The Working Lives of Prison Managers

Global Change, Local Culture and Individual Agency in the Late Modern Prison

JAMIE BENNETT
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The Working Lives of Prison Managers

Global Change, Local Culture and Individual Agency in the Late Modern Prison

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1
Introduction

This book is concerned with the contemporary working lives of prison managers in England and Wales. No individual or organisation sits in isolation, and any consideration of prison managers has to be located in an understanding of the prison system in which they operate and the broader social context in which that is situated.

The core of this book is drawn from new empirical research of the contemporary working lives of prison managers. There are a number of reasons for focusing on this group. Some are personal, as I myself have worked in prisons since 1996 and have held senior management posts, including being Governor of two prisons. The significance of this biography is discussed in detail in the methodological annex to this book. However, there are other reasons for exploring the work of prison managers, including the fact that they are a set of professionals who have a distinct, socially significant and historically under-examined role. It has been argued that studying prison staff is important for three reasons (Crewe et al., 2008). The first is that, because they carry out an essential state function that has a human impact on those who are imprisoned, it is important to understand their effects. The second is that, as a distinct occupational group, it is important to understand the effects upon them including the particular pressures, stresses and tensions that they experience. The third is that studying the work of prison managers can illuminate wider social issues including power, order, inequality and resistance as they are manifested in the contemporary prison. From this perspective, the experiences of those working in prisons are grounded in wider social transformations and processes. It is intended that this book will address all three aspects and that this will draw out the relationship between the particular local circumstances and the broader macro-level changes of late modernity.
The Working Lives of Prison Managers

The nature of the transformations in Western liberal society over the last half a century have been described in various ways, although the term preferred here is ‘late modernity’. There have been various attempts to encapsulate those changes, but their nature and form are difficult and problematic to define; ‘perhaps inevitably given the inexactitude of such large-scale generalization and periodization’ (Garland and Sparks, 2000, p. 14). They are also changes that are uneven and incomplete so that their exact contours will vary from place to place and time to time (Kennedy, 2010). However, in order to provide a broad introduction, ‘late modernity’ refers to:

the social, economic and cultural configuration brought into being by the confluence of a number of interlinked developments. These include (i) the transformative dynamic of capitalist production and exchange (the emergence of mass consumerism, globalization, the restructuring of the labour market, the new insecurity of employment); (ii) the secular changes in the structure of families and households (the movement of women into the paid labour force, the increased rates of divorce and family breakdown, the decreasing size of the average household; the coming of the teenager as a separate and often unsupervised age grade); (iii) changes in social ecology and demography (the stretching of time and space brought about by cars, suburbs, commuting, information technology; (iv) the social impact of the electronic mass media (the generalization of expectations and fears; the reduced importance of localized, corporatist cultures, changes in the conditions of political speech) and, (v) the democratization of social and cultural life (the ‘desubordination’ of lower classes and minority groups, shifts in power ratios between men and women; the questioning of authority, the rise of moral individualism).

(Garland and Sparks, 2000, p. 15)

Whilst such analysis draws the contours of grand structural changes, their ideological character is also important. In particular, it has been argued that the changes have reflected and enabled the power structures that underpin neoliberal market economies. Neoliberalism is not solely an issue of economics but has complex social, political, legal and cultural dimensions that have permeated the life of the contemporary Western world (Bell, 2011). From this perspective, the transformative potential of the coming of late modernity has been constrained and co-opted within the dominant capitalist power structures. This includes
facilitating the mechanisms of production and exchange, enabling mass consumption, expanding the reach and control of commercial organisations and legitimising inequalities in wealth and power. At the same time that the role of the state has been constrained in the economic sphere, it has expanded in relation to problematic populations including welfare recipients, migrants and criminal offenders.

It has been argued that these social developments raise important questions for criminology that demand an intellectual response (Garland and Sparks, 2000; Loader and Sparks, 2011). This book attempts to respond to these questions by locating an exploration of prison managers within these social transformations, as will be explained more fully below.

Prisons and late modernity

The late modern period has seen what David Garland (2001) has called ‘underlying patterns of structural transformation’ (p. 7) in the practices of criminal justice in the UK and the US. These transformations reflect and intersect with the broader social changes briefly described above.

