

RESPONSE

Reflecting on 25 Years of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* Bob Gaucher

INTRODUCTION

The *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) follows the tradition of the North American penal press by focusing on prison life and the issues that are at the forefront of prisoners' concerns. The heyday of the penal press was from the 1930s to the 1960s in the United States, and from 1950 through the 1980s in Canada. Its emergence reflects the *raison d'être* of penal authorities to reform the silent system prison regimes that were in place and move towards the creation of "rehabilitative" correctional institutions. This transformation required the freeing up of prisoners' movements and activities, as a necessary precursor to the functioning of rehabilitative programs, which was evident in the creation of the penal press. Authorities in both jurisdictions supported the penal press as a means to garner backing for prison reform from politicians and the general public within the containing civil societies.

This is clearly the case in Canada, where the penal press was encouraged and supported by the new (post-Second World War) Commissioner's Office as a means of selling penal reform to the general public and to prisoners. The *Kingston Penitentiary Telescope* – which commenced publication on September 1, 1950 – was the first Canadian penal press magazine, becoming a flagship for penal reform. The positive reception of *the KP Telescope* is evidenced by its success; by 1954 it had over 4,000 outside subscribers and was available to prisoners in all federal penitentiaries. *Pen-O-Rama* – established in 1950 and produced by prisoners in St. Vincent de Paul Penitentiary (Montréal) – had numerous advertisers, including Coca-Cola and the Hudson Bay Company.¹

There have been over 150 penal press magazines published from federal penitentiaries in Canada, as well as an array of others from provincial prisons and reformatories. Like the early years of the *KP Telescope*, some of these publications have influenced Canadian penal policy and civil society. For example, this is the case for the penal reform initiatives of the 1950s, and during the period of heightened prisoners' resistance in the 1970s and 1980s, as exemplified in the creation and spread of *Prison Justice Day* (PJD). This

day was conceived and created by prisoners in Millhaven Penitentiary as a response to the constant threats and aggressive actions of out of control prison staff following the premature opening of this super-maximum penitentiary in the 1970s. Long-term prisoners there established the *Quarter Century Group*, which later became the *Odyssey Group*, and conceived of *PJD* as a means of engaging prisoners and the general public in a discussion about the violent repression perpetrated by prison guards across the federal penitentiary system in Canada at that time (see McNeil and Vance, 1976; Culhane, 1979). With the assistance of the editors of *Tightwire* – published by prisoners at Kingston Prison for Women – and social justice activists like Claire Culhane and Liz Elliott, *PJD* spread countrywide and came to be observed annually on August 10th in all federal penal institutions, and in ceremonies held in numerous Canadian cities (Gaucher, 1990-91). The Canadian penal press played a major role in establishing its national scope.

What distinguishes the *JPP* is the academic nature of the publication, the first and only such scholarly journal. The project is a university-based, peer-reviewed journal that follows the general format of traditional social science publications. It publishes the analysis and commentary of prisoners, former prisoners, and prisoners' families on criminal justice and penal justice issues. The original intent of the *JPP* was “to bring the knowledge and experience of the incarcerated to bear upon [...] academic arguments and concerns and to inform public discourse about the current state of our carceral institutions” (Gaucher, 1988, p. 54). Our motto – “allowing our experiences and analysis to be added to the forum that will constitute public opinion could help to halt the disastrous trend toward building more fortresses of fear which will become in the 21st century this generation's monuments to failure” – conceived for the first issue by Jo-Ann Mayhew (1988), captures the essence of our intent.

The *JPP* is an academic journal that uniquely provides the insider knowledge and analysis of a major player in prison life and the primary commodity of the prison industrial complex, the prisoner. It aims to address a lacuna in penology and criminology, by adding the voices and understandings of prisoners to our academic and political scrutiny of penal custom internationally (Piché, Gaucher and Walby, forthcoming). In my *Response* to the first issue (Gaucher, 1988) I noted the influence that prisoners had on the creation of the new critical criminology that emerged in the 1970s. This was represented in the United Kingdom in the seminal

work of Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor (1972), *Psychological Survival: the Experience of Long-Term Imprisonment*, which arose out of the authors' teaching a university course to prisoners in a high-security prison and the influence generally of prisoners on the new criminologists in that country.² In the United States, the radical analysis of Tony Platt, Paul Takagi and the Berkeley Center for Research On Criminal Justice was highly influenced by prisoners (Gaucher, 1988). By the mid-1980s this influence on academic discourse had obviously waned. The *JPP* was in part, a response to prisoners slipping back into the shadows and out of academic consciousness.³

