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Pentonville Revisited:

An Essay in Honour of the Morris' Sociological Study of an English Prison, 1958-1963

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Pentonville is a prison in which reformist, punitive and apathetic attitudes are quite fantastically confused… [2]

Introduction

In this article, I consider the significance of Terence Morris' sociological study of an English prison, Pentonville. As preparation, I re-read Pentonville; visited the prison, for the second time in my research life, consulted the collection of 'reactions to Pentonville', (thanks to the penology lecture notes Tony Bottoms bequeathed to me many years ago). These several reactions were published shortly afterwards, as Terence and others will remember well. I read his own recent deliberations on the study (published in this edition of *PSJ*), and reflected on the study's significance to the fields of penology and prisons research. I talked with several professional friends, who (it turns out) were 'brought up' on Pentonville, and who also remember it well. Several confessed to having been persuaded into their prison governing careers by it. Another said he owed his career change from Classics to Criminology to a conversation with Terence Morris following a public lecture in Cambridge in 1962, as well as his long interest in prisons research, to Pentonville. Since I owe my own interest in prisons research to him, then Pentonville is firmly in my academic family tree: a kind of 'scholarly grandparent' or (since I have recently returned from a research trip to remote Aboriginal prisons and communities in Australia's Northern Territory), a kind of book-shaped 'elder' whose wisdom provides clues and signposts to my own professional identity.

Pentonville and its context

Pentonville constitutes both the first English sociological study of a prison, and an important historical record of a very significant period in penal affairs as well as in prison sociology. The research began with the support of Sir Lionel Fox, then Chairman of the Prison Commission, and as the White Paper for which he was apparently largely responsible, *Penal Practice in a Changing Society*[3], appeared. When I first learned criminology, I learned that this Paper represented the high point of penological optimism: open prisons, Grendon, the concept of treatment and an interest in the effectiveness of different regimes, as well as the Cambridge Institute of Criminology, all owe their origins to this paper. The role and training of prison governors was in transition at this time, with a new generation of assistant governors with social science backgrounds soon to be working their way into the Service, with criminological training. It was a time of self-examination, official compassion, and in some ways, of the coming of age of a broadly understood Criminology as a welcome participant in constructive penal policy. Sykes published his *Society of Captives*[4] in 1958, and although his prison contained a different, long-term population, its architectural design was 'almost identical'. This study clearly provided 'a most valuable comparative stimulus' to the Morris'.

The prison itself is also of huge significance. It is celebrating its 170th birthday. Staff and governors there today describe it as 'the oldest built prison in operation in Europe'. It represents the 'start of the modern penal system'. They say it has the 'biggest wing in Europe'. There have been brief periods in which its closure has been considered — part of the explanation for the lack of investment in its infrastructure, but that seems very unlikely in the current population climate.

What the Morris' Pentonville does, among many other things, is show how complex the meeting in practice is of this official penological optimism with the realities of a large Victorian prison infrastructure, staff culture, and the real prisoner community. The 'obsolete penology' inscribed in the dramatic buildings, lives on in the memories and identities of staff and prisoners, in the

1. I would like to thank Andy Barclay, Arthur de Frisching, Tony Bottoms and Keith Bottomley for reminiscences about *Pentonville*, and the Governor of Pentonville, Gary Monaghan, for facilitating and hosting my visit.
2. Morris, T. and Morris, P. (1963) *Pentonville: A Sociological Study of an English Prison,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 256.
3. Home Office (1959) *Penal Practice in a Changing Society* (Cmnd. 645). London: HMSO.
4. Sykes, Gersham (1958), *The Society of Captives*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

thick walls and high landings, and the cells with tiny windows. The Morris' put it like this:

> *Pentonville is in some ways like an archeological site, in that the remains of past theories are layered upon one another. But 'subsidence' and 'erosion' have created an uneven pattern. Relics of repression — the architectural structure — exist alongside recent innovations such as association, access to newspapers, and television. The overall atmosphere suggests not a coherent penal design, but rather an amalgam of entrenched tradition, minor innovation and shifting compromise*[5].

