

## Book Review

*Punishment and Prisons: Power and the Carceral State*. Sim, J., (2009) London: Sage.  
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The penal system in the United Kingdom is facing a number of challenges among which are the concerns over the cost of managing the prison system and the ever increasing prison population. At a time when questions are being asked about the very structure and form that a criminal justice system should take, Sim's work presents us with a stark and real view on prisons and in his words "...that the 'real struggle' around prisons should be conducted from an abolitionist perspective..." (p. xii)

In *Punishment and prisons*, Sim presents a clear and critical voice in the realm of criminological literature. The emphasis is on penal institutions and the dynamics that surround the role of the state and this is presented in language that is direct and unambiguous.

He begins by setting forth the premise of his work by identifying what he views as four dimensions as "an organizing, conceptual framework for analysing the social problem of modern penal arrangements." (p. 2) These dimensions Sim argues follow a different trajectory from previous literature on the area of punishment. These four dimensions are: continuity and discontinuity in penal policy and practice; prisons, state power and punishment; contesting and resisting penal power and finally, abolitionism, utopianism and deconstruction of the prison.

Sim then traces the development of strategies used in the penal policies in the United Kingdom from 1974 leading up to Blair's New Labour. These chapters are well researched with ample use of an assortment of facts and data that presents the reader with an opportunity to reflect on some of the political and cultural contexts in which the prison system in the United Kingdom existed.

Peppered with insights into the workings of the management of prisons and the criminal justice system and the nuances of state influence in the development of strategies in the penal system, these Chapters afford Sim the opportunity to develop a critical analysis of the relationship between penal policy and state power and hence the carceral state.

Sim also uses these Chapters as an opportunity to address one of the problems of the discontinuity thesis in that there is a tendency to read the social history of the prison as an account from above (p. 3). Hence Sim makes use of narratives that are often marginalized, namely those that come from prisoner's autobiographies and letters as well as documents and publications from prisoners' rights organizations. (p. 46&47)

The development of these varied strategies adopted by successive United Kingdom governments has led to the prison becoming an institution that "exists in the collective mind as an existential comfort blanket for the protection of the globalized citizen against the

material and psychological insecurities generated by the predations of the criminal and deviant.” (p. 128) The prison system has therefore become an indestructible part of the legal system.

Sim therefore believes (quoting Cohen, 1979:49-50) that it is the role of the critical criminologist to then play a pivotal role in not just combating knowledge but also the power of knowledge. In Chapter 7, Sim discusses the challenges that confront the abolitionists and then proffers radical proposals which he believes would challenge and ultimately transform existing penal institutions, perhaps as a means to combat the power of knowledge.

The first challenge that confronts abolitionists is the process of ‘defining-in and defining-out’ that takes place. This is the process of making sure that any debate on the issue is within the scope defined by the state. Thus the state dominates discourse around what is espoused as penal truths while defining-out or marginalizing alternative views. In fact Sim believes that the state control over the debates in these issues has increased in recent years and this is attributable to a number of factors.

Firstly, the state mystifies punishment by “a rhetoric of benevolence and paternalism” (p. 131) when in actual fact the reality is one of fear and pain. This is evidenced by strong statistical data of deaths/suicides that occur in the prison system.

Secondly, there is a great move in incorporating reforms which may not necessarily work as opposed to incorporating those that have worked, which then means that thirdly, there appears to be an undermining and ignoring of successful policies. Fourthly, Sim argues that many of these policies have then been legitimised by discourse on criminal behaviour that is “dominated by narrow, reductive presuppositions and conservative ‘domain assumption’ about human behaviour.” (p. 139)

In view of these challenges, Sim puts forward three specific areas that he believes can be mobilized to confront the failings of political and criminological effects on the prison system and the parallel effects on families and society.

The three specific areas are: introducing moratorium on prison building, redirecting criminal justice and prison expenditure, and dismantling the culture of prison officers.

On the first point, Sim argues for the stopping of the prison-building programme as the first important step. This would include the notion that the majority of women’s prisons could be abolished immediately without great danger to the wider society. While this is an important step, it cannot be pursued without ensuring the shift in the minds of those involved in the criminal justice system as treating the prison system as the ultimate solution to everything that ails society. (p. 141)

As a necessary corollary to the point above, Sim argues (quoting Mathiesen, 2000:343-344) that the dismantling of the prisons could then be put to better use in, for example, the area of youth justice programmes.

