

The pains of freedom: Assessing the ambiguity of Scandinavian penal exceptionalism on Norway's Prison Island

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Abstract

Where is the pain in exceptional prisons? A new generation of prisons produces unusual 'pains of imprisonment' which scholars of punishment are only beginning to catalog. This article brings the reader inside the social milieu of Norway's 'Prison Island', a large, minimum security ('open') prison. Here inmates live in self-organized cottages and enjoy relatively unrestricted freedom of movement. But even under exceptional conditions of Scandinavian incarceration, new vectors and modes of punishment arise that produce 'pains of freedom', a notion drawing on Crewe's historicizing examination of Sykes' concept. Serving as an addition to conventional sociological conceptualizations of prison pains, the 'pains of freedom' can be classified into five sub-categories: (1) confusion; (2) anxiety and boundlessness; (3) ambiguity; (4) relative deprivation; and (5) individual responsibility. Based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with 15 inmates, it is shown that freedom is occasionally experienced as ambiguous, bittersweet or tainted. These new pains may be indicative of what is in stock for clients of future penal regimes in other societies.

Keywords

open prisons, pains of imprisonment, prison ethnography, relative deprivation, Scandinavian penal exceptionalism

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Introduction

Popular media representations portray life in Scandinavia's 'open', minimum security prisons as comfortable, rehabilitation-oriented and couched in generous welfare state provisions. These open prisons have lower-security with limited outer-perimeter control, a more trusting attitude toward inmates among staff, and greater opportunities for autonomy, freedom of movement and leave to outside society for inmates than more typical prisons. To some degree they are comparable to Category D prisons in England and Wales. Such conditions have led some scholars to discuss the trend toward 'Scandinavian penal exceptionalism' (Pratt, 2008a, 2008b). Popular representations reinforce the scholarly vision of the Scandinavians as carceral champions. For instance, the UK tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mail* (2011) reported on life in a Norwegian 'cushy prison' as one where inmates were treated with 'saunas, sunbeds, and deckchairs':

They spend their days happily winding around the network of paths that snake through the pine forests, or swimming and fishing along the five miles of pebble beaches, or playing on the tennis courts and football pitch; and recuperating later on sunbeds and in a sauna, a cinema room, a band rehearsal room and expansive library.

Though nominally still a member of the domain of 'prisons', such institutions seem a far cry from the San Quentins, Sing Sings or La Santé of the world. More broadly, the Scandinavian correctional systems and their exceptional traits have generated interest and debate (Baldursson, 2000; Johnsen et al., 2011; Snortum and Bødal, 1985; Ugelvik and Dullum, 2012). In part this is probably because they seem to contradict broader penal trends on the international scene and they might serve as an example to follow for societies trying to counteract the turn of the penal screw. Pratt (2008a) contends the Scandinavians are exceptional on two counts: first, these societies exhibit low incarceration rates, nearly half of England and Wales and one-tenth of the United States. Second, these societies detain inmates under unusually favorable prison conditions (Pratt and Eriksson, 2011, 2013). The prison as a social problem-solving institution plays a less central societal role in Scandinavia than in most other advanced societies; while penal policies may be gradually shifting in these countries, 'commitments to liberal values, human rights, and rational policy making remain strong' (Lappi-Seppälä, 2007: 217). Scandinavian penal exceptionalism is not simply the expression of a quantitative difference between this region and the rest – measurably better material conditions and lower incarceration rates – but perhaps also the expression of a more tolerant, regionally bounded penal culture (Hörnqvist, 2012). Even as Nordic penal regimes may be changing, the 'social democratic way of thinking about crime and punishment remains the dominant one' (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013: 192).

Ground-level studies of exceptional prison systems are in short supply. Pratt has been criticized by Minogue (2009) for his reliance on scripted, day-long visits; more generally, Piché and Walby (2010, 2012) have criticized the adoption of 'carceral

tours' by social scientists as a surrogate for field immersion, contending that tours allow prison administrators to display the 'front stage' of imprisonment. Nielsen (2012: 135) takes Pratt to task for failing to account for the discrepancy between goals and practices, suggesting that, in the context of imprisonment in Denmark at least, 'penal realities as they are experienced from within may not match the level of exceptionalism that Pratt observes from the outside'. In the US penal context, Wacquant (2002) has drawn attention to an 'eclipse' in prison ethnography even as this institution has risen to unparalleled prominence. In Norway, until quite recently, one had to venture back nearly half a century for semi-ethnographic studies of the prison (Galtung, 1959; Mathiesen, 1965), although recently, Ugelvik (2011a, 2011b, 2012) has studied a Norwegian men's prison ethnographically.

Below, the empirical dearth on exceptional penalty will partly be redressed by engaging with an open, low-security institution in Norway which I have called Prison Island. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, the concept of the 'pains of freedom' is launched to produce a more nuanced scholarly vision of how Scandinavian penal exceptionalism plays out in practice.

