

The Prisons Must Be Destroyed

Raoul Vaneigem

2004

Papon is free, Menigon is in jail.¹ Papon is responsible for crimes against humanity. Menignon – according to an expression which, though it is no longer in style, has lost none of its pertinence – killed one of “capital’s valets”. There’s nothing true left, in the circumstances, other than the fact that killing a man in order to kill a system is as stupid as it is intolerable.

I’d like it alright, in these times when the world’s States make humanism into their *ultima ratio*,² if on all the streets of the world the words of Sebastien Castellion³ were plastered: “Killing someone isn’t defending a doctrine; it’s simply killing someone.”

If the blind anger that injustice and its cynicism incite do not excuse Menigon’s act, must one then resolve oneself to believing that there was any convincing excuse to liberate Papon, a killer on the payroll of many established Orders? Could such a solicitude come from politicians who take pride of place while at the same time many of them should be rotting behind bars according to the rigorous justice they say they advocate?

Nonetheless, even among those who think Papon is a piece of shit, there are those who, in the name of humanity, didn’t object to the fact that he escaped the torture of the penitentiary. Whoever opposes the generosity of life to the egoistic calculations of the petty shopkeepers that govern us will have to have the heart to demand not only the liberation of Nathalie Menigon but also the suppression of that physical and mental degradation, that slow death called “imprisonment.”

There are only a few prejudices that cannot be corrected, repaired, and rectified by those who committed them. A society should humanly take care of and treat those who are responsible for a crime, instead of corrupting and perverting them even more by punishments and guilt-trips. It’s time to bury in the past these notions of vengeance, mortification, pardon, clemency, an eye for an eye, redemption, and expiation.

The death penalty has been abolished – let us now abolish the barbarity of prisons.

¹ Maurice Papon was a convicted war-criminal, circa World War II. At the age of 91, he was freed from prison on health grounds in 2002. Nathalie Menigon was a militant activist in *Action Directe*, a French ultra-leftist group.

² *Translator’s note*: Latin for “final argument” or “last resort.”

³ Sebastien Castellion (1515–1563) was a French theologian.

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