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“PRISONERS ON PRISON ABOLITION”

-Howard Davidson

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

The focus of this issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* is prison abolition. The theme is not accidental; on the contrary, the story of how it came about is also the history of the founding of the journal.

It began as a more modest effort. In January, 1987 I decided to attend the third International Conference on Prison Abolition (ICOPA) at Montreal University and present a collection of papers written by prisoners on prison abolition. At that time I was teaching prisoners in the forensic unit at the Alberta Hospital Edmonton. I discussed the project with them and several said they would give it some thought. In February, I visited Hendrik Hoekema, the coordinator of the Simon Fraser University Prison Education Program, and he agreed to encourage students to submit papers. Sue Easton, an English teacher working at the Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Centre in Alberta, also asked students to do the same.

At the time I envisioned having at least six articles compiled as a pamphlet for distribution at the conference. This proved to be too ambitious. The time given to complete the pamphlet did not adequately account for the conditions under which prisoners must work. A week before the conference began, I had three papers from the Prison Education Program and one from Fort Saskatchewan. Although a pamphlet could not be printed in time, I decided to put these four articles together under the title "Prisoners on Prison Abolition" and to present them at a workshop called "Education in Prison: An Abolitionist Strategy?"¹

The decision was the right one. The papers were well received. Fifty copies were distributed at the conference; another seventy-five have been mailed out since. From the comments at Montreal and based on letters asking for copies, an editorial board was formed to expand the project into a semi-annual publication through which prisoners and former prisoners could actively participate in the development of research about crime, justice, and the experience and politics of punishment. This first issue expands on the papers presented at ICOPA; thus its focus is prison abolition. The Winter 1988 issue will include articles on a variety of topics. In the future special issues will focus on Natives and people of colour in prisons, women in prisons, prisoners' rights and political movements, the impact of long-term imprisonment, and other topics.

Prior to the publication of this issue I would have taken the trouble to explain in some detail the importance of taking papers written by prisoners to a conference on prison abolition. Today, I would suggest that the reader refer to the content of the articles published here. Thus, my own comments can be kept brief.

Since the mid-1960's some very innovative research has taken place on the question of crime and punishment. Coupled with prisoners' collective action in response to the mammoth increase in the rate of incarceration and the resultant degeneracy of prison conditions, the new explanations for crime and punishment generated by radical criminologists and Marxists has fueled and transformed the prisoners' rights movement and the movement for prison abolition. However, while the direction of research has changed, the profile of people doing it has not. The production of knowledge on crime, justice, and punishment continues to be as closed off from the people who are the objects of that research as ever before. Occasionally a newspaper publishes a prisoners' letter-to-the-editor, newsletters for prisoners' rights groups publish articles targeted for prisoners and political activists (e.g. *Bulldozer*, Toronto), and a few journals print the occasional essay (e.g. *Crime and Social Justice*). Books written by imprisoned men and women have changed people's perception, if not the condition, of prisoners. In a few cases former prisoners have entered academia and are making a significant contribution to the discourse on crime and punishment.

¹Three of the articles in this issue of the journal were included in that presentation. These were: Anonymous, "An Inside Viewpoint," Lepmer's "Prisons Must Be Abolished," and Senger's "Abolition: Good Idea/Bad Approach."

All of this counts. But for the prisoners and former prisoners who would welcome an opportunity to engage in the production of knowledge about crime and punishment, the barriers to participation remain formidable, to say the least. The cost of attending conferences keeps those who do not qualify for travel grants from coming and making presentations. Announcements and calls for papers are posted where only those who frequent universities or read professional journals will see them. If making successful submissions to journals and conference proceedings are not restricted outright to those with the appropriate credentials, there is always the acceptable form (e.g. "Manuscripts must be double-spaced and submitted in triplicate...") to keep the non-professionals out.

The problem is not exclusive to mainstream forums (e.g. *The Criminal Justice Congress*). Prisoners and former prisoners participation at ICOPA, a meeting of radical criminologists and political activists, was sparse in Montreal and non-existent at the second ICOPA in 1985. Ritually, participants express the importance of hearing what prisoners have to say about prison abolition, but no direct action is taken to make those voices heard.

As early as the turn of the century organised Blacks and feminists in the United States realized the importance of publishing not just newsletters but, also journals which would contribute to the development of research. This was necessary to challenge the descriptions and interpretations of their experiences offered by white, male, middle-class, professional academics (e.g. see *Crisis* and *Forerunner*). In Canada, a recent and most successful attempt to publish women's research into their own experience is *Fireweed*. Following this tradition, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* is dedicated to encouraging prisoners and former prisoners, educators and students, political activists, prison and community workers, and policy-makers to question their theoretical assumptions by reading and responding to the analysis of men and women for whom imprisonment is not a word but an immediate experience.

In closing, a comment about the process of compiling this issue seems appropriate. In selecting the articles we chose seven which reflect a range of positions on prison abolition. Editing them was a more complex matter.

Recalling the advice of George Jackson, Jo Anne Mayhew notes in her article "that words written by prisoners for readers on the outside must proceed obliquely; otherwise, those writing them need only to take words covered in blood...and fling them on paper" (p. 11). Unlike literature, the standard form of writing research avoids explosive phrases and exclamations. We decided as an editorial policy to disregard this convention. Mayhew makes it clear that the writer in prison has already "proceed[ed] obliquely"; thus it is best to limit the task of editing to making changes in composition only for the sake of consistency and grammar.