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Contro l'isolamento

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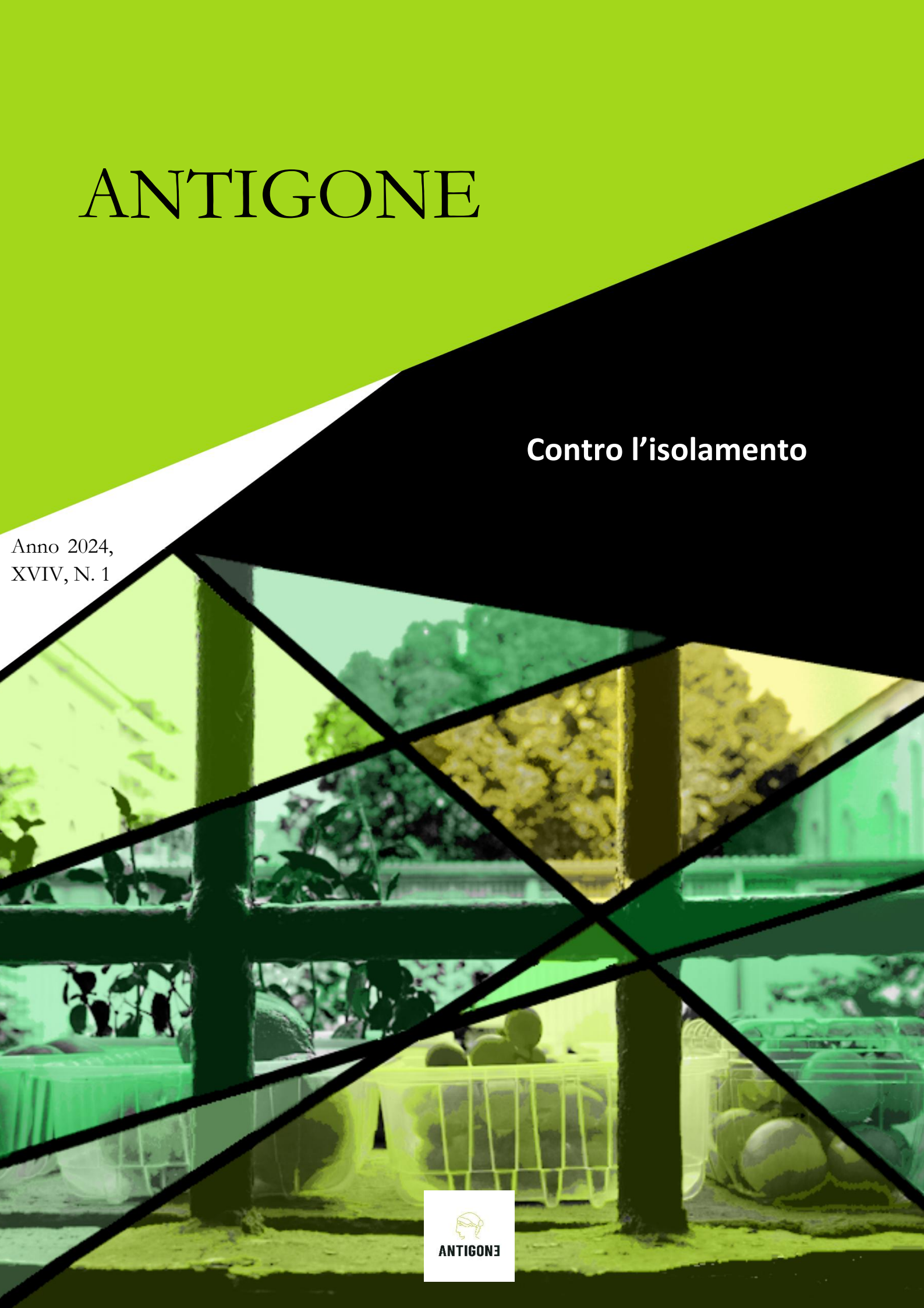

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SEDE LEGALE E OPERATIVA: via Monti di Pietralata n. 16, 00157 Roma

