

CENSORED WOMEN SPEAK

by Marilyn Buck
Anti-imperialist Political Prisoner

I am a politically objectionable woman: I am a political prisoner. Politically objectionable because I am a white woman from the middle class who has refused to accept the great Amerikan social contract: democracy, for the white few, unmitigated oppression for the colonized and exploited many. I am despised because I have rejected and betrayed the bonds of white privilege, have defended Black people's rights, and have engaged in the struggle to defeat U.S. imperialism, to support national liberation struggles and the right of all peoples to self-determination. I am censored, locked behind walls, and watched.

Imprisonment is an extreme form of censorship. There are many women and men who have challenged and fought the state in the struggle for justice, equality and liberation. Because of our revolutionary political beliefs and actions, we have paid and continue to pay the consequences meted out by the state, from virtual life imprisonment to execution. The so-called New World history of repression of political dissenters began before the Constitution and continues. From the witchburnings, the executions of the Nat Turners and the John Brown to those of the Rosenbergs during the height of anti-communist fanaticism and the impending execution of Mumia Abu Jamal.¹ From the imprisonment of those who fought slavery to those who fought for labor unions, civil rights and national liberation to the present situation of

political prisoners, we have been feared, despised, and attacked. We threaten the established order. As political prisoners we are so censored by the state that our very existence is denied.

"There are no political prisoners in the United States . . . there are only criminals and lawbreakers," decrees the government.

Censorship is the province of the state, existing within the society behind silken veils of illusory freedoms which mask the institutions of social control. How censorship is implemented and used changes in society to fit the particular goals of the ruling class in an given political economic period. By dictating that which may be considered legitimate or acceptable, and rabidly assailing that which falls outside those strictures, censorship functions to inhibit and dissuade the individual or group which would question the delimited social order and its supposedly democratic processes as well as its taboos and proscriptions.

In prison, censorship and its role in repression and control is explicit. 20 years ago all prisoners' letters would be cut up or withheld if any prison guard reading the mail (not merely checking for contraband) found them politically, personally, or sexually offensive. There were jails and prisons where books and newspapers, especially those which reported on the Black liberation struggle and the anti-war movement, or women's or gay liberation, were prohibited. Before the prison reforms.

Nevertheless, it is still explicit, couched in the language of "security needs." A political newspaper or a gay newspaper may be refused because it "threatens the secure and orderly running of the institution." The regulations say that mail will only be checked for contraband, but there is a provision that allows for thorough screening for those prisoners with "special security needs." All political prisoners fall within that category.

The Reagan regime fine-tuned censorship, integrating it fully into its repertoire of psychological operations. Censorship has been extended to deny political prisoners legitimacy as agents of political and social struggle; thus, we are characterized as dangerous "terrorists" in order to justify any measure employed to attack and destroy us.

Marilyn Buck (MB): We are locked away, separated from society. our physical behavior is censored. I say censored because it goes beyond rules and regulations. White supremacy and racism are grave censors here. Censorship functions to deny Latin American women their language; and all Third World women their national dignity and cultural integrity.

Women are subject to censorship in a very distinct way from men prisoners. There is a disapproval of who we are as women and as human beings. We are viewed as having challenged gender definitions and sex roles of passivity and obedience. We have transgressed much more than the written laws. We are judged even before trial as immoral and contemptible--fallen women. For a

woman to be imprisoned casts her beyond the boundaries of what little human dignity and personal right to self-determination we already have.

We are defective women, defective private property. For example, women who defend themselves against the men who possess and brutalize them are stigmatized, cast out, and censored because they dare to assert that their lives are of equal value as those of men.

For political prisoners, this exclusion from society is a weapon to isolate us from the world, to silence our voices and actions as much as possible, to create the context in which to destroy our political identities; and finally, to deny the reality of organized resistance and social opposition within the society. Quintessential political repression.

Susan Rosenberg² (SR): Being locked up . . . yes, there is a loss of freedom and then the destruction of one's identity. That is one of the objectives of repression. For political prisoners, repression is specifically geared toward undermining, chipping away at our political identities. That is censorship. We must endure this for years and years--this whittling away at our core--who we are and what we're about. It is frightening, especially when we begin to censor ourselves to avoid the conflict between us and the enemy.

Yes, we are censored. Censorship is an explicit weapon to destroy political dissent and opposition. If we can be silenced, then others will also be silenced.

