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# The Archipelago of Pain

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We don't flog people in our prison system, or put them in thumbscrews or stretch them on the rack. We do, however, lock prisoners away in social isolation for 23 hours a day, often for months, years or decades at a time.

We prohibit the former and permit the latter because we make a distinction between physical and social pain. But, at the level of the brain where pain really resides, this is a distinction without a difference. Matthew Lieberman of the University of California, Los Angeles, compared the brain activities of people suffering physical pain with people suffering from social pain. As he writes in his book, "Social," "Looking at the screens side by side ... you wouldn't have been able to tell the difference."

The brain processes both kinds of pain in similar ways. Moreover, at the level of human experience, social pain is, if anything, more traumatic, more destabilizing and inflicts more cruel and long-lasting effects than physical pain. What we're doing to prisoners in extreme isolation, in other words, is arguably more inhumane than flogging.

Yet inflicting extreme social pain is more or less standard procedure in America's prisons. Something like 80,000 prisoners are put in solitary

confinement every year. Prisoners isolated in supermaximum facilities are often locked away in a 6-by-9-foot or 8-by-10-foot barren room. They may be completely isolated in that room for two days a week. For the remaining five, they may be locked away for 23 hours a day and permitted an hour of solitary exercise in a fenced-in area.

If there is communication with the prison staff, it might take place through an intercom. Communication with the world beyond is minimal. If there are visitors, conversation may be conducted through a video screen. Prisoners may go years without affectionately touching another human being. Their only physical contact will be brushing up against a guard as he puts on shackles for trips to the exercise yard.

In general, mammals do not do well in isolation. In the 1950s, Harry Harlow studied monkeys who had been isolated. The ones who were isolated for longer periods went into emotional shock, rocking back and forth. One in six refused to eat after being reintegrated and died within five days. Most of the rest were permanently withdrawn.

Studies on birds, rats and mice consistently show that isolated animals suffer from impoverished neural growth compared with socially engaged animals, especially in areas where short-term memory and threat perception are processed. Studies on Yugoslav prisoners of war in 1992 found that those who had suffered blunt blows to the head and those who had been socially isolated suffered the greatest damage to brain functioning.

Some prisoners who've been in solitary confinement are scarcely affected by it. But this is not typical. The majority of prisoners in solitary suffer severely — from headaches, an oversensitivity to stimuli, digestion problems, loss of appetite, self-mutilation, chronic dizziness, loss of the ability to concentrate, hallucinations, illusions or paranoid ideas.

The psychiatrist Stuart Grassian conducted in-depth interviews with more than 200 prisoners in solitary and concluded that about a third developed acute psychosis with hallucinations. Many people just disintegrate. According to rough estimates, as many as half the suicides in prison take place in solitary, even though isolated prisoners make up only about 5 percent of the population.

Prison officials argue that they need isolation to preserve order. That's a

view to be taken seriously because these are the people who work in the prisons. But the research on the effectiveness of solitary confinement programs is ambiguous at best. There's a fair bit of evidence to suggest that prison violence is not produced mainly by a few bad individuals who can be removed from the mainstream. Rather, violence is caused by conditions and prison culture. If there's crowding, tension, a culture of violence, and anarchic or arbitrary power, then the context itself is going to create violence no matter how many "bad seeds" are segregated away.

Fortunately, we seem to be at a moment when public opinion is turning. Last month, the executive director of the Colorado prisons, Rick Raemisch, wrote a moving first-person Op-Ed article in *The Times* about his short and voluntary stay in solitary. Colorado will no longer send prisoners with severe mental illnesses into solitary. New York officials recently agreed to new guidelines limiting the time prisoners can spend in isolation. Before long, one suspects, extreme isolation will be considered morally unacceptable.

The larger point is we need to obliterate the assumption that inflicting any amount of social pain is O.K. because it's not real pain.

When you put people in prison, you are imposing pain on them. But that doesn't mean you have to gouge out the nourishment that humans need for health, which is social, emotional and relational.

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