

Introduction

Just when the experience of imprisonment is becoming a normal pathway for significant portions of the population, the pathways of knowledge that made the experience of incarceration visible are closing.... The whole question of the prison social order appears distant from the concerns of both social science and prison management.... Inmate society, represented centrally in the discourses of both prison sociology and prison literature, seems to be disappearing from public view. (Simon 2000: 285–302)

Observational studies depicting the everyday world of inmates all but vanished just as the United States was settling into mass incarceration and other advanced countries were gingerly clearing their own road towards the penal state. *The ethnography of the prison thus went into eclipse at the very moment when it was most urgently needed* on both scientific and political grounds. (Wacquant 2002: 385)

Imprisonment is the ultimate sanction of the state in nearly all Western nations, and its use in the developed world has risen considerably in recent years (Walmsley 2005). The prison occupies a central place in the politics of crime control and has become a normal social destination for growing numbers of citizens. At the same time, it has retreated from public view and academic scrutiny (Bosworth and Sparks 2000; Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002; Liebling 2004). Prisons are no longer built in city centres, as looming warnings of the consequences of crime, but on secluded sites, removed from the conurbations that feed them (Pratt 2002). Meanwhile, their innards have become increasingly obscured. While the aims and techniques of imprisonment have changed significantly, their social outcomes and effects are little known. At a moment when it seems essential to understand what imprisonment is and what it does, research into the prison's interior life has become somewhat scarce. In the terms of one prominent scholar, prison ethnography—in the United States (US) at least—is 'not merely an endangered species but a virtually extinct one' (Wacquant 2002: 385).

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Observers of the penological scene in the US have identified a number of reasons for the decline in academic interest: low levels of government research funding; the practical demands of intensive fieldwork; the unappealing nature of the research site; the stringency of ethical approval committees within universities; and the comparative ease and kudos of conducting research on related issues, such as sentencing patterns and prison population trends (Simon 2000; Wacquant 2002). Prisons have become less enthusiastic research partners, in some countries at least. In the early years of prison sociology, knowledge of the prison's internal social dynamics was considered vital for the development of a rational and effective penal system. Many prison scholars worked within or alongside the system, sometimes as psychologists, counsellors, or classification sociologists within the establishments they wrote about (Pollock 1997; Wacquant 2002). Donald Clemmer, for example, conducted his fieldwork for *The Prison Community* (1940) while employed at Menard prison, and went on to be the director of the District of Columbia's prison system and the head of the American Correctional Association (Simon 2000). Gresham Sykes gained access to Trenton prison, the subject of *The Society of Captives* (1958), by developing a close relationship with its warden, whom he had asked to contribute to his criminology course at Princeton (Sykes 1995). The classic studies that resulted—focusing on issues such as inmate roles, norms, and leadership—were highly influential in informing attempts by prison officials to design rehabilitative interventions and maintain order.

In many jurisdictions, particularly the US, there is now less interest in governing prisons through these social and interpersonal mechanisms. In some states, and in many prisons, reformist ambitions are negligible.¹ Relationships between staff and prisoners are minimal. Officers serve mainly as enforcers of compliance or as faceless instruments in sterile regimes that deliver services with little interaction or humanity. In such post-social prisons (DiIulio 1987), there is little to gain and much more to lose in granting access to researchers. Where prisoners are merely contained or

¹ It is important to note that prison philosophies and conditions are extremely varied within the US. Much of the writing about American prisons has been based on the particularities of the Californian prison system, which is notoriously squalid, overcrowded, and violent.

controlled, their values and relationships are of little concern to prison officials. In the UK—and elsewhere in Europe—interest in the prison's social world has not been abandoned. Officers are encouraged to build relationships with prisoners, in the interests of decency, safety, and security. Attempts are made to regulate prison cultures and regimes so as to diminish some of the burdens of incarceration and reduce conflict between prisoners. The huge 'warehouse' prisons described by Irwin (2005) and Wacquant (2002), in which prisoners are primarily seen as toxic units to be stored and managed at minimum cost, are not (yet) a reality. Nonetheless, while managerial data about the 'performance' of prisons are plentiful, there is much less sociological knowledge about their ordinary social characteristics: their arrangements of power, their social structures, the intricacies of their cultures, their mundane pains, and the behaviours and adaptations that they generate.