MB: The state does not even try to change our behavior so that we will function as they want within the society. They want to disarticulate our personalities, to kill our spirits. Nothing short of that is, in the final analysis, acceptable. Except death. As political prisoners we are extirpated from the community.

In 1971 nine leading members of the MLN (Movimiento de Liberacion Nacional, also known as the Tupamaros) in Uruguay were captured and imprisoned in pozos (wells). They saw and heard no news of the world for nearly 14 years. They were dead to the world, as dead as the US-supported military dictatorship could make them . . . without killing them. Major A. Maciel, director of Libertad (Liberty) Prison in which many left-wing political prisoners were held for many years, stated in an interview:

We did not get rid of them when we had the chance, and one day we will have to let them go, so we will have to take advantage of the time we have left to drive them mad.³

MB: Being locked up is physically and psychically invasive. All body parts are subject to physical surveillance and possible "inspection." Never-ending strip searches . . . one must dissociate oneself psychically, step outside that naked body under scrutiny by some guard who really knows nothing about us, but who fears us because we are prisoners, and therefore dangerous; political prisoners, and therefore "terrorists." The guard stands there before the prisoner, violating the privacy of her body, observing with dispassionate contempt. It affects each

of us. There is a profound sense of violation, humiliation, anger. It takes an enormous amount of self-control not to erupt in rage at the degradation of the non-ending assault. I do not think I will ever get used to it. However, being conscious, political women enables us to understand and articulate the experience in terms of the very real psychic censorship.

SR: One of the things that happens is that many prisoners stop wanting to see visitors. Such invasion of our private lives leads many to isolate themselves further from their families, their children, and their communities. They do not want loved ones subjected to the humiliation and degradation heaped upon them for being related, for visiting. The dissociation is profound. We must step beyond our bodies to save our human dignity.

MB: It becomes difficult to maintain personal relations because all forms of communication are subject to total intervention--all under the guise of security. We have no privacy--our phone conversations are recorded, every word we write or that is written to us is scrutinized, especially as "high profile prisoners."

SR: We are invaded--our intimate lives are subject to complete invasion . . . in the name of security. . . .

MB: . . . to build their psychological profiles, to learn how we function and to attack our ability to function.

SR: We know that their knowledge of us is a weapon against us. We have no real options except to say either, 'I will communicate despite them. I will not be silenced,' knowing the psychological profile will grow. Or, we can opt to withdraw completely. There is no middle ground.

My father had cancer. He told me on the phone and discussed it during visits. I was upset. Although I had never even informed prison officials that my father was ill, they kept asking me if I wanted counseling! They monitored my psychological state.

I have chosen to keep a journal. It is a longstanding, serious to give this experience breadth. We have to figure out ways to communicate, to defy the censorship.

MB: Every time I talk on the phone I have to decide what I will say. I refuse to let the government know how I really am; but I do not want to cut myself off emotionally either. How can I keep saying, "Everything is fine?" It is not believable; and, it would promote the official position that these high-tech prisons are fine places, especially these maximum security prisons with their veneers of civility. It would be a declaration that no, there are no violations of human rights here. It is a dilemma.

I express my interior life in poetry, when I have the wherewithal to put the lines down. Mostly, my thoughts are written on bits of paper. These bits reflect my own mental fragmentation under the conditions.

The lessons we learn, the verification of the power of the

state to destroy, has an intense effect on how we decide to function. I was forced to sit in a courtroom and listen to the prosecutor read an unfinished letter to a close friend, a comrade. She asserted that the letter was a confession-- confession by insinuation and Joint Terrorist Task Force⁴ interpretation. Every word and phrase was redefined and declared to be what I had meant--incontrovertibly. I was furious. How dare they presume, distort! At the same time I wanted to weep at the violation and manipulation of who I was before this public inquisition.

SR: It is one thing to stand up and be responsible, to say, "I take responsibility for my actions." It is another for all one's personal interactions, letters, relations with family, friends, to be used as evidence to prove guilt, to prove conspiracy.

What they did at Lexington, do at Marion (and to a lesser degree here at Marianna), and will do at Florence,⁵ is the ultimate of control. Being under such intense surveillance is like living in a fish bowl . . . not a private moment, ever. Only what we think silently is safe.

