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The 'Dangerous Other' in Maximum-Security Prisons

Drawing on data from maximum-security prisons in England, this article explores the way the representation of criminals as 'dangerous others' manifests in prison discourse and practice. Following Bourdieu, it is argued that within the 'habitus of maximum-security', prison staff become somewhat predisposed to seeing prisoners as essentialised, 'dangerous others' who are not 'like us', a perspective that is also reinforced in popular and tabloid print media outside the prison walls. The strength of these representations coupled with the habitus of maximum-security thus constrains possibilities for alternative representations of prisoners labelled as 'dangerous others' or for alternative ways of structuring the ethos and conditions of maximum-security prisons.

Key Words

maximum-security prisons, media, dangerous others, habitus

Introduction

Representations of crime and 'the criminal' in popular culture, political rhetoric, and the media have all been the subject of research and scholarly consideration within the field of criminology. These representations have been analysed as indicators of changing social and cultural configurations (Garland 1996: 462), a force for orienting public morality (Melossi 2000: 151) and as a means for studying social reaction (Cohen 1980: iii). There has been less consideration, however, of the way such representations hold salience or meaning in the lived experience of criminal justice professionals and the extent to which such representations are reconstructed or interpreted by them (but see Mawby 2002). This article explores the way the representation of criminals as 'dangerous others' manifests in discourse and practice in maximum-security prisons. Drawing on both historical and contemporary texts and data from long-term, maximum-security men's prisons in England[1] it analyses aspects of the practice of maximum-security prison work and its origins in the accumulated real history of these prisons. Following Bourdieu (1984; 1990), the article describes features of the 'habitus' of these prisons and illustrates the complex interplay between organisational history and contemporary practices, discourses, knowledges, and perceptions. It is argued that an interrelated set of acquired beliefs about prison administration, prisoners, and prison practices have come to be intertwined with the 'pursuit of security' – an enterprise of increasing concern and expanding reach both inside the prison and in wider society (Zedner 2003; 2009). Within this structure, prison staff become somewhat

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[1] It should be noted that although 'England and Wales' forms a single legal jurisdiction, all of the maximum-security prisons are geographically located in England.

predisposed to seeing prisoners as essentialised, 'dangerous others' who are not 'like us', which is also reinforced in popular and tabloid print media outside the prison walls. The strength of these representations coupled with the habitus of maximum-security thus constrains possibilities for alternative representations of prisoners labelled as 'dangerous others' or for alternative ways of structuring the ethos and conditions of maximum-security prisons.

Media and the Criminal

The role of the media in capturing collective social anxieties and attributing their causes to various social phenomena, outsider groups or 'types' of individuals has best been described in Cohen's (1972/80) classic study of social reactions and moral panics. In his analysis of the collective disturbances that took place in English seaside resorts between 1964 and 1966, Cohen illustrated the role the media can play in the amplification of deviancy. He was the first scholar to systematically consider the means by which a particular group or segment of society becomes associated either implicitly or explicitly with wider concerns about social degradation, destruction of social values, or the loss of cherished aspects of private or public life. As his well known argument makes clear, 'folk devils' become the focus of media attention when they emerge demonstrating unexpected and inexplicable behaviour that is deemed by the media, politicians, and segments of the public to be deviant. Their deviant behaviour becomes constructed as an indicator of social degeneration that becomes emblematic of a variety of other social anxieties. In the case of the 'Mods' and 'Rockers', their casting as 'folk devils' and the moral panic that surrounded them were symbolic of an accumulated set of insecurities brought on by post-war social change. The eruption of moral panics and the tendency to identify particular social groupings during times of increased social uncertainty can, as Jewkes (2004: 67) points out, 'locate and crystallise wider social anxieties about risk.'

Greer and Jewkes (2005: 20) have argued that in the contemporary context the problem of crime has become a major issue of social concern. Against this backdrop, narratives of individual causes of the deterioration of societal values have begun to proliferate in the media with crime and the criminal often taking centre stage. Greer and Jewkes suggest that media representations of high profile or exceptional crimes construct 'criminals' as unequivocal 'outsiders':

> They are offenders with whom we actively establish and outwardly maintain the greatest distance, and toward whom we are most punitive and vindictive. They are portrayed in terms of their *absolute* otherness, their utter detachment from the social,

moral and cultural universe of ordinary, decent people…(2005: 20)

Further, Jewkes (2004: 201) argues that in our postmodern age of uncertainty, the potency of Cohen's folk devils has weakened and been replaced by the more powerful symbolism in the 'evil monster'. A shift of this kind may be seen as a new cultural environment or historical moment which, Melossi suggests, may be indicative of

> …a given 'knowledge' of the criminal that spans different discursive forms, from scientific tracts to newspapers, from televised media to fictional accounts.' Such representations perform a work in society which consists, among other things, in orienting public morality (2000: 151).

