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Ordinary rebels, everyone:
activist scholarship, ethical encounters and resisting the mega prison

David Scott
The Open University

In the United Kingdom today we appear to have developed a fetish for punitiveness. What I mean by this is that we currently have an excessive and unhealthy commitment to punishment. Over the last couple of decades, collectively our society has come to think that punishment is somehow invested with magical powers that can not only solve our deep rooted social problems and ease our anxieties but also provide a secure platform for a better future. In fact it can do none of these things. Talk of punishments' magical powers are just a clever illusion, masking the fact that our excessive commitment to punishment actually exacerbates existing social problems, anxieties and insecuritiesⁱ. One of the most pressing pieces of evidence of this *punishment fetish* – and more broadly the development of an increasingly punitive state - are the current government plans to build six new 'mega prisons' in England and Wales.

The locations of the new 'mega prisons' were announced between November 2016 and March 2017. They were Wellingborough, Northampton; Glen Parva, Leicester; Full Sutton, Yorkshire; Rochester, Kent; Port Talbot, South Wales; and Hindley, Greater Manchester.ⁱⁱ Four of the mega prisons are also planned to be built on sites of existing prisons (HMP Wellingborough, HMP Glen Parva, HMP Full Sutton and HMP Hindley). I want to focus in this chapter only on the encounters with ordinary people in the campaign revolving around the rebuilding of HMP Hindley, in Bickershaw, which is a small village in the borough of Wigan, Greater Manchester from March to November 2017. Although full details of the proposed redevelopment at HMP Hindley have not been made public (and indeed plans appear to have stalled entirely at the time of writing in January 2018), the building of the new 'mega prison', if it does go ahead in 2022, would have capacity to hold at least 1,300 prisoners¹.

For penal abolitionists the prison – whatever the size - will always be an inhumane and immoral institution, and therefore prisons should be closed down and alternative life affirming alternatives promoted in their place.ⁱⁱⁱ Abolitionism is about raising political consciousness and the realisation of humanity for all. Thus a key goal is to render visible broader issues around social and economic inequities and the commitment to social transformation. The abolitionist struggle then is ultimately one of liberation, freedom and social justice. Abolitionists aim to awaken our cultural consciousness and to alter the direction of the punitive wind by changing the way people see both the punitive state and the role of the prison within our society. For the abolitionist, though, the prison is not the protector, but *the enemy of ordinary people*.

The punitive state and its punishment fetish presents a clear danger to democracy. The aim for abolitionists is not just about dismantling the prison but about a generating a philosophy of hope, building communities and fostering a widespread commitment to acknowledging the common humanity of all. Abolitionism aims to strengthen democracy by building stronger

¹ For a further discussion of this campaign, including a detailed account of the arguments used by local activists to challenge the mega prison, see Scott (2018).

bonds and networks of association in the community, developing community-based models of resistance and organising political activities that can work towards improving the safety and wellbeing of neighbourhoods. There are clear advantages for abolitionists to engage in political activism – *being part of the community and networking with like-minded people can renew energy as well as mutually affirming the abolitionist position*. So whilst aiming to produce politically useful analysis, abolitionism at the same time recognises the importance of key political agendas being defined by community members themselves. Underscoring this is the strong belief that democratic grassroots activism can be an effective way to challenge the punitive state. Of great importance for abolitionists is to stretch out their hand to activists (who are not abolitionists) and to other members of the community who are neither abolitionists nor activists. Abolitionists recognise that what we require collectively, and indeed should aspire to be individually, are to be *ordinary rebels* fighting for a truly democratic and socially just society.

The discussion below starts with a brief outline of the rules of engagement for penal abolitionists when attempting to build alliances among activists, academics and members of the public. These rules of engagement are specifically directed at the ‘activist scholar’ (Sudbury, 2008) to ensure that activists, scholars and members of the general public all work equally together for radically progressive transformations as ‘ordinary rebels’. This focus on the ethics and politics of abolitionist activist scholars is shaped by the experiences, skills and motivations of the author, who is both an academic working in higher education and also someone who has engaged directly in struggles against the punitive state. The first part of the discussion is therefore reflexive and based from the standpoint of an ‘activist scholar’. It acknowledges that whilst academics can bring certain skills and knowledge and can perform an important role in building the capacity of other members of the community, at the same time they are only a very small part of the struggle against the punitive state, whose overall success is dependent upon mutual cooperation and support and everyone working together collectively. Hence, *ordinary rebels, everyone*. The chapter then moves on to discuss the importance of stepping outside of ‘safer spaces’ to engage in a critical encounter with ordinary people in local communities near to the proposed Mega Prison site in Bickershaw, Wigan during the height of the local campaign and engagement with the local community from March to November, 2017. The chapter concludes with a consideration of how we can all work together, as *ordinary rebels everyone*, towards building an abolitionist future grounded in emancipatory politics and praxis.

