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BOOK REVIEW

Danielle Sered, *Until we reckon: violence, mass incarceration, and the road to repair*. New York: The New Press, 2019, 336 pp., ISBN: 978-1-62097-479-7 (hc), 978-1-62097-408-3 (ebook)

Many criminologists have long understood mass incarceration to be a social, political and economic tragedy. There is a wealth of scholarship documenting the deleterious and long-lasting impact of prison on incarcerated people, their families and the wider community. At the same time, there is also scant evidence of any meaningful ability of prison to reduce crime or keep communities safe.

It is also well-known that America stands out in its use of imprisonment, as Danielle Sered notes in her book *Until we reckon: violence, mass incarceration, and the road to repair*. With 5 per cent of the world's population, the United States holds nearly 25 per cent of the worlds incarcerated people (Travis et al., 2014). In Sered's words,

> incarceration is not just a dimension of how we punish crime in our country. It exists at such a scale that it is a defining feature of our culture. It is who we are, who we have become (7).

While the law and order rhetoric that has dominated the political landscape for the previous four decades remains strong (this book was written at the height of the Trump administration), there have been growing calls to reduce incarceration. This patchwork of movements, grounded in both empirical and moral arguments against the use of imprisonment, has in some states led to policy changes (for instance proposition 57 in California is likely to significantly reduce the state's prison population) and has ushered in progressive mayors, prosecutors and sheriffs across the country.

There is reason to be hopeful. However, Sered notes two main obstacles that need to be addressed if we really want to see meaningful criminal justice reform. It has, up to this point, been politically expedient and largely accepted that decarceration efforts should focus solely on non-violent offenders. This is a problem, as so many people in prison (54 per cent of people incarcerated in state prisons) are convicted of violent crime. Sered draws on a sobering statistic (6): in New York, where serious efforts are underway to reduce incarceration for people convicted of drug offences, reducing the number of these people in prison by half will only lead to a 1 per cent decrease in the overall prison population. Sered argues that we need to 'cross the line' and deal with violence, opening up avenues for a radical transformation of criminal justice.

Second, such a movement needs to grapple with race. In America (as in my home of Australia), the use of prison is inescapably tangled up in colonial histories of racism, slavery and violence against communities of colour (Alexander, 2010; Marks, 2022). As Sered notes, a Black boy in America today has a one-in-three chance of going to prison in his lifetime. Sered summarises the historical and

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political landscape that has brought us to this point as one characterised by a racialised narrative that dehumanises, refuses to acknowledge Black pain and tells a story of 'an imagined monstrous other' (11). This is a

> deadly, dishonest story, one with blood on its hands. It is a story that divides us, that impairs our ability to act rationally, and that underpins our culture's response to violence (11).

How do we begin to address this complex entanglement of violence, race and incarceration? Sered sets out a four-part test that any approach to violence needs to pass: it needs to be (1) survivor-centred, (2) accountability-based, (3) safety-driven, and (4) racially equitable.

Sered takes the reader on a journey, crafting a compelling story about what survivors want and perpetrators need (Chapter 1, *Across the river of fire*), the myriad ways that prison cannot address those wants and needs (Chapter 2, *Prison's broken promise*), and the power of real accountability, or in Sered's words, 'doing sorry' (Chapter 3, *In praise of accountability*).

These grounding chapters set the stage for a brief explanation of restorative justice and a description of the New York-based organisation that she founded and directs, Common Justice (commonjustice.org) (Chapter 4, *Displacing incarceration*). This is a remarkable organisation that offers a survivor-centred accountability process as an alternative to prison for young people (aged 16-24) who commit gunpoint robberies, serious assaults, shootings and other acts of street violence. Participants undertake a 15-month programme that includes a violence intervention curriculum running concurrent to a restorative justice process with the people they have harmed. The overwhelming majority of participants successfully complete the programme. Common Justice also provides a range of wraparound support services for violence survivors, many of whom are people who have typically been excluded from such services (70 per cent of survivors who participate in their programmes are men of colour). The goal is to seek meaningful accountability and repair, specific to each context and to each person's unique needs. For instance, Sered highlights an example of a survivor of a stabbing who requested that the person responsible meet him at the location of the stabbing to shake his hand. This 'seemed simple enough, but for the harmed party, this allowed him to overwrite the experience of trauma – which was situated for him in a specific place – with an experience of reconciliation, safety and respect (137).

This approach passes the four-part test set out in the introduction for addressing violence. It is survivor-centred in that it explicitly works to provide survivors with what they may need during their recovery journey (as in the example given earlier). It prioritises accountability through direct communication with survivors. As Donnell, a former Common Justice participant and current employee, explains, accountability means answering directly to the person you have harmed:

> When you do, you watch the magic of something happen where you start to give that same care back to the person that you have harmed … I'm sitting here looking at this person like, you're so similar to me. You're so much of who I am.