While I was in the High Security unit at Lexington, they kept a list of all correspondence--incoming and outgoing. They censored all the political literature. What little they did allow in, we read only under the watchful eyes of guards and surveillance cameras, for one hour at a time, in pairs. All to insure, as they say, "the secure running of the institution." The first time they allowed Alejandrina Torres⁶ and me to receive our political literature, at the end of 1986, they told us that

we had one hour only; that we could not exchange mail; that we were not allowed to talk. It was unbelievable; I wrote a little note saying 1984 and held it up to the camera. We laughed, but it was frightening.

MB: The withholding and monitoring of mail is part of the program of isolation--silencing, censoring the ideas and voices from outside the walls.

SR: I would call it "counterinsurgency." Marion, Lexington, and the individual states' control units are to insure isolation and manipulation. The psychological profiles⁷ they amass are a major tool to control and destroy us. Our letters are analyzed by the security forces and their psychologists. They have been sent to other repressive agencies like the FBI and the Joint Terrorist Task Force. Letters that Tim Blunk, my co-defendant, and I had written were used as evidence to say that we were still part of a conspiracy--letters written post-capture. As a result we were charged in the Resistance Conspiracy Case in D.C. in 1988.⁸

Political censorship inside the prisons is also generalized and overt. At the onset of the U.S. war against Iraq, the prison authorities here in the Maximum Security Unit announced that no prisoner would be allowed to discuss the war. The guards and officials strode around with their yellow ribbons and buttons extolling the war. While the order was not enforceable, it does indicate the Bureau of Prison's view on prisoners' First Amendment rights.

All prisoners must endure the repressive physical and psychological behavior modification program that is entrenched in the system. Physical repression engenders psychological effects. How can one emerge from such an experience without deep, numbing scars? The psyche can not escape the effects of the studied assault upon it, nor the casual cruelty that daily threatens to suffocate us. Staying healthy and productive is a monumental task, a painfully conscious task. Without that consciousness one's being is inexorably eroded and changed--rarely for the better (unless submitting to "authority", ready to do as told, without question, is laudable.)

. . . we are clutching the rags of time
and trying to come to terms
with bits of selves
shelved on the day of arrest.?

There is not a day that goes by that we are not reminded that we are censored women. Yes, we write letters and even articles; we talk to our families and friends by phone. But we are always aware that we must watch every word we say. We must censor ourselves.

I write a letter and reread it. I clench. I have a crisis of judgment about whether to send it as is. Should I say this? I do not mail the letter that day. By the time morning arrives again I decide to rewrite it. To couch my thoughts in vaguer terms. Will my vagueness and abstractions frustrate the reader?

I feel like I'm diffusing, becoming abstract. I am

censoring myself Like a painter who disguises her statement in an abstract play of colors and forms on canvas. Only she is certain of the voice that is speaking and what she is conveying. And if the observer misses what is being said?

Self-censorship is an oppressive, but necessary, part of my life now. For more than six years it has infringed upon my soul, limiting, constraining self-expression. Yet, it is a studied response--a self-defense--against the ubiquitous, insistent directive to destroy our political identities, and therefore us.

We censor ourselves to survive. The rage at the violation of our lives is inexpressible. Each of us has to decide how to guard our interior beings, to protect our psyches from being profiled, analyzed, and assailed. Every waking moment is a knowing moment. We can not even sit down and have casual conversations about where we used to hang out, who our friends were, because there are prisoners who are encouraged, and believe it to be to their advantage, to inform the officials of what they hear, what they weave from innocuous, innocent words. Too many time such casual talk has ended up in FBI files.

How can I transcend superficial relationships. Relationships I need to keep growing? Isolation debilitates. I worry about deformation. Our humanity can be truncated, marred. I fight to keep it intact, to renew it in those brief moments of privacy and with my comrades. I nurture the reasons why I have come to be here--the insistent voice of liberation whispers even

in the darkest moments. The thirst for justice is my sustenance.

The watchers, those select few trained in the skills of psychological observation and analysis, who implement the "special programs"--they know we understand. Do they wait to see if our efforts to survive and resist can withstand the daily pressure of the watching, the censoring? Do they think our efforts to guard our identities will entrap us and our own self-censoring will, in the end, serve the directive?

