

The “forgotten fight” for prison abolition in France

Friday 19 November 2021, by [BRANSON Scott](#), [DE LA HAYE Jacques Lesage](#) (Date first published: 13 November 2021).

Long-time prison abolitionist Jacques Lesage de La Haye reflects on decades of anti-prison organizing in France and his personal journey from inmate to activist.

When I saw that Jacques Lesage de La Haye had a new book called [The Abolition of Prison](#), published by the French radical press, Éditions Libertalia, I reached out through my anarchist radio networks to find contact information for him. Jacques is a longtime anarchist and abolitionist in France, who for many years hosted the anti-prison radio show *Ras les murs*. His book promised to be a culmination of all of his experience writing and struggling against prisons and working to support people both inside and outside.

As a translator and an anarchist, I am always keeping an eye out for new texts to try to bring into English in order to connect movements around the world and especially to help connect the abolitionist struggles across national divides. Jacques was equally excited to get in touch with a US-based anarchist and abolitionist. He was not sure what was going on over here, but was very pleased to learn about the robust organizing work happening today. Since we got in touch, we have had regular dialogues, not only about abolition and anarchism, but also sexuality, the pandemic and daily life.

As you will see in his reflections below, the abolitionist movement in France has dwindled, while the need to abolish prisons has only grown. In *The Abolition of Prison*, however, Jacques catalogues decades of thinking and planning about how to get rid of prisons; he surveys numerous texts and uses his own experience as a long-term prisoner to show the ultimate failure of prisons to do even the very thing they claim to do: to reform and reintegrate the criminal. From his anarchist position, Jacques acknowledges that the true abolition of prisons requires a social revolution, since the society we live in today requires prisons as a means of incapacitation and state terror. On the other hand, Jacques' vision of abolition is not immediate and does not depend on a punctual or bloody revolution. Instead, he walks the important line of supporting those who are already inside and caught up in its violence, while at the same time trying to transition the institution towards a larger network of care and autonomy.

Jacques' book provides an instructive entry point for thinking abolition practically. He details extensively the emotional and physical degradation that prison brings down on the people who get caught in its grasp. But he also shows how the prison functions beyond this torture and slow death to provide the state with cover for its wider social war against the people who are not (yet) incarcerated. Though for Jacques abolition and anarchism are connected, he does not see the process of abolition as one of indoctrination into a political point of view, but rather a form of care and support that comes through connecting to people where they are and helping them determine for themselves what they need. As he points out, though abolition seems like a tall demand that would also require the unraveling of all of the institutions of racial capitalism and the state, it is also something that is happening right now, all over the world, to varying degrees.

As abolitionists always point out, prison is a relatively recent invention, and the way it is enforced today has developed in tandem with the domination of the colonial state form and racial capitalism. As the state and capitalism wage their protracted war to disconnect people from ways that we could actually live and thrive in the world, we can hold on to the fact that people continuously innovate better ways to care for one another, even amidst widespread state destruction.

In what follows, Jacques reflects on his own experience in prison, in his studies, as a psychologist, and as a militant. Part of our work as abolitionists must be to retain intergenerational lessons and inspiration. In this piece, I want to present readers in English with some more of Jacques' insight beyond his book. Jacques provides a perspective that connects the social and emotional destruction both inside and outside that allows us to understand the violent surroundings we inhabit while we envision a world based in mutual care. In the end, he claims, abolition will come by building more and more of these forms of care until prisons are proven obsolete.

— Scott Branson

The continuation of a forgotten fight

Jacques Lesage de La Haye

I have aristocratic roots: my mother was Payen de La Garanderie, my father Lesage de La Haye. I received a very strict education that was both harsh and violent. My father was a long-distance sea captain and therefore always away, only spending two months a year at the house during his furloughs. Since she was alone, my mother believed that she should take on the role of the father, which in her mind meant beating her children when they didn't "behave." She did this assiduously for her two oldest — Jean-Paul, my younger brother, and me. She slapped and spanked us very often. But she didn't behave the same way with her two other children — our sister and our youngest brother — because she realized she had been mistaken: we [Jean-Paul and Jacques] had actually become delinquents and served time in prison.