Based on a case study of an English prison, HMP Wellingborough, this book provides an account of these rather neglected dimensions of modern imprisonment. It seeks to expose and dissect the prison's social anatomy, to illuminate the experiences that occur within it, and to relate these both to prisoners' prior lives and to the aims, means, and conditions of the institution—in this case, a medium-security or Category-C men's training prison, known colloquially as a 'Cat-C'. In its focus and method, the book aims to revisit and help renew the tradition of prison ethnography (see *inter alia*, Clemmer 1940/1958; Sykes 1958; Morris and Morris 1963; Mathieson 1965; Jacobs 1977; Carroll 1974; King and Elliott 1977; Genders and Player 1995; Owen 1998). Patched together, the studies within this tradition constitute a bright but ragged backdrop of knowledge: rich, colourful and highly elaborate in places, yet patchy, uneven and with some conspicuous holes. Most have focused on a single establishment, with depth of analysis and richness of detail taking precedence over breadth. Generalizability has been willingly sacrificed for an approach that can pierce the skin of the institution, penetrate official descriptions, and show the interconnections between apparently discrete elements of the prison's social structure. These studies have mapped the penal terrain selectively and sporadically, making meaningful comparisons between them problematic. Given that they span different eras and contexts, the variations in their findings are unsurprising. Yet there are also consistencies in

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their findings—recurring social patterns and tendencies. There is no such thing as ‘*The Prison*’ (Sparks *et al.* 1996) but, as early theorists argued, imprisonment entails some more-or-less ‘intrinsic’ pains, deprivations and conditions, and these factors influence the prison’s culture and social organization.

The degree to which these in-built properties of imprisonment mould the prison experience is one of the key debates of the discipline, and remains an empirical question. Many early studies, exemplified by Sykes’s (1958) *The Society of Captives* (but also McCorkle and Korn 1954; Garabedian 1963), presupposed the primacy of the institution in structuring the world within it. By the 1950s, the prevailing assumption of the discipline was that phenomena such as the prisoner hierarchy and interpersonal loyalty were outcomes of the inherent qualities of confinement and ‘products of official and unofficial administrative policies’ (Cressey 1958: viii). Sykes argued that the ‘inmate code’ arose as a collective response to the deprivations of imprisonment, which it alleviated through the promotion of mutual aid, loyalty, and collective self-esteem. Other scholars demonstrated that the nature of this code depended on the particular goals of the institution (Grusky 1959; Berk 1966; Street *et al.* 1966). Where prisons were treatment-oriented rather than custody-oriented, the values and behaviour of prisoners were less ‘oppositional’. In such perspectives—labelled ‘deprivation’ or ‘indigenous’ theories—the prison was seen as a virtually self-contained system whose social properties required little reference to the external community.

Later studies did not dispute that the prisoner society was a ‘response to problems of imprisonment’, but questioned ‘the emphasis given to the notion that solutions to these problems are found within the prison’ (Irwin and Cressey 1962: 145). Prisoner culture was instead seen as a version of criminal cultures and sub-cultural norms ‘imported’ from the outside community. In *Stateville*, Jacobs (1977) showed how Chicago gangs had transplanted patterns of leadership, loyalty, and conflict virtually wholesale into the prison environment. The prison’s social structures *reproduced* those of the urban ghetto, its code reflected the values of the street, and its frustrations were mitigated by the psychological, social, and material support provided by the gangs rather than a collective code of behaviour. Management ideologies and prisoner expectations were likewise shaped by broad social currents, shifts in political culture, and legal interventions into the prison.

The prison walls were porous and permeable, and institutions could not insulate themselves from these external forces.²

The importation–deprivation framework can be related to *individual adaptations* to imprisonment as well as the prison's *culture and social structure* (and the two are of course connected). Conceptions of the prison as an organization cut-off from the outside world assumed a particular model of prisoner socialization. Individuals entered an institution of domination, whose official aims involved refashioning their identities and whose informal social mechanisms remoulded them almost irresistibly into new and unfamiliar roles and relationships. Individuals did not capitulate entirely to these processes (Goffman 1961). But it was taken for granted that, in their adjustments to imprisonment, prisoners were subordinate to the social and institutional forces to which they were subjected. To adjust and survive meant acting in new ways, indeed, being a different kind of person. The social roles available to prisoners were defined by the needs of the environment: the need to cope with sexual and material deprivation, to recapture social status, to claw back some autonomy and to ensure one's personal safety. These roles were conveyed by labels that were allocated to prisoners by their peers, and which structured their subsequent behaviour (Garabedian 1963). As Sykes (1995: 78) explained, his experience in the army had shaped a belief that: 'for better or worse, people often became whatever they were assigned, regardless of personal proclivities or skills'.³

