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Reviews

Book Review

Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy

By Heather Ann Thompson

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(2016)

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Price: £25.99 (hardback)

According to Franz Fanon, 'we revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe'.¹ Fanon's insight is directly relevant to the barbaric events which unfolded at Attica prison in New York State in September 1971 when prisoners revolted against the suffocating conditions of their confinement. For three days they controlled the institution from D Yard before the state unleashed hell and launched a ferocious assault to retake the prison. The attack left 43 prisoners and hostages dead and 128 wounded, many seriously. Heather Anne Thompson's monumental, haunting and deeply moving study, based on 10 years of meticulous research, provides a compelling analysis of the roots of the revolt, the brutal, remorseless revenge enacted by the state, the deceit and lies peddled to cover up how the prisoners and hostages died and the iron resolve of survivors and the families of the dead prisoners and hostages to achieve truth, justice and accountability. It is a story of institutionalized violence and torture, deeply embedded racism and state collusion, conspiracy and cover-up which has taken 45 years to finally bring into the light.

Why did the revolt happen? Its roots lay in the challenges posed by the civil rights movement and the increasing influence of the Black

Panther Party, many of whose members were confined in Attica and who refused to accept the degrading treatment, casual sadism and systemic racism dispensed on a daily basis. Conditions were appalling. Prisoners were given one bar of soap each month and one roll of toilet paper which meant that they had to 'limit themselves to 'one sheet per day'. Expenditure on food amounted to 'a mere 63 cents per prisoner per day...' (p. 8).

The book is based on a range of unpublished sources and documents which were stored, often dismissively, in boxes and store-rooms around the USA. Among the items Thompson discovered were the still-bloodied clothes of L.D. Bartley whose rousing and defiant oratory poignantly articulated the perspective of the prisoners:

We are men. We are not beasts and we do not intend to be beaten or driven as such. The entire prison populace, that means each and every one of us here, has set forth to change forever the ruthless brutalization and disregard for the lives of the prisoners here and throughout the United States. What has happened here is but the sound before the fury of those who are oppressed (p. 78).

His defiance cost him his life when he was killed after the prison had been retaken. His, and the other deaths, were a direct result of the devastating and illegal firepower mobilized by the state.

The assault on D yard was led by troopers who were 'armed with .270 caliber rifles, which utilized unjacketed bullets, a kind of ammunition that causes such enormous damage to human flesh that it was banned by the Geneva Conventions' (p. 157). Between 2,349 and 3,132 lethal (shotgun) pellets were fired. There were also 8 rounds fired 'from a .357 caliber, twenty-seven rounds from a .38 caliber, and sixty-eight rounds from a .270 caliber....these counts did not even include the bullets from correction officers and other members of law enforcement not fully accounted for' (p. 526).

The relentless brutality of the state's assault was not the result of deranged individuals engaging in renegade behavior — the politically reductive and theoretically naïve 'bad apple' theory of state deviance propagated by an endless procession of politicians, media personnel and academics, linked together by a positivist, umbilical cord which defines state actions as inherently benevolent which are occasionally tainted by the activities of a pathological few. Rather, terror, torture and brutality were systemic to the state's brutal response. This was based on a process of conspiratorial, racist collusion which was integral to the actions of those who were on the ground on the day relentlessly abusing and killing prisoners and hostages and which moved remorselessly up through the ranks of the police, and state troopers, into the offices of the prosecuting authorities and finally to the highest reaches of the US government itself whose views were mobilized to legitimate the brutal actions of those on the ground. As Nelson Rockefeller, the

1. Franz Fanon cited in Kyerewaa, K. (2016) 'Black Lives Matter UK' in Red Pepper, Issue 210 October/November 2016 p. 8.

state governor, mendaciously told a grateful President Nixon in the aftermath of the state's assault, 'the whole thing was led by the blacks' and that state troopers had been deployed 'only when they [the prisoners] were in the process of murdering the guards' (p. 200).

As ever, when the state kills, its agents are immediately deployed to spread lies, and engage in deceit, exaggeration and distortion, a toxic mix designed to both mystify what happened and to mobilise a narrative for media and popular consumption that the violence of its servants was, given the dangers they were facing especially from black prisoners, legitimate. Yet, as the book makes abundantly clear, even at the height of the carnage in D Yard, it was not the prisoners — pejoratively labelled as liars, psychopaths and animals — who were murdering the hostages. Rather, prisoners attempted to safeguard them while putting their own lives in grave danger. However, even this selfless act of bravery and humanity was buried under the weight of the perfidious deceit of the state's spokespersons who unashamedly peddled the lie that the hostages had had their throats cut or had been castrated by the very prisoners who had attempted to protect them.