Seven rules of engagement for activist scholars

For the great Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci^{iv} everyone in society can be considered as an intellectual but not everyone in society has the function of intellectuals (i.e. are employed as an academic scholar). By simply using our mental capacities we think and *intellectualise*. A person who engages in writing, organising and devising political strategies is using their intellectual capabilities. For some activists the term ‘intellectual’ (and especially the shorthand term ‘academic’) has become a pejorative term, used today with disdain. Yet the very people who are most likely to be critical of intellectuals are actually, following the definition of Gramsci, intellectuals themselves. We then have the paradox of *anti-intellectual intellectual*.^v There is tendency to construct the ‘intellectual’ as extra-ordinary – they are either put on a pedestal, romanticised and glamorised or dismissed, treated with contempt and demonised. What gets lost is that intellectuals are neither. They are just *ordinary people*.

The most striking aspect of most people employed as ‘intellectuals’ (i.e. academics) is their everyday mundaneness. They undertake ordinary tasks and largely live ordinary lives. Some academics are apolitical or attempt to distance themselves from politics, but there are also academics who are rebels – ‘ordinary rebels’. The ordinary people (like myself) rebelling against the punitive state who work in the academy are referred to in this chapter as ‘activist scholars’. They work and campaign alongside other ordinary rebels from the community and non-academic professions, but I use this term to refer to academics engaged in rebellious activism.

The challenge today is to unite as one movement and collectively send the abolitionist message to ordinary people (the general public). The activist scholar should not play the elitist academic game but rather collaboratively work with others for a more just world. The people with whom the activist scholar speaks should include public audiences rather than just other paid intellectuals, and this shapes their intellectual outputs and contributions. The role of the activist scholar is therefore the production of knowledge and active engagement in struggles in the service of progressive social movements fighting for social justice. This focus on the production of useful knowledge for activists is the focus of the second part of this chapter. Whilst it would be correct to argue that anyone one of us as ordinary rebels can produce knowledge, activist-scholars have had privileged training and education through the University system. My focus then is on the ethical and political responsibility to utilise these skills and knowledge in ways that can best support ongoing struggles against the punitive state. Other ordinary rebels may not have had such support. We may well all be equal in certain ways, but at the same time different life experiences (harmful or beneficent) mean we also all remain different. The point of this chapter is to identify how the different skills of the activist scholar can best serve other ordinary rebels. Hence, the inequitable power relations invested in paid intellectuals means that there must be ‘rules of engagement’ for this. Below are detailed are seven central ethical principles underscoring the political actions of the abolitionist activist scholar.

Challenging privilege: The thorny question of privilege and education should be confronted head on. Privilege is embodied and lived in the everyday.^{vi} Privilege reflects life course and access to resources and the privileged university context may be alienating or disconnecting from ordinary people. We may have to just accept that the flattening of privilege is impossible, but it should be part of the daily struggle to live in a genuine democracy. Activist scholars should recognise that their tenure, salaries (sometimes with research grants) and technical support from their university give them significant advantages, but it is not impossible for academic ‘activist’ scholars to support radical social movements and to use their privilege in ethically principled ways. What it does involve though is moving towards ideas that have no connection to University priorities but do have direct relevance to activist concerns and can foster locally based intellectual solidarities. Education is profoundly elitist and can be based on promoting exclusionary and technicist knowledge. There should be no exploitation of community members by those in a privileged position to serve either individual career priorities or the demands of the University research assessments. Activists (and activist scholars) are right to be sceptical and raise serious questions about the motives of academics in becoming involved in social movements. Whilst it can be difficult to ‘fit’ rebellious and radical activism within the criteria many universities use to impact (hence reducing the attractiveness of such activism to unscrupulous academics) there is always a

danger that more is gained by the academic from the community than vice versa. Hence, the importance of reflexivity on the part of the activist scholar – we all must always guard against exploitation and opportunism - and the adoption an approach of service to others and utilising any privilege possessed (whether that be access, knowledge, skills, networks) to the benefit of all involved in the struggles against the punitive state.

