of protest which allow the subject to use the body as a political entity to refuse the "molding of consciousness" and spark the decolonial movement both inside and outside the prison.

Following the first hunger strike, the IRA paramilitaries gained 'Special Category Status' which meant they were to be treated as prisoners of war, per the Geneva Conventions, and would not be treated as the typical inmates. Special Category Status gave them benefits such as extra

visits, extra food packages, and they did not have to wear the prison uniform. This was significant to the IRA's ambitions because even with members physically imprisoned, they were still politically active and many aspects of the typical carceral state were not forced upon them. There was also a sense of protection they had as well as rights that would otherwise not be given to "ordinary criminals". The fight for freedom could continue and IRA members being classified as "prisoners of war" could actually in some way bolster IRA support outside of the prison. Special category status was detrimental to the British colonial agenda and control over Northern Ireland, so it was ultimately removed, and is around the time where the film begins. With the removal of Special Category Status, the paramilitaries were required to be treated as ordinary criminals, which had implications on multiple levels. For the individual prisoner, they would have to wear the prison uniform, do prison work, and ultimately be required to conform to the British government. Although there were much larger implications for the movement in how the British would use this to propagandize. Early in the film it features a clip of Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the UK at the time, giving a speech regarding the issue and she says, "There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing and criminal violence" (McQueen 2008). By removing the protected political status of the paramilitaries they not only had a label removed, but had that political label replaced by one of criminality, allowing the prisoners to be treated in more typical carceral fashion. This political shift is reminiscent of Giorgio Agamben's "paradigmatic state of exception" where [in regards to the carceral facility] "inhabitants [are] stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life" (Hajjar Lecture 3). This is dangerous for the political prisoner as the carceral state tries to reduce them to nothing but an imprisoned body. It creates a vulnerability for the prisoner while simultaneously making them invisible and blend in with the

rest of the criminals, subject to the same social death and necropolitical state. The overarching goal of this was to create obedience out of the IRA and discourage further revolutionary acts. Walid Daka's idea of the 'molded consciousness' in which the state uses carceralism to not only imprison the physical body, but also the political body is present here (Hajjar Lecture 3). In the process of doing this, the prisoners are at risk, but society outside of the prison is also affected as the political movement is deadened through the carceral state. In the early moments of the film, and continuing throughout we see this constant rejection of the carceral state by the prisoners who demonstrate their non-compliance to assert their will to maintain their political spirit behind bars.

The way in which we analyze carceralism and power as a whole, in the colonial context, is typically in a narrowly-viewed fashion. Decolonial struggle is seen as a hopeless fight to run from and avoid inescapable death and inevitable defeat at the hands of the colonial power. Basil Farraj acknowledges this in Chapter Two of his piece "Torture, Violence and Confrontation: Palestinian Political Prisoners in the Post-Oslo Era", which is titled "Power, Violence, and Confrontation", where he takes former theories of carceral power, and uses them to postulate new viewpoints of carceral power looking through the lens of the carceralized. In reference to Israeli prisons and the detaining of Palestians, Farraj explains how the goal is to "bring forth a disengaged, individualized, obedient and apolitical Palestinian subject" (Farraj 18). Parallels can be drawn between this process and the process we see undergone in the film, and we see how colonial powers often operate using similar playbooks and methodology. What Barraj is interested in and what we see play out in the film is how those fighting against the colonial power resist this process and retain agency over life and death, not allowing for the carceral project to facilitate this through necropolitics. The IRA prisoners began with the "no-wash" or

“dirty” protest in which they refused to wear the prison uniforms, leaving them naked, refused to wash themselves and would spread their feces across the walls of their prison cells. This was in order to show they would not conform and were complacent in existing within their own filth if it meant not having to adhere to the rules of state. This angers the colonial authority figures which is demonstrated in a scene where a prison guard forcefully throws a prisoner in the bathtub and shaves his head. These forms of protest make the authority feel as if they do not have control over the colonized subject, which is the ultimate goal. The dirty protest eventually evolves into a second hunger strike led by IRA member, Bobby Sands, who carried out the strike for 66 days until he passed. Hunger strikes are a unique form of protest and are critical to Farraj’s examination of carceral power as they work to reverse the power dynamics and put the facilitation of life and death into the hands of the carceralized subject, as a form of ‘necroresistance’. This term arises from Banu Bargu and her work on the Turkish hunger strikes and is explained as “a form of Refusal against simultaneously individualizing and totalizing domination that acts by wrenching the power of life and death away from the apparatuses of the modern state in which this power is conventionally vested” (Farraj 19). Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropower is essentially this form of politics where a colonized population is subject to a state eventual and inevitable death, and can be used to describe many carceral landscapes and facilities (Hajjar Lecture 3). Hunger strikes allow the subject to take control of the body away from the colonial authority and make it act as a political entity. In a later chapter of the Farraj piece, titled “In-the-Making: Emancipatory Politics Behind Bars”, he looks at the conflicting viewpoints of hunger striking as a form of liberation because while they do represent the seizing of power over life and death, they still present death or ever-approaching death as the only means of escaping carceral power. He states how “to understand hunger strikes, one has to

situate the practice as part of an ever-evolving repertoire of prisoners' responses aiming to constitute political subjectivities that reject defeat, that dream and work or liberation, and that constantly counter attempts at molding consciousness" (Farraj 24). We cannot view hunger strikes as an individual act of martyrdom or a hopeless suicide attempt, but rather see it as a just one tool in the larger movement of resisting conformity to state authority and allowing for the liberation movement to not be deadened through the means of the carceral state.

Ultimately the hunger strike was successful and the IRA prisoners received their requested demands. In some ways it could have been viewed as a "victory" for Margaret Thatcher and the British government because their opposition essentially was eliminating themselves, but overall the hunger strike bolstered support for the IRA and demonstrated the willingness for liberation of Northern Ireland. This form of necro resistance is not meant to directly come into conflict with the colonial power, but more so to demonstrate refusal of 'molded consciousness' and keep the liberation movement alive both within and outside the borders of carceral settings. There are certain moments in the film which promote a sense of beauty and art in contrast to the violence and filth which were typically characteristic of the struggle for liberation. A scene in which one of the main inmates plays with a fly by sticking his hand through a hole in the cell wall shows how this connection with the outside world is still attainable and keeps a sense of hope alive in the movement. Even a shot of the cell wall covered in feces, creating a circular art piece displays the "dirty-wash" protest as one of positive liberation, in contrast to its filthy nature. The film *Hunger* is one which gives a very direct and vivid image of the fight against carceralism and colonialism, focusing on the colonized subjects and how they navigate their conditions. When fighting an uphill decolonial battle, you can not

always use tactics within the structure of the colonial setting, which urges the importance of wins on the ideological battleground and fostering mass support. Shifting power dynamics such as what transpired through the hunger strikes was one of the main unconventional methods in which the carceralized could resist the carceral state while not directly coming into conflict with the authority, maintaining the politicized mind and body.

Works Cited

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