Tel.: 06 4511304; - Fax: 06 62275849

Sito: www.antigone.it; e-mail: segreteria@antigone.it

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a cura di Rachele Stroppa

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THE BANALITY OF TORTURE

*Nuno Pontes**

Abstract

Descriptions of torture, especially the type of sanitised torture that the prison systems of the USA have been perfecting for the past few centuries, are particularly challenging because they require not only a clear explanation of the techniques used but the conveying of an interactive dynamic between perpetrator, victim and environment which brings about a torturous synergy well beyond the descriptive power of words. Understanding these limitations, the hope is that the reader may get a sense not only of the severity of the torture techniques being used and the banality of their application but of how organically said torture has been integrated into institutional culture. The experience described is that of a relatively privileged individual, both by in terms of capital (cultural, social, embodied, economic, symbolic, linguistic, etc.), as well as race, but the vast majority of those undergoing this torture benefit from none of this, and therefore their suffering is both inflicted and viewed with much less indifference.

Keywords: *solitary, torture, pain, madness*

* Nuno Pontes è ricercatore presso l'ISCTE *University Institute* di Lisbona, membro della sezione portoghese dello *European Prison Observatory* nonché Presidente di Confiar.

When my colleagues at Associazione Antigone asked if I would be interested in presenting something at a conference, they were organising on alternatives to solitary confinement I was a bit reticent. Not that the topic escaped my grasp – after all, I am an expert on the subject with over 35 years of direct and indirect experience in all of its dimensions – but the manner in which I was being asked to tackle the question differed significantly from the many other times I have spoken to audiences, both laic and academic, on the issue. But I did accept, and I am glad I did so; not only because the presentation in itself went relatively well, certainly exceeding my expectations, but because it now offers me this further opportunity to present a more considered version of my live remarks on the, surely, synonymous subjects of solitary and torture.

In preparing the PowerPoint for my presentation I thought I would begin by challenging the audience's expectations and preconceptions by starting with a slide of my digested Cv; the aim was to normalise before asking them to travel elsewhere, outside of our collective, binding, experience. With that in mind I will introduce myself here too with a redacted list of my qualifications:

- Researcher in the field of sociology with a focus on prisons;
- Studied at the University of Pittsburgh, USA;
- Researcher at Iscte University Institute of Lisbon, Portugala;
- Specialization in Prisons includes over thirty years of in-depth research of prisons, prison conditions, prison institutional cultures, prison politics, and human-rights abuses;
- Studied and visited prisons in the USA, Uk, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Poland;
- Member of the Portuguese section of the European Prison Observatory (E.P.O.) since its inception in 2013;
- President of Confiar, an Ngo assisting prisoners and ex-prisoners with social reintegration;
- Director of There To Know, a Uk based consultancy offering a variety of research services including expert witness reports on prison conditions throughout Europe, the USA and Brazil.

This was the point of departure from the comfort of what we had in common. After many years of presenting on this and related issues as an academic, I was now to discuss my own personal experience, exposing how my knowledge of prisons in general, and solitary in particular, goes well beyond the theoretic.

I was incarcerated in maximum security and supermax prisons in the USA for 21 years, of which 14 consecutive years were spent in solitary confinement. I was subjected both to the structural torture of solitary confinement and, for over 5 of those years, to an intensive torture programme designed to neutralise those the authorities deemed a threat.

I imagine these to be rather startling claims. Not necessarily those of my past incarceration, but that the USA engages in deliberate torture of its civilian prisoners, beyond long-term solitary confinement itself, that is. But before I describe my experience, I should offer some context with which to frame what I will describe.

Since my release from prison in 2012, I have been impressed with the power of negative and positive preconceptions. My criminal history, making for rather tantalizing TV and prose, populates the internet in both written articles and TV programmes of various brands; yet, in my sizable public career as an expert on prison matters, I have not once been asked if I happened to be that other Nuno Pontes that so often shows up when searching for the academic one. You cannot look for one without finding the other, but the power of our expectations, negative in the case of the *criminal* Nuno, and positive in the case of *academic* Nuno, is such that people seemingly just cannot bring themselves to conflate the two. This, of course, is largely due to my privileged upbringing. Unlike the vast majority of those who end up in the world's prisons, I was not a member of the cohorts slated by society for the sacrificial spectacle that are our criminal justice systems. Carrying all the social, cultural and class capital that my birth lottery gifted me with, both in my mind and the minds of others, innumerable doors, both practical and empathic, are open to me that would otherwise be closed to what our generally internalised paradigm tells us a *criminal* to be. Nevertheless, having been judged so dangerous by the system that I was declared "a menace to society" and later seen as such a security threat that I was not only subjected to a focused torture programme but, even after my release from solitary confinement, was treated to such a high level of security that any external observer might have reasonably assessed me to be a monster of some sort, a synopsis of my criminal career is in order.