The relational dimension: The activist scholar exemplify good character and excel in what it means to be honourable, comradely and supportive activists. Activist scholars should give their time generously and be guided by the principles of kindness, care, compassion, love, friendship and the spirit of solidarity. It is essential that horizontal and democratically accountable relationships are fostered. An anti-hierarchical ethos and the sharing of resources, knowledge and information should be key priorities. There should be loyalty and transparency in all that is done. Recognition of the value of others is key - being involved in local campaigns means being involved in life affirming as life changing activities and this should underscore all relationships. Community solidarity, shared values and common beliefs in socialist politics and values should form the basis for reconstituting a collective radical agenda as a way of helping *communities to challenge state violence and coercion*. The important value of dialogue and conversation in developing a new consciousness of daily life are important part of being of service to the local community. Activist scholars should have a commitment to become a responsible and “virtuous hearer”^{vii}: that is some prepared to listen carefully, empathetically, sensitively and without prejudice to not only what is said but also listening out for what is not said and thus identifying structural denials of voice.

Accountability to the community: Activist scholars must be prepared to unlearn their sense of privilege and instead recognise their accountability to local communities, grass roots activism and struggles for social justice. This entails working towards collective knowledge and the building of trust. It is essential that the abolitionist is prepared to listen and learn from the community. This is exceptionally important in terms of decision-making processes. This means *not being in control* and allowing others to have their voice enabling them to shape and direct the movement. Local struggles are locally based movements that require local knowledge and locally embedded activist scholars. Alongside this the role of the abolitionist may be, at times, to provide a platform for the voice of others, for example those who voice is not normally heard, such as prisoners and ex-prisoners. The activist scholar should draw upon their expertise and *ensure* that their work is accessible to the general public.

Levelling up and capacity building: The activist scholar should aim to improve ordinary people’s capacity to function democratically to develop a critical kind of mindfulness and awareness of the socialist vision of justice. Abolitionists should aim to fulfil the potential of people around them and thus provide the intellectual milieu for socially transformative social movements. This means building potential and raising consciousness as a means creating rebels from ordinary people in the community. Rather than silencing – there must never be levelling down – activist scholars should aim to level up by sharing knowledge, strategies and key ideas in capacity building workshops. In order to promote a transformative political programme we need to build a radical historical and cultural narrative uniting abolitionist movement solidarity and providing inspiration for the agents of change for tomorrow – the ordinary rebel.

Consciousness raising among the populace: Activist scholars must be prepared to challenge dominant myths and official accounts of the prison place, as well as going directly against the received wisdom and common sense understandings to promote penological literacy. The activist scholar must then cut against the grain, questioning received ideas and treating the critical encounter with ordinary people in the local community through ‘dialogical transformation’ (i.e. critical and challenging conversations) through promoting anti-punishment education and contribution to the spreading of democratic norms.^{viii} The abolitionist activist scholar should not be a soloist playing their own tune, but perform a central role in creating a new abolitionist orchestra. Liberation is of paramount importance in the concept of raising abolitionist consciousness and the activist scholar should attempt to infuse the local community with confidence, renewed belief, pride and dignity.

Building new alliances and power bloc based on difference: To build a new world together we must work towards a solidarity through difference. Activist scholars should promote the importance of building solidarity and recognition of commonality across differences of interests of all in a new coalition of progressive forces. This means building relationships and addressing multiple crises – so when thinking about the ‘punitive state’ it means creating solidarities with communities who are experiencing the violence of austerity^{ix} (REF?), racialized capitalism and other forms of oppression. We need to co-operate in sustainable ways that can give expression to a collective vision. This means greater collaboration and cooperation and thus breaking down the silos between academics and activists framed by activist consciousness and activist concerns (such as those highlighted above that academics will be exploitative and focused on personal or professional gain rather than rebelling against social injustice and the punitive state) and abolishing the punishment fetish mentality.

Community spaces and the agora: There is currently an absence of an appropriate public arena in which to do hold detailed and deliberative dialogues on prisons and punishment. The mainstream media currently hold the monopoly on this, but what we urgently need is an ‘agora’ (public space for rational debate) where ordinary people can raise discussion of the problems that concern them the most. The activist scholar somehow needs to create a public democratic space where ordinary people can both question and dream; a space where they can develop and use their imagination to find a new way of doing politics and to awaken and educate new desires for a better world. What is urgently required is a public seminar that is open to all and guided by the rules of rationale discourse. This agora would be a space where informed debate could help convince sceptics that another type of world is possible – a world without prisons, with an authentic democracy promoting the interest of all.