Entering Prison Island

Prison Island houses around 100 inmates at any one time, and around 80 officers and staff are employed there. At the end of the ordinary working day, only a handful of officers remain on duty until the next day, indicative of apparently high levels of social trust and remarkably low security levels. Inmates spend their first weeks or months in one of two reception dorms – large, imposing brick structures several stories tall – housing between 15 and 20 inmates each, before transitioning over into one of the dozen or so cottages on the island that house four to six persons each. Inmates work, study, shop for groceries and cook most of their own meals; they receive visitors, hang out in the library, or run on paths around the island for exercise. Living conditions are, as far as possible, meant to mirror the world outside. But Joseph, an inmate, warned that 'there is one thing you should understand: This is still a prison.'

Inmates must work or study; in exchange, they are paid around 60 Norwegian *kroner* (around eight euros) per day. Inmates work in the commissary, communal kitchens, laundry building, horse stables or onboard the ferry that travels between the prison and the mainland. Some work in the fields, raising staple crops using ecological farming techniques. During the harvest season, most inmates are expected to take their turn out in the fields. Others attend classes in the educational building. Some work out in the forests, felling trees for firewood, which inmates sell to nearby communities, accompanied by an officer. Those who have earned an adequate degree of trust and have progressed sufficiently far along in their sentences can attend school or hold down jobs on the mainland. There is great freedom of movement on the island. Inmates can freely walk about in the leisure time left after work.

But prison life in this unusual institution is not entirely unrestricted. Rules govern behavior. For instance, there is a curfew in force after 11pm. Inmates are expected to show up for a 'body count' several times a day. Officers collect urine samples during the morning 'count', usually targeted at random within the population of inmates who have a known history of drug addiction. Visitors can bring food and share a meal with inmates, but any leftovers have to be thrown away or taken back to the mainland. Inmates can jog around the island, but the north tip of the island is off-limits because the beach there is reserved for recreational boaters. Telephones are for the most part switched off during working hours, but some inmates reported being able to negotiate with officers on this point.

More informally, inmate codes massage action into socially acceptable routes. Inmates expect basic courtesies of one another when passing on the gravel roads around the island. Violent confrontations are strongly frowned upon by inmates because violence attracts the officers' attention and can get innocent bystanders kicked off the island and sent back to less comfortable, higher-security facilities. As far as possible, inmates try to sort out conflicts that arise without involving officers. That this is at all a possibility is because of the spatial concentration of officers (who spend a great portion of the day in the officers' building) and de-centralized living and working conditions of inmates (who are spread out across the island).

One might expect that the clientele of such a low-security prison would be exclusively drawn from the ranks of petty offenders, non-violent white collar criminals and the like. Potential residents are certainly filtered according to risk and behavioral history, but the prison warden places emphasis on holding inmates with long sentences, who, it is believed, will be more successful targets of rehabilitative interventions than those with brief sentences, and that means also taking in offenders who have committed violent crimes. The average prison sentence length in Norway is around three months, while the average Prison Island sentence is five years long (Justis- og politidepartementet, 2008: 33), indicative of the unrepresentative offender clientele that the prison houses.

Around one-third of prison beds in Norway are in open prisons. These institutions are meant to act as 'socialization machines', gradually acclimatizing prisonized offenders to life on the outside. As a rule, offenders are first sentenced to closed prison and only later, if they meet certain criteria of risk and probable pay-off in rehabilitation outcomes, can they be transferred to open prison (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2012). Offenders with a sentence of less than two years may be considered for direct placement in open prison, provided that lower-security confinement does not create 'security issues' or violate public perceptions of fairness. One year prior to release, Correctional Services is legally obliged to consider transfer to open prison. The Norwegian Execution of Sentences Act (*Straffegjennomføringsloven*) contains a principle of 'efficient penalty', that sentenced persons should 'not be transferred to a more restrictive prison than necessary'. This is partly justified with reduced fiscal expenditures: each additional low-security prison bed costs between one-third and one-half of what a

high-security prison bed costs (Justis- og politidepartementet, 2008: 213), mostly due to lower staffing requirements in open prisons.

Criminal justice bureaucrats consider a number of criteria in deciding who gets in to open prison, including the gravity of past offenses and inmate behavior – for instance, they consider whether the inmate has violated institutional rules, used drugs or been caught with illicit materials (Kriminalomsorgen, 2008). Inmates otherwise eligible for an open prison may be kept in closed confinement if capacity is low because of staff or space shortages (Justis- og politidepartementet, 2002), an important qualification since Norway has experienced a shortage in prison beds throughout the 2000s (Justis- og politidepartementet, 2006).

Theorizing the open prison

There are differences between prisons. Some prisons hurt their residents a great deal, while others display a better ‘moral performance’ (Liebling, 2011). Sykes (2007 [1958]) famously documented five distinct ‘pains of imprisonment’. These were ‘deprivations’ of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security. The ‘pains of imprisonment’ form a conceptual toolbox to critique penal institutions and show ways in which incarceration produces harm.