ORIGINS

The *JPP* was conceived and created within the nexus of the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA), a grassroots movement focused on overturning the dominant punitive response of criminal justice and penal servitude to ongoing social conflict and inequality. In the current acceptance of expanding definitions of crime and the wholesale incarceration of marginalized and disenfranchised populations, ICOPA's mandate to reduce and abolish carceral solutions appears to be truly "radical". However, when ICOPA held its first congress in Toronto in 1983, there was still a lingering hope that the liberalization of criminal justice policy and a reduction in penal populations could be achieved by a move towards community-based solutions to social conflict such as reconciliation, approaches that are now regrouped under the restorative justice banner, decriminalization and decarceration. Indeed, as first conceived ICOPA was a response to the punitive shift to the right and cutbacks of the welfare state that was emerging in the Thatcher, Reagan, and Mulroney era of neo-conservative politics and get tough on crime ideology. We still had hope for a new tomorrow.

ICOPA I (Toronto) – although it included academic contributors, like Norwegian Thomas Mathiesen⁴ – was largely a grassroots initiative, and prominently featured Canadian activists such as Claire Culhane,⁵ Art Solomon⁶ and Ruth Morris.⁷ ICOPA II (1985) was held Amsterdam, Netherlands, and provided a greater academic contextualization and legitimation of our arguments. This congress led to the reformulation of the mandate from a primary focus on "prison abolition" to the broader focus, relocating the analysis of the prison within the complex social structures, social relations and social control institutions of western societies; that is, "penal" abolition.⁸

That congress was not without controversy. The organizers, principally René Van Swaanigen, who represented the emerging counter-intuitive school of “realist criminology”, brought the academic contest of abolitionism versus realist positions in critical criminology to the fore.⁹ He seemed to have concluded that “ICOPA liberals” were in need of a reality check. On the second day of the congress, during the lunch break, the staged theft of a woman’s purse erupted in the university cafeteria where delegates were gathered. At a table of Canadian activists (Claire Culhane, Art Solomon, Liz Elliott and Howard Davidson) with whom I sat, the “set up” was obvious. The arrest of the perpetrator shortly after the event was a further indication to our group that this event was not real. This was not the case for many other (liberal?) delegates who were immediately concerned. When we arrived for the post-lunch plenary session, we discovered that it had been cancelled and replaced by a pre-written lecture on criminal victimization by a local police psychologist. The cat was out of the bag! During the ensuing uproar, a number of us left and went outside for a smoke and discussed this childish and insulting turn of events. It encouraged us to turn a discriminating eye on the congress and the direction our movement seemed to be headed. While many of the European academics were enriching our intellectual grasp and analysis of the issues, we worried about the absence of grassroots involvement and the paucity of prisoners’ voices at this congress. This directed us, with the support of some activists and academics from the United States, to ensure that ICOPA III would return to our home soil. It was agreed that the next congress would be held in Canada. ICOPA III was hosted by the Université de Montréal in 1987.

As an organizer of the English language sessions at that congress, I made a major effort to invite and include grassroots activists and organizations, with a particular emphasis on First Nations involvement.¹⁰ The Native Women’s Association of Canada and Patricia Monture¹¹ made presentations, and Lew Gurwitz brought a large delegation from the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee.¹² The Toronto-based *Anarchist Black Cross- Rainbow Coalition* and their associated group, *Radical Fairies*, played an important part at the congress. We were particularly keen to have prisoners’ presentations, although getting prisoners out to attend a penal abolition conference was obviously problematic. In a session organized by Professor Barker (Boston College) on prison education, Howard Davidson and I presented papers written by Canadian prisoners with whom we were working at that time.¹³

The session was very well received and it encouraged a discussion amongst Canadian activists as to how we could increase the involvement of prisoners at ICOPA, more generally within the abolition movement, and in academic discourse. The result was the creation of the *JPP*. The original editorial board was drawn from these discussions, with Howard Davidson acting as editor. Our thinking was informed by the (then) recent success of the Canadian penal press, especially *Odyssey* (Millhaven), *Tightwire* (Kingston Prison for Women) and *Tarpaper* (Matsqui) in establishing *PJD* observance in Canada. With people like Claire Culhane and Liz Elliott in our group discussions, we came to the conclusion that a journal that was published outside, beyond the control of prison censorship, made sense and offered prisoners a real possibility to engage the society that caged them. As we conceived it, the prisoner would not be a mere ethnographic subject, but the ethnographer of the prisons and societies they lived in (Gaucher, 1988).

