7 Prospects of Prison Riots

Tyranny sets up its own echo-chamber; a void where confused signals buzz about at random; where a murmur or innuendo causes panic: so, in the end, the machinery of repression is more likely to vanish, not with war or revolution, but with a puff, or the voice of falling leaves . . .

(Cha~n, 1989, p. 120)

Inevitably, some of the content of previous chapters has spilled over into the issues which concern this final chapter, namely the evaluation of prison riots. By 'evaluation' is meant examining the impact on prison riots of trends in penal policy and practice. This leads to a discussion of the future prospects of lessening the scale of prison riots, or even preventing them altogether.

POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

This discussion begins with the depressing but realistic observation that, if history is anything to go by, prison riots are as likely to be a part of the future of imprisonment as they have been of its past. Collective resistance to imprisonment is inevitable. But despite the history of widespread protests by prisoners, and riots as an aspect of their collective resistance, the authorities have tended not to take on board the social dimension of prisoners' collective actions. Thus, in the information booklet for male prisoners produced by the Prison Service in Britain in the early 1990s, though there are references in the 'Race Relations Policy Statement' to 'all prisoners' its substance, including the section on how to complain, is addressed to prisoners as individuals and not as a group (HM Prison Service, undated, p. 15).

One consequence of the fragmentation of prisoners into cliques and subgroups in the last quarter of the twentieth century has been to make it less likely that their collective actions will be perceived as directed, however obliquely, at the powers which oppress them. Although in one sense prison riots represent the more directly confrontational aspects of collective resistance by prisoners, in another sense, as the history of protests by pupils shows, such resistance is expressed also through diversionary and subversive acts (Adams, 1991). The
need has emerged above to examine the changing nature of prison riots and responses to them over time, with a view to establishing how their negative and destructive aspects may be minimized and the likelihood of positive outcomes from them maximized.

Experience demonstrates the close interconnections between the actions of rioting prisoners and those of the authorities, before and after the onset of a riot, though the 'chicken-and-egg' character of their interrelatedness makes this complex relationship difficult, if not impossible, to probe. So, the nature of future prison riots depends on the future nature of prison policies and practices and vice versa.

For many years, well into the twentieth century, the struggles of prisoners to resist the conditions of their imprisonment were denied or ignored by the authorities, the media and by other commentators. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the increasing scale and scope of prison riots in particular has made protests by prisoners impossible to ignore. Two hypothetical alternative scenarios of the future can be envisaged, the more likely prospect of the more rigorous control of potentially riotous prisoners and, on the basis of precedent, the less likely option of their being given more humane treatment by the authorities. The trouble with words such as 'control', 'humane' and 'treatment' is that they have been pretty well worked to death in the penal literature. But any alternatives we might choose—'authoritarian', 'liberal', and so on—are just as laden with overtones. So, we shall retain these as evocative labels which indicate contrasting directions in penal policies and practices.

Control Scenario

From the standpoint of this 'control' scenario, prison riots are viewed in terms of the overriding preoccupations of the authorities with the more effective control of prisoners within the penal system as it stands, or rather, in an enlarged system with enhanced facilities for the control, disciplining and, where necessary, segregation of prisoners judged by professionals to be difficult. The fact that the state has moved increasingly towards a mixed economy for the provision of facilities for imprisoning people does not override these parameters. If anything, it reinforces them. It find evidence to corroborate the view of prison riots as spontaneous, involuntary or preconscious, unconscious, instinctive reactions by subrational, or even subhuman, prisoners.