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Book Review of "The Prisoner Society: Power Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison (Crewe, B.)

Mary Rogan
Dublin Institute of Technology, mary.rogan@dit.ie

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Book Review

The Prisoner Society is the first book-length account of what late modern penalty feels like to those imprisoned in a medium security prison in England, HMP Wellingborough. Ben Crewe, in a work of impressive breadth and depth, has provided us with a unique and precious examination of the nature of late modern imprisonment. Crewe positions his work, in part, as a form of ground level analysis to complement recent grander narratives of contemporary punishment in the Western world, referencing Garland, Wacquant, and Liebling, with the debt to Liebling being the most apparent. In some respects, however, it is a pity that Crewe feels the need to position himself in relation to The Culture of Control. The Prisoner Society does not need such a hook to warrant attention. As Crewe says elsewhere, the book also seeks to reinvigorate the study of the lived experience of imprisonment, a form of analysis with a venerable history in its own right. Crewe should be confident that he has fulfilled his aim.

The book is described as being, essentially, one about power. It examines how penal power is deployed within the institution, why it is so used, how it is experienced, and how it is reconstituted by those subject to it.

The Prisoner Society is divided into seven main chapters, each of which contains reference to a rich literature which grounds the narratives of prisoners and staff and which could be read independently. As such, excerpts of the book would grace any reading list on penal theory and the sociology of punishment. Chapter 2 provides the context and history of HMP Wellingborough, whereas Chapter 3 investigates the general ethos, views, and practices of the uniformed workforce within the prison, finding that staff may also feel disempowered by the way in which penal authority is now exercised, considering themselves rule-bound, subject to centralized oversight and audit.

In a key chapter entitled ‘‘Power,’’ Crewe elucidates the ‘‘diminishment of pure authority’’ (p. 99), that is the shift away from violence and the threat of violence to secure order in contemporary prisons. Although basic living conditions may have improved, the nature of managerial power is no less potent. Penal power today is shown to have been dispersed and relocated, no longer concentrated in staff on the wings, but instead implemented through officers.

Rehabilitative programs, the prison’s opportunity structures, or what one prisoner (Tommy) described as the ‘‘dangling of carrots’’ (p. 111), such as increased privileges and courses are also part of this deployment of power and its emphasis on self-governance in what Crewe categorizes as a neopaternalist environment. Intriguingly, psychologists in the prison were considered by prisoners to exert some of the greatest power of all, having a critical impact on decisions such as release and increased privileges. This aspect of Crewe’s work is particularly significant and should be reflected upon by all those working in and advocating for increased provision of such programs.
Although any parts of The Prisoner Society would be worth reading on their own, it is, once again, in the voices of prisoners that the most compelling accounts are found. In Chapter 5, Crewe develops a typology of forms of adaptation, compliance, and resistance found among prisoners, though case examples are used to ensure that prisoners’ individual stories and characteristics are not lost through such abstraction. This typology will no doubt frame future such work. ‘‘Enthusiasts’’ are committed in their compliance to penal regimes and accept the legitimacy of authority, being desirous of personal transformation. ‘‘Pragmatists’’ and ‘‘stoics’’ were resigned to power and sought to ‘‘do their time’’ as unobtrusively as possible. ‘‘Retreatists’’ were passive in their compliance and fatalistic in their outlook. The stories and attitudes of ‘‘Players’’ such as Ashley are particularly memorable. Such individuals were normatively opposed to penal power but feigned compliance, calculating that such behavior would reap significant rewards in the neopaternalist culture. Consequentially, Crewe finds that late-modern penal practices and its pressures to comply and the rewards for so doing mean that social affiliations are limited, though not completely absent.

How those affiliations are experienced by prisoners is the subject of three important latter chapters.
In Chapters 6_8, Crewe writes fluidly of the economy in drugs and other items, the power bestowed by the possession of heroin, the stigma of heroin addiction and the need and vulnerability it engendered, loyalty, the importance of consumer possessions to status, and the hierarchies of associations and friendships. Violence was not the primary basis by which respect was obtained, nor could the offense category guarantee a place in that social hierarchy, though those convicted of
 sexual crimes could expect little in the way of respect. Shrewdness and an ability to manipulate that system being afforded significant esteem. Crewe identifies a number of themes around the development of friendships amongst prisoners. These included the presence of widespread emotional suppression, sexual crimes could expect little in the way of respect. However, local loyalties, shared race and ethnic backgrounds as well as relationships developed through domestic routines acted as routes by which friendships could be formed. Significant in the creation of this landscape of a general lack of deep emotional commitment was a prevailing individualism, the creation of which would reward further investigation.
In Chapter 8, the views and experiences of prisoners on a variety of subjects are explored. Attitudes toward women, penal policy, masculinity, ‘‘grassing,’’ fighting are all examined here and the narratives are at their most engaging and worthy of attention by penologists and policy makers alike.
Crewe’s commitment to his craft and reflection on his interactions with prisoners and interpretations is patent. Thankfully, Crewe provides an honest account of the long research process and methods in the appendix of the book, which all those conducting similar research would be wise to read. Similarly, it is also to be hoped that Crewe’s aim to stimulate further such studies is achieved. Criminological scholarship such as this can only enrich our understandings of penal policy and how that policy is lived out on a daily basis.