This assessment shares similarities with Cohen's (1972/1980: 76) suggestion that 'dominant societal models for explaining deviance need careful consideration by the sociologist…because such models form the basis of social policy and social control structure.' Examining such societal models, images, or conceptions are also important because, as Greer argues: 'media images do not exist in a vacuum. They intersect with people's lived experiences in complex and varied ways' (2003: 5).

In the contemporary context, Jewkes (2004), following Stokes (2000), suggests that serious crimes have come to be defined as purely evil acts. Their occurrence is explained as an intentionally evil deed perpetrated by depraved individuals. Further, the depravity or individual pathology of criminality is constructed in media accounts in such a way that it becomes a common factor in all crimes forming a single moral panic (Franklin and Petley 1996; Stokes 2000, cited in Jewkes 2004: 201). These changing representations of crime and the criminal have led to those convicted of crime being seen as *a*, if not *the*, 'public enemy'. In a similar vein Garland (1996: 461) has argued that there is an official criminology that is dualistic and polarising. It consists of a 'criminology of the self' that characterises those who commit crime as making a rational choice to do so; and a 'criminology of the other' that characterises the criminal as a threatening, excluded outcast. Garland suggests that one of these criminologies is invoked to encourage preventive action and to see crime as a routine activity that can be anticipated and controlled through situational measures. The other, by contrast, demonizes the criminal who, arguably cannot be controlled with such measures and must be punished. Characterising the criminal as 'other', argues Garland, raises public hostilities and garners support for state interventions and punishments.

The proliferation of official and media-driven representations of the depravity and wickedness of those who commit crime result in a bombardment of disturbing images, stories, and perceived threats all

depicting the monstrosity of the dangerous other. The rhetoric which accompanies this, Garland argues, suggests that 'the only practical and rational response to such types is to have them 'taken out of circulation' for the protection of the public, whether by long-term imprisonment, as in the UK, or else by judicial killing, as is increasingly the case in the USA' (1996: 461). The banishment of individuals deemed 'monstrous' or incorrigibly dangerous into the penal realm calls into question the way such individuals are then viewed, managed and engaged with once they arrive there. For staff working in English maximum-security prisons, those who society has excluded are not 'folk devils' or distant phantoms depicted in media accounts with equal amounts of fascination and revulsion. They are real individuals who it is their duty to hold in custody.

Maximum-Security Prison Policy in England

To explore the tensions that are created for prison staff working with those cast as 'dangerous others' or 'evil monsters', it is first necessary to briefly outline aspects of the rationale behind the establishment of maximum-security prisons in England and then to consider their structure. In order to do so, this article relies on data and analysis conducted during two research studies, which took place in 2005 and 2007-2008. Both studies used an ethnographic approach which cumulatively included 14 months field work in all 5 men's long-term, maximum-security prisons in England. Between them, these two projects yielded: 450 hours of observation, 105 in-depth interviews with prison staff (civilians, officers, and governors) and 204 in-depth interviews with prisoners. Participants were selected using snowball, opportunistic, and purposeful sampling and included a representative sample according to the population demographics of each prison. The research and interviews in both studies sought to examine what shaped contemporary life in maximum-security prisons, with a broad focus on order, legitimacy, and quality of life. Both studies also included an historical component informed by analysis of original materials generated through 43 in-depth oral history interviews with both ordinary and key figures in the history of maximum-security prisons, including long-serving prison staff, former prison governors, civil servants, and senior managers in the Prison Service. These participants were selected based on their length of service within the individual prison establishments or within the organisation. The research and analysis followed a constructivist grounded theory approach which included the simultaneous collection and analysis of data, comparative methods, in-field refinement of theoretical ideas, and focused methods of data coding (see Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 1978). These methods allowed for an inductive, data-led approach which was consistent with the overall ethnographic design of the research projects. In this article, these data are also supplemented with a reading and analysis of key texts – including

internal official documents, the writings of criminologists and practitioners, and prison inspectorate and inquiry reports.

