

Sykes: *The Society of Captives*

VICTOR L. SHAMMAS

University of Oslo, Norway

Few studies have been quite as formative for the sociology of punishment as Gresham M. Sykes's *The Society of Captives* (1958). In this observational study of the New Jersey Maximum Security Prison, a men's correctional facility that in the early 1950s housed some 1,200 inmates and employed around 300 persons, Sykes proposed a series of weighty premises for the study of imprisonment. Among the key highlights are that, due to the *defects of total power*, custodians only have imperfect control over their charges. Additionally, in response to environmental deprivations known as the *pains of imprisonment*, inmates develop a prison culture populated by persons who take on prison-specific patterns of behavior described as *argot roles*.

Born in Plainfield, New Jersey in 1922, Sykes enlisted in the US Army during World War II, fighting in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium and rising to the rank of captain over a period of two years of combating Nazism. His early brush with a totalitarian counterpart can be discerned in the later analysis of the limits to absolute authority in *The Society of Captives*. After the war, Sykes pursued studies at Princeton University and completed a doctoral dissertation at Northwestern University in 1954. Sykes taught at Princeton, Dartmouth, and Northwestern before becoming a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia.

Defects of Total Power

Sykes's study was published at the peak of the Cold War contest between market society and Soviet Communism, with the memories of the brutality of the Nazi concentration camps fresh in

the public mind. The specter of total power looms large over the canvas of the study. Reassuringly, however, Sykes suggests that the human will to freedom is indomitable. Even in a US maximum security prison, the institution that most closely resembles the "systems of total power" (2007/1958: 140) in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Sykes argues that absolute authority is largely an illusion. The defects of total power entail that prison custodians only seem to be fully in control. The book is littered with qualifications that total power is only "formal" or "theoretical," that prison staff only "appear to be the possessors of almost infinite power within their realm" (p. 41).

In reality, the authority of custodians is shared with a series of other parties. On the one hand, external society imposes constraints in the form of norms and laws. The ever-present threat of outcry and outrage in the press and among the public, and the possibility of courtroom challenges to the custodial regime, mean that custodians are wary of letting conditions grow too decrepit – or, at the very least, that they are concerned with the flow of information beyond the prison walls. On the other hand, custodians share their power with prisoners. Inmates throw all kinds of grit into the machinery of custodial power, so that dominance is "more fiction than reality" (p. 45), and obedience is a doubtful and dubious proposition. Inmates swear, exhibit insolence, gamble, smuggle and trade contraband, manufacture knives, make noise, and generally behave in an unruly, disorderly fashion. This means that the custodians are very clearly "not total despots, able to exercise power at whim" and therefore they lack the "essential mark of infinite power, the unchallenged right of being capricious in their rule" (p. 42). The very real possibility of resistance imposes constraints on custodial rule.

In recent decades, microsociological studies of prison culture have taken up this theme almost obsessively, emphasizing the prominence of "resistance." For instance, Crewe (2007: 272) contends that inmates in an English men's prison outwardly appear as docile subjects, all the while subversively engaging in "backstage resistance of

various forms, including illicit activity invested with anti-institutional meaning (e.g., drug dealing, stealing from kitchens and workshops) and active subversion (e.g., setting off fire alarms).” Such studies have taken their theoretical cues from poststructuralist scholars like Michel Foucault and Joan Scott, and seek to resuscitate “agency” at a time when practically all industrialized nations have witnessed a ramping up of the penal state. However, as Rubin (2015) argues, a more apt description of what inmates do when they resist custodial authority is *friction*, not resistance, since their acts are rarely intentional attempts to alter the political economy of punishment. Prison scholars have been prone to project their fantasies of political transformation onto subjects that are unlikely to become the kinds of revolutionary subjects such scholars are more or less consciously seeking. Even as inmates cast sand into the machinery, the machine (i.e., the prison system) persists and remains relatively unperturbed.

Pains of Imprisonment

Prisons derive their legitimacy in part from *depriving* convicts of those things they might enjoy in liberty. Sykes discovers five frustrations: the deprivation of liberty, the deprivation of goods and services, the deprivation of heterosexual relationships, the deprivation of autonomy, and the deprivation of security. The totality of deprivations explains why inmates find prison life undesirable, and it is suggested that the deprivations are an innate, universal characteristic of imprisonment as such. Inmate society is formed as a shield to defend against the destructive effects of the frustrations.

Argot Roles

Sociolinguists define argot as the vocabulary of a particular social group. Sykes contends that the vocabulary of criminals serves a particular function, albeit not the function that most early observers of underground jargon assumed, namely to keep communications among criminals a secret from the public or police. Instead, argot is functional because it rearranges reality,

“ordering and classifying experience within the walls in terms which deal specifically with the major problems of prison life” (p. 85). Criminals live differently from conventional society, and argot arises because they live differently, Sykes claims. It is a brutally simplistic, mechanical account of linguistic change. But the book is not a work in linguistics, and one might forgive the author for making these remarks *obiter dicta*, as things said by the way of introduction to the weightier theory of social roles in prison.

The argot roles Sykes draws out of the prison consist of a number of colorful categories, such as “rats,” “center men,” “gorillas,” “merchants,” “wolves,” “hipsters,” and “toughs.” *Rats* betray the trust of inmates by providing information to the custodians. *Center men* take on the values and attitudes of the custodians. *Gorillas* forcibly appropriate desirable goods from other inmates. *Merchants* are those who violate the gift-exchange norms of prison culture by selling goods when they are expected to give them away. *Wolves* are inmates who engage in “casual, mechanical” (p. 97) homosexual acts with other inmates, often amounting to non-consensual acts that are, essentially, rape, according to Sykes. *Hipsters* pretend to be tougher than they are, while *toughs* love resorting to violence with anyone willing to fight.

