Historical Book Review | Walls and Bars: Prisons and Prison Life in the “Land of the Free”

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Eugene Debs. *Walls and Bars: Prisons and Prison Life in the “Land of the Free”*. Ker Publishing Company, 1927/2000; 248 pp.; ISBN: 0882862480.

For President—Convict No. 9653

This piece reviews a largely overlooked account of prison experience written by Eugene V. Debs, concerning observations of prisons around the turn of the 20th century in the US. The book *Walls and Bars: Prisons and Prison Life in the “Land of the Free”* contributes many insights consistent with contemporary knowledge for criminology and criminal justice. It is not, however, without notable limitations. The subject-position of this account is clearly political and biased in a Protestant brand of morality and humanism. Debs expresses himself substantively throughout the book between the polemics of the sacred and the profane, although not in those words specifically. The theoretical paradigm of the sacred and the profane underpins many sociological contributions of this historical era, most notably Durkheim. Although this work is historical, there are many statements that stand consistent with contemporary academic thought. As such, Debs’ work contributes a substantial historical and situated perspective to the Criminal Justice and Criminological body of knowledge.

Eugene Debs (1855-1926) is well known as a labor organizer. His popularity grew throughout the early twentieth century, and Debs was even nominated for President of the United States five times. Importantly, Debs was also a Federal inmate. He had been incarcerated because of his public protest of the United States’ involvement in World War I. His only book, published posthumously, was entitled *Walls and Bars: Prisons & Prison Life in the “Land of the Free.”* This book chronicles a first-hand account of prison stints from just before the turn of the century to his eventual pardon of 1921 by President Harding. Debs’ longest term in prison was two and a half years, which prompted him to write this book. His thesis is clear in the introduction provided below:

While still an inmate of the United States Penitentiary at Atlanta, Georgia, the suggestion was made to me by interested publishers that upon my release I write a series of articles describing my prison experience. The suggestion, coming from various sources, appealed to me for the reason that I saw in it an opportunity to give the general public certain information in regard to the prison, based upon my personal observation and experience, that I hoped might result in some beneficial changes in the management of prisons and in the treatment of their inmates. (Debs, 1927/2000, p. 18)

What can criminology and criminal justice garner from visiting this early participant-observation of US prisons early in the twentieth century? Loic Wacquant (2002) once asked where to find prison ethnographic research during an age of mass incarceration. Where is it? The call for ethnographic research in this area continues more recently with a special issue of *Criminal Justice Matters* concerning

what prison ethnographic work contributes to the body of knowledge (Drake & Earle, 2013). One contributing article in that issue by Yvonne Jewkes (2013) calls for an "ethnography of confinement" pertaining to the growing prison systems around the world. The article ends with a hopeful claim that this ethnographic dearth seems to be narrowing as emergent research is published across several areas of prison research. Examining the past for such empirical based records, such as that provided by Debs, however, would contribute a wider breadth and historical depth to our base of knowledge.

While there may be limitations to Debs' theoretical lens, he was clearly a cogent, consistent, and deep thinker of topics that pertain to our fields of study in Sociology, Criminology and Criminal Justice Studies. These first chapters of *Wall & Bars* introduce the macro trends on prisons during Debs' time. Chapter 1 is entitled, "The Relation of Society to the Convict," and concerns reflexive stories concerning the overwhelming poverty of prisoners encountered by the author. Perhaps most significantly, Debs (1927) contributes an early argument against deterrence stating, "The ancient idea was the more cruel the punishment the more certain the reformation" (p. 32). The scholar completes this inquisition of deterrence with a rather Foucauldian notion, arguing, "We now know that brutality begets brutality, and we know that through the centuries there has been a steady modification of discipline and method in the treatment of prisoners" (Debs, 1927, p. 32). This thought and thesis continues through the following chapter, "The Prison as an Incubator of Crime."

