

# Prison expansion without a labour market orientation?

Magnus Hörnqvist considers how labour market changes have affected the experience of imprisonment.

Fifty years ago, the model prisons in Sweden were being built around factories. The inmates were disciplined to adapt to the routine habits of industrial labour. Their release into the welfare state was designed to meet the needs of the labour market. Today, when new prisons are being built, to accommodate the rising prison population, the labour market appears more distant. The inmates are no longer seen to be employable. The current rehabilitative approach, the *What works?* strategy, arises out of the assumption that the inmates are different from other citizens precisely because they lack the fundamental prerequisites for employment. They suffer from anti-social values; that is, impulsivity and irresponsibility, and do not master the necessary cognitive and social skills. Thus, finding work and accommodation for inmates is futile; such an effort will sooner or later be subverted by the inherent shortcomings of the individual.

At the same time, the assembly line has gone overseas, and several researchers, writing with the US carceral archipelago in mind, have pointed to the fact that prisons swallow the growing number of people who do not compete on the regular labour market. The relation to the economy is negative. The prison is seen as the central pillar of 'the government of surplus', since it takes care of a part of the population which is not required on the labour market, and which in this sense constitutes a surplus (De Giorgi 2006). The surplus population is physically isolated, and barred from interfering with the operation of the market economy. Their surplus status is permanent rather than temporary. In 'the waste management prison', dangerous collectives are warehoused without any thoughts about their future labour market participation (Simon 2007).

Similar trends are noticeable in Europe as well, even though the rate of incarceration is significantly lower than in the US. The current government spending on prisons signals a determination to manage repressively the growing numbers of poor people. Betrayed by the economy or failing social security systems, the 78 million poor Europeans may face prison, in the last resort. Yet it would be wrong to think of this as a strictly repressive campaign. Even the small minority of the non-working population that is sent to prison will encounter an institution that is productive and maintains positive relations with the labour market. The rising incarceration rates contain elements of 'the government of surplus' and 'waste

management', but the prison cannot be reduced to the repressive function of keeping undesirable people at arms length from the rich, or the orderly wage labourers. It is also a site of productive power, as Foucault would say, with intimate connections to the prevailing economic regime.

I would argue that the labour market is no more distant to the prisons today than during the height of the welfare era. The wage labourer is still at the centre of the training programmes, and everything that is new in the *What works?* strategy reflects the changes in the labour market. The current prison is shot through with the norms of the service economy, as modified by considerations of social class. The emphasis on cognitive and social skills does not imply a good-bye to the workplace. On the contrary; it reminds us that it takes more to reconstitute wage labourers for the low-paid service sector. A crash course in the virtues of being on time and delayed gratification is no longer sufficient.

*The Reasoning and Rehabilitation Training Programme* is the most well-known of all cognitive behavioural programmes. Since the mid 1980s, it has been widely used in Western European and North American prisons. Self-reasoning techniques and role-playing are the preferred means of intervention. According to the manual, by participating in the exercises, prison inmates will learn 'to act in social situations in such a way that one is *accepted* and met with positive reactions – rather than *rejected and punished* – which demands that the offender develops an adequate register of cognitive and social skills' (emphasis added). The use of the words 'accepted', 'rejected', and 'punished' are not indicative of a relationship between equals. The inmate is the subordinate party. The responsibility lies with the inmate to act so as to avoid being 'rejected' and instead become 'accepted'. This begs the question, who makes the choice? 'Employers or other authority figures', for instance, will reject or accept former prison inmates, who have to settle with being on the receiving end. There are no other imaginable options – such as mutual respect or collective action. As so often in the programme, the inevitability of social class is used as an argument (Hörnqvist 2007).

The main targets for interventions are where inmates demonstrate impulsive reactions in stressful situations and fail to act responsibly in the marginal

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social position which prison inmates are assumed to occupy. In the role-playing and self-reasoning exercises, all situations are fraught with trouble. Four figures constantly recur in these scenarios: 'your boss', 'your parole officer', 'your partner' and 'a friend'. The inmate should learn to handle everyday frustration in the workplace, negotiate conflicts with superiors, manage stress in close relationships and say 'no' to old friends.

'Your boss' in the role-playing exercises is consistently unsympathetic – demanding, irritated, or arrogant. One scenario is: 'You want to ask your boss about a day off, but you notice that he seems tired and irritated when he arrives in the morning'. In another scenario, the issue is a more appropriate dressing at the workplace. The boss requires clothes which the former inmate cannot afford to buy. Among the options at hand, the successful ones involve a combination of deferring and explaining, which makes the boss forgiving to the extent that the former inmate is not fired. In this way, by acting out micro-conflicts at the workplace, the course participants learn that sustained employment relies on complex negotiating and coping skills.

Within labour market research, this is also known as 'soft employability skills', which are considered to be of paramount importance. At the same time, however, wage labourers in the new economy are also expected to be active, flexible, risk-embracing, creative and independent (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004). Even 'at the lowest levels of fluid work, the realm of so-called McJobs – flipping hamburgers or clerking in stores,' the value system has changed, and 'the steady, self-disciplined worker has lost his audience' (Sennett, 2006). Risk-taking and shorter time frames are eroding the classic Protestant work/ethic. But this change, and the creative dimension of employability, is not acknowledged by the authors of prison training programmes. Expressions of creativity and independence are instead exposed in the risk communication system in operation within the prison, and branded as indicators of disorderly behaviour. The old-fashioned norms of self-control and responsibility rule supreme in the world of corrections, with the paradoxical consequence that the same acts and values, which are celebrated as entrepreneurial risk-embracing in the new economy, are considered to be antisocial in the prison.

The prison has changed along with the nature of work. The factory was at the centre of the prison during the industrial era. But when entry level jobs are mainly found in the service sector, the cognitive skills classroom has dethroned the factory. The continuity is also striking. Now, as then, inmates are trained to become wage-labourers. Now, as then, some inmates will establish a foothold on the labour-market,

whereas many will not. The impact of the *What works* strategy on recidivism rates is marginal at best, and suggests that the cognitive-behavioural focus is equally successful – or unsuccessful – as the previous welfare/factory-centred approach. Whereas only a minority of inmates will ever establish themselves on the labour market, no inmate escapes its imperatives. The current ideal of the self-controlled, stress-managing and submissive service worker saturate the walls, and blurs the boundary between what is inside and outside of the economic exchange.

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