The encounter: abolitionism beyond safe[r] spaces

Emancipatory politics and praxis, like all forms of knowledge generation and practical ethico-political engagement, are dependent upon and shaped by an actual encounter with someone else. The encounter, by which I mean a face to face relationship, is inevitable. We will always have encounters with other people and sometimes those encounters will be with people that we find difficult to understand, or find their embodied privilege problematic for us. They may have done something hurtful to others or may simply hold views that we find incomprehensible or morally reprehensible. Yet if we want to create a new and better world grounded in social justice we need to generate support from ordinary people who may not think like we do, share our values and principles or have the same interpretation of the world.

An inclusionary vision of a socially just and truly democratic society must be grounded in reaching out to those who on many issues are on the ‘other side’ and somehow generating solidarities of difference predicated upon successful engagement with others. Indeed it is the only way which activist scholars can help facilitate a movement constituting ordinary rebels.

We need then to ensure that a given community is heard, even when words are not spoken, or they are spoken but in anger or misunderstanding. We have to try and look at the world through the eyes of the ordinary person, adopting or translating their language, meanings and understandings and trying read or unexpected forms of communication. But for Dussel^x we need to do even more than this – we need show solidarity to sufferers by taking responsibility for facilitating (communal) storytelling that can *rebuild lives and world collectively* alongside the political commitment to attempt to *transform existing asymmetrical power relations*.^{xi} As a bottom line, inclusionary visions of social reality acknowledge difference and diversity whilst at same time recognising what we share: a common humanity. The only way we can challenge the punitive state and build a more progressive and humane future is by reaching out to local communities as they are currently constituted today. But it also important to recognise that the encounter with other people in itself is a central feature of all of our experiences and not something special. We have encounters with ordinary people every-day: sometimes they will be in the context of emancipatory politics and praxis.

Effective activism requires the activist scholars to reach out to the wider community. No struggle against the mega prisons will be taken seriously by local and national politicians unless it is deeply embedded in local communities. The activist scholar must then be prepared to perform a balancing act between listening and learning from the local community and challenging problematic categories and interpretive frameworks. As highlighted above, the activist scholar must recognise and take into account their own privileged position and be prepared to negotiate how they present their political analysis in light of the diverse (and potentially hostile environment) where the community-based activism takes place. There must also be recognition of the oppressive structure that the everyday lived experiences of the community and how the community itself is socially constructed, potentially in problematic ways. Moving beyond ‘safe[r] spaces’ is inevitable. Safe space policies, for Wang,^{xii} not only fail to effectively address privilege and power but in practice means that “it becomes impossible to develop a revolutionary political programme.” Safe spaces cannot remove structural violence – they can only make it less visible and create a little distance from its presence. To bring about the world we desire requires direct encounters, perhaps involving some kind of confrontation, in public and undoubtedly less safe spaces. The following discussion details the engagement with local people in Wigan Borough, Greater Manchester by activist scholars and some of the challenges this presents. The account below is written from the perspective of this author and is based on extensive field notes undertaken during the campaign from March to November 2017.² It follows the emergence of the pressure group *Pies Not Prisons*; the direct encounters with local people in Wigan and Bickershaw; and engagement with the local politicians and media. This ‘warts and all’ account is in chronological order and is followed by a consideration of how well it connected to the seven rules of engagement for abolitionist activist scholars and it is hoped will provide useful insights for future emancipatory politics and praxis.

² See discussion in Scott (2018) for further context of the campaign to rebuild HMP Hindley, Bickershaw, Greater Manchester.

i) *Pies Not Prisons*

Almost as soon as the plans for the mega prisons were announced in March 2017,^{xiii} a strategy was put in place by a number of local activists for a local meeting to be set up. The government plan was to demolish HMP Hindley, the existing prison in the area, and to rebuild a much larger prison on this land. Knowledge of the local prison area – Wigan Borough – was greatly aided by previous connections to local socialist activists who'd been involved in establishing the *Diggers Festival*³ in Wigan. Of these connections, the most crucial proved to be with Tony Broxson⁴, a hugely influential local activist who was well-regarded by people in the local community and especially the local left-wing socialist community. Tony Broxson immediately arranged a venue and potential speakers for a Wigan meeting to start the debate on resisting the mega prison. Speakers included activist scholars (Emily Luise Hart and this author), a former prisoner and also a leading member of the Momentum wing of the Labour Party who acted as chair. At this first meeting on 3rd April 2017 people came from around the local area, including activists from *Manchester No Prison*⁵ and activist abolitionists who were based in Liverpool as well as a number of people from the local community. The meeting was attended by 60 people, some of whom were local councillors. The meeting was then followed up almost immediately with further discussion at a local NHS crisis meeting event in Wigan town centre a few days later. Here once again concerns about the mega prison were expressed and information was given to members of the Socialist and left-wing constituency of Wigan borough.

