“A Parade of Trick Horses”: Work and Physical Experience in the Political Prison

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One of the very few extant photos of the prisoners of Robben Island comes from around 1964, and shows the “high security prisoners” – Nelson Mandela and other leaders – sitting in two rows outside their section, the B section reserved for the top prisoners of the anti-apartheid opposition.

They are seated in the exercise yard, breaking stones with hammers. I would like to use this photo to consider some ways of understanding the daily experience of the political prisoner and the prisoner’s relationship with the incarcerating state. In so doing, I would like to search for some commonalities in experience, drawing upon examples from Poland and Ireland as well as South Africa in order better to understand the significance of activities taking place in the political prison cell.

Figure 14.1  B-section prisoners in Robben Island.  
PHOTO CREDIT: CLOETE BRYTENBACH, UWC-ROBBEN ISLAND MUSEUM, MAY-IBUYE ARCHIVES.
We might say that there are two types of physical activities in which prisoners engage (aside from the physiological, like sleep): activities they endeavor to direct themselves, like writing or hungerstriking, and activities directed by the institution. Here, I am interested in the latter, leaving aside prisoners’ resistance to institutional tasks. As we will see, the element of coercion blurs the boundaries between these tasks as they are experienced by the prisoners.

Let’s return to the photo. First and most obviously, these prisoners are performing work: repetitive physical labour that produces something, in this case crushed stone ostensibly for the island’s roads. But it is hard to see this first as labour, for we cannot help but note its cruelty, akin perhaps to torture. What does it mean to say this activity is work or torture? How might prisoners experience of it help us to situate it in their incarceration? We might start with our sense of utter alienation from the scene before us and, by acknowledging the disorientation of its participants, consider prison work and torture as similar forms of abrupt, brutal removal from reality. Torture, rather than work, provides the starting point here for, as we shall see, work was likely to be a secondary experience.

By the time the arrested political entered into the cell and began to learn to be a prisoner, he or she has already undergone full disorientation. John Laffin claims that politicals are usually arrested at night, the better to shock the target while also avoiding the gaze of neighbors.1 This point does not hold up well, as participants in strikes or demonstrations are as likely to be detained according to the rhythms of police suppression, and not by the arbitrary clock of security forces. Still, this idea of disorientation helps one to understand the examination, interrogation, and torture of political prisoners as processes both of initiation and identification/surveillance. As they generally take place away from the cell, in ordinary offices amid everyday furnishings, they dislocate the familiar, laying groundwork for the descent into the radically unfamiliar – like torture.

Not every political prisoner undergoes torture, even in the broadest sense of the term, though every political prison community contains within it the memories of past torture. As Darius Rejali has shown, regimes that imprison also torture. The incarcerating state and its ideology creates certain expectations about its prisoners, and hence the necessity for torture, as also for work. However, torture and labour practices themselves are the product of the prisons. The police and prison staff do so without the need for guidelines – though these, of course, sometimes exist. Rejali’s masterful history of modern torture