Born in Portugal during the fascist regime, I was brought up with a strong sense of one's duty to stand up to oppressive systems. The Revolution of the Carnations in 1974, and the subsequent years of political and societal transformation were the most powerful formative experience of my youth. At the same time, family problems left me with a rather serious level of emotional and social dysfunction. At 16 I moved to the USA thinking that I would escape my family issues. Living with family in the Pennsylvania countryside, I found myself in what to me seemed to be an intellectual and cultural dead zone. Acting out my own dysfunctions, I soon found myself in conflict with an authoritarianism, both statal and cultural, that rubbed raw against the ideals that my upbringing had instilled in me. Undoubtedly my own dysfunctions informed my initial clashes with the authorities, but as these clashes came and went, protected to some extent as I was, yet again, by familial social status and, very importantly in the USA, *race*, the more I rationalised my inability to integrate socially

in political terms. Eventually this dynamic developed into a mission that both provided me with a means of subsistence outside of the social framework and allowed me to feel righteous doing so. Though I could not find partners who adopted my idealism (perhaps they were more honest in their dishonesty), I put together a crew to help me in a massive project of redistribution – I was redistributing, not my partners in crime, but that was fine with me.

Needless to say, that this scheme came tumbling down. My supposed comrades got themselves apprehended with some of their own independent projects and immediately delivered me to the authorities in exchange for leniency. Their practical American approach to life meant that they had money for good attorneys and were willing to trade upon anyone else's freedom to secure their own. I, on the other hand, had neither money nor the capacity to bargain with the lives of others, so that when it was all said and done, even though my now co-defendants faced many more and more serious charges than I, they were given 5 years to serve whereas I received a total of over 30. Again, this seemed to confirm all that I saw wrong with the system. At one of my last sentencings, I told the Court that, though I recognised my debt to society for my crimes, I did not recognise it beyond that of my co-defendants; as such, I would only willingly serve the same 5 years that they were to serve. The Court did not think much of this, but, for good measure, ordered that I be committed to a maximum-security prison.

Having served 5 years, I put another crew together, dug a tunnel under the massive wall surrounding the maximum-security prison housing us, and travelled to Texas where we were to get identity cards before proceeding to South America. Unfortunately for me, I continued to be the same hopeless criminal due to my need to do *wrong* the right way. My new crew was composed of particularly volatile characters (maximum-security prisons offer even more limited options than American society at large), and though I understood that remaining in their company was a foolish thing to do, my need to ensure that things did not get out of hand if my companions were left to their own devices kept me from going my own way long enough for one of them to get himself arrested and deliver the rest of us to the authorities.

And so begins my journey into the torture chambers of America. But before we get to that, I will need to explain how one like myself, who never committed any type of violent crime, before, during or after my escape, becomes one of America's most dangerous criminals. American prisons are notorious for their violence and human rights abuses, but even in that paradigm of violence the system reserves its most focused punishments for those it deems most dangerous. In the case of Black and Brown people, of any ethnic background, it is easy enough, their surplus of melanin imbues them with

obvious dangerous qualities (not that racism is a systemic problem – perish the thought!). But in my case, it was slightly more complicated; being Portuguese, though I can easily, my base complexion is rather pale, so authorities were not likely to see me as inherently dangerous. But I did manage to dig a tunnel out of a maximum-security prison, and because it was done in such a notorious way, the political fallout was significant enough that a special investigation as to how such a thing could have happened was ordered by the Governor of Pennsylvania. This posed the prison authorities with a thorny problem: how were they to explain how a few inmates managed to dig an extensive tunnel in full view of thousands of other inmates and hundreds of guards and other staff without making security and management staff look responsible?

This is where another great institutional tradition comes in. The art of the coverup is well developed in American prison institutional culture, as it is in such cultures worldwide, which is why prison reform is so difficult to accomplish: ranks close, and to the extent that change must happen, it happens on the surface while internally new procedures are developed to continue to maintain things as close to what they were as possible. But that is another discussion. In my case, were they to admit the truth, the blame would have to be placed squarely at the door of the security department.