These meetings, with the aid of local activist Tony Broxson, helped to generate considerable interest in the prison building programme, and notably the transformation of HMP Hindley into a new 1,300 capacity prison. They were following meetings with members of the *Momentum*⁶ group in Wigan in May 2017, which once again included both long-term socialist activists and left-leaning councillors. The end result of these interventions was the creation of a Wigan borough based pressure group. This new group was given the rather quirky title of *Pies Not Prisons*, a title which reflected the tradition of pie making in Wigan borough. Underscoring this of course was also a rather simple message: that rather than locking people up, we should feed them. In a town with a number of food banks and high rate of social inequality this message clearly resonated.^{xiv}

ii) *The encounter - Bickershaw social club*

Although the meetings in Wigan town centre had proved to be hugely successful both in terms of getting the key message across^{xv} and also generating some 'momentum' towards providing a sustained critique of the proposed mega prison. However, it was felt essential that *Pies Not Prisons* should engage directly with the community that was most affected – that is the local community in the area surrounding the existing prison (HMP Hindley) in Bickershaw, a small village just on the outskirts of Wigan. A meetings was organised for 29th June 2017, and the

³ This is an annual festival which commemorates the life of early socialist thinker Gerard Winstanley, who was born in Wigan, and the social movement the 'Diggers' which were active in England the late 1640s.

⁴ Permission has been sought and granted to use the real name of this local activist.

⁵ Manchester No Prison was an anarchist anti-prison group formed in Manchester in 2016 and has close connections to CAPE (Community Action Against Prison Expansion), a national prison abolitionist group formed in 2014.

⁶ *Momentum* is a radical social group which is closely associated with the UK Labour Party.

local community was widely leafleted with details of the speakers and the issues that were to be addressed at the local community meeting. Strategically it was felt that it would be helpful to draw upon the relationship between welfare and punishment to highlight the social costs of building a new mega prison. Therefore a number of speakers were brought together to explore first of all some of the welfare issues they were confronting Wigan and the area around it of Wigan borough (which included the village of Bickershaw) as well as issues regarding the closure of HMP Hindley and the subsequent rebuilding of the site as a new 1,300 place mega prison. Speakers were invited to talk about the NHS; the funding crisis in schools; and a platform was also provided for an account of personal experiences of ex-prisoners and the mother of a currently incarcerated prisoner. One further speaker (this author) was then planning to speak about the social and economic harms of rebuilding the prison and to give the local community as much detail as we possibly could at that point in time, given that the new prison had only be announced a number of weeks beforehand.

The first Bickershaw village meeting perhaps provided a classic illustration of misunderstandings and the difficulties that activists face both in terms of trying to read the local community. It also highlighted the democratic deficit regarding the organisation of local meetings and a public space for meetings to rationally and collectively discuss social problems and possible solutions (what I have described above as the agora). It also provides an example of an encounter in what ultimately proved to be a less than ordinarily safe space, albeit, one that could hardly be described as dangerous or unsafe. The meeting involved ordinary people coming from both the local community and also a large number of activists who had been inspired to challenge the mega prison from the previous Wigan meetings. The first speaker was the mother of a currently serving woman prisoner. She was allowed to speak, albeit with some grumblings from the gathered local residents. When, however, it came to the following three speakers – who had planned to engage with issues around social welfare education and health - the speakers were challenged by members of the local community who effectively tried to shout them down.

The local community wanted its voice to be heard and there was clear frustration in the room. The three speakers on welfare spoke more briefly than planned and directed attention more to the local issues of Bickershaw and the prison than was originally intended. To appease the situation one of the speakers (this author) then spoke directly to the most dissident voices in the room, leaving the platform and standing within almost touching distance of a number of the most rowdy members of the local community. There had been a misunderstanding. The local community had thought that the meeting had been organised by Wigan Council and that local councillors would be speaking and giving them direct and specific detailed information on the rebuilding of the prison. Some local councils were there but they remained largely silent among the angry local voices. The local community were quite vocal in their dissent - shouting "YES or NO is there going to be a new prison YES or NO?" This was something that none of the members of *Pies Not Prisons* could answer.

