

Fred Emery

Freedom and Justice Within Walls

The Bristol Prison Experiment
and an Australian Sequel*

Bristol Local Prison

This experiment was carried out in the Bristol Local Prison in the period 1958–1960. The inmates were given greater opportunities to associate with each other in their leisure hours and an attempt was made to measure the effects of this change on the social atmosphere of the prison.

The Prison Commissioners invited the Tavistock Institute to participate in an experiment to test the applicability of the “Norwich scheme” to medium-sized local prisons. This invitation was accepted on the mutual understanding that the interests of both staff and inmates would be considered and that it would probably be impossible to measure the effects of the experiment on the reform or rehabilitation of the inmates.

The Norwich system involved two changes from the normal pattern of local prisons: a daily routine allowing inmates to spend most of their waking hours outside their cells in association with each other and a change in the officers’ responsibilities for inmates.

In its completed form, the study is very much like an iceberg: the part exposed to the light of day is only a fraction of the total, and is deceptively clear and pristine. The data presented could not have been interpreted and ordered but for the multitude of informal observations and conversations with staff and inmates. Methodologically, the key part in the study was played by the small randomly selected samples of officers and inmates. Long initial interviews with those men provided the orientation to, and entry into, the daily life of the

*This is a very abridged version of the book published by Tavistock Publications in 1970 under this title. It excludes the detailed discussion of the contradictions in the inmate/officer roles and summarizes the findings. Added to this is an extract from *Hope Within Walls*, a design study for a maximum security prison which explicitly sought to spell out the implications of the Bristol Experiment, and a note on what subsequently happened.

prison. Repeated interviews with the same men not only gave evidence of the psychological significance of what was going on, but also served to preserve the openness of the author's relation to the prison community. Thus, despite the considerable turnover in inmate population, it was possible to feel after a period of absence that one was returning home. Similarly, this set of relations provided the base from which one was able to explore what had, in fact, happened in disciplinary and other incidents of importance.

The sample of officers and inmates was selected with some care so that, although small, they provide a reasonably unbiased representation of what were judged to be the key groups for the purposes of this study. Amongst the uniformed staff, these are the basic grade officers who are still in the prime of their careers and, amongst the inmates, the ordinary prisoners other than those who tend to be in and out on very short sentences for such crimes as vagrancy.

In a sense these core samples are called upon to serve the various functions of a microscope, trace element and reagent. At the same time, an effort has been made to avoid basing any significant part of the argument on these data alone.

Although no conscious attempt has been made to avoid theoretical issues, this report has been overwhelmingly concerned with practical matters. It was created under the constant awareness that statements made in it might become the basis of decisions affecting real people in the here-and-now. This is not in itself unusual in the work of the Tavistock Institute. However, in this instance, I was more than ordinarily impressed with the fact that the issues involved suffering for the inmates and danger to life and limb for the staff—they were not simply those of more or less optimum conditions of welfare, profit or happiness. Of still greater import was the fact that prisons, of all present-day institutions, were felt to be notoriously lacking in those higher guiding purposes and conditions of day-to-day cooperation that normally allow a body of people to test and correct false counsel.

Insofar as the report might influence decisions made for a wide class of prisons, it has been necessary to omit those details that alone would depict Bristol Prison as a flesh-and-blood affair and to concentrate on the bare bones of oft-repeated behaviors that might tell a general story.

The study could not have been carried out unless we had been given a clear, unambiguous guarantee that neither praise nor blame would be attributed to identifiable individuals, whether staff or inmates.

Socio-Psychological Aspects of Prisons

In examining social systems, I have elsewhere (Emery, 1959) found it useful to inquire into what I have termed their "boundary conditions"—those aspects of

the institutionalized complex of men and material things that mediate between the social system and the wider setting. The key and distinctive boundary condition of a productive enterprise is its technological system. Through the technological system, the enterprise achieves those productive ends that relate it to society; through this arises the major set of independent limitations and requirements of the social system. Hence the appropriateness of the term "socio-technical system" for productive enterprises. The material apparatus of a prison clearly plays no such dominant role. Unlike a factory, the typical prison problem is not that of adapting the social system to technological modifications but of trying to adapt old material means to newly modified social systems.

The key to the difference would seem to be in the obvious and indisputable fact that one is primarily concerned with things, the other with human beings. The prison achieves its institutional ends only by doing certain things with and to its inmates. It must therefore give primary consideration to the psychological properties of the inmates, because these make some measures effective and others non-effective. These common psychological properties constitute the key boundary conditions of the prison—they are an essential part of the prison and yet they must, in large measure, be treated as a given, i.e., as existing and obeyed laws and influences that are independent of the wishes of prison administrations. The material means (cells, walls, workshops, etc.), the type of staff and the system of staff roles are devised, more or less appropriately, to achieve the institutional ends with the kind of inmates that are thrust upon them. Basically, the prison is one of the class of socio-psychological, as distinct from socio-technical, institutions. It differs, however, from hospitals—medical and mental—and from religious, educational and political institutions in that it is based on the premise of doing something against the wishes of its inmates, and usually against their interests.

If this interpretation is correct, then the key to an understanding of prisons should be the analysis of the psychological characteristics of the inmates and of the ways in which these are coped with by the staff.

The basic psychological fact about the inmates of a prison is that they are, with few exceptions, confined against their will in conditions of life not of their making and seen by them as depriving and degrading relative to the life they would be leading if free. The generality of this state of affairs arises from the social fact that the inmates (the "objects" handled by the institution) are defined by the State, not by any subordinate part of the society, as a morally inferior class of persons who constitute a cost to the society.

In all prison-like institutions there is, therefore, a body of officials concerned with confining, against their will, a much larger body of men. The staff are also impelled to maintain a detailed regulation of the internal life of the prison in order to prevent escape and carry out other institutional purposes such