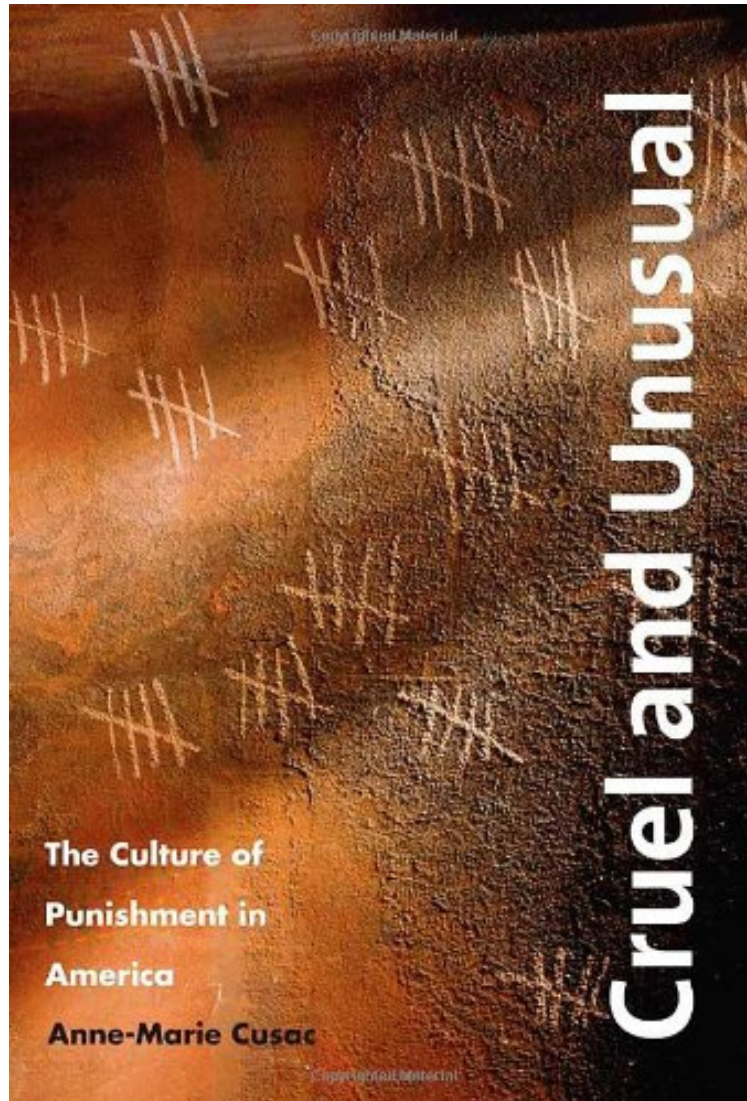


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Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America

Anne-Marie Cusac

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Anne-Marie Cusac : Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Why the USA has the worlds highest incarceration rateBy Paul FroehlichThe United States did not always lead the world in the proportion of population incarcerated. During the 1930s, the US had imprisonment rates similar to or lower than Europes. Since 1973, however, Americas imprisonment rate increased by more than five times. The American imprisonment rate remains seven to twelve times higher than the

