

Crises of selfhood and expressions of punishment

A conversation with psychotherapist Susie Orbach

*Susie Orbach is a distinguished psychotherapist who has published widely. She is interviewed by **Dr Anastasia Chamberlen**, Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Warwick and **Charlotte Weinberg**, Director of Safe Ground*

As part of this special issue on the prison's various and often re-emerging crises, we sought to incorporate the perspective of an outside observer; someone who can speak about the role of punishment beyond prison walls and who has thought about punishment rather differently to how practitioners, researchers and campaigners approach it in their day-to-day work in the prison context.

More specifically, as part of our conversations on punitivity and public attitudes to punishment we thought it was important to unpack current problems and so called 'crises' in prisons through individual, psychic experiences that drive punitivity today. To do so, we approached one of the UK's leading psychotherapists, Susie Orbach. Though not usually a commentator on punishment, Orbach is a prolific psychoanalyst, writer and social critic who has written on women's experiences and the politics of eating and the body, the dynamics of relationships and dependency in intimate relations, including those of mother and child, and more recently has written on the experiences and challenges of being a therapist. She has also commented on various social and political issues and has not shied away from making often controversial but thought-provoking interventions on various contemporary debates. Susie Orbach kindly accepted our interview invitation and, on a May afternoon, hosted us at her house in London.

A psychotherapeutic perspective on punishment can arguably tell us about punishment not only as institutional practice, but also as something experienced and expressed (and often repressed) within all of us. After all, as sociologist Emile Durkheim established long ago, it might be that the primary subjects of punishment aren't offenders (alone), but rather the rest of the 'law-abiding' community. In this interview, we wanted to unpack why punishment keeps finding itself within different crises, why despite these

crises we keep relying on it, and what our attitudes towards punishment might be able to say about us as a society and individuals.

In prisons research and in the sociology of punishment we often speak about the 'emotions' of punishment and prison's symbolic role in society. We do so to explain punishment as a social phenomenon linked to our values, insecurities and broader relations with one another. In the following extracts, we consider the psychic dimension of such emotions and drives in order to understand what it is that makes punishment not only so popular, but also desirable even when found within conditions of crisis. Together with Orbach, we think about the origins and causes of our reliance on punishment, discuss long-standing problems inside our justice process—including its targeting of the most disadvantaged, and consider ways around and beyond our punitive attitudes. We have summarised our discussion within the following themes: punishment's expression of racism, class divides and authoritarian practices; punishment's expression of contemporary fragility and vulnerability; the fantasy and anxiety driving punishment and the satisfaction of sadism; and its expression of an emotional illiteracy when it comes to establishing social and personal boundaries. We also consider punishment's position within the psychic structure and the transformative role of conversation and dialogue in contemporary life.

On the functions of punishment: Racism, class divides, and expressions of authority

We started our conversation with Susie Orbach by discussing punishment and prisons' role in society. Orbach explained that for her the motivation for rises in mass incarceration in the Anglo-American world was evidently greater than simply the pragmatic need to respond to crime. Similarly, she clarified this wasn't simply an instrumental pursuit in search for economic

This interview was conducted in May 2018. The editors of this special issue would like to thank Susie Orbach for agreeing to take part in this conversation.

profit. As she explained, 'I don't think the motive is money; I think the motive is racism. But I think money is a nice by-product.' She referred to Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* and that of Kathy Boudin's work which looks at how prisons create employment and profit. Orbach raised the issue of racism and structural inequality as a fundamental component of punishment's application—not only with regards to offenders, but also with regards to penal institutions and logics often targeting people seeking asylum or refuge from conflict and political violence. Orbach's perspective on the role of punishment in society also included the idea of nationalism and the notion of 'our country' as being a place and an idea in need of protection, an entity to defend and keep safe from so called 'others' from whom we may perceive to be under threat.

This thinking is useful as a critique of current perspectives on prison and penal reform as it perhaps reminds us that we ought to study prisons within a wider and broader network of socio-political processes. Indeed, when discussing whether punishment today is expanding and widening as a practice, Orbach directed us to the work of Anthony Loewenstein on *Disaster Capitalism*. In this work, she explained that 'Loewenstein describes how the UK participates in the promulgation of outsourcing as a key element of economic growth through 'disasters' such as homelessness (particularly for refugee and asylum-seeking people), criminal justice and 'defence' needs. Loewenstein points out the emergence of profit from migration, climate and environmental disasters (like hurricanes, volcanoes and wars) whilst promoting a simultaneous expansion of militarisation.'

