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Reviews

Book Review

'Doing' Coercion in Male Custodial Settings: An Ethnography of Italian Prison Officers Using Force

By Luigi Gariglio

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In June 2018 I was invited to participate in the formal launch by the Italian Ministry of Justice of a book, *'Doing' Coercion in Male Custodial Settings: An Ethnography of Italian Prison Officers Using Force* by Dr Luigi Gariglio, a former journalist and photographer turned prison scholar. The launch took place in the ancient and beautiful *Museo Criminologico* in Rome. Senior members of the Ministry of Justice attended, including the Head of the Training School, and an entire cohort of newly trained prison officers. It was a formal celebration of the first major ethnography of the work of prison officers in Italy. The book is a careful and engaging study carried out in a single Italian prison, Reggio Emilia. It presents a unique exploration (a 'micro-sociology') of the lawful yet morally problematic use of force. The author is creative and imaginative in his use of methods and scholarly in his approach to the subject. He includes an annotated chapter of photographs. He sheds new light on the 'traumatic and complex world' of the prison. This is an important achievement. It takes a lot of courage, patience, and resilience to carry out extensive ethnographic research in prison, as many prison scholars know. Reciprocal trust is required, as Luigi suggests. That he has emerged from two years of ethnographic work, apparently on good terms with everyone, and that the Prison Service honoured his study in this way, is to his credit.

His description, and analysis, is both original and familiar. Wherever they work, prison officers face common difficulties. They use force, albeit 'on behalf of citizens', and therefore face danger, moral challenges, contradictions and strains in the workplace. The use of force is lawful, but is challenging and contested. This basic problem might be emblematic of their work as a whole. The work of prison officers is 'low visibility', and poorly understood, even by their managers, but even less so by the public. In the public eye, prison officers are not regarded as heroes, like nurses, or firemen, yet they often share similar tasks and develop comparable skills. Anyone who does extended fieldwork in a prison fairly comes to admire and respect prison officers who do their job well, and to sympathise with the conflicting aims underlying their day-to-day work.

The use of force, and its threat, which together constitute the use of coercion, is one of the least visible, yet most sharply felt aspects of their work. Luigi rightly identifies a gap in the research literature here. It is a typical paradox of the prison officer's occupation that the part of the job most central to their training, identity, and sense of camaraderie, is neglected by scholars and taken for granted by managers. I know of only one study of the use of force, which explored the experience of restraint by prisoners, by a Cambridge MPhil student (I am still trying to trace the study). As far as I am aware, there is no existing study of the practice from the perspective of prison officers. So he is right to declare that his study is unprecedented. He subjects a critical and specific aspect of the prison officer's practice to careful scrutiny. His definition is helpful—*coercion* is the *threat* as well as the *use* of force or sanction. So his study is about what officers do once the talking stops 'working'. There is often still talk, during the final negotiation stages, but it stops being effective. My own work has insisted that we take more interest in the under-use of power by prison officers, since the under-use of their full powers is more common than its over-use. Critical scholars tend to focus exclusively on its over-use, as they are ideologically committed to a position that defines all power as bad.[1] Luigi's work takes 'legitimate use' as its starting point: what officers do when all else has failed. This is 'hard power'—still present, and required, despite some apparent 'softening' of the kinds of power used by modern penal systems. The first characteristics of a good study are the clarity and originality of its focus. Here, Luigi has been careful and purposive.

An important theme, or question, arises in his book, which

1. Crewe, B., Liebling, A. and Hulley. S. (2011) 'Staff culture, the use of authority, and prisoner outcomes in public and private prisons' *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Criminology 44(1)* 94–115.

is not its main theme, but is important to reflect on. This is the question of the past: how prisons used to be. How much power, of the wrong kind, was available, invisible, or accepted? Contemporary prison narratives are often haunted by 'what used to be'. Prisoners and staff have long memories. So the past is sometimes played out in the present, even when violent practices no longer occur. Perhaps this relationship between time and violence in penal systems is not linear. To tackle illegitimate violence, Governors have to uncover it, know its shape, understand its meaning and function, get their own sense of 'what is going on' right. There has been increasing talk about the illegitimate use of violence by staff in England and Wales in recent years. There are grounds to believe it might have made a resurgence in a very challenging policy, financial and political climate. Perhaps the use of both legitimate and illegitimate violence ebb and flow in penal systems, in ways that are linked to political discourse, pay and conditions, staff numbers, and changing prisoner demographics. It is important to pose the questions, what makes penal systems more or less violent? Then, how are legitimate and illegitimate violence related to each other?

