

Struggles for Justice

Interview with Claire Culhane

Brian E. Burtch

Introduction

Claire Culhane was born in Montréal, Québec in 1918, the daughter of a Russian immigrant family. As a teenager she joined the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion (Québec branch), which fought against fascism during the Spanish Civil War. As a member of the Communist Party of Canada during the Great Depression, and also as a union organizer at the time, she was sought (unsuccessfully) under the first War Measures Act.

In 1967, she accepted an administrative position with a Canadian-sponsored hospital in Vietnam. Witness to the U.S. intervention, she resigned her post, returning to Canada to lobby against her own government's complicity in supporting the American military. Prevented from presenting her report to the Sub-Committee on External Affairs, in 1968 she held a 10-day fast on Parliament Hill to dramatize Canada's involvement. Three years later she chained herself in the Visitors Gallery of the Parliament Buildings. Her research and activism are outlined in *Why is Canada in Vietnam? The Truth About Our Foreign Aid* (1972a).

In June 1971, she testified before the International Commission of Enquiry into the United States Crimes in Indochina, held in Oslo, Norway. Following is an excerpt from her report:

When I protested later to the Canadian Ambassador in Saigon that we were not operating as a 100% independent Canadian humanitarian team (as we were officially known) and should therefore be withdrawn officially under protest, the reply was made that I should be satisfied with a ratio of 50% humanitarian and 50% political work as that was what we were really there for. Our presence was evidently

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required to provide another facade for the so-called pacification program (1972).

Claire's concern for social justice extended to prisoners in the mid-1970s. For five years she produced the Vancouver television program *Instead of Prisons*, and was a member of the Citizen's Advisory Committee at the British Columbia Penitentiary for a brief period in 1976. At that time she was also a founder of the Prisoners' Rights Group (PRG) in Vancouver. Through her substantial correspondence with prisoners, Claire helped to organize the annual August 10th National Prison Justice Day in memory of prisoners who suffered unusual deaths while in custody. Twice convicted of trespassing on penitentiary land after occupying the warden's office at the B.C. Penitentiary, she refused to pay the fine, but was not sentenced to a possible six months, lest she be consigned to the women's prison she was barred from visiting.

In *Barred From Prison: A Personal Account* (1979), Claire documented the escalation of conflicts between prisoners, guards, and officials at the B.C. Penitentiary prior to its eventual closure. This included an eyewitness account of the 80-hour hostage-taking when the Citizens Advisory Committee was invited inside. She was later forced to resign when she urged the Committee to reveal guards' mistreatment of prisoners held in segregation during that period. Later barred from visiting the prisoners "in the best interest of the institution," her attempt to restore rights proved unsuccessful when the B.C. Court of Appeal upheld the administration's discretionary decision.

Still Barred From Prison: Social Injustice in Canada (1985) is her most recent account of prison politics. In it, Claire establishes links between carceral power and prevailing economic and political forces. This book combines provincial and national issues with an international perspective on the military-industrial complex. Her essay "Prisons: 1984 and After," is included in the book, *1984 and After* (1984).

Claire maintains correspondence with prisoners across Canada and is able to visit them whenever she can travel their way. She is only barred from visiting British Columbia prisons (with two exceptions, at this point). She is also a persistent lobbyist of prison officials and political representatives for corrective action on prisoners' grievances. She participated in the two International Conferences on the Abolition of Prisons (Toronto, 1983, and Amsterdam, 1985), and she helped organize the "25-day Public Education Campaign on the Canadian Prison System" in Ottawa in the Spring of 1985. She has also made presentations to the World Federation for Mental Health Congress, 1977; the People's Food Commission, 1978; and the Royal Commission on Female Offenders, 1978 (all Vancouver based). Claire is an active member of a housing cooperative in Vancouver in addition to her continuing work with prisoners.

At the time of this interview, she was embarking on another cross-country lecture tour, to follow up an earlier book promotion tour. This interview is condensed from transcripts of two interviews with the author and an exchange between Claire and members of an upper-level criminology seminar at Simon Fraser University.

Interview with Claire Culhane

Brian: Your work deals with the role of the state and resistance to state manipulation of people, prisoners, as well as nonprisoners. Do you feel that in prison struggles there is a kind of fatalism in resisting criminal justice authorities?

