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Small Voices

Editorial Comment

Small Voices: Hidden diversity in prisons past and present

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At a time when public and political discourse seems to be dominated by inexorable simplification and the imposition of compassionless homogeneity, small voices are needed. Small voices can provide a check on unreflective generalisations — about individuals, groups or behaviours — that seldom seek causes, justifications or deeper understanding. Small voices highlight diversity of circumstances and experience, impact and consequences. They are complex and difficult, but raise the bar on what might be required to address social problems and injustices. The adjective of small reflects not only the difficulties of these voices emerging, getting out beyond their own immediate space or confinement, but the multiple obstacles which prevent them being listened to and acted upon. Historically, individuals or groups who had such small voices may not have been able to leave records or their records were not considered significant enough to be preserved. For those historians committed to social history, revealing a history from below, the recurrent problem is the dearth of materials produced and preserved by those most marginalised and, thus, the perennial reliance upon sources which may relate to those with small voices but which actually derive from, and are shaped by, those with greater influence and volume. This problem may take a different shape in the early twenty-first century but has a similar outcome. Even though new technologies and forums make it possible for small voices to be more easily relayed, they often remain mediated, overwhelmed or silenced by noisier, dominant speech. In such circumstances, small voices require others with influence, networks and volume to enable them to emerge, be heard and listened to. With this in mind, the contributors to this edition endeavour to capture and reveal small, often unheard, voices within the prison system, past and present. Their aim is to utilise these voices to highlight broader struggles and injustices that can all too easily go unnoticed and, in doing so, emphasise the extent to which structural factors determine that some groups will differentially experience the criminal justice system and incarceration.

Starting in the present, Barton and Hobson focus on the experiences of prisoners with special educational needs, in terms of both their trajectories to custody and their experiences within prison. Challenging approaches to prison education that mirror neoliberal schooling methods — with their focus on measurable outputs and prioritisation of conformity over personal and political enlightenment — they reflect on how, if structural inequalities are not recognised, education can become a route to social exclusion rather than liberation.

Similarly, a lack of recognition of structural issues is evident in the historical response to prisoners who entered prison with a disability, or indeed acquired a disability while in prison. Johnston and Turner suggest that such prisoners may have experienced a less physically arduous experience at a particularly deterrent period in prison history, but they were unlikely to receive remission in terms of sentence length. Using case studies from Woking prison, they shed light on the experiences of disabled prisoners in Victorian England, noting that, unless it could be deemed 'absolutely necessary', special provision was not made.

Nevertheless, the margins given by that 'absolute necessity' may have been sufficient to encourage individual prisoners to feign insanity, although historically it is extremely difficult to draw the line between feigned and real illness. Sheppard examines the divide in her analysis of discourses around, and responses to, those prisoners who were conceptualised as 'feigning' insanity in the late-Victorian period. Narratives around those feigning mental illness, she argues, fed into broader concerns about the recidivist and the perceived necessity to maintain deterrent penal regimes.

The enduring complexity of the prison population which has often been hidden in public debate is also clear in the article by Davies who suggests that the prison is a key determinant in the level of fluidity in social labelling. Veterans of military service, even active service, can quickly experience a shift from being considered 'heroes' to being condemned as 'villains' following their incarceration. Davies asserts that the state has played a role in this shift by failing to provide sufficient support for veterans, post military service, leaving them exposed to a potential 'military to prison pipeline' and to social condemnation when things go wrong.

Both in the early twenty-first century and historically a high proportion of those who experience judicial confinement are less educated, less skilled and more vulnerable due to a variety of reasons including problems with alcohol and/or drugs. As Brown observes in her article on serial offenders during the first third of the twentieth century, state intervention was often experienced by such groups in terms of legislation which targeted their offending and not the structures which exacerbated their disadvantage and framed their criminal behaviour. Sometimes those structures were not an immediately visible aspect of the ways in which the criminal justice system operated. As Green notes in his discussion on black prisoners in Victorian Britain, the Victorian criminal justice system seldom recorded the race or ethnicity of people accused or convicted of crimes. Nonetheless, Green presents evidence which makes it clear that there was significant ethnic diversity in prisons at this time. The problematic nature of the historical evidence means that it is difficult to determine issues such as the fairness and equality of the trial process for the men and women concerned, but attention to the small traces they left can tell us much about the broader social concerns of the time

In contrast to the majority of poor prisoners, some middle class offenders received considerable public and political attention. Furthermore, they were more likely to leave records behind and thus have their voices heard. However, as Bethell points out, the experiences of many 'white-collar' prisoners have been eclipsed by attention given to other prisoners of their class, for example those who broke the law for political reasons (like suffragettes, Fenians and conscientious objectors) or well-known public figures, such as Oscar Wilde. Prisoners such as these could, over time, become more easily perceived as tragic and wronged characters in the public consciousness. By contrast, despite the majority of 'white-collar' prisoners being relatively low level clerks or shop workers, history has judged them less sympathetically, as individuals who committed crime not from want or political conviction but, for perhaps the worst of all motivations, greed. The final article in this edition examines the experience and *self*-(rather than public-) perception of one white-collar prisoner. By drawing on an extensive personal record left by Edward Bannister, Cox highlights how, despite being a serial offender, Bannister saw himself as different from regular prisoners (or 'roughs') and argues that his story can be used to explore the significance of both personal and public perceptions of Victorian respectability.

Taken together, the articles in this edition combine to raise some important considerations that we must acknowledge if we are to really 'know' the prison. First, they highlight that because prisoners, historically and contemporarily, have tended to share very similar social demographics, it is easy to overlook the diversity within the prison population. Further, it is easy to ignore the questions and complexities posed by this diverse population because prisoner voices are 'small' by comparison to the volume of official and political rhetoric. An examination of small voices (whether that be directly via the excavation of personal testimonies from specific individuals or indirectly via a broader reflection on issues that affect particular populations) can help provide a better understanding of the powerful yet nuanced politics of prison punishment and the structural contexts that shape trajectories towards, experiences of and responses to imprisonment, past and present.