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The Ecosystem of Justice

Corey Jasmin

Susan Scheckel
SUNY

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“The Ecosystem of Justice,” by Corey Jasmin

“Justice (Noun): The ideal of righteousness, fairness, and impartiality, especially with regard to the punishment of wrongdoing.”

Every man in prison is intimately acquainted with the concept of justice. Every day, the notion of it invades our personal space, much like an illness. The system, which buries us beneath mountains of razor-wire and granite, bases its legitimacy to punish on the dictates of justice. Justice, like the blood of Abel, slain by his brother Cain, cries out with hunger pangs. For the crimes of armed robbery and murder, which I committed when I was only 18, justice demanded I receive a life sentence. And justice got its just deserts.

The ideal of justice, in theory, is a beautiful and noble thing. All men, no matter their color, class, or creed, should be accorded the fairness and equity that are the baseline benefits of being born. That a man will eventually get what he’s got coming to him is the foundational premise of karma, the bend of the moral arc of the universe, and God’s law of sowing and reaping. Again, this is justice in theory, an un-applied concept.

Applied justice in the United States could not be a more hideous, wretched, and ignoble thing. Justice, specifically criminal justice, has overseen, for example, a disproportionate number of minorities sentenced to death. It has ushered in the mass surveillance and targeting of whole generations, along with the erection of a “gulag archipelago” more gargantuan in scope than anything the Communist regimes in Russia, East Germany, or China could ever chain together.

When my friends and I go to the yard to play basketball, we see faces mostly black and brown and barely any white. We can’t help but wonder if, all along, justice was just for us. Our skewed worldview of justice has been shaped more by what it takes than by what it claims to give. The irony of the criminal justice system is that it’s designed to procure justice from the unjust. It is justice they themselves have mostly been denied. There is a neglected nexus between criminal justice and social justice. In truth, social injustice creates the kinds of people who become prime candidates for criminal justice.

Social injustice is a common thread that runs through the mosaic of men who live in prison. Their origin stories, much like my own, are rife with episodes of discrimination, deprivation, and degradation regarding housing, jobs, and education. These conditions have so disadvantaged communities of color, multi-generationally, that it has created a type of American caste system, inescapable and inevitable. We are trapped with the foregone conclusions it creates for us all. Left behind, with little hope and limited options, rumbling stomachs grow louder while the voice of reason grows quiet. Crime becomes unavoidable. Indeed, as one of our “founding fathers” has remarked, “A robbery is nothing more than a grassroots redistribution of wealth at the point of a pistol.”

When a state does not render justice to members of its most resource-vulnerable population, it becomes an accomplice to injustice. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King Jr. famously writes, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” His statement is a commentary on the “interrelatedness of people everywhere,” and his belief that “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Justice, in this respect, is therefore an

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ideal. It is an ecosystem, one that perpetually requires equilibrium to remain harmonious. When an imbalance of justice arises in this ecosystem, the consequences are unforeseen and harsh corrective measures will be taken to restore balance.

It is difficult for those Americans living cushy and privileged lives to truly empathize with the moral dilemma constantly confronting the hungry, the homeless, and the unemployed. Most Americans are rarely affected. That is, until a member of this underclass, denied social justice, renders injustice to a fellow man through the mechanism of crime. This is not to say that all crime is a result of social injustice. Much crime is due to the inherent evil, greed, and stupidity which resides in the hearts of men. However, other crimes and other criminals are the derivatives, the blow back. In sum, the chickens are coming home to roost against the discrimination and destitution which plagues our cities.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere because of how it seduces victims of injustice to pursue justice through unjust means. Bearing this in mind, it is only obvious that the true key to criminal justice reform is social justice reform. When we, as the Prophet Amos says, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an overflowing stream,” then the forgotten of our land will feel dissuaded from taking justice into their own hands. When social justice is delivered in housing, in jobs, and in education, it will lead to less of a need for criminal justice. Justice will beget justice.

With fervent desire, I look forward to the day when the ecosystem of justice is so balanced, our prisons are empty, and our playgrounds are full.