Savages and Slaves

I will make a set of comments on the black man and the prisoner, to whom he is most curiously and intimately connected throughout history. By means of these observations I complete a tapestry formed by my life: the strands of it are, the thought, the sexuality, the race and criminality. The prisoner and the black man have as the pity of them, their very sorrow, their limitation in common, which is also the source of their danger.

The prisoner was not always such, but the black man was so all his life. The prisoner who is also black is doubly limited, by his race and his social position. I think I can, with minimum metaphor, assimilate the history of the black man and the history of the prisoner. And I am fortunate in having been both, yet whilst I had my freedom I was able to obtain a good education and write a published book through my own efforts. Therefore I am able to invest at first hand a certain knowledge and passion into an essay, which certainly can be done well by one who is neither imprisoned nor black, but who would thereby be constrained to keep a distance from the subject.

In Africa the black man was, until very recently, and the influence of it remains to this very day, a savage. Africa and civilization seem like a contradiction in terms. Consequently, he was not respected by outsiders and, in the Americas, was enslaved. His lack of intelligence seemed innate and a servant’s role was, in the rest of the world, his highest ambition.

Similarly, the prisoner is generally deemed to have an inferior intellect to the average, and this is why he is forced to commit crime in order to survive, rather than obtain a job or a profession. He is disqualified early on from the educational process, which he cannot see the need for nor academically grasp. He is a savage in civilised society, who, like the black man in the New World, almost invariably becomes a slave, that is, a prisoner.

There are exceptions to this rule, but it is well-founded, and thence the attempts at intellectual distinction that come from the black man and the prisoner are generally passed over with contempt. I do not think it worthwhile to speculate how this might be changed, but perhaps those who demonstrate such a prejudice may decide that they sometimes are missing out on ideas that might be valuable.

The black man can be a popular musician or a sportsman, and thereby gain distinction. But a profound reason for his subjugation, even in democratic societies, is the recognition that he lacks intellect. The prisoner may, after years spent in the security of prison, among criminals of his own ilk, accrue the education he should have got in in his early years, and produce an autobiography of his own which, because it is so unlike the experience of the general reading public, obtains a succes-de-scandale. But the prisoner generally has nothing to say, as his world is so limited, his experience so impoverished.

Recently, however, in the case of the black man, the notion of an innate mental inferiority may be demonstrably false. It seems to be a matter of environment and nurture, not a matter of genes, that enables an individual to shine intellectually. The first black president of the United States was a man whose father came directly from Africa, and thus bypassed the environmental stumbling-block of slavery. He was a Ph.D. from Kenya. His son did not feel the oppression of those who grew up in the ghetto, and who, especially when they moved among the great, doubted their own worth.

Likewise, why are so few Old Etonians in prison? If prison is a measure of the ethical standing of a person, are we to assume that a private school education makes one a morally good person; and is the person who has that education responsible for obtaining it, and thus earning his own moral worth? There seem to be other factors at play, and possibly if the majority of prisoners had in their youth been given a private school education, might have they not have ended up behind bars?

So things may be more complex than at first sight. Perhaps the word is ‘more fluid’. As in the essay on Homosexual Love, I divide this one into sections. So ‘Savages and Slaves’ will concern itself with the histories of the black man and the prisoner; their social, political, individual, psychological, moral, religious, physical and fictional aspects.

Like the denizens of a black hole, the prisoner and more recently, the black man, both know there is a wider universe outside, but for both many among them believe it may as well be in another dimension.

The history of the human race in Africa appears to be the most ancient one. The rainforests of central and west Africa, as well as the Savannah, the grasslands adjacent to the Sahara Desert, contain the oldest evidence of the human species that have been discovered. Evolution provides a record of how the race attained its present human characteristics in a development that has been most specifically unearthed in the valleys of East Africa and the plains of southern Africa.

But over most of the continent evolution only went so far; apart from the pictorial writing and civilization of the Nile Valley, which is indeed the one which reaches furthest backwards into written human history, real civilized development and progress appears to have by-passed Africa. The black race as such is not to be the one responsible for the monuments, hieroglyphs, farming and social structure of ancient Egypt.

Left to himself, and on his own, the black man achieved at the best nomadic lifestyles, slash and burn peasant agriculture, hunting, fishing, and gathering. A very basic level of subsistence at most was all that was in his ability. He does not appear to have left written records, or indeed to have achieved literacy; but oral history certainly was kept by specialists in the small village communities he lived in.

Clans or tribes, related by blood, were the basis of his society. Initiation rites for manhood and for the attainment of warrior status were very common. Warfare between tribes for women, land, and over long-standing hatreds, or mere clan-difference required a constant, generational supply of warriors. Tribes could be very large and occupy large areas of the continent.

Now, all this is not specifically African, and it is to be surmised that all human societies in every part of the world went through this stage I have here described. But with the black man in Africa, this stage appears to be the highest he ever attained and sustained by himself. This was one of the reasons for the prevalence over much of the continent of herds of wild animals, in great numbers and great varieties. Because there was no competition from civilized societies, the natural preponderance of species in the Tropics was unchallenged by mankind, as it had been elsewhere.

Also, because humanity was at such a primitive level, and the development of medicine and cities almost entirely absent, mortality, especially in childhood, was high. Consequently the sexual roles of male and female were emphasised by the community and its mores.

In the beginning of the novel, ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being’, by the author Milan Kundera, to exemplify something that is wholly irrelevant and completely unknown, and apparently non-existent, he speaks of a war between two black African kingdoms in the fourteenth century AD. That is how the history of the Dark Continent seems until quite recently. The black man came into contact with the outside world in relatively modern times through the agency of imperial Islam. Then, even more recently, he came to meet up with transcontinental trade when, after the Middle Ages, the Euopeans travelled by sea to India, the East Indies, and America.

Slavery was common all over black Africa, between Africans, long before the Arabs or the Europeans used the black man on an industrial scale in their own trades. Because of the backwardness and vulnerability of the black man, and owing to his special adaptation to labour in tropical climates, he was substituted by the Europeans for the Amerindians, who died off in droves when used as slaves. The black man was not respected as a human by the Christian Europeans; indeed, he was not seen as a man, but as property and as a beast. The idea was that if a person was not European they were not really human, and this lies behind all sorts of racism, not just that between white and black. White and non-white seemed a fixed division in the human species, which referred not just to kinds but to levels of humanity. It is a strange division and judgement from a race which claims to worship a non-white man, Jesus Christ. LIkewise, this same man was executed on what was his era’s equivalent of the gallows, and yet those who die on it these days suffer the basest of human deaths.

In the Americas, the black man eagerly seized upon anything which could emancipate himself from his blackness. For though he resentfully laboured under the lash, and, from time to time and in different places, revolted, he was stripped of his identity and self-respect. He lost his languages, his gods , his tribal system, and adopted those of his masters. He worshipped a Christ whose European features were constantly and falsely foisted upon him and re-emphasised, and in effect was taught to worship his master. But he could not strip himself of his skin: it was his shame.

Racism became the original sin of the Americas, and it was learnt on the Middle Passage: the journey across the Atlantic, between Africa and the New World, where the black man suffered the profoundest agony. All Gods are racial gods, and all religions, especially the evangelical ones, propaganda for the race. This has never been more firmly exemplified than in the relation between the black man and the religion of his Christian masters.

It worked and it didn’t. The black man may have become Christian, even enthusiastically so, but he couldn’t become white. So he was criminalized and imprisoned. Like with the white man, the religion is largely sham, a means of empowerment by the one way a single man can gain precedence over the rest: morality. Since the price of being ‘good’ as society and religion see it, is credulity in the incredible miracles, the black man in modern society does not really believe, but lives by wits and pretence. He is the ‘hustler’ of American parlance.

In Latin America the black slave was taught Catholicism, and as the years have gone by his celebration of the rites of that faith have markedly African features. I suppose it was always so. Only in that way could they understand and assimilate the dogma. In parts of the West Indies and elsewhere, voodoo was practised, with a belief in spirit-possession and the undead. Long after the white man ceased believing in witches, this was firmly held onto in the slave plantations, as it is to this very day in Africa.

In the protestant North America continent, segregation of the Christian churches emerged. Now, some sects are black, some white in their entirety. As James Baldwin, the author, said, Heaven was going to be just another ghetto. For the white race in respect to slavery, what is emphasised in the telling of the story was the ending of the trade, and the Abolition. What slavery actually was like during the ages it lasted was conveniently forgotten.

Slavery has done untold damage to the black man psychologically; but that is for later on. Colonialism, which started spectacularly in the 19th century, has left its mark, especially in the apartheid era in South Africa. The backwardness of African society; the alien boundaries on the continent, and the disrespect the black man has been held in by his masters on his continent, have made African countries as independent entities, fantastically unsuccessful. Indeed, the crime, disease, and rape prevalent over much of South Africa makes apartheid as a system almost preferable to the present dispensation. Yet possibly apartheid was responsible for that chaos in large part.

As a slave in the New world, the black man, as was said, was owned. He was bought and sold. He was bred, not for intelligence, but for strength, like a beast. He did not keep family ties, and this persists to this day as a character-trait of the black man. He will father children, but he will not bring them up. He is promiscuous, irresponsible, and sees no need or education or culture.

