

Teaching and Learning in Prison

The centerpiece of this special double issue is a forum on teaching and learning in prison. Some of our readers may be surprised to learn how important prisoners have become in the HGI's educational program, as students and teachers, and indeed, as sources of insight into our country's deepest social problems. Teachers have been noticing an increasing number of students with inmate numbers beside their names — but beyond that, this phenomenon may not have incited much thought. I think it is noteworthy, though, for several reasons. We present here a series of statements by incarcerated HGI students and teachers. They are a fascinating record of stubborn determination, independent thought and — as Oscar Geiger would have put it — steadfast effort in pursuit of a worthy goal.

The program started modestly, and of its own accord, in the early 90s when a resource list circulated among prisoners started listing our courses. The promise of a "tuition-free course that casts light on today's baffling economic problems" struck a chord with inmates, and word began to spread. In fact, HGI has never spent a nickel in advertising for this market; our following among prisoners is a genuine groundswell.

I think that Thomas Lyons (p. 22) is right when he calls inmates (those with the gumption to enroll in our courses, anyway) a serious, sober lot. Many "outside" students complain of the toil it takes to get through Henry George's 19th-century sentences; prisoners by and large do not. For middle-class readers, the root cause of poverty is an abstract thing, a philosophical diversion — but for inmates it is a matter of vital and immediate concern.

Of course, many question the worth of teaching "criminals", who "can't even vote"* — but there are many answers to that. Look through the statements in this issue, to start with, to see the level of discourse that can go on between teachers and students. And the burgeoning numbers of students show that in this market, anyway, our influence is spreading. But beyond that: in our zeal to (parochially) spread our philosophy we mustn't lose sight of the fact that we are social reformers! It behooves us to understand what we can about the prison boom and what it reveals about the state of our society and economy.

(continued on page 38)

** Whether or not convicted felons are allowed to vote is a matter that the US Supreme Court has left up to the States to decide. Many states, indeed, do not allow convicted felons to vote — even after their sentences have been served.*

A number of inmate students have completed the entire HGI curriculum and gone on to become teachers themselves. Inmate instructors are far prompter than their free-world counterparts — which is a good thing, because they pose some formidable administrative challenges to the home office. In every case, I have had to make multiple long-distance calls to secure various kinds of approval. Going through this process is a revelation of how our “justice” system views its commitment to “rehabilitation”. Each prison has its own bizarre set of regulations, which must be followed to the letter, and which cannot be known in advance. When an inmate teacher has an inmate student, of course, the problems are multiplied — because, like antebellum slaves, prisoners are not permitted to communicate with others of their station. Some facilities won’t accept hardcover books; others reject padded envelopes; some refuse even something as innocent as a return envelope! Why is it so difficult to exchange questions and answers about a century-old economics text?

Yet it is. The fact is that the explosive growth in the prison industry means that a great many new prisons are being built in places where they represent a precious source of stable, good-paying jobs. People take those jobs because they need them. They aren’t naturally sadists and they don’t want to believe that their

livelihood is part of a Death Force. Hence they have no choice but to believe that their charges are dangerous criminals who cannot be trusted and must be vigilantly restricted. That is the only theory I can come up with, anyway, to explain the levels of vindictive meanness that are directed toward people who are only, after all, trying to gain access to some interesting ideas.

One of our correspondents in this issue is famous. The presence of Mumia Abu-Jamal in these pages will doubtless occasion much comment, for he has many rabid detractors and vehement supporters. But his connection with HGI is not a matter of celebrity. Indeed, I was halfway through the second course with a student named M. A. Jamal before I learned, on the radio, who he was. After completing *Principles of Political Economy* in 1990, he has gone on to teach 47 HGI students, making him one of the stalwarts of our volunteer faculty. His "case" has been gone over at length in many venues, and I won't discuss it here — except to say that justice unmistakably demands that he be given a new trial. I will, however, say something about his character. A man of formidable intellect and unassailable dignity, he has been living in "disciplinary confinement" for most of his 17 years on death row, and has managed to make great contributions, despite incredible obstacles (among other things, he has written two critically acclaimed books, *Live from Death Row*, and *Death Blossoms*). He has done invaluable service in the HGI's program, and I am grateful to be able to call him a colleague.

Mumia's silence about his own circumstances is characteristic of prison students, I have found. One does wonder "what they're in for" but it has tended to be a ground rule that one doesn't discuss that, even after a long correspondence. For a long time I didn't give much thought to that, just thinking it was a comfortable way to proceed. But now I realize that this simple fact says something profound about the humanity of prisoners amid their utterly dehumanizing conditions. The fact is, of course, that it doesn't matter what they did to be put there — not to me as a teacher and, most important, not to them as students.

Many people want (or think they want) their government to get tough on crime and criminals, and to make treatment in prisons as rough as it can be — the theory being that the awfulness of prison will instill a deep desire never to return. But facts don't confirm this. As sentences have gotten harsher, prisons more punitive and self-improvement options more restricted over the past 15 years, recidivism has increased. So, in practical terms, there is no good reason to "rub their noses in it" and make the punishment as horrible as possible.

It is even more important to realize, though, that in constitutional terms (not to mention moral terms) there is no justification for this perverse intensification of punishment in prisons. What is it that convicts are sentenced to, when they are sent to prison? Physical and psychological torture? Sensory and intellectual deprivation? Isolation from loved ones? Branding? No. For having broken the social contract, they are deprived of their basic freedoms of movement and association — perhaps, if their transgression was serious enough, for their whole life. That is, in itself, the whole punishment that the law mandates, and that is enough. As a teacher, it is none of my concern what they did to get there; my concern is what they are doing now.

And I am pleased to report that what many of them are doing now is spreading the word about the Georgist philosophy! **GJ**