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# Silently Silenced

ESSAYS ON THE CREATION OF ACQUIESCENCE  
IN MODERN SOCIETY

Thomas Mathiesen

WATERSIDE PRESS



# Silently Silenced

Essays on the  
Creation of Acquiescence in Modern Society

**Thomas Mathiesen**

**Thomas Mathiesen** is Professor of Sociology of Law at the University of Oslo. He was one of the founders of the Norwegian Association for Penal Reform. His many publications include *The Defences of the Weak* (Tavistock, 1965), *The Politics of Abolition* (Martin Robertson, 1974) and *Prison On Trial* (Second English edition, Waterside Press, 2000). Earlier versions of *Silently Silenced* have appeared in Norwegian, Swedish and German. This is the first English edition.

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## Preface to the English Edition, 2004

This book contains a number of essays on the general theme of silent and unnoticed political silencing which I largely wrote during 1977-1978. Most of the essays were collected in book form in Norwegian and published by Pax Forlag in 1978. At the beginning of the 1980s, the book was translated and published in Swedish and German. I translated the book myself into English in 1981, adding one essay that had not appeared in the Norwegian version, but left the manuscript unpublished in a drawer. I was too preoccupied with other matters.

However, the theme of how - silently and unnoticed - people are brought to silence, especially political silence, continued to haunt me over the years and decades. It seemed and seems to me to be a process which penetrates social life, notably also political life, in all its forms, certainly also in other Western societies like ours which have freedom of expression and democracy on the agenda. So, in 2003 I took the manuscript out of the drawer and had it typed into a computer. Thanks are due to Helga Smári Hanssen and Magnus Gommerud Nielsen for their painstaking accuracy.

The manuscript remained in my computer for a while. Then something happened in my own life which placed the process of silent silencing in bold relief for me. It was intensely political and intensely personal. I had never thought that silent silencing could have such a force in a person's life. In fact, I am silenced to the extent that I cannot write about it even now: maybe later if I live to be old enough. But I can say that what happened concerns the heart of what in Norwegian is called the 'care system', or 'aid system' (*hjelpesystemet*). Ideally, the 'care system' is a part of the welfare system, and should in theory in different ways and through various institutions care for, help, support and provide treatment for people in various forms of distress, from psychiatric disorders to child welfare. However, in so far as it actually exists and is not a just a myth with symbolic functions for the welfare state, the 'care system' is *structured* in such a way that it silently and suavely makes clients and patients fall into silence, keep quiet, hold back their criticism, beware of protest, go along, be acquiescent and strategic.

But what happened at least jolted me to get the old manuscript up before me on the computer screen. It was a kind of vindication of the utmost importance of my concern with the topic.

This English translation includes all of the original essays which I had translated back in 1981. I have been tempted to augment, adapt and change the essays in line with events and developments since then. To a fair extent I have done so. The basic theoretical conceptualisation, with the emphasis on 'silent silencing', is new - in the original Norwegian version I discussed the issues in other terms that I now find less apt. Furthermore, in some of the essays I have deleted obviously obsolete material and added obviously clarifying passages, and also made a number of other changes. Other essays, however, largely remain as they were, the reason being that I think they are still relevant as they stand,

only perhaps more so. But throughout the book I have added a large number of updating notes, many of them quite extensive, in which relevant theorising and empirical material as of 2004 are added to the essays. Taken as a whole and including the extensive notes, which I invite the reader to study, the book is in this way updated into our own century. Also, at the end of the book I have added two relatively short new essays, written in 2004 (*Chapter 8* and *Chapter 9*).

Let me be very clear on this: what follows is not at all a denial of the existence and, indeed, the expansion of types of repression which are very 'loud', visible and physical rather than silent and quiet. If I had denied that, I would have gone against much of what I have been working on, academically and politically, through many decades. Prison figures are soaring in many Western countries, police forces are expanding in terms of number of personnel as well as in terms of technological equipment and areas of control in society. The 'war against terrorism', which started back in the 1990s but acquired new impetus after 11 September 2001, has been loud indeed, with bombs and killings. It has involved vastly increased police and military activity, which in turn has had the erosion and downright downfall of civil rights in its wake.

This, however, does not detract from the importance of the silent methods of silencing people. Hidden in the deep structure of the expanding prison systems across the Western world various forms of silent and quiet structural forces are in operation, silencing criticism and protest against the prevailing expansive policy. The same goes for the police. Inside both of these sectors of criminal policy, there is uneasiness about what is going on, but the uneasiness rarely comes out, or, alternatively it is subdued to such an extent that thinking is more or less totally changed. And after September 11, with the stepping up of the war against terrorism, voices claiming that alternative roads against terrorism should be used, were clamped down upon – such as the idea of an alternative 'war' against *international poverty* which fosters terrorism. For example, at university campuses in the USA, criticisms of the way in which the war on terrorism was waged, were stifled. Observers from elsewhere have testified that critically oriented academics in the USA, who wanted alternative roads and who believed that the war against terrorism only enhanced terrorist activity, didn't dare to speak up, at least not loudly, or more or less changed their minds. To speak up would be more or less tantamount to treason. The American public system is an open and critical one, but apparently there are limits. The important thing here is that the methods of repressing alternative opinion were not noisy police methods and prison. Rather, they were largely silent ideological methods, including subtle forms of censorship. Deep inside academic workplaces across the nation, structural forces – especially power relations - shut many people's mouths.

