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Prison and Degradation

Jim McManus

John Vorhaus importantly considers a number of issues in his article, '[From dignity to degradation](#)' (TPM8). I was, however, left looking for something following on from his analysis of the issues.



Vorhaus is absolutely right to contend that simply to 'construe degradation in terms of humiliation or, at any rate, gross humiliation' is not enough. And of course he is right in highlighting the difficulties we may face in interpreting the meaning of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights in English and Scots laws. However, as an ex-prisoner, albeit one serving a fairly short sentence, I have perhaps a different perspective on degradation than his own.

There is, I feel, a need to have some means other than just the claim by someone that they are suffering degradation, of judging whether degradation *is* actually taking place. That doesn't mean, however, that we should exclude the victim on the grounds that 'well, prisoners will say that, won't they.' There are some people for whom being imprisoned by itself will be degradation, while others accept it with aplomb or even experience an improvement in their living conditions. Degradation has, at the end of the day, something inalienably subjective about it. In the same way, so does our experience of health care. In considering something like the prison system, we cannot avoid subjective experience. We also, however, need to consider the nature of the system.

I have conducted nearly 100 interviews with serving prisoners about the experience of being imprisoned, health and well-being, and psychological adjustment. In the interviews, and in helping inmates with emotional or practical problems, most men (83 of the interviewees) accept that some sort of degradation or dehumanising is going to be part of their experience of imprisonment. That does not mean they are resigned to it. Indeed many react angrily (about 65) whereas others resort to strategies to improve the lot of other prisoners (46) or themselves (58). These strategies for those helping other prisoners include becoming a listener or member of an inmate support group. Strategies for self-improvement include getting qualifications, going to the gym, learning meditation, becoming involved in church and even learning to find new leisure pursuits within the constraints of prison. Having said all of this, all 97 of the men I interviewed stated that there is something fundamentally 'not right' about their treatment.

The following causal factors of degradation were identified by the interviewees as key issues:

- Some degradation is intrinsic to punishment by imprisonment, some is an unavoidable - whether or not intended - consequence of being imprisoned, and some of this is at least tacitly socially sanctioned. I call this *intrinsic degradation*.
- Some degradation is present because of the attitude of those within the system. I call this *endemic degradation*.
- Some degradation is a function of a large, cash-limited and pressurised system wherein mistakes happen and everything falls below what we would wish. I call this *entropic degradation*.

It seems to me that all of these types of degradation are present in my own experience, and have been identified in the experience of most of the men I interviewed. I'm not talking here of the experience of being imprisoned by itself, but of what goes with it. Much degradation identified by men I have interviewed seems to come from staff. In the words of one man:

'It's not being in prison that really causes me the problem. It's daily being called "murdering slime" by a

screw who was my landing officer for fourteen years of a sentence. I never experienced staff as wanting to rehabilitate me, only to completely crush me as a man.'

Lifer, 63

When prison officers take delight in publicly asking intimate questions about one's sexuality and then making jokes about one's answer; or take delight in humiliating an inmate about his children's appearance, one wonders about the prison service values of 'integrity' and 'treating prisoners with fairness, justice and respect as individuals.' (HM Prison Service Statement of Purpose.) If this were so, we could dispense with endemic degradation.

Admittedly, there are many good officers, but there are many who seem to want to devalue inmates as much as possible:

'There's one who comes on our landing for role call. Every time he does it he says "I've never seen so much scum in my life." Why's he been doing this job for 25 years, then?'

Neil, 23

Society has sanctioned imprisonment for some offences, and the system which exists to imprison people committed by the courts has among its stated aims the provision of a safe, healthy and human environment for those committed to custody. A system of checks and balances involving boards of visitors, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and the substantial body of prison law is supposed to ensure that the prison service does indeed maintain that environment. Prisons like Wormwood Scrubs, Exeter, Brixton and Wandsworth continually remind us that the system fails.

One wonders, then, whether the whole prison system itself needs such overhauling, because degradation of any degree and from any causal factor suggested above is unavoidable. A recent survey estimates that 95% of male remand and sentenced prisoners display symptoms consistent with psychiatric disorders. Is prison causing these or is prison somewhere where the problems in people likely to be imprisoned come to light? If it's the former, can we tolerate this? If it's the latter, are prisons degrading people by failing to deal with this issue? In any case, we seem to lack the will and resources truly to address this issue.

