

# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

## A Thousand Points of Light

Liz Elliott

---

**D**uring the recent Canadian and U.S. federal elections, when issues of crime and punishment were predictably prominent, a letter to the editor published in a Canadian national newspaper contributed an interesting perspective:

As a cargo pilot who flies over the United States almost every night, I am amazed at the network of prisons lit up all over the country. Perhaps Stockwell Day [leader of the Canadian Alliance Party] should borrow former president George Bush's phrase, "a thousand points of light." For me, that line accurately describes what I see nightly and says a lot about how well the punishment policies in the U.S. actually work. Mr. Day simplistically thinks that punishment deters people from committing a crime. I think he should perhaps ask around and find out how many prisoners planned on getting caught.<sup>1</sup>

The vision of a "thousand points of light" as an earthbound network of prisons observed at night from the sky is an apt metaphor for the role of criminal justice in the platforms of the politically eager. This is the current political vision of the "better" society, a society in which the hopes of the future are measured by the numbers of citizens it incarcerates and by the length of their sentences. In a civilized society, we might expect to find such a platform alarming. But in a sound-bite world, where pressures for immediate gratification and oversimplification determine public policy, the prison is the one-stop-shopping answer to virtually all social problems.

Elected politicians routinely advertise passages of legislation as proud evidence of the work they are doing on behalf of their constituents. Wherever social problems are identified, solutions are found in the creation of new laws rather than trying to find solutions in the fabric of society itself. In the

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter to the editor written by Mark Coffin (Oshawa, Ontario), in *The Globe and Mail*, Saturday, November 18, 2000. The Canadian Alliance is a right-wing political party, with conservative fiscal and moral values.

past twenty years, the use of the prison has expanded and adapted to include a variety of social “misfits,” such as the mentally disordered, the elderly, the physically addicted and ill. In the past, prison administrators agonized over changing security technologies and legal accountability; today they ponder procedures for administering psychotropic medications, making bathing facilities wheelchair accessible, and managing prisoners suffering from HIV, AIDS, or hepatitis “C.” This is evidence of what Kent Roach calls the “criminalization of politics,” where “criminal justice reform [is] offered as the primary response to broader problems.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1980 there were a little over 500,000 people imprisoned in the U.S.A.—by 1995, the number of incarcerated people had more than tripled.<sup>3</sup> Earlier this year, these numbers rose to surpass two million; a fourfold increase in just twenty years. To keep these numbers in perspective, it is useful to compare the recent U.S. incarceration rate with the rates of other countries. The comparison is also startling: the U.S. rate of imprisonment in 1997 was 649 for every 100,000 people, in contrast to the rates of Norway (53), Belgium (82), and England (120). Even Canada’s rate of incarceration, which is high among western industrialized countries, was 129 in 1997,<sup>4</sup> a rate one fifth of the U.S.

What has happened in the last twenty years in the U.S. to warrant this mass incarceration of its own citizens? There are many possible responses to this question, and some are more empirically resilient than others. The simplistic answer, such as that offered by the economist and legal scholar Michael K. Block, is that “There are too many prisoners because there are too many criminals committing too many crimes.”<sup>5</sup> But violent crimes in the U.S. have been decreasing,<sup>6</sup> and the proportion of people sent to prison for

---

<sup>2</sup> From p. 8, *Due Process and Victims’ Rights: The New Law and Politics of Criminal Justice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> These tallies were quoted in Vivien Stern’s *A Sin Against the Future: Imprisonment in the World* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), p. 61, and are credited to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics are taken from “Faits et Chiffres sur le Service Correctionnel Fédéral,” published by the Correctional Service Canada, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in “The Prison-Industrial Complex” by Eric Schlosser in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 282, Number 6, December 1998, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> For examples, see *The Real War on Crime: The Report of the National Criminal Justice Commission*, edited by Steven R. Donziger (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996).

violent offences has actually dropped from one half of the committals to state prisons in 1980 to less than one third in 1995.<sup>7</sup>

Block's disingenuous argument has been challenged by, among others, the National Criminal Justice Commission, a nonpartisan group of citizens and experts formed in the U.S. in 1994 to study the effectiveness of criminal justice policies. The conclusions of the Commission echo the concerns of Nils Christie, who warned in his book *Crime Control as Industry* (1993) that, "The major dangers of crime in modern societies are not the crimes, but that the fight against them may lead societies towards totalitarian developments."<sup>8</sup> In the U.S., fears of totalitarianism that were historically projected onto communist states in the 20th century appear to have materialized, ironically, in a domestic war against crime. Despite their legacy of opposition during the Cold War, Russia and the U.S. today incarcerate their own citizens at similar rates.<sup>9</sup>

The conflation of law and order mandates and the marketplace in the U.S. has resulted in the development of what is now commonly referred to as the prison-industrial complex. Described by American journalist Eric Schlosser, the prison-industrial complex is

... a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need .... It is a confluence of special interests that has given prison construction in the United States a seemingly unstoppable momentum. It is composed of politicians, both liberal and conservative, who have used the fear of crime to gain votes; impoverished rural areas where prisons have become a cornerstone of economic development; private companies that regard the roughly \$35 billion spent each year on corrections not as a burden on American taxpayers but as a lucrative market; and government officials whose fiefdoms have expanded along with the inmate population.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> See footnote #4.