Claire: Not really. I simply recognize that this is part of the existing struggle for change. Obviously it is not going to be perfect anywhere. My approach is that since the whole of life is a struggle, one fights at every level. When asked what place legal practice has in this arena, I would answer that if lawyers can establish useful precedents in court to bolster prisoners' rights, then good luck to them. Nor am I anti-guards. I have friendships with a few prison guards, men and women who, I know, try to help prisoners in their custody as best they can. Eventually, I would prefer to see them in community settings rather than in prisons under the military style of command. I suspect they would prefer that too. However, we have enough enemies, so why reject allies? I realize this is a contentious issue, but I see it as part of the strategy to combine short-term reforms with the long-term objective of the abolition of prisons, operating within the guideline of "fewest prisoners for the shortest period of time."

Brian: I would like to hear your views regarding the debate between Paul Hirst and Taylor, Walton, and Young. Hirst contended that Marxists ought to concentrate on economic struggles and that prisoners are unlikely allies in socialist movements. Few of them are politicized and, historically, they are especially vulnerable to serving as agents of reactionary intrigue.

Claire: I have also heard how this philosophy dismisses prisoners as lumpenproletariat, scum, not part of the labor force so why bother about them? I am not in agreement with him. Granted, in the 10 years that I have known prisoners, some more intimately than others, I could count on one hand the number who have had any kind of political background or scientific understanding of this subject. Members of the FLQ (Front Libération du Québec) and the Squamish Five are the only ones I know who related their lawbreaking with political motives. They represent only a very tiny handful in Canadian prisons. We can expect environmentalists to join their ranks as they carry out civil disobedience actions and anti-nuclear war demonstrators, for the most part initiated by Native Indian groups. But to exclude the demand for prisoners' rights as part of the wider movement for social justice is a poor

strategy in my opinion, and highly immoral. Even more crucial is the apparent lack of political understanding that such an attitude betrays by those who boast radical backgrounds but are ignorant of the role which prisons play in any society, whether capitalist or socialist or social democratic. It should be obvious that any government must keep tight control of its military forces, its police, and its prison system to maintain itself in power.

Brian: This appears to be a point of contradiction for you. You have faced the pressure of the state for decades and documented the building of state control in prisons and elsewhere; however, you also meet with state officials and seek immediate reforms to alleviate suffering. Do you see your political outlook as contradictory?

Claire: Not at all. As a survivor I combine a practical outlook with my principles. I see suffering and I invest time and energy in any short-term gain to ease it. I believe we can use these little victories as a basis for more substantial gains later on. In that way I consistently work at challenging everyone: officials, politicians, the judiciary, the police. While we cannot predict the form their reactions will take, it is axiomatic that nobody shares or surrenders power voluntarily. This is evident in the pressures that are brought to bear on those officials who must surely have to silence their consciences as they continue their absurd practices. People genuinely committed to social justice must eventually accept the futility of state policies as the present system continues to deteriorate. The decision to move from the present road, which is leading to total chaos, to one in which the entire prison system is dismantled is consistent with the universal need to strive for abolition of poverty and war.

Brian: You are working to abolish prisons as we know them. What steps or phases do you foresee in reversing this tradition of incarceration?

Claire: To begin with, it is necessary to understand that prisons developed as a form of slavery. This challenges the official explanation of prisons as a form of social defense in the public interest. In order to deal with the monstrosity of imprisonment we have tried to tackle it methodically. Organizing conferences about prison abolition is one method. Another is attending seminars sponsored by various criminal justice groups. Our Parliament Hill education campaign is another example, which included three weekly information sessions to deal with a variety of subjects: solitary confinement, Special Handling Units, forced involuntary transfers, overcrowding, and discrimination against women and Native Indian prisoners. Special emphasis was given to the substitute for the death penalty: the 25-year minimum sentence before parole eligibility. Church representatives and several other groups have publicly declared themselves in favor of reducing its judicial review date from 15 years to 10 years. This would be a tremendous victory for sentence reform.