We cannot answer these kinds of questions without a decent grasp of what goes on in prison. We need theoretical resources, but most of all we need 'authentic description'. Authentic description is harder than it sounds.[2]

David Garland argued in *Punishment and Modern Society* that the prison is a complex, distinct, and tragic social institution, 'which is marked by 'conflict, tension and compromise'. What appears on the surface to be a means of dealing with offenders so that the rest of us can lead our lives untroubled by them, is in fact a social institution, which helps define the nature of our society, the kinds of relationships which compose it, and the kinds of lives that it is possible and desirable to lead there.[3] The prison is full of paradox. It is a place of distrust, and yet in it, guarded and often intelligent readings of the situation, uses of discretion, exceptions, and acts of trust and kindness go on. To overlook these unexpected aspects of the prison world, as I have argued elsewhere, is to fail to understand it.[4]

On the other hand, what Luigi calls 'implicit violence' and coercion lurk everywhere in prison. This is the 'main frame' through which action occurs. Often, violence is averted at the moment of threat—the threat is enough to resolve the incident. But sometimes, close to the edge, the situation erupts into a 'critical incident'. The use of force is *lawful*—officers are authorised to use it on behalf of the state—but it may still not be legitimate (the prisoner might have been willing to concede; he may have been provoked, his anger might be reasonable). Or, there was no alternative: a custodial crisis has arisen and both sides are committed to a violent resolution. The moment of coercion is the breaking of the link in a long chain of events involving tacit agreements, characters with history, status, mind sets: 'frames' of their own. Luigi's close up account of the kinds of 'hard interaction' events in which violence erupts are both disturbing and illuminating. He writes like he uses his camera. The descriptions are vivid, and clearly focused. Afterwards, prison life returns to 'normal': the officers' dominance, and the role of the rules, are re-established. The difference between a boxing ring, and the use of force in prison, Luigi argues, is that only one party's violence can ever claim to be legitimate. That order is reconstituted, at least until the next break, tells us something important about its nature: it is both fragile and binding. Most of what is interesting about prisons goes on in this gap between order and disorder, legitimacy and illegitimacy. This is precisely where ur focus should be if we are to understand the difference between a prison that is 'moral' and a prison that is not.

Donald Cressey argued in 1961 that 'it is a remarkable and yet taken for granted achievement that most prisons are in fact orderly' given the potential for conflict and resistance.[5] In most prisons, order depends upon the willingness of prisoners to assent to the demands of a regime that is less about coercion than it is about interpersonal relationships and treatment. The term 'legitimacy' has been increasingly used by prison scholars, to help us to conceptualise and evaluate different types of penal order, to compare them, and to reflect on what kinds of prisons may be more rather than less legitimate, and what more sustainable and constructive models of penal order might look like.[6] Basically, research has shown, as the theory would predict, that more legitimate prisons, that use coercion less, and

2. Liebling, A. (2015) 'Description at the edge? I It/I Thou Relations and Action in Prisons Research', *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy 4 (1)* 18:32.
3. Garland, D (1990) Punishment and Modern Society Oxford: Clarendon Press.p.287
4. Liebling, A; Elliot, C and Price, D (1999) 'Appreciative Inquiry and Relationships in Prison', Punishment and Society: The International Journal of Penology 1(1) pp 71-98; Liebling, A, Price, D and Shefer, G (2010) The Prison Officer (second edition), Cullompton: Willan.
5. Cressey, D. (ed.) (1961). The Prison: Studies in Institutional Organization. NY: Holt, Rinehart, Winston. P.2
6. See e.g. Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) 'Beyond Procedural Justice: A Dialogic Approach to Legitimacy in Criminal Justice', Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology 102(1): 101-150.

talk, persuasion, and opportunities for growth more, tend to generate more assent than less legitimate prisons. This is all about the work of prison officers.