It was thought that this was a fixed racial trait, but for generations, the black man was not his own master. Only if- and this will take a long time and will not be immediate- he is allowed space to develop as a man, will he manifest his true abilities. So those, for instance in America, who oppose positive discrimination, just because within a short lifetime of many people the black man has been civilly emancipated, these people should not expect the effects of democratisation to be instantly apparent, and that every one should start on an equal footing resultantly, as if history had been abolished and was irrelevant.

Your past is connected to my present, and the world is not a series of atomic individuals that have no relation through space and time. Ask yourself why the black boy in inner London stabs the white man, and history will provide the answer that they are in the same place, not through an accident, but through a definite historical progression. History has brought them together, not chance.  
 The black woman in some ways was and was not more fortunate. Like all Third World women, she was subject to the black man, but under slavery learnt the values of responsibility that came with having to bring up children alone. That skill persisted after emancipation. She was less brutal, more intelligent than the black man, and this enabled her to attain academic and professional qualification more readily than the male. Maybe she was seen as less of a threat to society and potential employers; as being more tractable than the black man.  
 Through history the type of crime for which someone could be imprisoned has changed. The number and severity of the punishments used to be, in the past, a great deal more extreme. Things that today do not seem as meriting punishment by prison sentencing, did so in past ages. Small amounts of money could, if stolen, result in imprisonment and death. The method of trial was rarely by jury, and only relatively elevated members of society got one. Usually, and in most countries this remains so, the trial was by judge, or judges, or panels of magistrates. Therefore bias and corruption were prevalent.

Vagrancy was, in many societies, an imprisonable offence, as was bankruptcy and debt. In the latter case, one was kept imprisoned until the debt was paid by arrangements with one’s extended family. Those in jail were, and in many Third World countries still are, fed by one’s families from outside. Sometimes food sent in could be shared among one’s fellow prisoners.

Religious imprisonment for such crimes as heresy used to be in the past far more common than it is now. Death could be the end-result of such a sentence. Generally it can be said that what would now be regarded as a sin, would be an imprisonable offence in past times. This applied especially to sexual crimes, of which sodomy was one until very recently. The legislation for what was criminal and what was not was based in large part on religious texts that came down from antiquity. Prostitution was in a limbo between legality and illegality, with the prostitutes earning the full weight of punishment if caught. But gentlemen availed themselves of their services, so in many instances the practice was tolerated, though the women were oppressed, despised and often in prison.

Prisons were intended to be places of punishment, so conditions inside them were insalubrious, with the prisoners being brutalized. Discipline was maintained there by such practices as corporal punishment, with the birch. The age of criminal responsibility at which one could be imprisoned or executed used to be quite young in times past. This seems at odds with a Christian ethic, but it was apparently and conveniently overlooked. The priests and clergy who ministered to the spiritual wants of prisoners, and constantly reminded them of the price of sin, seem also to have forgotten how the founder of their faith lost his liberty and was executed by the state.

Especially in the past, men who were used to having servants could undergo a level of treatment in prison, whilst in their cells, appropriate to their social position. They could have a softer regime, and servants while in jail. Sir Walter Raleigh and Bertrand Russell were prisoners who enjoyed this privilege during their sentences. But otherwise, a prison sentence could in itself be a death sentence because of the harsh conditions suffered.

In other times, hard labour went along with loss of liberty. Men worked the treadmill, they picked oakum, and they broke stones in chain-gangs on the outside of the prison, under the supervision of jailers. This could break a man in spirit and in body. Such a man, upon release, would be good for nothing else except crime, and bitter with his suffering.

For many ages, but especially in the 20th century, men were imprisoned for political crimes, of opposing the government, that is to say. Starting in the Boer War, whole populations, including women and children, could be put into concentration camps. Suffering and death were the result, and lasting resentment. This was industrialized in the 20th century by Germany, who imprisoned whole races and political opponents and types of person: from Jews, to Gypsies, to Communists, to Homosexuals, to the mentally defective, to prisoners of war, and Jehovah’s witnesses. Millions were imprisoned, and millions killed.

It is ironic how in modern democracies especially, such as the United Kingdom, the children of parents who fled Central Europe to escape the Holocaust, should be the ones who put the greatest emphasis on strong prison policies to tackle law and order issues. ‘Jail works’, said Michael Howard, conservative and Jewish Home Secretary, forgetting that his entire race was locked up and six million of them killed. The Soviet tyranny of Stalin, and his successors, instituted the GULAG, a system of Siberian labour and concentration camps. There again, millions, political opponents, most of them imaginary, died off. They were Kulaks, rich peasants, Ukrainian peasants who resisted collectivization, talented, middle-class people, communist party members, who had taken part in the revolution.

In both the Nazi and GULAG death and concentration camps, slave labour was used, the prisoners being the slaves, to build the great infrastructure projects of the Third Reich and the Soviet empire; and they worked, unpaid, in the war-industries of those states. They died in their hundreds of thousands from the climate, in the GULAG, the harsh conditions, in the Nazi concentration camps.

These labour camps differed from the run of the usual prisons, in that, though many of their inmates were common criminals, most were ordinary people, who were deemed by the rulers to be the wrong race or the wrong class. In the Holocaust, whole families, from grandmothers to babies were imprisoned and killed, or died from starvation and disease. There were university professors, and heroes of the 1st World War. These people could not have been said to have committed a crime, and no crime deserved what they went through. All this history goes to show is the arbitrary nature of human law, and the falsity that the system of prison can represent.

Though prison, the loss of liberty, can be regarded as a torture in itself, in the past this was not enough. Tortures, such as the Rack, whereby a person’s limbs could be stretched until the tendons were close to snapping, were common. This was used to extract confessions to crimes; but since the torturers seem already to have decided upon the guilt of the prisoner, they were beside the point and gave no true information.

In a country as vast as Imperial Russia, exile was a form of punishment and something similar to this was often used in the early days of the extensive British Empire. Criminals could be transported on prison ships to places like the West Indies, North America, and most notably, Australia. Returning to the United Kingdom from these places was a capital offence.

Though in the modern European Union, the death penalty has been abolished, previously there were many methods of executing prisoners. Hanging until dead was a grisly and sometimes public event. Beheading with an axe was common for prisoners of high social rank, for crimes like treachery. In France, with the Revolution, came the guillotine, where a mechanical blade sliced off the head in a special frame. This was used at least until the 1950s. Garrotting, where an instrument strangled the victim, was more ancient. Even more ancient, in Classical times, and in several cultures, crucifixion was a means of dealing death. Here, the convict would be spread out, with his arms apart, and hung from a large, cross-like frame, until, after a long time, his heart gave out and the man died.

People could be burnt at the stake, alive, until dead. Hanging, drawing and quartering was particularly gruesome, and used for political prisoners. A person would be hung; taken down before he was dead; his torso opened; his heart, still beating, extracted; and his limbs and genitals cut off; and lastly, his head would be put on stake. Quite young children could be executed.

In Britain, in the 19th century, there were the beginnings of prison reform. People in jail could have daily exercise, though it had to be in silence in the prison yard. If someone from outside the prison came into the jail, prisoners would have to turn and face the wall. There was education, with the attempt at teaching those who could not to read and write. The purpose was rehabilitation. Prisoners should acquire marketable skills whilst in jail, so that when they left they would be able to work for their living. So libraries were installed in prisons.

Also the number of capital offences were greatly diminished, so that such crimes as sodomy no longer merited a death sentence, but a very long period of incarceration.

The vast, world-wide industry in illegal, addictive drugs has spawned a huge growth-area in crime and criminals in modern times. A large proportion of the present prison population consists of men and women who have flouted the anti-drugs regulations of their various countries. From the occasional user who was unlucky enough to get caught, to the burglar and mugger and prostitute who strive to gain relatively small amounts to feed their crushing habit, to the dealer and drugs-baron who manufactures and transports his goods, the jails of the Western world are at present groaning with such convicts. It is quite recent and forms a continuum in the history of crime and prisoner.

Generally it can be said that socially illiberal countries which lack a developed welfare state, are more prone to suffer from the effects of the easy pickings, and the relief from desperation that drugs provide. Such countries are especially to be found in the Americas. Such countries contain, at the same time, large black populations; and in the United States especially, the black man and the prisoner largely identify. He was always excluded by a society which thought him worthless, and felt it owed him nothing. He reacts accordingly, and the prisons of America are full of black men. It is no accident.

At this point in history the black man is himself the prison he needs to escape from. It is not the fault of others if he does not even attempt his own emancipation. The elements are there and the possibilities are ones he must himself seize. The prisoner in modern times is victim of an Anglo-American political system which became increasingly illiberal with longer sentences and more criminal offences. Thus, his salvation must come from outside, from a society which should realise that crime is decreased, not increased, by a socially liberal system, and not by stringency. Progressive policies are therefore the key to the chances of the black man and the prisoner.

The black man is no longer a slave, and even in the West and Latin America, there are black majority countries; so his is not necessarily the tale of a minority in society. No, that needs qualification: the black man is no longer enslaved by other races. There are black slaves though, at present, in Africa.