But Sykes’ five imprisonment deprivations do not capture the full scope of prison pain. As a new generation of prisons is being constructed, an expansion of this original typology is taking place. McDermott and King (1988) argued that the nature of inmate–officer relations was changing inside English prisons; crucially, the preeminence of ‘mind games’ was supplanting the role of physical abuses in inflicting pain on prisoners. More recently, Crewe (2011a, 2011b) has argued that the ‘softening’ of penal power in certain prisons calls for a historicization of prison pains, as the rise of ‘neo-paternalism’ has invalidated the use of ‘hard’ and direct coercive power in prisons. Prisons are experienced as ‘considerably less heavy than in the past’ and power is ‘exercised more softly, in a way that is less authoritarian’ under a regime of ‘neo-paternalism’ (Crewe, 2011a: 523–524) as violence and squalor give way to new pains following the deployment of various cognitive-therapeutic interventions, the rise of inmate responsabilization and sentencing progression. More specifically, these include pains of uncertainty and indeterminacy, pains of psychological assessment, and pains of self-government. Even though Crewe writes on the basis of empirical work with a medium-security prison in England, the argument he proposes is assumed to have broader implications beyond the confines of that particular institution or, indeed, the limiting category of medium-security prisons. Similarly, on prison architecture, Hancock and Jewkes (2011) have argued that ‘new generation’ prison environments – which are cleaner, brighter and more spacious – may bring about their own ‘insidious form of control’ as they mask more effectively the fact of incarceration.

In historicizing Sykes’ prison pains, it is argued that new imprisonment deprivations exist that one might call the ‘pains of freedom’. These pains posit freedom as an experientially ambiguous, bittersweet privilege; under the constraints of penal

confinement, even exceptional degrees of liberty are never unproblematic and can be directly cost-inducing to the inmate. The concept develops tendencies discussed by Crewe (2011a), but extends the substantive reach, arguing that freedom within constraint is itself the source of experienced pain. While to Sykes, the 'deprivation' of liberty and autonomy is a fount of suffering, in open prisons, it is the provision of freedom that causes frustration.

Methods

I spent a three-month period in 2011 conducting ethnographic fieldwork on Prison Island. Fifteen inmates were interviewed over the course of 17 interviews. Dozens of informal conversations were carried out with inmates, officers and other staff. Time was spent 'hanging out' with inmates on an informal basis. Since inmates were spread out all over the island and were often busy with work, pre-appointed interviews were useful for establishing rapport with sources. This allowed for a stronger bond to be developed more casually later. Contradicting Gobo (2008), who argues that early interviewing will make the field-worker seem 'aggressive' and 'misled', semi-structured interviews were useful icebreakers.

Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and three hours, and they were recorded digitally and transcribed. All but three interviews were conducted in Norwegian; transcriptions in Norwegian were translated into English by the author. Fieldnotes were written immediately after returning to the mainland or in a borrowed office in the prison. Transcribed interviews and fieldnotes were coded using computer software according to the five dimensions of the pains of freedom developed below; the five dimensions were developed through a combination of inductive immersion in the data and through a process of refinement and extension of existing theoretical categories in the research literature. In addition, a database containing interviews with around 40 prisoners serving time for drug-related convictions in Norway was checked for codes or statements relevant to open prisons.

Prison ethnography is fraught with practical difficulties (Crewe, 2007). 'Gatekeepers' can be formidable obstacles to prison research (Waldram, 2009). Surprisingly, this study was facilitated eagerly by parties who might otherwise impede research. Institutional Review Board approval was secured without difficulty. Correctional Services, the local warden and officers facilitated prison research willingly. On occasion, officers expressed concern over the author's safety while 'wandering about' among inmates on the difficult-to-monitor terrain of the island. After some time, and to appease concerned officers, the author agreed to limit interviewing to the visitor's building. Some officers were more liberal and allowed the author to 'wander' freely. Officers were ultimately responsible for the safety of visitors, and so their impulse to err on the side of caution was understandable, but this also limited observational opportunities. Below, many data are derived from interview situations.

Findings and analysis

Many of Sykes' original pains of imprisonment were found on Prison Island. On the deprivation of heterosexual relations, some complained that sex was frustrated by the sounds of other inmates engaging in intercourse with guests in visiting chambers; others expressed surprise that overnight conjugal visits were prohibited even though they were permitted in some higher-security prisons. On the deprivation of goods and services, some said there was not enough food to go around: since 'self-empowerment' of inmates means having them cook most of their own meals, inmates must purchase food, even as their daily allowance from Correctional Services remains mostly unchanged from closed prison. But what will interest us below are non-Sykesian vectors of pain and power. The pains of freedom can be studied as five distinct but related sub-phenomena: (1) confusion; (2) anxiety and boundlessness; (3) ambiguity; (4) relative deprivation; and (5) individual responsibility. These new pains are described and discussed along the five dimensions below.

