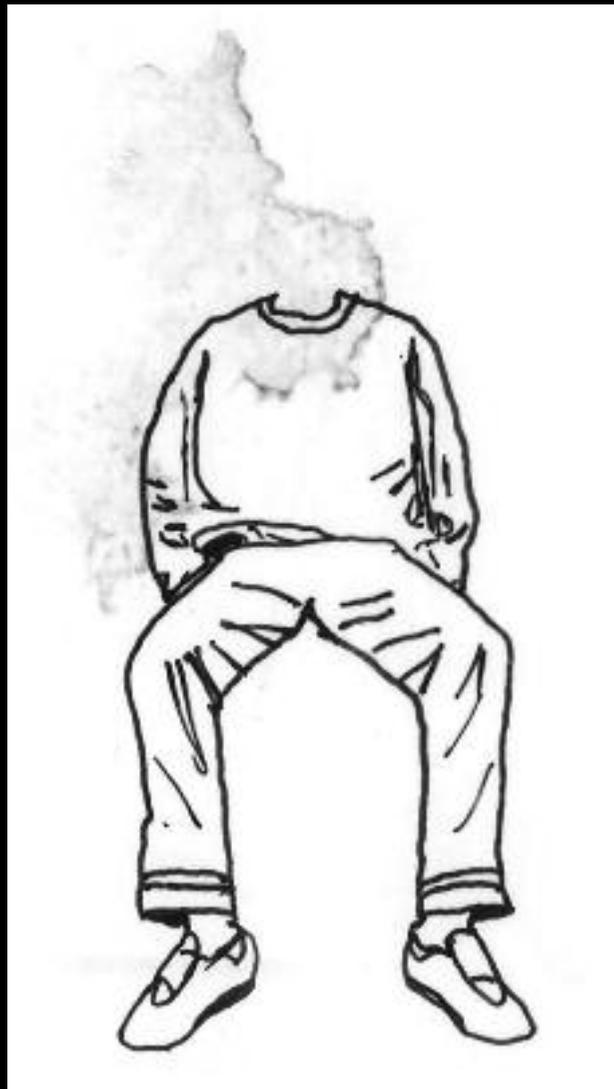


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*Special Edition*  
**The Prison and the Public**

# Editorial Comment

## The Prison and the Public

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**In one sense 'public' is a wonderfully flexible word, associated with a rather amorphous, unspecific yet all-embracing body of humanity. The word is democratic and can be used interchangeably with other seemingly unrestricted terms like 'the people', 'citizens', 'society', 'community' or even 'the nation'. Yet in many ways the concept of the 'public' is not neutral. It is a politically loaded label. Even if it is not always made explicit, the term 'the public' often refers to very specific parts of the whole, implying the inclusion of certain groups and the exclusion of others.**

Because of its leading connotations, 'public' is a word that can be used to give force or legitimacy to statements or actions which otherwise would not have it. It can be used as a weapon to convince or persuade. For example 'public' or 'popular support' is a phrase often to be found in conjunction with justifications for punitive measures against offenders or other 'outsiders', to the point where, amongst critical commentators at least, the terms 'popular' or 'populist' have gained derogatory associations.

In recent years the concept of the 'public' has become even more ambiguous through developments in forms of new media and social networking. Online, 'the public' becomes more unpredictable, ever more intangible, even harder to locate and identify. In one sense, this could represent a form of subversion of the exclusionary nature of the 'public' as it provides a voice to a genuinely wider populace and could therefore be used to challenge, resist or threaten dominant values.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively it could be a vehicle through which to castigate, marginalise and exclude on an even wider scale.<sup>2</sup>

