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Close Encounters with Prisoners

Conceptualising prisoners

This chapter is about the everyday lives of prisoners. We explore how they experience prison and what matters to them. Specifically, we consider the spaces of their everyday lives, their practices of adjustment, their relations to the outside world, and their experiences of uncertainty. In the latter regard we discuss how judicial limbo is a central feature of imprisonment in all three contexts.

There is much evidence that, far from being merely unpleasant, the pains of imprisonment can transform prisoners, impede their development, undermine their overall well-being, and negatively affect their potential for post-prison adjustment. (Haney 2006, 149)

As Haney implies, the question of how prisoners survive prison is vital. Martin Jefferson and Bandyopadhyay (2014) identify survival along with the themes of governance and transition as central to the idea of prison climate, an idea designed to capture the complexities of everyday prison interiors and the position of the prison in historical and societal discourse. Survival in the face of pain and deprivation is a recurring theme of prison studies. In particular, Sykes (1958) and Taylor and Cohen (1972) document the pains of imprisonment, their debilitating effects, and the possibilities for ‘psychological survival’. Similarly, Goffman’s (1961) reflections on mortification and the threat to identity inherent in the encounter with the total institution detail the seriousness of the stakes. Liebling’s (1999; 1992) study of suicides in prisons and Medlicott’s (2005) study of cruelty bear witness to the harshness of prisons and their sometimes fatal consequences. For people incarcerated
in conditions of poverty, limited resources, and political volatility, survival stakes are ratcheted up a couple of notches. With this chapter we hope to contribute to a ‘deeper understanding of the true pains of imprisonment’ (Haney 2006, xv).

Donald Clemmer, in 1940, popularised the term *prisonisation* for referring to the way prisoners are obliged to adjust and adapt to the institutional confines and relational exigencies of prison life. This can be done by resisting the formal and informal norms of the prison, or by quietly acquiescing. Either way, adaptation is necessary, and identity is challenged. The question of how prisons affect prisoners has been at the heart of prison studies for decades. Answers to the question of whether prison in itself is harmful are contradictory, with conclusions reflecting different methodological approaches to the question and contrasting politics. Our encounters with prisons leave us with little doubt as to their harmful effects, though these may be collateral rather than directly a result of the deprivation of liberty.

Sykes identified five deprivations contributing to the pain of imprisonment: loss of liberty, loss of access to goods and to sex, loss of autonomy, and loss of security. Our material suggests that the losses of freedom, autonomy, and security are the most central concerns of the prisoners featured in our study, though basic access to goods features in struggles to survive, especially under conditions of poverty. Our analysis also suggests, as others have too, that temporal concerns – relations to the past and the future – are central to prisoners’ experience of prison (Gaborit 2013; Jefferson 2012; Bandyopadhyay 2010; Grounds and Jamieson 2003; Rocheleau 2013).

Jewkes and Bennett argue that survival in prison typically involves striking a balance between maintaining a public face and maintaining a private sense of self (2008). In this regard our analysis shows that this is an issue in Kosovo but to a lesser extent in the Philippines, where relations are closer and more intimate. In Sierra Leone it is unclear whether the immediate and pressing struggle to survive actually displaces the need to present oneself as something other than what one is or whether the commonality of experience means individual differences fade away.

The idea that prisoners might face psychological or social difficulties both during imprisonment and on release is widespread in the literature (Cohen and Taylor 1972; Grounds 2006; Liebling and Maruna 2005; Crawley and Sparks 2006; Haney 2006), but there is a dearth of scientific work documenting this in the countries of our study.

Liebling has argued that the earliest periods of imprisonment are the most troubling for prisoners, constituting an ‘overwhelming transition’