According to Garland, the changes in criminal justice include the decline of the rehabilitative ideal and its replacement with a more emotional and punitive orientation, fuelled by images of dangerous offenders and vulnerable victims. Criminal justice has ceased to be an area dominated by elite or professional expertise but is instead colonised by popular media and political discourse. Managerialism has also expanded with the adoption of business practices in public organisations and direct competition for the provision of services in an ever-expanding web of security and control both through the formal criminal justice system and private services. These streams of punitiveness, populism and managerialism have fed an expanding ‘Culture of control’ both in public policy and private lives. It has also been argued that these changes have reflected and facilitated the dominant neoliberal ideology (Bell, 2011). In particular, the expansion of the market for criminal justice services has created private wealth, whilst the popular targeting of problematic populations acts to obscure and distract from concern about the powerful whilst also legitimising the inequalities of capitalist societies by moralising the conduct of the poor and marginalising concern for their plight.

The changes brought about by these macro-level developments have, however, been uneven and have not obliterated what has gone before. Instead:
It has been a process not of inventing new institutions or instituting new practices but of redefining those that already exist, giving them different force and significance, putting them to different use.

(Garland, 2001, p. 174)

There are therefore elements of the past and of local cultures that persist and exist in relationship to the wider changes, an issue which will be elaborated later in this chapter.

It is worth briefly discussing how these themes have developed in English and Welsh prisons over the last 25 years. What follows in the next section is a brief, contextual overview that summarises as concisely as possible some of the leading issues contained in recent discussions of this period. In particular, this section will focus on populism and punitiveness, managerialism and the changing nature of work in late modernity. The key concern for this book is how these surrounding events, as well as the ideological and cultural currents that have accompanied them, have served to shape the working circumstances of, and demands upon, prison managers.

**Populism and punitiveness**

It has been argued that, across Western nations since the 1990, there has emerged widespread popular public support, whether organic or manufactured, for more punitive punishment, including expansion of the use of imprisonment, the implementation of longer sentences and deliberately making prison conditions harsher or more onerous (Pratt, 2007). In England and Wales, crime and punishment became increasingly contentious issues in the early 1990s, spurred on by a signal case, the murder of the two-year-old James Bulger by two young boys in Bootle, following which the then Prime Minister John Major called for society to ‘condemn a little more and understand a little less’ (see Bennett, 2008a). The resurgent Labour Party attempted to establish their governing credentials through the then Shadow Home Secretary, Tony Blair, calling for an approach that was ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’ (Downes and Morgan, 1997). This strategy attempted to encapsulate an approach that bridged both credible punishment and progressive social reform. The Conservative government, whose popularity was in serious decline, responded by adopting a more populist stance towards crime, with the then Home Secretary, Michael Howard, making his much quoted speech to the Conservative Party Conference in 1993 in which he argued that:
Prison works. It ensures that we are protected from murderers, muggers, and rapists – and it makes many who are tempted to commit crime to think twice.

(Howard, 1993)

This political language shaped and was also shaped by public and media discourse. It has been noted that public concern about crime has grown, people experience greater insecurity and they have looked for certainty in more rigorous responses to crime (Pratt, 2007). This, Pratt argues, has been given voice through an expanded and increasingly accessible media, whilst the status of expert opinion has been eroded through a general decline in deference and trust. These changes have reflected an acceleration of a longer-term trend away from welfare-orientated approaches to more expressive and punitive ones (Garland, 2001). Rather than being a reflection of a particular place or political campaign this is instead deeply implicated in the coming of late modernity. It has been argued that:

It may no longer be the case that major actors in British or American politics can meaningfully be ranked as more or less ‘populist’, or indeed as more or less ‘punitive’. Rather, populism can reasonably be regarded as one of the inevitable modes of late-modern politics; while ‘punitiveness’ is a stance that no serious politician can safely disavow.

(Sparks, 2003, p. 170)

It may also be that this change reflects the values of neoliberalism (Bell, 2011). From this perspective, punitiveness enables economically marginalised groups to be the subject of condemnation rather than empathy, so delegitimising concern about the effects of inequality and legitimising the retreat from social welfare.