When Jean-Paul was 16 and I was 17 [years old], we had to deal with the police because of a botched robbery, but there were no consequences. However, we were thrown into an uncontrollable spiral. We committed other robberies and even moved on to hold-ups. With two of our friends, we took part in a robbery on a train. It went wrong: a man was killed. One of our friends had hit him with a club borrowed from his father, who was a colonel in the engineering corps. He didn't realize that [the club] had a lead tip.

We were all arrested in 1957 and our friend Jean-Claude was sentenced to death, then pardoned and commuted to life in prison. My brother and I got 20 years of hard labor (it would be imprisonment today). [My brother] Jean-Paul couldn't withstand the shock. He decompensated and became mentally ill, and was sent to a psychiatric ward. He was unable to get out of there. Today, he is dead. Thanks to sentence remissions and a strong conditional release, Jean-Claude got out at the end of 13.5 years.

As for me, once I got to the *Maison Centrale* (prison), I took up my secondary studies again and passed the *baccalauréat* in philosophy (equivalent to a high school degree). Then I continued by enrolling at the University of Caen, because I was in a penal institution in the same city. I did my courses by correspondence, because I could not leave prison. It was long and difficult. I received my bachelor of arts and a part of my psychology degree. I completed this work only once I got out, finishing the psychology degree, my master's, and advanced specialized graduate degree (*le diplôme d'études supérieures spécialisées*, DESS, a former terminal graduate degree).

Our mother's violence spawned social violence in my brother and me. Unfortunately, being alone against the state apparatus, Jean-Paul didn't resist. As for me, in my psychological studies, I undertook a self-analysis. I had learned that Freud, the inventor of psychoanalysis, could not have his own psychoanalyst and so he performed a self-analysis. So I carried mine out with the help of Karen Horney's book *Self-Analysis*. This lasted six years, from 1959 to 1965. Later, I completed this process from 1978 to 1986, through an analysis with Arlette Gastine, a follower of Wilhelm Reich.

Fairly quickly, realizing the inhuman conditions of incarceration, I stood in opposition to detention and, with exceptions, the prison staff. My rebellious attitude got me punished many times, put in the hole and in solitary confinement. There were nevertheless two directors of the *Centrale* who supported me and even helped me pursue my studies by facilitating the process for me to take exams. Since I received a number of sentence remissions due to the diplomas I earned and a large parole — 5.5 years out of the 20 years — I was released after 11.5 years, in 1968.

Shortly after my release, I joined with the philosopher Michel Foucault, who created the militant group, the GIP (*Groupe Informations Prison* — Prison Information Group) in 1971. We organized debates and actions against incarceration, which got lots of publicity due to Foucault and his many intellectual friends. With other recently released prisoners from the *Maison Centrale* in Melun, we then started another anti-prison movement, the *Comité d'Action des Prisonniers* (CAP — Prisoner Action Committee) in 1971. It operated until 1980.

The difference between the CAP and the GIP was that the CAP was formed by former prisoners, while the GIP was more of an intellectual movement including Foucault, Claude Mauriac, Vidal-Naquet, etc. and then a number of prisoners that they gathered together. But the CAP was created by ex-prisoners — and even if Foucault joined us, it was a movement by former prisoners.

The fact that I met Michel Foucault and participated in the GIP and the CAP, and my many anti-prison actions explains the writing of *The Abolition of Prison* in 2019.

When I was 17 [years old], I took a trip studying the oil trade between France and Romania. As an officer-cadet on an oil tanker, I found what I was looking for: a country behind the "Iron Curtain." I had thought that since I could not accept the ideas of aristocrats and the bourgeois, there was nothing left but to become a communist. I found myself in Costanza, a Romanian port on the Black Sea. We were at the dock, I had gone down to visit the city and the port. On the way back, I took many photos of the harbor facilities as well as Soviet battleships. I was seen and followed by some guards carrying guns. I was able to go back onto the boat, but these men waited for hours at the bottom of the gangway, hoping that I was going to come back down... I was shocked by their reaction, and from the height of my 17-year-old mind, I came to the conclusion that I could only become an anarchist.

At the *Centrale* where I served my time from 1958 to 1968, there were no anarchist prisoners. The prison population was poor and apolitical. I didn't have much contact with people fighting from inside. It was only from the 1970s onwards that a fringe of prisoners became politicized. However, in the GIP, I saw prisoners released from the *Centrale* in Melun, like Serge Livrozet, who called themselves anarchists. I read up on this political current and I learned that it completely fit with my ideas. Livrozet wrote the book *De la Prison à la Révolte* ("From Prison to Revolt," not translated in English), and co-founded the CAP with myself and some others.