<sup>8</sup> From *Crime Control as Industry*, by Nils Christie (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> In 1996, the incarceration rates of Russia and the U.S. were 690 and 615 per 100,000 people respectively (according to Vivien Stern's *A Sin Against the Future: Imprisonment in the World* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), p. 32. Since then, Russia's rates have decreased while those of the U.S. have risen.

<sup>10</sup> See footnote #5, p. 54.

Given the particular interests inherent in the prison-industrial complex, it is inevitable that a macho “get tough on crime” political stance prevails. It is, therefore, not crime rates but criminal justice policy that holds the key to the numbers of the criminalized fed to the prison machinery. The criminalization of politics coincides with the fetishism of the prison<sup>11</sup> and the commodification of prisoners.

Implicit in this criminal justice regime are labour remedies to the residual effects of capital flight to the “more competitive atmospheres” of other countries, moves which have been enabled by new trade agreements fostering the global economy.<sup>12</sup> The prison-industrial complex generates employment for many of those displaced by this trend. Indeed, the prison industry is said to employ more than 523,000 people, making it the largest employer in the U.S. after General Motors.<sup>13</sup> Incarceration is also a process whereby a large number of unemployed are made invisible. The authors of a study published last year argued that American unemployment statistics appear to be low compared to those of other industrial democracies because 1.6 million mainly low-skilled workers (a group less likely to find employment in a high-tech economy) are imprisoned, with a net effect of a 2 percent difference in real unemployment levels.<sup>14</sup>

The authors in this issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* speak to the effects of the prison-industrial complex and the distorted values of the

---

<sup>11</sup> “In capitalist society, Marx argues, material objects have certain characteristics conferred on them in virtue of the prevailing social relations, and take on the appearance that such characteristics belong to them by nature. This syndrome, pervasive of capitalist production, he calls fetishism...” (*A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, edited by Tom Bottomore, et al. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 165). The term was popularized by the anthropologist E. B. Tylor (1832-1917) in denoting the worship of inanimate objects by regarding them as having magical powers (*A Dictionary of Political Thought*, by Roger Scruton. London: Pan Books, 1982, p. 172). The attitudes and beliefs associated with the prison in the context of law and order agendas, in this sense, have the force and illusion of superstition.

<sup>12</sup> See *The Prison Industrial Complex and the Global Economy* by Eve Goldberg and Linda Evans (San Francisco: AGIT Press/AK Press Distribution, 1998), pp. 7-8.

<sup>13</sup> From “U.S. jails two millionth inmate,” by Duncan Campbell, *The Guardian Weekly*, February 17-23, 2000, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> From “How Unregulated is the U.S. Labor Market? The Penal System as a Labor Market Institution,” by Bruce Western and Katherine Beckett, quoted in “When They Get Out,” by Sasha Abramsky in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 283, Number 6, June 1999, p. 34.

societies in which it is imbedded. James Blau sets the tone for the issue in the opening piece, "Heat," in which we are invited to consider the meaning of his carceral existence: "Maybe it wouldn't matter so much ... if I thought there was a reason." The search for a purpose in the colourless world of the prison is found, tangentially, by Stephen Reid in "A Clockwork Grey," where the new risk assessment reforms of the contemporary Canadian prison are weighed against the punitive regimes of prisons past.

Yet traces of this past have been carried forward to the present. Capital punishment is a prominent example of a penal practice that has been long considered past in most member countries of the European Union. The death penalty was last used *de facto* in Canada in 1962, where it was finally abolished by law in 1976. The continued and accelerated use of the death penalty in the U.S. is a bitter anomaly in western societies, a reality confronted regularly in the *JPP*. Fueled by sentiments of revenge and notions of religious expiation, the use of the death penalty has nevertheless been restrained in cases where the convicted are too young or are mentally incapable of understanding the purpose of their punishment. In recent years, however, even these prohibitions have lost their moral resonance. The idea that the death penalty should be extended to youths is challenged by John MacKenzie, who contextualizes this punishment in a violent society that lacks compassion. In "Capital Punishment of Minors" he argues that violent youth mirror the violence they see and experience in the actions of the adults who run their country, media institutions, and homes. The topic of youth and crime is addressed further by Jon Marc Taylor, who considers the solemn predictions of "experts" who forecasted the immanence of a yet-to-be-realized juvenile crime wave. Taylor locates recent "get tough on youth crime" mandates in the nexus of American criminology and punitive politics in "Where Have All the Superpredators Gone?"