Confusion

There are conflicting sensations and situations that arise as the inmate balances between norms, roles and expectations in prison and the world outside the prison. The open prison can produce confusion over roles, and below it is described how the inmate role enters into conflict with the role of wage-earner and of autonomous intellectual, and how role strain (Goode, 1960) – in which inmates have trouble balancing dual and contradictory commitments – enters into each of these areas.

The role of wage-earner and the role of inmate can enter into conflict with one another. An inmate who commuted between prison and a regular job on the outside said time on Prison Island was surprisingly hard because 'you're free and you aren't free' and 'you get confused moving between the outside and in here'. By day, the standards of ordinary working life applied, while at night, he lived by officer rules and inmate expectations. His life consisted of a migration in and out of these two contrasting worlds, and, he suggested, this migration produced cognitive disarray. Mario, an inmate who was starting work as an office clerk outside the prison, said he was worried what would happen if his boss kept him behind for overtime work. He knew from past work experience that overtime work was a regularly recurring feature of the job, and it might delay return past a set curfew. 'See, that's the thing, you don't know where they draw the line', he said. He worried how he was expected to make a choice if the wage-earner role came into conflict with correctional expectations.

More broadly, exceptional conditions of confinement can produce an autonomous mindset in inmates. Ali, a young inmate in his early 20s, described how he was confused about what kind of environment he was expected to adjust to: 'It's not really a prison. I don't know how to say it. But it *is* a prison.' He noted the

increased risk of rule-breaking behavior attendant with the lowered vigilance that freedom tended to produce:

Ali: Sometimes I feel like I'm not even in prison. I forget myself a little.

Author: When do you forget that you're in prison?

Ali: Almost all the time, nearly. You're not supposed to walk outside [at night] and if you walk outside, you'll get a report. You don't think about the fact that it's nighttime and you have to stay indoors. You forget you're in prison.

This place did not *look like* or have the *feel* of a prison, but violating institutional rules could still produce very 'prison-like' effects. For instance, a seemingly innocent mistake like breaking the curfew would lead to a 'strike' on his prison record and three 'strikes' in a month would lead to a disciplinary report which could affect sentencing progression.

Johan, a middle-aged inmate, reported a conflict between the role of autonomous intellectual and the role of obedient inmate. He had embarked on a course of self-study. The warden had granted him permission to read and write in his room instead of taking on a regular prison job. But Johan had missed three counts in one month. The officers had called him in for routine questioning, and a report was being written. If worst came to worst, he would be sent back to a closed prison. His date of release was drawing near, and this could jeopardize release. He explained that when he was engaged in intellectual labors, he was 'not in prison any longer'. Rather, he would 'dive straight into the text' he was working on. His room looked like the comfortable office of an academic: rows of books lined the walls, a computer and a desk by the window overlooked the sea, manuscripts and stacks of paper were everywhere. One could forget the 'count' in there, maybe even prison altogether. The prison had equipped him with conditions of life in ways conducive to a 'normal' mode of existence. But these freedoms were precisely the things that were disrupting the smooth workings of the institutional order.

An officer who cracked down on several inmates' seemingly innocent but semi-illicit actions, asked them: 'Have you forgotten that you're in prison now, boys?' When inmates forget their place, officers see it as their job to continuously reinforce the steeply hierarchical relations between inmates and themselves as a procedure for 'managing trouble' (King and McDermott, 1990).

Anxiety and boundlessness

Both anxiety and a sense of boundlessness can arise as inmates transition from closed to open prison, from tight confinement to looser regulations. 'A lot of people told me: "Do time in closed [prison]."' There isn't a whole lot that can affect you [there]', Espen said. In the solitude of the high-security cell, he explained, 'you just go into your own world'. The apparent boundlessness of freedom can be troubling to prisonized inmates (Clemmer, 1958; Thomas, 1977). Their 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1990: 92), that is, their confidence in the permanence of

'self-identity' and stability of 'social and material environments of action', is disrupted by increased freedom. Too much is made possible. Analogous pains can be identified in prisoner 'release anxiety' (Crawley and Sparks, 2006; Mabli et al., 1985; Uggen et al., 2004; Visser and Travis, 2003). Inmates on Prison Island experience a foretaste of release proper, and therefore live in a kind of permanently suspended release anxiety. This is seen in two areas of inmate life: in stories inmates tell about arriving in prison, and in their stories about home or town leave.

Arrival stories describe the transition from closed to open prison. Magnus had arrived from a high-security facility and had been told to take a stroll around the island while officers completed the transfer paperwork. But unused to the sudden expanse, it turned out that going for a walk became 'too much':

First of all, I didn't know how far I was allowed to go, so I just took a chance and went for it. And then I discovered a sign that read 'Prison Area: No entry.' But it was *turned around* [the wrong way]. So I thought I wasn't allowed to walk any farther. But then I thought to myself, 'I'm already in prison, I'm a prisoner.' So I just started walking real slow in case anyone would start shouting after me.

