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Q&A WITH DAVID CAMPBELL

David Campbell†

*Was there anything you wanted to put in your article that you didn't?
Why?*

Tons! Some of it, of course, was just naturally weeded out during the revision process for the sake of clarity and brevity. For example, most of the inmates on Rikers want to work. It helps them pass the time, and it helps them feel productive, but that just didn't seem like a relevant point as the draft started to take shape. Or, for instance, the point that most work on Rikers barely qualifies as such; I've often used the example of four guys watching a fifth change a trash bag. I don't think it's impossible to argue for better pay for incarcerated workers and better jobs for them at the same time. In fact, that would be ideal, that inmates are not only compensated fairly, but compensated to perform labor that is both fulfilling and socially necessary. But getting into the quality of work seemed like it would require a whole lot of extra exposition that the essay just didn't have space for, and it would distract from my main point.

How has the experience of being incarcerated shaped your relationship to writing?

When you're incarcerated, passing the time from one day to the next becomes an absolute priority. It overrides probably everything except food and physical safety. For me, writing and translating became an essential part of the routine I followed in order to pass the time. I did both writing and translating before I was locked up, but not as consistently as I did inside. My routine changed multiple times because the institutional schedule is always changing at Rikers, and you don't have a choice but to organize your day around that. For example, over one period of several months, I would get up at 8 AM, eat breakfast, sit down, and start writing or translating in the day room. I'd work until they called lunch, usually

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for four or five hours, and then try to put in another hour after lunch, at which point the day room usually became too busy to work anymore. I did this every single day, and it became not only something I looked forward to but almost second nature, something I did reflexively. I'm not quite so rigorous since my release, but I do try to hold myself to a similar standard, where I'm consistently setting time aside to write or translate and just sitting down to do the work, whatever that may be.

When you were incarcerated, how did you think you might share your experience one day?

I was regularly sending out handwritten updates to my defense committee, which they would then post online, so I was already sharing my experience to some degree while serving my time. I imagined there might be some interest in my experience after I was released, but I really never thought there would be quite so much of it.

Has that changed since you've been out and writing about those experiences?

Going into jail, I was wary of this very predictable transformation: white person with a middle-class suburban upbringing gets sentenced to a relatively short period behind bars, becomes shocked, depressed, or outraged about the conditions there, and goes on the warpath to get the word out about what it's really like after their release. That felt like a trap to me and perhaps a bit exploitative. I didn't want to fall into it. I wanted to just do my time, put it behind me, and move on to other things in my life. But once you've lived it, purely because it is so weird and so unnecessary, it's impossible not to focus on it. I have friends that did time years ago, and since my release, they've confided to me that they still think about their time inside every day. I know I do.

While I was always open to writing about my experience, I was initially skeptical of the idea of writing a book, which numerous people, both inside and outside, kept suggesting to me. I've since come around on that for a number of reasons and I am currently working on a book about my experience.

How do you consider your audience—those who are incarcerated and those who have never been—when you're writing?

When writing or talking about my time inside, I'm always careful to explain things so that those who have never been incarcerated can understand them. Sometimes this takes some doing; it's easy to forget that one anecdote may be built upon a whole mini society that people aren't familiar with. You have to include a little context, whether that be a footnote,

a parenthetical, or an introductory paragraph. For those inside, I just try to be honest and share the stories I've heard. I'm not trying to exaggerate or put words in anybody's mouth; I'm just trying to pass what I've seen and heard on to a larger audience that might otherwise never know what the guys at Rikers do and feel. Lastly, no snitching. This is a simple rule but an important one. I always review what I write about my time inside to make sure I'm not including anything that would constitute a breach of a fellow prisoner's trust, or worse, put them in danger.

Were there any efforts you began organizing while incarcerated which you continue today? How does your writing/getting published further those efforts?

When I started my sentence, I had zero interest in becoming a jail-house activist. But then COVID struck, and things inside started to deteriorate, and it became very evident to all of us trapped there just how petty, incompetent, and unconcerned for our wellbeing the entire C apparatus was. So, we went on strike. I was one of the key organizers, but it was really a collective effort. Amazingly, we actually won a fair amount of the concessions we demanded. This was in late March of 2020. About a month later, I had a long-form firsthand account of our strike published, and it got a lot of attention on the outside. That was the first time it really became clear to me that I could serve this function of describing what was going on inside, a function that of course benefits me, benefits those who want to learn about it, and hopefully benefits those who were or are locked up there, too.