

# РЕЦЕНЗИИ

## Mary McAuley

**Judith Pallot and Laura Piacentini. *Gender, Geography, and Punishment: The Experience of Women in Carceral Russia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xi + 290 p. ISBN 978-0-1996-5861-9.**

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In 2005 Judith Pallot, a geographer from Oxford whose recent research, undertaken with a fellow geographer from the Institute of Geography of the Russian Academy of Sciences, had focused on the fate of the private plot in post-Soviet Russia, embarked on a collaborative project of a different and more ambitious kind. The aim was to look at issues relating to women's imprisonment within the context of "Russia's inherited penal geography." Her key collaborator, and subsequently coauthor, Laura Piacentini from Glasgow was a criminologist whose PhD thesis, based on field research, had recently been published as *Surviving Russian Prisons: Punishment, Economy and Politics in Transition* (Piacentini 2004). A third member of the initial team was Dominique Moran, a human geographer who worked in Russia and would subsequently develop an interest in what has come to be known as carceral geography. Their Russian partners were from the Ryazan' Academy of Law and Management (*Akademiia prava i upravleniia Federal'noi sluzhby ispolneniia nakazanii (FSIN) Rossii*). Unfortunately by 2008, with the research half done, the Academy withdrew from the project, refused to share the research results, and the UK scholars were refused further visas. If, however, here was an extreme example of the hazards of embarking on collaborative research, in this case the outcome was very positive. Pallot and Piacentini turned to a group of sociologists from the Ulyanovsk Research Centre "Region," headed by Elena Omelchenko, with a request to conduct in-depth interviews with women who had been released from prison; they took on the task, and then engaged in their own research on some of the issues. Other Russian experts came to the aid of the UK team and contributed their knowledge.

The result is two books on a little-explored subject that complement each other so well that the reader will benefit hugely by reading them both—together. I would advise Pallot-Piacentini first, then Omelchenko. But these books are worth being read by a far

wider audience than those with an interest in penology or gender issues. They represent collaborative, cross-disciplinary research at its best, which is why I have described the participants. Collaboration (whether between scholars from one academic culture or from different ones), and the writing up, is not easy. Pallot and Nefedova, despite both being geographers, had ended up writing, jointly, two different books, one in English, one in Russian (Nefedova and Pallot 2006; Pallot and Nefedova 2007). Cross-disciplinary research can pose additional problems. And here there was an experienced human geographer with a long interest in Russia, a young criminologist, experienced qualitative sociologists from in-country, and penal reform specialists. I approached the results with some trepidation. Yet in this case it works. The Pallot-Piacentini volume reads easily, you cannot guess (without checking) who was responsible for which chapters, and the Omelchenko interview material is woven in. In turn, the Omelchenko volume includes a chapter from the Oxford book, and the interviews surely gained from the skills of the interviewers and from them being Russian. Which are the ingredients, I find myself asking, that can increase the chances of cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary research making a significant contribution to scholarship, and which are the ones best left out? It might be worth exploring this further.

However, to the subject matter of the two books. From Pallot and Piacentini we have an account of the way the penal system works once women are held in detention awaiting trial, then sentenced to imprisonment (in the prison colonies, maybe hundreds or thousands of kilometers away). The approach adopted is both historical and spatial. We move from the structures at the national level, and the geographical distribution of the colonies, to the local (*oblast'* or *raion*) level, and down to the internal structure of the colonies themselves. This provides a framework within which the authors explore the uneasy relationship between punishment and "reeducation," the conflict between a heavily male-oriented penal system, in which women find themselves, and stereotypical views of women's role in society; further chapters focus on the effect of distance and of regimes of constant surveillance and lack of privacy upon women, on their relationships within the colonies and with their families outside, and on the systems of support (or lack of support) when they are released. Two of the themes—the lack of privacy and relationships between women within the colonies—are treated in more depth in the Omelchenko volume.

Here the authors take the unresolved paradox in the aims of imprisonment—punishment and "resocialization"—as their main theme. Humiliating rules and procedures, military practices, uniform clothing, and degrading conditions all "punish" the women prisoners while the declared principle is one of "correction" in order that they should occupy an appropriate womanly role in society, but society bears little resemblance to the isolated world they are now in. Pallot's chapter "Socialism in one barrack" provides an opening chapter, followed by Natal'ia Goncharova's discussion of the issue of hygiene (a vital and neglected subject, one which emerges strongly from the interviews). Giuzel' Sabirova provides a thoughtful methodological chapter on the issues inherent in women talking of their prison experience, and Elena Omelchenko takes up the complex theme of "love, trade, and exploitation" in relations between women prisoners. Usefully she prefaces her discussion with a *précis* of the way relations

between women have come on the agenda of Western penologists and sociologists in the past twenty years and their findings. Up until now, only Liudmila Al'pern (2004) and Natal'ia Tishchenko (2007) in Russia have focused on women prisoners and they have left these questions largely unexplored. As Omelchenko suggests, and this is borne out by the seven interviews that make up the second half of the book, relationships are complex and based on different sets of needs.

The women's stories—of their lives before imprisonment, of some aspects of life in the colonies (to mention only one: two sets of toilets, some not working, for three hundred women to use between “wake-up” at 6 a.m. and appearance on the parade ground, ready to start the day, at 6:30), and of their chances of finding work and shelter once released—make for depressing reading. Everywhere, if one wants to find the marginalized and deprived members of a society, the best place to look is in the prisons. In this case, an inadequate family background (often the absence of a father, a mother unable to cope or turning to drink) appears time and time again. By the time the girl is in her teens, she is looking for a way out. Drugs feature frequently. Once in the colony, many receive little support from outside (in contrast to the queues of women visitors standing outside the male colonies). They count the days until release but their plans for the future are threadbare. Not surprisingly, they come back.

These books should be read by all those who hold research and teaching positions in the universities and academies belonging to the Federal Penal Service, and those who are involved in “reforming” the penal system. They do not provide the answers as to what should be done, but they suggest which are the issues to address. And they surely will encourage younger scholars to take up some that are not covered here—recidivism, the success or failure of drug treatment while in prison, the fate of children whose mothers are in prison. The prison officers barely feature here, and they deserve a study of their own.

Then there are comparative questions. The post-Soviet countries inherited very similar penal codes and practices. What could we learn of the significance of gender stereotyping, of cultural differences, and of the staying power of penal practices from a study of women's “criminality” and their treatment as prisoners in today's post-Soviet countries? How different is the situation in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Belarus from that in Russia, and what accounts for the differences? And of course within Russia, we have Arkhangel'sk, Stavropol', Perm' region, Buryatia, Tuva, and the North Caucasus...

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