

Resisting the spiral of silence: reflections on Thomas Mathiesen's contributions to surveillant studies, social silencing and ever-expanding controls

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Abstract

In late 2021, some six months after his death, the University of Oslo held a commemoration to the work of Professor Thomas Mathiesen. As this edition of *Justice, Power and Resistance* will attest, Mathiesen cut across definitions of theorist, scholar, interventionist, pedagogue and an archetypal academic activist. In this short intervention, I aim to pay tribute to the influence Thomas' work has had not only on my own, but on so many interventions around injustice and ever-expanding aspects of surveillant social controls which proliferate contemporarily. In doing so, this intervention will highlight an overview of his most recognised work, before delving into a concept that I consider to be more relevant than ever: Mathiesen's conceptualisation 'silent silencing' (2004). Overall, this contribution seeks to remind those new to studies of harm and social control of the value of critical work which came before us, and the need to engage, reflect and rebuild perspectives such as Mathiesen's in ways which are meaningful to contemporary problems and optimal (abolitionist) solutions.

Keywords: abolitionism; silencing; surveillance; criminology; critical pedagogies.

COVID-19, synchronicity and Statewatch

At the time of Thomas Mathiesen's death, I was co-coordinator of the European Group for the Study of Deviance and Social Control, and invited to contribute to his commemoration. The European Group was and remains a critical collective which had been established in Florence in 1973, and to which this very journal owes its foundations. Today, it remains an international network for academics, practitioners, and activists working towards social justice, state accountability and decarceration. For decades, and long before my time there, Mathiesen has been an active participant, member, contributor, and a key epistemological influence on the workings of the Group and in particular, its engagement with and development of abolitionist perspectives and the problem of imprisonment.

Although Mathiesen earlier works such as *The Defences of the Weak* (1965), *The Politics of Abolition* (1974), *Law, Society, and Political Action* (1980), and *Prison on Trial* (1990) made significant contributions to knowledge on imprisonment and prison abolitionism, it is fair to say that texts such as *Silently Silenced* (2004), *The Politics of Abolition Revisited* (2015), and *Towards a Surveillant Society* (2013) have had more than a profound influence on my perspectives on border harms, sexualised violence, and detention abolition. Whilst these were not topic areas of Mathiesen's primary interests, these texts (and many works from before them) encouraged ways of thinking which, although not always relevant to the precise subject at hand, applied new ways of 'seeing' social problems, as well as untangling the limitations of reforming repressive state practices and advancing knowledge on how to work towards abolishing them. On these points, I will elaborate in more detail later. But first, to synchronicity.

Despite all best intentions of attending the Oslo University commemoration in December 2021, a new wave of COVID-19 regulations put a temporary end to international travel shortly before the event.

However, there had still been relatively free movement in the weeks prior in the UK, where I had taken part in a workshop event facilitated by Statewatch in Bristol. As some readers may know, many Statewatch colleagues over the years shared strong bonds with the European Group and, under the directorship of Tony Bunyan (and now his successor, Chris Jones), had accumulated an exceptional wealth of documents and files, many of which remain in the Statewatch library in London, and some which have been archived online.

Amongst the piles of original texts and Zines from the 1970s and 80s on the table, was a 1981 edition of *Social Justice* journal with a feature article by none other than Thomas Mathiesen, entitled *Law and Order: A View from Scandinavia* (see *Image 1* and *Image 2* below). The synchronicity of the timing was palpable: it was only weeks away from the memorial, and the edition was exactly 40 years to the year it had been printed. The article drew attention to the increasing rates of custodial sentencing in Sweden, and similar trends in Norway; issues Mathiesen would continue to publish, teach and speak publicly on prolifically. On a temporal note, it was holding the physical edition that reminded me that he had been writing on and raising concerns on carceral expansionism before I (or many of my contemporaries who continue to use his work) had even been born. This is not to be flippant, as we will go on to see, but a key reminder of the significance of understanding where arguments come from and recognising the importance of reading, teaching, and learning in ways which situate those texts that have come before us.

Image 1: Cover of edition of the *Social Justice* journal. Picture taken by author.

