Pushing the boundaries of prison ethnography.

Deborah Drake¹, Rod Earle¹ and Jennifer Sloan²

¹The Open University, ²Sheffield Hallam University

Stories from a prison for young men in Ghana, a women’s prison in north-east England, a Dutch men’s prison full of Belgian prisoners, and reflections on over twenty years of researching Russian prisons: all this and much, much more are to be found in the recently published Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography.

Stories are an important part of the book but the 25 chapters gathered by the editors do more than tell tales. We, the editors of this collection - Deborah Drake, Rod Earle and Jennifer Sloan - wanted a book that presented graphic accounts of prison life, told by people fully immersed in the strange world of metal gates, mesh fences, concrete cells, officers, uniforms, fenced compounds and locks. This world of pains imposed and freedoms denied is also the confusing world of hopes and fears, human hearts, tenderness, wounding, harms and healing. These prison places, rich in human life, are filled with some of their societies’ poorest people. Some of them have done terrible things to other people, and many have had terrible things done to them. For us, ethnography is a crucial tool to raise better understanding of these strange and unsettling places, and how we have come to tolerate their explosive growth in modern society.

We are worried that the growing use of imprisonment in almost every country of the world is the symptom of a spreading sickness rather than a sign of progressive modernity. This book reflects the complexity of the challenges prison growth poses. Ethnographic research is needed, we argue, to widen the range of questions that can be asked about prison. Ethnographic research can, we suggest, help bring it out of the social shadows that cloak its presence in society.

The book is the direct result of a symposium held at The Open University in September 2013. ‘Resisting The Eclipse: An International Symposium of Prison Ethnographers’ brought together an impressive range of prison researchers who challenged Loic Wacquant’s dismal diagnosis of the imminent extinction of ethnographic prison research. Wacquant’s challenge was thrown down with
characteristic eloquent and graphic force, but the symposium itself and the Handbook reveal resistance to this decline. In the book’s Foreword, Professor Yvonne Jewkes is careful to qualify the optimism generated by the symposium. The chilling effect of an eclipse may simply have been gathering pace, she cautions, before embracing the renewal of ethnographic engagement she finds in the book.

Editing a major international collection of papers on prison ethnography involves wrestling with the porous methodological boundaries of ethnography. The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography reveals a diversity of both prison form and ethnographic method. Collectively the chapters demonstrate what ethnography can do and why it is such a highly valued form of sociological inquiry. The authors tell stories of prison life with vivid detail gathered by a determination to remain sensitive to the little things that reveal a lot, and that are often missed by other forms of qualitative inquiry.

Despite including accounts of prison research carried out in Russia, France, England, Norway, Ghana, Uganda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, India, Belgium, Canada, and The USA, there are none from South America. One of the criticisms levelled at the grandiose sweep of theorists like Loic Wacquant and David Garland is that they present a picture of globalizing trends in neo-liberal penalty that fail to address the S.American experience where radical and socialist governments, elected on popular mandates, have refused to align themselves in the global currents of neo-liberalism they describe. In S.America complex penal politics arise from dynamics that are far from neo-liberal, and the absence of ethnographic accounts of them in this collection is to be lamented. It is all the more regrettable in light of the fact that two such accounts were given at the symposium in 2013, by Sacha Darke and Chris Garces but could not, for various reasons, be included in our edited collection.

In other respects however, the collection succeeds in displacing the concentration of Anglophone penal scholarship on the prisons of the richer countries of the North and the West. The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Ethnography gives the reader glimpses of other worlds through their prisons. In many cases the writers have drawn from longer, richer and more detailed accounts — their full ethnographies. These must not be neglected. Ben Crewe’s ‘The Prisoner Society’, Mahuya Bandyopadhyay’s ‘Everyday Life in a Prison: Confinement, Surveillance, Resistance’, James Waldram’s ‘Hound Pound Narrative: Sexual Offender Habilitation and the Anthropology of Therapeutic Intervention’ Deborah Drake’s ‘Prisons, Punishments and the Pursuit of Security’ (2014), Coretta Phillip’s ‘The Multicultural Prison’ and Thomas Ugelvik’s ‘Power and Resistance in Prison’ are examples of the real thing, the genuine article: prison ethnography in full effect. They must not be eclipsed by this collection, wonderful as it is.

Here, from Adam Reed’s, ‘Papua New Guinea’s Last Place: Experiences of Constraint in Postcolonial Prison’, is another glimpse of a story from another full ethnography, another writer, another prison:

‘This is the last place’, he muttered, ‘the very last place in the country’. The convict paused and surveyed the compound yard around us, as if to confirm that he was indeed talking about the prison. ‘Here’, he continued, ‘everything is left behind. There is no beer or tobacco, no women. You cannot see your forest, your rivers, mountains and rocks. You cannot see your children. In this kind of place you are abandoned.’ These sad thoughts were followed by silence.