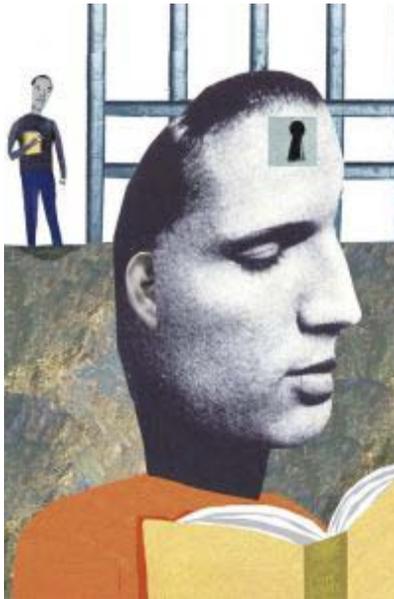


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## On Lecturing in a Prison, Where Minds Are Free



By Jefferson Cowie

On a sweltering afternoon last August, I had the professional thrill of giving one of the kickoff lectures of Cornell's New Student Reading Project, an annual effort to knit the entire campus together in the shared intellectual experience of reading a single book. The uncomfortably hot crowd of thousands of students and faculty members assembled in the field house was the largest gathering I had ever addressed, complete with big-screen projections of the lecturers, like academic rock stars, floating over the stage.

The topic was close to my heart: my favorite character, Tom Joad, grappling with the teachings of Preacher Casey, from one of my favorite books, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The issues of migration and family, environment and social crisis, economic calamity and occupational justice, it seemed to me, made the book extraordinarily relevant to the problems of today.

Then in October, I gave the talk again. I shivered more from nervousness than the cool autumn air as I entered another strangely cavernous space—an almost 200-year-old maximum-security prison, Auburn Correctional Facility. Behind fortresslike walls rising above the small, historic town of Auburn, the state of New York incarcerates its murderers, thieves, and gangsters; put the first electric chair to use; and still stamps out license plates. As I worked my way through security to the prison chapel, I couldn't help recalling that the central characters of my talk had done time for murder and spent much of the book in violent scrapes with the law, much like those people I was about to address.

On the Cornell campus, every time I'd attended the huge opening of the reading project, I was struck by the students' indifference and boredom. Whether the book was by Sophocles or Garry Wills, F. Scott Fitzgerald or Jared Diamond, the students seemed incapable of engaging with the lectures. A colleague blogged: "I saw students asleep, milling about, talking on their cellphones, texting, talking and laughing with others, and what seemed to be a precious few engaged by the presentations." The students' restlessness led him to ask them, "What are you doing here at Cornell?"

The inmates who filtered into the prison chapel, on the other hand, knew exactly what they were doing at Auburn Correctional Facility: hard time, often for violent crimes they had committed when they were quite young. I arrived skeptical that my presentation would mean anything to them; I was motivated more by curiosity and civic obligation than grand pedagogic hopes. Clearly, these guys had bigger problems than literature and history.

The 60 inmates enrolled in the Cornell Prison Education Program were, in contrast to the Cornell students, hardly bored, restless, or indifferent. They were on fire. They sat attentively without PowerPoint photos to keep them entertained, autumn walks through the gorges to look forward to, or fancy careers to anticipate. They occasionally tossed questions to me during my talk, testing my mettle. Then, when I finished, their hands shot up. For the next hour, I got a vigorous intellectual workout—an exhausting barrage of questions any teacher would relish.

The questions came from every direction. How could Tom Joad, asked one, be the quintessential American working-class hero (as I had suggested) if Steinbeck had ignored the Asian and Mexican workers who had done most of the agricultural labor in California? Another, responding to how land got used in Oklahoma and California, asked if the constitutional system functioned in a way that enforced inequality. When I showed how Okie iconography was used in advertising and television in the postwar era, another asked if advertising and consumption were designed to prevent popular revolts. An inmate even asked whether the dollar was grounded in human labor, and whether human labor can be considered a commodity like any other.

One prisoner asked a multipart question that I did not fully grasp. I dismissed part of it and moved on, but his hand went back up. Though it was rough around the edges, in academic parlance his question was this: Was the type of civil society that Preacher Casey struggled for ("Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's a part of") possible, given the social atomization brought about by computers and technology?

I turned my head to the program's director, Jim Schechter, with an incredulous look—was this for real?

Before the night was over, the inmates' questions had me delving into constitutional theory, Lockean property rights, spirituality, political dissent, the tensions between civil rights and economic rights, and the use of state power. Granted, there were a lot of grandstanding, polemics, and semiarticulated ideas floating around, but these guys were serious about what they were doing. At one point, carried away with the moment, I even delivered a spontaneous mini-lecture on Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, which had been scrawled on scraps of paper while he was imprisoned in Fascist Italy. Gramsci tried to figure out, I told the prisoners, how market culture

creates a common sense that ensures the consent of the governed. They murmured. They nodded. They got it. Rarely had I felt so alive as a teacher.