As someone classified as an escape risk, there were many restrictions to overcome to affect my escape. In order to dig the tunnel (not the first plan, but brevity is required), I determined that it would be essential to work in the prison's maintenance department, from where I would more easily have access to areas and information essential to completing the task. But my classification barred me from working in maintenance. To overcome this, I first cultivated a relationship with maintenance personnel using my knowledge of construction and maintenance work (I had owned a construction company in my early years in America). With their interest in hiring me kindled, I then had to go in front of a special security panel, constituted of five of the most senior security officers in the facility, asking for a deferment of the prohibition from working in maintenance. The security panel asked several questions to determine if my intentions might be concerning and ultimately asked me directly why I wanted to work in maintenance. Knowing that anything I said would be viewed with suspicion, I told them that I was planning to escape, and maintenance was the job that would make it possible. This was met with initial stunned silence, and then general laughter, followed by the recommendation to the Central Office that deferment be granted – obviously someone willing to state such an outrageous thing did not mean it, or so they rationalised the unexpected answer. I got the job.

My job in maintenance was clerking for one of the maintenance managers. As part of my duties, I was in charge of receiving all

requests for work and then scheduling and issuing work orders to the various trades that handled the maintenance work. Knowing that I might lose my job if something happened, such as getting a misconduct, which was commonplace in the chaos and violence of everyday institutional life, I set out to make myself so indispensable to the running of the department that, should anything happen, the managers would fight to keep me on the job. To this end I asked for permission to redesign the rather cumbersome filing system in place for all the various aspects of maintenance work. Permission granted, I set out to develop a filling system that was both more effective than the existing one and impossible for anyone but myself to make sense of. This I did rather successfully.

Next came the main challenge to the project: digging a tunnel is a complex and extensive project, with all sorts of unforeseeable challenges which may require unexpected action. When one proposes taking such a project on, within an environment where thousands of inmates and hundreds of security and other staff are tuned to anything which may look out of place, it becomes necessary to create space not only for the foreseeable but also for the unforeseeable to happen without exposing what is actually going on. To do this I availed myself of the most basic trick in the magicians' playbook: misdirection. Knowing that everyone would eventually catch on to the fact that my associates and I were up to something, I decided to start a parallel operation that was illegal enough to get everyone focused on bringing it down, and yet trivial enough to not cause too much alarm among the authorities. In prison, wine making is commonplace. There is always someone making a small batch of wine, and if you do not want to make it yourself someone will make it for you. The authorities typically do not pay much attention to this, unless there is something exceptional about how or what is being done. This space between unconcern and concern was what I exploited.

The rank and file of the security forces were not too fond of me – they felt that I played them quite a bit and got away with a lot. For this reason, they were always keen to catch me in some rule breaking. This too was a blessing, because once I baited them, they were hooked. Most people would produce a few pints or maybe a litre of wine at the time. I established a production line which was putting out about 30 gallons (113 litres) every 3 to 4 days. We flooded the market with wine. Soon the authorities were on us. When the initial investigation did not produce any results, the Central Office got involved and a major investigation, with a special team assigned to figuring out how and where we were producing the wine, was ordered. We were placed under strict surveillance, followed and spied on by security and inmate informants. But the wine kept coming. They would put one of us in punitive segregation for some trivial infraction, and it still kept coming. Their focus was such that even though on several occasions events related to digging

the tunnel placed us in compromising situations, when they swooped on us but found nothing relating to wine production, they dismissed evidence of the actual project as insignificant. They were so obsessed with what we were letting them see that they could not see anything else. In essence, the security staff become our cover for digging the tunnel.

Of course, the entire process was much more involved and required a lot more of this type of basic psychological manipulation than what the object of this article allows me to describe. But ultimately, it was this manipulation of the security forces that became the foundation of the *monster* I was to become. The investigation ordered by the Governor and signed off by the Secretary of Corrections – the most senior official in the prison system and the same person who had signed off on the security deferments applied to me as well as the wine production investigation, mentioned nothing of the above; rather, responsibility was shifted from the Security Department to the Maintenance Department whose responsibilities, of course, had much less to do with security than the security staff who had unwittingly become our foil. But this is the same old story seen the world over: police investigating police will always find the blame elsewhere. In my case, I became a kind of super villain who could, in some inexplicable way, control the minds of those around him.

