



BOOK REVIEW

Vincenzo Ruggiero, Mick Ryan and Joe Sim - Western European Penal Systems: A Critical Anatomy. Sage Publications. £12.95 Pb. ISBN 0 8039 75 63 5

For many years discussions of imprisonment have been dominated by reference to the situation in America. In official circles this legacy continues and involves a preoccupation with privatisation, boot camps and what have been dubbed new 'Alcatraz' type prisons.

In many ways, however, an examination of penal systems throughout Europe may be more instructive to prison administrators and researchers in this country. Strangely, very little is known about the changing nature of imprisonment throughout Western Europe and the different types of prison regimes which operate in these countries.

In a very welcome overview of those developments, Vincenzo Ruggiero, Mick Ryan and Joe Sim have brought together a number of European experts who provide an informed and accessible account of current developments.

In the opening chapter the editors provide a useful overview of recent developments. Summarising the findings of the various contributors they argue that there has been a general increase in the number of prisoners and the length of sentences passed by the courts and an expansion of both prison capacity and the use of community-based sanctions. In a number of countries various authors report a 'drive towards authoritarian law and order solutions for social problems'.

The various contributors examine developments in a number of countries, including Spain, Germany, Holland, England and Wales, Italy, Sweden and Ireland. Although there is no general uniformity of development across Western Europe and Scandinavia the various contributors map out developments in different countries which indicate points of overlap.

Indicative of the changing role of imprisonment and the recent developments which have occurred in Holland, which for many years has been seen as one of the most liberal countries in Western Europe with a relatively progressive penal policy, René van Swaaningen and Gerard de Jonge describe how the penal system in Holland has become more punitive in recent years and the emphasis upon welfare and

rehabilitation has been 'toned down' following a shift towards incapacitation and deterrence for the increasing number of those incarcerated.

Similar developments are identified in other chapters. Most of the contributors note the changing nature of prison populations in different countries, particularly in relation to ethnicity and gender. In several countries throughout Europe the number of non-national prisoners has been increasing creating new problems both for prisoners and for prison administrators. The number of people who have been incarcerated for drug related offences also appears to have increased dramatically in most European countries in recent years.

Changes of this type are identified by Karen Leander in her chapter on Sweden. Like Holland, Sweden has been widely seen as a fairly liberal and progressive country in relation to penal policy in the post-war period. However Leander notes that the numbers per 100,000 of the population have increased steadily in recent years, and there has been a noticeable increase in the number of long-term prisoners. Although Sweden retains its relatively generous system of parole by which the actual period of time spent in prison remains relatively short, she notes that there has been a marked shift towards tougher policies and changing views on the use of imprisonment, particularly in relation to drug related crime.

Similar concerns have been expressed in Germany in recent years according to Claudius Messner and Vincenzo Ruggiero. Although there were significant reductions on the prison population

in Germany during the 1980s there are signs that the prison system is in the process of re-expanding and that there have been significant increases in the use of remand.

This collection of articles provides a useful overview of changing penal philosophies and penal practices in a number of countries in Western Europe and Scandinavia and although there is no uniformity in the changes which are identified by the respective authors there are some points of overlap and convergence. These include a general shift towards more punitive penal policies, a growing emphasis upon drug related crimes, the growing percentage of foreign prisoners in most European prisons, the changing role of alternatives to custody and the changing composition of the prison populations. In sum, this book raises the question of the role of imprisonment in Western Europe and elsewhere as we approach the 21st century.

Roger Matthews, Centre for Criminology, Middlesex University

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