The reference to a clear 'we' from the start of this conversation was telling. Orbach suggested that today we invest in creating a range of punishing environments (e.g. through war and military interventions) and then generate profits (often for large corporations) derived from so-called 'clean ups', or punitive and security-based responses that we offer as responses to the various 'disasters' we encounter and produce. She argued that engaging in such processes maintains a vicious circle in which punitive and captive institutions like the prison or detention centres appear always necessary and unavoidable and are rarely questioned. Her sociological reflections on punishment extended also onto the role of class and gender. Orbach

recalled the work of Beatrix Campbell in *Goliath* and the importance of gender and class in considering how authority and status are ascribed in our contemporary contexts, highlighting how all of these intersect in driving punitivity and mass incarceration.

**The psychic structure of our vulnerable selves:
The basis of our reliance on punishment?**

As we wished to unpack further the drivers motivating our specific reliance on punishment as a technology and practice, we asked Orbach to give us a technical explanation of how the urge to punish might emerge. She explained it as an act of expulsion and distancing from individually experienced pain, performed primarily through the infliction of pain on others:

SO: *You're trying to expel what's been done to you, and as you're doing so, you are living through it, at a distance, so you're enacting something similar onto someone else. You're trying to get on top of the hurt that you experienced; that would be a psycho-analytic understanding of punishment.*

The analytic approach then, she went on to explain, enables us to see the use of punishment and, to some extent, authority, as a way of 'distancing oneself from one's own punishment' by enacting it and seeing it instead on someone else. But, as Orbach

clarified, this is not just a process of mere distancing; it is also a mechanism for 'surviving' and coping with the exercise of punishment. In the simplest terms, she explained, 'one's use of punishment is a defence against their own hurt, hence the adage about violence, 'hurt people, hurt people'.' This suggested that the exercise of punishment is often not an act of superiority by a confident authority, but in psycho-analytic terms at least, it is often an act of fragility or vulnerability. It also clarified a basic but often overlooked feature of punishment: that somewhat inevitably punishment is an act of pain infliction and thus of violence too.

CW: *So is the notion of punishment an inherent, innate human need? Why do you think politically, analytically, personally, we punish ourselves and each other so much?*

SO: *Because we find things really difficult. Here's how I understand it psychologically: something happens to you that's incomprehensible, you are dependent on whoever, whatever the environment is.*

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Let's call it your Mum, for the sake of argument, since that's still what most people are first exposed to. You're continually exposed to incomprehensible behaviours but you cannot afford to hate that person because you need them so desperately, you can't cross the street, you can't feed yourself, you can't do anything. You are utterly dependent emotionally and physically. That inability to countenance rejection of the person on whom you're so dependent can lead you to make yourself the author of your misfortune. In this way, you become an agent of your own distress. Eventually and normally you learn how to split yourself and how to be self-critical and simultaneously how to give powers to others, and so you've developed a mechanism inside of you for distilling that distress.

CW: *If we're split between love and hate, why is the punitive split bit of me (and therefore of us) so much stronger and more pervasive?*

SO: *Because it's indigestible. I think hurt, pain and confusion are indigestible, unless you have a mechanism for understanding it. Which could be a collective response. For instance, you could say, fascism, could give someone an answer to such turmoil, or so could communism. Or, proper conversations could also give you an answer. I think it must be the indigestibility of pain that sticks around and turns into punishment. And that's why I think therapy is very powerful. Because if somebody gets that their anger is a displacement from vulnerability, they don't have to be angry all the time, they can risk feeling vulnerable. It might take them a long time to get there, but they can risk that feeling and therefore the feeling is metabolised and goes through them. They don't need to seek to enact it, or export it on to everybody else.*

The link between violence and punishment appeared to be about shared experiences of 'unmetabolised' vulnerability and pain. At this point, the conversation took us to HMP Grendon and the fact that it is one of few therapeutic prisons in the UK. Orbach recalled recently watching the documentary film 'The Work' based at Folsom state prison in California where members of the public and prisoners engaged in a difficult but cathartic process of group therapy. She was hugely moved and impressed by the prisoners' ability to care for each other and the public who come in the draconian and hostile environment of the prison; she admitted 'It's a shame we can't put that film in this Journal'.