Upon my recapture I was no longer just an inmate who had escaped, I was a threat to the entire prison system due to my capacity and willingness to make staff do things they did not want to do. I was treated to such a high level of security that a lay person watching it might have thought I was a serial killer. More unfortunately for me, the authorities decided that if my mind was the problem then it should be neutralised.

Solitary confinement for indeterminate periods of time, often extending into many decades, has always been casually used in the American prison system, but by the 1990's, after several court cases found the practice problematic, institutions were forced to implement rules ending the practice of open-ended commitment to solitary. To meet the new legal requirements regulations were put in place which compelled institutions to give some sort of periodic *meaningful* review to anyone placed in solitary confinement. But, as I have pointed out, prison culture is very difficult to reform. With the new rules rendering long term solitary confinement difficult to justify, new ways of continuing to do the same thing needed to be devised. In Pennsylvania the Secretary of Corrections got around the new legal requirements by instituting what he called the Restricted Release List. If one was placed on this list, one would still go in front of the Programme Review Committee every month (later changed to every three months) to have the reasons for the commitment to solitary confinement reconsidered, but the power to authorise the individual's release was taken away from the Committee: for those on the List, the

Committee could recommend their release, but only the Secretary of Corrections could grant it. This had the obvious effect of rendering the review meaningless. Those on the review committees were not likely to place their careers on the line by trying to tell the Secretary of Corrections what to do, and even if they did, their recommendation meant nothing if the Secretary wanted the prisoner in solitary for the long term. In effect, this list implemented by the Secretary of Corrections rendered the periodic reviews for those on it a mere *pro forma*. I was placed on the Restricted Release List.

Beside the practical implications of the list, being placed on it also sent a message to the institutional staff – a sort of scarlet letter. But before we get to what that meant in my experience, let us consider the effect of *basic* solitary confinement on the human mind.

The effects of forced isolation on the human mind have been extensively studied. Confinement to isolation has been shown to lead to mental health problems, such as confusion, hallucinations, depression, psychosis, suicidal ideation, self-harm and so on. The reasons for this are easy enough to understand. Under normal circumstances the human mind is constantly having to process sensory information throughout the day. When a person goes from room to room, or from inside to outside, the sites, sounds, smells and feel of things changes and the brain must process all that information, use memory to determine what is known, decide what is novel, assess threats and otherwise weigh and decide what to do with the millions of bytes of information absorbed by the senses at every moment. When the individual is placed in an isolation cell, all of this, by and large, comes to a halt. The neurons previously firing thousands of times per second stop firing, axons shrivel, and synaptic connections breakdown. The brain starts to shrink, neurons start to fire randomly (leading to hallucinations and obsessive-compulsive disorder behaviours), cycles of panic and depression set in.

That is the short of it, but of course in most solitary confinement situations one is subjected to many other types of pernicious stresses, occasional shocks which severely compound the destructive effects of isolation. For example, there are programs on Tv purporting to show the reality of solitary confinement units in the USA. Often, in order to justify the inhumaneness of those units, they will show one of the persons in the isolation unit being approached by guards who in a very reasonable and patient tone ask that s/he back up to the door to be cuffed so as to exit the cell. The viewer will then be confronted with the apparent irrationality of an individual who aggressively refuses to comply with the order to cuff up and, as the guards continue to very calmly and reasonably plead with them to «please cuff up or we will have to come in there and restrain you», taunts the guards to come in and beat them up. Eventually the special intervention team shows up in all their protective gear, a psychologist and nurse are called, as

well as a camera just to make sure that things are done by the book. Anyone watching this could be forgiven for thinking that obviously the guards have no choice but to go in that cell and forcibly restrain that person, who certainly is not rational, or at least aggressive to a point that isolation is the only way to deal with them. And so, we are treated to the voyeuristic experience of seeing a person behaving more like a caged animal being roughed up and subdued by these brave women and men who must confront such awful things in their everyday work. And everything done so methodically and with such restraint – surely activists need to stop complaining about how those people are treated.