The black man is distributed through sub-Saharan Africa, where he lives in separate, independent countries; he is to be found in the West Indies, where he lives on tiny, isolated island states; and in South and Central America, in countries such as Belize and Guyana. There he rules himself in recently-decolonized countries. He is a large minority all over North and Latin American states; and is an immigrant in the former imperial powers of Britain, France, and Holland. In these countries he is, though in a minority, to be found sometimes in his millions. Spain and Portugal contain substantial black populations as well.

Countries adjacent to the Sahara, like Mali, are Muslim. In Nigeria the Ibos and the Northern populations present a clash of religions, where Christianity and Islam intersect. Civil war has recently been the result of this. In Eastern Africa, black racism manifested itself in the expulsion in the ‘70s of the Asian communities in Uganda. With post-colonialism, which arrived mostly in the ‘60s, came a peculiarly African type of government to the various states. Men, limited in the scope of their abilities, with societies of backward culture and immense poverty, instituted cults of personality, and were in the effect tribal chieftains in nominally modern states. The continent was, and is, riven by despots, the governments corrupt, with dictators accumulating, usually by fraudulent means, vast fortunes in foreign bank-accounts. These are the little big-men of Africa: the Mobutus, the Mugabes.

Some freed states hopelessly and idealistically flirted with a totally inapplicable type of socialism, before descending into barbarism and primitivism. Tribal and political wars and revolutions have endlessly disturbed the peace of the continent. Agriculture remains at a basic subsistence level through most of the region, and mining for minerals and diamonds in places like Sierra Leone is carried out by foreign companies, who make the profit, which does not benefit anyone except a few corrupt politicians.

Diseases like malaria and AIDS are rampant, and these countries lack welfare and health-care systems. Education has to be paid for in most countries, and this means that sometimes children are sold into slavery to pay back debts. Of all inhabited continents, Africa is the least developed in terms of infrastructure. In South Africa, which has emerged from apartheid and has a substantial and prosperous white minority, we have the most advanced country there economically. The black man is noted in southern Africa for his criminality, with murder, theft and rape being epidemic.

Though in countries like Kenya, cash-crops maintain for some people a relatively high standard of living, farming is basic and at subsistence-level among the black race; and so it seems people want little, though much of the populations of African countries live on hand-outs from the developed world. It has been thought that this, rather than helping the black man, has in the long term, hindered him, as it delays the emergence of a proper economy and trade and agriculture from the black recipients of aid on his own terms.

Water is often lacking for season after season, or can be undrinkable where available. But the black man simply has not found the means to provide for himself the basic necessities of civilized life. When once a man has emancipated himself, say through education, from the general very low average, he works abroad or selfishly and corruptly accumulates wealth for himself and his family, and does not seek to aid the community. This appears as a black trait throughout the race’s history, and it has made it vulnerable to exploitation.

The greatest form this was manifested in was the slave trade. The result of that trade can be seen at present in the Caribbean islands. Here small men were humiliated and rendered even smaller when abandoned by the colonial masters who owned the slave-plantation countries. A good study of this phenomenon can be gleaned from books such as ‘The Middle Passage’ by V.S.Naipaul. In Africa, and naturally, the black man was an animist. In the New World he succumbed to the Godly psychosis of his owners. But he was seen as a criminal, and his religion, like his master’s, was fake. Nothing demonstrates the hypocrisy of the white Christian in the New World quite so evidently as does his treatment of the black man and of the prisoner.

In countries of the French West Indies the project was to completely assimilate the black man with metropolitan France. This has curiously succeeded, but seems like a mockery. The independent islands of the British West Indies are parts of the Commonwealth, but not one corporate body. That might make them viable. But they are separate, and dependent on tourism and sugar, as well as their status as tax-havens, for their economic survival. Some are richer than the rest, like Trinidad, which has off-shore oil, some poorer, like Jamaica, which is drug-infested and crime-ridden. In Jamaica, not only are drugs a problem for the population, but for other countries, when its citizens are used as couriers for the lucrative smuggling racket. It is also a very violent country, which exports its criminal gangs to America and Britain.

So the black man is not merely a criminal in others’ eyes, but in objective reality. Homophobia and sexism are rampant, and the police will turn a blind eye to violence against, and even murder of homosexuals. This is of a piece with the black man in Africa, where homosexuality is rare, but not misogyny. When men have been humiliated by others, they seek to humiliate women in their turn. But in neither part of the world, East or West, are sexual attitudes, even among women, very advanced.

The freed slaves of the United States were mostly to be found in the southern states. A diaspora took place from there to most parts of North America. In cities like Washington, Chicago and New York, the black man, part of an ethnic minority, is to be found in ghettos and the ‘projects’. In the West, in California, as in all those cities, criminal gangs, involved in drugs and prostitution, abound. The picture is not as dark as I paint, for the black man can be found even in the police force and the professions. There are black colleges in the south, which has not recovered yet from emancipation of Civil Rights disturbances and laws of the ‘60s. The South has never forgiven the Democrats who enacted that legislation. It is almost, to this day, solidly Republican.

The blacks of the West Indies speak a patois, a broken-English, and the American black can, at the extremes, speak in an English accent almost impenetrable to the outsider. Education softens these speech-tones, and corrects the slang; and this enables the black man to assimilate with the wider community, for he has nowhere else to go.

The black man’s in America is the history of a turbulent recent episode. He faces prejudice; he is disenfranchised from birth in many places; but he rejects with a prejudice of his own, a society whose richness he does not wish to understand. This is his fault. Wealth is more than money, but even for the non-black man in America, that is a lesson so young a people have not yet begun to grasp. For the United States is in effect a Third World country.

Brazil has a huge and impoverished black population, and so have some of the other Latin American countries. From the West Indies, especially after independence in the ‘50s and ‘60s, came large influxes of black people into Britain. They have never had to suffer what the black man has had as his lot in America, but they, because they were alien, stirred up much resentment among the native population. Indeed, the black West Indian was partially assimilated even before he came to Britain, speaking the language and enjoying some of the culture and educational system of the mother country.

As in America, but to a lesser extent, the prisons of Britain are full of black men. To France, from the African territories, came at the same time, immigrants, whose history is typical of the poor, colonial minority. Resentment by the white populations of Britain and France is not merely irrational, vis-a-vis the black man in their midst, but unjust. There was no future on the small, isolated Caribbean islands for the inhabitants to look forward to, and the former colonialists owed them recompense. Why do they think specifically black men are in their countries? They should consult their history, and remember how proud they were of their empires, and how eager to acquire them they were as well. Black men are in Britain and France because these countries were in black men’s countries. They made them what they have subsequently become.

The story of the black man and the story of the prisoner intersect in Britain and America. I do not readily know too much about the present tale of the prisoner in the various other parts of the world, so I shall limit my consideration of the socio-political study of the prisoner in so far as he appears in these countries.

Under the Labour government criminal offences for which someone may be imprisoned have increased by the hundreds, and the length and severity of sentences have been further extended, such that, whereas twenty years ago four years in prison was a long time, it is now quite common. Consequently, never has the prison population been as great as it is now, with frequent instances of over-crowding to the maximum extent in the prison estate. Therefore rehabilitation suffers and is demoted from prisons’ priorities. So re-offending rates are high.

Because of media and newspaper headlines, politicians feel the need for ever more stringent treatment of criminals and prisoners. ‘Toughness’ is the watchword, as if it is the solution to all problems, and the obvious solution at that. There is the mistaken belief that the crimes frequently reported by the press are the result of a too-liberal sentencing and prison regime, when the opposite is the case. The very size of the prison population shows that judges are not lenient when it comes to sentencing, and deterrence is not obtained by severity of the prison system and the length of sentences, but by a more liberal and equitable social-liberal regime. The Scandinavian countries exemplify this readily, whilst in countries like America where there is the death penalty, murder rates are extremely high. Severity of punishment does not stop a person from committing serious violent crime; knowing that one is living in a humane and liberal society, where people feel they owe something to each other, and are treated fairly by the community, and caringly, does lessen the incidence of serious criminality.

People who have never been to prison tell each other that prison is like a ‘holiday camp’. What sort of holiday camp requires its clients to be forcibly locked in? It is a lie, and a deliberate one. The sort of person who makes it their job to keep others locked up must have something psychologically amiss with him. He is the sort of person prone to sadism, which is always a danger when one group of men has complete and untrammelled power over others. He will break the nominal law as he is unsupervised from outside the prison walls, and will be apt to violate his charges’ human rights. There is, indeed, the notion that the prisoner is not exactly human, so anything can be done to him, as it was to the black slave. Anyway, we must always remember that jailers, and policemen, are men, not gods , and the mere wearing of a uniform does not turn a man into an incorruptible angel. They will behave as men do, and break the law, if they can get away with it, and if it suits them. The person who suffers from this is the prisoner.

The age of criminal responsibility is, in Britain, ten: one of the lowest ages in the developed world. There are more children in prison than elsewhere in Europe. Such vulnerable prisoners, children, women, men, have a high rate of suicide whilst in prison. It is a common ritual in prisons when a whole wing is locked up, and men who have hung themselves, or otherwise killed themselves, are removed from their cells. A life-sentence, and the despair this engenders, can be a reason for suicide. But not always; and sometimes prisoners who have relatively short sentences, but other psychological causes for it do this.

