

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Divergent Voices: Discourses and Perspective

Susan Nagelsen and Charles Huckelbury

Western prisons have been, and continue to be, described in various terms and using a broad range of images, each description relying on the interpretation of the individual, whether prisoner, guard, visitor, academic, or other interested party. It will come as no surprise, then, that the various descriptions, many self-serving, often conflict and even contradict each other. M. C. Escher's famous lithograph, *Ascending and Descending*, serves as a metaphor for this inconsistency, with some of the figures going up the staircase as others descend, all of them retracing the same path in perpetual lockstep.

When applied to Western prisons, this dual nature frequently finds its expression in the public face of the administrators and staff (safety and security) versus the private face (neglect and brutality). This issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) therefore offers an examination of the prison experience, given voice by those who have endured it, framed in terms Escher would doubtless understand and appreciate.

Colin Scholl opens the discussion with a personal narrative of what an American prison is like, in response to frequently asked questions by those on the outside. Scholl's stark recitation reveals its brutal nature. He shows us the life that many prisoners have known and to which they can relate. For at least twenty years, his life is totally controlled, from the time he gets up until the time he goes to bed, and he brings the reader into his struggle against the regimented routine and the constant refrain that he is worthless.

An Australian prisoner, Craig Minogue, recounts his adventure in the absurd world of prison by detailing the bureaucratic obstacles encountered when attempting to get clear plastic covers for his books, which on the face of it is a reasonable request. The incoherent staff responses and the bureaucratic bungling make this simple request resemble a private in the military requesting nuclear launch codes from his commander in chief. The surreal aspect of the account is that Craig Minogue encountered the prison administration's ire after he successfully mounted a campaign to reduce drug abuse by prisoners. His narrative thus parallels Escher's creations perhaps more faithfully than many outsiders would believe, but his is no optical illusion.

Eugene Dey follows with a poignant description of the decline and death of a California prisoner trapped in a system in which sending a prisoner out in a body bag elicits no more reaction than swatting a fly. Diagnosed with hepatitis C long after his symptoms appeared, the lack of medical care produced a terminal condition that could have been controlled in its earlier stages. Freddy was an inveterate armed robber who made no excuses for his choices, but as Eugene Dey points out, even such a man merits fundamental medical treatment and concern for his physical health.

In perhaps a classic example of the bizarre and self-defeating nature of American prisons, Jon Marc Taylor delves into the labyrinthine (and lucrative) nature of prison phone services. Given the obscene profits phone companies reap from overcharging prisoners and their families for a few minutes of conversation, Jon Marc Taylor devised a plan to channel some or all of the prison's percentage of the profits into a fund for higher education. He recruited a variety of supporters, including state legislators who agreed to sponsor such a bill. Everything looked on track until the actual amount of money moderated the enthusiasm. Rather than the ten million dollars originally estimated, the actual amount was six times that figure, a sum the Department of Corrections and the Missouri legislature categorically refused to allocate for higher education. As in most things American, it was about the money.

Confirming the punitive nature of prison comes Timothy Muise's powerful and disheartening essay on the persistent reluctance – and often refusal – to grant U.S. prisoners any kind of release prior to parole or the completion of their sentences. Ignoring both statistical evidence and historical precedent, states continue to prefer long-term incarceration to compassionate release, even for infirm and geriatric prisoners. Fiscal constraints, traditionally a strong motivator, fail to sufficiently move those charged with making the decisions to consider authorizing the release of terminally ill prisoners with literally weeks to live. As Muise reveals, the drive to punish until death remains the dominant philosophy.

Grace Gámez then takes us on a *tour de force* through the chronological events that have enabled a patriarchal society to treat current and former prisoners as if they were zombies, that is, neither alive nor dead and having no intrinsic worth. Her mastery of historical precedent and command of information bring to these pages a powerful argument for reversing the retribution juggernaut and acknowledging the fundamental humanity of every citizen.

But, as Grant Tietjen corroborates, the federal prison system in the United States is as equally pernicious as the state's scheme when it comes to both the treatment of its prisoners and in preparing them for re-entry to society. His detailed account of his foray into the system and his subsequent attempts to acclimate a prison mentality to the real world beyond the walls is part of a comprehensive analysis of the often-surreal nature of living life exclusively at the mercy of others. Tietjen's experiences have produced a compelling story about his efforts to mentor and comfort others who have traveled the same path.

Given the sheer numbers of men and women incarcerated in the United States, encountering innocent people consigned to cages no longer surprises. It should, however, continue to alarm. Mwandishi Mitchell points out that wrongful convictions create victims no less than the actual offenses themselves, many of who find it impossible to leave the trauma behind once they are released. To their credit, some states are moving to enact greater safeguards, including mandatory DNA testing, to prevent innocent men and women from going to prison. However, as Mwandishi Mitchell points out, the road remains long and strewn with both philosophical and legislative obstacles.

And yet, all the Escherian implications notwithstanding, there is light in even the deepest recesses of the system. Colin McGregor, serving time in a Canadian prison, describes what can happen when prisoners take control of their own futures, at least to the extent they can. McGregor's paper addresses literacy efforts inside a particular prison and the determination of an older prisoner to learn to read. Getting help from a non-profit, Colin McGregor became a certified tutor and was able to watch while that older prisoner mastered the task he had chosen for himself. Although the non-profit lost its funding, Colin McGregor remains optimistic about grassroots efforts to continue reading programs on the inside.

Throughout its twenty-five-year history, the *JPP* has provided a consistent forum for those whose voices would have otherwise remained mute. Part of that mission has been a vigorous opposition to censorship, a frequently used weapon against prisoners' attempts to resist their conditions of imprisonment and always an effort to convince the authors that they have nothing worthwhile to add to public discourse. That is not to say that we have agreed with every position appearing in the journal. As one researcher put it, "there are as many prisons as there are prisoners" (Sykes, 1958, p. 63). Our focus has been and continues to be on getting those voices, irrespective of our reaction to them, into the public arena as long as the

peer-reviewed submissions fall within clearly defined editorial parameters. We continue that tradition by closing this section of prisoner narratives with a paper by Miguel Zaldivar.

Miguel Zaldivar, a federal prisoner in the United States, agrees with the other writers in this issue that prison is distinctly an unpleasant place. However, whereas those contributors criticize the operational ethos, structured oppression, and systematic brutality of the prison itself, Miguel Zaldivar places much of the blame for the inhumane prison environment squarely on the men and women behind the walls. In his view, every complaint by a prisoner about prison conditions fails to acknowledge the prisoners' complicity in erecting and sustaining the physical and psychological dungeons that hold them. Indeed, he assigns them primary responsibility for their Stygian existence for the same reason Mallory wanted to scale Everest: because they are there.

Such a proposition is in our view ironically refuted by Miguel Zaldivar's description of some of his own encounters with prison officials. While his standpoint differs significantly from those of the majority of *JPP* contributors, his position is one that is shared by many prisoners and thus merits exposition and the debate that will follow.

REFERENCES

Sykes, Gresham M. (1958) *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press.

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