European rate. Anne-Marie Cusac, an assistant professor at Roosevelt University, explains why. There was cultural shift starting in the 1970s leading to public support for harsher punishment and less emphasis on rehabilitation. The news media helped to promote fear of the underclass, a synonym for minorities, by devoting more time to crime coverage. The show *Cops* greatly exaggerates the arrest rate (60 percent on TV vs. 18 percent on the street), and the rate of violent crimes (87 percent on TV vs. 13 percent of all crimes). Consequently, the public became more fearful even after the crime rate fell in the 1990s. Politicians responded by routinely campaigning on a platform of harsher penalties for categories of criminals, such as sex offenders and drug dealers. The rise of the Religious Right was another factor. Christian conservatives are the strongest supporters of the death penalty, favoring retribution more than other Americans. Jerry Fawell and Pat Robertson claimed the ultimate penalty is Biblical. The Christian Reconstruction movement was preoccupied with punishment. Conservative Christians such as James Dobson advocated spanking toddlers starting at 18-months old. In short, there was a religious component behind the tough-on-crime attitude that developed in the 70s and '80s. Meanwhile, some scholars claimed that rehabilitation didn't work. An influential 1973 article by Robert Martinson fed the popular view that nothing works to rehabilitate. Though Martinson retracted his earlier claim in 1979, America had turned away from rehabilitation. Ronald Reagan warned about human predators, while scholar James Q. Wilson asserted in 1975 that wicked people exist. Nothing avails except to set them apart from innocent people. When offenders were seen as a different species of threatening, violent individuals for whom we have no sympathy, the consequence is politicized penalties with mandatory sentences, three-strikes laws, supermax prisons, and the revived death penalty. The War on Drugs was the most important single factor in skyrocketing imprisonment. The number of people incarcerated for drug crimes jumped 15 times between 1980 and 2000. Laws were changed to impose long mandatory penalties for selling or possessing drugs. Some penalties are longer than for violent crimes. The victims rights movement pushed punitive policies. This movement consisted of conservative law-and-order advocates and women's groups fighting rape and domestic violence. Bill Clinton was a supporter. The 1994 Violence Against Women Act included \$10 billion for new prisons, expansion of the death penalty, and a three-strikes provision. Full disclosure: This reviewer played a prominent organizing role in getting the first victims rights amendment ratified to the Illinois constitution in 1990. A stronger version was ratified in 2014. Consistent with the emphasis on harsh punishment was the reintroduction of pain into corrections with the use of stunning shields, stun belts and stun guns. In 2000, the United Nations Committee Against Torture demanded that the US abolish electroshock stun belts and restraint chairs as methods of restraining those in custody because use of such devices almost invariably leads to breaches of the international treaty against torture. Most Americans, however, say they support torture of suspected terrorists, according to polls in late 2014. Research on recidivism now finds that at least four factors reduce the rate of repeat crimes: drug treatment, education, maintaining close contact with family, and religious conversion. The prison systems in Illinois and many states are full beyond capacity, so there are precious few resources available to fund education and drug treatment. The Illinois Department of Corrections has recently welcomed evangelical volunteers into prisons, probably because such programs have no virtually no public cost. So what are prospects for the future? So long as the public looks at criminals as almost subhuman evil people, there will be support for harsher punishment. Politicians who come out for moderating penalties will be vulnerable to the accusation of being soft on crime. Growing economic inequality makes it harder for the policy-making class to empathize with the poor since the gulf between rich and poor has become so wide. It's no coincidence that the US has the widest inequality among the rich democracies. On a more positive note, the nation is finally reconsidering the War on Drugs, at least with regards to marijuana. The imprisonment rate has dropped slightly because the Great Recession put a strain on state and county budgets. There are now some conservatives, such as Gov. Chris Christie, who advocate treatment for drug offenders rather than locking them up and throwing away the key. In their drive to reduce the cost of government, Gov. Christie and some of his counterparts recognize there are budgetary consequences to longer prison terms. A dollar spent on corrections counts just as much as a dollar spent on health care. But a sick person might recuperate with proper treatment, while prisoners probably get worse without opportunities for treatment, education and faith. ###

The statistics are startling. Since 1973, America's imprisonment rate has multiplied over five times to become the highest in the world. More than two million inmates reside in state and federal prisons. What does this say about our attitudes toward criminals and punishment? What does it say about us? This book explores the cultural evolution of punishment practices in the United States. Anne-Marie Cusac first looks at punishment in the nation's early days, when Americans repudiated Old World cruelty toward criminals and emphasized rehabilitation over retribution. This attitude persisted for some 200 years, but in recent decades we have abandoned it, Cusac shows. She discusses the dramatic rise in the use of torture and restraint, corporal and capital punishment, and punitive physical pain. And she links this new climate of punishment to shifts in other aspects of American culture, including changes in dominant religious beliefs, child-rearing practices, politics, television shows, movies, and more. America now punishes harder and longer and with methods we would have rejected as cruel and unusual not long ago. These changes are profound, their impact affects all our lives, and we have yet to understand the full consequences.

From Publishers Weekly The Abu Ghraib prison abuses, widely condemned as violations of American ideals, were actually as American as apple pie, according to this scattershot study. Cusac, a journalist and communications professor, surveys the American enthusiasm for confinement, pain and humiliation as instruments of legal and social control, from colonial-era stocks and ducking pools to today's supermax prisons and amped-up stun guns (she includes a litany of cases of kids and old ladies tasered by cops). Abandoning a mid-20th-century consensus favoring humane rehabilitation for miscreants, Americans since the 1970s have embraced a view of crime as the product of individual evil, she contends, with harsh retribution the appropriate response. For this view she blames religion specifically the Christian Right, citing everything from spanking manuals to the Christian Reconstructionist movement, which recommends the death penalty for theft and homosexuality. Cusac's disorganized, repetitive argument treats developments in policing and penology as atavistic cultural phenomena largely unrelated to concrete social concerns; she spends far more time analyzing movies like *The Exorcist* and *Carrie* than discussing postwar crime rates. The result is a sometimes insightful but often unbalanced and distorted take on our supposed gluttony for punishment. (Mar. 18) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "This book is a bracing indictment of our culture's obsession with pain and revenge. In chronicling the history and current reality of punishment in America, Anne-Marie Cusac exposes our collective loss of compassion to damning effect." Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*