25th ANNIVERSARY OF PUBLICATION

I find it difficult to get my head around the fact that the *JPP* has been publishing prisoners' writing for 25 years. Over those many years I have been privileged to work with creative, inquiring and committed people who have provided the articles, and managed the editing and production. We have been particularly fortunate to have had contributions from outstanding prisoner activists and writers from Canada, the United States, Ireland, Australia, South America and elsewhere. The many outstanding artists whose work has graced the covers of the publications added immeasurably to the quality of the Journal.¹⁴

The creation and first publication of the *JPP* in 1988 took place in the context of the rapid expansion of prisons across western democratic societies, led by the carceral binge occurring in the United States. While successive liberal governments in Canada engaged in prison construction, the hard turn towards retributive criminal justice policy and a consequent explosion of prison populations that took place in the United States did not occur here. The freedom of prisoners to engage in academic and public discourse is indicative of the policy direction of governments. As previously noted, when the Canadian and American states embarked on the policy of penal reform, the penal press and the voices of prisoners were utilized as a means of encouraging public support for rehabilitative as opposed to strictly

punitive penal regimes. In the United States, the “get tough on crime” political mantra of the 1980s, and subsequent rejection of the rehabilitative model, led to the return to punitive warehousing regimes and the massive expansion of penal institutions and prison populations. The accompanying silencing of prisoners was a consequent of New York State style “Son of Sam” legislation, purported to prevent criminals from financially benefiting from their writing about their crimes,¹⁵ along with the proliferation of Marion style closed/locked down prisons that greatly curtailed prisoners’ access to the outside (Morgan and Reed, 1993).

Despite the increasing recognition of the problematic nature and obvious failure of this approach in the United States, the current reactionary Canadian Conservative government is attempting to reproduce this model of repression in Canada. As the Reform Party, they endorsed the “get tough on crime” political gambit which included an attempt to silence prison writers via Bill C-205/220 (1997), which aimed at preventing prisoners from publishing their writing.¹⁶ After their takeover of the Conservative Party of Canada and their ascension to power, this government has made major punitive changes to law and prison regimes. These changes include an array of mandatory sentences that abrogate judicial discretion and delimit the possibility of community-based sentences and supervised parole. The growth in prison populations these changes promote are being realized.¹⁷ These changes have been accompanied by the demise of lower security institutions (Farm Camps), as well as the curtailment of access to prisons by family, visitors and prison-focused groups. This delimiting of public access and the ability to scrutinize the operation of prisons deems the continuation of publications such as the *JPP* as important as ever in Canada.

Over the past 25 years this Journal has encouraged prisoners to write of their experience of criminalization and penal servitude, to analyze that experience and to reclaim their own humanity in the process. A number of our contributors gained confidence in their writing and their ability to engage the outside world through publication in the *JPP*, which led to their success in publishing books and articles in mainstream magazines and newspapers.¹⁸ Our writers’ articles have influenced thousands of university students, helping them to overcome dominant stereotypes and fictional representations of crime and criminality (Gaucher, 1986). Discovering that prisoners can eloquently and analytically engage the subject of their studies has helped many students understand the contradiction between popular

images of crime and criminal justice and the academic critique of *criminal just-us*. Prisoners' analyses serve to ground this critique in the flesh, blood and torment of real human beings.

I have worked with prisoners on this Journal since its inception and been rewarded for doing so in numerous ways. The lasting friendships stand out. The contributions of our writers, especially those whose work sustained the Journal over many years, established the *JPP* as a unique and important entity within academic criminology. Our contributors taught me, and kept me informed of changes and the impact of legislation. This was the case from my initial engagements (see Jo-Ann Mayhew (1988)) and continues to this day. Imprisonment is a high-risk engagement and a number of these friends have died in prison. I was devastated by the murder of James Allridge III by the State of Texas on August 26, 2004 (Gaucher, 2005) and overwhelmed by the news of Victor Hassine's death (Gaucher, 2008). For many years I worked closely with Little Rock Reed and his sudden accidental death shortly after being released left so much promise unrealized. The *JPP* belongs to all of our contributors. I know that I speak for all of us who have worked on the outside when I say thanks for taking us along.

