

# The Prisoner As Ethnographer: The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons

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A number of years ago I was asked by a colleague active in prison volunteer work to write to a prisoner who was in the “hole” in a Canadian penitentiary. She thought I might help, at least by providing moral support for the duration of his “closed” confinement. After the exchange of a number of letters I noted a confusion on the part of the prisoner. What exactly was a criminologist — forensic scientists, an investigator of the so-called “criminal-mind”, or possibly a Sherlock Holmes type who worked with the police? As one of Canada’s first members of the new school of critical criminologists I appreciated his confusion. He was touching on a question which permeates our work: what is the focus and subject matter of radical criminology? This confusion was compounded by our different perspectives. His was a personally reactive damning of the prison, while mine was a more distanced, theorized condemnation of the whole system of criminal-justice industry. In our correspondence over the next year we discussed these issues at length and we grew in our understanding of the phenomenon of imprisonment. After many years of working within criminology, I had come close to concluding that there was little left for me to learn. The self-discovery that this man, and prisoners generally, still had much they could teach me was intellectually and academically liberating.

My response was to reconsider the development of radical criminology. In “Whose Side Are We On?”, How-

ard Becker (1967) made a strong argument for taking the part of the criminalized/prisoner, including taking what s/he had to say seriously and following through on it. Becker, Edwin Lemert, Erving Goffman, and David Matza were leading social reaction theorists whose work in the 1960's established a new liberal tradition of critique. They argued that the "pathology model" of the rehabilitators, which defined the criminalized as "sick" and in need of treatment not punishment (a slight of the hand most professionally turned), served to deny their voice. Matza advanced Becker's position by arguing the need to take "seriously" the definitions of reality of the criminalized and imprisoned and to place them at the centre of our analysis. During the 1960's and early 1970's, radical psychiatrists, social psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists advanced similar arguments for giving authenticity to the voice and meanings of their human subjects. The development of this liberal line of critique is exemplified by William Ryan. In *Blaming The Victim* (1976) he argued that it was primarily the poor, powerless and disenfranchised, racial and ethnic minorities, who were the focus of social control and the fodder of the rapidly expanding agencies of social control in North American societies.

The publication of *The New Criminology* (1973) seemed to signal a new departure. The authors thoroughly trashed academic criminology as theoretically and methodologically impoverished, incapable of fulfilling its own "scientific" requirements, and therefore amounting to nothing more than control ideology. They argued for the creation of a new marxist criminology which would oppose the existing social order. In California the Berkeley Center for Research On Criminal Justice created an American brand of radical criminology that actively studied the "enemy".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In 1973 this group created the journal *Crime and Social Justice* which remains the major publication for critical/radical criminology. They have published numerous books: including *The Iron Fist and The Velvet Glove* (1975), an analysis of policing in the United States, and *Punishment and Penal Discipline* (1980), a collection of articles on the uses of imprisonment and other forms of social discipline edited by T. Platt and P. Tagaki.

This wave of critique spread to Canada and parts of Europe, and was for a short time highly informed and advanced by the emerging radical consciousness of prisoners themselves. In most instances this “radical” criminology was the product of writers who had been working directly with prisoners. For example, the writings of George Jackson (1970; 1972) and Angela Davis (1971) were a strong force in the radical movements of American society in the early 1970’s, and had a major influence on the creation of a radical criminology there.<sup>2</sup>

This fertile relationship between prisoners and politicized academics led to attempts to create prisoners’ unions in Britain, Europe, and North America.<sup>3</sup> However, as the repression of radical politics grew in these societies, the prison ceased to be a major focus of critical political attention, and outside support for prisoners’ rights and unions also waned. After the marriage of inside and outside radicals broke down, this burst of light illuminating the destructive horror of imprisonment was explained away as the product of the penetration of the penitentiary by outside political activists. For example, it was claimed that the political consciousness and radicalization of prisoners in the United States had been the product of the influx into American prisons of the Vietnam war draft resisters and political opponents. And the voices of prisoners once again receded.

