

Prison Abolition

It's Time!

Ernest Larsen

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Through the uproar of the sustained near-uprisings of Covid summer 2020 against police violence and systemic racism, one could sometimes hear more radical voices. The assertion from them that everybody behind bars should be recognized as a political prisoner is no longer completely beyond consideration. If so, then it's worth looking at how radical prisoners have conceptualized their experiences within the state's institutionalization of punishment.

As long ago as 1887, anarchist ex-prisoner Peter Kropotkin wrote, "The first duty of the revolution will be to abolish prisons—those monuments of human hypocrisy." Here, abolition, at least as an obligatory idea rather than a movement, is already solidly in place.

By 1893, Kropotkin's history of the French Revolution sweeps to this idea's embodiment: "As soon as the bridges of the Bastille had been lowered the crowd rushed into the courtyards...to search the fortress and free the prisoners entombed in the oubliettes. There was great emotion, and tears were shed at the sight of the phantoms who issued from their cells, bewildered by the light of the sun and by the sound of the many voices that welcomed them...The whole town was soon delirious with joy on hearing that the Bastille was in the hands of the people."

From this salutary delirium, you can pluck one word: "phantoms," emanations of living death. Just about every political prisoner (anarchist or not)—from 19th century illegalist Clement Duval, to Alexander Berkman, straight through Barbara Deming's 1966 *Prison Notes*, to Tasos Theofilou's 2019 *Writings from a Greek Prison*, characterizes the experience of imprisonment as living death.

Last summer, a harrowing slippage and crossover became unavoidable. The living death of mass incarceration simply became death—neither chosen. During the ongoing Covid onslaught, the authorities, state and federal, stumbled toward releasing from our unspeakably vast carceral system a significant number of inmates convicted of nonviolent crimes.

New York opened the gates to 3,000 prisoners, for instance. The Marshall Project calculates an eight percent drop in the prison population—from 2.3 to roughly 2.2 million, in the first six months of 2020.

However, this deceptive decline largely resulted not from opening the doors, but from shutting down much of the justice system. Fewer arrests, closed courts, few grand juries, and still fewer convictions.

Submitting only to the unbreakable Law of Unanticipated Consequences, Covid acted as an unexpected friend to many who would otherwise find themselves swept into the clutches of what still passes for justice. A swiftly expanding disaster temporarily relieved the slow unending catastrophe of state punishment, attesting to its obscene bloat.

Political prisoners tirelessly point out that it is the social order itself that's criminal. Thus, in her 1971 "Letter from the Marin County Jail," Black activist and academic Angela Davis wrote: "...the police would be unable to set into motion their racist machinery were they not sanctioned and supported by the judicial system. The courts not only consistently abstain from prosecuting criminal behavior on the part of the police, but they convict, on the basis of biased police testimony, countless Black men and women."

One turning-point came last summer with the remarkable insurgence of the abolitionist movement. Sparked by George Floyd's murder caught on video, an event experienced as yet another outbreak of a civil war declared over in 1865. It evokes the following chilling comparison.

In Wisconsin in 1854, Joshua Glover, a runaway—self-freed—slave was re-captured and dumped, mangled and bleeding, into a wagon, and, with a marshal's foot on his neck, taken to a Milwaukee county jail.

Two days later, a fired-up abolitionist crowd forcibly re-freed Glover and spirited him off to Canada via the Underground Railroad. The sustained, compressed violence of these two historical incidents, white lawman's foot against black man's neck and white lawman's knee against black man's neck, remains shocking, but not surprising. One difference. In 1854, the direct action of the abolitionist movement succeeded, a revolt still beyond the reach of today's abolitionists.

In 1892, five years into his inflated sentence for shooting industrialist Henry Frick during a strike, Alexander Berkman, among the most disciplined of anarchist revolutionaries, felt, "I am buried alive in this stone grave."

In his 1970 introduction to Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, Paul Goodman points out that "men like Kropotkin, Berkman, and Debs were quite certain, both by their philosophy and the evidence of their senses, that the concept of punishment is worthless and the jails must simply be abolished. The Bastille is the essence of what is rotten and must be stormed first."

Echoing Berkman, 120 years on, Tasos Theofilou calls the prison cell "a grave for the living." While Greece itself has been treated like a debtor's prison by the wardens of the European Union, Theofilou, convicted of complicity in homicide and bank robbery, active in the Network of Imprisoned Fighters, was eventually completely exonerated.

His unusual book consists of an open letter, a statement on the appeal, a reflective prolegomena, some fragmentary stories from prisoners' points of view, including one on prison uprisings. It's interwoven with commentary, a free-verse poem, a prison-slang dictionary, and 22 lo-res photos of prisoner-fashioned tools.

This somewhat Brechtian dossier structure subverts the redemption narrative common to prison literature: textual shifts permit only intermittent, contradictory identification with its emotional logic. Stories are compressed into wrenching anecdotes that encapsulate the state's processes of dehumanization.

Yes, Theofilou, says, "you're always naked in the cesspool." He sees the daily brutality and withering repetitiveness of confinement as conditions of ceaseless "condensation." The book is subtitled *32 Steps, or Correspondence from the House of the Dead*. "32 steps in the yard...How much pain can be squeezed into 32 steps, how much injustice, how much poverty,...how many family tragedies, how much suppression, how much life in condensed form?"

The "House of the Dead," evokes Dostoyevsky's fictionalized account of his own four-year imprisonment. Theofilou's deadpan prison dictionary, a microcosmic study of a canibalistic social order, defines speech that at once reinforces prisoners' toxic hetero-masculinity and assist resistance to their situational "fuckovery."

Anarchism has necessarily been marked by the deployment of tactics and/or strategies shuttling between legalism and illegalism. The social/anti-social space of prison as reality, microcosm, and text has long been a testing-ground for such resistance. Theofilou, Kropotkin, Bakunin, and Berkman have all affirmed what they learned from this abysmal negativity.

Theofilou attests, "Even though I did not commit the offenses for which I am accused, I am not innocent. I committed the one offense that includes all others. I am an anarchist. In the class war, I chose the side of the excluded and the underprivileged, the prosecuted and the accursed, the poor, the weak, and the oppressed."

Finally, Emma Goldman noted the hesitant emergence of Law from the punishment-centric Church, then added: "Society might with greater immunity abolish all prisons at once than to hope for protection from these...chambers of horrors."

Here, Goldman must reach out to Madame Tussaud, originator of the famous waxworks, Chamber of Horrors, in 1802. Tussaud kickstarted her career casting guillotined French revolutionaries' death masks in the shadow of the re-established Bastille.

Ernest Larsen's *The Trial Before the Trial* (Autonomedia) is the only existing first-person account of the secret grand jury system. In 2014, Larsen was forcibly removed and charged with contempt of court for "disruption" while serving on a Manhattan grand jury. He lives in New York City.

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