Maximum-Security prisons in England have a relatively short, but particularly salient collective history. They were first established in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s had significant problems with maintaining order (King and Morgan 1980; Home Office 1984; Sparks et al, 1996; Liebling 2002; Drake 2006; 2009). It is important to acknowledge that the operational arrangements of maximum-security prisons in England are somewhat unique in comparison to elsewhere. They are not like, for example, American-style supermax facilities which often include little staff-prisoner engagement and few opportunities for prisoners to emerge from their cells (King 1999; Rhodes 2004). English maximum-security conditions allow prisoners to associate with one another, become employed in a range of educational or vocational activities in the prison, attend structured exercise, and engage in fairly high levels of staff-prisoner interaction. The original rationale for their approach was founded on the perception that long-term imprisonment was in itself a harsh punishment and, as a result, prisoners who required the highest conditions of security should be provided with a liberal regime that offered choice and autonomy within an appropriately secure perimeter (Home Office 1968). Further, the notion of concentrating high-security prisoners in a single fortress style prison (Home Office 1966) was thought by some to increase the likelihood of creating repressive prison conditions (Home Office 1968). In an effort to avoid such an eventuality, it was decided that those prisoners who required the very highest conditions of security should be *dispersed* amongst a population who did not require such high levels of security. The adoption of this policy was not without its critics (King and Morgan 1980). However, in the event, the policy was implemented in 1968 and so began the oddly titled 'dispersal prison system'.

Despite the ambition of dispersals to create more orderly and secure prison environments, their first 25 years were fraught with significant problems of order, particularly in relation to prison riots (see King and Morgan, 1980; Sparks et al. 1996). Their operational problems were arguably the result of the practical difficulties of implementing a 'liberal regime within a secure perimeter'. Dispersal prison governors experimented with locally designed regimes and strategies to maintain order. Each dispersal prison, therefore, differed in their internal practices and the levels of control they exercised over prisoners. Further, there was a heavy reliance on staff discretion which varyingly resulted in inconsistent practices and uneven prisoner experiences – both within and between dispersals (see Sparks et al. 1996).

It is beyond the scope of this article to delve further into the extent, details, and causes behind all of the operational difficulties of the early maximum-security prison system (but for an in-depth consideration of the problems of order in dispersals see King and Morgan 1980; Home Office 1984; Sparks, Bottoms and Hay 1996; for more detailed histories of the dispersal system, see: Liebling 2002; Drake 2006; 2009; and in preparation). It is important, however, to note that that the problems with order which troubled these prisons up until the mid-1990s have left an indelible mark on institutional and organisational memory. This accumulated history of disorder is important to understanding the objective structures that have shaped what might be called the 'habitus' of maximum-security. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is a multi-layered concept which includes both individual and collective trajectories and histories (Bourdieu 1990). In some respects it might be best understood as a structure of the mind, though Bourdieu argues that it does not include explicit rules that dictate what one should think or do (Bourdieu 1990). He suggests instead: 'agents who are equipped with it will behave in certain ways in certain circumstances' (1990: 77). With it, he seeks to understand both structure and agency, discourse and action (Callewaert 2006). Understanding maximum-security as a habitus is useful in establishing the foundations and deep structures of the contemporary ethos of maximum-security prisons. It helps to explicate the processes by which constructions of criminals as 'dangerous others' in popular culture, the media and in political rhetoric come to hold salience for maximum-security prison staff.

The 'Habitus of Maximum-Security'

The mid-1990s is widely agreed amongst prison staff and managers as well as prison commentators and researchers as marking a discernable turning point in Prison Service policy and practice (Wheatley 1997; Clark 1997; Morgan 1997; Liebling 2002; Drake 2006; 2008; 2009; and in preparation). This turning point must, of course, be understood against the socio-political climate in which these prisons were situated. Loader (2006) has canvassed the move toward a more overtly populist political bipartisanship that began in the early 1980s. From the mid 1950s to the late 1970s, according to Loader, decisions about crime and punishment were led by a relatively small cohort of liberal elites, characterised by what he has called their 'Platonic guardianship'. Perceived shortcomings of this approach were identified by the Conservative government in the 1980s, who introduced a new rhetoric of governance. Loader argues:

> …the Conservative government of the early 1980s launched a sustained, radical critique of the alleged weaknesses and indecisiveness of liberal rule, and its role in rendering Britain 'ungovernable' (King, 1975). The commitment of Platonic

guardianship to patient, deliberative policy formation and its excessive zeal to protect individual rights and keep a lid upon public passions, failed, on this view, to recognise that good order and government require that 'enemies within' (whether they be burglars, muggers, rioters or striking miners) be identified and defeated. What followed in the early 1980s was, inter alia: a penal rhetoric dominated by deterrence and retribution…and a crime-fighting agenda... (2006: 574).