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> Your dreams are like mine. Your mother's dreams for you are like my mother's dreams for me. We are so connected and we didn't even know this thing (146).

It promotes safety across multiple dimensions, including by the cessation of violence and by facilitating healing. Finally, and crucially, it is committed to racial equity in that it respects and empowers those most directly impacted by violence, which in New York City are communities of colour. Sered notes,

> One way that racial inequality manifests is in shaping who gets to decide what happened in response to harm. These men [participants in restorative processes] … accessed an exit ramp from the courts and the road to mass incarceration and instead built a thing they were always capable of from the start: a reconciliation that honoured the past and made possible the future each of them deserves (153).

Restorative justice then becomes not just an alternative route to justice, but a radical act in an ongoing struggle against racism and healing the deep wounds of large-scale racialised violence, particularly against Black Americans. This chapter is full of specific examples of restorative processes, accountability and repair. It is well-crafted and makes the theory and prescriptions of the earlier chapters come alive.

Chapter 5 (*Policy and power*) turns back to the world of contemporary criminal justice and offers a range of policy recommendations that will in some cases (reforming sentencing policies, limiting prosecutorial power, reforming parole practices) lead to an immediate reduction in the use of incarceration, and will in others (re-enfranchisement and reducing other 'collateral consequences' of a felony conviction, transforming policing, investing in prevention, decoupling victim services from law enforcement) have a longer-term impact. All these recommendations are sensible and well-evidenced, but in the context of this book they seem perhaps undercooked.

Sered returns to the theme of racial equality and racial justice in the final chapters of the book. Chapter 6 (*The opposite of violence*) explores how American culture became one that celebrated violence, especially violence against Black people. Part of this narrative is bound up in racist and patriarchal ideas about who is a victim, who feels pain and who needs protection. Such a culture that normalises violence disproportionally impacts Black and Brown communities, but also poor and working-class white communities (Sered provides a brilliant unpacking/critique of the concept of 'white trash'). How do we reverse this narrative? This is daunting, because, as Sered notes, 'there is no way out of the normalisation of violence without massive cultural reorientation' (232). Sered provides a series of case studies of inspirational leaders and movements who have resisted, organised and created spaces for reconciliation and healing; for instance, Equal Justice Initiative in Alabama has carefully documented victims of lynching in America, visiting hundreds of sites across the country and collecting soil for a permanent and sobering memorial that allows for mourning and 'sacred grief' (224).

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This example points to the crux of Sered's final argument: that the opposite of violence is reckoning (Chapter 7, *Our reckoning*). In her words, 'there is no way out of this without dealing with the past. We will have to face what we have done' (236). Just as an approach to individual violence needs to be survivor-centred and accountability-focused, so too does an approach that reckons with history and culture. This involves truth-telling, acknowledging harm, expressing remorse and developing strategies for reparation. Sered explores how her restorative justice work at Common Justice has given some insight into how reckoning can be achieved. Very few responsible or harmed parties are enthusiastic about their restorative encounter in the lead up to it. Most would rather be doing something else. But every single person has benefitted in some way from the experience. This transformative process, of dragging unenthusiastic or apprehensive people towards their reckoning, is what she envisions on a grand scale. This is the most exciting, but perhaps also the fuzziest, part of the book.

The strength of this book is the passion that Sered brings to it, backed up with a strong command of the scholarship around violence, victimisation, incarceration and justice. It is gripping and well-argued. Sered clearly communicates the criminological literature while making the research come alive with passion and clarity.

Sered is writing this book for a non-specialised audience, and much of the book is her impassioned plea for readers (especially American readers) to see and feel the badness of incarceration and the legacy of racialised violence, and to convince the reader that an alternative is possible: a better approach that empowers survivors, brings about real accountability and heals communities. Each of these narratives may be a hard sell in some corners of America, but Sered is to be commended for the clarity of her voice and her unflinching insistence that such an approach is the only way to address violence and heal a wounded country.

This book will be of value to the restorative justice community as it grapples with the link between restorative and racial justice, a central element to the growth of the movement (Davis 2019; Lewis & Staufer, 2021). It was written before the 2020 killing of George Floyd and the protest and reckoning movements that arose from this tragedy. But it speaks to the same issues laid bare during this period: the historical legacy of racialised violence, often embodied in police and other criminal justice institutions, the ongoing trauma and pain experienced by communities living at the nexus of racism and violence, and the capacity of such communities to take control of their own healing. Reckoning in America seems to happen in fits and starts, in pockets of innovation, swells of momentum and shifts in political discourse. It seems necessary but frustratingly elusive. As Sered accurately predicts, 'I believe we are due for a reckoning. I understand our collective desire and the wild contortions of our culture that we are going through to avoid it. But I also believe

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it is time' (253). This book offers a way to integrate the lessons of restorative justice into a larger dialogue about such a reckoning.

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