It was through my analysis that I truly learned about Reich's thinking. I then joined the Center for Wilhelm Reich Studies, created by Gérard Guasch and Arlette Gastine, who had introduced me to this method that is simultaneously psychological, physical and socio-political. This training, which lasts four years at minimum, allowed me to become a Reichian analyst. In 1995, I created the Circle

of Wilhelm Reich Studies with Gérard Guasch. In January 2021, I stopped leading the Circle, and another Reichian analyst has taken over the training.

A Reichian anarchism is political thought that is not simply theoretical. It involves taking the psyche, the body, and the social into account. According to psychosomatic medicine, this implies the idea of a functional unity of the living being, which transcends Cartesian dualism. The human being is bio-psycho-political. The drawback of a solely political struggle is that it doesn't include the body, or the psyche. But similarly, a number of body therapies forget the political dimension and end up only serving the privileged social categories, because of their rates. On the other hand, we practice what we call democratic rates: each person pays what they can.

My work as a psychiatric psychologist made me realize that the incarceration of mentally ill people was a quasi-medieval mistake. In my mind, therapy should happen in freedom, above all without constraint. My clinical work has always led me to encourage the feeling of freedom for my patients. To be insane is not to be free. Psychology and psychiatry remind us that we cannot treat human problems only with political means, which was the trap of the socialist republics on the other side of the Berlin Wall. In prison, there are people whose mental illnesses lead them to crimes and misdemeanors. There are also incarcerated people who become mentally ill due to their incarceration. That was the case of my brother, Jean Paul.

The issue of emotional states and sexuality seemed essential to me in prison. Frustration leads to rage, hatred and desire for revenge. What's more, the idea of punishment is a monumental mistake. It works by way of the feeling of guilt. It thus assumes the notion of fault, which is the basic backward belief of many religions. The atmosphere that prison creates leads to the violence of incarcerated people, which reflects the violence of incarceration.

I was forced to fight twice at the *Maison Centrale*. Therefore, I believe that a punishment should never be violent, since it leads to anything but healing. This isn't the only thing that led me to abolitionism, but above all the fact that prison destroys the individual physically, psychologically, and socially. If we want to help incarcerated people to rebuild themselves, we have to create a pedagogical and therapeutic atmosphere.

Anti-prison militants have almost vanished in France. Those who remain only run the risk of having their shows taken off air, or the banning of their journals, a minimal threat which basically never happens. Anyway, the idea of abolition interests few people today. I receive fewer and fewer requests for debates about prison. I imagine I won't have any more for a while! Since I've stopped being part of shows about prison at Radio Libertaire (1989-2019), I have less information about the carceral world. And above all, I know that there is practically no movement against prison in French society. The public seems barely concerned with the problem. It's more fashionable to be worried about fundamentalist Islamism. Theories of abolition only make a minimal contribution, based on the reputation of the theorists, like Angela Davis.

I still believe in the abolition of prison, and of the state as well, but a bit less because that seems further off — perhaps in 20 years, 30 years, 50 years; I don't know. But perhaps if we keep achieving things, prisons could be closed because only alternatives to prison will remain. This has already begun, but without more work, it could be way off.

Abolitionists should still publish books, organize debates and challenge the governments. To take one example, the abolition of the death penalty in France happened due to the struggle of two groups and the arrival of Robert Badinter, a lawyer, politician and activist. When the left came to power in 1981, he was named Minister of Justice. He succeeded in passing the abolition of the death penalty despite the opposition of 62 percent of French people. It could only be a political decision.

The publication of [The Abolition of Prison](#) is a personal attempt to continue a fight that in France now seems to me forgotten and even outdated.

Jacques Lesage de La Haye is a formerly incarcerated psychoanalyst and the author of [The Abolition of Prison](#) and *La Guillotine du Sexe (Gender's Execution)*, among others. He broadcasted the radio show, *Ras les murs (Tear down the walls)* on Radio Libertaire and has been fighting prisons for more than 50 years.

Scott Branson (they/them) is a writer, translator, community organizer and teacher, based in North Carolina.

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