Chapter Two presents a strong observation that we have come to consider "stigma." This chapter considers the social conditions, the class of those policed, and finally the social "branding" that being a convict bears. This resonates with two venerable theoretical positions. Describing Labeling Theory, Howard Becker reminds the reader that it is not the cells or categories we use to denote certain behaviors, but their interrelations with surrounding factors (1973, p. 180). Debs (1927) states, "That record will follow them through every avenue and lane of life and will serve to convict them in advance of any charge that any malevolent person might subsequently bring against them" (p. 43). It would be almost half of a century, however, before Ervino Goffman (1963) would establish Debs' second theoretical position in his book entitled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*.

Debs' first-hand accounts are deeply reflexive, contributing insights into inter-personal and community identity within prisons. Debs articulates how he was treated by the fellow inmates and experienced environmental conditions through a largely silenced and invisible population, historically. Chapters Three through Six concern the situations that led to Debs becoming Convict no. 9653, his experiences with the inmates, his illness while in prison, and stories of solitude in the absence of visitors; he shared the isolation imposed on many fellow inmates.

Yvonne Jewkes argues that ethnography allows the researcher to write herself into the narrative (2013). This auto-ethnographic perspective, as Jewkes notes, "provides a benchmark for others trying to process their experiences about the research they undertake" (2013, p. 15). Debs' account allows us

as scholars to peer through his first-order analysis. The following example exercises the use of personal reflexivity to humanize the numbers of the incarcerated pertaining to getting to know the general population of the penitentiary:

These men were convicted felons, outcasts from society, pariahs, and yet in their ministrations to me and to each other in their unselfish desire to give rather than to receive, and in their eagerness to serve rather than be served, they set an example that might well be followed by some people who never saw the inside of prison walls. (Debs, 1927, p. 71)

Chapter Five includes an account of Debs getting sick after a particularly hot summer in 1919. He accounts losing 25 pounds due to the conditions and quality of food served to him while incarcerated (Debs, 1927). While Debs' heart condition led to his hospital stay and the recording of events he encountered while there, the reader is treated to a more profound realization concerning drug addiction and incarceration. While hospitalized, Debs (1927) observed people going through withdrawal and argues:

They are sick people who require special treatment, and not vicious ones to be sent to the torture chamber of a prison, and it is nothing less than a reproach to society and a disgrace to our civilization that this malady is branded as a crime instead of being ministered to as an affliction, which it most assuredly is. (p. 85)

This observation of a more medical approach to corrections would not be revisited for more than thirty years.

Chapter Seven concerns the period when Debs was nominated for president. The famous campaign pin reads "For President—Convict No. 9653." Eugene Debs was a political prisoner for voicing his opinion. This resonated with many who had been influenced by Debs' organizing efforts through labor unions. Having been nominated four times previously, in 1900, 1904, 1908 and 1912, his nomination as a political prisoner in 1920 made sense. Debs (1927) cites an editorial reading, "Debs started for the White House, but he only got as far as the federal prison" (p. 100). While this narrative elucidates conditions of prisons, the account also tells us something about political dissent during the years of the First World War in the US.

While many critical accounts of corrections and prisons define issues and contextualize mechanisms, often times these arguments seem bereft of any proposals for how to make policy better. Debs, however, offers his recommendations for change both politically and via alternative prison policy initiatives. Chapter Ten concerns conditions that he himself has witnessed from a more phenomenological position, but argues critically against the general conditions of prisons. Debs speaks out not only against minority over-representation, but more fundamentally, against the tendency of

class over representation. In Chapter Eleven, "Poverty Populates the Prison," Debs recognizes the need for empirical prison research. The author argues, "It is unfortunate that hitherto no scientific and comprehensive method has been devised of ascertaining and setting forth clearly to just what extent poverty is directly and indirectly responsible for crime" (Debs, 1927, p. 143). With the extensive expansion of the criminal justice/industrial complex, this "call to action" is perhaps finally possible.