The pitiless response to the prisoners, and the unshackled violence they experienced, was based on the scornful, mortifying and degrading vilification of their helpless bodies, dead and alive. According to one eyewitness, Tommy Hicks, a prisoner who was still alive after the prison was retaken, was "'hit with a barrage of gunfire" after which he saw troopers walk over to Hicks's body take "the butt end of the gun, pound the flesh in the ground, kick it, pound it, shoot it again"'. Survivors were made to crawl naked through a mud-filled yard towards state servants where they were savagely beaten. This brutality

extended even to the most severely wounded who were given no sedatives and who were 'expected to suffer through the pain'. In contrast, state troopers, whose injuries included a 'fractured finger, bruised knee [and] a fractured toe', were prioritized (pps. 206–7). The role of medical staff before and after the revolt, and their abject capitulation to the state's dehumanizing goals, is made abundantly clear in the book. They were active agents in the brutalization of the prisoners.

Thompson beautifully crafts the forgotten and moving story of the survivors into a devastating indictment of the naked exercise of power from state servants who acted with total impunity before, during and after the revolt towards them. The chilling calculation around life and death extended to its own surviving, employees who were only paid for eight hours for each day they were held hostage as the rest of the time 'they were technically off the clock' (p. 538). The campaigns by the survivors and families, spread over nearly half a century, demanded a reckoning with state servants, whose every action, despite the occasional, honorable, individual exception, was built on denying truth, subverting justice, intimidating those who disagreed with the dominant narrative, burying and destroying evidence, destabilizing different campaigns and attempting to ensure that those responsible for the carnage would escape justice. This was done through 'refusing to hand over materials expeditiously — even when required by law to do so....' (pps. 315–316) and ensuring that funding was minimal for lawyers who were acting for the families.

The book concludes by focusing on the legacy of the revolt. The liberal, humanizing reforms proposed by the state quickly dissipated under the collective, regressive weight of resurgent law

and order campaigns, the ongoing war on drugs, the hostility towards prisoners and the drive towards mass incarceration through a racist process of criminalization which targeted the powerless while leaving the powerful, as ever, free to engage in rampant acts of criminality. Mass incarceration legitimates institutionalized racism and institutionalized racism legitimates mass incarceration while the police and the courts provide the glue that holds the whole, racist edifice together. And yet collective webs of resistance still persist. The strikes which took place in late 2016 across 22 prisons — the biggest in US prison history — against slave labour conditions, links directly back to Attica. So too does the principled activities of Black Lives Matter contesting the ongoing, systemic racism, and state-induced death, disproportionately experienced by African Americans.

Nearly half a century on, the aching desolation generated by the barbarity perpetrated by the state at Attica still lingers in all of its melancholic toxicity. At the same time, the righteous anger and the relentless desire to ensure that Attica is not forgotten, is an eloquent testimony to the human spirit's enduring sense that injustice needs to be confronted, wrongs righted and responsibility attributed. Voltaire's famous quote — 'to the living we owe respect but to the dead we owe only the truth' — provides a fitting tribute to all of those who have struggled over the last 50 years to right Attica's wrongs. It is also a fitting testimony to this magnificent book, and to Heather Thompson's rigorous scholarship and extraordinary commitment which runs like a clear stream from the book's first through to its last sentence.

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Book Review

The management of change in criminal justice: Who knows best?

Edited by Martin Wasik and Sotirios Santatzoglou
Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan (2015)
ISBN: 978-1-137-46248-0 (hardback)
Price: £65.00 (hardback)

Justice and penal reform: Reshaping the penal landscape

Edited by Stephen Farrall, Barry Goldson, Ian Loader and Anita Dockley
Publisher: Routledge (2016)
ISBN: 978-1-138-19106-8 (hardback) 978-1-138-19107-5 (paperback)
Price: £90.00 (hardback) £29.99 (paperback)

Recent years have seen rapid shifts in penal policy and practice. In broad policy terms, the seemingly inexorable rise of prison populations and increasing punitiveness have abated and there has been the articulation by senior politicians including Kenneth Clarke and Michael Gove of the need for lower use of imprisonment and a focus on more rehabilitative approaches. Inside prisons, organisational changes including changes to regimes, staffing levels and pay structures have left many prison managers feeling that change management has become their central role.¹ These two books, in their own ways, attempt to both reflect and inform these trends.