Joseph described a kind of mental passivity in his arrival story. After having been taken on a brief tour of the island by one of the officers, he was taken back to the officers' building for his transfer papers to be processed:

And then she [the officer] said I can go. I said, 'Go?' I said, 'Go where?' When I came outside, I stood in front of [the officers' building]. I was waiting for her because normally, in closed prison, if you go outside, an officer has to follow you around, like if you go to the doctor, or the lawyer, if you go to the *wherever*, they follow you around. So I thought it would be the same here.

It was quite simply unthinkable for him that he would be allowed to walk around in comparative freedom after years in closed prison, and the mere possibility of it was anxiety-provoking.

Leave stories describe visits to the outside. Confrontations with 'normal life' during home leave or town visits can be distressing. For instance, Magnus was going on his first home leave. It was a distressing experience that manifested itself somatically:

I had my first overnight leave, a welfare home leave, and at that point I'd been in for three years. It was *not* a great experience. Way too much stress, so much stress in fact that I developed a rash all over my back. Uncomfortable.

He continued,

Well, I went straight to a family party. I met relatives I hadn't seen in three years. I met my cousin who had become an adult all of a sudden. He didn't talk to me before,

he used to be very shy and now he was sitting there, telling jokes. It was very like, 'Who is this man?' And my other cousin, she talked lots, and I didn't *know* them any longer. I was there for an hour-and-a-half before I said, 'Look, I *have to* go now.' I was dripping with sweat. It was all too much. I had to go home and get changed because I was *soaking* wet. I've always been very social, but all of a sudden it's uncomfortable being close to lots of people, even my own family.

Freedom is an arena for anxiety: It produces *sweat* and *dizziness*, even a *rash*. On a town visit accompanied by officers, Magnus had walked into a grocery store for the first time in years, and confronted with the sudden plenitude of choices, he said he 'just got dizzy in there'. What should have been positive events were converted into moments of dread. Joseph had a similar story of how freedom was problematic and frustrating. He too had been taken out on a town visit with an officer, and they entered a department store. But touching the outside world only reminded him of obligations unmet:

My mind was occupied with my family mostly, so I didn't get a chance to *feel* the atmosphere, *feel* being among people again. And then when I came into the shop, I see some stuff that's for kids, you know, and I'm supposed to buy this or that for my kid. But I don't have the money. It left me just thinking about them.

Instead of contact with the outside world being a pleasant experience – a welcome break from prison life – it was a source of trepidation and anxiety. He was reminded that he had failed as a provider for his family. Other inmates commented how leave confronted them with new technological innovations like electronic coin counting machines and credit cards with electronic chips, developed after their incarceration, which left them bewildered and paranoid. To inmates, freedom is not necessarily something to be clutched after because years in prison have made them wary; freedom is something to be analyzed carefully and accepted piecemeal.

Ambiguity

The institutional provision of goods and privileges is frequently experienced as ambiguous by inmates; the key experiential descriptor here is *bittersweet*, the sense that liberty is a double-edged sword that provides both pleasure and pain. Haney (2010) argues that there is an 'empowerment myth' surrounding the soft, 'community' alternative to incarceration. Instead of empowerment, semi-permeable institutions can produce dependency, frustration and ambiguity. Similar ambiguities can be found on Prison Island. Exiting the prison on leave is 'good, but at the same time, it's a little weird', Jonathan said, because 'you get a taste of freedom'. This 'taste of freedom' is the basis of Prison Island's *raison d'être*: to provide a hint of the world outside, to 'socialize' and mentally 'decarcerate' inmates, to 'normalize' the malignant effects of high-security confinement.

But the 'taste of freedom' is sometimes bittersweet because it promises too much and leaves inmates unfulfilled.

Comparing English and Norwegian prisons, Baer and Ravneberg (2008: 205) note that the traditional binary opposition between the 'outside' and 'inside' in Goffman's (1961) definition of the 'total institution' seems strangely absent from many modern prisons; instead, a series of 'incompatible juxtapositions between inside and outside' were in evidence as the prison and normal society became 'entangled and fused with one another'. Developing this argument in the context of a study of prison visiting rooms in Russia, Moran (2013) notes that visiting rooms are 'liminal' spaces that blur the boundary between inside/outside norms and expectations. While Van Gennep's (1965) notion of 'liminality' was originally intended to study a linear progression from childhood to adulthood, Moran (2013: 343) notes that in prison visiting rooms, liminality can instead be a repeated occurrence that is 'followed not by a post-liminal reintegration in a different social status, but by a return to the state experienced before pre-liminal detachment.' The fact that the liminal stage seldom leads anywhere but back to where the inmate came from can give rise to what Moran calls a 'space of frustrated partiality'. To inmates on Prison Island, some of the same mechanisms are active.