In relation to this same span of time, Sim (2009) has argued that the impact of the succession of Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997 included a strengthening of the punitive goals of imprisonment in Britain. Against this political context, two escapes from two maximum-security prisons occurred – one in September 1994, from Whitemoor and the other in January 1995 – from Parkhurst. In practitioners' retrospective accounts of key events in Prison Service history, the Whitemoor and Parkhurst escapes, the shock that they caused, and the governmental and organisational responses to them are identified as defining moments in the Prison Service that marked a new era in prison administration, especially in dispersals.

The occurrence of these two escapes became a catalyst for the propagation of certain penal and security discourses. In the world of the prison and its attendant political field, these escapes were constructed and responded to in disaster terms. They attracted immediate political, media and public attention. As one former officer recalled in relation to the Whitemoor escape:

> It had a big impact on the local community, huge impact on the staff….Staff who worked [here at the time] were a laughing stock around the bars and in the schools. Kids got teased. And that hurt people. Everybody's chins were well and truly on the floor (Former officer and former governor grade #9).

Urgent inquiries were called with specific terms of reference to make recommendations to prevent such events from recurring. The escapes seemed tantamount to a threat of national security (Woodcock 1994; Learmont 1995). This observation shares parallels with Cohen's (1972/1980) analysis of media and political reactions to the Mods and Rockers disturbances. He delineated the way psychological and social significance of the activities of the Mods and Rockers was perceived and constructed in disaster terms in political rhetoric and in media accounts, which in turn, endured in public opinion statements. Importantly, these disturbances and the damage they caused were not disasters of the same order as earthquakes or floods (Cohen, 1980: 22), though their construction as such could open up particular discourses surrounding

what measures could be put in place to prevent such occurrences from happening again. The construction of these two prison escape in disaster terms invited questions about 'security'. The invocation of which can signal both urgency and the need for extreme measures (Zedner 2003; 2009).

The reaction to the Whitemoor and Parkhurst escapes cannot be called a moral panic, though the political rhetoric and media attention that the escapes attracted were of an order that demanded drastic change. Media accounts included details of the escapes and criticism of maximum-security prison policy. Prison staff who worked in these establishments at the time felt as though they had been complicit in a disaster:

> The problem was that *everybody* jumped on the bandwagon, all the local papers jumped on it, led by the national press and the TV and for days and weeks we had TV cameras outside the prison…so it was a bad time for the Prison Service in general. And then you had quite a delay until they published the report, the Woodcock Report that came out, and then there was a documentary on the failings of [the prison] again. So again you just get over it and then all the embarrassment comes back about it (Prison Officer #8).

Ultimately serious disaster was averted because all the escapees were recaptured a short time after both incidents. However, the occurrence of the escapes was viewed as inexcusable and was attributed to the 'liberal' and 'permissive' dispersal prison policy. As such they provided the means and political leverage that was needed to argue against the perceived weaknesses of some of the more liberally-intentioned aspects of these prisons in favour of more punitive and security-driven strategies. Increased security focus in prisons had been an expressed goal of the Conservative Government since the early 1990s. Sim (1994: 42) has pointed out that on the day that Woolf reported on his inquiry into the Strangeways riots (Woolf 1991), the then Home Secretary, Kenneth Baker, made clear the intention to bring about a wider range of security and control measures in prisons, including stiffer penalties for prisoners who engaged in riots. After the Whitemoor and Parkhurst escapes, Baker's successor Michael Howard, presented an agenda promoting prison austerity and famously declared at this time that 'prison works' (King 1995). The escapes and their framing in disaster terms provided a convenient rationale for the implementation of rapid and extreme solutions, which were deemed as essential and necessary. It is at this point that some of the key structures in the contemporary habitus of maximum-security were established.

The Woodcock (1994) and Learmont (1995) Reports, which respectively inquired into the escapes and made recommendations to

improve prison security, resulted in a range of practices and procedures that would significantly alter the working and lived experience of especially maximum-security prisons, but all other security categories too. The vast majority of the recommendations in these two reports were related to matters of either security or control (a few examples include: prescriptive procedures for searching staff, prisoners, visitors and cells; volumetric control of prisoners' property; heavier control over prisoners' movements; dog patrols; and increased use of CCTV). Together the Woodcock and Learmont Reports produced 191 recommendations, the majority of which were implemented. These resulted in real and significant policy changes (Clark 1997) which in turn led to a substantial transformation in the way prison administration was conceived and practiced. As Liebling (2002) has observed:

> The concept of security was transformed. It was no longer about the perimeter, but was made up of thousands of daily practices inside the prison. The perimeter wall was only one small part of a secure prison. Procedures and practices mattered too (p. 119).