These programs are good propaganda for the institutions seeming to open themselves up to such public scrutiny, but what the viewers do not see is all that has happened to bring things to that point. Of course, there are deranged individuals who will act irrationally for no discernible reason, but those are rare exceptions. Imagine being closed in a cage, unable to get away from anything or do anything about what those outside the cage may decide to do to you. No agency whatsoever. Picture a world where, because of the dearth of stimuli and purpose, every small thing that is supposed to happen throughout the day assumes a huge importance in your life – the meals being served, the opportunity for a shower, mail being delivered, the opportunity to go out to cages for an hour of *exercise* where you might get to see the sky, etc. Now imagine that the guard working your unit that day, either because s/he does not like you, had a bad day at home, or was told to make your life uncomfortable, simply walks by your cell while passing out one of the meals, and when you complain, tells you that you were not standing at attention by the door as required by the rules, but you know they saw you standing there as required because they looked and grinned at you as they walked by pushing the tray cart. You see the with rage at the violation but there is nothing you can do. Then, a few hours or a few days later they come by with the mail, show you that there is a letter for you, and tell you «Hoops, this got lost», walking away with whatever magic was in the words you will never have an opportunity to read; and again, there is nothing you can do. Now imagine innumerable *small* violations, and reductions of your tiny universe like this taking place over and over again through the course of weeks, months and years until you get to a point you can no longer contain your rage, not just at the injustice of all those aggressions, but more so at your lack of agency. You have been reduced to the body as your inability to react to the world around you leave internal combustion as the only outlet for all that poison being forced on you. Might it, under such circumstances, in order to alleviate that destructive pressure building up inside of you, not be rational to do the only thing you realise you have the power to do: to force *them* to come into your cell and beat you up?

This is the type of slow descent into madness that can take place in solitary at its best. But my experience, like that of so many others, was far more destructive. As I have described, I went to solitary confinement as a marked man. I was a monster who had in some mysterious way managed to force people to act against their will. I was dangerous and any interaction with me put the other person at risk. SCI Greene, Pennsylvania's Super-max prison where I was confined to solitary, would become known as the institution that trained Charles Graner in the torture techniques he would later build upon as a torturer at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. When he was standing trial for the torture exposed by the photos of it he and his friends posted online, some of his colleagues at SCI Greene bemoaned the injustice of their friend being prosecuted for doing to "the enemy" things not too dissimilar to what they did to us, their fellow citizens for the most part, in there (a quick read of Graner's Wikipedia listing offers a hint of how right they were). Torture at SCI Greene was so banal that we laughed at the predictability of the excuses they would use to justify its practice. For example, we knew that as the very cold Pennsylvania winter began to set in, the hot water in the showers would mysteriously cease to work, so that we were forced to wash with ice cold water and stand there naked waiting to be taken out of the shower in the ice cold of the cell block (the shower is a small cell where once the water is on there is not enough space to get away from it so that you could not just dart under it momentarily, nor could you turn the water off and on at will; once on, the water would run for several minutes until it shut itself off), and in the very hot summer the water would equally mysteriously be stuck on extremely hot so that we had to nearly scald ourselves to wash. The apparent inability of the maintenance people to resolve these recurring *problems* was laughable, of course.

In any case, I have no direct knowledge of how the determinations of who is to be subjected to more severe and intense torture are made, but I imagine that it happens more organically than procedurally. An order probably does not come down from the top telling the guards who like to do that sort of thing to make some prisoner's life exceptionally miserable. It is more likely that, once a prisoner is marked with certain attributes, institutional culture takes over, and everyone just understands that that is the way it is. I recall, not too long before my escape, a prisoner at Western Penitentiary, having gotten into an altercation with security staff members and injured several, was taken to an isolation cell where everyone in the vicinity could hear, after every shift change for several weeks in a row, groups of guards going into his cell and just beating him senseless – this is three times a day, every day for several weeks, and no one, including us prisoners, thought anything of it; it was just the way it was and everyone knew it.

I too was well aware that I was in for it. I do not know what, if anything, the

authorities called the focused intensification of torture of a particular individual, but we prisoners called it the Break Program. I was on this program for roughly 5 years of the 14 years I spent in solitary, and the fact that I survived with some semblance of sanity is something which I still struggle to explain.

The Break Program works on a simple principle: every guard who is so inclined should use every available opportunity to make the object of their attention suffer. I have already described what the practice of closing someone in a cell does, the impact of the reduction of stimuli, as well as the cumulative effect of *small* violations inflicted on a whim by the guards. On the Break Program these things are turned up, and turned up, until the person cannot cope anymore and either kills themselves or is mentally and physically disabled as the body and mind start to break down.