The term 'prison' on the other hand is a far less nebulous concept. It is solid, extant, persistent and, importantly, written into architectural form. The 'public' know that form and have an understanding of its parameters and underpinning philosophies. Yet 'public' understandings of this institution are not necessarily

accurate and may be shaped more by powerful (mediated) symbolism than actual experience. For example, in architectural terms, the prison form the public are most familiar with largely relates to the Victorian monolithic radial structure which, although still present on the penal landscape, has been superseded by newer, less architecturally ascetic forms of prison buildings. But these latter structures do not capture the imagination to the same extent. Likewise, in terms of the purpose of imprisonment and the treatment of offenders, public or popular perceptions appear to be strongly influenced by political rhetoric and media representations and to be largely punitive.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its conceptual vagueness, when the concept of 'the public' is used in relation to the prison, a clear demarcation is made: the included public (the 'respectable', the taxpayer, the 'law abiding', the 'hard working') are very easily distinguished from the exiled 'others' (the criminal, the inadequate, the anti-social outsiders). This conceptual segregation is compounded by the fact that the definition of 'public' also denotes that which is open, transparent, expansive and unlimited, clearly the antithesis of the hidden, constrained and exclusionary prison environment.

This is the second of two special editions of the *Prison Service Journal* focused around the segregated relationship between the 'prison and the public'. The first of these aimed to investigate how the public might become more connected to and informed about the realities of prison life, past and present.<sup>4</sup> Presenting the work of those who had conducted research into the prison, the focus was on exposing the world of the prison to members of the public via methods such as digital archives, archaeology, prison museums and heritage sites.

In this edition we take a different approach to the notion of the prison and the public relationship. Rather than looking 'inwards', focusing on how the public might be brought into the world of the prison, the intention here is to look 'outwards' and examine the work undertaken within the prison, in order to

1. See Taki & Coretti (Eds, 2013) *Westminster Papers In Communication and Culture*, Vol 9, No.2. [https://www.westminster.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/220675/WPCC-vol9-issue2.pdf](https://www.westminster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/220675/WPCC-vol9-issue2.pdf)
2. Solove, D.J. (2007) *The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy on the Internet*, Yale: Yale University Press.
3. See Mason, P (Ed, 2006) *Captured by the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture*, Cullompton, Willan; Monterosso, S (2009) 'Punitive Criminal Justice Policy in Contemporary Society', *QUT Law Review*, Vol 9, No 1, <https://lr.law.qut.edu.au/article/view/39> ; Harper, C. & Treadwell, J. (2013) 'Punitive Payne, Justice Campaigns and Popular Punitivism: Where next for public criminology?', *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol 52, No.2: p216-222.
4. *Prison Service Journal*, No 210, November 2013.

integrate (ideologically, politically and materially) those citizens who are incarcerated and those who are not.

To achieve this, the articles that follow will challenge the separation of the prison/prisoner and the public on a variety of levels. The concept of 'the public' is critiqued, particularly its definition and management in neo-liberal society which undermines the true interests of citizenship (Corcoran). The ways in which the 'public' are informed (or misinformed) about prisons and prisoners via mediated channels, the impact this has on (punitive) perceptions and the ways in which misleading representations can be challenged, is also examined (Bennett, Swaine Williams and Crowe). The use of the arts in prison as a means of encouraging self-expression and as a form of rehabilitation for prisoners, but also as a method of forging connections and constructive relationships with the non-incarcerated public, is discussed in several papers (Baillie, Crowley,

Forster, Spargo and Priest). Finally, the ways in which prisoners themselves directly reach out to or connect with the 'public' is addressed. For some prisoners, forging a dialogue with the state and social world outside of the prison is part of a broader political struggle (Rossi). But for other prisoners/former prisoners, the divide between 'prisoner' and 'public' is a chasm difficult to traverse and thus the transition from one perceived state to the other is fraught with difficulties (Buck).

This notion of elucidating and restoring the relationship between the 'excluded' prisoner and the 'included' public was the theme of a conference, entitled *The Prison and the Public*, organised by the editors of this edition and held at Edge Hill University in March 2013. The contributions to this edition are drawn from that conference and what follows is a review of the full event.