Martin Wasik, a distinguished professor and judge, and Sotirios Santatzoglou, a teaching fellow at Keele University, offer an edited collection that is concerned with 'the ways in which criminal justice policy emerges, takes shape and is implemented through the activities

of practitioners on the ground' (p.vii). One of the defining features of contemporary organisations are the ways in which they attempt to assert greater control over workers, both through ever more elaborate architectures of surveillance such as targets, audits, information technology and prescriptive policies, but also the ways in which they attempt to use human resource strategies in order to access the subjectivity and identity of employees so as to nurture conformity and self-regulation.² Of course, total control is impossible, even in the most extreme circumstances and therefore the aspirations of contemporary organisations are always destined to be incomplete and inchoate. These centralising ambitions are always moderated by their interaction with both local cultures and individual agency, that resist, adapt and appropriate attempts at control. It is this complex dynamic that Wasik and Santatzoglou are attempting to access.

The chapters in the book are wide ranging, contributors include policy makers, practitioners, researchers and campaigners, covering areas including courts, probation, policing, policy development and youth justice. The chapters are grounded in detailed descriptions and analysis of specific developments in policy and practice. Each is an informed and lively illustration of the tensions that shape criminal justice: individual discretion and central prescription; national standardisation and local variation, and; punitiveness and humanitarianism.

In *Justice and penal reform*, the aim of the editors is to intellectually enrich the drive for progressive change: 'creating social and penal institutions that can contribute to the realization of safer

and more cohesive societies' (p.1). The book is edited by an impressive quartet, including three internationally respected criminology professors, Stephen Farrall from University of Sheffield, Barry Goldson from University of Liverpool, and Ian Loader from University of Oxford. The fourth editor, Anita Dockley is Research Director at the Howard League for Penal Reform, an organisation that has collaborated in the publication of this book.

The editors argue that the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent recession have offered an opportunity for a new kind of dialogue about criminal justice. This is partly a result of necessity, as mass imprisonment is no longer affordable, but also the popular resonance of punitiveness has waned as crime rates have reduced and other policy matters have become more pressing. The response of this book is to invite rigorous intellectual engagement with some fundamental questions about imprisonment, its form, role and function, and its relationship with wider society. The contributors read like a who's who of international theoretical criminology. Their discussions raise questions about the notions of character that shape our ideal of citizens, as well as the nature of trust and legitimacy in contemporary public services. Most significantly, the contributors locate imprisonment, not in isolation, but in the context of a wider social system. What forms of order and structures of power are prisons reflecting and reinforcing? What forms of social justice are prisons contributing towards or eroding? The argument for penal reform has always been part of a much wider social discourse regarding the kind of world we are living in or creating.

1. Bennett, J. (2015) *The working lives of prison managers: Global change, local culture and individual agency in the late modern prison* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Parker, M. (2002) *Against Management: Organization in the age of managerialism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

There is more at stake in criminology than crime and criminal justice alone.³

These books take different approaches to exploring the issue of change in the criminal justice system. Wasik and Santatzoglou focus on practice, using detailed case studies in order to reveal common threads and theoretical dimensions. Theirs is an approach that reflects the state of things. In contrast, Farrall, Goldson, Loader and Dockley start from a theoretical perspective, attempting to enrich and enliven the intellectual, policy and public debate. They are attempting to guide and inform alternative futures. Together, these books offer a fascinating contrast in approaches, but both ask awkward and difficult questions, agitating in the reader a discomfort in the status quo and a desire for a different kind of change.

Dr Jamie Bennett is Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill

Book Review

Imprisonment Worldwide: the current situation and an alternative future

by Andrew Coyle, Helen Fair, Jessica Jacobson and Roy Walmsley.

Publisher: Policy Press (2016)

ISBN: 978-1-4473-3175-9

(paperback)

Price: £7.99 (from publisher)

The book has three sections: 1) Trends in imprisonment and numbers worldwide; 2) Ethical considerations for imprisonment and how this impacts on those in custody; and, 3) Alternative approaches and proposals including justice re-investment approaches. Throughout the book, information is collated and summarised in a series of infographics making it easy to read

and assimilate the potentially complex variations and differences. For example graphs of changing rates of imprisonment between five European countries over the last 35 years — show remarkable differences: Finland has steadily fallen over the entire period whilst England and Wales has steadily increased (see p.53).