I was locked in a 6.75-meter by 2-meter cell. The lights were on 24/7. I was given nothing except my jump suit and a pair of slippers. There was a schedule of things I could expect throughout the day: three meals, morning, noon and evening; mail at the end of the day; three showers per week at varying times; and, five days per week, one hour out in the cages to look at the sky. As I have said, not all guards participated in the active torture practices, and those who did the more destructive things were a small minority; this probably saved my life. There were, of course, all the small assaults of refusing me meals because I "was not standing at the door", refusing me showers for the same reason, losing my mail, denying me my one hour of sky for whatever reason (should be noted that the *hour*, even when it happened, was always much less than an hour, and often as little as 5 minutes).

One of their favourite screws to turn was the sleep torture. Any time that I fell asleep, whether night or day, the guards doing their 15 to 30 minute rounds would stop at my cell and yank on the sliding steel door, making a loud clang that echoed through the cell jerking me awake, and as I fell back to sleep they would do it again, and again, and again sometimes for several days in a row. The only reason why this did not finish me off was the refusal of many of the guards to participate. Often a torturing guard would be keeping me awake but the colleague with whom s/he was alternating rounds would not continue the practice; but many times, there would be a series of guards who were happy to spell each other in keeping me awake and I would be pushed to the brink of hallucinations. This went on for five years. If you wonder how they could get away with it, I have responses to the grievances I filed (the grievance system is supposed to afford you due process if you feel your rights are being violated) where they would simply claim that because I was an escape risk they had to check the door at every round (never mind that the doors were electronically controlled from Central Control and would immediately sound an alarm if they were somehow tempered with).

Another favourite was to find three prisoners who had already lost their minds and expressed their madness by banging incessantly on their metal toilets (this was a common acting out for those who had gone over the bend) and place them in each of the other three cells on the same pipe and ventilation chase as mine. The units at SCI Greene were made up of two levels of cells running at a convergent angle; each two contiguous cells on the bottom level shared the pipe and ventilation chases with the two cells directly above them. This created a channel for sound to travel so that, when three of the individuals in those cells started to bang their shoes on their respective metal toilets, it was like being inside of a bell that went on being rung for days and days on end, sometimes for weeks. They might all bang at the same time, or they might spell each other in doing so, but either way the ringing would go on with rare intervals.

The rules allowed for one to have very few things in one's cell, but over time one might have some meaningful letters, notes and other writings of some importance, legal documents etc. Often, under the pretext of searching for contraband, the guards would pull me out of my cell, cuff me to the railing, and leave me there for hours as they sat talking in my cell (there was nothing to search, of course). Finally, when they were tired of keeping me in that stressful position, they would put me back in the cell having taken with them every little thing I had in there. When I say that they took everything I mean everything. They would take the toilet paper, any writing implement, any request slips or grievance forms, any documents or letters regardless of how much the law may claim to protect your right to those things. The cell would contain only the metal bunk and toilet, and when I protested the fact of not even having toilet paper, they would laugh and tell me to write a request for it (obviously amused at the idea, given that they had taken anything to write with or to write on).

Another favourite was sexual humiliation. Anytime that I was taken out of my cell I would have to first be strip-searched. This was done by standing in front of the closed cell door. The door had two vertical strips of bulletproof glass through which two guards would watch you as you took all your clothes off, one item at the time, and passed them through the tray slot they had opened for the purpose so they could closely inspect each item. The tray slat was located at waist height. Once one was naked they would tell you to show them inside your mouth, behind you hears up the nose, to run your fingers through your hair, to show the armpits and both side of your hands, to lift the scrotum and pull back the foreskin, to turn around and show them the bottom of your feet, and then would come their favourite part: «bend over and smile at me», they would say, and from there it could go in all sorts of humiliating ways; they might tell you that they could not see well enough and force you to repeatedly stretch you cheeks apart, all the while making all sorts of demining commentary, or

they might reach with their baton (nightstick) and touch you as if about to rape you with it – though, for me at least, it never reached the level of actual penetration, the humiliation of what was done is still hard to put into words. And it was not like I could just refuse to go out of the cell. Sure, I could not take my hour of sky time if the guards doing the strip search were those that did this sort of thing, but often they came to get you out of the cell for things that were not a matter of choice.