I live with a peculiar kind of fear. Fear of getting so wrapped up on the contradiction of self-censorship that holding onto the essential inner truth and being becomes difficult. Fear of losing the ability to maintain my identity and humanity. How long can one stay conscious of each act of self-censorship before it becomes a habit no less potent than an alcohol or drug addiction? Where is that place within the self that enables one to resist--to carry on? Not to let the act of shielding the self from the invaders become the weapon of my own self-disintegration, bringing the directive to fruition; not to allow it to transform itself into cowardice and fear of the state; not to turn tail and run and run until one reaches the point at which one leaves behind that essential part of the self--that sense of humanity that demands, urges resistance, that part which has led so many of us to be revolutionaries and partisans of justice. The fear of succumbing to self-censorship as well as to the state's censorship is a real fear. It has happened to comrades

who, through fear, or through "maintaining a low profile" ultimately lost their voices and became nothing more than whispers so low that not even they themselves could hear screaming injustices.

"The point is not capture, it is never to surrender."¹⁰

In this country there are political prisoners who have been held for more than 20 years and whose political identities remain uncorroded. I think of Puerto Rican Nationalist Lolita Lebron and her compañeros.¹¹ Their vision of an independent Puerto Rico never wavered. Geronimo jiJaga Pratt,¹² a Black Panther comrade, was held in isolation for more than 8 years and is still imprisoned after 20 years. Sundiata Acoli¹³ who was captured with sister Assata Shakur,¹⁴ spent more than 8 years in state control unit and in Marion, and remains in prison. They like so many of the other Black Panther and Black Liberation Army comrades are unshakable in the knowledge that national liberation is the only road to salvation for Black people in Amerikka. And I think of the comrade sisters Alejandrina Torres, Susan Rosenberg, and Silvia Baraldini who fought to survive the psychological torture and extreme isolation in the Lexington High Security Unit, and whose courage and endurance exposed it and helped to close it down. They, after all, are still able to smile and laugh. All the political prisoners¹⁵ have remarkable senses of humor and compassion in the face of the designs of the ruling class and its arbitrary implementations of power. We have

lived within the deepest entrails of the belly of the beast and we are still clear that we hold and live a worldview diametrically opposed to the torturers and assassins. The state has failed in its mission to force us to capitulate to individualism and cynicism; it will continue to fail.

As political prisoners we have a lot of time to consciously experience and explore censorship. Because it circumscribes our daily existence on a palpable level, and because we live under the suffocating shroud of repression, we have the potential also to explore intellectual freedom in a distinct manner. To think about and understand profoundly the nature of repression and the concomitant censorship. Some important creative writing and thought have issued from behind the walls.¹⁶

But the damage that cannot be erased is the chill, the censorship, the self-censorship, that tempered our thought and creativity back when the Rosenbergs were executed--when speaking out, in whatever way, might imply guilt by association. That tempered our thought and creativity for many years afterward. And that continues to do so today in an atmosphere that has *itself been nurtured by an ongoing conspiracy of silencing forces.*"

Censorship creeps on silent feet, creating silent fear, silencing voices of protest against injustice. Principled, progressive women must preserve your voices, sharpen consciousness, and resist state-sponsored censorship at every level. Women must be prepared to fight. It is your struggle. It is your struggle. Sixty years ago, in Germany, those who were

not Communists and political activists joined in the Nazi consensus. Women did not the power of their voices. Now we do. We are part of, and leading forces in every struggle for justice, equality and liberation. We must not allow ourselves to be gagged. Do not allow the voices of political prisoners to be gagged.

I walk a fine line in the maze of opposites, avoiding the counter-insurgency directive through self-censorship, finding ways to overcome their censorship. I make many choices of what not to say. it is difficult, but never so difficult that I stand silent before injustice. I do not think it will ever become difficult to speak out clearly and decisively, as long as I nurture my voice our collective voice of resistance--here behind these walls where we are exiled.

Free all political prisoners!

FOOTNOTES

1. Mumia Abu Jamal is a former Black Panther. He was a leading Black journalist prior to his arrest. He was sentenced to death in the killing of a Philadelphia cop. The death penalty was given explicitly because of his political background and his support for MOVE.

2. Susan Rosenberg and Marilyn Buck, together with Silvia Baraldini, are anti-imperialist political prisoners imprisoned at the Federal women's maximum security prison unit in Marianna, FL, a "special unit" within the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Susan and Silvia, along with Alejandrina Torres were imprisoned in the Lexington High Security Unit, an experimental program (see fn 5).