I first studied prison officers seriously using a method called Appreciative Inquiry. This approach is based on a view that under certain conditions social research has a 'generative capacity'. Far from being 'deficit-oriented', like most social science, it can be affirming. Instead of asking about what goes wrong in prisons, it invites staff and prisoners to talk about what they are most proud of, when they have felt at their best, as an officer, what that looked and felt like, and what else was going on that made this best work possible. Appreciative inquiry can 'unleash the positive' in conversation, creating new discoveries, focusing attention on the most 'life sustaining aspects' of experience. This emphasis on 'exceptional' but real experiences provides new imagery and direction without ignoring or overlooking worst experiences. It adds the full range to accounts of human experience rather than focusing exclusively on problems and deficits.

Using Appreciative Inquiry in an organised way, a small research team and I were able to uncover and describe what it was that good prison officers were doing in a study of Whitemoor maximum security prison in 1998-9.[7] Their three greatest talents were talk, peacekeeping, and using their discretion. These are refined skills, which are difficult to describe, although officers call the use of them 'common sense'. At their best, experienced prison officers made evaluative judgments about individual prisoners, detected and anticipated threats to order, and cajoled prisoners into compliance, using talk, humour, straightness, and the right combination of scepticism and trust. What they are doing is 'reading the situation' right. This is extraordinarily complex work. Most ordinary humans can't do it. Watching an outstanding officer absorb an angry prisoner's threats, communicate confidence, ask the right questions, and take the temperature on the wing down, returning the atmosphere from tension to order, is as impressive as watching David Beckham score goals, or Rudolf Nureyev dance Swan Lake. The analogies are deliberate. Experienced prison officers draw on what sociologist Anthony Giddens calls 'practical consciousness'—skills lying beyond the realm of verbal expression—in order to perform the accomplishment of order.[8] If at the end of a day in a prison, 'nothing has happened', this is due to the successful deployment of refined peacekeeping skills, and the careful and appropriate use of discretion.[9]There is a huge gap between 'the rules' or instructions in a prison, which are numerous and impossible to implement precisely, and the real prison world, in which officers make unworkable requirements 'work'. They operate in the gap, or the grey area, between the rule book and the prison in action, enabling the prison to function. They form judgments, take calculated risks, and exert informal forms of authority, drawing on many distinctive forms of power at their disposal. Very rarely do they use coercion. Their coercive powers constitute a last resort, when all the other forms—reward, legitimate, exchange, expert or professional, and respect or personal authority—fail to work.[10] Knowing which form of power to deploy, and to what degree, requires close familiarity with their prisoners, and experience. They have to read the situation right, or 'see what is really going on in a situation'. Domination does not work, on the whole, but recognition, respect, courage and fairness generally do.[11]

This is complex territory, but it becomes all the more so when coercion and its threat appear. And when prison populations become less familiar. In today's multi-cultural world, in which we imprison minorities, foreigners and immigrants increasingly unevenly, and in which young men live a 'street life' that is oppositional, materialistic, and infused by drugs, prison officers have to be experts in culture, youth, and religion as well as, or in order to, be experts in distributions of trust.

So what about when prisoners are determined to be antagonistic? When they are in conflict with each other? Prisons concentrate, and bring into sharp relief, many of the rules and consequences of human conduct at its least cooperative. Luigi's book takes up the delicate point between optimistic visions of penal or social order and pessimistic, more dystopian visions, grounded in real antagonisms. Whether we design, manage, research and reform prisons from positive or negative visions of human possibility determines outcomes in ways we do not reflect upon carefully enough. He holds us in this difficult place between the two possibilities and asks, could violence really have been avoided in this scenario? Prisons are not all

7. Liebling, Price, and Shefer, G (2010) see n.4
8. Sparks, R., Bottoms, A.E. and Hay, W. (1996). Prisons and the Problem of Order. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
9. Liebling, Price, and Shefer, G (2010) see n.4
10. Hepburn, J R (1985) 'The essence of power in coercive organisations: a study of prison guards', Criminology 23(1):145-64; Liebling, Price, and Shefer, G (2010) see n.4, p.134-5
11. Liebling, A (2011) 'Distinctions and distinctiveness in the work of prison officers: Legitimacy and authority revisited', European Journal of Criminology 8(6): 484-499.

about power exerted upon the 'unfortunate'. They are about the points at which no other option exists, the efforts to avoid the worst, the ways in which power is used lightly and unobtrusively, to minimise harm, and the difficulties of getting this right.