As Richard Sparks[6] has noted, the constant return of symbolic notions of 'hard work and discipline', and 'less eligibility' in new guises makes it important to grasp their original meaning and form. It is striking that in the Morris' Pentonville 93 per cent of the prisoners were actively employed. You could more than halve that figure today. There are 650 'activity places' including work, education and domestic prison work like cleaning and painting, for its 1260 prisoners.

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The research was officially sponsored, and welcomed, formally, but the Morris' give an uncensored account of the hostility and suspicion they encountered from some staff, in part because prison officers were encountering what the Morris' call 'a dilution of authoritarianism in the regime' at the time (that, incidentally, is still how they see things, on the whole). It is significant that their choice of prison was supported — there was no attempt to steer them away from a large London local 'possessing [some] pathological characteristics' into a prettier, smaller, more manageable site, although Maidstone (a smaller training prison) was included as a kind of partial pilot-come-comparator. There were clearly widespread assumptions higher up in the organisation, including among Governors, that prison sociology was potentially useful in the tackling of 'unwholesome' aspects of prison life. A wave of riots in the US in the early 1950s had reinforced a burgeoning interest in the social organisation of the prison:

> *The explosive clash of traditional inmate culture with its elaborate system of graft and corruption and new 'reforming' administrative programmes opened up a new prospect, the study of the prison as a system of power*[7].

It is important to remember how closely the sociology of deviance and the sociology of the prison were connected in these early days, although the Morris' describe themselves as more like social anthropologists, with some helpful social work training, than as either sociologists or criminologists. Their study explores the 'complex relationships between captor and captive', the adaptive roles assumed by prisoners, and the way power and authority work, imperfectly and unpredictably, in this environment.

Pentonville was, at the time of their study, termed a 'maximum security prison' for recidivist prisoners (star prisoners went to Wormwood Scrubs or Brixton), but this was of course before Mountbatten and the introduction of security categorisation. There were 39 escapes from the prison in 1959[8] — a figure that would have led to the sacking of the Governor, the Prison Commissioner, and even (at 39) the Home Secretary if it had happened today. Today it is a Cat B local — secure enough to be almost completely escape free. A prisoner did manage to escape from underneath an escort van two years ago — an incident for which there are still some recriminations today. It was, then, a 'prison for failures' — 'one of the sumps of the English prison system'. The prisoners are not glorified in any way — in fact, the account reflects a certain paternalistic kind of criminology. The authors observe that: 'one dominant characteristic of this recidivist population seemed to be a virtual inability to enter into mature and stable sexual relationships[9]'. (The assumption that the rest of the world are engaged in 'mature and stable sexual relationships' may be of its time). Their comment is trumped by Sykes, who writes that, 'order, like a woman's virtue, once lost, is never regained' … This doesn't stop it being a brilliant book, but it might deter the occasional student from reading further. It is a problem with history.

5. Morris and Morris 1963: 161.
6. Sparks, R. (1996) 'Penal austerity: the doctrine of less eligibility reborn?' in R. Matthews and P. Francis (eds.) *Prisons 2000*, Macmillan.
7. Morris and Morris 1963: 2.
8. Morris and Morris 1963: 131n.
9. Morris and Morris 1963: 68.

There was clearly concern throughout the study about the effects of imprisonment on prisoners. The concepts of prisonisation, and institutionalisation (a kind of learned passivity) were recently accepted currency, giving rise to adaptations, and a subculture, that the Morris' describe vividly. They adapt Merton's classic typology in *Social Structure and Anomie*[10] in a slightly different way from Sykes' adaptation, adding 'manipulation' to the categories of conformity, innovation, two types of ritualism: identification with staff and dependence, retreatism, and rebellion. Becoming inauthentic in prison is a basic hazard, and yet prisoners also express their own deterrence theory — if prison were harsher, I wouldn't be here. That is still their instinctive position, often, today. The authors make clear the limits and damaging effects of a social system based on fear, absence and suffering:

> *[The prisoner] suffers physical discomfort in varying degrees, but in almost every case manages to adjust to these problems. It is at the psychological level that imprisonment is a painful, depriving and destructive experience. The important point here is that while some prisoners actually experience a conscious sense of pain and deprivation, there are others who are, as it were, anaesthetised to the pains of imprisonment by frequent exposure to it resulting in their being in an advanced state of prisonisation and institutionalised neurosis. For these men the problems are serious in that, unaware of the way in which imprisonment is progressively reducing their chances of successful rehabilitation outside, they do nothing to mobilise their resistance to it. What is even more serious is that the prison itself lacks both facilities and staff resources either successfully to identify such individuals or to help them*[11].