Support for prison abolition begins with very practical steps, by visiting and corresponding with prisoners to keep lines of communication open. We have to worry when the visiting regulation has been systematically restricted every two years since 1976, at which date anyone could visit any number of prisoners in any given prison, provided they were on the prisoner's visiting list and had been cleared by Security. The trend to building prisons away from urban centers makes it difficult, and sometimes impossible, for families to visit.

Since we still live in an open society, with a certain degree of freedom of speech and of the press, we must use this freedom effectively to win short-term and long-term gains. It is vital that we make direct contact with the public as we did in our 25-day Public Education Campaign, distributing thousands of fact sheets to hundreds of people. We were convinced that the majority of Canadians did *not* favor reinstatement of the death penalty. On taking the time to deal with the superficial reactions which the pollsters are fond of listing, we did not find any groundswell favoring the death penalty. The Police Union, which promised to present Parliament with a petition with a million signatures favoring capital punishment, actually fell short of their goal by about 860,000 signatures. The recent failure of the British government to reinstate capital punishment, despite the ardent support of Prime Minister Thatcher and most of her cabinet, is pertinent.

When all the legal, orthodox channels have been explored and exhausted, we can consider nonviolent, civil disobedience at prison gates. Civil disobedience is already identified in the public eye with demonstrations against environmental disasters and nuclear power plants. I believe we have had enough conferences, studies, seminars, and books on prison problems. A new style for prison activism is in order to expose what is happening to the 27,000 Canadians held in lock-ups, jails, penitentiaries, and juvenile detention centers on any given day. This industry costs \$4 billion annually. I believe that we could excarcerate most of these prisoners. I favor a policy in which only 5% (or more accurately, the 1.1% of Federal prisoners as noted in the Solicitor-General's 1982-1983 *Annual Report*) of prisoners are confined for long periods of time. These prisoners would be those who are clearly a threat to public safety and who have to be imprisoned. But then we would be looking at only *one* prison in Canada instead of the multi-billion dollar industry that treats the other 95% as if they were that dangerous.

The second group, about 15%, would need some meaningful assistance to address the problems that bring them to prison in the first place, before they could participate in a restitution program. This help could only be obtained from community services and not by sitting in prison. The great majority of sex offenders, for example, are known to have been sexually abused as children and need more effective treatment than prison confinement. I know of

a case in British Columbia where one prisoner with a compulsion to strangle his sex partner begged for treatment, but was released without being treated for it. He then *did* kill a young girl as he feared he might. By treatment I do not mean behavior modification projects run by experts, using prisoners for their experiments. Real treatment would recognize that aggressiveness is a social problem, that we live in a culture of violence, and that prisons are a subculture of violence. Reeducation programs for offenders and community members would be a positive innovation. Nor should dietary factors and environmental factors (such as lead concentration in blood) be ruled out, even while emphasizing the political and economic dimensions of crime. The largest group, about 80% of prisoners, could be excarcerated in order to make reparation or restitution to their victim or victim's family, or to the community. However, this assumes that we live in a civilized society where everyone is gainfully employed. If we set that aside for a moment, we have to examine whether prisoners are not being held hostage to the economy.

Brian: How do women prisoners fit into the struggle for social justice?

Claire: Viewed in their traditional subservient role in society, most women are presumed to be "good" prisoners by officials. Even though the situation remains deplorable, the excuse is used that there are too few women in prison to warrant additional expenditures. As the saying goes, this is not cost effective. Consequently, there are few, if any, improvements in their education, job training, medical or living problems. Women prisoners therefore have even more problems than men prisoners.

There are often exciting episodes of solidarity among women in prison. In Oakalla (a provincial prison in B.C.), 10 men were forced into dungeon cells under the old cow barn. After several days, a few of them were offered the opportunity to return to their cells. They refused to leave unless *all* were returned. Eventually the administration had to relent.

There are two minimum security women's prisons where mothers are permitted to keep their children until the age of two. This is considered progressive but I think it is hideous. What kind of a judge sends a woman to prison for a short time (less than two years in provincial prisons), breaks up the family, intensifies home crises, and without considering what happens when the child passes the age of two and is then taken away from his or her mother?