The same thing happened after the war against Iraq got under way in 2003. Right before the onset of the war, there were loud international protests, also in the USA, and there have been protests throughout the war. But suave, silent and quiet methods of silencing protests against the use of the formidable war machine were employed to the utmost, in the media and in other ways. President George W. Bush's various sudden appearances among the American soldiers in the Iraq war,

serving turkey on Thanksgiving Day and speaking as a tough leader on board a huge American warship, are cases in point, though in the light of Bush's peculiar kind of charisma they were not among the most silent and quiet ones. Bush's appearances were widely televised, bringing the message home not only to officers and rank and file soldiers, but to the public in general. It would require careful media research to find the specific effects of such appearances. But they were used as part of a vast battery of even more subtle ways, a wide range of censorious methods such as appeals to patriotism and duty to the nation as well as the importance of freedom and democracy which were presumably defended in the war, and so on. In line with this (and though other factors may also have been involved) the American opinion surveys for a long time showed a majority of the population supporting the war. On 20 March 2003, right after the military attack, 67 per cent approved of the job Bush was doing as President. Following the fall of Baghdad 73 per cent approved. Only then did the approval ratings start to decline, after among other things increasing coalition casualties and less victorious military results, down to 55 per cent in August 2003, a temporary boost but only back to 59 per cent after the capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2003, and further down to 51 per cent in March 2004 (CBS News Polls, March 2004). Later the approval ratings partly became still lower, the majority at times turning into a minority. The development has been similar in Britain, the other major country involved (and of course different in the other large countries of Europe, critical as they were from the outset). But we should note very clearly indeed that the minorities in the USA and Britain which in various ways supported the war and the occupation were still very substantial – despite casualties, exposure of the Americans' use of torture and so on, and, in the end, Bush won the election in November 2004.

In short, silent ways of silencing are often used in defence of the loud and noisy ones. Also, they may interact with the loud and noisy ones, and go hand in hand with them. Today, in this day and age of prisons, police and military activity (Bob Woodward has reported that when the war against Iraq was first contemplated in the late autumn of 2001, the United States' Defense Department had 68 – *sixty eight* – secret war and other contingency plans worldwide!) we tend to forget the silent ways of silencing in the clamour of the noisy ones. We need to be forcefully reminded of silent silencing in order to understand our political situation as a totality.

Silent ways of silencing are relevant today not only on the highest political level as mentioned above. The signals from this level trickle down to the lower levels of administration in the sector in question, and become authoritative signs to be followed there. As such authoritative signs, they appear and silence silently and 'as a matter of course', without crude methods such as batons and prisons: The political signals are simply to be taken for granted, and any doubts are to be set aside. As implied already, silent silencing is vitally important to the tens of thousands of people working in various branches of public administration – be they social workers, lawyers, health care workers, economists or general administrators. To give but one little example: In a Norwegian questionnaire study of lawyers working in public administration, 80 per cent of the respondents replied that 'correct law' 'at times' or more frequently has to give way to 'politically oriented assessments'. The

feeling that politics overruns the work of lawyer as lawyers, and a rather resigned acceptance of this, is apparently widespread in public administration. Silent ways of silencing are equally important in the private sector, which is expanding in the Western world. Also here one little example: In a study of private court cases some years ago, I observed an insurance company suing a woman for fraud. She had twice lost a suitcase when travelling, and had claimed insurance both times. The company's lawyer tried to convince the court that the woman, who used high heeled shoes and had a rather dashing appearance, was an untrustworthy person. The company lost the case. When I called the lawyer afterwards, he forcefully stated that the case should never have been raised, and that it was an unreasonable and discriminating charge, but that he had simply done what was expected of him and that he had argued as best he could despite his doubts.

This book is perhaps especially relevant to silent silencing as it appears and operates over and against the wide range of professional and semi-professional civil servants and other workers in public administration and the private sector, including penal institutions of various kinds. An interest in punishment and penal institutions lies behind many of the theoretical notions presented in this book, and is the basis of many of the examples.

Please note clearly that what follows is not a denial of the fact that open criticism and protest exist in modern society. The last years' great protests and demonstrations against aspects of globalisation constitute a case in point. It may even be argued, as the Swedish researcher Stellan Vinthagen has done, that the globalisation - and peace movements - which are mobilised throughout the world today may involve more people than protests and demonstrations did during the 1970s. If I had denied that vocal criticism and protest exists, I would again have gone fundamentally against much of what I have been doing myself during most of my adult life, in areas such as criminal policy and political control. I am fundamentally an optimist as far as criticism and change go. What follows is, however, an ideal-type emphasis on the other side of the coin, the (silent) repression of protest, also necessary in order to understand our society.