Their depiction of the slowly forming prison society as restrictions were lifted on the silence rule and a more overt form of communication grew, and leaders emerged, is deeply insightful. They argue, for example, that the pattern of 'friendships' or groupings to arise depend on class, or cultural and ideological identity, in order to achieve equality — an essential element of prison relationships, and unavailable in the world outside. They report the often poetic words of prisoners describing the culture — always poised somewhere between solidarity and chaos, oscillating according to the particular constellation of individual relationships. This shrewd use of just the right word or analogy by staff or prisoners to describe a complex social phenomenon is one of the attractions of prisons research. The runners, traders, gamblers, alcohol brewers and 'bent' prison officers are all here, doing their thing. There is a thriving illicit economy. When an amplifier hiding home-made alcohol explodes at a Christmas concert, we are reminded that, however tragic, prisons are at the same time full of humour and humanity. 'Beneath the calm runs a constant and dangerous undertow of inmate conflict', marking the surface frequently, but kept 'in obscurity' most of the time. Their account provides an important reminder to current sociologists of the prison that power struggles in the prison have always been an extension of group conflicts outside, that race riots have happened many times before, that power and stability can never be taken for granted, and that even in 1959, 'if you have a fight with a … gang member you have to go on and fight all the gang in turn if they feel like it'[12]. Even the operation of prison councils — with its problems and difficulties — is described[13]. We modern scholars of the prison need to remember that these initiatives and features of the prison community are not new.

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The authors make visible much of what lies beneath the surface, arguing, also somewhat poetically, that:

> *Because a common normative thread of attitudes and behaviour runs through the activities of each, the general effect from a distance is one of uniformity, whereas in reality, both staff and prisoner groups are like impressionist paintings in which dots of many different colours combine to produce a general effect'*[14].

10. Merton, R. K. (1938) 'Social Structure and Anomie', *American Sociological Review*, 3 (5), 672-82.
11. Morris and Morris 1963: 183.
12. Morris and Morris 1963: 245.
13. Morris and Morris 1963: 250-53.
14. Morris and Morris 1963: 221.

One of the most controversial chapters in the book was on 'the prison staff'. 52 attended for interview, and 26 — particularly long serving and 'Pentonville only' staff — declined. At least 3 were 'intensely and actively hostile towards the research'. The controversies related to a depiction of the staff as very similar to prisoners in their backgrounds, values and culture (a case that has been made since). The comparisons are somewhat graphic, including an observation (actually made by a prison officer) that Pentonville is a 'dumping ground for the poorest officer material'[15]; and the authors hypothesise that the prisoner 'tends to be the expression of his own worst self'. Whilst the staff are portrayed also as victims, there is something harsh and unforgiving about they way in which prison officers are approached in the study. On the other hand, the account provided of a split between those with a vocation, and those trapped or hostile towards the job, of other conflicts and resentments between staff from different specialisms or areas, of the monotony experienced, their organisational 'malaise' or confusion, and lack of enthusiasm, their fear of the forces of permissiveness and nostalgia for discipline, and the despair of a then idealism in 'headquarters', is all utterly recognisable, and its implications still very real. The Morris' account of the way officers use 'an excess of power', decide on the worthiness of prisoners, and use formal reporting processes differently, and yet find that prisoners can make things happen that they can't, is insightful and sensitive and anticipates some of the important work done on prison officers done since — a focus that was lost for many years, to the detriment of the study of the prison.

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The POA, meanwhile, are described as militant, tenacious and unreasonable, as dominated by the Committee members, and 'authoritarian in its penal views'. The authors argue:

> *The 'function of the branch meeting at Pentonville .. is essentially to act as a safety valve for complaints and feelings of anger and frustration rather than as a democratic setting for constructive debate which might be subsequently channelled to reach national level'*[16].