While the women's movement concentrates on wife and child abuse, sexual assault, professional discrimination and such, there has been very little interest shown in their sisters in prison. The National Status of Women Organization once explained that their budget did not allow for a workshop to research women in prison, the very victims, for the most part, of the violence, discrimination, poverty, and helplessness that the conference was presumably organizing around.

Brian: What does this say about our sense of community?

Claire: I would ask: What does it tell us about our legal system? I have more hope in the process of accountability where people are elected or volunteer to work on a Community Board, which in turn has access to the media. This would be a great advance over the Citizens Advisory Committees (CACs) which are accountable *only* to the Solicitor-General, not to the public.

We should stop for a moment and define crime. In this land of plenty, the rich get richer as they pay no taxes while the poor get poorer. The lack of proper housing, health care, education, opportunities for people, all of these are criminal. Consider that while Reagan is seeking billions of dollars for the Star Wars military program, there are millions of people in the United States who are functionally illiterate. Look at the growth of food banks across Canada and the levels of unemployment here and in other capitalist countries.

Deaths and injuries in the workplace should also be viewed as crimes. According to Reasons and his colleagues (1981), a worker died on the job in Canada every six hours and is seriously injured every seven seconds. I remember how 12 people dies in a cement cave-in during subway construction in Montréal. It seems that third grade lumber was substituted for first grade to shore up the sides. I don't recall any criminal charges being laid against those responsible for those workers' deaths. Imagine if an entire Board of Directors were sentenced to death for preventable deaths of workers in the workplace. Imagine how quickly the call for the death penalty would disappear.

Brian: What are the effects of the global economic crisis on criminal justice policies in Canada, Britain, and the United States?

Claire: Unemployment has of course created great anxiety and suffering for millions of people in the three countries you mention. At the same time, there has been an extension of state power of surveillance and regulation, not only in criminal justice but in all areas. In *Still Barred From Prison*, I argued that prisons provide the experimental ground for wider social control mechanisms refined by the military, police, and other state representatives. An example of this was when Bill C-9 was passed, establishing the CSIS (Canadian Security Intelligence Service), which legitimizes opening mail, and electronic monitoring of phone calls and homes (a joint CIA-FBI operation), just as mail and phone privacy has been denied in prisons.

Keep in mind also that prisons are a growth industry. In Renous, New Brunswick, and Kamloops, British Columbia, they are building, or have built, new prisons as a means of reducing unemployment. This is a growth industry; we are talking about human beings used as merchandise for political reasons. The quality of media coverage also adds to misconceptions about real crime. Outcries about muggers who slug elderly women do not include a description of the same elderly woman who may be surviving in a cold room, undernour-

ished and frail, because a corporation deprived her of her pension. One crime is visible and condemned; the other is invisible and ignored.

Brian: In *Still Barred From Prison* you raise the concern about Native offenders in prison.

Claire: Native Indians and Metis constitute about 3% of Canada's population, but make up between 40–60% of the prison population, depending on the province. In some prairie women's prisons, they reach 90–95% of the population. However, the grim standard of living on Reservations and in urban ghettos must be examined to understand why they are so overrepresented in prisons. I meet kids in prison who have lived on the street since they were 10 or 11 years old. I know one young Native Indian who at 17 killed another boy in a drunken street brawl. When the judge learned that the two knew each other before the incident, he ruled that it was premeditated and consequently ordered 25 years before parole eligibility, instead of 10 years (for second degree murder). This is terribly out of perspective. Of course murder cannot be tolerated, but we also know how human merchandise is needed to stock the prison industry.

CORCAN, an abbreviation for Corrections Canada, generated a revenue in 1982–1983 of over \$10 million through the sale of goods manufactured in prisons: furniture, office supplies, upholstery, and so forth. And they pay prisoners between \$1.60 and \$6.50 daily in wages. The privatization of prison services is related to this. There is a profit to be realized through the criminal justice sector, and this private approach is applied to rest homes, hospitals, and other community services.

Brian: Paul Gordon has written that discrimination against black people is structured throughout Britain and reflected in policing practices, court decisions, and corrections. How do you account for racism there or in general?

