Padraic Kenney - “The Political Prisoner as a Global Figure”

When considering the term “political prisoner,” who usually comes to mind? Many people would certainly think of Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, and Mahatma Gandhi, each imprisoned for their ideas and political activities. Mandela, however, is not, officially, a political prisoner. Amnesty International actually rescinded its decision to consider Mandela a political prisoner after he was arrested as a member of an armed faction that was conspiring to violently overthrow the government (even though he himself never used violence). The human rights organization stipulates that a political prisoner, rather than fighting against the institution, uses the prison as a kind of vehicle, a means through which to do, or perform, politics, becoming an instrument of political activity and protest, of articulating one’s self as a political subject.

Much of Professor Kenney’s lecture was devoted to laying out the genealogy of the term “political prisoner.” While individuals have been imprisoned for their politics for centuries, these people (Kenney calls them “imprisoned politicals”) saw prison as an obstruction blocking political work. Around the time that nations began to develop more comprehensive and institutionalized systems of mass incarceration, however, the category of “political prisoner,” of someone who uses the prison for political purposes instead of seeing it as a hindrance, began to emerge, although exactly how the prison served the politics of such prisoners varied.

These are some of the insights with which Padraic Kenney, professor of History and International Studies at Indiana University, opened his New Directions Lecture, “The Political Prisoner as a Global Figure,” on November 5th. And it is precisely a more nuanced approach to the topic that Kenney offers in his research. Adopting what he calls a “global historical framework” to trace the idea of the political prisoner in various countries not necessarily linked by borders or through institutions (in this case Poland, Ireland, and South Africa), Kenney examines how prisoners use the experience of incarceration politically. He suggests that a political prisoner, rather than fighting against the institution, uses the prison for his or her politics – the prison becomes a kind of vehicle, a means through which to do, or perform, politics, becoming an instrument of political activity and protest, of articulating one’s self as a political subject.

Indeed, Professor Kenney observed three historical periods in which the figure of the political prisoner was utilized differently. The first, lasting from the 1860s to about World War I, was a period defined by a sectarian approach to political incarceration – those imprisoned for their politics were often viewed as martyrs by the groups they represented, assets to the causes they espoused. Kenney noted how one prisoner from this era remarked how he “felt a kind of pleasure in seeing them treat us brutally,” recognizing the value of poor treatment, the attention it would attract to the politics of the
During the second historical period, lasting until the 1960s, the prisoner was used less for the specific politics of a particular group and more for the general humanitarian concerns of far-reaching ideologies. Organizations such as the Soviet Union's International Red Aid, intended to help Communists in prisons around the world, or the United States' counter organization, the International Committee for Political Prisoners, established to assist dissenters imprisoned in the Soviet Union, were typical of this period. The third historical phase outlined by Kenney began in the 1960s with the emergence of Amnesty International, which cast the politics of the prisoner in the background, transforming him or her into a neutral symbol of human rights. The emphasis was placed more on the experience of incarceration and less on the politics that placed a prisoner there (although, as mentioned earlier, the politics of the prisoner had to be of a non-violent and peaceful variety).

Professor Kenney ended his lecture with a discussion on prisoners' sensory experience of incarceration, their physical relation to the space itself, and how the prison becomes a kind of performative sphere in which the political prisoner engages the state in a contest of legibility that challenges his or her own status as an independent subject with agency. The state imprisons prisoners to impose a kind of illegibility on them, placing them in such radically different and uncertain situations that they begin to question their fate, their reasons for being imprisoned, their very selves. Prisoners fight back by insisting on their legibility or, quite often, by marking themselves as illegible in turn, making themselves unpredictable and indefinable to the state. Certain extreme acts committed by political prisoners, such as the “dirty protests” of IRA prisoners who smeared excrement on the walls of their cells, force the state into acknowledging that it cannot define the prisoner, that he or she has an agency that cannot be suppressed. Like Amnesty International, Professor Kenney's interest lies with the prisoners' experience of incarceration, but rather than defining the prisoner by the politics, whether violent or not, that landed him or her in jail, Kenney examines the political agency of the prisoner within prison and how that space becomes a place for demonstrating and acting out those politics.

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