Little more needs to be said, here, about the continuing relevance of the Prison Officers' Union to understanding prison life.

They also say the following:

> *This book is not an* indictment*, neither of the system nor the people within it. It is not accompanied by a conviction that 'heads should roll'. Rather, it is an attempt to show that in the maximum security prison all men are prisoners. The staff, like the inmates, are subject to the constraints of their institutional environment and what they do represents a functional adaptation to the demands of the social situation. Until the community re-writes the character of the prison system Pentonville cannot be otherwise than it is; it is the utterly confused state of penal philosophy in our society which is responsible for the pathologies of the maximum security prison*[17].

This sentence could be written today.

So the authors are harsh about the staff, mostly, but then so are Cohen and Taylor in *Psychological Survival*[18] ('and outside on the landing sat the plebs..') for similar reasons: a combined effect of clashing ideologies and backgrounds, and a kind of naïve self-belief that sociologists know better, and a zeitgeist that risked portraying prisoners as romantic heroes ... though the Morris are less rosy about prisoners than Cohen and Taylor. I can see why staff were offended. That is not to say that they don't make some shrewd observations about staff culture, or that the observations they make about conflict, status, discipline and values would not still stand, in some prisons and among some staff. That Pentonville scored lower than any other local prison on its last MQPL score suggests it still has problems of culture and resistance to overcome. On my recent visit, I met some of the most energetic, enthusiastic, committed and forward-thinking staff and Governors I have come across in a long time. I left the prison feeling reassured after

15. Morris and Morris 1963: 99-100.
16. Morris and Morris 1963: 218.
17. Morris and Morris 1963: 4.
18. Cohen, S. and Taylor, L. (1972), *Psychological Survival: The Experience of Long-Term Imprisonment*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

some far more depressing visits to other prisons and YOIs in the area. The reasons for staff indifference, brutality and intransigence, precisely because these aspects are not the defining characteristics of the prison officer but stand in contrast to staff at their professional best, still need to be much more carefully explored and understood.

Staff-prisoner relationships

The Morris' recognise the significance of prison staff to prisoners, and their analysis of these relationships is a familiar account of the forces of liberalisation, reflected in modern training, clashing with 'the way we do things around here'. The more enlightened staff and governors knew their best chance of effecting change was a transfer out of Pentonville. Relationships were a bit gruff, but those officers who were assaulted were on the whole, believed to be asking for it, even by their less 'touchy' colleagues. Staff embodied authority. If they provoked prisoners, this showed a lack of skill or pettiness that was inappropriate. Relationships were at their best when staff and prisoners spent time together in small groups, working at tasks, in a way that compelled them to 'regard each other as individuals'. Even the risks of unthinking permissiveness are documented. In the more liberal and experimental H Wing, with its different kind of penal order, its much better conditions, and its contested status in the prison, there was too much tolerance:

> *Without specialised staff training, explicit objectives, and the use of socio-therapeutic techniques such as group counselling, officers and prisoners sink into a dangerous tolerance of each other's shortcoming (p. 268)*[19].

Ben Crewe, Susie Hulley and I have just published a paper[20] on this very theme — they are live issues in the understanding and management of prisons today, just as they were in 1959. There are strong hopes described in the long section on H Wing that excellent staff-prisoner relationships are likely to have a 'high training value', or at the very least, to provide the required pre-conditions for training. The 'association of amelioration with 'reform' in the minds of staff and prisoners' is still a question in need of empirical and theoretical elaboration: precisely what combination of supportive, rigorous, and 'decent' prison environments leads to better outcomes after prison? This is an area my colleagues and I have stumbled into, as we enter yet another phase of high official expectations for the prison. The confusion of punishment, reform, hope and despair, desert and lack of it persists in practice, with new overtones of fear and risk-aversion, which together make for confused and angry prisoners as well as confused and cynical staff.

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In short, the Morris' study lays many of the foundations for subsequent work on the prison. It shaped a generation or two of prison governors, and was still being read as part of their training course at least twenty years after it was published. That it is not always read today, by students or practitioners, has something to do with Paul Rock's observation that students no longer read 'the classics'. They think ideas become dated. This is far from true, perhaps especially in the case of the prison.