Debs argues in Chapter Twelve that the point that society creates the criminal; genetics does not create the criminal. However, with the punitive turn in crime policies that is so familiar since perhaps the Crime Omnibus Act, as Simon argues in "Governing Through Crime," politically promulgated legislations are hardly unique to late-modern trends. Debs (1927) proclaims:

And what is the usual remedy proposed for combating crime which steadily increases in spite of the church, the school and the country club? Adopt more drastic laws! Increase the police force! Pronounce longer sentences! Inflict severer punishment on the evil doers, etc., etc.,—all of which simply indicates the puerile understanding we have of this social phenomenon known as crime. (p. 154)

In Chapter Thirteen, "How I Would Manage the Prison," Debs calls for a more efficient and cost-effective social justice and control philosophy—one of human dignity. This human-centric position denotes an early call for restorative justice rather than punitivity.

Debs conducts a crude analysis of political economy and crime. The organizer observes, "Capitalism needs and must have the prison to protect itself from the criminals it has created" (Debs, 1927, p. 174). Debs theorizes, "The evolution of the prison has kept pace with the evolution of society and the exploitation upon which society is based" (Debs, 1927, p. 175). This sets up following chapters, culminating in Chapter Sixteen, "Socialism and the Prison," which signals the final section of Debs' intellectual contribution and moves to the overt political positioning of a candidate. Yet, again, Debs predates Foucault's treatment of the evolution of prisons in modernity. Debs (1927) states, "It required five hundred years to travel from the inquisition to the injunction" (p. 197).

Even while Debs was finishing his only book, he called for future studies among prisoners from their perspectives. Sociology has, in fact, developed this since Debs' time. Chapters Seventeen through Nineteen concludes Debs' only published book. These chapters include his release from prison, Debs' own look into contemporary studies, and his conclusions pertaining to the waste of those lives spent unproductively incarcerated. However, Debs makes yet another important observation for future studies pertaining to prison. He argues that scientists attuned to humanist and social perspectives should not only research prisons and prisoners, but also effect the policies regarding criminal law itself.

Given this perspective, we should recall a suggestion from Ron Akers (1992) in the early nineties. Akers argued to maintain a sociological center to criminology. Although Debs' account/analysis predates many meaningful debates concerning an ethnographic approach, his insights, articulation, and observations on multiple levels of analysis are meaningful and salient today. Akers (1992) argues:

Sociology does not dominate criminology as it once did. Similarly while it remains important to sociology, it is not as near the center of sociology as it once was. Nonetheless, in term I used earlier, sociology remains the intellectual center of gravity in criminology. (p. 9)

I argue that this perspective has been slipping in the following two decades since Dr. Akers' observation. Criminology and Criminal Justice have continued to specialize further away from its sociological center. Historical contributions like that of Debs, however, could offer perspective and breadth that have withered as more specialized, yet relatively ahistorical, contributions have been made. Historical accounts allow a context for this political era to be considered to previous, albeit less prolific, epochs of politically promulgated crime legislations. For example, Debs suggested a relationship between wealth and ownership and prison populations almost a century ago. It is certainly true that wealth has increased alongside prison populations over the previous three decades. One contribution of historical accounts related to Criminal Justice and Criminology is a return to the sociological center that gave birth to our growing disciplines.

Ferrell (1998) proposes, "[E]xperiential immersion on the part of field researchers can begin to unravel the lived meanings of both crime and criminal justice" (p. 20). This methodological approach contributes a theoretical depth to Justice Studies of all spectrums which can lead to situated narratives and understanding of the past to know what was similar and different from contemporary prison experiences. More specifically, this historical ethnographic perspective gets back to primary theoretical assumptions that gave birth to criminological studies. While the field has become more specialized, methodological procedure has become more prescribed. Throughout *Walls and Bars*, Debs refers to such topics prior to the language that theorists currently use to describe these concepts. For example, the author suggests themes such as institutionalization, the fiscal burden of a growing criminal justice system, and arguably, perhaps most insightfully, the intersection of crime, prisons and inequality. Revisiting the historical contributions of the intelligent, insightful and socially cogent can only help expand the history and currency of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

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