



Book Review

James Gacek (2022) *Portable Prisons: Electronic Monitoring and the Creation of Carceral Territory*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press

Cristina Zackseski, Welliton Caixeta Maciel and Vinícius de Souza Assumpção
University of Brasília (UnB), Brazil

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In *Portable Prisons: Electronic Monitoring and the Creation of Carceral Territory*, James Gacek proposes that we live in a “carceral age.” The “carceral age” is characterized by surveillance, punishment, and control that extends beyond the walls of traditional incarceration spaces, such as prisons.

The notion of “carceral” used by Gacek has been previously employed by other authors, as mentioned in his literature review, who, reflecting the interdisciplinary dialogue between the fields of political geography, political economy, and criminology, have contemplated the concept beyond its connection with imprisonment. Within the book, the word “carceral” is generally used as an adjective, but sometimes as a noun or theoretical and empirical category.

Some gaps that remain in the research of these authors take center stage in Gacek’s book (2022) and appear in the questions that guide his research: 1) how does the “carceral” connect to those who live outside conventional incarceration spaces? 2) how do aspects of this “carceral” invade the private space of the offender’s home? 3) how does the “carceral” reshape conceptions of citizenship? and 4) can we resist further privatization of criminal justice or future incarceration campaigns?

Gacek’s goal is to reveal and explore the presence, proliferation, and expansion of electronic monitoring (EM) in Scotland. The United Kingdom has provided a fertile ground for research on probation and electronic surveillance, including EM. Gacek’s innovation is to address the issue of EM not from a purely normative and institutional perspective but with an ethnographic approach, exploring EM in a series of surveillance paths and networks, including people and places in changing strategies and measures of sanctions and penalties in the community. Therefore, for Gacek’s analysis, it was essential to consider the experience of EM “operators” (state officials who monitor those wearing electronic anklets) and “users” (the individuals who wear electronic anklets pursuant to court orders)—particularly how the latter manage their daily lives and how EM affects their movements in restricted spaces.

Gacek identifies a research gap in this “surveillance from below” within the field of “geographies of everyday life” (p. 4), which is where his study lies. Gacek conceives of “carceral territory” as an appropriate framework of reference to contextualize



EM as a form of punishment for an offender in the community (Chapter 2). In other words, he broadens the understanding of the concept of “carceral territory” by considering the politics and dynamics of mobility, allowing for a broader consideration of how prisons and territory coexist with EM in Scotland and how the privatization of criminal justice has transformed citizens into “carceral subjects.”

Portable Prisons: Electronic Monitoring and the Creation of Carceral Territory is divided into seven chapters, with the first three dedicated to placing political geography in dialogue with criminology. Gacek employs qualitative research methods and presents and discusses his results in Chapters 4–6. Chapter 7, the book’s final chapter, reviews the significance of the concept of “carceral territory.”

Gacek’s research was carried out in two phases: observations at the National Electronic Monitoring Center in Glasgow, followed by semi-structured interviews with ten detainees at Her Majesty’s Prison in Edinburgh who had returned to the Scottish Prison Service after violating EM rules (Home Detention Curfew). Gacek adopted the multi-situated approach of George Marcus (1998) and employed a hybrid design using institutional ethnography, mobile methods, and “ethnographic commuting.” The mobile interviewing methods, mobile micro ethnographic interviews, were applied with observations. Gacek coded his field notes and interview transcripts to facilitate the analysis, similar to Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996) model. Considering his own social location, Gacek claims to have used the self-reflective sociology of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992).

The author admits the limitations in conducting the research and analysis of the data, acknowledging how his life trajectory and experiences as a young, White, Canadian, heterosexual male without a criminal record and not under state supervision influenced his epistemological point of view. Gacek considers his perspective as a researcher and that of his participants, drawing on the studies of Berger and Luckman (1966) and Bogdan and Taylor (1998).

Gacek observes that EM began in the 1990s and gained popularity, giving rise to a new category of penalized individuals and offering support for research conducted by criminologists such as Mike Nellis, Kristel Beyens, and Dan Kaminski (2013). For Gacek, prison is not restricted to imprisonment and surveillance because punishment and control extend beyond traditional incarceration spaces and manages poverty and increases marginalization. The author highlights that EM cannot be viewed as a neutral technology because of its social, economic, and political dimensions and implications. In other words, although many countries have implemented EM because it can help reduce the prison population and incarceration and recidivism rates, Gacek’s findings and the sources he cites affirm that this is not necessarily the case. In fact, EM reflects criminal policy agendas based on tougher approaches to crime.

Gacek recognizes that while the proponents of EM consider it an innovative approach to punishment, this is not the case in practice. Still, and there has been growing interest in surveillance and control technologies, as well as alternatives to incarceration, notably for serving sentences in the community. Gacek’s choice of Scotland as the site of his research is particularly important because of the unique relationship between the Scottish Government and private security companies and because Scotland is generally considered progressive, with a more humanitarian and rehabilitation-focused penal orientation.

One of Gacek’s main criticisms centers on the structure of the prison state. As Gacek argues, the Scottish power to imprison has been modernized and made more palatable: a kind of “civilized” criminal language is used in Scottish culture and criminal policy, capable of refining control techniques rather than reducing the use of prison. According to Gacek, the application of “carceral territory” is designed to normalize experiences of surveillance and make “civilizing” punishment more palatable to deflect criticism and reduce resistance.

Although *Portable Prisons: Electronic Monitoring and the Creation of Carceral Territory* focuses on Scotland, Gacek’s work should be enthusiastically welcomed by Brazilian critical criminologists, especially at a time when EM is being used in all 27 federative units and there are more than 80,000 people under some level of monitoring in Brazil. Gacek should be commended for his interdisciplinary approach to the subject of study and contributions to the broad dialogue between researchers and research centers that prioritize international training and comparative research based on different perspectives and empirical approaches.

Correspondence:

Cristina Zackseski, Associate Professor at the Law School of the University of Brasília (UnB), Federal District, Brazil. cristinazbr@gmail.com

Welliton Caixeta Maciel, PhD candidate in Law, State and Constitution at the University of Brasília (UnB), Federal District, Brazil. wellitonmaciel@gmail.com

Vinícius de Souza Assumpção, PhD candidate in Law, State and Constitution at the University of Brasília (UnB), Federal District, Brazil. viniciusassumpcao@outlook.com

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