Pentonville revisited

What struck me most on re-reading the book at the same time as my recent visit to the prison was the feeling of continuity. The authors describe Pentonville as follows:

> *The facts about Pentonville are incontrovertible. The buildings are archaic and grossly overcrowded, there is not enough work for prisoners to do, the staff are short-handed, 'training' and social work provisions are rudimentary, and, in spite of its inhospitable character, familiar faces enter its gates again and again*[21].

This sentence could have been written last week. The population when the Morris' conducted their study was 1,250, with 650 allocated three prisoners to a cell and the rest in single cells. When I visited in 2012 it was

19. Morris and Morris 1963: 268.
20. Crewe, B., Liebling, A., and Hulley, S. (forthcoming), *'Heavy/Light, Absent/Present: Rethinking the 'Weight' of Imprisonment'*.
21. Morris and Morris 1963: 4.

1260, mainly two to a cell. It would be interesting to compare the overall population figures and rate of imprisonment in 1958 with today's figures — both are very much higher.

The large bell remains a prominent feature of the centre, and its current governor described a 'real mix of violence and vulnerability' completely reminiscent of the Morris' account of the borderline disturbed-dangerous offender. The problems of the 'disturbed-disruptive' prisoner are carefully captured, and again, foreshadow the work of Hans Toch in this area. That the prison operates in exclusive and simplified categories — bad or mad, risky or trusted, redeemable or beyond redemption — or that apparent indifference is experienced as maltreatment — is one of its painful habits. 'Far from rehabilitating', argue the authors, 'Pentonville … pushes the chances of rehabilitation further and further into the realm of pious optimism'[22].

Some aspects of their account are fundamentally changed — the novelty of 'a woman' in the prison 'who walked around unescorted but interviewed prisoners alone, visited them in punishment cells and listened to evidence of obscene language at adjudications' has worn off. Now, at least 20 per cent of the prison staff would be female, and most of the education and many other support staff also. Two of the top three senior management team are fast-track young women, both accepted and respected by staff and prisoners. It is still the case that prisoners say 'sorry, Miss' when they swear, and staff look embarrassed when they do the same, thinking they are out of sight, but the basic controversy of being a woman in a man's prison, still prevalent when I began my own fieldwork in 1986, has almost disappeared.

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A large portion of the staff at Pentonville (36 per cent) are from Black and minority ethnic or mixed race backgrounds. This is not all good, reflecting as it does another striking difference over time. About 3.5 per cent of the population were 'recognisably non-white' in the Morris' time. This compares with 45 per cent today. Attitudes of prisoners and staff are described in their study as primarily xenophobic. Plenty of examples are provided. Overt racism is much less prevalent in prisons, but the death of Zahid Mubarak in 2001 at the hands of his white racist cell-mate, and other such incidents, illustrate the deeply troubled and troubling nature of living in a multi-faith, multi-cultural, divided, impoverished and selectively policed society. This is a significant change.

That there were two executions during the Morris' research is staggering to read. These events were controversial, dividing the staff, attracting protests, and persuading the research team to declare their anti capital punishment position — a choice which reinforced opposition from those staff who were already hostile. How this differs from what Jonathan Simon today calls 'life-trashing' sentences[23]: the 30 year tariffs that effectively end a life, but without the clarity of a formal state killing, it is difficult to judge. Are we more or less civilised in 2012? The routine practice of physically beating prisoners who assault staff described in the book is no longer tolerated. Today there is a different challenge, of staff experiencing sometimes violent or life threatening assaults having to return to work, sometimes to face the offending prisoner. Staff are required to do this professionally and without retaliation. It is 'right', we might say, but nonetheless emotionally challenging.

Suicide attempts are no longer a disciplinary offence — although being regarded as attention-seeking is still a serous hazard.