² Nor can we consider the world *outside* the prison to be isolated from the cultural and 'collateral effects' of incarceration. Some scholars have recently noted that the era of mass incarceration in the US turns the prison into a 'shaping institution for whole sectors of the population' (Garland 2001: 2). Attention should be focused not only on how external forces *flow in*, nor how the prison impacts upon the individuals within it, but how its effects *flow out*: the social consequences that result when some populations and communities are so ravaged by the 'war on crime' and its penal consequences. Others have argued that divisions between the prison and the ghetto have been virtually obliterated (Wacquant 2000; 2001). The prison and its culture are neither appendages to nor reflections of a separate world outside. Rather, they form part of a 'carceral continuum' (Wacquant 2001) that regulates a social underclass that is superfluous to the neo-liberal economy. In such readings, as the cultures of the prison and the street mesh and merge, questions about their relative impact on each other become almost obsolete.

³ Influential studies in social psychology, in particular Milgram's (1963) research on obedience to authority and the Stanford Prison Experiment (see Haney *et al.* 1973), added weight to the notion that individuals easily submitted to institutional roles and authority.

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Variations in the degree to which prisoners took up the values of their new world could be explained by factors such as the amount of time they were exposed to them and the relative hardship of the environment (Wheeler 1961; and see Akers *et al.* 1977; Thomas 1977). Why prisoners with similar carceral histories occupied different roles—that is, why certain prisoners adopted some roles rather than others—was harder to explain.

Importation theories could account far more adequately for the distinctions between prisoners' adaptations, by pointing to the role of personal histories, prior orientations, and future expectations in shaping prison conduct. Pre-prison identities were not dispossessed completely by the institution, or entirely surrendered. They were drawn upon to navigate its demands. The work of Irwin and Cressey (1962) and Jacobs (1974; 1977) also gave some sense of how imprisonment was subjectively experienced: how social positions and cultural assumptions informed different perceptions of the prison environment e.g. the status of officers, the value of institutional rewards, and so on. Yet the degree to which prisoners acted knowingly, strategically, and self-consciously in adopting their roles was not always apparent in such work. Although early importation studies disputed the implication that prisoners were blank slates upon which institutional roles could be inscribed, at times they too presented prisoners rather facelessly, as carriers of external roles and cultures that seemed just to *flow through* them into the prison.⁴ The place of *agency*—the capacity of individuals actively to shape their environment—in the adaptive process remained elusive. Likewise, the lived realities of imprisonment were not often illuminated.

The subjective experience of imprisonment is now better documented, in prisoner autobiographies (e.g. Boyle 1977, 1984; Shannon and Morgan 1996; Smith 2004; James 2003; Warr 2008) and in academic studies (e.g. Cohen and Taylor 1972; Toch 1992; Medlicott 2001; Jewkes 2005a, 2005b; Harvey 2007). Such accounts have provided considerable insight into how incarceration feels and how prisoners interpret and negotiate its terms and obligations. They have shown how acts that are apparently trivial can represent assertions of selfhood (Bosworth 1999; McEvoy 2001), and how seemingly irrational practices have meaning to the

⁴ It is instructive in this respect that these were labelled theories of 'cultural drift' (see Jacobs 1974).

people who engage in them (Carrabine 2004). However, few studies have provided a joined-up analysis of the connections between individual acts and experiences and the institutional contexts where they occur (although see Jewkes 2002 and Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005). Put more simply, there is little systematic knowledge of how prisoners actively live out their sentences within the constraints of the environment.

This book seeks to address the issues outlined above. First, it is a book about *power*: how it is deployed by the institution, and with what ambitions and techniques; and how it is experienced and reconstituted by prisoners in their everyday practices. It asks what attitudes, behaviours, and relationships the prison both promotes and inhibits, what it rewards and punishes, with what logic, and through which means. It provides an empirical analysis of what Liebling (2004: 484) has called ‘the largely undocumented penal project of the last decade or so: to eliminate residual resistance and secure a new mode of compliance’. But it does not assume that this mission has been successful or that prisoners are rendered docile by the strategies of the institution, potent though they are. In this respect, it explores the ‘dialectic of control’ (Giddens 1984: 16; and see Sparks *et al.* 1996) between the institution and its inhabitants: the perpetual struggle that is the prison’s essential dynamic. It is the struggle by one side for order and compliance and by the other for autonomy, influence, and self-assertion.