In 1996 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons stated that prison health care does not match up to National Health Service (NHS) standards. In 1999, the Joint Prison Service and NHS Working Group produced a report, *The future organisation of prison health care*. The government established a joint policy unit and has started work on reforming and reshaping prison health care. In all of this there is an explicit acceptance that standards of health care for prisoners should be as good as those experienced by members of the public. Although in the 1996 HMCIP report the term is never used, it seems that some of the treatment prisoners were receiving was considered degrading. Can we say the same of the mental health situation in prisons in the light of the 1999 Office of National Statistics survey?

The ONS survey suggests that there is an association between exposure to prison and use of mental health services. This is hardly surprising given the nature of being imprisoned. It's also not necessarily causal. The literature is too vague for that at present. But there is a growing literature which sees prisons as causing or giving rise to disease in prisoners. This is implicitly recognised in the development of 'healthy regimes' to provide inmates opportunities for recreation, association, and physical, social and spiritual pastimes. Unfortunately, the experience of 94 of the men I interviewed was that prior to open conditions, they had experienced at least two weeks of 23 hour 'bang up' because of 'staff shortages' or undisclosed reasons. Maybe this is necessary or unavoidable. But when does the necessary reduction in someone's mental, physical and social functioning, with long term consequences for them and implications for the NHS after release become degradation which lessens their humanity? If prison is a punishment, is the change in the human being a part of that, or is it degradation? Is it acceptable or a necessary evil? We could be casuistic about it, but we cannot ignore the effects on individuals.

The ONS survey was carried out in 131 of the 133 English and Welsh prisons. Of 51,834 remand and sentenced males, 5% were interviewed as the initial sample. 6,500 of that sample group had personality disorders, 55% neurotic disorders, 60% showed hazardous drinking in the year prior to incarceration and 10% had psychiatric disorders. Is prison a cause or a symptom, or is it simply the place where these problems make themselves manifest? 94 of the men I interviewed stated that being in prison had made a physical, emotional or psychological problem worse. 75 told me it had created emotional or psychological problems, even if 56 of these were short term. I myself experienced panic attacks and although I was in no state to support anyone, my first week in prison involved a succession

of other new intakes in my cell who had attempted to self-harm. I was to look after them.

Prisons, it seems, will always be with us, and will probably always need to be, if only because we still have no other way of dealing with some kind of offender than to imprison them. The system is resource-limited because of economic constraints as much as the perception that prisoners should not be seen to be enjoying better conditions than citizens outside who have not been imprisoned. Some degradation is unavoidable. But if prison is to punish *and* rehabilitate, there is a need to address the extent to which it plays a part in degrading the humanity - whether in terms of health, mental health or ability to lead meaningful lives on release - of those who are committed to it.

For some of the men I interviewed (11) the system has worked because, they said, they have been able to change themselves or because their loved ones have helped them:

'I did everything off my own bat. I even sorted out where I will live when I get out. I've had no help from any one in here. Thank God I'm able to help myself.'

'Ben', 28

'My wife and kids have stood by me. Without them I'd be nowhere. The prison has been no use to me at all, and Probation has been a waste of space.'

'Frank', 45

For many the system seems to have failed. They leave a system where they have been patronised, demeaned and have seen their loved ones suffer, and can do nothing about it. This can, at times, be the cruellest punishment imaginable. Loved ones serve the sentence as much as the prisoner. It is no good wringing our hands and saying, 'well people shouldn't do crime' as one visiting magistrate said to me. We have created the prison system because crime exists. We must accept responsibility for the consequences.

There is a cost in imprisonment, economic as much as social and human. There is also a cost in crime, enormous human and economic cost. But if we work on the cost-benefit analysis methodology which some of our criminal justice system seems to work on, things will not improve. We need a more fundamental analysis of the issues, and the role of degradation by criminals of their victims and themselves, and degradation by society of criminals. We may be creating a circular system, rather than truly finding people a way out of and a means of reparation for their crime.

Most men I interviewed (89) and indeed most prisoners I have met tell me prison is a world wherein the language rules and 'reality' have been constructed; where the only logical certainty is that 'the prison will do what the prison will do', regardless of policy or the human consequences. We need a Wittgenstein in here! Prison seems to be a system where reality of what goes on and the constructed reality of rules, regulations and policy occasionally meet, dance, get limbs intertwined, and then break apart. In such a system, things constantly go awry and people suffer. The degradation many experience lies therein. How we change it requires more than fashionable management speak and mission statements. It requires practical commitment and rigorous thinking. This is a task for philosophy and philosophers at their best.

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