

**Robert P Weiss and Nigel South (eds), *Comparing Prison Systems: Toward a Comparative and International Penology*, Gordon and Breach, Amsterdam (1998) ISBN 90 5700 511 5**

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The use of imprisonment as a key crime control sanction attracts perennial attention and debate, in political and public realms. Views differ about its efficacy and effectiveness. On the one hand, broadly speaking, are the law and order advocates of incarceration who argue that prisons can deliver realistic retribution and deterrence outcomes and, therefore, are essential in a society's quest to control crime, generally, and certain types of offences in particular. Other observers are more concerned about the frenetic growth of prison populations that have become entrenched in the structural and cultural systems (as well as, labour markets) of some industrial societies. They, typically, point out the deleterious consequences of formalised correctional systems of social control, with the prison as the keystone, for the severely diminished quality of life experienced by many - now and projected into the next millennium.

Overall, *Comparing Prison Systems* is a text that has a strong general theme for using imprisonment as a last resort option in the sentencing tariff. To support the realisation of that option, it presents readers with a discourse for understanding specific political, sociological and cultural constraints that come into play in given jurisdictions. While some others are evident in the book, the editors argue that five major international developments have shaped the current state of imprisonment practices:

- (1) the rise of neoconservative politics and neoliberal economies in North America and Western Europe, and the concomitant economic decline, class polarisation and fiscal crisis affecting most Western nations; (2) the introduction of a market economy in China; (3) the collapse of the Soviet Union and associated communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe; (4) a return to civilian rule in most of Latin America, as well as a renewed push by elected officials toward privatisation and other neoliberal economic prescriptions for the region; and (5) the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa (p 2).

In effect, therefore, the book provides excellent coverage of global prison systems, offering critical insight about the development of prison-industrial complexes in various regions. The underlying arguments about such developments take different forms, depending on precise national macro structural and cultural shifts that have taken place over time, and are continuing to take place.

The 'bookends' of this collection, written by the editors, are the *Introduction* and *Conclusion*, which serve as informative overview discussions of issues involved in furthering comparative penological works, useful for understanding the precise place and role of prisons at the end of this century across a diverse world.

Weiss and South, as editors, commissioned a collection of well-crafted original essays covering 16 industrial countries, characterised by differing degrees of economic and social development. Contributors are an internationally recognisable group of distinguished scholars. The years covered are roughly 1975 to projected 2000 and a little beyond. Of course, to be expected for international penology projects, nations included are the United States, Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. To be reasonably expected for consideration are Australia, South Africa, Germany, Italy, China and Japan. Rounding out

the list, are less surveyed nations for comparative analysis including Poland (maybe, a reasonable category candidate), Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. It is not clear why other countries, particularly those located in the continents of Africa and Asia, have not been part of this international and comparative analysis. Nevertheless, this text does enable global and nation specific events to be critically canvassed.

Clearly, a review of this kind of collection cannot possibly provide adequate coverage of the myriad of issues that define the particular context of penology, and more definitively the use of prisons, in such specific sites that can be found in and across 16 countries. The precise nuances of how such matters as globalisation, economic rationalism and privatisation of social systems, for example, impact on different settings is solid reading. Their implications and consequences for various correctional systems provide a most comprehensive international coverage.

To give readers some idea about the specifics contained in the text you might consider the following. Some countries are in the throes of a continuous carceral growth with unprecedented prison population numbers (e.g. the United States and the United Kingdom), while others have actually witnessed some stability, albeit small declines, in such populations (e.g. Japan). Many prison systems can be characterised by high rates of incarceration of indigenous and migrant peoples, having a major role in waging a 'war against drugs', undergoing significant changes with respect to prison labour and industries, being reformed by a push for their privatisation, considerably varying in the role they are expected to play in rehabilitation and/or resocialisation of the correctional system objectives, and the strategic use of prisons to control 'unruly' social groups. While this listing is far from complete, it gives some indication of the informative nature of the text and its insightful discourses on larger global forces that shape contemporary penology.

If contemporary criminology is to move further toward greater relevance for correctional policy, then this book deserves careful reading. The essays demonstrate the intent of Weiss and South to produce a text that reflected analyses of various penal systems in terms of historical changes and patterns, which could be used to explore possible futures. This book contains important 'lessons' based on stories of penal practices implemented by 16 countries during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It tells us about what does not work in particular nations and what might provide 'windows of opportunity' for a rethinking of penology in nations caught in the nexus of crime myths, public/political quests for 'doing something' about crime and a reliance on the prison far from being a 'last resort' option, at a time of significant global economic and cultural change.

Absent in this book about structural and cultural societal changes are voices of those who are and would be imprisoned. Some in-depth analyses about the impact of such changes on people, beyond incarceration rates, would be appropriate. To be fair, however, that was not the intention of Weiss and South and might be the focus of some future edition in the publisher's series, *International Studies in Global Change*.

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