By the 1980’s, the analysis of the “new criminologists” concentrated on the capitalist state. Criminal justice institutions are portrayed as a principal means of dominating the working class and disciplining them to labour. Through their analysis of the creation of the capitalist state it was

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<sup>2</sup>The early work of the Berkeley Center was greatly influenced by California prisoners’ struggles. The first issue of *Crime and Social Justice* included numerous contributions from prisoners and dealt directly with prison conditions.

<sup>3</sup>The most complete analysis of these movements is Mike Fitzgerald’s *Prisoners in Revolt* (1977). John Irwin (1980) *Prison in Turmoil* deals with the prisoners’ union movement in California. Thomas Mathiesen’s *The Politics of Abolition* (1974) is the most important book on the Scandinavian unions and on strategies for prison abolition.

argued that criminal-justice institutions were constructed to forward class discipline and as a means of reproducing and legitimating the emerging capitalist social order and class divisions (e.g. see Gaucher 1982; Ignatieff 1978; T. Platt and P. Tagaki 1980). This led (inadvertently?) to prisoners once again being relegated to the status of the “lumpenproletariat” — the dregs of capitalist society and its aggressively competitive system of social relations. Ian Taylor and Jock Young, dominant figures and intellectual leaders of the new criminology, have argued that working class people are the major victims of street crime and therefore we have to realistically deal with the problem of the “lumpen” fraction of the working class who prey on their fellow class members. Though this is in part a response to the “new realism” of an increasingly successful reactionary right-wing criminology, in essence their arguments differ little from those of traditional law and order rhetoric (See Taylor 1981; Lea and Young 1984). Today the voice of the criminalized and incarcerated in Canada is confined to sensationalized commercial work.

The use of ethnographic work in qualitative social science is well established. The necessity of taking into account the sense and rationale of all actors within the analysed social situation or cultural realm has become an accepted part of contemporary anthropology and sociology. However, in the current analysis of prisons, this component is increasingly absent. This void is important because a reliance on the perceptions and interpretations of prisoners serves to inform and vitalize academic analysts. The originators and proponents of the new schools of critical criminology seem to have forgotten the role the criminalized and imprisoned have played in the development of their own thinking and the critical positions they have established. The major analysts and spokespersons of this critical tradition in criminology are all indebted to prisoners. As noted earlier, in America, the initiating work of Howard Becker and other interactionists was informed by their work in carceral institutions, and the Berkeley group was highly influenced and directed by the prison revolu-

tionaries of California. In England, the work of the “new criminologists” was formed and informed by their interaction with prisoners in the maximum security wing of Durham prison.<sup>4</sup> In Scandinavia, major theorists such as Thomas Mathiesen, formulated their work on the basis of their involvement with prisoners’ struggles, and in France, Michel Foucault’s involvement clearly served as an inspiration for his highly innovative analysis (1977).<sup>5</sup> The prison abolition movement was also the product of these times and these interactions; Mathiesen’s *The Politics of Abolition* still serves as the theoretical bedrock of the movement.

So why rehash this history of criminology? Are our prisons any better because of these developments? Have there been any “real” changes or has the expansionary dynamic of the social control apparatus been slowed? Certainly not. Our penitentiary system continues to grow at an alarming rate, and the violence and brutality that characterize them have kept pace. Yet that short period of time in the 1960’s and early 1970’s when outside critics joined with those inside prisons to examine, criticize, and oppose state repression were the most fruitful in the modern history of criminology and did spawn a “new” critical stream of analysis and political activism that held considerable, if unrealized, promise. These critical and marxist social analysts seem to no longer remember their debt to, and the legacy of, the analysis and writings of prisoners. That is the point that must be made, and that is what, in part, underlies our creation of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*.

