

International Conference on Prison Abolition: An Over/Under View

June 24-27, 1985

My first thoughts of the conference were: what a "crazy" idea, abolish the prisons. I thought the idea typically European--Avant Garde. I thought, too, that it was/is a good idea, but could it be brought about; made to happen in these years just before the year 2000. These were my first thoughts, while in the U.S.A. and hoping at that time that money could be found so that I could attend. The money was raised and on June 21, 1985, I found myself in the company of Porter Kirkwood in Paris, France--headed for the conference in Amsterdam. There I was on registration day at the Free University of Amsterdam, my first impression at registration was of disorder; on second thought, however, I decided that given the problems of trying to get all of those people settled into the conference framework and to deal with the language differences and the cultural differences was no small matter and that conference hosts were doing a good job. As to the conference, I thought that compartmentalization got the upper hand and the workshops concerning various issues and aspects of criminal justice seemed isolated. I would have liked a greater sense of connectedness, somehow.

The workshops that I attended were informative and presented in a clear and organized format. I especially noted that there was much presenter/audience interaction in the workshops I attended. The one sour note of the conference that I am aware of came on June 26. This was the afternoon session where Carol Bergman and Frank Dunbaugh were to have given the presentation on North America. Instead of Carol and Frank, an official (he claimed) of the Dutch Penal System took to the P.A. system and began to read what seemed to me to be a paper on some obscure aspect of Dutch criminology. At the time I only wondered about the apparent change in the program. Then, the 65-70 people in

the auditorium began to grumble about the change in program. In about a half hour people began to leave the auditorium after heated exchanges with the Dutch official and some of our student hosts who took to the P.A. system to explain/placate the disgruntled audience. It was never made clear to me exactly what happened but a conference host spoke with me after the aborted workshop and said that they (the student hosts) had agreed to relinquish the stage and P.A. system so that the "official" could make an announcement. It turned out that this official wanted to read a paper instead. Beyond that explanation, the story gets murkier; we will leave that episode and that explanation, for brevity's sake.

One thing that made a powerfully good impression on me was the mix of race, gender, nationality, youth, and age. René must be all of 24 and my friend Daphne much older; both believing that they can do something about making society better, a better world. Overall, I think that the conference was a good success; the greatest good of the Abolitionist movement, I believe, and of the conference is to raise the issue of getting rid of prisons--seriously, what a bold idea! What struggle yet to be done!

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9/9/85