The sort of man who is a prisoner in Britain is the person who commits crime, say, in order to fuel a drug-habit. There are a hard-core of ‘real’ criminals; gangsters and such like. People have a vast ignorance of why someone may serve a life-sentence: It is quite often not for murder, but for wounding with intent, armed robbery. Whatever the actual time served in prison, it is a life-sentence, for one may at any time and for the most trivial of reasons be recalled to jail for more time, as long as one lives.

There is intense lack of knowledge of conditions in jails, and this is intentional. A person is put there to be forgotten about, and he can be even if, after many years, he is proven innocent of any actual crime. DNA technology in recent years and originating in Britain, has enabled great and long-standing failures of justice to be rectified.

Rehabilitation, in the form of education, is available at the present time at different levels in British prisons. The majority of prisoners have a low educational level of attainment. What is common knowledge to the general population, they are quite ignorant of, and when they are educated, it comes as a revelation. To some extent, and for a few prisoners, degree-level courses are available. But there are very few educated men among the average prison population.

The spiritual needs of prisoners are satisfied, with the Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist faiths being catered for. Nowadays, kosher and halal menus are to be had, and ramadan is recognised. Though the prisoner cannot keep actual cash whilst in prison, he may have postal orders sent in, with a television in the cell of each life-sentence prisoner, at least. Therefore a necessary link with the outside world can be maintained. Sometimes, a block of prisoners will share a television.

To various degrees, newspapers can be sent in or purchased in the various prisons. There are regimes for each. Visits and meetings with solicitors and probation offices are allowed. One can, with some difficulty, telephone friends and contacts outside the prison, and write letters. The latter, however, are censored. We must realise that the greatest problem with prison, next to the actual loss of liberty and boredom, is the other inmates. They make life unbearable at times, and violence is a lingering threat for one not used to the system. So in the different levels of prison, there are more or less constant interruptions to the day when the officers seek to pacify prisoners or stop incidents.

There are four levels in the British prison estate: the A-category prisons, for the most serious and dangerous offenders; then in descending order of danger, the B-category, the C-category, and lastly, the D-category. The D-category prisons, or ‘Open’ prisons, contain the prisoners judged least serious, like fraudsters and white-collar criminals, and others, who have progressed their way through the system and reach a level of minimum danger. Here, they are prepared for release into the outside world, and there are no bars or walls in the prison, but the inmates are trusted to do daily work outside the prison, in the nearby community.

As far as I know, at the present moment, all prisoners are subject to psychiatric assessment by staff on the premises. There has emerged the notion in relatively recent times, that criminality is a psychological malady, and can be so treated. This, I do not think, for all violent crimes, is realistic. Certainly, violence is part of human psychology, but it is not always a pathology. And what would have been acceptable in the past, is not so now. That does not make it a treatable illness. This is common sense. What is the difference between a man who assaults his wife during an argument at home, and a police officer who strikes a woman demonstrator with his gloved hand on the spur of the moment? Is it the uniform?

Hospital wings and punishment blocks are to be found to various degrees of sophistication in prisons, as well as separate blocks for vulnerable prisoners. These last can be judged vulnerable for all sorts of reasons: they may be sexual criminals, paedophiles and rapists, who are detested by the general run of prisoners; feeble-minded, alcoholic, or otherwise excluded inmates. Sometimes, when prisoners have rioted, and gained control of the inside of the jail, these prisoners are picked upon and made to suffer punishment at the hands of their fellows. It is quite irrational, since the non-prison population tends to equate the rapist and the prisoner. The latter feels, maybe, that the sexual criminals are not ‘manly’ enough. Anyhow they, who have suffered the whiplash of morality, are quite keen to exercise it on others. This demonstrates the weakness of the prisoner: his lack of ability to think and act as a group. Therefore he is susceptible to organised and disciplined forces which seek to exert power over him.  
 Though in Britain, unlike with some other countries, terrorists and criminals can both be prisoners, the former is not a criminal, so is not an ordinary prisoner. The IRA man and the member of Al-Qaeda are political prisoners, and the Islamist will behave like no criminal would: he can attempt to blow himself up with the aim of martyrdom, and attaining heaven: this is not criminal behaviour. I do not know why it has not been said by others, but the Islamist seems to be mad, quite literally. He is not a normal criminal and prisoner.

In America the death penalty for murder operates in several states. Places like Texas seem to outdo all the others put together in the number of annual executions. This shows how the death penalty is not a deterrence against murder; it is rather a form of revenge, and an expression of rage. It is pointless, for the dead will not be thereby resurrected. Biblical sanction is urged in the places where there is the death penalty; but it is not the New Testament cited here, but the Old. The depths of the depravity of the states’ treatment of death-row inmates is in inverse proportion to their adherence to the Christian faith, the founder of which was a man executed by the state. They see no irony in their actions and beliefs. Their hypocrisy is total.

America is a huge, continent-sized country, with hundreds of millions of people. The prison population runs into the millions, and, as in Britain, recent stringency in sentencing has been responsible for this. Drugs-criminality is vast, and gun-ownership is a constitutional right. I understand that the state of California spends more on its prisons than on its schools. The country is a violent one, and the welfare state is tiny. Whole ghettos are abandoned to lawlessness and gangs.

American treatment of prisoners range from those states which allow conjugal visits whilst in jail, to execution. There has been supreme court deliberation on whether the death-penalty constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. Certainly the regime in many of the maximum-security prisons amounts to torture. The land of Disney is also the land of lethal injection. This is the most common form execution takes in the modern American prison system. A man is strapped prostrate on a cruciform frame. He is injected with drugs which stop him breathing and paralyse him until dead. I do not know of any states which still use the electric-chair or gas-chamber. There may be some.

In Britain there was until quite recently, the two-strikes legislation for life sentences. In America, I believe this has an effect, especially in California. It depends on the different states as to what exactly their criminal code and prison systems are like. The federal government in Washington has little power. A liberal and reforming American president has more power overseas than at home, and America is a deeply conservative country.

Prison-based drugs gangs, especially amongst the Latino population, exercise great sway in the criminal fraternity. Murders may be ordered by jail inmates of other gang-members outside the prison. One prison group, spread throughout the American prison estate, is the Aryan Brotherhood, a new-Nazi, white supremacist organisation; in-jail crime and violence is carried out by the members.

Prisoners in American jails, especially the Mexican gangs, wear tattoos, like criminals in the prison-system of every country in the world. American prisoners are noted for their violence and danger. At least, that is their reputation. How can one country contain such extremes of lifestyles? Perhaps the falsity of the sentimentalized American family, and the degradation of the American prisoner and criminal go together. A land which venerates marriage, but in which divorce is so prevalent and rampant is a hollow nation spiritually. One entails the other.

Although the black man in America may be a politician or a professional, he is more often a proletarian and a prisoner. As we see, history is largely responsible for this, but history is the history of people, and people are to blame: both the white man and the black man. We must not fool ourselves however, into imagining the emancipation of the black man and the prisoner to be swift. They are both inextricably linked, and change of culture and outlook is requisite.

I consider now black individuals and their psychology, and shall begin with the famous or the notorious and end up with ordinary people in Africa and the Americas.

The first British colony in Africa to be awarded full independence was Ghana, in West Africa, in the late nineteen-fifties. As a student in Britain, and as a young man, Kwame Nkrumah had moved in liberal-leftist circles, and agitated for the independence of his native territory. Britain was in dire economic straits after the Second World War, and the Suez debacle of 1957 had hastened the end of the remaining British Empire.

Nkrumah became the leader of Ghana upon its independence, and sought to impose upon it an African form of socialism. This experiment however, did not survive long, and in the mid-sixties he was deposed following an army coup. This is a pattern common to many newly independent African countries, and their rulers. Idealism made them adopt socialism as the only non-racialistic political doctrine they had encountered in their early lives in Europe, just as in Britain, as elsewhere, anti-fascists had seen no hope against the spread of the doctrine save the adoption of communism, before the war.

Africa was not ready for socialism, and to this day is not sufficiently developed for it. Idealism thus, was a feature of black politicians in the early days of independence. Utopianism rather-for Africa could not support welfare states-led to disenchantment among the ruling elites, and this led to corruption. This is a feature that has persisted amongst Africa’s rulers. It became a feature of Nkrumah’s government, and a reason for the coup-d’etat.

Maybe if people like Nkruma had been more deeply imbued with African culture and traditions, they would not have attempted to impose an alien creed on an unreceptive continent. We see what the failure of dogma over reality does to rulers, and this has been exemplified in the vase of Robert Mugabe. Not only was he a Marxist, but he was embittered by the long struggle for independence of the black majority in Rhodesia from the white minority. He fought in the bush with his guerilla army, and he was incarcerated by the white government for over a decade.

In prison he acquired a higher education, earning several degrees and in 1980 a treaty brokered by the British made him president of the country. He was twisted by his suffering however, and never lost the sense of desire for revenge and feelings of inferiority. He made his black political opponents suffer, causing massacres to be carried out on his orders, and sent his party members finally out on a mission ro appropriate white-owned farms. These were well-run businesses and kept the country well-fed. Taking over white-run farms, and substituting African subsistence farming led to starvation for many of his countrymen. The pure dogma of African ownership of the land led to economic disaster. Unemployment rocketed, and so did inflation to unheard- of levels. The dogma was adhered to, and Britain and America were blamed for the country’s misfortunes. People left it in their millions, but since Mugabe was recognised as a hero of black liberation, the leaders of the nearby countries did nothing to restrain him.