These are just some examples of how they turned the heat up for me for the five years I was on the Break Program. They were often creative in the ways they went about driving you out of your mind, but the point is that all of this had a powerful cumulative effect. I am a relatively strong person, but I soon started to break down in ways that I could not control. My body started to break down, my skin broke open and broke out in odd ways, my hair started to fall off, I started to have terrible abdominal pains, so severe that I would be writhing in agony on the floor. I had a nervous breakdown that left me constantly shaking. I started to suffer symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorders, I became paranoid and depressed. But the torture continued.

All the while I was trying to figure out how to survive this thing with no foreseeable end in sight. I saw individuals undergoing similar treatment lose their minds and discussed with others the merits of suicide as a means of escape (the same ventilation and pipe chase that served to torture permitted us to communicate between cells when there was enough sanity for that). I wrote grievances and filed lawsuits. I appealed to people and organisations on the outside, and I organised with my comrades on the inside who were undergoing the same treatment to bring what was going on to light.

But the event that dramatically changed things for me, not only in motivating what became the techniques that allowed me to survive the Break Program but also to convince my torturers that there was no point to continuing it, was of a more terrifying sort. As my body and mind started to break down all sorts of symptoms appeared, some of which I have already described. Being seen by a doctor while in solitary was no easy thing, and months would pass as one tried to be seen for whatever alarming reason it may be. At some point I noticed that there was something growing on my throat. A lump started to develop right over my Adam's apple, and as the weeks passed it got bigger and bigger. Alone in my cell with this growth, my mind imagined all sorts of terrible things. I asked to be seen by a doctor, but as usual I was ignored. A nurse came by and told me she could not see anything, but the thing kept on growing. Soon it was big enough that, as I turned my head from side to side, it would visibly pop from one side to the other of my Adam's apple. It must be cancer, I thought, and I kept on writing to everyone I could think of so as to be seen by the doctor. Finally, after months of obsessing over this thing that was so obviously growing on my

throat, I got word that the doctor would see me. The triage room where solitary confinement prisoners were seen by the doctor was right outside the cell block, but still five guards came to take me there. I was strip searched, shackles were placed on my ankles and cuffs attached to a belt around my waist. And so, I hobbled the few meters to the triage room and was sat on the examination table to wait for the doctor.

Doctor Falor was a picture-perfect doctor. In his 70s, white haired and bearded, he gave the impression of someone who could be trusted with anything. «So, Mr Pontes, what seems to be the problem?» he asked in a kindly tone. Turning my head from side to side so as to make the lump visibly pop, I blurted out that there was this thing growing on my throat. Doctor Falor looked at my throat, made me turn my head again from side to side, and then, looking into my eyes with a concerned look on his face, said: "But, Mr Pontes, there's nothing there."

There are moments in life when something fundamental seems to shift, and at that moment I felt myself lose grasp of reality – I tasted madness. But then I noticed the look on the guards' faces; they wore a look of surprise, and that snapped me back. I was not mad, though the kindly doctor was doing his damnedest to drive me there.

I have given a lot of thought as to how a doctor comes to participate in a torture program. But that is a subject for another paper. The fact is that that event rekindled my fighting spirit. I had support on the outside and my case being high profile made it difficult for the authorities to just snuff me out. I went on hunger strike demanding to be seen by an outside doctor. After 24 days with no food and a lot of pressure from outside the prison agreed to let me be seen by an outside doctor. The lump turned out to be a benign cyst which was surgically removed. I remained on the breaking program for a while longer, but my outlook had changed dramatically, the torture became the fuel for my resistance, and I think that they soon realised this.

I could go on describing all the creative ways in which I and so many of my comrades were tortured, most of them true political prisoners, men of colour who had dared to stand up to the brutal abuses of a racist state which continues to think itself justified in obliterating those who dare to resist its inhumanity. But the point I hope the reader will take from here is the simple banality of how torture happens, despite all the structures and policies put in place supposedly to minimise the practice of such abuses. If, as I suspect, the process for who and for how long someone is placed under a severe torture program happens organically, then it is even more disturbing than if there were an actual structure of control on how such things happen, because it means, as I often observed being done to some of my comrades, that torture can be cyclical, as new waves of guards come through who judge an individual's history worthy of particularly severe treatment, the torture programme for that

individual can be reinitiated over and over again. Torture happens in these environments because they are, inevitably, dark corners of a system the existence of which is justified by the supposed inhumanity of those confined therein. In such environments, those with the power will abuse those without it – the imbalance is too great to allow for anything else.