The engagement with a range of new daily practices began at this time to change the working practices of staff, who gradually began to enact and embody 'maximum-security'. As Liebling (2002: 125) has shown, this was not, at first, an easy transition for many staff who believed some of the changes were being made too rapidly. However, there was a general consensus that the new security policies were 'right' and were informed by an accumulated knowledge that had been gained about 'how prisons really work' (Senior Manager, Prison Service). The focus on security included not simply practices, but also a new orienting purpose. The Learmont report argued that 'security', should be seen as the primary goal of prisons. Although, the centralisation of the goal of security was at first met by discomfort by staff and managers (see Clark, 1997; Liebling, 2002), in the intervening years after the implementation of the Woodcock and Learmont recommendations security gradually became 'hard-wired' into the very fabric of the Prison Service.

Every aspect of maximum-security prison life has come to be viewed through the filter of security, which can and does constrain the way individuals and actions are constructed and understood. It prevents the possibility of other filters being applied and constrains alternative imaginings of how prison life might be differently arranged. The 'habitus' of maximum-security, then, must be seen as a belief, notion, penal cultural or moray that is not routinely subjected to 'rational reasoning'. As a concept it has become taken-for-granted as necessary by prison staff who do not question its purpose or morality. It is a learned habit; something which is expressed and embodied in the daily practices of prison officers. For the prison officer it is both a state of mind and a shared belief that has currency in social structure. Indeed, it is an ideal

or belief promoted by the popular media and upheld by society at large as *necessary*.

The accumulated histories of maximum-security prisons, particularly their problems of disorder, have contributed to the formation of the constituent parts of this habitus. The tighter focus on security has clarified the administration of these prisons and resulted in more procedurally consistent practices within and between dispersals. The particular security measures adopted (e.g. CCTV; dog patrols; increased levels of surveillance and searching) also resulted in higher levels of control, which in turn, contributed to more orderly prison regimes. In this way, the habitus of maximum-security is self-reinforcing because it results in the appearance of more controlled, efficient and comparable prison environments which prove that it 'works' and is necessary. Moreover, the security agenda has proven to be compatible with and able to incorporate other additions to prison administration and management, including performance targets, offending behaviour programmes and incentives schemes which seek to regulate prisoners' behaviour. Each of these aspects of contemporary prison life have, to some extent, complemented the over-arching purpose of security and contributed to its justification. The habitus of maximum-security also comes with a particular set of discourses surrounding prisoners. These discourses were introduced in the aftermath of the escapes and laid the foundation for constructing prisoners as 'enemies within' and as threatening, dangerous others.

Prisoners as 'Enemies Within'

Maximum-security staff work day-to-day with people described in official discourses as some of the most 'difficult and dangerous prisoners in the country' (see HMCIP 1997; 2002). The extent to which this is truer in the contemporary context than it was when dispersal prisons were first formed is a matter of subjective conjecture. The crimes for which contemporary maximum-security prisoners have been convicted do not suggest trends that are inconsistent with the longer history of dispersals. They have always housed the small proportion of prisoners convicted of very serious or prolific violent crimes.[2] Apart from these few prisoners, the crimes for which prisoners in dispersals are convicted are not markedly different from those serving in Category B establishments. The top four types of crimes for which maximum-security prisoners are imprisoned are robbery, murder, drugs and sexual offences (Drake 2006)[3]. Despite these

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[2] There are only around 30 prisoners in England and Wales serving whole-life tariffs due to the extreme seriousness of their crimes, all the rest of the maximum-security prisoner population could theoretically be released one day.

[3] The vast majority of the maximum-security prisoner population could be housed in Category B establishments. Only around 30% of those serving time in maximum-security prisons are actually 'high security' (Category A) prisoners (Drake 2006).

realities, the underlying and often explicit message that officers are given in daily wing briefings, regular security awareness training, and the heavy security-focused environment in which they work is that they are responsible for 'very serious, very violent offenders'. Whilst this may, in part, be true, it is not a new or unique characteristic of the maximum-security prison population. The change that has taken place is the focus on prisoners as security risks first and foremost and the tendency therefore to view them as 'other' or the 'enemy'. Staff-prisoner relationships have, unsurprisingly, been affected by these changes and, in many ways have taken on a sense of military occupation in their character. There is an underlying general propensity towards an 'us versus them' approach to staff-prisoner relationships, though the security-laden approach of staff towards prisoners is both more subtle and more tactical than such a combative stance implies. In essence, a 'Cold War' atmosphere prevails, complete with espionage, other forms of intelligence gathering, tactical and contingency planning, and even a degree of propaganda. Within this structure and like other crime control arenas, the language and technology of risk management have become useful handmaidens, incorporated in the pursuit of prison security (Zedner 2003).