Here we see evidence of the legacy of suffering, humiliation and colonialism. It has made a man a monster, motivated by revenge and corrupted. This was not their effect on a remarkable black man, Nelson Mandela. He led the African National Congress, and this organisation had, in the 1960s, decided upon a strategy of terrorism to end apartheid in South Africa. Mandela was sentenced to a life-sentence term, along with others in the movement in the mid-1960s. He spent even longer in prison than Mugabe, and whilst there went through a spiritual journey. After 27 years in the jail on Robben Island, the journey led to forgiveness.

Already an educated man, a lawyer, whilst in jail Mandela educated himself even further. He kept in touch with outside events, and grew old with his companions. When released in the early 1990s, after much civic disturbance in South Africa, much pressure from the international community, and after the end of the Cold War, he took up leadership of the ANC party, and when the first democratic elections took place in a post-apartheid south Africa, he was elected president of the nation. Influenced by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Truth and Reconciliation commission was set up, where former members of the apartheid government could tell their tales and make recompense to the victims of the system’s families. And this without legal punishment.

Mandela was obviously an exceptional man, but it is his time in prison which made him the man he became, and this must not be forgotten. He never lost touch with his African context. He was not twisted by imprisonment and humiliation: he responded by realism and forgiveness.

Idi Amin was not such a person. He was a sergeant in the colonial army in Uganda, and upon its independence was strangely made into a General. A huge, imposing man, he gradually engineered a coup against the civilian government, and instituted a reign of terror. He acted the clown on the international stage, with his self aggrandisement and personality cult, but at home he committed massacres, took part in polygamous marriages, and was rumoured to be a cannibal.

He terrorised his government and his people. And performed an act of singular black racism when he, at a stroke, expelled the entire Asian population, most of whom went to Britain in the 1970s. He had a white man, an ex-soldier, as a ‘Mr. Fixit’, to enable him to rule as despotically and erratically as possible.

Amin was a man who always felt in awe of the British Empire, and decided to live up to and emulate, in his own mind, its glories. This was part of his clownishness. But he was psychotic and deeply disturbed. How much of this was owing to feelings of inferiority learnt from his early years in the British colonial army of Uganda, how much innate, I do not know.

He was overthrown when a foreign African ruler sent in his army to depose him, and fled to Saudi Arabia, where he died, years later. His is not such an exceptional story among African leaders. Total power, unchecked, led to extremes of behaviour, and especially of violence and depravity. This happened in Amin’s case. Added to that, tribal rivalries encouraged rulers to take their populations along paths they might not otherwise have gone.

An American black man, a son of slavery, shows the other face of the coin among black leaders. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a southern Baptist preacher, in a

black church. In the 1950s he led the Civil Rights movement for the ending of segregation in the American South, and the acquisition by blacks of the vote there. He took part in many protest marches, and was an inspirational orator.

He led hundreds of thousands of demonstrators against racial oppression, of all races, and not a few times had to suffer imprisonment for brief periods. Television enabled the whole country, and the world, to listen to his words and watch his deeds. He was a graduate of a black university, and he was part of the general movement which started in the ‘fifties in America, and culminated with the counter-cultural permissive society of the 1960s. It was a great period, when poets, musicians, artists, film-makers, writers and such like people led and changed the world.

A leading centre of this era was London, and a cultural revolution spread out all over the world from it. King was part of this age, and he lived to see the Civil Rights Act enforced in America by a democrat Presidency. It was also a violent time in that country, as blacks rioted in the ghettos, and students demonstrated against the Vietnam War. Dr. King was a man of religion, though the FBI sought to undermine him with a secret file of supposed sexual misdeeds. This was part of the prejudice the black man in America had always faced: that he is a sexual predator. King was the victim of the violence of his country and his times, and he was assassinated in 1968.

Like Mandela, he too was exceptional, and sought to lead his race along the path of non-violence, in emulation of Ghandi. He was articulate and saintly, and never doubted the foundations of his Christian faith. I wonder if he probed deeply into how it came about, how he acquired it, and who it came from. After his death, the Black movement in America lost its greatest leader, and it degenerated into violent splinter-groups, who had no hope of achieving their aim. The Permissive Society became drug-riddled and crime-infested, as did the black man’s communities

Michael de Freitas was a West Indian immigrant in England in the early ‘sixties. He worked as an enforcer, a gangster, for a slum-landlord. In the Permissive society of London he set up on his own as a drugs-dealer. He got to know famous people, and to move in progressive cultural circles.

As a gangster, he set himself up as a black leader, with a host of black, criminal footsoldiers at his beck and call. He was taken seriously enough as such in the media. The organisation he led aimed for black liberation and assertion. It was largely a cover for criminal activities, but as some of his clients were famous people in the progressive movement of the ‘sixties, who took drugs, like the Beatles and their associates, he found that notoriety rubbed off on him. He was sent to prison for a stint when he overreached himself, and made anti-white, racially threatening statements amounting to incitement to hatred against racial groups. He was deported, or went into exile, back to Trinidad, his native island, in the West Indies.  
 After setting up with a group of like-minded West Indians and Americans in a house in a rural area of the country, he grew gradually more and more unbalanced. He, with his friends, killed another member of the group, and later murdered the white mistress of a visiting American friend. He fled the island, and was found in South America.

He was tried in Trinidad for the murders, a story which made international news, and sentenced to death. He was hung, and his group broke up. Even in the West Indies, De Freitas worked as a black agitator, though the circumstances were different there than in Britain. De Freitas' story was a pitiful one. He changed his name to Michael X, the last letter to signify that he had lost his family name as a result of slavery, and he became a Muslim.

He was not an educated man, which is probably why in England he felt alien and became a gangster. His resentments built up, and his sense of inferiority. Like Mugabe, he became a monster, but maybe not for any innate perversion of character, but because of history and circumstance. The liberalized society in England in the sixties allowed him to rise, to fulfil himself, but only in a limited way, a twisted way. Like most men, he had ambition, but it could not be satisfied in the socially recognised manner given his abilities. This was why he probably took to crime. Once he had risen a certain height, he became a victim of his own myth, and did not realise that the confidence trickster can only go so far, fool a few people.

My reading of De Freitas' history engenders profound pity, and I do not think even his murders deserved the death penalty by hanging- the most shameful of deaths.

So we see that in the black continent, in America, in the West Indies, the terrible and common result of the black man's encounter with the outside world is a deforming and limiting inferiority complex. It affects black men, whether they be in the projects of Chicago or are the rulers of nations. Only exceptional men escape it.

One such was the author James Baldwin. Others have written about his oeuvre, and I will not do so specifically here, except to say that his is one of the most powerful and beautiful literary voices of the twentieth century. He grew up in New York, and his father was a pastor in a black church. He spoke rhetorically, in church as a young boy, and it had been decided for him that he would follow his father into the ministry.

But in his adolescence he changed his mission, and aimed to be a writer. He said he had seen too many 'college-graduate handymen' in the black community, and did not go to university. In this he followed Hemingway. He read voraciously, and early on was especially impressed by Dostoevski. The latter's themes and style, and darkness, was an influence on him, which he later said was 'fatal'.

Apparently, he told his father that he could do anything a white boy could do, to his father's astonishment and fear. It seems he won a literary prize very early, and with the money he went to France. There he came of age as a writer, composing some of the novels and gleaning the material that would make his name.

He wrote, in more than one book, of the psychology of homosexual love. He wrote about the civil rights movement when in America. He wrote of sex, writing, race, politics, in his novels and non-fiction. All in the seamless, powerful prose, full of metaphor and imagination, that characterises him.

He was a homosexual, and seemed to entertain a dark, fatal vision of the love. He was an intellectual leader of his time, who wrote classical works of analysis, such as 'Notes of a Native Son', and 'The Fire Next Time'. He had bulging, staring eyes, and though a friend told me he was ugly, it seems to me he was extremely beautiful, his face radiating intelligence and intensity.

He did not, in 'Notes of a Native Son', say that it was all the white man's fault, but, contemplating the dead body of his father in his coffin at church, said that, 'The dead man was important; blackness and whiteness were not important.' 'Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hates, and this was an immutable law.' The fates of the black and white races were intertwined he said, in 'The Fire Next Time'. It was in the white man's self interest to liberate the black man. Mandela's exceptionality may be due to his period in jail; Dr. King's to his Christian faith. Baldwin's seems innate: he got it from nowhere but himself. Chinua Achebe was a Nigerian writer who made his theme Africa from the African's point-of-view. His first novel, 'Things Fall Apart', presents a story of a tribal leader and community, in Nigeria, before the arrival of the European. It is extremely strange to ears primed to words written by middle-class authors for a middle-class readership. The novel deliberately ends when, after tribal life and events have been depicted at length, and in detail, through the mind of an African, white colonial strangers arrive and decide to classify them according to European prejudices. Because he suffered from an illness not easily treatable in Nigeria, Achebe decided to live in America. This is ironic, but he said that he only felt inspired by Nigeria, to which he returned, at different times.