Luigi has managed to be both critical, and respectful. The images he includes are powerful—both demystifying and yet shocking. They add something important to the task of authentic description he sets himself. This is a human world, in which difficult moments arise often, but are normally unseen. Officers express surprise that academics want to understand their world. As he writes in his conclusion, 'millions of flesh-and-blood human beings live and work behind bars in more or less precarious conditions and with varying numbers of staff to oversee them' (p. 197). Luigi gives us a nuanced and informative account of what this means, for many of those most centrally involved.

It can be a challenge to work in prison. Luigi mentions almost in passing that officers talk about suicides amongst prison staff. This was also the case when I studied suicides in prison many years ago. '*What about the staff?*' They asked. '*Had I noticed that staff suicides clustered in prisons where prisoner suicides were also highest?*' Burnout, sick leave, and absenteeism, are major organisational problems in most penal systems. But rates of these 'indices of discomfort' differ—we could learn much more about what it is like to work in a prison where staff derive enormous satisfaction from their work, where commitment to the job is highest, and sick leave is lowest. Prison scholars should be more interested in the professional and personal lives of those who work in prisons, and in the difference that professional confidence, support, and clear goals can make to cultures, moral climates, and outcomes. Luigi makes prison officers human, in his study. He reflects their emotions, fears and commitments; their humanity. As he rightly argues, this allows a much more nuanced account of their work, and their world, to develop. This is both important and unusual.

Luigi used observation, visual methods, and interviews, for an extended period in a single prison, with both ordinary prison wings and a psychiatric facility. He was granted unprecedented access and seriously 'did his time': long days; a long sentence. He gives us several vignettes: close descriptions of the unfolding of an incident, and the responses to it. He was doing micro-sociology, not 'critical criminology', and this distinction is important. He does not moralise. This makes his work especially good, and trustworthy. Officers do not, as I have said, just 'hold their power in reserve'. They 'carry it', show it symbolically, present a credible threat to use it, signal to each other when the situation approaches the crucial turning point. This makes for gripping reading, and is only possible in long-term studies of the kind he has carried out. Some observers argue that we are witnessing something of a prison ethnography revival in Europe (can I still claim to be part of Europe?), and Luigi's study may be the first Italian contribution to this revival. This kind of work is challenging, time consuming, and not easily supported by academic employment structures. When they are done well, such studies make a very valuable contribution to understanding, and to the development of practice.

Luigi admits that these observations took their toll on him, and that he has not reported everything he saw or heard. He has been diplomatic, in the interests of dialogue, learning, and future research. These are the micro-politics of prisons research. He leaves the question of what 'good violence' might be somewhat open-ended. He hints that power in prison is often exerted most heavily on the relatively powerless. But he also makes another important point: that prison reform has to take the problem of violence seriously. It often doesn't.

I knew absolutely nothing about Italian prisons when I first met Luigi. But I have become intrigued. I have learned a lot, and I recognise the officers depicted in his book, as well as the context in which they work: prison officers often express weariness with the idealisms of senior managers and academics, with human rights law, or rehabilitation scripts. There are reasons for this. They are in the trenches, dealing with the rest of the world's 'unreason'. Some excel at the job, and these officers find a way of combining credible authority with compassion, or sensitive management of individuals who are both troubled and troublesome. At their best, they can create a new normative order, in which reason is once again on the table. They can make a highly challenging form of punishment 'morally intelligible'. This is highly skilled work. Luigi's book adds an important missing ingredient to this picture.

The prison administration in Italy deserve praise for opening their doors to long-term ethnographic research. This is a mature act of trust, in the interests of knowledge-generation, and is always a risk. I left the event hopeful that the book, and the considered response to it, is likely to lead to well-informed dialogue, public education, and improvement.

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