Second, the book is a study of *adaptation*. It explores how the behaviour of individual prisoners is shaped both by institutional imperatives and by the values and orientations that they carry into the sentence. It shows how, within the terms delimited by the institution, prisoners reflect on their circumstances, evaluate their options, and make decisions about how to ‘do time’ in ways that relate to their pre-prison characteristics.⁵ Here, the book seeks to

⁵ It is important to emphasize that agency is not the same as autonomy or free will. As conceived in recent social theory (for example, Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1972), agency is structurally constituted, such that it tends to reproduce existing structures, particularly in its pre-conscious forms (what Giddens labels ‘practical consciousness’ and Bourdieu calls the ‘habitus’) but always holds the possibility of transforming them or finding ‘creative’ ways of existing within them. There is little work on imprisonment that shows how, in their purposeful actions and particular dispositions, prisoners both reproduce and transform the social structures of the prison *and* the outside community.

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move beyond the stale impasse of the importation–deprivation debate to provide a more nuanced description than those that can be offered in quantitative studies of prison culture and conduct. It illustrates in some detail *how* these processes work: how structural, institutional, and external determinants interrelate in practice, and do so differently for different individuals, creating a variety of adaptive outcomes. It is because prisoners confront the penal regime with such a range of backgrounds, expectations and sentence conditions that they experience and adjust to different pains and deprivations, contest different aspects of the regime, discard and maintain their identities to different extents, and develop different kinds of social relationships.

The *social world* that comprises these adaptations is the book's third main focus. Here, the framework of the study is most apparent. In analysing the prison's hierarchy, social relationships, and everyday culture, it takes into account three main influences: first, the prison's structural imperatives i.e. its more or less inherent conditions and the social requirements these produce; second, its institutional culture, function, and policies, e.g. its role as a Cat-C prison, its ethos, practices, and techniques, and the frustrations and pressures that these generate; and, third, the ideologies and inclinations that are imported into the environment by prisoners. These include views on masculinity and status, sentiments of shame and defiance, and histories of addiction and power that are themselves structured by biographical, social and criminal experiences. The ambition is to provide a comprehensive sociological analysis of the prison. Like the studies from which it has drawn most inspiration, the analysis also illustrates the links between the prison's social components. These include its mundane system of norms, its patterns of leadership, loyalty, and affiliation, its tendencies towards order and disorder, and its institutional characteristics. The prison is not a self-contained social domain in the manner that some of its early students suggested, but it remains fruitful to think of it, to some degree, as an 'organic inter-related whole' (Clemmer 1958: 322). Without seeing its elements in reference to each other, the day-to-day exploits of the landings become free-floating acts disembodied from their wider context and determinants.

A further aim of the book is to capture a particular moment in penal history, to provide a sociological snapshot of the prison in what could be considered the 'managerial' or 'late-modern' era

(but does not necessarily require such epochal labels). Institutional politics, culture, and power relations are worthy of analysis in themselves. Prisons are complex, conflicted organizations, whose dynamics are rarely exposed, even though they reveal important dimensions of state practice and authority. Their specific organizational qualities also mould the world of prisoners, and have created some distinctive new pains and frustrations. The book explicitly relates prison social life to the terms of contemporary imprisonment. In effect, it asks how shifts in the penal and political climate have been translated into a particular arrangement of policies and practices, and explores how these arrangements serve to condition the new society of captives. As Carrabine (2000; 2004) and Sparks *et al.* (1996) have noted, few studies have successfully traced this relationship between the prison's political logic—what it is *for*—and its internal dynamics—what it is *like* (although see Jacobs 1977; Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2005). In doing so, this book provides a ground-level analysis that should complement recent accounts of modern penalty (Garland and Young 1983; Garland 2001a; Pratt 2002; Wacquant 2000; 2001a, 2001b) and more specific descriptions of the history and moral performance of Her Majesty's Prison Service (Liebling 2004).⁶

It is here that the book commences, in Chapter 2, where the scene is set for the empirical analysis that follows. The chapter outlines the broad trends that have shaped modern imprisonment in recent decades, developments in the Prison Service since the early 1990s, and the history and functions of HMP Wellingborough, an establishment that can be seen as a typical prison of its kind. Through these descriptions, the chapter discusses shifts in the aims, means and strategies of imprisonment, and the manner in which these shifts framed the priorities and concerns of the prison under study.

Chapter 3 documents in more detail the culture and ethos of HMP Wellingborough, exploring how the ideologies and techniques of modern imprisonment were translated in practice. The chapter focuses in particular on staff attitudes and practices, and the prison's overall value culture: its moral and emotional climate. It describes the orientation of staff towards prisoners as a form of benign indifference, and discusses the somewhat fractious

⁶ The term Prison Service is used hereafter to denote the Prison Service of England and Wales.

relationships between uniformed staff and governors. The aim is to indicate the balance and location of power within the establishment and to depict the experiences and outcomes of power for staff.