Critical criminology is running in circles these days and seems incapable of transcending its own inability to move forward. What we currently see dominating books and

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<sup>4</sup> *Psychological Survival: A Study of Long-Term Incarceration* (Cohen 1981) was written with the assistance of long-term prisoners in the maximum security wing of Durham prison in England. The list of the outside members of this group reads like a line-up card of the British “new criminologists” and the founders of the National Deviancy Conference in England, Scotland, and Wales.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault was a founding member of Le group d’Information sur les Prison which started in 1971 and aimed at giving prisoners a public voice. Like similar groups in Norway and England, it was not concerned with prison reform.

journals is the “same old stuff” dressed in a new language, but written in the same boring academic style, concerned primarily with its own armchair arguments and careerist endeavors. We need to get back in touch with those who know and experience the “reality of oppression” and to once again make the connections between the theoretical advances made by the “new criminologies” and the “material reality” they address. It is an even sadder state of affairs when those who claim to follow in a marxist tradition ignore a most vital aspect of this tradition’s analytic demand — the marriage of theory and practice, the holistic demand that theory be informed by the practical and material aspects of everyday life and struggle.

That is what we want this journal to accomplish — to bring the knowledge and experience of the incarcerated to bear upon these more academic arguments and concerns and to inform public discourse about the current state of our carceral institutions. Is it too much to ask of prisoners that they take the initiative and revitalize the work of critical criminology? I don’t think so, and the articles in this journal suggest otherwise. Furthermore, if the prison abolitionist argument that the goal and necessity of the outside critic should be to empower the disenfranchised, then providing the opportunity to prisoners to state their case, to identify the major problems, and to provide us with up to date information and analysis about what is actually occurring in our prisons is a necessity. Amongst the diverse group of people who serve as the carceral commodity there are many with extraordinary talents and insights, whose contributions can revitalize this barren area of study. Furthermore, as a teacher I am constantly in search of ethnographic materials which will provide insight to my students and will help to combat the “monster” stereotypes of the criminalized and incarcerated which dominate public and academic discourse. So there clearly is a role to be played by prisoners and a need for them to try and take back a small measure of control of their destinies by actively engaging the concerned public and by defining the dominant problems of the current situation. The articles in this

first issue hold promise for doing just that.

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The literary work of prisoners constitutes a well established if largely unrecognized tradition within western literature. Many prisoners and former prisoners have been celebrated as writers over the years; Americans — Herman Melville, O. Henry, Carl Chessman, and Malcolm Braly — have made important literary contributions as have Europeans such as Victor Serge and Jean Genet. Bruce Franklin (1978) argues that this tradition's origins in America can be located in the songs and poems of slaves, and that prison writing was pushed to the forefront of American literature in the 1960's with the autobiography of Malcolm X and the work of George Jackson. Their books provided the impetus for a flood of contemporary prison writings and poetry. For Franklin, this tradition is largely that of the oppressed blacks of America, and more recently of other oppressed minorities. For example, a former prisoner, Ricardo Sanchez (1971; 1981) has established a world renown reputation as the father of American Chicano poetry.

Another source of prison writings is the officially sanctioned prison magazine. The first publication I am aware of was produced by members of the renowned Jesse James and Younger Brothers gang at a United States Penitentiary in the late 1800's (See Baird 1967). In Canada the first prison magazines were the Kingston Penitentiary *Telescope*(1950) and Ste. Vincent de Paul's *Pen-o-Rama*(1950), followed by Stony Mountain Penitentiary's *Mountain Echo*(1951) and *The Diamond*(1952) from Collins Bay.<sup>6</sup> While varying in focus, style, and quality, these magazines continue to be published and represent the sole (though censored) voice of Canada's carceral population. However,

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<sup>6</sup> For the past two years I have been researching and collecting prison magazines produced by prisoners in Canada. To date I have collected approximately two-thirds of the publications dating back to 1950. I would be pleased to accept any copies people would like to contribute. I would also be interested in corresponding with current and former prison editors who could share their views on these journals with me. Write to R. Gaucher 75 Laurier East, Ottawa K1N 6N5.

their distribution is not widespread and they remain largely unknown. Their importance is unacknowledged by both academics and the general public. The more focused format and targeted audience of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* holds the promise of transcending these problems and filling an important void. Its specific intent is to provide a legitimate avenue for prisoners in Canada to publish their analyses of Canada's criminal-justice and penal industries. For its first issue, the organising theme is prison abolition.