The black man in Africa retains his tribalism, and even when he has adopted Christianity, modifies it to his own tastes. Some Africans believe in witchcraft and magic, and in some regions there is a belief in spirit-possession, even alongside a Christian faith. Subsistence farming is widespread, and urbanization, though growing, is not great. The black man is by now, in America, a creature of the projects and urban ghettos. He is more and more assimilated into the wider community and economy, but the events can show that, just because the Civil Rights movement was politically successful some time ago, he can still feel alienated and excluded. He leads, and has led, in the production of popular American musical genres. Crime and subsistence on welfare is common in the community. These are massive generalizations, and there are many exceptions to these characterizations.

The most celebrated prisoner in English history was Oscar Wilde. He was a remarkably unconventional man, with the broadest of minds. People said that he was a man who could easily entertain the company of a burglar, and treat him with the greatest of tolerance and forbearance. He was consequently a victim of Victorian morality and went to prison for two years on a conviction of homosexual practices. His mind was free and he flickered with intelligence. He was the last person who should have been sent to jail.

He grew quickly and easily bored. Confinement oppressed him. The cruel newspapers of the times enjoyed depicting him pacing back and forth in his cell as he awaited trial. The prison uniform was a torment to his sensitive skin, as was the coarse food to his refined tastes.

When he was escorted by the prison guards, his long hair shaven, in a train station, he was recognised and spat upon. The memory of it regularly brought tears to his eyes, as the hours passed in his cell. He, for some time, was put on a regime of hard labour, working the treadmill.

Later on he worked in the prison library, a more gentle occupation; but he had been broken by his imprisonment, and he collapsed. He was divorced; he suffered beatings; but he did manage to compose a long essay, 'De Profundis', to his lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. It was unimaginable that the brilliant, paradoxical social comedies could ever come from his pen again, but he did find the material to write his greatest poem; 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', when he left prison. Compared to the sentimental aesthetical poems he had previously written, this was a huge improvement, for the material was sincerely felt and utterly serious. People do write when they are imprisoned, but almost never is the subject fictional or comic. Something alive within one is killed by imprisonment.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a victim of the GULAG. As a soldier in the Russian Army during the Second World War he was caught making disparaging remarks about Stalin. He went to the Siberian prison camp system. He was an educated man, and later wrote a fictional account of life in a labour camp, called One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich'. Reading this book, one feels inspired every time to eat brown bread and soup, like the inmates. When he left the GULAG after Stalin's death, he wrote and taught mathematics. The book was submitted to ever higher levels of political authority before anyone could take the courage to publish it. At last, it reached Nikita Kruschev, who cleared it for publication. One reader at the publisher's felt when he read it that he had to put on an evening suit. This was uncommon literature, and deserved respect.

The prisoner Ivan Denisovich is a good worker. He lays bricks on the infrastructure project the inmates are engaged upon. Before going outside to work, the prisoners carefully consult the thermometer. They must not breathe on it, or the temperature will go up. If it is too cold, they get off work.

Later, inside, the degraded behaviour of one prisoner who wants a cigarette stub is portrayed. The smoker, a 'rich' man, has to decide: who shall he give it to? One prisoner looks at him hungrily and openly like a dog, with his tongue hanging out. Ivan behaves with greater dignity, and only looks out of the corner of his eye. The smoker gives the stub to Ivan: 'Take it, Ivan Denisovich.'

Just one day is recounted, and the book became an international classic. It won the author a Nobel Prize. When Solzhenitsyn had been expelled from the Soviet Union, he wrote about the Russian labour camp system in 'The GULAG Archipelago'. When the Soviet Union fell, Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia from America. He detested the hollow 'television stupor' of the West, and in his homeland was recognised as its conscience. He denounced the Russian Oligarchs, the successors to the communists; he spoke before the Duma; and he outlived Stalin and the Soviet Union, a government of gangsters in his opinion, which had imprisoned him. He was a religious, nationalist and conservative man.

Geoffrey Archer was a conservative too, a peer of the realm, and a candidate for London's mayor. He went to jail because of perjury. He was sentenced to four years, of which he would have to serve two. He spent three weeks in the maximum security prison, Belmarsh, where he came close to suicide. Only the thought that he might fail and have to go to the horrible hospital wing stopped him.

Archer was surprised at the loudness of the rap music the prisoners played on their radios. He quickly subsisted on a minimal vegetarian diet owing to the badness of the food. His dinner parties in London had been famous. He was a millionaire novelist. But the prisoners' only complaint with the unpalatable food was that there was not enough of it.

He was subject to light harassment as a famous man. He also spoke with incredulity of how one prison governor during an interview, told him that they found public school boys adapted best to prison. He soon was put in an open prison where he could collate all the notes he had been writing for his prison diaries. These were published after he left prison, to great acclaim. Whilst he was at an open prison, he was able to work outside the premises, in the local town. There he was photographed by a newspaper, having lunch with a prison officer. A scandal was concocted by the tabloid press, which doubted whether he really was a prisoner. He had, for a long time, whilst in jail, been able to visit his family and friends at weekends. They did not abandon him.

As a result, and for political reasons, he was put into a closed prison for a few weeks, to satisfy the media. It was even said that the Home Secretary planned to send him to the deepest, darkest hole in the prison system, because parts of his diary had been appearing, in serialized form, in the press. This did not happen, and soon he was returned to an open prison, and not long thereafter, released on parole. His family, his friends, stood by him; even his wife, which was difficult, because he had perjured himself over a sexual liaison.

Charles Bronson was an armed robber, who has served, at the time of writing, thirty-five years in prison. He has not committed murder, but has been so violent whilst in prison, that he has earned a reputation as the most violent man in the prison system. He has been put under a regime of solitary confinement, and has been treated as if he were an animal. Perhaps the reason he was so violent is that he simply does not like being locked up, and would not be a danger if given his liberty.

His case shows that the British prison system can be cruel, and is as cruel as those who enforce it. I have already said that only a certain sort of person would make it their business to keep another man locked up; and such a person must be prone to sadistic tendencies, as well as an inability to regard those he has power over as properly human. Bronson has won awards for literary efforts in jail, so is not sub-human. He should not be so treated. Human sympathy should be extended towards him.

Certain prisoners reveal patterns that are common with the general type. Jonathan Aitken was a Cabinet minister who was found guilty of perjury. As a member of the government he was, early on in his prison sentence, subjected to bullying. But he was protected by a set of old-style criminals, or gangsters, whilst in jail, from the people who sought to trouble him. He only had a relatively short sentence, but never lost his gratitude to these prisoners, and when he left jail, maintained a close friendship with them. He lived in elevated social circles, and he took his friendship even there, when he regained his freedom.

Another thing he got from prison was a christian faith, and wrote a book about his experiences, started in prison, in the light of that religious faith. This is quite common to not a few prisoners, especially those who have never been to jail before. He was a stern law-and-order conservative before being imprisoned; but afterwards became more open and liberal, advising the conservative party on prison policy. Something similar happened when the American heiress Paris Hilton went to prison. I suppose all she knew of it when first sent there on a driving offence, was what she learned from Hollywood films. She was traumatised by her experience, even though her sentence was short, and resolved to help women who had come out of prison and were socially excluded. She had some sort of religious epiphany, like Aitken, but it was shallow and short-lived, and she was soon back to her empty, socialite life-style.

The areas of prisons which hold murderers and life-sentence prisoners are noted for their relative civility. The prisoners generally aim not to cause trouble, or get into fights. Since their release is dependent upon parole, and parole upon good behaviour, they behave themselves. They do work and take up educational courses. But they are prisoners, and if they can get them, will use drugs, which can be smuggled into prisons in all sorts of ways, by every sort of person, even officers. They may also make alcohol, and conceal it from the staff. Prisoners are regularly tested for drugs.

Murderers, and such like prisoners, will see the psychologists, or take psychotropic medication. They go on courses designed to enable them to control their anger, and these may be a condition of their release. Murderers are prone to commit suicide, say, over the length of their sentence, despair, the conditions in prison, or regret.

The rest of the prison population, consisting of prisoners who know when they will get out, can be more disturbed. They feel they have little to lose, will bully others, and take drugs.

Whatever the religion of the black man in Africa, there are moral constants in operation across the entire continent. In the Sahara and Savannah regions, Islam is dominant, and in the sub-Saharan areas, Christianity, in the forms of Catholicism and Anglicanism, is widespread, and rising. These two Abrahamic faiths have been superimposed upon, and are greatly influenced by, older animistic beliefs. The ancestors are worshipped, as are the spirits of the forest and the elements. So Christianity is shot through with acceptance of witchcraft and demon-possession. Evangelical forms of the faith, with much rhythmic dancing and drum-beating, are increasingly popular, especially in West Africa.

The coexistence of the two great Abrahamic faiths of Islam and Christianity, allied to tribal allegiances, led in the 1960's to the war of secession in Nigeria, in Biafra. The Muslim north was pitted against the Christian Ibos, in the south. Like most great civil wars, there was much suffering in Biafra, the rebellious state, many massacres, and a huge deal of starvation, especially among the children. All this was played out in front of the television cameras in the West. The rebellion failed, but only after it was brutally put down by the Muslim armies of the north of the country. It was a moral as much a political event.