But we probed Orbach a bit more about the links between self-vulnerability and the enactment of punishment upon others. Using the narratives of prisoners such as those in 'The Work', we wanted to better understand why our vulnerability, expressed through punishment, tends to target those most marginalised and vulnerable in society.

CW: *We brutalise people and then we punish them for having been brutalised. We're being brutal in response to a brutal situation.*

SO: *I think that's true.*

CW: *It sounds very simplistic.*

SO: *Yes but it isn't simplistic, it's really complex.*

CW: *And that is endemic throughout our institutions. Because it's in our organisms.*

SO: *Unfortunately. But, it's not the only thing in our organisms.*

AC: *But then we know some people are less punitive than others.*

SO: *Of course, but we're currently in a culture in which brutality, or punitiveness, sits alongside being lovely and empathic. We've got two dominant narratives if you like.*

The satisfaction of sadism in punishment

Our discussion on the links between brutality and punishment took us onto a conversation around punishment's alleged purposes. We also reflected on what the emotions on which punishment relied were, and questioned whether punitivity itself might be an emotional practice.

AC: *So is there something satisfying about punishing then?*

SO: *I think so, I mean sadism can be satisfying. It's also inside of you, so you can tell, you can catch yourself doing it. I think we're more insecure, we're more fearful today so punishment can be a kind of a solution. We're a very angry society now, because the whole social structure has changed so rapidly from the post war settlement, which was a progressive settlement. I mean it wasn't that progressive because that's why it needed to be revised in the 60s and cast off to be re-thought again. But it was the beginning of a mentality of 'no you don't just get to rule', 'we fought the war, we rule now.' And it's just heart-breaking, because now we don't have a notion of society anymore, or, we don't have a notion of affiliation.*

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CW: *Is this anger linked to the idea that 'nobody's looking after me, I'm looking after myself', and the level of resentment that this brings?*

SO: *Yes. It incentivises the notion of 'I'm going to toughen up now. And I'm going to have my own little rules. This is the sheet it'll all go on. I'll tick anything on it, and don't you dare come anywhere near me and my plan'.*

AC: *So, is punitiveness then an emotion, an expression?*

SO: *It serves an emotional role, it's driven by emotion. But, no, it's a behaviour.*

AC: *The rise or return to this right-wing authoritarian kind of politics that we see around us today, in migration and education, for instance, happening here, the US, across Europe. Do you think there're links between that phenomenon and this turn to punitive measures: punishing more people, for longer, letting punishment spill out in our schools, hospitals, immigration policies, into our language or logics.*

SO: *Of course. If recognition is not what you get when you're in a family, in the school, if you don't have a society that recognises you just for you being human, then what options have you got? There're very few people getting sufficient recognition today, so then you've got to react. I think punishment is a consequence of the lack of recognition we experience in contemporary society. I know it's a bit of a funny leap to make, but I do think it's all linked. Though punitiveness is not a feeling in itself, in the absence of recognition you feel like 'I'm not having this', your authority is being threatened, you feel there're no boundaries, you think I need to get back control, something like 'get this room cleaned up now, or I'm out of control', or whatever it is that's triggering you. But when doing so, you don't think of what you're doing as being punitive, you think of it as 'this is what I need to do for me now'.*

Gendered fragility in punishment

CW: *We see different people as worthy of punishment in different degrees. For instance, we've seen support for the gendered idea that, a bad girl is worse than a bad boy. Is there a gendered element to punishment?*

SO: *Of course there's a gendered element, we can conceive of behaviours that are appropriate for each gender to be entirely different. We expect boys to race cars and fight, we don't expect girls to go and beat up granny, or each other. In this context, aggression has to be somehow channelled if you're a girl.*

AC: *In a similar vein then, is punishment and the promise of authority attached to it about expressing some forms of 'toxic masculinity'?*