The popular notion that prison populations compose an homogeneous group, strongly influenced by prison culture and the "prisoner code" is denied by the wide range of opinion and degrees of understanding found in the articles in this issue. These articles contain diverse ideological and theoretical views, extending from traditional criticisms of the penitentiary *per se* to more contextualized arguments which portray the prison and its operation as a symptom of the problems which dominate the containing society.

The short opening piece, "An Inside Viewpoint", takes a position similar to that of the American functionalist Robert K. Merton, arguing that it is the social structure of our society with its overemphasis on material goals and the lack of possibility of attaining them which frustrates people and drives them into drug abuse and related crime. The connection between excessive alcohol, other drug use, and lawbreaking is clearly argued in this paper and is a theme in most of these articles.

The essay by Alderf Lepmer addresses the need to cease destroying people through society's reliance on (the proven failure) imprisonment, largely using traditional arguments about the inappropriateness of incarcerating the "sick" or "pathological" individual. The author also addresses the contradictory demand that prisoners should be reformed and the penitentiary's stifling of any and all attempts by prisoners to do so. Here he keys in on how the penitentiary authorities' priorities - the facilitation of the orderly operation of the institution - leads to "clever ploys



and outright intimidation to get prisoners involved in a multitude of silly social groups, just to keep everyone busy and to stifle the possibility of original thought.”

In a more elaborated argument, Jo-Anne Mayhew addresses the forgotten minority, the female prisoner. Written on Canada’s Prison Justice Day (August 10) as a commemorative piece, Mayhew laments the futility of wasting human lives in the stultifying boredom of the prison. She forcefully argues that within the numbing inertia of prison life, women are especially victimized. Seen as an insignificant minority by the bureaucratic policy maker and prison administrator alike, women suffer even more acutely from the lack of meaningful programs and opportunities than the focus of so-called penal reform, the male prisoner. The author works through the well known problems associated with the only female penitentiary, “P.4.W”: the hardship of necessarily living miles from family and friends, the curtailment of activities because of the prison’s multi-security level status, and the refusal to offer women even the minor benefits of thirty years of “reforming” male prisons. She argues that for the woman’s penitentiary, policy shifts and penal reforms are even more a matter of semantic change. “It is well to understand that the new terminology does little to change the material substance of living.” She spells out the poverty of life in the archaic world of Kingston Prison for Women and in a free flowing often poetic language argues the case for abolishing incarceration for women, who too often are the products of long-term male abuse and who often are serving sentences for trying to overthrow this tyranny. Mayhew addresses the particularly devastating effects of incarcerating mothers and argues eloquently for alternative therapeutic means of dealing with female offenders. This author also notes the centrality of alcohol and other drug abuse as an intervening factor in female offenses, a problem clearly not addressed by the Prison For Women.

At this point Mayhew widens the frame of reference for understanding the criminalization of women (and men) by addressing the social structure and ideologies of capi-

talist society. Rejecting the “less eligibility principle” for the incarcerated poor and disenfranchised, she locates the problem within a patriarchal class structure which moralizes to the oppressed while playing out its own immoral charade. Mayhew ends by strongly advocating prison abolition (i.e., the abolition of retaliation) and supporting reconciliation.

Yves Bourque, a writer of passion and commitment, starts his essay with a personal account of his initial experiences of imprisonment. In a descriptive narrative he captures the alienation, bewilderment, and frustration of the prisoner’s first encounters with the prison and the pronounced sense that the punishment often vastly exceeds the offence. In the second section Bourque addresses commonly held misconceptions about the nature of crime, prisoners and prisons, touching on the most current issues and debates within the Abolition movement. Bourque writes within the radical politically conscious tradition of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, and in his work we hear the echoes of George Jackson’s revolutionary cant: “Anyone who can pass the civil service examination yesterday can kill me today with complete immunity” (See Jackson 1970: 6). He explains the production of these “gross misconceptions” as the “justificatory ideology of a bloated insatiable criminal-justice and correctional system” which, with the assistance of the mass media, tell “only one side of the story”, and consistently fail to identify the perpetrators of criminalizable offenses as previous victims of social inequality and often past victims of the brutality of the criminal-justice system itself. At this juncture he makes the telling point that even prisoners have become so completely taken in by this dominant criminal-justice ideology that they also scorn the concept of prison abolition, that the mass media distortion and process of desensitization serve to legitimize the degradation and torment of prison life for the public, prison personnel, and prisoners alike. He states that this is especially true for prisoners who come to acquiesce to their own oppression by giving in to prison demands. In this penetrating analysis, Bourque traces the self-fulfilling