Trickle-down perspectives and pedagogies

The influence of Thomas Mathiesen's work surfaces regularly at European Group conferences, and in the legacy that he and other colleagues at Oslo University have left that is identifiably unique in its contemporary critical criminological status. For more than a decade now, many others and I have benefited from being able to debate, discuss, challenge, and learn from abolitionists and critical pedagogues who were themselves influenced – my own reflections range from long debates on prison reform and abolition with Joe Sim, Marte Rua, Andrew M. Jefferson, and David Scott to lengthy exchanges on the state of contemporary critical criminology with Katja Franko, David Rodriguez Goyes, Steve Tombs, and Ida Nafstad. Certainly, the list, and the length of the evenings, could go on! Importantly though, it is these discussions which keep critical thinking alive, and from which trickle-down perspectives (unlike trickle-down economics) can be realised intergenerationally and continue to thrive.

Although Mathiesen's contributions to abolitionism have come to be those which are most acknowledged and discussed at European Group conferences, his (perhaps less acknowledged) work is as significant, and indeed as important. One such timeless text is *Silently Silenced: Essays on the Creation of Acquiescence in Modern Society* (2004). A collection of essays ranging from the 1970s onward, they had until been published exclusively in Norwegian until 2004, again a timely synchronism in relation to this journal edition - exactly twenty years after the book's publication.

Silently Silenced is a remarkable text. It is, I would wager, even more relevant now that it was when it was first published, and has the potential to cut across and be applied to so many forms of political and social issues than it has yet to be tasked with in academia. Mathiesen defines silent silencing as 'the bringing on of acquiescence [that] takes place through a process which is quiet rather than noisy,

hidden rather than open, unnoticed rather than noticeable, unseen rather than seen, non-physical rather than physical' (2004: 9). It is, in short, the coercive means by which decisions are made and power is woven through politics, states and societies. As many regions have seen the increase in surveillant controls, criminalisation of dissent and activism, expansion of social controls, and proliferation of corporate power, the tools to understanding these modalities and mechanisms is arguably required now more than ever. That is what *Silent Silencing* gives us.

Mathiesen situated mechanisms of silencing as a fivefold process: it is structural (strategic and not requiring physical force, but instead built into social fabrics); an everyday matter (routine and dependent on economic compulsion in an industrialised world); unbounded (not consciously perceived, and thus difficult to avoid or diffuse); noiseless (takes place without organising, or much public debate), and dynamic (it develops over time and continually becomes stronger and more encompassing) (2004: 10-14).

Understandings of the complex nature of violence and its relationship with control have changed and proliferated over the past decades. The recognition of the dynamic and unbounded nature of, for example, structural violence, coercive control and bureaucratic violence has become more cemented in contemporary policy, practice and academia¹. And yet, across many countries and regions contemporarily, political decision making and bureaucratic governance has become *less* transparent, not more. Many such aspects do indeed resonate with Mathiesen's definition with the key challenge being 'noiseless'. In an era of social media and hyper-expansionist media outlets, to claim noiselessness provides a juxtaposition. Almost everyone can have their say, or 'felt heard'. And yet I would argue that the pace and power of subject focus, challenges to critical pedagogies and perspectives (McLaren, 2019) and increase in avenues facilitating conspiracy without much in the way of empirical evidence, allows for a new form of noiselessness in a way which can undermine meaningful engagement for sustainable social change.

In relation to this, Mathiesen specifically highlighted step by step processes through which identifiable problems become recognised², superficially responded to and 'fixed' without truly addressing structural causes or contributors. He noted these as: *individualisation of 'the issue', normalisation, displacement of responsibility, and the expansion of control through coercion and absorption* (2004: 25-29). Rather than seeing systems or practices as being inherently flawed, issues are individualised and action is taken in a way that ensures that those who benefit from the given process or practice will continue to do so, whilst those whose concerns are raised might be gradually co-opted into assuming or accepting that adequate action is taken without wholesale change: societies and individuals within them are acquiesced.