Compared with life outside, high-security facilities involve sensory slowdown. Time perception changes and inmates receive fewer impulses. Surprisingly, some inmates report that sensory slowdown is beneficial; conversely, the comparatively high-impulse life of open prisons is experienced as injurious by some. One inmate suggested that 'there are lots who would rather serve in closed [prison] than in open [prison]' because in open prison you 'have to *do* stuff' and '*make* something out of your time' while under tight confinement, time passes through a tunnel, 'like standing in line all day'. In interviews with men in closed prison convicted of drug-dealing offenses, this perspective was reiterated. An inmate who had recently been returned from open to closed prison over possession of illicit materials in his cell said:

The days pass a lot quicker here in closed [prison] than in open [prison] because here everyone is in a bubble. Here you just keep your thoughts inside these walls. Focus on your own well-being in here and everything will pass fucking smoothly. In open [prison] it's like you always have leave once a week, right, you've always got something to look forward to, you've got a phone, right, the opportunities are there.

The ambiguity of goods and privileges was echoed by Fredrik, a middle-aged inmate. On Prison Island, he said there were more opportunities than in high-security facilities, but these did not come without a cost:

You get to make phone calls out, but the problem is that at the same time you get a *contact* with freedom, you *notice* freedom without being free. You get more involved in the troubles your wife has at home, but without being able to do anything about them. I can call her every day. In closed [prison] you get 20 minutes [of phone time]

a week. But here I'll call her all the time, and that way you get a running update on everything going on at home, about things you can't decide over or take part in. It makes it harder because you're sensing the problems they have at home a whole lot more. In closed [prison] you can isolate yourself more. You don't *know*, you're isolated.

He added, 'in a way, being here is harder [than being in closed prison]'. Regular contact with the world outside gives inmates a 'taste of freedom' that whets their appetite for more. Under penal constraint, apparent privileges can therefore be subject to ambiguity. This theme is developed by Neumann (2012) in a study of an open women's prison in Norway. Neumann (2012: 151) argues that even though Norway's prisons may be more 'humane' than their British counterparts, 'It is not at all certain that observable differences in material standards between the two countries have an effect on how prisoners experience being imprisoned.' In her study of Bredtveit Women's Prison, Neumann (2012: 151) points out that 'prisoners are forced to impose on themselves the image of prison discipline' and to 'conduct a self-control that can be extremely challenging'. Following Foucault, even as the body remains relatively free, Neumann (2012: 148) notes that this is an extreme case of 'imprisoning the soul' and perhaps the 'ultimate version of Foucauldian governmentality'. The freedom to leave the open prison at any time gives rise to an ambiguous relation to that very same potential mobility:

In order to return every day, [inmates] would have to build inner bars – some said they actually had to visualize the picturesque house with physical bars in front of the windows – constantly reminding themselves of the consequences of leaving the prison never to return. (Neumann, 2012: 148)

While viewing prison conditions through the optic of 'humane' or 'inhumane' conditions arguably produces a flattening, one-dimensional gaze – the task of prison scholars might better be understood as studying how punitive power varies in kind rather than degree, how the nature of pain-imposition varies qualitatively, producing incommensurable pains that are to some extent not easily given to cross-national comparisons – Neumann's study confirms some of the same notions of ambiguity witnessed on Prison Island.

Relative deprivation

Social immiseration is relative. Inmates come to regard aspects of open prison life as painful because they measure their experiences against their immediate surroundings, not a (worse, higher-security) past. Marx famously noted that:

a house may be large or small; as long as the surrounding houses are equally small it satisfies all social demands for a dwelling. But let a palace arise beside the little house, and it shrinks from a little house to a hut. (Howard and King, 1985: 120)

Well-being is measured in relation to surrounding levels of welfare rather than an absolute benchmark (Crosby, 1976). On Prison Island, relative deprivation is facilitated by freedoms creating rising expectations.

The problem of telephone access for inmates illustrates this point. In Norway's closed prisons, inmates are as a rule allowed 20 minutes of telephone time per week, while open prisons usually place far more relaxed time limits. In closed prison, officers usually dial numbers on behalf of inmates, phone calls may be monitored and inmates may be prohibited from using their native language, while open prisons are exempt from these restrictions (Kriminalomsorgen, 2008). On Prison Island, inmates share six telephone booths. They pay for calls with telephone cards on sale in the commissary, and calling rates are slightly more expensive than outside. Telephones are switched off during working hours and switched back on in the evenings. The telephone is a frequent topic of concern and consternation, and inmate complaints revolve around two main areas: *first*, inmates complain about high prices. Particularly non-residents who frequently make overseas phone calls to speak with relatives find this galling. For instance, a foreign national inmate believed the prison had raised rates so that wages earned on a prison job were 'earned back' by the prison over telephone calls. *Second*, inmates complain about limitations on operating hours. Steffen pointed out that inmates occasionally need to call prospective employers ahead of release. Restrictions on operating hours hindered this:

It's pretty stupid because the only time during the day before 2.30, 3.00pm [you can use the phone] is during lunch break, and if you want to take care of anything practical in terms of an employer, public offices, those kinds of things, then you have to go through a big process and ask [the officers] *nicely* if you're allowed to call, and you may not be allowed to even then.

