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Invited Book Review

Contesting carceral logic: towards abolitionist futures

Edited by Michael J. Coyle and Mechthild Hagel

Over recent decades and especially in Western countries, the number of people held in prisons has increased dramatically, a pattern traced in phrases, such as 'mass incarceration', 'imprisonment binge', 'the new punitiveness', and 'the politics of punishment'. Less noted, but also of serious concern, has been a deterioration *in the way* people are imprisoned. Often now, conditions are more severe, even dehumanising, sentences are longer, and opportunities for some semblance of normality are far less. Many prisons are overcrowded, chaotic, and dysfunctional.

A related development—one that underpins the rise in incarceration and degeneration in prison regimes—is a shift in how people accused of crime are represented in public discourse. They are more demonized and othered, and less likely to be seen as needing help. 'Penal populism' often coarsens politics, with political and media actors advocating greater criminalization, ever-increasing sentences, and more austere prison regimes.

Yet, imprisonment, even with the poorest conditions, is invariably very costly and mostly counterproductive in social terms. Crime is not reduced, and the problems people bring with them into prison are rarely resolved there and are frequently worsened. Prison damages people psychologically and in many other ways, leaving them even more alienated from wider society upon release.

It comes as no surprise then that such policies are increasingly questioned, even by conservatives in the USA who baulk at the enormous costs.[1] Council of Europe bodies, drawing on founding principles around human rights and human dignity, consistently call for reductions in prison populations and criticize inhumane conditions. Some, however, advocate 'better' prisons

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1 The prison population in the United States dropped from about 2.31 million people in 2008 to a still staggering 1.76 million in 2021 (World Prison Brief, n.d.).

or changes that amount to little more than tinkering at the edges of a horrendous and destructive phenomenon.

Increasingly, however, others are 'questioning the whole show', concluding that it is the prison rather than the prisoner that is problematic and that there must be better ways for society to deal with undesirable acts. So, there is a reactivation of interest in 'abolitionism', a term originally used in relation to slavery, but in more recent decades to describe a movement calling for the end of imprisonment. This book is an admirable source of rich writing on prison abolition.

Understandably, given that the USA is the world leader in imprisonment, most chapters are drawn from there, but there are insightful chapters also from Europe, Latin America, Canada, and New Zealand. An important quality of the book is that nine contributions are from men and women with lived experience of prison, most still incarcerated as they write. They, in particular, convey vivid descriptions of inhumane treatment and expose glaring contradictions between what prisons say they are doing and what actually happens.

Another strong feature is the way thinking around criminalization and imprisonment—the 'distorted narratives and punishing mindsets' (xvii) referred to in the foreword—is interrogated throughout, a scrutiny expressed in the title, *Contesting Carceral Logic*. So, what is defined as crime and who is regarded as a criminal are seen as selective processes that ignore harm caused by others. The chapter by Clécio Lemos notably undermines assumptions in penal discourse whereby punishment is seen as the 'natural' response to wrongdoing.

The fallacy of rehabilitation (the idea that prison corrects deficits and faults and returns people to society as reformed individuals) is demolished in many ways, not least in accounts from inside prisons, where basic rights and access to services are systematically denied. Emmanuel X, imprisoned in Louisiana, says: 'the elements of incarceration . . . cripple you mentally, dismantle you emotionally, desolate you physically and leave you scrambling, spiritually broken' (p. 178). Richard Sean Gross is incredulous at the extent of untreated mental health problems in Pennsylvanian prisons. For authorities to place a person in a facility for years, he says, 'where he may be raped . . . and then release him with the same mental problem as before is lunacy'. He describes imprisonment as 'a system predicated on false assumptions' (p. 129).

The editors speak of 'the traumatic and disabling effects of incarceration' and note how 'the same groups of people are sent into total institutions the world over, namely, the dispossessed, racialised and otherwise socially disconnected from the system's powerful actors' (pp. 3–4). A clear theme throughout the book is that criminal justice systems are not stand-alone

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processes but are inextricable from other ways in which poor, marginalized, and vulnerable groups are treated. Consequently, many chapters blend analysis of imprisonment with insights from other fields, such as feminism and critiques of neoliberalism, racism, and settler colonialism; addressing the problem of the prison is seen to go hand in hand with wider societal change. Chapters dealing with prison guards' culture, the situations of indigenous peoples in Canada and New Zealand, and the dehumanising official rhetoric in the USA revealingly blend such themes.

A chapter by Marc Jacobs examines an abolitionist movement in Britain in the 1970s, Radical Alternative to Prison (RAP). RAP faced a dilemma as to the extent it should support alternatives to prison and the rights of those imprisoned, as opposed to seeking the abolition of the entire justice system, positions supported respectively by what Jacobs calls 'moderates' and 'radicals'. Thomas Mathiesen, a father of the abolitionist movement internationally, offered a way through this dilemma, distinguishing between reforms that legitimize prisons and those that undermine their exit. In the chapter following, we learn how campaigners against a notorious prison in Ottawa relied on this same distinction in their strategy, wary of being co-opted by authorities but still pushing 'towards reducing imprisonment and diminishing the pains of human caging as interim goals' (p. 164).

The dilemma critics of prisons often face, between focusing on substantial changes to prisons as 'interim goals' and a longer-term aspiration to achieve radical change in society as a whole, remains. The latter strategy is emphasized by Diana Block: 'abolition points to the overthrow of racial capitalism and the building of a restructured society which is no longer ruled by white supremacy, gendered violence, carceral logic or capital' (p. xxii). However, Doyle and colleagues, describing their struggle over an Ottawa prison, speak of 'interim goals . . . decarceration measures . . . to shrink the jail population as steps towards abolition' (p. 164).

I worry about those who see efforts to reduce imprisonment or improve conditions as hindering progress towards final abolition. Some prison systems are vastly more harmful than others. Achieving situations, such as in Iceland or Finland, where the rates of incarceration are low, where there is official recognition that 'there is no such thing as a good prison' but damage can be limited, and where there is a realization that 'good social policy makes best criminal policy' must surely be preferrable to tolerating dehumanising hell-holes, such as those exposed in this book. Thankfully, most of the writers lean towards this more humane and pragmatic position.

Nils Christie, a Norwegian colleague of Mathiesen, puts forward the idea of *minimalism*, which he says is 'close to the abolitionist position, but accepts that in certain cases, punishment is unavoidable' (Christie, p. 84). Still, to a large extent, he shares the analysis and values of abolitionists.

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Imprisonment, he says, 'means to take most of what is included in life away. Incarceration has not gained the same protection against use as torture and capital punishment. To me a small prison population within a state has some of the same sacred qualities as the absence of torture and capital punishment' (*ibid*., p. 103).

References

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