Across prison and criminal justice agencies the management of risk in relation to prisoners and crime has become a central mechanism of crime control. Feeley and Simon (1992: 452) have suggested that the penal realm in particular is: '…concerned with techniques to identify, classify, and manage groupings sorted by dangerousness. The task is managerial not transformative…' (Feeley & Simon 1992: 452). By identifying prisoners as 'risks' that need to be managed an atmosphere is created where the 'othering' and essentialising of prisoners is seemingly inevitable. Although the provision of offending behaviour programmes might be seen to include a transformative element, these programmes too are closely connected to risk and security classifications and are, in practice, absorbed into the security apparatus. Offending behaviour programmes implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) reinforce a model that explains criminality as a rational-choice or as the result of individual pathology. Consistent with media representations of crime and the criminal, these programmes put primacy on prisoners-as-offenders and construct their identities and capacities in limited ways. Such essentialising of prisoners within the context of cognitive behavioural programmes, then, reinforces dominant media representations of crime and the 'othering' of prisoners.

Media constructions of those convicted of serious crimes (who are sometimes the named individuals who end up in maximum-security prisons) inevitably depict such individuals as unpredictable, dangerous, inexorable and irrational. Such constructions are over-applied to the entire population of dispersal prisoners and can become conflated with the

real risk maximum-security prisoners have posed to prison *order* in the past (though problems of control and problems of security should be viewed separately, see King and Morgan 1980). One of the fundamental flaws of the dispersal system has always been its policy to 'disperse' prisoners who require the highest conditions of security amongst a population of *those who do not require such conditions* (italics mine, Home Office 1968; King and Morgan 1980). As King and Morgan argued in 1980:

> …it unwarrantably taints the long-term population with the high security or dangerous prisoner label. What all this suggests is that whoever is put into dispersal prisons, for whatever reasons originally, they soon come to be seen as needing or deserving maximum security (pp. 81-2).

Such a policy has a tendency to 'level-up' assessments of risk, dangerousness, deviance, and threat. However, in the original dispersal system these fundamental flaws of the policy were somewhat mitigated by the discourses and political rhetoric of ruling liberal elites (described as Platonic guardians by Loader (2006) earlier in this article). For example, in the report that established dispersal prisons and provided impetus for the implementation of 'liberal' regimes within them, the humanity of prisoners was emphasised and their status as prisoners was seen as secondary.

> …the regime of a prison must aim to meet the needs of human beings in custody…we have tried always to bear in mind the need to preserve a prisoner's self respect, to enable him to make choices in his day to day existence, and to give him access to a variety of mental and sensory stimuli that will help to combat the deadening effect of a long period of institutional life and the sameness of the environment (Home Office 1968: 77, paras 203-4).

Although the extent to which these discourses 'from above' permeated prison environments on the ground may be questioned, their presence at the level of policy and amongst Prison Service senior managers meant that prisoners were 'officially' constructed as human beings and not as 'other'. As a result dispersal prison governors were under some pressure to foreground the 'humane treatment' of prisoners in their approach to operational practice. However, once these liberal discourses from above gradually gave way to security-oriented ones, prison governors were instead under pressure to foreground 'security'. Such a shift in focus, which was also in keeping with discourses increasingly heard within law and order political rhetoric and in popular media left few alternative discourses available to moderate the tendency of dispersal prison policy to 'define dangerousness up'. Further, the discourses of dispersal prison staff began to unreservedly construct prisoners as potential security risks.

These developments converged with long-established staff concerns with losses of order. As such, one of the structures of the 'habitus of maximum-security' is the institutional memory of over 25 years of disorder (despite the fact that there has not been a serious riot in these prisons since 1998). Staff concern over the possibility of violence and the threat prisoners can pose to their personal safety remains quite deeply felt:

> …the potential for violence [in this prison] is immense, absolutely *immense.* I always think if people outside here, living in [surrounding villages] knew the potential there was inside these four walls, they wouldn't sleep at night. We have some horrible, horrible people here. Things happen here every week, prisoner on prisoner violence that just absolutely makes you wonder what type of people we have here. (Prison Officer #32)

As the above quotation suggests, the depravity or individual pathology of criminality constructed in media accounts has come to be unproblematically imported into the prison as the dominant model for explaining deviancy. The conflation of concerns over security with deeply-held staff concerns over control has led to a tendency for staff to view prisoners as always potentially threatening and as 'dangerous others'. These constructions can, in part, be traced to the particular tone of the security strategy implemented after the Whitemoor and Parkhurst escapes. Rod Morgan has astutely observed that the construction of prisoners in both the Woodcock and Learmont reports marked a significant departure from the way prisoners had traditionally been constructed in official inquiry reports up to that time. He argues that in previous inquiries into the state of prisons prisoners had been seen as 'real people':

> By contrast Woodcock and Learmont see prisoners as 'dangerous phantoms who must be exiled or controlled. They are the *objects* of the Prison Service, not its subjects… (Morgan, 1997: 66).

