

Theatre states: probing the politics of arts-in-prisons programmes

Leonidas K Cheliotis focuses on the proliferation of arts-in-prisons programmes and questions the extent to which they have a positive function

Over recent decades, the use of imprisonment has undergone a dramatic rise in a large number of jurisdictions around the globe. Concurrently, at least in the anglophone world, there has been a rapid expansion of so-called 'rehabilitation programmes' run by practitioners inside prisons, including programmes based on the arts. The aim of this brief commentary is to probe the politics surrounding and underpinning the philosophy, formation, operation and effectiveness of arts-in-prisons programmes in contemporary anglophone jurisdictions, although the analysis may also be applicable elsewhere. To focus attention on the political context and dimensions of arts-in-prisons programmes is to deviate from, and provide a counterweight to, the hagiographic or otherwise unreflexive tenor that typically characterises pertinent criminological scholarship. While there is no denying that arts-in-prisons programmes may and sometimes do perform truly positive functions – a point undermined by hailing them uncritically – the argument outlined below is that they are just as likely to be employed as a means to latent ignoble ends.

Let me begin at the beginning: what exactly are arts-in-prisons programmes supposed to achieve? Commonly evoked to justify investment in prison arts programming is the concept of offender rehabilitation, yet the contours of the concept and the ways in which it should be applied in

practice have long been far from lucid. Despite or perhaps because of this, offender rehabilitation through the arts has been increasingly tied to the tangible and highly appealing goal of recidivism reduction. The problem, in this case, is that prison arts programming cannot realistically address obvious and proven precursors of offending such as unemployment and lack of housing. So long as these precursors continue to go unaddressed by state policy, ex-prisoners will be effectively forced back into crime and arts-in-prisons programmes will have taken upon themselves a heavy load of undeserved blame.

A suitable amount of rehabilitation

Here we would do well to take a step back and question the extent to which offender rehabilitation is a desirable outcome for prison authorities and the public. It seems, for example, that the penal establishment is prepared to take credit for exceptional achievements by prisoner artists, where they are evoked to advertise the prison as a site of effective pedagogy and rehabilitation, only insofar as such cases do not become the norm. Erwin James, who famously took up education and rose to become a regular columnist for *The Guardian* while serving a life sentence in various British prisons, captures this point eloquently when he quotes a prison governor as saying to him: 'Oh, we believe in rehabilitation, but we're not quite sure just how rehabilitated we want prisoners to

be ... You see, so long as society demands retribution for offenders, we have to be careful about allowing you too much rehabilitation' (James, 2003). What is not conveyed by this quote is that prison officials may share such retributive sentiments with 'society', not least because they themselves are members of that society.

The prospect of offender rehabilitation specifically through the arts can also be thought to pose an unconscious ontological threat to prison professionals and the public (including arts practitioners): not a 'fear of falling' as such but a fear of being matched or even overtaken. For artistic development signals acquisition of a prized source of symbolic capital, thus creating possibilities for distinction and upward social mobility to the point of upsetting established power differentials. Behind this fear perhaps lies a latent expectation that prisoners are more likely than most of us to produce inspirational art owing, paradoxically, to the exceptional strains under which they find themselves. And, indeed, this fear may not be unfounded given that prisoner artwork has at times transcended the objective boundaries of the prison and the symbolic boundaries of class, entering the ranks of popular and even 'high' culture; the prison blues in the US is but one example from the musical genre.

It seems no coincidence that prison officers so often effectively sabotage the operation of arts-in-prisons programmes, including sticking to inflexible institutional protocols that pose practical obstacles, being hostile to arts practitioners, mocking prisoners who take part, and claiming that training in the arts runs counter to the very spirit of punishment and may even enhance prisoners' criminal skills. But the negative stance prison officers may take towards arts-in-prisons programmes should not be taken to imply that systematising the process of engagement with the arts behind bars necessarily works best in discovering, preserving or cultivating the creative artistic potential of prisoners.



Prisoners interested in the arts are today frequently channelled into programmes run by practitioners with variable credentials, where they are schooled in the elementary artistic skills they are presumed to lack by dint of their lower-class upbringing and ethos and are preached the virtues of 'high-brow' bourgeois culture as an especially demanding benchmark by which all else is to be judged. Prisoners thereby receive what we may call, paraphrasing Nils Christie (2004), a 'suitable amount of rehabilitation', and are eventually trapped in what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) terms 'cultural goodwill'. While they grow familiar with, and appreciative of, the hierarchy of symbolic goods in the artistic field, they are safely denied access to the practical means of attaining the most desirable standards of artistic expression.