prophesies of prison life through a complex dialectic of prison employee - prisoner interaction. It is within this process of forced submission that he locates “a major factor” in the cause of crime.

Bourque writes from the soul — from the centre of his being — with clear radical consciousness that critiques both the Canadian prison system and the society that produces it. A Canadian writer approaching the quality of Jackson or Genet, in Part Three, he provides the real stuff of prison living and in doing so attests to the fact that a human being can survive the onslaught of imprisonment with his sense of humanity intact. How else can one explain the marvelous flow of his passionate indignation but by recognizing that here is a man who knows human suffering as a human being, and who experiences life as life even within the systematic degradation and oppression he so ably analyses. This is not the writing of the deadened, heavy-eyed academic producing yet another essay to fill out his curriculum vitae or to fulfill job requirements. This is the real stuff of criminology and should be mandatory reading for the armchair academic analyst, for the bloodless bureaucrat who formulates penal policy, and for the glazed-eyed general public mesmerized by the fictitious presentations of television crime shows and the mass media news.

Bourque addresses many of the major issues of contemporary “corrections” and is particularly opposed to the use of women guards in male facilities. Those who oppose this “innovation” have found a spokesperson in Bourque, whose brilliant analysis surpasses anything his opponents have yet to offer. But then there are few spokespersons working in this field who can approach the depth of his understanding of what happens to human beings in our prisons. This author’s prescription is to recognize the damage we perpetrate and to change both the prison system and our society.

This last theme is taken up by the last two writers, Richard Sauve and William Senger. Sauve distinguishes the naive abolitionist position — “close all prisons” — with the

more realistic demand that we stop the system's expansion and gradually eliminate it. He takes a strong position against trying to "reform" the prison by arguing that the ideology of prison reform has been the motor of prison expansion, and that we must start to take the "proven failure of prisons" seriously. His position represents an important stand in the prison abolition movement - namely, to stop sending people to prison, particularly property and non-violent offenders. That this is the only alternative is recognized by many abolitionists who argue for the decriminalization of social conflict (See Hulsman 1986). The author makes the point that the problem of abolition lies within the realm of the lack of societal will to take action.

William Senger continues along these lines in arguing that any attempt to reform the prison institution is misguided. He identifies the existing power structures of society as the key element reproducing the criminal-justice cycle, and notes that without recognition of this fact the prison abolition movement, in its best moments (e.g., creating public awareness), will lead to nothing. For Senger, it is the transformation of society which will curtail the current trajectory of expansion justified by prison reform ideology and lead to the abolition of the carceral institution.

Working for years as a political activist and intellectual in this field has led me to cringe at the prospect of reading yet another criminology text. My involvement with the International Conference on Prison Abolition has often left me with a strong sense of futility because of the "unreal arguments" and consideration we focus on, and because of our obvious failure to advance our position here in Canada. Within the movement arguments for reform and "new" alternative programs (here read net widening activities) still prevail, and it is difficult not to become disheartened at "the same old story". If nothing else, the field of criminology is characterized by old goals and programs disguised as something new and innovative. But having the opportunity to read and comment on the essays in this journal has given me reason to pause, for here is the blood

and spit which first motivated me to study and contest "prison issues". I came away from this task with the hope that we could renew the critical moment of the past and with the hope that this journal will motivate prisoners to once again take an active part in their social destiny and mine.

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