The paradox here is that Prison Island inmates may feel worse-off the greater the access to goods and services. Given a comparative abundance of telephone time, one would expect fewer complaints. But by giving inmates greater privileges, officers are also giving them something to lose, whetting inmate appetites for things unreachable. If a person 'thinks that possession of X is feasible' (Crosby, 1976: 85), then plausibly only the *entire* X will be satisfactory. However, restrictions of some kind must probably always circumscribe privileges within the framework of penal institutions, since inmates must be reminded of their place – to prevent social unruliness and maintain the punitive component of imprisonment.

That this is so is illustrated by officer talk. Each year for the past three years, Prison Island has opened its doors to neighboring communities for an 'open house' event. Hundreds of outsiders flock to the prison ferry and spend a few hours on the island. Speaking of the 'after-effects' of such an event, an officer commented that 'there's always a bit of unrest after something like that'. Contact with the outside world, the sudden influx of persons who have not been screened in the way that visitors usually are (a background check for a criminal record, for instance),

the ‘carnevalesque’ atmosphere of such a day – all this disrupts the subtle balance of power on the island. When asked what he meant by ‘unrest’, the officer simply stated that, ‘well, they [the inmates] begin to think that it’s not quite a prison’. Their task is to remind inmates through a series of micro-level ‘technologies of control’ of their incarcerated status, and this work inevitably produces frustration. In addition to the use of population counts, telephone restrictions, visitor regulations and urine samples noted above, infractions against rules can earn the inmate a ‘dot’ or a strike. Three strikes in the course of a month results in an officer writing a report and calling the inmate in for questioning. Reports count toward the broader institutional evaluation of the inmate, and can form part of the reason for why an inmate is deemed unfit for continued residence in the prison. Another example of a ‘technology of control’ is the locked isolation cells on the island. When a prisoner fails to produce a urine sample for a drug test, he may be placed in one of the cells with a pitcher of water for a few hours. These places of confinement are referred to as ‘solar cells’ (*solcelle*), a euphemism that plays on the fact that on sunny days, the sun will be trained straight on their windows. In the prison handbook for newly arrived inmates, the euphemism is taken one step further: here they are referred to as ‘leisure single rooms’ (*fritid-senerom*), though no-one used that term in conversation. The fact that these cells must be shrouded in euphemism is in itself telling of the fact that the prison has an uneasy relationship with their existence.

Individual responsibility

Responsibilization is a prison governance strategy (Hannah-Moffat, 2000, 2001; Ugelvik, 2011b). On Prison Island, ‘doing time’ in an isolated vacuum is not an option; instead, inmates are forced to strive for self-improvement. Inmates express carceral-managerial ideologies of ‘creating the responsible prisoner’ (Bosworth, 2007), which can be frustrating because they are enmeshed in broader structures that limit the reach of individual action in producing successful outcomes. Norwegian Correctional Services recognize that self-improvement is painful, noting that ‘it is just as demanding to go through with intensive personal development as it is to be locked up in a high-security prison’ (Justis- og politidepartementet, 2008: 33). Instead of burrowing inside their cells, inmates are expected to fill their days with rehabilitation programs, cognitive interventions and daily life routines mimicking those found in the world outside. Many inmates voiced the notion of individual responsibility for sentence outcomes, emphasizing the trope of *opportunity*. Mario also said enthusiastically that ‘when you come to a place like this, you’ve got a great number of opportunities’, but qualified this assessment by underscoring that ‘it depends on what you make of them yourself. No-one will do anything for you here. It’s so that you’ll get used to making it on your own.’

For officers, increased social control at a lower input labor cost is achieved by a ‘transfer of responsibility’ (Crewe, 2011a) from officer coercion to inmate

responsibilization. Echoing Joseph's warning against 'misuse or abuse' of opportunities, Ali said that escape was unthinkable, even though it was easy enough to pull off because of loose security and availability of town leaves. Commenting on what it felt like voluntarily returning to the prison ferry after town leave, he said,

Ali: It's a little hard. Irritating. [snickering] 'I have to go back now. Catch the ferry back.' It's something you have to do. You have to come back and finish up. That's how I think. Come back, take the ferry. I could walk away. If you want to escape, you can go right ahead.

Author: Why don't you escape?

Ali: I'll never be done with it. Get it over with, that's what I think about. That's the goal. Finish my sentence, so I can start over. Go to school. [sighing]

Contrast this with Conover's (2001: 96) vision of Sing Sing, the US maximum security prison, described as 'a microcosm of a totalitarian society, a nearly pure example of the police state' where 'the military provided for the chain of command' among officers and inmates. This is Alford's (2000) prison, where 'lock 'em up and throw away the key' is the dominant control practice. But in the open prison, it is instead the 'submission of subjectivity' (Foucault, 1983: 213) that constitutes the vector of control, that is, the remolding of subjects into 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1995[1977]). A whole host of fine-grained 'technologies of power' are mobilized so that they may be made a-new into self-governing subjects; a new 'governmentality' (Foucault, 2007; Garland, 1997) or 'conduct of conduct' (Dean, 1999) is set in motion.