**Thomas Mathiesen**  
Oslo, November 2004

# Silently Silenced

Essays on the Creation of Acquiescence in Modern Society

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# 1 Introduction



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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The Scandinavian societies have recently witnessed an increased sharpening of political conflicts and of 'the political climate' generally. A similar development has taken place on the European scene in general. A rather large category of politically active people on the 'Left' are being exposed to political repression. A wide circle of radical and critical groups is included.

To the Left, this is not necessarily a bad sign. The sharpening of political conflicts and measures means that the 'Left' has become politically more dangerous. Otherwise, it would not have to be persecuted.

However, two conditions are of considerable significance for the 'Left' if this development is not to *become* a bad sign. In the first place, it is important to *understand* the main features of the political repression which we are exposed to. Secondly, it is important to *organize* in order to meet the repression—against the background of an understanding of it.

This book deals with these two general themes. The book is a collection of essays. With the exception of this introduction, the chapters constitute essays which I have written on the two themes over the years, and which I have published in various professional and political contexts. As a consequence, the chapters are somewhat loosely knit together. On the other hand I hope that, taken together, they throw light on a relatively broad range of problems.

The two main themes of the collection—the understanding of the political repression which we are exposed to, and the significance of organizing in relation to it—need some further introductory comments.

By political 'silencing' is here meant attitudinal and behavioural subordination to political standpoints which are regarded as authoritative in the society or the group, so that acquiescence follows and given standpoints are accepted without protest. 'Silence' in this sense is a continuum, from silence despite disagreement (grudgingly you go along) to silence as an accepting attitude (you accept the standpoint, not even noticing that silencing has taken place, or at least not taking the fact of silencing seriously).

By 'silent' political silencing is meant that the bringing on of acquiescence 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. In other words, a number of subtly different qualities are brought into the concept. Rather than going further into definitions, the subtle nuances will hopefully evolve from the text below.

In political debate and struggle, it is often taken for granted that in our late capitalist societies, the physical means of coercion which are the monopoly of the state—like the police and the prisons—constitute the most important methods of political silencing.

Obviously, the presence of physical means of coercion is significant, and quite obviously a strengthening—in terms of increased resources and

personnel—is currently taking place, for example of the police and the prisons in many countries.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, however, a one-sided emphasis on the physical means of coercion leads to a simplistic political analysis, and thereby to the danger of a poorly formulated political strategy. We are not only confronted by a state apparatus of physical coercion. Over and above this apparatus, which certainly may be and often is mobilised, we have a non-physical, non-violent—more or less invisible—type of political silencing to struggle against. The present book deals with this invisible or silent political silencing, which also constitutes a context for the use of the apparatus of physical coercion.

Let us first determine more closely the characteristics of the invisible, silent political silencing.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SILENT SILENCING

### **It is structural**

The first distinguishing characteristic of the invisible, silent silencing—which sets it apart from the use of physical means of coercion—is that it is *structural*. It is the participants' position in a structure, in the relatively permanent relationship between units, which is silencing. A child welfare authority, for example, is silencing through structure—imagine the parent who refrains from criticizing the authority because criticism might make institutionalisation of the child, which is the issue, more likely. A series of similar examples from the Norwegian care system could be given. Because of your position in the structure, you have to act strategically—which means to keep quiet.

Structures are not immediately observable, but are derived from observations. The total pressure which stems from one's position in a structure thereby becomes correspondingly unobservable. In economic and political theory it has been emphasised that the basic structure of the capitalist mode of production itself results in invisible coercion of this kind. And not only in relation to the working class by the fact that its members have to sell their labour in order to survive as workers, but also in relation to the capitalist class by the fact that its members have to continue their maximising of profit in production in order to survive as capitalists.<sup>2</sup> But it is not 'only' the basic structure of the capitalist mode of production which has this invisible coercive character; so do structures deposited 'above' this basic structure, straight into the daily life of the majority of us.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the case in 1978, when this book first appeared. But it was only the beginning. As of 2004 a great strengthening of the state's physical means of coercion has taken place, including a vastly increased use of police and prisons. Though there are variations across the Western world, the increased reliance on prison has taken place nearly everywhere. Contrary to popular opinion, it is to a large extent unrelated to the official crime rate. Rather, it is a matter of political choice. The leading countries are, of course, the US and Russia. The increased use of methods of physical coercion, however, does not detract from the importance of the silent kind of silencing discussed in this book.

<sup>2</sup> See Terje Rød Larsen, 'Makt og herredømme' (Power and Domination), *Sosiologi i dag* 1975.