Claire: Racism is obviously a form of economic and political scapegoating. In the 1930s and 1940s, there was a quota on Jewish applicants to McGill University and the nursing profession. On the public beaches I saw signs that read: "*Ni des chiens. Ni des juifs*" (No dogs or Jews allowed). It is a typical strategy to focus attention on a visible minority and divert attention away from government repression. Those were the days in Québec when people on relief received \$1.65 per week, when infant mortality rates exceeded that of the southern United States, and where Adrien Arcand, head of the Québec fascists, openly paraded his uniformed men in Montréal public squares, even after the declaration of war against Germany.

I am opposed to all policies associated with the nation-state terrorizing its own minorities, such as Apartheid in South Africa and the exiling of Palestinians from their own country. Wherever people have little or no control over their lives, scapegoating becomes institutionalized.

Brian: What would you do with alternatives to employment in the multi-billion dollar prison industry?

Claire: For one thing, some would be needed to take care of the approximately 5% of offenders as long as they remained a social danger. Then people would be needed to work in their communities as resources in all the preventative areas that we already know about, as we move toward a more caring society, which is the universal goal.

Brian: The United States clearly has a profound influence on Canadian politics and public policy. In what ways do you think this affects criminal justice operations? Are there points of divergence between the two countries that you would identify as significant?

Claire: We don't have a great deal of autonomy in that respect. There is a colonial dimension to our continental relations. Canadian foreign policy is mainly subordinated to U.S. foreign policy. When our government was shipping war material to the U.S. war against Vietnam, I referred to Ottawa as "the Butcher's helper." The threat of economic reprisals by the U.S. government has a significant influence on how autonomous our political policies are.

Turning to criminal justice operations, in the area of standards and accreditation for adult corrections initiated in the United States and set up on Canadian territory, it matters little that there is now a Canadian Board. It certainly hasn't decreased our rate of incarceration or eliminated any of the violence or other alarming prison conditions. The *per capita* rate of imprisonment in the United States is the highest in the Western world, and Canada's is the second highest. This high rate of imprisonment in Canada continues despite the lower rate of violence relative to the United States. In other words, our rate of imprisonment in Canada is far beyond what it should be were it based on the comparative figure of violence, and shows no signs of lessening. Instead, more prisons are constantly being built.

Other than the return of capital punishment, and higher rates of racism, violence, and incarceration in U.S. prisons, there is little or no divergence between prison policies in Canada and the U.S. There is a very grave danger that the Corrections Service of Canada is about to be swallowed by U.S. business concerns Nashville-based Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) is selling stock to the public to finance its offer of a 99-year lease to the Tennessee prison system for \$250 million (*N.Y. Guardian*, October 9, 1985). An article in the *Globe and Mail* on July 20, 1985, mentioned the possibility of a U.S. company that has proposed a forestry prison in B.C., using non-union staff, that aims for a 9% profit.

Even more frightening was the remark of a corrections officer during my recent tour, and I quote him verbatim: "Setting aside the moral aspect for a moment, wouldn't you have to agree that privatization would be more efficient and economical and would therefore relieve some of the taxpayer's burden?" I

had to ask him if he would agree, using the same rationale, that by setting aside the moral aspect for a moment, Auschwitz was a good idea since the furnaces and gas chambers were set in the same building instead of being spread around the compound. I was appalled at his lack of understanding of the implications of his thinking.

Brian: The position of the state in justice struggles is complex. In *Still Barred From Prison* you quote Antonio Gramsci: "Instead of dreaming with our eyes open, we should be practical and concrete, setting for ourselves only those goals that we can actually attain, and concentrating on the best means of attaining them." And you are aware of various concessions and services the state makes in response to various initiatives. Do you see the state as a force that can be deeply influenced by popular struggle, or is it essentially a force of domination?

Claire: You have to view this in its totality. Perhaps we should begin by talking about educating people to consider the alternatives to state control. Social democracy is sometimes considered to be one of those alternatives, but I believe it is structured to make capitalism work better, not to really change anything fundamentally. Instead of state power I would look to people power if we are to achieve any measure of justice. The struggle to overcome all forms of control, be they state, corporate, or individual, must include efforts to abolish war and poverty, and within that context, the ultimate in control, its prison system.