Prisons make moral assessments. At San Quentin State Prison, signs targeted at visitors reveal an institutional assumption that female visitors possess a 'hyper-sexualized body' that must be corrected by decent moral standards (Comfort, 2008: 53). Hannah-Moffat (1999: 82–83) uncovers 'moral evaluations of behaviour' in a Canadian women's prison where 'leisure training' courses make the demeaning assumption that 'women do not engage in socially legitimate activities' in their spare time. On Prison Island, all inmates are expected to take part in a Domestic Training Course where they are taught basic aspects of cooking, cleaning and personal hygiene, deemed necessary before 'letting inmates loose' to live semi-autonomous lives in de-centralized living conditions. Some inmates welcome the course, either because they lack life skills, or because they would, in the absence of the course, risk living alongside housemates lacking these skills. But to others, moral assumptions of responsibility are resisted. One inmate derisively called it the 'learn to wash your cock course'; another had been a father, husband and homeowner for years before going to prison and felt he no longer needed reminding to 'wash your hands and brush your teeth every day'. By casting its moral net wide, the prison makes infantilizing assumptions about inmates as part of its program of responsibilization, projecting a vision of inmates as helpless and incompetent.

Conclusion

Where is the pain in exceptional prisons? Above, it has been argued that it resides in *confusion* over roles; *anxiety* when transitioning from closed to a (seemingly limitless) open prison and from open prison to a (seemingly boundless) world outside; *ambiguity* over seemingly unequivocally beneficial goods and privileges; expressions of *relative deprivation* at the ‘taste of freedom’; and notions of *individual responsibility* in self-improvement and discipline. Clearly, as with all typologies, the boundaries bleed over into one another: when an inmate experiences a wage-earner role as *confusing*, it is connected with the *ambiguity* of access to the world beyond the prison. Nevertheless, these analytical categories are useful to the extent that they attune us to occluded punitive components in exceptional incarceration.

To govern in open prison is to produce self-governing prisoners, what might be described as ‘authoritarian governmentality’ (Dean, 1999: 141–148) or ‘neo-paternalism’ (Crewe, 2009: 144). Power is, in Crewe’s phrase, ‘soft, but tight, with hard edges’ instead of ‘heavy’. Power pursues inmates into the depths of their being, and it becomes integrated in them. For instance, Fredrik, an inmate, said, ‘It’s a prison. There’s no escaping that. But it’s a prison without guards.’ Guards were ‘invisible’ and spent a great deal of time in a central guards’ building. That they could afford to do so was because inmates to a significant degree shouldered the burden of self-control.

Admittedly, to observers of penal hardening or expansion in the age of ‘austerity’ in other advanced societies, the experiences outlined above might not occasion raised eyebrows. For instance, how can too much telephone time be a bad thing, as Fredrik’s story above tries to show? Are Norway’s inmates simply spoiled by a strong, over-protective welfare state? This is taking too shallow a view. Instead, for inmates, all lived experiences are recast by the long shadow of confinement, which skews and reconfigures sensations in its sign. Norway’s Ministry of Justice has asked why so few inmates seek transfer from closed to open prisons (Justis- og politidepartementet, 2011: 86). Do inmates know something outside observers do not? Perhaps inmates’ stock of ‘folk concepts’ (Banton, 1979) already contains an inkling of the pains of freedom – that they, on some level of cognizance, understand that there are frustrating demands and opportunities in open prisons. Further work should excavate the reasons why open prisons are not the coveted institutions for inmates one might expect them to be.

In taking a step back from the site of inquiry above, four points can be made. *First*, despite popular representations of ‘soft’ incarceration, deprivations do exist therein, but they are occluded from view, unusual and counter-intuitive. We must break out of conventional notions of rewards and punishments to be able to analytically delineate such sensations as components of a new imprisonment experience. *Second*, this finding, if replicated and developed in further empirical cases, is simultaneously a methodological defense of ethnographic immersion – in place of quick ‘carceral tours’ by social scientists or brief excursions by journalists; tours are scripted and supervised to produce ‘impression management’ for visiting social scientists, while journalists have arguably described prison conditions with worn-out

tropes and narrative structures ('prison as hell', or, on the flipside, 'prison as paradisiacal non-prison'). *Third*, the concept of the 'pains of freedom', if developed across a broader range of institutions, can strengthen the political legitimacy of 'soft' incarceration, showing that this imprisonment form is sufficiently painful to stand the test of rising punitive sentiment even in the Scandinavian countries (Balvig, 2005; Green, 2009; Smith, 2012). *Finally*, as the nature of imprisonment changes, so too must the conceptual toolbox which prison scholars deploy. Exceptional penal institutions may perhaps be said 'not to punish less, but to punish better' (Foucault, 1995 [1977]: 82). Further research should study other unusual penal institutions – other open prisons in Norway and Denmark, or Category D prisons in England and Wales, for instance – to expand our understanding of unorthodox prison pains.

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