What were remarkable from the meeting were two things. First it was evident that the local community was starved of voice: we heard time and time again that they had been very limited numbers of council meetings in the local area that many people living near HMP Hindley felt as if they had been neglected and denied a voice. Members of the local community also felt that there was a general lack of concern for their interests and indeed,

that the proposed mega prison was going being rolled through irrespective of their concerns. There was a palpable sense of passivity and a sense of fatalism when it came to the idea of the new prison. This frustration boiled over on the June 29th meeting and so what *Pies Not Prisons* encountered was a lot of angry people who did not really know the rules of rational dialogue in terms of a democratic discussion. Nor were they necessarily interested in issues that lay outside of their local remit: their exclusive concerns lay around HMP Hindley and the proposed new mega prison and how that would impact on the local infrastructure and community. This has been widely described in the academic literature as the 'Not In My Back Yard' (NIMBY) agenda. Second the meeting did not end as a disaster, although it looked as though it may on a couple of occasions. The meeting actually proved to be a great success in terms of building connections with the local Bickershaw village community over the coming months. In the first instance once the local community had vented their anger and it was clear that we were ready to engage in reciprocal listening and started to respond in a more open manner. It was also evident that *Pies Not Prisons* was listening, and that the local activists were responding to what the local people were saying. At the end of the meeting there was much shaking of hands thanks for the speakers making the effort to come to because so and also an immediate call for a follow-up meeting within only a couple of days, to be once again held at social club.

The June 29th meeting was quite well attended and highlighted more than anything else the problem of not being heard. It showed the importance of a dialogical ethics and what situations can arise if such a dialogue stalls. The encounter was initially experienced in a way that the venue felt like a hostile environment. But it is important to emphasise how the meeting evolved. It was clear that understanding and engaging in dialogue with the other was starting to produce results, and that once there was clarity and a sense that the *Pies Not Prisons* was there to work with and alongside the local community there was a significant change in attitude and atmosphere. A further set of local meetings in Bickershaw village were established before the first meeting closed. At the follow-up meeting, held in the first week of July 2017, 20 members of the local community attended. This encounter started in a very different way. Rather have guest speakers we organised an organic and collective community meetings. Through this relational dialogue we started to build a sense of what the local community actually wanted and how they thought we could help them try to stop the mega prison being built. More than this, the local community also requested quite practical advice that we could immediately and directly share with them to help build the capacity to resist. Local ordinary people wanted to know exactly what they could do in terms of challenging this through their local political channels. They wanted their local councillors to be involved; they wanted their local MP to be involved; they wanted the Mayor of Manchester to be involved; they wanted other local councillors who were well known for being dissident in council meetings, to be involved; they wanted more ordinary people who were residents in the adjoining villages to come and join them in their struggle.

Pies Not Prisons facilitated various different sets of meetings (some of which I will go into below when discussing engagement with the local political community of Wigan and Bickershaw). But one of the things that came from the follow up meetings was a crucial connection with other communities only a short distance away from because show itself and this related to a campaign group challenging the building on land adjacent to South Hindley village. This new housing estate was to be situated not far from where HMP Hindley currently

stands. Through engaging with local activists in South Hindley village, who were much more organised The South Hindley village protest group had come together for quite a number of months before the prison was announced, and whilst their focus was not the prison but rather on the building of an of new houses in a woodland area, their support and engagement allowed us to extend even further the network of local people. *Pies Not Prisons* established a small email newsletter; put local people protesting against the mega prison into direct contact other ordinary rebels; and helped organise further meetings. Crucially, we brought together local speakers and made direct connections between the land surrounding HMP Hindley and the issues around asbestos. Through local knowledge, activists and local residents learnt about the harmful legacy of an old *Turner and Newell* asbestos factory that had been situated just north of the prison and just south of the village of Hindley itself. A further meeting was quickly organised which this time involved councillors and also a number of local people from both Hindley and Bickershaw.

Although the numbers at this 25th July 2017 meeting were much smaller than the previous big meeting in Bickershaw village, it once again provide an opportunity to hear the views of the local community and what they wanted *Pies Not Prisons* to help them with. These local meetings quite clearly were not a straightforward political community grounded in values of social justice and human rights. The opposite in fact. The moral and political frameworks held by members of the community were punitive – they wouldn't have a problem with prisons but they did have a problem with it being near to where they lived – the NIMBY approach. *Pies Not Prison* raised the harms of asbestos contamination, invited a local asbestos expert to the meeting, and also delivered information regarding the practicalities of submitting a planning application objection, all of which we hoped would be of some direct use to the local community or had been requested by them. In attendance were also representatives of the Prison Officers Association (POA) from HMP Hindley. Activists from *Pies Not Prison* had leafleted the prison and spoken with prison officers as they were leaving the jail in the days before the big meeting. At this meeting, however it became clear that new information had been revealed that they stay of execution had been granted to HMP Hindley and that rather than close in November 2017 as a being initially announced it was now to stay open until at least November 2019. This news was not officially confirmed until October 2017, when the date of closure was delayed until at least 2022.^{xvi} Ironically then this disjointed campaign only a few months old had achieved results. But it was a hollow victory at best and in truth possibly had very little to do with any of the issues regarding the campaign (Scott, 2018). More likely a key factor was the broader stalling of the mega prisons that occurred in in late 2017 and rising prison populations.^{xvii}