Despite the current state of criminal justice affairs, there remain memories of the ideals of the "American Way" that embody the intended meaning of the "thousand points of light." In "America the Beautiful?" H. D. Blake muses on these memories of the "land of the free" from a position informed by years of incarceration and failed parole attempts. Charles Huckelbury continues the theme of a new "American Way" and takes us outside of the prison experience to the street. His piece, "Life and Death in America: The Killing of Amadou Diallo," situates the killing of an unarmed citizen by New York City police officers in the wider theme of police militarization. He

compares the current zeitgeist of the police to that of soldiers engaged in battle, where a general awareness of perceived dangers is hypersensitized and particular groups are targeted as likely sources of threats to law and order. Coinciding with the rise of the prison-industrial complex, the role of the police over the past twenty years has evolved into one of a domestic army in a war against its own citizens.

In "TIME: A Convict's Perspective," Gregory McMaster offers an insider's disturbing view of the proverbial clock on the wall. With twenty consecutive years in the "cage," McMaster's view of time is particularly relevant to the current wave of cries for longer sentences in the United States and Canada.

In the final article of this issue, Ed Poindexter identifies some positive meaning in his lengthy prison experience through an expanding influence of personal and intellectual mentors. His personal journey is recounted in "On Heroes and She-roes: Self-Esteem and Breaking the Cycle of Prison Recidivism."

In this issue's "Prisoners' Struggles" section we have included three submissions covering different terrain. The attempts of native rights activist Eddie Hatcher to represent himself against murder charges and a concomitant death penalty are documented in "In Self-Defense: Constitutional Rights for *Pro Se* Criminal Defendants in North Carolina." The ever-present theme of capital punishment also forms the basis of "Dispatches from Death Row," in which contributor James Allridge III recounts the move of prisoners in Texas from the Ellis Unit to the Terrell Unit and muses on the execution of Gary Graham, who maintained his innocence to the end. Finally, we offer the report of Dawnya Ferdinandsen, an account of institutional negligence resulting in the death of Carol Ann Bell in the Ohio Reformatory for Women, reminding us that there are different ways of dying in prison.

A discussion of the prison-industrial complex necessitates a reference to the work of the Norwegian academic Nils Christie, one of the first analyses of criminal justice policy to tie the politics of crime control to the new economy. Christie has characterized the growing carceral network as Western-style gulags, and he argues for a greater use of civil remedies to resolve criminal conflicts whenever possible. In this issue's "Response," Professor Christie is interviewed by Luc Robert, a Belgian student studying at Simon Fraser University in Canada. Christie and Robert discuss the promises and pitfalls of restorative justice as an alternative to retributive justice.

We close this issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* with three book reviews on topics that resonate with the thoughts of our prisoner contributors. An enticing review of *A Few Small Candles: War Resisters of World War II Tell Their Stories* is offered by Peter Brock who writes from his own experience of incarceration as a conscientious objector. By highlighting the different ways that political prisoners coped with incarceration, we are reminded of the deep impact of the prison on those who have endured it. Jay Jones follows with a review of *The Funhouse Mirror: Reflections on Prison*, a collection of essays by Washington state prisoners and their writing teacher. These writings, Jones notes, “affirm the hardships of convicts and others that find themselves on society’s underside and poke a sharp stick of reality in the proverbial eye of those who find themselves a world away from such daily struggles and pain.” The collaboration of prisoners and outside advocates in the writing enterprise is also the basis of *Women on the Row: Revelations from Both Sides of the Bars*, reviewed by longtime prison activist and academic Karlene Faith. Again, the recurring theme of the death penalty finds expression in the words of those who anticipate it, and we are struck by the substantial similarities shared by condemned women and those outside this experience.

As a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* for the past ten years, I have been privileged to work with a great number of talented and dedicated imprisoned writers and prison activists. I want to thank those of you who have been so patient with the lengthy delays in responding to letters, requests and manuscript submissions while we undergo a re-organization process that we hope will streamline the division of labour and expand the distribution of the *JPP* by partnering with Canadian Scholars’ Press. Bringing the *JPP* to this point has been a collective exercise, as was noted in the introduction to the previous issue (Volume 10, Nos. 1 & 2) To the list of significant contributors to the *JPP*’s history, we would like to add Paul Wright and John Lowman. We are grateful for their involvement.

We are sorry to note the departure of Kim Cunnington-Taylor from the editorial board; Kim’s contributions towards the production of the *JPP* over the years ensured our publication, and cannot be understated. On a positive note, we are proud to announce the addition of Charles Huckelbury to the board. Charles has been a longtime contributor to the *JPP* and we look forward to working with him on future issues.

Many people contributed their time and skills to compose this issue and maintaining communications. I benefited greatly from the help of Jay Jones, who took care of the technical production of the issue, helped edit articles and wrote a book review. Bob Gaucher provided much appreciated guidance and copyediting. Special thanks are also owed to Stephen Reid, Steven Foote, and John MacKenzie in Mission Institution (British Columbia) for their editorial commentary on manuscripts and our ongoing dialogue on social justice issues. Thanks also to our new partners at Canadian Scholars' Press: Jack Wayne, publisher; Ruth Bradley-St-Cyr, managing editor; Laura McIntyre, business manager; Jo Roberts, copyeditor; and Brad Horning, final layout.

And finally, I want to affirm and celebrate the enormous contributions of Bob Gaucher, who has been the heart and soul of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* for the past few years. Bob's continued involvement with the *JPP* no doubt ensures its existence.