The final point Sim makes is the need to dismantle prison officer culture arguing that “prison officer culture is the elephant in the corner with respect to political and criminological debates around prisons.” (p. 145) The approach suggested therefore is to redesign and refocus staff training so that concepts of rights, empathy and respect are normalized.

These suggestions do not exist in a vacuum but are part of a number of broader changes and interventions that are geared to radically transforming prisons. Much of this centres on radical transformation of as many stakeholders as possible that participate in the criminal justice system. These include the judges and magistrates, who deliberate on cases, lawyers

and the legal system, the decentralising of the prison system, the removal of private company involvement in the prison system and other broader changes he outlines on pp 148.

For Sim, politicians have kept the debate on the penal system as part of the myopic need to be seen to be doing something about crime and this is tied in to the need to maintain political survival. This whole process then is geared to prevent any alternative debate on the issue of the penal system. Sim argues that this position is however besotted with its own contradictions and in the final Chapter, he sets out to consider the abolitionist stand in an anti-utopian age.

The abolitionist stand does not in Sim's view; disregard the good work done by those who seek to reform the present position. Hence "Liberal reform groups have therefore played a central role..."(p. 154). However, Sim is of the view that abolitionists remain "justifiably sceptical" of the reform group's activities.

The principal bone of contention is that while reform groups have been arguing for the alternatives to custody, they have failed to question the very need for the prison system and failed to challenge the fundamental presuppositions that undermine the need for the prison system. Hence, there is unfortunately a situation which reforms groups become slavish to their own point of contention -reform. Sim argues that most of these initiatives have done nothing substantial in terms of reducing crime rates or the stigma of offenders or of reducing the pain and damage of imprisonment.

In Sim's view, therefore, there are five overlapping 'contradictions, contingencies and contestations' (p. 156) which in his view, when taken together 'continue to deny the prison an all-embracing hegemony within the contemporary apparatus of punishment.'

Firstly, the process of carceralisation has resulted in society accepting that punishment is natural and acceptable. However, this process has its own contingencies and contradictions. Particularly, the notion of a penal state is not necessarily an inevitable historical fact that is destined to continue ad infinitum and furthermore there is no guarantee that state led punitive policies will inevitably work.

Secondly, Sim argues that the prison system has been subject to major and minor internal acts of subversion, refusals and confrontations. Thirdly, these confrontations have support from various external parties or bodies or groups. Fourthly, Sim identifies that there is also no hegemony in the campaigns used to highlight the victims of crimes, as there is evidence to suggest that victims themselves are sceptical in the penal system as a means of solving crime. Lastly, he argues that society's perception of dangerous crimes and criminals and the role of the prison as is presently constructed require greater critical thinking. (pp 159)

So where do we go from here? In the final part of his book Sim argues that the notion of abolitionism is often perceived as utopian and incapable of achievement. But this perception is flawed as it is often utopian thinking that drives change. Furthermore, the very notion of reforming the penal system to make it better is in itself a notion that is utopian in nature as it seeks to make things better within the prison system.

More importantly Sim is of the view that his work seeks to create the need for a reappraisal of crime and the prison system in order to break the futility of the current penal system and it is his hope that his views will "help contribute to its eventual demise before another two centuries have passed." (p. 163)

The concept of abolitionism is not entirely new. Michel Foucault, Angela Davis and Nils Christie, to name a few, have advocated the notion of abolishment of the prison system. So in that sense, Sim's work does not advocate a new concept or view towards the penal

system. However, there is much merit in the manner the work is presented. Particularly, the discussion on the successive UK government's policies on prisons and the ample evidence of these policies in practice help the development of the notion of a political hegemony in creating the carceral state. The use of uncommon sources of information and views especially from those in prison themselves creates the stark and 'realspeak' of the work that is indeed commendable.

As we enter into an era where the views of the government and those in power are no longer able to dominate or control the debate on the penal system, this work does present a realistic view of how societies are coping with crime and punishment. It of course remains to be seen if there is enough in terms of will and power to make a change. But Sim has, in my opinion fulfilled his objective of creating an insight that is a valuable contribution to the realm of critical criminology.