At times, the labels feel more like caricatures than careful portrayals of complex social dynamics. There is an element of exoticism. What is more, social action could be seen as a spontaneous process of continuous reordering, as opposed to the static functionalism of Mertonian role theory. The categories feel dated due to temporal dislocations in the empirical and theoretical domains since both 1950s slang and 1950s social theory are now out of fashion. The argot roles suggest a stable and readily self-ascribed set of patterned behaviors. The argot roles may seem quaint and outmoded today, but they contain one important implication for present-day studies: that inmate society is only imperfectly cohesive, that it can quickly devolve into a distrustful environment where inmates are prone to resort to deception, con artistry, and violence – the poor preying on the poor. Solidarity among inmates is a crucial counterweight to misery: the greater the social solidarity among inmates, the greater their tolerance of the pains of imprisonment, Sykes suggests (p. 107). In this way, the society

of captives provides emotional protection against the sorrows and suffering of doing time.

The book is written in refreshingly crisp prose and, unlike many present-day studies, does not drown in postmodern raptures of reflexivity. But it is not without its shortcomings. It is steeped in structural functionalism, perceiving social action as taking place within systems that are characterized by recurrent regularities of human behavior. As noted in the preceding section, the static nature of role theory may be problematic.

The work solidified Sykes's reputation as an early proponent of the *deprivation model* of inmate behavior. On this view, stressors in the prison environment shape prisoner behavior. Prison culture arises as a functional response to how the prison is organized. In opposition to the deprivation model, the *importation model* contends that individual responses to imprisonment are the result of pre-prison social characteristics, including educational attainment and class position. On this view, prison culture reflects pre-prison lifestyles, folkways, and social mores, typically those of the "street." While the importation model underscores the effects of wider society on prison culture – the prison as continuation of the outside world – the deprivation model emphasizes the prison as hermetically sealed and endowed with unique environmental properties that give rise to distinctive functional adaptations.

Perhaps too much has been made of this theoretical couplet. Logically speaking, the central claims of both the deprivation and importation models can be simultaneously true: that prisons bear the imprimatur of external society, that inmates are bearers of the values and norms they bring with them from the outside world, and that inmates adopt special behaviors and hierarchies that are a reaction to the peculiar constraints of incarceration. A close reading of Sykes's work should make us question the ease with which it has been slotted into the deprivation side of the debate, and perhaps the effortlessness with which the theoretical distinction between the importation and deprivation models has been drawn in the first place. Sykes carefully notes that the "prison wall is far more permeable than it appears ... in terms of the relationships between the prison social system and the larger society in which it rests" (p. 8), underscoring that the "prison is not an autonomous system of

power," and thereby rejecting the hermetic take on prisons. The distinctiveness of the importation and deprivation models can be rescued by noting that they emphasize external or internal factors differently while failing to exclude either. However one might salvage the dichotomy, Sykes is certainly open to the idea that the prison can be viewed as a continuation of the outside world.

There is also a problematic universalization from the particular. Sykes refers throughout to "the prison," but it is frequently unclear whether that is in reference to a particular instantiation of temporal-spatially anchored practice or a universal category. Are the mechanisms uncovered valid for the abstract domain of imprisonment, or are they limited to the concrete empirical site of New Jersey Maximum Security Prison in 1954? All students of the case study must grapple with this problem, but Sykes glosses over the problem of generalization. Writing on the problem of prison riots, Sykes contends that "the prison appears to move in a cyclical rhythm from order to disorder to order," and riots are a "logical step in a pattern of repeated social change" (p. 110). But prison riots have grown far less common in recent decades, at least in the industrialized societies, suggesting that there is nothing inevitable about the regular ebb and flow of conflict. Riots can simply vanish.

Similarly, not all institutions induce an equal amount or form of pain. England has experimented with Category D "open" prisons. The Nordic countries channel up to one-third of the prisoner population into minimum security facilities (Shammas 2014). Meanwhile, the United States operates prisons that are frequently overcrowded, underfunded, and marred by lethal violence. This would suggest that the imprisonment experience varies not merely because individual prisoners differ in their perception of punishment but because penal regimes vary. Sykes constructs a precise anatomy of a concrete institution but in places the phenomena uncovered are seemingly translated into a Weberian ideal type, which is an ideal type of one prison. That is surely unhelpful for scholars of punishment today. As a historical document, however, *The Society of Captives* remains powerfully evocative of postwar American incarceration, a comparatively blissful era prior to the ascendancy of the latter-day Leviathan of hyperincarceration.

SEE ALSO: Pains of Imprisonment; Recidivism;
Sykes, Gresham

Sykes, G. 2007/1958. *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

References

- Crewe, B. 2007. "Power, Adaptation and Resistance in a Late-Modern Men's Prison." *British Journal of Criminology*, 47 (2): 256–275.
- Rubin, A. T. 2015. "Resistance or Friction: Understanding the Significance of Prisoners' Secondary Adjustments." *Theoretical Criminology*, 19 (1): 23–42.
- Shammas, V. L. 2014. "The Pains of Freedom: Assessing the Ambiguity of Scandinavian Penal Exceptionalism on Norway's Prison Island." *Punishment & Society* 16 (1): 104–123.

Further Reading

- Irwin, J. 1985. *The Jail: Managing the Underclass in American Society*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Rhodes, L. A. 2004. *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Wacquant, L. 2009. *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.