

Living with death

Author's argument against capital punishment is compassionate and thought-provoking, but could go deeper

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If you're going to put somebody to death for a crime, you'd want to be sure they'd committed it, right? Yet prisoners, guards, chaplains, lawyers and others who are acquainted with death row estimate that a sizable percentage of people there — perhaps 7 percent — never committed the

crime for which they are convicted. In a third of death-penalty convictions that have been overturned, there's been a signed confession by the accused. In 75 percent of those that have been reversed based on DNA evidence, the accused was "identified" by at least one eyewitness.

Those are some of the statistics you'll find in "13 Ways of Looking at the Death Penalty,"

"13 Ways of Looking at the Death Penalty"
by Mario Marazziti

by Italian activist Mario Marazziti. The book is best for dipping into rather than reading straight through — less an analysis than a series of chapters on different facets of the death penalty.

Marazziti, who projects a compassionate, reasonable tone, is at his best in writing about people such as the curator of the prison museum in Huntsville, Texas — the state with the largest prison population in the nation — who says, "My feelings about the death penalty are very mixed. But I guess it ... goes to the basics that we shouldn't be killing each other."

In a chapter about death-row inmates who have been exonerated, Marazziti interviews Curtis McCarty, who was on death row for 19 years: "I learned humility ... I do not hate. Anyone. If I did I would still be a prisoner."

In a chapter titled "Life Row," Marazziti talks with murder victims' relatives who

have come to believe that affirming life and putting people to death, whatever their crimes, are contradictory ideas. As Marietta Jaeger — whose 7-year-old daughter was kidnapped and murdered — puts it, "The loved ones who have been wrenched from our lives by violent crime deserve more beautiful, noble and honorable memorials than premeditated, barbaric, state-sanctioned killings." These chapters in particular give the sense of how capital punishment affects the people involved — the accused, the convicted, the prison workers, the families of victims.

Marazziti points out that retribution, as a reason for putting people to death, often becomes emotionally empty. The cost of a murder trial and of keeping someone on death row for years of appeals is

counterproductive, compared to a life sentence in prison. The experience of being on death row is often transformative for those who survive it, as they learn to value their life and the lives of others in ways they never did before their convictions.

The experience of overseeing the application of capital punishment often has transformative and unexpected effects.

Also thought-provoking are the chapters of statistics and facts, most of which could be useful in a game of trivia. Number of

countries that execute by beheading: One. Number of countries that execute for drug-related offenses: 13.

Least effective are the chapters about Marazziti's

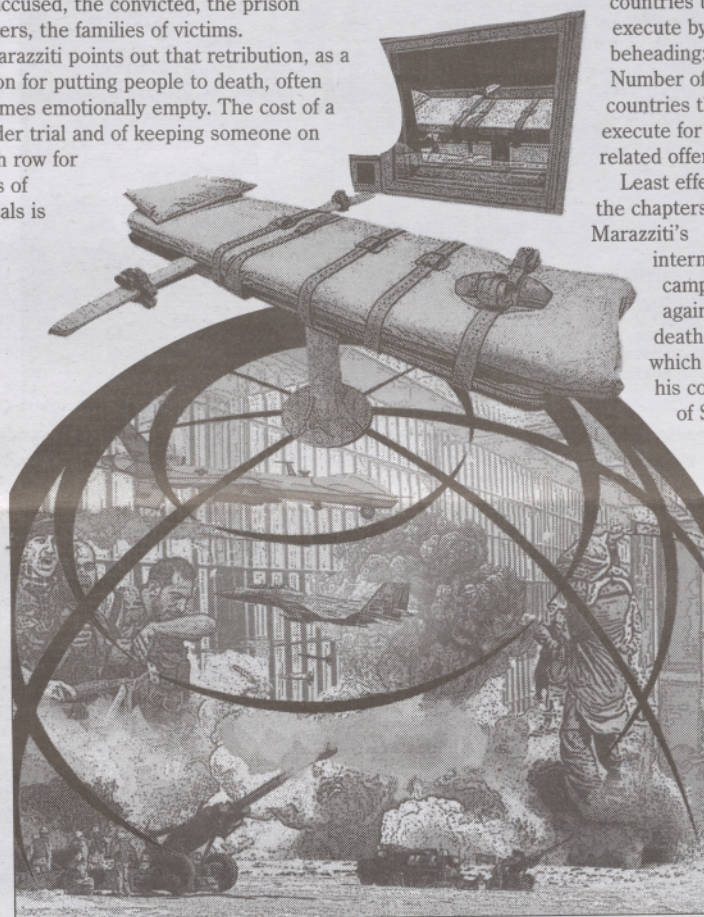
international campaign against the death penalty, which read as if his community of San