The concern of Chapter 4 is to provide a detailed description of the form and flow of power, as it was applied to Wellingborough's prisoners. The chapter begins by outlining the modes of power that can be used to achieve order and compliance, and outlines how these have featured in sociological studies of imprisonment. Prisoner testimonies are then used to convey the nature and location of power in HMP Wellingborough: its scope, targets, qualities and objectives. The chapter shows how a range of policies and mechanisms—including staff-prisoner relationships, early release and earned privilege schemes, mandatory drug testing, and psychological expertise—constituted a particular form of power, which can be characterized as a form of 'neo-paternalism'. It argues that this form was both 'soft' and 'hard', both muted and oppressive, both remote and highly gripping. It combined a welfarist concern with rehabilitation and decency, a neo-liberal emphasis on responsibility and self-regulation, and an authoritarian impulse of control and compliance. Its aim was not so much to make prisoners meekly passive or merely obedient but to inculcate in them a kind of enthusiastic engagement with the terms of the regime. In this respect, while being less authoritarian and less destructive than its previous guises, it was demanding, invasive and unforgiving: 'tight', as well as 'deep' (Downes 1988) and 'heavy' (King and McDermott 1995). The accompanying burdens of this power formation—some of the new pains of imprisonment—are discussed further in the book's conclusion.

The issue of how prisoners engaged with this form of power is taken up in Chapter 5. As David Garland has noted (1996; 1997) to describe power's intentions without observing its effects is to paint only half a picture. The chapter elaborates in some depth a range of adaptive outcomes. These were not types of prisoner *per se*, but particular kinds of responses or strategies that were linked both to prisoners' particular backgrounds and to the adaptive positions that the institution promoted. This typology reveals significant differences between prisoners in relation to a range of attitudes and behaviours: the main deprivations that they experienced and thus sought to alleviate; the reasons for their compliance; the sources of their resentment; the outlets they used to

express frustration and hostility; their views of staff and of the prison as a criminal justice organization; their engagement with officers and the wider system of power; their future plans and preferences for 'doing time'. The chapter concludes by discussing how the prison's power formation contributed to a particular model of social order and dissent: a relatively atomized community, where open defiance was rare and resistance largely took forms that were individualized and surreptitious. It also discusses the fluidity of prison behaviour, illustrating how institutional practices and changing self-conceptions could contribute to significant shifts in adaptive styles.

The second half of the book—Chapters 6 to 8—explores the shape and complexity of prisoner culture and social life, and tries to convey its daily texture, structure and experience. It shows how Wellingborough's everyday social world was shaped by the interplay of structural, institutional, cultural, and biographical factors. Exploring in turn the prisoner hierarchy, social relationships between prisoners, and the everyday culture of the prisoner community, it shows how the prison incited as well as constrained particular patterns of social organization through its intrinsic conditions, its institutional character, and its policies and practices. These factors set the parameters within which imported characteristics took their various forms. Chapter 6 documents power relations between prisoners, unpicking the determinants and consequences of status and stigma. Chapter 7 describes the structure of social relationships within the prison, the inducements and impediments to friendship formation, the bases and nature of interpersonal loyalties and affiliations, and the relationships within and between primary and secondary groups. Chapter 8 examines other aspects of everyday social life and culture, focusing in particular on the informal economy and drug culture, issues of interpersonal politics and conflict, the prisoner value system and emotional rules, and the public and private sentiments of the prisoner society. Throughout, these chapters illustrate how the prison's inherent and institutional conditions created competing pressures—broadly, to 'individualize' and to 'socialize', to restrict and to develop allegiances, relationships and interactions. These pressures (and the frustrations they represented) weighed upon and were weighed up by different prisoners in different ways, according to their values, needs, expectations and particular penal predicaments. Thus, through the use of the

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typology, each chapter highlights the considerable diversity within the prisoner world in terms of attitudes towards and commitments to friendship, trade, and the prisoner value system.

The book is a study of a single Cat-C prison at a particular point in time. It makes no claims to widespread generalizability as such. The hope is that, by exposing the prison's social components and examining its constituent parts, it may provide a framework for analysis that can be employed in other circumstances and can shed light both on the similarities between prison social systems and the reasons why they differ. First and foremost, it is an attempt to open up the prison to sociological analysis and help drag its inner life out of the 'dark zone of knowledge and power' (Simon 2000: 285).