SO: *I think a better way to think about it, but that's just because I've been thinking about this and I moved from toxic masculinity about 15 years ago, I think it's best described as the result of a fragile masculinity.*

The discussion on fragility was helpful on multiple levels. It helped us see the 'urge' to punish as psychosocially wider and driven by our sense of self; as fulfilling a set of unsatisfied fears and vulnerabilities in a world that is often unforgiving to signs of weakness and does not often open up safe spaces for dialogue, contact and self-expression. It also helped us make sense of the current state of crisis in prisons. We discussed how we have prisons largely built upon and representing a range of traditionally masculinist-ascribed ideas like order, authority and control. Our capacity for care and conversation in such contexts is

often hindered by various practical and structural constraints but also by the need to perform certain representations of 'toughness' in the context of criminal justice. After all, why is it that only a few of our prisons are founded upon therapeutic principles? Similarly, what are currently prevailing logics inside prisons? See, for instance, the focus in prison staff training, where clearly there is an overemphasis on control and restraint.

However, this 'masculinist' focus has its limitations; such structures are increasingly challenged and resisted by prisoners (often using similarly masculinist tactics), and this raises questions about the very purpose of such damaging spaces, both for officers and prisoners. This discussion also took us to the issue of boundaries, a big theme in psychotherapeutic contexts. Orbach clarified that punishment is all about the lack of appropriate and helpful boundaries; hence why, according to her, today punishment is deemed more and more necessary:

SO: *It could be said that we've got a misunderstanding of what constitutes a boundary.*

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Because we all need boundaries, you can't think or relate without a boundary. So the question is: shouldn't we have a discussion about what a boundary might look like within a frame that goes beyond punishment or cruelty.

In other words, as boundaries are increasingly blurred and fluid, we are more insecure and uncertain within our relationships and interactions. Such lack of clarity can make one feel at once both vulnerable and unnecessarily hostile. Lack of boundaries, then, can take us back to a primitive reliance on violent forms of protection. It is worth noting, however, that the notion of having boundaries in psychoanalytic terms is rather different to that of isolationism, borders and walls.

Addressing punitivity

AC: *If we were going to try and resolve all of this hostility, is there an answer? Is there a therapeutic approach to all this?*

SO: *I suppose it would be parenting in a broader, social sense of the term, in terms of state or civic care. We used to give kids orange juice and milk, and that was part of what you got, and you'd have the health visitor coming around every day when you had a baby, because you had problems that would be ordinary, every woman would have them. They'd be there to listen to them and then calm you down. It was just sort of part of what you had. And, yes, there was some looking after. So you'd have the experience of existing outside yourself, being within a collective. We don't have any of that now and I'm not saying that's all we need, but there's no undergirding, no early intervention. And, also, it's about what you teach children and adults. For instance, what are we teaching*

children about vulnerability? We don't have proper emotional education and we're so divided as a society. I mean we're in silos politically, we're in silos age-wise, etc. I think it's quite possible not to relate outside your own group these days.

AC: *Is punitiveness then driven by us not being emotionally educated or emotionally intelligent?*

SO: *Yeah, I think there is no emotional literacy around, we don't teach it. We do not teach about feelings, and we don't tolerate them. Normally families have a couple of feelings that are tropes for that family, right? You might be the angry family, or you might be the smiley family, or you might be the funny family, but that's not it. Famously my son, when he was about 5/6, once said to me 'why do we have to be a feeling family?'*

It seems then that therapeutically speaking, there is a way around punitiveness and punishment. For us, that was an optimistic and hopeful way to end this conversation. After all, a therapeutic approach can help teach and develop a healthier exposure to emotional literacy and honesty. This, in turn, can help channel our vulnerabilities and fragility within safer, more accepting spaces that don't rely on the quickly satisfying but not sustainable solutions afforded by institutional and personal relations reliant on punishment, control and distrust. Of course, for such approach to emerge, we need a collective will to move away and beyond our reliance on punishment; we need to see it as not always necessary and certainly not always helpful, neither for offenders nor for us, as communities and individuals. We also need to feel less pain and isolation. Socially, then, the antidote to punishment may be to work towards a more genuine, collective sense of solidarity.