To get back to your question, I would say that, so far, the state is essentially a force of domination. It has yet to be sufficiently "influenced by popular struggle." Having admitted that, I see no other choice but to "maintain"; that is the prison code word signifying "keep the faith." And since the survival instinct is so important, personally as well as globally, we have no other choice than to find more effective ways of fighting the war makers through our special concerns, you through your university and student focus, and me through prison abolition.

Brian: You have documented the extension of surveillance and control in prisons. Cameras have been installed to monitor prisoners who are thought to be suicidal, and possibly for other reasons. What underlies this trend toward technological surveillance?

Claire: There are several examples of this electronic surveillance of prisoners, presumably to ensure greater security. The official explanation is that it helps to thwart suicide attempts. However, it reduces prisoners to a 24-hour fish-bowl environment. Apparently the Right to Privacy, as guaranteed by the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, does not apply to prisoners.

Technology is also extending to forms of "house arrest" where people convicted of minor offenses may have the option of returning home provided they wear electronic anklets. These devices send signals which are monitored via a

central computer. If the offenders leave the immediate perimeter, officials will be notified and action taken.

Not only does this high technology fail to deal with the human problems or raise the possibility of community participation, but it dramatically expands the net. I have been told that about 1% of the total population in Maryland is now under some form of official surveillance, whether through prisons, probation, parole, passes, halfway houses, and now this form of house arrest, which incidentally has been around for decades in South Africa, without the electronic perks. We also know that the conversations of prisoners and their visitors are monitored and recorded.

Brian: In *Still Barred From Prison* you criticize the planning of internment camps in Canada. What do you know of these camps at this point?

Claire: This is a new concern which is just surfacing. Prisons presently under construction in remote areas of New Brunswick and Québec may conceivably be used as Civilian Internment Camps. I refer you to the non-debatable Order-in-Council (1981-1305) called *Emergency Power Order*. It is to be implemented in time of war, natural disaster, or breakdown of law and order. So-called rioters could presumably be held in these camps without a trial or hearing.

After empowering the Solicitor-General to establish these camps, it goes on to add "to facilitate the selective reduction and transfer of prison populations for the establishment of Civilian Internment Camps" (*Hansard*, November 17, 1981). In subsequent letters to the Solicitor-General's Department for further clarification, I learned nothing more.

Brian: What is the link between unemployment and the use of imprisonment for coping with the surplus labor population?

Claire: With millions of people unemployed across North America, it should be no surprise that the prison population is also increasing, keeping in mind the extensive unemployment within prisons. I find, in corresponding with prisoners, that so many have nothing to do: no work, no course, no job training or life-skills instruction even while we hear so much about rehabilitation programs. And something new has been added: prisoners are now *finned* for alleged infractions of regulations, in some cases leaving them with only pennies for their two week supply of stationery, smokes, toothpaste, postage, and so on.

This underscores the very real need for prison authorities to be made truly accountable through public scrutiny on a regular monitoring basis, since the public is never properly informed about the abuses which are regularly committed in prisons.

Brian: A number of writers have criticized the growth of prisons and the corrections industry in Canada. Chan and Ericson have documented the expansion of the social control apparatus, Friedenberg speaks of the punishment

industry, and Luc Gosselin has analyzed the use of prisons as an instrument of elite interests. What is your assessment of the economic and political purposes of prisons in capitalist states?

Claire: The trend toward using prisons to boost the economy continues. Prime Minister Mulroney has announced that jobs will be created in his constituency by constructing a \$60 million prison (capital costs only). Maurice Dionne, a former Member of Parliament, successfully ran his 1980 election campaign on the assurance that jobs would be secured in his constituency in New Brunswick through construction of a \$73.3 million prison; again, these are capital costs only. At that time I was sorry to read in an Atlantic paper that trade unionists were celebrating these new jobs. To the credit of the paper's editorial board, it accepted my criticism that since labor unions are supposed to be concerned about their members' welfare, it was terribly ironical to hear of workers finding satisfaction in prison construction when they could well be building their own prison. Farmers are forming Survival Associations, and fishermen are also raising their voices in protest at no longer being able to earn enough to feed their families properly. And as people can be expected to rebel against such dire circumstances, they may well find themselves on the other side of the law, eventually sentenced to the very prisons they helped build.