There have been two key aspects of my research and activism which this 'maintenance of hidden silencing' has been influential. Firstly, in relation to addressing harms of the neoliberal university, whereby as keynote speakers at the British Society of Criminology in 2019, David Whyte (Queen Mary University London) and I highlighted the ways in which insidious and anti-democratic means of economic and structural management in UK universities control and punish staff and students

¹ For examples, see Abdelhady et al, 2020 on bureaucratic violence in Northern Europe; Boochani and Tofighian, 2021 on the harms of offshore immigration imprisonment in Australia and Papua New Guinea; Canning, 2017; Lindberg and Edwards, 2022 on deportation and violence; Moones and Tofighian, 2023 on resistance; and Renehan, 2022 on coercive control)

² Issues focussed on included for example of the collapse of the oil rig 'Alexander Kielland' in the North Sea, a fire in Statfjord A platform (also in the North Sea) and the silencing of Sociology as a profession.

following the same pathway Mathiesen had identified. Indeed, in my own former workplace, I had hoped to encourage all colleagues in my department to engage with the concept to expose the punitive structures and technologies which I considered to have hindered our capacity to research and teach with academic freedom and critical thinking. In 2020, I had asked Thomas for an electronic copy to send round, who replied by apologising that he had not kept the electronic version in English – only, and good to form, in Norwegian.

The second, and more widely accessible, is through research on asylum, immigration and border harm. In my book *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System* (2017), and later in an article published in the *European Journal of Criminology* (2017), Mathiesen's framework provided a basis by which one can identify and evidence ways states and corporations deflect responsibility when identifiable problems occur and encompass fundamental strategies of silent silencing. Indeed, almost cyclically, ways in which 'scandals' or 'tragic events' - from migrant deaths at sea to the violation of basic human rights - is a form of this. As someone who has long advocated empirically evidenced approaches to activist academic interventions, it was from Mathiesen's 'spiral of silence' that I concluded with the chapter *Resisting the Spiral of Silence* (Canning, 2017: 149-160) as a means to embed calls to action. This influence continued long after in relation to immigration detention abolitionism, an issue that has become fundamental to my teaching, and which I hope trickles academically to further generations of graduates who might find value in envisioning and engaging in struggle to realize decarceral futures, as Mathiesen did.

To long-term ventures

Despite all our best efforts, no one text is perfect, and no one scholar unflawed. As well as being deeply influenced by Thomas Mathisen's work, I have also critiqued some of his (and others) perspectives and omissions. Critique is the role, and indeed value, of academia. Perhaps most vehement has been my points on gendered acknowledgment of silent silencing, and specifically sexualised violence which is one of the most silenced forms of violence that exists across societies. However, and as stated at his commemoration, from where there are omissions there are opportunities to challenge, build, address, and reconfigure into contemporary knowledge and resistance. To engage first with legacies of criminological interventions is the first step, and one which should not be forgotten.

With this in mind, and drawing back to the aforementioned article in *Social Justice* journal, there is no underestimating the value and relevance of understanding historical contexts of criminalisation and social control. Mathiesen closed by doing just this, as he drew from Weber, to say,

'A struggle such as this is among those in which I think progressive criminologists and social scientists should engage. For this struggle, the words of Max Weber come to mind: "Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective"' (1981: 58).

In relation to prison abolition, Mathiesen witnessed the long running debates and socio-political landscape shifts over a four-decade period. The time between *The Politics of Abolition* (1974) and its *Revisited* (2015) counterpart demonstrates the value of sustained engagement, but also the temporal trajectories by which he was able to witness the failure of states in addressing harms through imprisonment. We need not agree with all that is written by those who have come before us, nor pretend that there are not limitations in perspective or precise

contemporary concerns or situations, such as the points I made on gender, harm, and silence at his commemoration in 2021. What we can agree, however, is that the value of such vision has paved the way to developing knowledge and interventions as social scientists now can. As such, I finish here with Mathiesen's closing line from the pile of texts laid out on tables in 2021 in Bristol – exactly 40 years after its 1981 publication – '*And it is clearly a long-term venture*'.

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Further information:

Conflict of interest: the author declares there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements: many thanks to the editors and reviewers, and to colleagues in Criminology and Law at the University of Oslo for their invitation to the commemoration. Above all, thanks to Thomas Mathisen for sharing his work and ideas so that we might move them forward.