The book is a major contribution to the knowledge of those currently debating prisons and the use of imprisonment, whether from an academic, policy, practitioner, campaigner or lay perspective, making it also a valuable teaching resource for courses in criminology and related subjects. The final chapter reminds us that (potential) solutions are unlikely to be 'simple' (p. 131) nor found exclusively within the criminal justice system, and perhaps more importantly prisons are unlikely to (the authors use the word 'never') be a place of reform. I enjoyed reading the book through and then coming back to look for more details, trying to understand what the many differences were worldwide and why these occurred. Of course no publication can completely explain the reasons 'why', but this one nevertheless provides a significant body of evidence to help us on this journey.

Steve Hall is a former prison governor currently living in New Zealand.

Remote control: Television in prison

By Victoria Knight

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

(2016)

ISBN: 978-1-137-44390-8

(hardback)

Price: £68.00 (hardback)

Television is such a central feature of everyday life that it is no

longer considered a luxury but instead is an unexceptional, even essential, part of our domestic worlds. Over the last 20 years, this has also become true of prison life. The systematic introduction of television in prisons started in 1998. It was initially a reward for 'enhanced' prisoners who demonstrated a high level of compliance with prison regimes, but since then it has become part of the 'standard' privileges, only to be removed from those who demonstrate poor behaviour. In this book, Dr. Victoria Knight, a senior research fellow at De Montfort University Leicester, examines the ways in which television is viewed by prisoners, how this shapes their social world and their inner emotional experiences.

The book draws upon research conducted in an adult male category B prison, including structured diaries of television viewing along with interviews with prisoners and staff. As well as becoming normalised, television has, in fact, become a dominating aspect of the experience of imprisonment. The diaries collected in this study show that prisoners will spend over sixty hours a week watching programmes, more than double the national average.

One of the primary policy justifications for the introduction of television was the way that it reinforced the incentives and earned privileges scheme (IEP), which offered graduated privileges reflecting compliance, good behaviour and positive work towards release. This approach aimed to extend the use of soft power over prisoners. This book reveals that in unforeseen ways the effects have been more extensive.

The social effects have included a retreat from public spaces into the private space of the prison cell, a pattern that has also been discussed in the community outside. Within shared cells, interpersonal dynamics have altered as these relationships require careful negotiations around

3. Loader, I. and Sparks, R. (2010) *Public criminology?* London: Routledge.

potential areas of conflict or harmony, including television viewing. With those outside of the prison, including family and friends, programmes can become shared interests and act as a proxy for being together. In these ways, television becomes integral to social relations inside and outside of prisons.

This research is also concerned with the ways that television intersects with the emotional life of prisoners. As with other viewers, they experience joy, happiness, sadness and anger while watching. In prison, Dr. Knight argues that it can also be a 'package of care' helping men to cope with the pains of imprisonment. Some, however, become concerned about their dependence upon television and how it will affect them in the longer term, particularly after release. Resistance and the assertion of independence comes in different forms, so that some refuse to have a television at all, while others manage the quantity they watch or the type of programmes they consume.

In the final chapter, Dr. Knight speculates regarding the development of in-cell technology including communications and information technology. Such developments may offer opportunities for more flexible family contact including video conferencing, and may also include educational content so that time in cell can be used constructively. The risk, of course, is that technology comes to replace or reduce real interactions and prison activities. This dystopian vision is of a financially-motivated impoverishment of the social life of prisoners. Such polar perspectives reveal that technology does not in itself determine such outcomes, instead it is the social context in which it is used that shapes this.

Dr. Knight's research is an important contribution to the understanding of the social world of the prison. Television has become a greater, even dominating, aspect of this and so deserves the close

attention it is given in this book. It is a work full of new insights into the uses and effects of television in prisons and adds significantly to current understanding of the issue, in particular by exploring the emotional and social context.

Dr Jamie Bennett is Governor of HMP Grendon and Springhill.

Theatre Review
Through the Gap
York Theatre Royal

In the days when HMP Askham Grange was regarded as significant enough to have a governor in its own right, one of its incumbents was Sue McCormick. Contrary to what one hears in the media, Sue was genuinely the youngest governor both at the time and since, having been appointed at 29. It was with her support and encouragement that Clean Break Theatre Company was formed, in 1979, by two former Askham prisoners, Jenny Hicks and Jackie Holborough. Almost 40 years on, Clean Break continues its ground breaking work in women's prisons and elsewhere.