One of the most explicit passages of the Learmont report which objectifies prisoners
states:

> A feature of prison life is that prisoners endeavour to manipulate staff. They may do this for malicious reasons or as a game played for psychological domination…In manipulating staff, prisoners seek to take control from them and this threatens safe custody, leaving staff anxious and uncertain (Learmont, 1995: 123, para. 4.45).

The discourse used here is carefully chosen and includes several emotive themes: domination, maliciousness, manipulation, threat, anxiety and uncertainty. In keeping with media representations of the problem of crime and the criminal the discourse used in the Learmont report, it might be argued, elevated the threat that prisoners actually pose and in so doing provided justification for heightened security measures and left little room for debate about the extent to which such measures were necessary for the whole of the maximum-security prisoner population.

Othering as a Means of Denying the Tensions in Prison Work

For prison staff such constructions of criminals and prisoners can be seen as unequivocal and necessary to maintaining prison security. They are thus easily incorporated into the 'habitus' of maximum-security. However, it must be recognised that tension can arise for staff when they are confronted with aspects of their role that challenge such constructions. The official rhetoric on the purpose of prisons still includes a secondary clause that recognises the humanity of prisoners. The Prison Service Statement of Purpose reads:

> Her Majesty's Prison Service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and help them lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release.

In the practice or habitus of maximum-security the first clause in the above statement dominates the second one. Prisoners as 'dangerous others' cannot easily be reconciled with prisoners as human beings. Delivering 'care in custody' or fulfilling a 'decency agenda' (both underused, but still present phrases in official prison rhetoric) are difficult to implement alongside the security agenda and are, in practice, subordinated to it. Part of the reason for this is because they contradict certain dominant beliefs amongst officers about the way prisoners should be treated. Crawley (2004) argues that prison officers across the prison system adhere to occupational as well as establishment-specific cultural norms. Expressing 'care' or 'concern' for a prisoner can be viewed with contempt amongst prison officer cultures and risks exclusion and censure by fellow officers. The security agenda and viewing prisoners as 'dangerous others', therefore, can provide a means by which staff in maximum-security (particularly) may feel they can legitimately avoid engaging with the parts of their role that they might personally find difficult or may ideologically disagree with.

The construction of prisoners as depraved individuals, dangerous others, or perpetual threats to security have grown extremely salient for staff. In part these views have been reinforced by the availability of

discourses that suggest that the only appropriate means of managing prisoners convicted of serious crime is with 'harsh punishments' and heavy security controls. Dominant messages of this nature come to prison staff from a variety of sources. For example, former Minister of Justice, Jack Straw, made frequent public statements directly to prison staff and to the media that 'prison is for punishment' (e.g. The Guardian, 27 October, 2008). Such a declaration can provide further means by which some of the tension prison staff experience by being required to treat prisoners with decency and humanity can be relieved. That is, in addition to feeling troubled by the violation of their occupational norms, many prison staff experience tension in treating prisoners with humanity and decency when they find the crimes for which they have been convicted personally disturbing. Declaring that prison is for punishment means that some staff can internally justify de-personalising prisoners or avoid trying to understand them as individuals because they are, after all, in prison to be punished. Punishment or its more benign alternative 'secure containment' have come to be seen as the only appropriate ways to respond to *these types of people*.

Welfarist concerns over the extent to which prisons should avoid creating repressive conditions, should endeavour to create opportunities for prisoners to retain a sense of autonomy or be given choice in order to ameliorate the painful and damaging effects of a long prison sentence have long been dismissed. Meaningfulness in the work of maximum-security prison staff is found more often in fulfilling their duty to protect the public, not in making a difference in the lives of individual prisoners. Indeed, such a goal expressed by a member of maximum-security prison staff runs the risk of derision and condemnation by colleagues (another potential violation of occupational norms, Crawley 2004) as well as censure on the grounds of naivety. Further, maximum-security staff have found new meanings for their work that remain consistent with constructing prisoners as dangerous others. Many staff experience a degree of machoistic satisfaction in having custodial responsibility for those who society has found it necessary to 'take out of circulation'. The reality of the crimes some of these prisoners have committed, coupled with representations of criminals in the popular media as 'monsters' combines for prison staff to create a sense of heroism about their work.