As in many countries including the USA and Australia, these developments were put into operation in England and Wales through specific policies such as zero-tolerance policing, greater use of indeterminate sentencing for incapacitating offenders considered dangerous, greater use of mandatory sentencing such as ‘three strikes’-style laws and minimum terms for particular offences (see Pratt et al., 2005), and more onerous conditional release and more rapid recall to prison for violation (Padfield and Maruna, 2006). All these changes accelerated the growth in the prison population.
There was a gradual but somewhat inexorable rise in the prison population in England and Wales from 1945 onwards, growing from 15,000 to 45,000 in the late 1980s, although there was a brief reversal following the Criminal Justice Act 1991 (Morgan, 1997). However, the population again began to rise from 1992, reflecting more punitive public and political attitudes (Downes and Morgan, 1997) and a number of adverse, if contingent, events, such as the James Bulger case. The prison population continued to expand, exceeding the 85,000 mark during the 2010 general election. This made the UK one of the highest users of imprisonment in Western Europe (International Centre of Prison Studies, n.d.).

Within the prison, however, there was no corresponding move towards the brutal internal conditions and treatment seen in some other countries (see Pratt et al., 2005). Indeed, the first half of the 1990s saw a focus on the improvement of conditions and humane treatment. This was prompted by findings of the judicial inquiry established after the extensive riots of 1990 (Woolf and Tumim, 1991). This called for and led to improvements including the installation of integral sanitation in cells, reduced overcrowding, improved levels of activity and procedural protections for prisoners such as formal complaint mechanisms (Morgan, 1997).

In the later part of the decade, and following high profile escapes from two high security prisons, the Prison Service commissioned an external inquiry to review control, order and security (Learmont, 1995). This was not a public, judicial inquiry but instead a report commissioned by the organisation and conducted by a senior military officer. Amongst other recommendations, the inquiry proposed a move away from prisoner rights and entitlements to a more conditional approach through incentives and earned privileges. This meant that prisoners would receive services such as access to visits, private cash, telephones, televisions and time unlocked according to how well they behaved and complied with prison staff; this was a move towards the responsibilisation of prisoners and the use of ‘soft’ power, encouraging self-regulation (Crewe, 2009). This policy was strengthened by the introduction in 1999 of home detention curfew, which allowed compliant and low risk prisoners to be released early providing they were electronically monitored (Dodgson et al., 2001).

The election of the New Labour government in 1997 saw increased investment in public services, including prisons. Material conditions improved with the extension of access to telephones, activities and in-cell televisions. There was also significant investment in services
designed to reduce reoffending, including drug treatment, psychological interventions, education and work training (Bennett, 2007a). Although these appeared to be more welfare-orientated approaches, providing better conditions and opportunities for rehabilitation, their purpose and application were subtly different. They were instrumentally directed, structuring the conduct of prisoners through ‘offender management’ (Crewe, 2009). They were also more actuarially designed, with services being based upon research as to specific activities that are evidentially linked to offending (see Feeley and Simon, 1992).² This reflects Garland’s observation (2001) that:

The welfare mode, as well as becoming more muted, has become more conditional, more offence-centred, more risk conscious. (p. 175)

Whilst popular punitiveness is particularly evident in the political rhetoric, media representation and the growth of imprisonment in the UK, it has been an uneven and incomplete transformation. Whilst the dramatic expansion of imprisonment is incontestable, however, the inner life of the prison has retained, albeit in an altered condition, a concern with the care and rehabilitation of those incarcerated. It may be suggested that this concern is merely necessary in order to legitimate the expanded prison population, but it also draws upon values that have deep historical roots and which run counter to the emerging ‘Culture of control’. These shifting expectations, changing practices and tensions have an impact on the thinking and behaviour of prison managers, altering their working world.

**Managerialism**

It has been widely observed that a hegemonic form of management now dominates contemporary organisations, particularly in the developed Western world (Parker, 2002). This includes a movement towards larger organisations with hierarchical structures that attempt to monitor and control the behaviour of employees through target-setting and the use of information technology. It also encompasses the use of human resource management techniques such as recruitment, reward, appraisal, development, communication and consultation in order to shape the ways that employees think about their work, enlisting them as corporate citizens. This trend has sometimes been termed ‘managerialism’.