So although this third Bickershaw open meeting proved to be the last, what was interesting was that by this point there was a growing sense of community cohesion and that the campaign with the South Hindley group – and especially the concerns raised around asbestos - may actually have proved to have had some momentum. *Pies Not Prisons* had not seen the radicalisation of consciousness-raising of the community – and we certainly hadn't be created any future ordinary rebels – but we laid some solid foundation work that was cut short by the announcement of the stay of execution on HMP Hindley in October 2017.

iii) *Engaging in local politics*

The encounters with the local community of course did not just involve being involved with village residents or organising big meetings. Encounters during this form of activism also went into the local political community, which itself proved to have various positives and negatives in terms of how the local political process worked. As had been illustrated in the first big Bickershaw meeting, members of *Pies Not Prisons* found a general sense of apathy and lack of engagement in terms of some serious political support regarding many of the issues that confronted Wigan and also Bickershaw. This was perhaps best illustrated in a meeting with the local MP for the area, Rt. Hon. Yvonne Fovargue, MP. Ironically this meeting was set up with this author and local activist Tony Broxson following the first meeting in Bickershaw by the MP. The local MP had a reputation for being on the conservative wing of the *Labour Party*, but we assumed that she had some interest in at least finding out what some of the main objections to the mega prison. We hoped that she might be interested in coming to a meeting with her constituents or engaging in the broader campaign with *Pies Not Prisons*. Yet the meeting proved enormously disappointing, at least in terms of the MPs enthusiasm for our campaign.

Almost immediately as the meeting started the local MP said she was not prepared to talk about any policy issues regarding prison building programmes and was only prepared to talk about practical elements that could lead to an objection to the planning application. That is the ‘material conditions of an objection to a prison plan’. The meeting lasted an hour and as time went on we found not only had spoken with local councillors but the local Manchester Labour Party Mayor, Andy Burnham, who had taken an interest in the campaign. The meeting proved to be an obstacle in terms of the MPs position regarding a public objection to the prison (although she did make a statement of local newspaper about the prison and how she felt this was something that should be open to public debate), but *Pies Not Prisons* did hold a follow-up meetings with the office of the local Labour Party MEP (with the hope that perhaps there could be some kind of discussion in the European Parliament) and also direct liaison with the Manchester Mayor’s office, both which provided encouragement in terms of showing interest in the kind of arguments that would be raised against the mega prisons more broadly. There were also discussions with Labour Party councillors, who, whilst reluctant to engage with many of the key moral and political issues of the campaign, raised question marks about whether the planning application would even go forward and gave us some insight quite early on that they regarded the pathway to the building of the mega prison on the site of HMP Hindley as by no means clear. We also held discussions and debates outside of the local council offices at times when the local planning committee was meeting (July 18th 2017). This was done in a polite and informal manner but one which sent a message that the local community (and there are about 25 people who attended the demonstration) were not going to allow this to happen without some kind of protest (see also discussion below).

Engagement was also made with local unions and also with the *Momentum* group of the Labour Party in Wigan. Talks were given at both the Unison’s main group meetings, the Unison retired meeting group, and the *Trades Council of Wigan*, to highlight issues around the problems of building a mega prison. Whilst these talks were largely undertaken by this author, there was also direct connection with local activists – and indeed it was always local activists from *Pies Not Prisons* who established these meetings in the first instance and local activists, notably Tony Broxson, were always present and contributed to the meetings themselves.

There was then a genuine attempt to not only inform the public here but also to try and build capacity to try and help the local activists themselves to build a knowledge base and encourage them to participate in direct dialogue regarding the objections to the mega prison.