My day in Pentonville in May 2012 was something of a surprise. The average age of the senior management team has dropped significantly; all of them were bright, energetic, positive about staff, and determined to make improvements — if necessary, by forgetting the pressures facing the wider Service (as well as some censorship and constraints imposed by it) and concentrating exclusively on Pentonville's physical state, and its diverse regimes. New floors and lots of paint had lifted the tone and mood, and some newly functioning wings — a first night centre, and a drug free unit, had something of the atmosphere intended in H Wing all those years ago. The prison has a newly built health care centre — indistinguishable from the kind of centre you would find in the community. The prisoners were not complaining — but acknowledged how much change they had witnessed in the last few years.

The current senior management team are still tackling the tendency described in the Morris' study for the staff to be 'friendly but not helpful'. It still has a 'put an app in' culture. There is a 'fatalism' among staff,

22. Morris and Morris 1963: 206.
23. Simon, J. (2001) 'Entitlement to Cruelty': The End of Welfare and the Punitive Mentality in the United States', in K. Stenson and R. R. Sullivan (eds.) *Crime, Risk, and Justice*, Cullompton, Devon: Willan.

about their own fates, and those of prisoners. They still say 'it sometimes feels that discipline has slipped', and there is a persisting problem of corruption. But there is also a pride and energy in the place, and prisoners said, 'there's no negligence no more'. The Governor said:

> *We* do *have cockroaches here, but the prisoners know that we battle like hell to get rid of them. Everyone knows that.*

Prisoners can be generous in their assessments of genuine efforts towards legitimacy.

The prisoners' main grievances were to do with sentence lengths, and the imposition of custody on inappropriate populations. I did not hear one complaint against the staff (which is unusual). The presence of drug addiction and recovery in the prison was noticeable. The staff I spoke to were full of pride and energy — and related very informally and respectfully to prisoners, although they complained that ordinary front line prison officers in large local prisons were completely overlooked in reward and recognition schemes. You had to be 'doing a special project' in a 'fancy' prison, to get noticed. An officer with an operatic voice was singing his way through the centre, to the amusement of his colleagues.

I came away both pleasantly surprised and bemused by the continuing paradoxes of prison life: the best and worst of human nature, the confusion of purpose and effects, the friendliness and willingness to talk and share stories, and the sadness of lives being wasted and professional effort going unrecognised. There were still suicides, fights, risks, and challenges. Having just repeated a lengthy study of a single prison after a gap of twelve years, I have learned how haunting and intriguing it is to take your own body back to a place you once knew well, and find it changed. I wonder what Terence Morris would make of Pentonville today? In my case, the change in the prison I revisited was in the wrong direction. I read with feeling Terence's talk to prison visitors, included as an appendix to the book. He counsels them to 'tell him about yourself as well as getting him to talk' — an instruction to be human, to bridge the gulf, and to dispel fantasies prisoners may have about lives lived by others on the outside. This wise advice is in tension with increasingly formal anxieties about giving information away, the risks of conditioning, and the dangers of being human in relationships with prisoners, especially in high security prisons. It is urgent that we remember the less securitised past

Reflections on doing prisons research

I shall end with some reflections on the matter of doing prisons research, and on some continuities and discontinuities. The Morris' write of the emotional demands of fieldwork, the need for independence, the need for continuing presence, and the need to maintain the role of researcher rather than social worker, or any of the other roles that prisoners and staff draw out of us. All of these points are valid. What has changed is the nature of the penal project. Whereas in the 1950s and 60s, (and throughout the 80s and first half of the 90s, when I started my prisons research career) reform was 'in the air' the current climate is more sinister. This makes the role of the prison researcher politically complex. There may be some naivety in the assumptions of the 'social work' generation that their methods and theories were right, but today prisons operate almost without criminological theory. Economics is more dominant. That the bibliography in the back is called *The International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction* makes me both nostalgic and envious; to have lived in such an era, and believed in it, must have been very satisfying.

There is far more prisons research than there was, and I like to think the Cambridge Prisons Research Centre has stimulated as well as built the foundations of some of that. Questions of access are somewhat improved, but the politics of handling research results can still be tricky. There are new developments, including private sector competition, and the recent competing in particular of existing prisons run by the public sector, that require expert research attention. Whatever the context, it remains the case that 'the dominating concerns of the prison are not for tomorrow and the promise of rehabilitation and reform, but with the pressing burdens of today'[24]. We forget that important message at our peril.

24. Morris and Morris 1963: 309.