I spoke earlier about prisons being a growth industry, probably the only growth industry left in the country. They are also calculated to win votes. In a letter to the Member of Parliament responsible for lobbying for Renous Prison in Miramichi, N.B., I called him a cannibal since his merchandise would be human beings. He answered telling me that obviously I had no heart for the unemployed. So much for vote-catching!

There is also a practical side to my belief in abolition. The estimated cost of construction at Renous Prison lists \$150,000 per cell, which has escalated to \$228,000, and who knows where it will end? So, for the cost of a single cell, how many transition homes for battered women and children could be build? How much assistance could be made available for the 4.3 million Canadians living below the poverty line?

Criminologists should also be studying the politics of those whose interests are served by the state. The Star Wars program is just one example of an unjustifiable investment, presented as a means of providing jobs, setting aside the warnings of socially responsible scientists who are describing the potential danger. It also includes those strange attitudes which jeer at "bleeding hearts" for wishing to help prisoners help themselves to stay alive. For myself it is a vital part of the larger struggle for social justice, so how dare it be ignored? In this connection we should be asking of the Criminology Departments why there is such a proliferation of studies on prisoners. The perennial "effects of long-term incarceration" has to be one of the most annoying as the number of prisoners receiving 20–25-year sentences increases simultaneously. Why are

there no Royal Commissions set up to study corporate crime or the effects of long-term power manipulation and government corruption? Obviously, priorities set on research funding are determined directly or indirectly by government-controlled contracts and grants.

Brian: You are in favor of broadening the definition of crime. Would this be similar to the Schwendingers' formulation of social crimes and the documentation of job-related injuries that are not seen as criminal acts? I am thinking here again of the work of Reasons *et al.*, Carson, and Leyton.

Claire: Yes. We cannot accept limitations of standard criminal codes when we see so many job-related deaths, like the sinking of the oil rig, Ocean Ranger, with the deaths of 84 workers due to the lack of safety inspections. These are Board-room decisions — not unforeseeable accidents — as I mentioned earlier. This includes the Union Carbide scandal in Bhopal, substandard buildings in earthquake zones, and unscrupulous exporting of hazardous products to Third World countries. You could include those from the U.S. to Canada as we become the stupid receptacle of their reject F18 planes, M16 guns, and banned pharmaceutical products. All of these should be redefined as crimes. It will take a re-awakened social movement to alter the legacy of designating mainly poor people as our society's criminals. We certainly can't expect the courts and prison officials to do this voluntarily.

Brian: How do you react to those who argue that prison reform has already been substantial, that it is unrealistic to expect prison authorities to initiate more reforms?

Claire: Certainly it is ridiculous to expect the authorities to correct problems of their own making. Actually, there have been no serious reforms. It is an illusion to think that just because earlier corporal punishment, flogging, the silent system, and bread and water diets have been ruled out that things are better. We now have overcrowding, double bunking, more physical and mental illnesses, and an increase in assault and suicide rates with no compulsory inquests to determine the validity of "suicide" as the final diagnosis. Prisoners are still being hog-tied, which means being chained and shackled before being stomped on and beaten. What does it matter that it is officially called "restrictive restraint"? New names change nothing as far as the prisoner lying on the cell floor is concerned.

Psychologists and psychiatrists must also be seen as part of the problem, and not necessarily as a therapeutic element. They contribute as much to the control of prisoners as do government-employed staff and guards (who rarely speak out to improve the lot of prisoners). The same applies to prison doctors and nurses who must take an oath of secrecy, notwithstanding their Hippocratic and Florence Nightingale pledges. Anyone passing information to the public is liable to dismissal.

This takes us back to the value of Community Prison Boards as probably the only way we are ever going to be able to expose what is happening behind prison walls and force some measure of accountability. There have been some attempts along this line. In San Francisco, we are told, there are over 100 Community Boards that deal with neighborhood complaints, including criminal offenses. This empowers the local residents to solve their own problems without interference by social workers, courts, and police.

Brian: The political economy of prisons is a central theme in *Still Barred From Prison*. Just what does this theme encompass?