> I'm always being asked by people, 'have you anybody famous at your prison?' Yeah about 600! They've all been famous at some time. Most of them have been on the front page or headlines of the newspaper. But once the public is done with the story - three days later whenever those newspapers are today's chip wrappers - they're forgotten about but we still have them here. And I am amazed sometimes at how professional the staff are when I go to them and I say: 'I've got some information here from the security

department that says that prisoner who you're going to unlock in ten seconds has got a knife and he may well come out and try and stab you…, so I want you to be prepared for this. I want you to keep an eye on him. I want you to make sure that if anything happens, we're ready and prepared.' They go and they unlock them, and they stand there and they watch and if something does happen, they intervene and they stop it. And if I was to take anybody off the street in any other job and say 'look we're going to unlock this murderer who has got lots of previous charges for stabbing people, and we think he's got a knife and he may well have a go at you, so I want *you* to unlock him now'. They would run the other way, but we do it and the staff do it on a daily basis (Senior Prison Officer #24).

As is evident in both the above quotation and the one below, the entire population of maximum-security prisoners has become tainted with a 'dangerousness or infamous' label, as such seeing all their charges as 'other' becomes a natural and obvious conclusion to draw. In response to being asked about the hardest part of maximum-security prison work, one officer responded by saying:

> You know, I actually believe that it's painful in a way for prison officers to be in the company of these prisoners. They are such different animals at their very core…because a lot of people we're dealing with are very bad people and if you didn't watch it, you know, it would get to you…(Prison Officer #12).

This distancing between self and other suggests, as Greer and Jewkes (2005) have identified, an *absolute other* who is at the extreme of otherness. These are people who are perceived as:

> …those who are *in* society but not *of* it: paedophiles, child killers and religious fundamentalist terrorists, whose acts are portrayed as an affront against the sacrosanct values of virtue, decency and morality, apparently held by all respectable citizens (Greer and Jewkes 2005: 21).

The strength of such constructions coupled with the habitus of maximum-security thus constrains possibilities for alternative representations of prisoners labelled as 'dangerous others' or for alternative ways of structuring the ethos and conditions of maximum-security prisons.

Conclusion

Representations of crime and the criminal in the media and in law and order political rhetoric hold both salience and meaning in the work of maximum-security prison staff. When examined through the 'habitus of

maximum-security', as described above, such representations can be seen as essential, unequivocal and necessary. Further the habitus of maximum-security constrains possibilities for engagement with alternative constructions of prisoners, their motivations or their identities. The seriousness of the crimes committed by some of those housed in maximum-security prisons make them difficult individuals to understand for prison staff and the general public alike. Further, the tendency for media constructions of crime and the criminal to see 'depravity' or 'wickedness' as common features in all criminal activity leads to a tendency to 'define dangerousness up' and see it as a general trait of all maximum-security prisoners. Moreover, the seemingly innate nature of 'evil' and 'monstrosity' that often accompanies punitive political discourses and media constructions of the criminal leave few incentives or opportunities to think about other causes of or solutions to crime. The 'simple' answer, of course, is that crime is caused by purely depraved individuals without the capacity to understand the value of human life or human compassion. However, such explanations have no empirical basis and are dismissive of the complex lives, mutli-layered identities, and social backgrounds of those who end up in long-term prisons. These explanations, however, are convenient and allow avoidance of other, socially contingent or personally challenging avenues of inquiry. As Jewkes has argued:

> To be blunt, crime is constructed and consumed in such a way as to permit the reader, viewer or listener to side-step reality rather than confronting or 'owning up' to it... the crimes which conform to journalistic perceptions of 'newsworthiness' elicit a deep cultural unease that we, as a society can only confront if we detach ourselves from the perpetrator(s) emotionally, morally and physically. Through a process of alienation and demonisation we establish the 'otherness' of those who deviate and (re)assert our own innocence and normality (Jewkes, 2004: 201, citing Blackman and Walkerdine 2001).

Jewkes' observations above hold true for prison staff as well. It is 'safer' and less emotionally troubling for staff to detach themselves from prisoners and avoid the tensions associated with recognising that in actuality prisoners are not 'them' but 'us'. Further, the deep structures of the security agenda in maximum-security prisons actively discourage staff as individual agents from attempting to propagate alternative constructions of prisoners because such attempts are seen as anathema to the maintenance of security.

These reflections on the prison provide opportunity to question both how serious crimes are responded to and constructed in popular culture, media accounts, and political rhetoric and the potential consequences of

such constructions. The prison helps to illuminate the ways in which the exclusion, othering, and objectification of those who we may feel threatened by can restrict and close down opportunities for alternative ways of orienting and shaping public morality and 'owning up' to complex social problems that have seemingly become unthinkable and unknowable.

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