There were two further aspects of the political engagement at the local level. First of all there was a stall at the local *Diggers Festival* in September 2017 (and also *Pies Not Prisons* were represented at the festival in September 2018) which much to the delight of the local activists involved the eating of a large number of free pies. Further there was also a fringe event organised at the local Labour Party conference (North West region which was held in November 2017 in Blackpool, Lancashire). This Labour Party Conference fringe events attracted unfortunately no local MPs, but it did generate debate from a considerable number of people who are members of the Labour Party in the region.

iv) Connecting with the local media

One final area also deserves some brief commentary. This is engagement with the local media. In particular this involved connections with the local Wigan newspaper the *Wigan Post*. Over the period of around six months there were 12 separate stories on Hindley prison that in one way or another were connected to the activities and knowledge sharing of *Pies Not Prisons*. One of these stories even made it to the front page of the newspaper (as a headline). These stories albeit quite brief and sometimes offering also a pro prison narrative as an alleged balance to the anti-prison activism of *Pies Not Prisons*, were often informed by members of *Pies Not Prisons* and were able to give a critical narrative of the prison as the institution and also to get the message across about both the lack of need for the local prison to be any bigger – indeed we argued that the prison should be shut down – as well as highlighting the problem of asbestos in the prison and the local community.^{xviii} *Pies Not Prisons* therefore made direct connections between the corporate harms of asbestos related deposits and the harms of the prison place. This actually proved to be one the most significant aspects of raising consciousness because people would start to look beyond the social death of the prisoner and to recognise that the issues that were being highlighted in terms of the rebuilding of HMP Hindley is a 1,300 space mega prison affected the wider community. Making connections local journalists proved to be a useful way of getting our message across and crucially proved a source of credibility in terms of our direct engagement with the local community. The *Pies Not Prisons*, demonstration outside Wigan Town Hall council planning committee meeting on the 18th July, attracted local newspaper coverage, including interviews and photographs with activists. However, a critical question was raised by local residents: ‘who actually reads the *Wigan Post*?’ Some of the local newspapers also picked up stories but primarily it was the *Wigan Post* that provided a platform for the voice of *Pies Not Prisons*. There was also some minor engagement with local radio in greater Manchester and in Liverpool including *BBC Radio Merseyside* about the mega prison these interventions were relatively brief and did not necessarily provide the space and platform that would be required for a genuine abolitionist agora.

Conclusion: an ethical engagement?

The activist scholar should play a key part in public engagement. The activist scholar should provide a platform for the voice of excluded and subjugated voices (which it did do on occasion in the above illustration of the campaign by *Pies Not Prisons* with the platforming of ex-prisoner voices). The activist must also make sure that they do not silence local voices, but

at the same time the activist scholar should not be silenced – they should channel their privilege into providing resources to engage the interest of ordinary members of the community. It is important to reflect more generally on how, as an abolitionist activist scholar, the direct interventions of *Pies Not Prisons* related to the seven rules of engagement detailed at the start of this chapter. Certainly a number of the processes behind rules of engagement can be seen to have been followed. There was a strong building of horizontal and non-hierarchical relationships and there were genuine attempts to turn privilege into a levelling up and capacity building for local socialist activists and people living near the prison. Accountability to the local community was also evident in terms of the manner in which the agenda for engagement was decided and the commitment to supporting local residents who held views diametric to many of the members of *Pies Not Prisons*.

For all its strengths though the activism around the Wigan Mega Prison made only a small contribution to changing outcomes. This includes generating consciousness raising among the populace (though *Pies Not Prisons* did at least make good connections with like-minded people and highlight how prisons are a socialist issue); did little to build new political alliances based on the recognition of difference (though dialogue between activists and ordinary people in the community was established); or create a genuine new space for rational argumentation (though local people were becoming more active and prepared to engage in direct action before the announcement of the five year extension of the existing prison in the village).

The story of the encounter with local residents of Bickershaw then highlights a number of key issues about the importance of working with the community from where it is at. What is required is negotiating strategy that can both challenge and accommodate the opinions of local people. It is essential to try and build some kind of the political momentum by both working through grassroots connections and local people's views and opinions but also trying to mobilise local activists who are not necessarily focused on the prison. If there was one big success story of *Pies Not Prisons* it was that it was able to mobilise members of the Labour Party and in particular members of *Momentum* and associated unions in a way that meant that challenging prison with rebuilding was seen as a major local concern that should be objected.

Alongside all of this is the enduring commitment to emancipatory politics and praxis. Through engaging in praxis the activist scholars in *Pies Not Prisons* aimed to build a new power base and to generate and tap into existing political consciousness in the community. This meant listening (and often carefully challenging) the ordinary voices of local people. If we are to live in a different kind of world we need to create a mass movement that can involve or inspire millions of people. It is not just about the intellectual or those involved in grassroots movements, but reaching out to the general public. For real and lasting change we need the support of ordinary rebels, everyone.

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