3. Benedetti, Mario, El Desexilio y Otras Conjeturas, Editorial Nueva Imagen, Mexico, 1986, p. 84; in translation.

4. The Joint Terrorist Task Force is led by the FBI, drawing its agents from the FBI, state, and local police agencies. It functions as the political police agency within the U.S. with branches in major cities.

5. The Women's High Security Unit (HSU) at the now all-women Federal prison at Lexington, KY was a separate experimental isolation and psychological torture unit. It opened in October, 1986 and was forced to close in August 1988 through political protest and action. Its mission was to incapacitate and ultimately destroy the prisoners. It was built for women political prisoners.

Marion is the Federal government's maximum security/control unit prison at Marion, IL. It replaced Alcatraz in the early 1970's. The prisoners are held in 23-hour lockdown and may not leave their cells unless handcuffed, shackled and accompanied by 3 guards armed with metal batons. A number of men political prisoners have been sent there solely because of their political beliefs. Both HSU-Lexington and Marion were condemned by Amnesty International. Florence, in Colorado is under construction as a high-tech, increased isolation prison to replace Marion.

6. Alejandrina Torres is a Puerto Rican independentista and prisoner of war (POW). She and Susan Rosenberg were the first women to be sent to HSU-Lexington. After it was shut down she was removed to California and is now at a Federal women's prison at Pleasanton, CA where four of the other Puerto Rican women POWs and political prisoners, Carmen Valentin, Dylcia Pagan, Ida Luz Rodriguez and Haydee Beltran have been incarcerated for many years.

7. Psychological profiles--Letters, taped phone conversations, officer's observations and notes are used as intelligence and are analyzed to draw pictures of who we are, how we respond to stimuli and events, both physically and emotionally. If a person's responses and behavior can be predicted that person can then be attacked, manipulated and possibly controlled, systematically. An element of psychological warfare.

8. Seven North American anti-imperialists were charged with conspiracy to protest U.S. policies by use of violence against U.S. government and military property: Marilyn Buck, Laura Whitehorn,

Linda Evans, Susan Rosenberg, Tim Blunk, Alan Berkman, and Betty Ann Duke. The case was resolved through negotiations in which Marilyn, Laura, and Linda entered guilty pleas in exchange for dropping all charges against Susan, Tim, and Alan. Betty Ann is being sought for by the government.

9. Chipasulla, F.M., ed., When My Brothers Come Home, _____, _____, from the poem "Resurrection" by Felix Mnthali of Malawi.

10. From the poem "That's How it Goes" by Nazim Hikmet.

11. On March 1, 1954, Lolita Lebron, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Andres Figueroa Cordero and Irvin Flores invaded and attacked the U.S. Congress to bring the colonial status of Puerto Rico before the world. Three and one-half years earlier Oscar Collazo, with Griselio Torresola (killed by U.S. agents) attacked Blair House in the name of Puerto Rican independence. After 25 and 29 years respectively they were released from U.S. prisons and are recognized as national heroes of Puerto Rico. A. Figueroa C. was released earlier because he was dying of terminal cancer.) They continue to struggle for independence.

12. Geronimo was a target of COINTELPRO, the now-exposed and documented counterintelligence program whose purpose was and continues to be to undermine and destroy oppressed and exploited people's just struggles and demands for liberation and justice. Although there has existed ample evidence of his being framed by police agencies, the courts have disregarded all such evidence.

13. Sundiata has been imprisoned for more than 18 years. There

are many other comrades, particularly from the Black liberation struggle who have been imprisoned for 20 years. (see fn 15)

14. Assata, a member of the Black Panther Party along with Sundiata Acoli, was liberated from the New Jersey women's prison at Clinton, NJ in Nov. 1979. She is now in political exile in Cuba.

15. For information about political prisoners and prisoners of war in the U.S. see the list of organizations at the end of these notes. The Verdict of the Special International Tribunal on the Violation of Human Rights of Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War in U.S. Prisons and Jails, NY, December 7-10, 1990.

16. In Conspiracy of Voices, a small volume of writings by the women of the Resistance Conspiracy Case is a partial list of prison writings, primarily written by women political prisoners. In 1990, Hauling Up the Morning, T Blunk and R.L. Levasseur, Eds., Red Sea Press, Trenton, NJ, a collection of writings and artwork by political prisoners and POWs in U.S. prisons was released.

17. Okun, Robert A., Ed., The Rosenbergs: Collected Visions of Artists and Writers, Universe Books, NY, 1988, from the Introduction by Margaret Randall.