Eligido single-handedly built the movement, which actually has risen and fallen through most of the 20th century. Marazziti's practice of working on the level of governments and international diplomacy creates strange bedfellows for him, as when he lauds Uzbekistan, well known for its bloody repression of protesters, for eliminating the death penalty. He makes it sound as if the process of abolition is mainly a matter of petitions to governments, rather than a change in hearts and minds of populations.

The book leaves some questions unasked. Is life imprisonment without possibility of parole really a humane alternative, especially considering the amount of abuse and solitary confinement that takes place in U.S. prisons? Elimination of execution for drug-related crimes is a gain, of course, but what about elimination of the drug war? And if the president can sentence somebody to death by drone, doesn't that count as a kind of death penalty? Similarly, the author doesn't devote even one of his 13 chapters to exploring how intertwined the death penalty is with maintaining social control and repressing minorities and political oppositions.

The book suggests that nothing fundamental in our culture needs to change to eliminate the ultimate punishment; Marazziti's view is that abolition would be consistent with the values of our civilization. But underneath its advocacy of democracy and humanism, Western civilization has a much darker tradition that includes warfare, torture, repression and exploitation, which kill many more people than are put to death by lethal injection. One likely reason that the death penalty exists is that it is rooted in this darker tradition, which ultimately elevates social control, property rights and profit over human rights. Yes, the death penalty needs to be abolished. But it's only a symptom of a much larger problem.

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HOUSE KEYS, from page 8

made a major contribution to the recent history of political art, especially in California. He has been responsible for making Street Sheet a newspaper where art by and about homeless people has been published and become available to large audiences. His personal artwork has graced the pages of Street Sheet for many years. Several of Hazelwood's pieces appear in "House Keys Not Handcuffs," allowing readers a splendid sample of his work addressing homelessness, poverty and related themes.

As a curator, Hazelwood has assembled several exhibitions that reflected his exemplary commitment to using art in the long struggle for social change. "Hobos to Street People: Artists' Responses to Homelessness From the New Deal to the Present," which ran from 2009 to 2012, is

most closely linked to the themes in the current book. That exhibition, which was shown in various California venues, featured both iconic artists from the Depression era and contemporary artists dealing with the seemingly endless struggle against poverty.

In "House Keys Not Handcuffs," Hazelwood has gathered a stunning group of contributing artists, including some major figures in contemporary political art. Readers and viewers who follow visual arts will recognize names such as Eric Drooker, Jos Sances, Doug Minkler, Christine Hanlon, Hazelwood himself and others. Notably, works from several unidentified visual artists also appear in this book, as well as works from the San Francisco Print Collective and other sources.

Above all, the book's inclusion of all these provocative artworks reveals once again that the arts are an integral feature of the long struggle for social justice, not a mere cultural adjunct to organizing and concerted political action. Throughout history, visual

artists have mobilized their talents to support movements for social change. In the United States, for example, visual artists have played prominent roles in the civil rights movement, and, more recently, many have been extremely active in demonstrations supporting "Black Lives Matter" actions. Painters, muralists, poster artists, printmakers, photographers and others have also been deeply involved in the Chicano, Asian-American, Native American and other ethnic struggles, the gay and lesbian movement, the environmental movement, various anti-war resistance activities and every other progressive movement.

Eric Drooker's 2008 drawing for Street Sheet, reprinted in the book, is an excellent and unnerving example of the link between visual arts and the broader struggle for social justice. The artist's image of a menacing police officer standing in front of a building representing City Hall, with a club swinging in his hand, signifies the dubious

policy of governmental repression against the homeless. "House Keys Not Handcuffs" is a persuasive reminder of the tremendous work that remains to be done to close the gap between American ideals and American realities. Paul Boden ruefully notes at the book's conclusion that the government never stopped investing in housing; it merely stopped investing in housing for the poor. Boden and fellow homeless advocates know that there is a desperate need for federal funding for affordable housing. Beyond that, more fundamental systemic change is required to end homelessness and provide the educational, employment, health care and other services that a decent and humane society should guarantee to everyone. This book represents a small but valuable step in generating that consciousness.

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