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To this extent, although arts-in-prisons programmes profess to 'empower' prisoners by rehabilitating them, boosting their autonomy, self-control and confidence, the ways in which these programmes are practically structured and operated may furnish precisely the opposite function. No wonder that prisoners' artwork is subjected to perfidious condescension, even by the system entrusted with their 'acculturation'. Consider, for example, the depth and nature of the chasm in power dynamics at ceremonies where the genteel community confers, with a self-delegated authority reminiscent of early twentieth century colonisers who detected traces of 'civilisation under savagery' (Strathern, 1990), certificates to prisoners who 'make it through' an arts scheme.

Arts-in-prisons programmes as 'good stories'

Pausing to take stock at this point, there still remains the crucial question of what policy and civic functions arts-in-prisons programmes serve. Their proclaimed mission of rehabilitating offenders is belied, firstly, by the lack of official effort to clearly determine the ambit of the concept and the form arts-in-prisons programmes should assume; secondly, by the fact that offender rehabilitation through the arts is unrealistically tied to recidivism reduction; and thirdly, by the broader context of opposition to the rehabilitative potential of arts-in-prisons programmes, both at the level of unconscious desires and in terms of practically undermining their operations and outputs.

If, as Stan Cohen (1985) argues, the main function of rehabilitation programmes is to serve as 'good stories' that 'stand for or signify what the system likes to think it is doing, justify or rationalise what it has already done, and indicate what it would like to be doing (if only given the chance and the resources)',

arts-in-prisons programmes may be viewed as partaking in the political art of lending the inherently harsh prison system an appearance of open-heartedness and care. There is an obvious theatrical element at work here, with arts provision to prisoners being itself a play directed by the state for self-promotional ends. That the protagonists in this play tend to be females – arts-in-prisons programmes, for instance, are commonly delivered by women – reaffirms its message: the state is genuinely devoted to the maternalistic task of promoting rehabilitation. All the while, the very fact that arts programming is added to the panoply of rehabilitative interventions inside prison walls lends further retrospective validation to stereotypical perceptions of prisoners – here the necessary extras of the play in process – as pathological cases in need of institutionalised treatment. Once accomplished, this move in turn revalidates the necessity of the programmes that have been invoked and legitimates their hosting institution: the prison, now perceived as the arm of a ‘mother who provides and protects’ (Duncan, 1996).

Taking Cohen’s account one step further, it could be argued that prison arts programming is a ‘good story’ that appeals to the middle-class segment of the population. It is the middle classes, after all, who systematically consecrate the love of art (even as they arbitrarily claim monopoly over knowledge of the ways to love it). Equally, it is the middle classes who ‘donate’ money, time, and what is often their self-ascribed competence to endeavours related to the provision of arts

behind bars (including, for the most daring, unsqueamish and perhaps voyeuristic among them, initiating prisoners into the basic essentials of aesthetic education). This is not to say that the middle classes are somehow purified of punitive sentiments; indeed, it is plausible that their active support for the provision of arts in prisons helps alleviate their lurking guilt for voting into power successive punitive governments while ensuring that prisoners learn to respect middle-class symbolic goods but remain ignorant of how to produce or consume them in the ‘proper’ manner.

The ultimate irony of failure

The greatest irony here is not that arts-in-prisons programmes, whether by offering too little or promising too much, may essentially set prisoners up for all sorts of failure, from lagging far behind the artistic standards they are taught to venerate to falling back into a life of crime once they are released. Nor is it the greatest irony that such failures can serve to invest presumptions of offenders as culturally and morally inferior with the symbolic force of a *fait accompli*. The greatest irony of all is that these symbolic effects have grave material consequences for the supposed recipients of state and middle-class benevolence, insofar as they work to legitimate offenders’ past and ongoing repression by way of penal institutionalisation.

Note: The points put forward in this text are elaborated in the author’s introduction to a collection of essays entitled *The Arts of Imprisonment: Control, Resistance*

and *Empowerment* (Cheliotis, 2012). The main title of the present text is borrowed from Clifford Geertz (1980), who coined the apt phrase ‘theatre state’ to emphasise the role of symbolism in nineteenth century Balinese politics. But whereas Geertz’s own substantive argument was that ‘[p]ower served pomp, not pomp power’, the goal in this text is to draw attention to precisely the reverse situation, where pomp serves power, not power pomp. ■

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