Claire: Let's begin with the book cover. A prison wall in the foreground behind which is the Peace Tower of the Parliament Buildings, symbolizing government. Then the glass high-rise National Defense Building in Ottawa, representing the link between the military and prison. And then there are factory smoke stacks signifying prison industry.

I came across one of the best examples of what linkage between local economy and prison policy is about when I visited a prison in British Columbia many years ago (when I was still allowed in). I noticed a crop of garden vegetables still in the ground. No one accepted my suggestion that the administration might allow prisoners' families to take some of these surplus vegetables home as so many are on welfare. Imagine my surprise when touring the prison kitchen next, where we saw large plastic bags filled with washed carrots and potatoes supplied by local merchants, obviously part of the "boost to the economy," which they justify for building more prisons.

Brian: We began this interview by talking about your disappointment in people who withdraw from the work for social justice, many of them becoming careerists. How do you maintain your optimism in the face of state power?

Claire: In part this is a personal characteristic. I have learned to survive despite the discouragement we all feel at times both in our personal and political lives. Realistically, though, surely we should recognize by now the escalation of military hostilities and the dangerous times in which we are living. I consider every day as a "found day," meaning that it is a miracle that we are still here. In this less-than-secure world it is understandable why people become insecure and discouraged, especially when they feel they can't change anything. Nevertheless, I have learned that you can bear up even under the most adverse circumstances.

At the same time, any serious study of the social forces at work should provide us with some comprehensive overview. Reinforced with that kind of analysis, we simply have to find a way, again within our specific peer group, to join the mainstream of the struggle. That way we have a hope of maintaining some semblance of sanity, and what you call optimism.

I should add that I have trouble with the assumption that North Americans are moving so drastically to the right. I fight "groupism" as hard as I fight

sexism and racism; that is to say that to generalize does not paint an accurate picture of any particular group. There are many who are beginning to realize the limits to conservatism and who are approaching *even* the prison issue with a more enlightened perspective, possibly because they are also part of a growing number of families and friends touched by the criminal justice system.

I am also seeing among my own contacts more political awareness about government corruption. I don't think people are waiting for "the revolution" the way they used to, realizing instead that it has to be built *now* in the form of a caring society, step by step. This applies to our personal lives as well as to our special concerns, be they world peace, women's rights, poverty, even prisons.

Brian: Your work deals with the cultural implications of injustice. What observations are central to cultural expression in North America?

Claire: I see a link between prisons and the world outside prisons. You may call it a subculture, whether of the drug scene, or gang warfare, or an outpouring of writing, poetry, or painting, to express the agony of loss of freedom and separation from loved ones.

On the outside, we desperately need a revival of the creative arts, particularly theater, relating the many faceted, multi-racial prison scene. Only a very few dramas have been produced to date, some of the best by prisoners themselves. Living with the Vietnamese people during the most savage Pentagon assaults, I saw how people can endure outrages beyond description, hold onto their courage, and never lose their zest for life. That was a very useful experience for me.

Brian: What are the major disappointments you have had in working for prisoners and toward prison abolition?

Claire: When one is engaged in any part of the class struggle, which is what the political struggle is all about, it is more like taking part in a war. So, when the enemy has more weaponry one learns to be more skilled to compensate for their superiority in equipment. What I am saying is that "disappointment" is probably not the right word. Perhaps "set backs" would have a less personal sound to it, for again I see it as a political response.

Of course, insufficient resources, people and funds, are disappointing, but not at all surprising. I don't ever expect to see thousands turn out at demonstrations for prisoners' rights, mainly because the majority of support is either behind the bars or those who are friends or relatives but who would fear reprisals for themselves and prisoners whom they visit, were they to be seen at public demonstrations. That means we have to be more careful about who does the public, up-front work, and who helps with all the background chores where their identity is protected. Again, anyone who is committed to social justice should be prepared for struggle. The mobilization toward even more

repression is hardly surprising, so it can't be called disappointing. I still believe that we must resist wherever and whenever possible and at times we will gain small victories, enough to keep us on track.

One of my first heroines was Dolores Ibaruri, better known as "La Pasionaria," a revolutionary leader during the Spanish people's war against fascism. Her battle cry was: "Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees."

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