A quarter-century of publication would not have been possible without the efforts and hard work of the many people who have worked on the outside to ensure its continued existence. Unpaid and largely unrecognized, they have worked diligently to ensure that we have a high quality journal that meets the academic and aesthetic standards of the writers and artists we have featured. Without their commitment the *JPP* would have expired years ago. The spirit of Claire Culhane, and the friendship and many contributions of Liz Elliott, inspired this Journal from its inception. 25 years of publication attests to their success.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Gaucher (1989). Many of these Canadian penal press magazines may be accessed at <www.penalpress.com>.
- ² See Taylor, Walton and Young (1973; 1975).
- ³ This is exemplified in an article by Ratner and Cartwright (1990), which was debated in the *JPP* (see Ratner, 1993; Gaucher, 1993).
- ⁴ See Mathiesen (1974) which is a seminal text for the penal abolition movement. Professor Mathiesen addressed the first ICOPA held in Toronto in 1983.
- ⁵ See Culhane (1985) and Lowe (1992). Claire addressed the first ICOPA held in Toronto in 1983.

- ⁶ Arthur Solomon, an Anishnawbe Elder, worked closely with Aboriginal prisoners in Canada to establish spiritual rights for First Nations prisoners. He was instrumental in creating the *Canadian Association in Support of Native People* (Toronto), a group who were actively involved in a wide variety of issues affecting native people, including imprisonment (see Solomon 1990a; Solomon, 1990b). Art addressed the first ICOPA held in Toronto in 1983 and was a participant in subsequent ICOPAs .
- ⁷ Ruth Morris was a creator of ICOPA and until her death in 2000 was instrumental in co-ordinating the bi-annual congresses across the world. Ruth championed alternative approaches to punitive criminal justice such as reconciliation, restorative and transformative justice (see Morris, 1995; Morris, 2000).
- ⁸ Conference organizers published a text of papers from this congress (see Bianchi and van Swaaningen, 1986). Stan Cohen (1986) also edited an issue of *Contemporary Crises: Law, Crime and Social Change*, focused upon the discourse on “abolitionism” at this congress.
- ⁹ A presentation by Louk Hulsman “Critical Criminology and the Concept of Crime” critiqued “realist criminology” and became a bedrock argument of the penal abolition movement. Fittingly, it was published in both the post-congress texts noted above (see supra note 8).
- ¹⁰ First Nations peoples are vastly overrepresented in Canadian prisons.
- ¹¹ A Mohawk woman, Trish started to work with Arthur Solomon and Aboriginal prisoners in Kingston (Canada) area penitentiaries while a law student at Queen’s University (see Monture-Angus, 1995).
- ¹² Lew Gurwitz of the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee of Kansas and Frank Dreaver of its Toronto counterpart made presentations at ICOPA and a number of other events in Montréal. In 1987, they helped co-ordinate a major initiative around Bill M-28 in Canada’s federal parliament in Ottawa, which aimed to have Leonard released from custody and returned to Canada because of the illegality of his extradition to the United States. Arthur Solomon and the *Canadian Association in Support of Native People* were involved in both of these initiatives.
- ¹³ The first volume of the *JPP* featured these articles.
- ¹⁴ The most notable of the many outstanding contributors was Norval Morrisseau, the Ojibway “shaman artist”. Our first coloured cover, featuring his work, sold out immediately, in no small measure due to his fame in Canada.
- ¹⁵ New York State Executive Law 632-a, 1977, was subsequently amended, challenged and copied by other States throughout the 1980s.
- ¹⁶ For a full discussion of this censorship initiative see Gaucher and Elliott (2001). This Private Members Bill was maneuvered through the House of Commons by shifting the focus away from the wealth of evidence that would undermine its passage and masking the ramifications of its enactment with the rhetoric of moral indignation and stated concern for victims of crime, which characterize the Reform Party / Conservative Party duplicity on criminal justice issues. The thorough scrutiny this Bill received during Senate Hearings led to its rejection. At that time, Curtis Taylor and I distributed copies of the *JPP* (1997, 8:1-2) to all members of the Senate Committee, and Stephen Reed as a representative of PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists) and the *JPP* addressed the Hearings.

- ¹⁷ For a discussion of recent developments, consult the blog posts written by Justin Piché at <www.tpcp-canada.blogspot.ca>.
- ¹⁸ For example see Little Rock Reed (1993), Victor Hassine (1996, 2005), and Charles Huckelbury (2008).

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