

## Book reviews

### **Sound, order and survival in prison: The Rhythms and routines of HMP Midtown**

by Dr Kate Herrity

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This innovative and sensitive book explores the soundscape of a prison, based on extensive research by Kate Herrity, currently a fellow at Kings College, University of Cambridge. Although I worked in prisons for over 20 years, I didn't consciously think about sound until I first encountered Dr Herrity almost a decade ago, at a prison where I was governor. Prior to that, I had largely treated the everyday sounds of prison life as an indistinct 'white noise'. After learning of her research, I took a moment to listen to the sounds around me and have subsequently been more mindful of the soundscape. This book realises the potential of sound as a tool to access the social world of prisons and to sensitize actors, including people like me working in the system, to the significance of sound.

The book is based on a year-long fieldwork in 'HMP Midtown', the anonymised name for a city centre prison holding 300 men, mostly in a single wing. The prison largely holds people attending the local courts and serving short sentences. The average stay is 46 days. The research for this book was ethnographic, involving many hours being in and around the

prison and its people, listening, interacting, and observing. The methodology is described as 'auscultation', a term that is drawn from the medical lexicon and refers to the process of listening as part of medical diagnosis, such as using a stethoscope to check heart and breathing. In this study, the process of listening is used as an instrument to explore and understand the social world of prisons.

Sound is, of course, all around us. The opening pages of this book describe a soundscape that to insiders will be all too familiar: 'Keys, jangle of chain, thunk of lock bites, clunk of lock, creak of gate' (p.1). While the texture of sound alters from place to place within the prison, Herrity describing that from outside the wing, there is a 'lively symphony of radios, tellies, voices', while in administrative areas there is the 'the more familiar thrum of office life; jovial voices, ringing phones, tapping keyboards' (p.1). This absorbing description immediately and authentically draws the reader into the life of the prison.

This book deploys sound to explore aspects of the social world of prisons including power, vulnerability, relationships and order. There is too much intriguing and enlightening material to cover in this review, but there are a couple of examples that really stood out. First, the way that sound conveys an emotional texture. The noisy intensity of the visits hall, including the voices of women and children, otherwise absent in the prison, contains within it all of the emotions of family life condensed into a confined space for an hour or two — the love and companionship but also the strain and stigma for families. As the visits end, the eerie silence and 'ghostly remnants' (p.24) left behind evoke the

painfulness of separation. The sounds of the crowds at the local football stadium bridges space at time; a shared experience with those in the community, while also accentuating physical separation. Through these examples, Herrity explores the permeability of prison walls and the continuing, if constrained place within the community.

Another example that stands out is the exploration of the dynamics of power. The book describes how prisoners use the ritual of shouting out of windows at night as a masculine display and a way of establishing hierarchy, for example by taunting and threatening the vulnerable. For some people in prison, the quietness and solitude of the cell can be a refuge away from the power struggles of everyday prison life. The exercise of power by prison officers can be conscious but is also mundane. The institutional thoughtlessness of clanging gates, heavy footsteps and raised voices in the middle of the night are used as examples of how power is exercised, and imposed, in ways that are often unconscious to those wielding it. Yet wherever there is power, there is also resistance and Herrity provides the example of protest. The rhythm of the banging of cell doors conveys different emotions and messages, including the rapid rhythmic 'bangbangbang' (p.115) conveying frustration and irritation, while the slow rhythmic 'bang bang bang' (p.116) expresses focussed and intense displeasure. Banging can also be collective and euphoric, erupting around the wing to celebrate sporting success. In these various ways, Herrity argues that banging can be 'a means of redressing unequal power relations by imposing an effect on others through noise' (p.117). For those

who live and work in the prison, the familiar, everyday sound of the prison is part of the routine — unlock, movements of prisoners to work, cleaning and domestic management, the serving of meals. All have a different sound and aural quality. Herrity describes that: 'The soundscape could carry and shape 'the feel' of the day, providing an invaluable barometer for wellbeing and stability' (p.66) and that officers 'listened for anomalies or disruptions to the usual rhythmic ebb and flow, for movement out of speed and out of place' (p. 77). Collectively, these observations reveal the ways in which sound integral to issues of power, order, and resistance.

Given my history as a prison manager, my thoughts somewhat inevitably turned to the practical application of Herrity's work. How

could a better understanding of sound be put to use? Sound could, for example be better deployed in the architecture of prisons, as it has in urban planning and design, to accentuate natural sounds, reduce traffic noise and insulate private spaces.<sup>1</sup> Distinct spaces are created for those with particular needs, such as the current emergence of 'neurodiversity units',<sup>2</sup> or the more established older prisoner units,<sup>3</sup> how could sound be incorporated into the design of these units such as reducing disruptive noise or creating soothing sounds. Prison officers could be trained to hone their senses, including hearing, as part of their 'jailcraft'.<sup>4</sup> These questions reflect the success of Herrity's work in encouraging engagement with the significance of sound in everyday life. Herrity's work, however, does much more

than this. Like all the best ethnographic research, it offers the reader access to hidden experiences, revealing them with richness and complexity, and invites critical engagement with difficult questions about institutions and society. The text is not a narrow and esoteric book about sound, but rather it uses sound to examine and illuminate the social dynamics within prisons and between prison and the community.

This is an innovative and insightful book. For practitioners, Herrity invites the reader to engage with the senses to experience and understand the prison world. As Herrity herself observes, the art of listening takes on added potency in prisons, 'a place where people so frequently feel unheard' (p.4).

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1. Ruiz Arana, U. (2024). *Urban Soundscapes: A Guide to Listening for Landscape Architecture and Urban Design*. Routledge.
  2. Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2021). *Neurodiversity in the Criminal Justice System: A review of evidence*. CJI.
  3. House of Commons Justice Committee (2020). *Ageing prison population*. HM Government.
  4. Liebling, A., Price, D. and Shefer, G. (2011). *The Prison Officer* (2nd ed). Willan.