In the 1990's, tribal rivalries between the Hutus and the Tutsis in Rwanda, in East Africa, led to a brutal and primitive genocide of the Tutsis, as neighbour turned on neighbour, with machetes. The racial differences between the tribes of the former Belgian colony were minimal: a matter of skin tone and nasal width. But it led to a shameful massacre where hundreds of thousands were killed in the streets and in their homes.

The general brutalism of Africans is manifested in the AIDS pandemic in Southern Africa. After apartheid, South Africa became the crime and rape capital of the continent. The murder-rate spiralled out of control, as did the thefts and muggings; and women were victimized by the male population, with a huge swathe of females being subjected to the crime of rape. Their age was not a barrier, nor their sexuality, with lesbians being singled out for special attention by the men. AIDS has created a generation of orphans throughout Southern Africa, even though the sexual nature of the disease means that mention of it is publicly taboo. Also, the authorities are loath to recognise the viral nature of the infection, and cling to outmoded beliefs in primitive African medications.

Concerning sex and sexuality, the Christian churches in Africa are notably reactionary in their views. When the Ecumenical Church in America caused a controversy by electing an openly homosexual bishop, those laity in the USA who could not tolerate him accepted a black, West African bishop as their spiritual leader. Homosexuality in the priesthood has caused schism in the entire Anglican church, with Africa being the focus of reactionary forces. It is ironical how the black man is so intolerant of a vulnerable minority, and is prepared to make it the object of discrimination, forgetting how he himself has been treated by other races.

The black man is generally sexist and misogynistic, and he is also rampantly homophobic, in whatever continent he is to be found. This is a symptom of his primitivism, which can be manifested, in Africa, in tribalism, and tribal warfare, which ravages large regions.

The West Indies is noted for its religiosity and amorality, a manifestation of which is the drugs trade. Now, this is, at first sight, paradoxical, but maybe is comprehensible when one realises the background against which the black man was Christianized. The latter was the religion of the slave owner and colonist, who was both feared and respected. The slave learnt to despise himself, and a feature of this was the acceptance of Christianity, which the master showed by his practice he did not really believe in.

Consequently, the black man hypocritically mouths his religion. Catholicism and Pentecostalism, where worshippers go into frenzies and speak in tongues, are common throughout the region. The black man believes in a blond-haired blue-eyed Jesus; professes also to believe in his ethic, but is not a genuinely practising Christian. In the West Indies the death penalty is vigorously adhered to: a sign of and contribution to the brutality of those societies.

The West Indian black man belongs to simple islands with petty values of money and race. A man's worth increases with the amount of money he has, and the fairness of his skin. The black man has a fine eye for shades of blackness, which equate to value. The black man in the West Indies is notably narrow-minded, with limited horizons, and a deep inferiority-complex; and even when he walks in the company of the great, he takes his smallness with him. It takes a special kind of man to be born there, and yet rise above the common herd by his own efforts, and attain stature on the world stage. Such a man was Derek Walcott, the poet, who won a Noble prize for literature in the 1990's.

Pentecostalism is an American creation, of a black man, I think, and the churches in America are largely segregated by race. This is a natural division. Black men are attracted to Evangelical Christianity, with its show of faith and lack of sincerity. They like the noise and the music. That the black man's christian faith is hollow is demonstrated by his adherence to crime and gangsterism. He consumes and markets recreational drugs, which destroy what he has left of his soul. He is notoriously sexist and homophobic. He is generally promiscuous, leaving the women he has fathered children by to bring up her family on her own. Is this a hangover from slavery, when families were broken up and sold, and the men used as studs to breed the next generation of slaves? Or is it a more general African trait? That it may be the latter is evidenced by the spread of AIDS through Africa, a consequence of blatant promiscuity. But then, the African, especially in the south, is, like the slave, a humiliated man, who lost his masculinity.

Among prisoners, we have the tendency with many of them to adopt the morality of the jailer. Some holocaust victims felt truly guilty. An indication is the acquisition of a faith, usually Christianity, after a period of incarceration. The tendency was noted in Boris Pasternak's book, Dr Zhivago, when good and idealistic men adopted the rationalizations of the Bolsheviks, when jailed for a long time. The Doctor dismissed these 'conversions' with contempt. Is the same to be said of those who, nowadays, become Christian, or 'get religion', after being in prison? Is this to be said of the religious conversion of men like Jonathan Aitken? I do not know.

The Nazi party, especially the Brownshirts, had many ex-prisoners in its ranks. And the doctrine appeals to prisoners to this very day, who are quite overtly Nazi. Islam is similar in its morality to much of Facism, and it appeals to ethnic-minority prisoners in Great Britain. The sexism and homophobia are greatly attractive to the prisoner-mind, which is generally misogynistic and tends to despise women, who are a civilizing influence in society. Prisoners do not like the admission of physical weakness and vulnerability.

More typical than faith among prisoners is amorality. Any expedient available to achieve whatever one wants, as long as it is easy, is acceptable among them. So drugs and theft abound in prisons. Violence, and at the extremes, murder, can be features of prison life. There is some truth to the belief that the criminal mind is, to an extent, sick; and psychopathy is greater among prisoners than in the general run of the population. For the ranks of prisoners are equivalent to the lower depths of depravity in society. One must admit it; though large numbers of prisoners are simply pathetic and inadequate human beings: weak men.

Between the races of the human species there is very little genetic difference. This is shown by the lack of any barrier to procreation between the different races. Miscegenation is a cultural misnomer: there is nothing unnatural about it. It has though been seen as almost equivalent to bestiality, especially in relation to sexual intercourse between white and black races. Until very recently, in some of the southern states of America, it was a crime for the races to intermarry. Within living memory, the phenomenon of a white man kissing a black woman on the television screen, or in the films, was shocking, unheard of, and prohibited by censorship.

The shape of a black man's skull compared to the Caucasian's, is somewhat different. Certain facial characteristics are emphasised, like the nose-width and the thickness of the lips with the black man. This is an environmental, evolutionary trait, or else culturally evolved. There are some racially-specific diseases the black man is subject to, in different parts of the world. In the Caribbean, owing to the diet, strokes and kidney failure are more common than elsewhere. Sickle- cell anaemia only pertains to the black race. Bone-marrow has evolved along racial lines as well, such that only marrow from black donors is suitable for patients of that race.

Like all races, the black man is so adapted as to predominate in certain activities. In the Americas, black excel in athletic sports. This may be innate to the regions of Africa he was taken from, or be the result of generations of slavery, when he was suited to and bred for harsh physical exertion on the plantations.

In Eastern Africa the people lead in long-distance running events in international athletic meetings. The black man has less fat content to muscle in his natural environment, and wherever he is to be found takes this feature with him, than other races. He is not as prone to suffer from eating-disorders as is the white man. These disorders seem to be a trait of highly advanced societies. In America, and other parts of the New World, he suffers quite as much as the white man from obesity, in recent years. It is an unpleasant sight.

Is the relative backwardness of black culture due to some cerebral deficiency in the race as a whole? This has been asserted to be the case; but maybe the lack of contact with other cultures and civilisations for much of their history, is one reason for the lack of evolution the societies of Africa manifest. Cultural cross-breeding has been a feature of many of more historically advanced peoples. If one is placed where societies intermingle and cross-reference, as in the Near East, ideas and concepts may bring forth shoots in many different areas. Africa however was cut off by the climate, the barrier of the Sahara desert, and the density of the rain-forests, from civilization.

The Victorians did equate the black races and the prisoner-type. The prisoner seemed to exemplify a nature physically different to the social norm. His features were more bony than average; his forehead seemed to slope backwards, and his brain-case was smaller. Finally, his jawbone protruded, so that he had a prognathous appearance. The Victorians believed in phrenology, reading a person's character from the shape of the skull. The criminal-type and the black man were of a piece, and only skin colour differentiated them in Western society.

Observation of prisoners leads to the conclusion that there are some types of cranial features which are irreconcilable with criminality. Some people just could not be found behind bars among prisoners. How has this happened? Many of our present-day ancestors were peasant-stock, and definitely could be found in prison. Has the gene for criminality been bred out over the ages; or is it not genetic, but a matter of nurture, upbringing, and environment? In most cases, I believe it is the latter; and this indicates the fluidity of the human condition. Classless, but not class-ridden, societies hold that the difference between wealthy and poor people is not an innate human matter, a matter of one's genes; and poorer people populate prisons.

I enter upon the subject of the black man in literary fiction, by considering the work of some authors who featured black characters in their novelistic efforts. Mark Twain was an American writer, born in the South in the 19th century, whose life spanned the periods before, during, and after the Civil War. His work is full of irony and humour, and the character I speak of here is to be found in his novel, 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn'.

Set in the South, before the war and during the days of slavery, Huck Finn has come into a fortune as a boy. He is the son of the town drunkard, and a vagabond. He is taken into the home of the Widow Douglas, and is oppressed by the restraints of civilisation. His father, returning home to the town in the hope of getting Huck's windfall, kidnaps him from his guardian's care and keeps him prisoner in a hut on the Mississippi. He escapes when his father goes away, and plans to flee down the river, away from his father, who beats him; away from civilisation, which oppresses him.

He takes a raft and encounters Jim, the runaway black slave of his former guardian, the Widow Douglas. Both decide to go down the river, to a town called Cairo, where Jim will make a full break for freedom. Though the novel is full of humour, it is seriously intended. The depravity of the communities Huck and Jim stop off at, on their journey south on the river, is relentlessly and wickedly portrayed.