I became aware of Clean Break's ongoing involvement with Askham Grange some two years ago when attending a presentation by York St John University's Prison Partnership Project on narrative, women and prisons. Regular drama workshops and choral activities were being held in collaboration with the University, Clean Break and the prison's Education Department. Now, third year undergraduates and Askham Grange prisoners have co-created a sensitively crafted yet hard hitting short play, *Through the Gap*, under guidance from the University.

A sparse set. Five chairs against a black background. Five sets of neatly folded clothes as five women enter to a plaintive chant of those

who have been 'so high and so low', one senses in more ways than one. The women don the identical grey shifts which, though female prisoners have worn civilian clothes for decades, serve to represent the depersonalisation inherent upon entry into the penal system. This is reinforced by a skilfully mimed portrayal of the reception process including searching and a frequent repetition of their prison numbers.

During an early sequence, the cast simulate running quickly towards the audience with a cacophony of voices explaining why. All are running from something yet all have distinctive back stories. One, whose addicted mother and absent father mean that prison is the only secure and caring environment she knows. Another who 'didn't go out that morning to kill somebody' but whose careless driving did. Others who are mortified at leaving their children behind. The beauty of a mother's love, once deprived of expressing it, is tenderly expressed.

A recurring image develops when large pillow cases of white feathers are scattered upon the stage which first come to symbolise the white powder for which many of the women crave and for which they must somehow find the money. Later the feathers are bundled together into make-believe substitutes for the babies they have left at home. But there is further symbolism to come.

Case histories are touched upon as are the fears and uncertainties of daily living, relationships and the uncertainties of life on release. Will family and friends see the person as she is and not how the media have painted her? Will the cheerful husband on the telephone be quite so cheerful and accepting on his wife's return home? And what if the husband or partner, house and job have disappeared? What then for the isolated and vulnerable woman whose hopes for the return of her

child may thereby have disappeared too?

The work confirms the eternal penological truths of Gresham Sykes's pains of imprisonment.¹ However the performance is not completely bleak and there are unsentimental but accurate portrayals of the mutual support offered by fellow prisoners in time of crisis. The action stops abruptly. The stories do not have convenient ends for who knows what those ends might be? Who knows?

There followed a lively and informative question and answer session with the cast and, in the audience, the Director of the Prison Partnership Project and senior lecturer in Applied Theatre, Rachel Conlon. The participants held weekly workshops in the prison and whereas many of the characters were based on those at Askham, some had been conflated and others shaped by observation of women's trials over a year in the local Crown Court. The student actors were careful to respect their Askham counterparts' requested confidentiality and this helped shape the final piece.

It was during this discussion that further symbolism became apparent

to me though possibly not to the cast. Juliet Foster, the Theatre Royal's Associate Director, joked about the staff's imminent job of Hoovering up the thick bed of the feathers left behind. How closely that correlated with one of Thomas Mathiesen's functions of the prison: the 'sanitation function' whereby seemingly unproductive elements in society are swept away.² Just like the prisoners and the feathers.

Harriet Walter, who has also worked with Clean Break, when speaking of her recent Donmar Warehouse Shakespeare trilogy using all-woman casts and set in the prison environment, talked of 'giving voices to the voiceless'. Such an aspiration informs and is manifestly achieved in this production. The work won the York Theatre Royal annual graduate prize for final year students of Theatre. This offers the winners professional mentoring to develop their work culminating, in in this case, with performances at the prison, within the University, at the Theatre Royal and hopefully beyond.

Were there shortcomings? Well perhaps some. There was no recognition of the infantilizing of prisoners that was so evident in the

women's prisons of my experience, albeit many years ago. The same might be true of the medicalizing of normality. The poignancy of the absent mother's plight and the influence of dysfunctional parenting were well demonstrated but not the presence, within the prison community, of the cruel or abusive mother. Prisoners' responses to her could be equally cruel often resulting from their own covert 'justice' system. And there was scant mention of staff. However these are slight criticisms set against a production of remarkable maturity from such a talented young team. A full house experienced a challenging evening and responded with fulsome enthusiasm.

York St John University continues to work with Clean Break and with Askham Grange and hopes, in due course, to extend their work into a closed prison. Sue McCormick would have been so pleased.³

Peter Quinn

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1989–1991).*

1. Sykes, G.M. (1958) *The Society of Captives*, Princeton N.J., Princeton UP, 65–7.

2. Mathiesen, T. (1974) *Politics of Abolition*, London, Martin Robertson, 77.

3. Sue McCormick's obituary (27th October 2010) containing further details of her work with Clean Break is available on the *Guardian* website.