After each of the big panels at Cornell, a small handful of the several thousand students would come up to ask the panelists follow-up questions. In fact, the open-mike question period of previous years had been eliminated because the bulk of students used the opportunity to make a quick exit. After the prison talk, in contrast, the men filed up to introduce themselves, thank me for coming, and ask if I'd teach a class in the program. Most simply looked me in the eye with affirmation, shook my hand, and headed back to their cells. Their humility was humbling.

I wondered if it was simply the boredom and constraint of prison life that had the prison students so motivated; the well-prepped Cornell kids, of course, had every media device and distraction imaginable to draw them away from us droning professors. Maybe the Cornell students had worked so hard to get in that they now felt complacent, having made the grade. Maybe the Cornell kids were indifferent because the reading project was not a graded assignment.

Yet the prisoners had also studied hard to get into the prison-education program. They were not simply looking for ways to pass time. They had other things to distract them if they chose, and they attended graded classes as well. My lecture had been purely voluntary for them.

The experience at Auburn got me thinking about entitlement, motivation, and the life of the mind. It forced me to ask troubling questions about status and reward in our academic system. It made me wonder what I was doing with my life and my career, now in midpassage. The contrast between the free minds of the imprisoned bodies at Auburn and the imprisoned minds of the free bodies among some of the nation's most gifted college students could not have been more stark.

Marcus Rediker, a visiting scholar at Cornell last year, also gave a lecture at Auburn, on slave ships. I heard that he rocked the house (the inmates do, after all, call Auburn the "slave ship"). Summing up his experience, he reported: "Most of all, I was impressed by the intelligence, the thoughtfulness, the engagement, the curiosity—in short, by the life of the mind—that I found among the people inside Auburn Prison. That mind, I am pleased to report, cannot be imprisoned."

I wondered what the bars were made of that seemed to imprison my Cornell students, and what it would take for them to begin emancipating themselves.

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Picture by Katherine Streeter for The Chronicle Review

Source: <http://chronicle.com/article/On-Lecturing-in-a-Prison/64247/>

1) to free prisoners, a city, a country etc from someone's control 2) to free someone from feelings or conditions that make their life unhappy or difficult. release. to let someone go free, after having kept them somewhere. when a person or animal is kept in a prison, cage etc and not allowed to go where they want. on parole. permission for someone to leave prison, on the condition that they promise to behave well. be at large. (of a dangerous person or animal) to have escaped from somewhere or not to have been caught. be on the loose. (of a criminal or dangerous animal) to have escaped from prison or from their cage. behind bars. If a prison closes down, will prisoners be free or be sent to another prison? What is it like to go to prison? Is it normal when someone wants to go to prison? There is a prison library, accessible to inmates; and for inmates in restricted housing, books are made available. Reading is becoming less popular in society generally, owing to changes in technology and the prison population is proportionally less literate than the "free" population. That said, reading is an excellent pastime for incarcerated persons. Federal prison libraries participate in the ILL, or inter-libr. Continue Reading. Actually never mind the books in prison, but I use to get the following magazines in the mail as well at one point or another: The Economist. Foreign Affairs. Blackgate Prison, where a thousand men have languished under the name of this man, Harvey Dent, [holds picture of Harvey Dent] who has been held up to you as the shining example of justice! John Blake: Commissioner, we need to keep you moving until we can get you in front of a camera. Bane: You have been supplied with a false idol [tears up picture] to stop you tearing down this CORRUPT CITY! Bane: Behind you stand the symbol of oppression. Blackgate Prison, where a thousand men have languished under the name of this man, Harvey Dent, [holds picture of Harvey Dent] who has been held up to you as the shining example of justice! Would you like us to send you a FREE inspiring quote delivered to your inbox daily? Please enter your email address: Submit. I invite you to look at the following facts with an open mind and then come to your own conclusions 3. In 2015 A Testing Method Was Patented For COVID-19. In 2015 a "System and Method for Testing for COVID-19" was patented by Richard Rothschild, with a Dutch government organisation. Did you catch that? There's NO DOUBT in anyone's mind about this. How could Fauci guarantee a surprise outbreak to happen during the first term of the Trump administration? What did he know, that we don't? 8. Bill And Melinda Gates Guaranteed An Imminent Global Pandemic. In 2018 Bill Gates publicly announced that a global pandemic was on its way that could wipe out 30 million people. He said this would probably happen during the next decade. (4). A prison, correctional facility, penitentiary, gaol (Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales), or jail is a facility in which inmates are forcibly confined and denied a variety of freedoms under the authority of the state as a form of punishment. The most common use of prisons is as part of a criminal justice system, in which individuals officially charged with or convicted of crimes are confined to a jail or prison until they are either brought to trial to determine their guilt or complete the period of