Jim grows in Huck's eyes as a fully-rounded human being. Jim tells him of how he had struck his young daughter after she had recovered from a bout of scarlet fever, telling her to shut the door of their hut. She did not respond to his orders, and suddenly he realises that she has been stricken deaf and dumb by her illness. He grabbed her in his arms, and wept tears of contrition. He was full of remorse for having treated her so. Huck realises that the black man feels for his children as a white person would.

Jim's ignorance is cunningly demonstrated as wisdom, in other places. When Huck tells Jim about French, and speaks some to him, which he himself has only recently been introduced to at school, since previously he had been an ignorant vagrant, Jim is disgusted. Why can't the Frenchman say what he means, like an American? Huck reasons: Does a cat talk like a dog, or a man like a cat? No. Well, the Frenchman doesn't talk like an American: that is his way of speaking. Jim replies: Is a cat a man, or a dog? Is a Frenchman a man? Yes. Well, why doesn't he talk like a man? Huck gives up: 'You can't teach a black man to argue, so I quit.' The irony is open.

Twain knew Oscar Wilde, and visited his house in Chelsea. His mind was free. He shows in 'Huckleberry Finn', his masterwork, a sympathy he conceived early for the black race. He did not fight for the South during the Civil War. He understood the iniquities of slavery, where man owned man, and could sell and buy him, and act like a corrupt God.

V. S. Naipaul was a West Indian from the island of Trinidad, of Asian stock. In his book, Guerillas, he bases his fiction on the true events that concerned Michael de Freitas and his associates. At the time of writing, Trinidad had undergone disturbances, where young men took off into the bush and hills, and waged guerilla warfare on the police.

Jimmy is the fictional anti-hero, the alter-ego of de Freitas, on a small, unnamed Caribbean island. He heads a group of city boys, who live with him in a commune in the forest. The white main character arrives from South Africa to liaise with Jimmy and his group, for a shadowy organisation. He brings with him his mistress Jane, a white woman. These two visit Jimmy's commune. The black boys appal jane. The conditions disgust her. She however feels an attraction to Jimmy, a man of danger.

Later, she goes back to his house and starts up an affair with him. This fails to satisfy her. But she behaves like she is on safari, and can go into dangerous places and remain unscathed. The second time she goes to Jimmy's house, the sex is different. He sodomises her and forces tears from her eyes, at which she is astonished. Walking out in the bush afterward, he tells her to beware of a certain tree. There is always a snake at the bottom of it. 'Can you smell it, Jane?' he asks her. 'Smell what?' she replies. 'Snake! It smells of sex, Jane; bad, stale sex. It smells of a dirty cunt.'

He also tells her that they will meet one of his boys, who had run away from the group: Bryant. 'You remember Bryant?' he queries. 'I don't remember Bryant', she says. 'He remembers you', he replies menacingly.

Bryant had been one of the boys Jane had seen on the first visit. He had horrified her. His hair was in pig-tails, deliberately ugly, a Medusa's head.

Bryant appears. He wields a machete. Jimmy grabs Jane around the neck and offers her to Bryant: 'The rat! Kill the white rat! Your rat, Bryant!' Bryant slays her with the weapon, and the two men conceal the body, as best they can.

Later, the South African man, Jane's lover, arrives to visit. He realises something is amiss when he sees Jimmy with Bryant, with his machete. He goes home. He phones to tell Jimmy that Jane is with him, and they are leaving. The police know his whereabouts. He will not return to Jimmy's house at the latter's insistence. He knows Jane has been murdered. The last word in the book is Jimmy's; it is 'Massa' ('Master').

Naipaul holds a fatal vision of the black man's condition in the West Indies, and elsewhere; even blacker than the one presented in this essay. He is a dwarf, struggling against his hopeless limitations. Though this book is dark and humourless, there is more fun in his early novel, 'Miguel Street', where the same pettiness cripples the black man; but the short chapters that constitute this early work eventually and relentlessly tell the same tale.

James Baldwin, his book 'Another Country', completed in 1961, has two leading black characters. Eric, the white, homosexual son of wealthy Southern parents, has his first affair with a black boy, LeRoy. Eric has pursued LeRoy blindly, and in ignorance of his real aims, but LeRoy knows what the stakes are. He tolerates Eric, even likes him, but knows that their affair can go nowhere; for LeRoy is black. He has sex with Eric, and Eric's eyes are opened. There is not much credulity to be given to the idea that blacks, even in the South, were not homophobic. That is an impression we are meant to take away with us from this book.

When Eric goes to New York, he encounters Rufus Scott, the black jazz drummer. He has an affair with him. Rufus uses Eric sexually, and resents him. Rufus, after Eric has left, meets a young, Southern girl at a party. He engages in an affair with her, which destroys her psychologically, and destroys Rufus, who after his mistress has been committed to an asylum, is homeless, and takes his own life, by drowning.

Rufus was thrilled to have a white woman as his lover; but his sister, Ida, says that he would not have looked twice at so plain a girl had she not been white. Ida says that he is ashamed of being black. In the book the racism of New York at the time is exposed. A black man and a white woman walking together down the street, earn the loathing of the passers-by.

The chief character in the book is an Italian Irishman called Vivaldo Moore; and much of the book is about his attempt to write a novel. Vivaldo is a friend of Rufus; liberal minded. But he remembers when he was younger, how he went to a black prostitute's salon. In the middle of getting undressed for intercourse, her black pimp appears, and claims to be her brother. He demands all the money Vivaldo has, and ejects him from the bedroom. Vivaldo was in no position to fight. He fell for the oldest trick in the book. What did the pimp really want? He asked him. And Vivaldo sees him struggle to articulate a lifetime of resentments and oppression.

Earlier, when Rufus had first met the white girl at a party given by a black singer who had made it big, the singer, a former pimp among other things, said that whenever the studios gave him one of their large cheques, he thought that he was receiving some, just some, of the recompense for the money that white men had made out of black labour.

I have heard it said that, among prisoners, nothing is as judgemental as a roomful of psychopaths. They are all in favour of the death penalty for murder. And a murderer I met was definitely in favour of it, even though it would apply to him. This is of a piece with the tendency of prisoners to condemn and detest, and morally judge the sexual criminal in their midst. Just as the prisoner acquires the morality of his jailer, the murderer employs the harshest condemnation of himself.

I abhor the death penalty, and believe it should apply to no one, however serious the crime he is guilty of. There is something uniquely horrifying in a healthy man being so unnaturally put to death, before his time. We are all going to suffer mortality, and we are all equal, whether guilty or innocent, before it. We all equally, in normal circumstances, wish to avoid it. No matter who the criminal and what the crime, no one should take it upon himself to put another death. This means not Hitler for the Holocaust, nor Pol Pot for the Killing Fields. They may not have known it, but we know, that no one has that right.

The Holocaust is pertinent: some of the men who planned and ordered it were to die in their beds, as free men. This very arbitrariness of human law shows that there is no objective foundation for the morality which sends a person to his death. Indeed, the holocaust was carried out by the state, and its victims were criminals, as the Third Reich defined them: a criminal race.

Hilter was just one man. No amount of personal suffering, even to the point of death, dealt out to him alone, could make up for the torment he inflicted on millions. There is no justice. Imprisonment should be an expedient to keep the world safe from his kind, not make him suffer, and render to it some sort of recompense for his actions.

Again, my writings on the black man are in many ways platitudinous. The black man is not, even in large part in America, a ghetto-dweller or a criminal these days. He is a normal member of the society. He has never been economically better off than today, and his hopes have never been higher. He is a politician, a professional, a capitalist, a university professor, and a student. But much of what I have said was, especially in the recent past, true. And historically, his progress has been, until not so very long ago, as I describe it.

But the black man is victimized by the legal system, in that it is he who suffers the full weight of sentencing when found guilty of crimes, and is least likely to have sympathetic juries or clever lawyers to defend him in court. The caricature of the black man as gangster is just that; but it was more true in the recent past than it is today.

The black man's condition in Africa is less hopeful. He does not seem able to shake off a crippling attachment to his ancient and primitive mores. Too many African states are kleptocracies, in which the populace benefit not at all from whatever wealth the country acquires. Foreign companies mine the minerals. And take them abroad to be made into finished products. In more recent times, rising Third World economic powers like India and China have made investments in Africa. They build the roads and infrastructure, and set up viable industries. They do not, like Western Governments, have colonial baggage in the continent, and do not make stipulations about governance and human-rights. They may be more acceptable to Africa, and a hope for the future.

The environmental and Green movements in the West would, if they examined their motives, like Africa to remain in its present backward state. That way, it does not pollute the planet's atmosphere. Africans must reject that. They have a right not to die young, to have health systems, industries, education and wealth, like the developed world. They have a right to clean water. Environmentalism is a luxury of advanced societies: a luxury Africa cannot afford.

In the West, the fate of the black man and the fate of the prisoner seem intermingled. Where one is emancipated, so is the other. On a more metaphorical and metaphysical level, the condition of the black and the condition of the prisoner identify. Only human progress as a whole will benefit both.

Garvin Rampersad. January 2024.