



The 'society of captives' in the era of hyper-incarceration

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Abstract

Forty years after the publication of Gresham Sykes's *Society of Captives* and the second edition of Donald Clemmer's *The Prison Community* (1958) the incarcerated population in the US, now over 2 million, has grown to an unprecedented size, but paradoxically attention to and concern with the social order of prisons in US academic and political discourse has declined. Just when the experience of imprisonment is becoming a normal pathway for significant portions of the population, the pathways of knowledge that made the experience of incarceration visible are closing. Clemmer, Sykes, and the golden age of US prison sociology they ushered in, helped make prison social order a seemingly knowable object for prison managers and public discourse more generally. The publication 30 years later of John Dilulio's *Governing Prisons* (1987) can be seen in retrospect as marking a new model of the relationship between expert knowledge, prison management, and the social order of prison. Dilulio's research strategy addressed fundamental weaknesses in prison sociology that had come to be evident in increasingly ungovernable prisons. It also contributed whereby prison social order falls into a dark zone of knowledge and power, integral neither to the production of scientific expertise or governmental programs within the prison. The conjunction of this shift with an enormous expansion in the size of the US prison population is cause for alarm.

Key Words

governance • knowledge • power • prisons • sociology
• the social

Introduction: the era of hyper-incarceration

For the last several years scholars have been raising increasingly alarmed attention to the unprecedented growth of the correctional population in the United States, and particularly the incarcerated (jail plus prison) that is likely to cross the two million mark before the close of the 20th century¹ (Gordon, 1990, 1994; Scheingold, 1991; Zimring & Hawkins, 1991; Christie, 1993; Simon, 1993; Donziger, 1996; Miller, 1996; Currie, 1998; Stern, 1998). To take the best established comparative series, the rate of adults in state and federal prisons hovered around 100 per 100 thousand free residents from the 1920s through the 1970s (Maguire and Pastore, 1999: 490).² Since then it has soared to more than 452 per 100 thousand (Gilliard, 1999: 3). This rate continues to increase at the present writing despite eight years of consecutive drops in the rate of reported crime (as well as victimization).

This discourse has focused primarily on the sheer growth of the incarceration rate and effects of a penal population on such a scale. What was going on inside prisons, the nature of their regimes, or of the prison social order that was emerging, has not been a major focus.³ If the social organization and 'experience' of imprisonment has not itself yet drawn extensive alarm, it may be because by comparison with the past, the average American prison in the 1990s was a better place in many respects. Through a combination of massive prison construction, court orders, and the slow diffusion of amenities like telephones and visitation, the experience of imprisonment may have actually improved in some important aspects of life. Throughout the decade of the 1990s, however, a countervailing trend has been mounting to make the experience of imprisonment more severe by removing gym equipment, televisions, college extension courses and the like. But for much of the decade these lines had not yet crossed. Whatever is likely to come from combining an enormous expansion of the prison population with a significant degradation of living conditions still lies ahead of us. Thus to the pioneering critics of the imprisonment boom, it has not been the internal order but the scale of the incarcerated population that has been the focus.

Recent work suggests that this is beginning to change. Two articles by veteran observers of imprisonment in the US, treat the emerging regime of imprisonment as a primary problem (Haney, 1997; Robertson, 1997). Both articles are concerned with the emergence of the so called 'super-max' or 'maxi-max' modality of imprisonment in many US prison systems. This term generally refers to modern day stainless steel 'panopticons,' in which inmates are held in near total isolation with only an hour of out-of-cell time in a particular day (King, 1999). They are also concerned with the far broader shift toward pure custody or 'warehousing' as the organizational principle of the prison, and what this foretells for the fate of human rights for prisoners. Both point to the danger, not of a simple regression to the dungeons that preceded the age of enlightenment but a slide into a kind of

post-enlightenment dead end where the prison and its inmates 'survive rather than live' in what Robertson (1997: 1005) describes as 'our modern houses of the dead. . . . They don't instruct or correct. They merely contain'.

While it is most evident in the 'super-max' style prison, the logic that pervades the whole continuum of warehouse prisons can be usefully compared to the arts of 'waste management' practiced by contemporary environmental engineers (Simon, 1993: 259–61; Lynch, 1998). Prisoners in warehousing systems are defined through and through as unchangeable and dangerous. When they are 'recycled' to the community it is almost always with the perception by the public, including governments and employers, that they are now more toxic than ever. The 'super-max' prison is the deep end of the continuum. A facility for those elements so toxic in the eyes of the prison administration that their removal is crucial for the survival of the mainline prisons responsible for society's primary protection.

The analogy is not just figurative, the warehouse prisons described by Robertson and Haney reflect a similar style of power and knowledge as that found in environmental disasters like Three-Mile Island; dense procedures, demobilization, and the predominance of risk prediction knowledge techniques (replacing the prison's earlier focus on clinical treatment-oriented expertise). Both articles call attention to recent transformations in the forms of expert knowledge associated with the prison. Rehabilitation and clinical treatment is losing value in the market for correctional expert services. Meanwhile risk prediction and management increase in value.

I want to extend the discussion of the discursive forms that surround the emergence of an enormously distended 'warehouse'-styled prison system by looking at the place of sociological knowledge on the prison. I mean by this not only the work of sociologists, but also criminologists, psychologists, and political scientists when they study the prison as a whole. One point of departure is the 1950s, when sociology was moving toward its high tide as a state science in the US, and prison sociology was emerging as a highly productive field for both theory building and positive policy application (both central to the claims of sociology's boosters). Two texts published in 1958 suggest important features of prison sociology as a program of both power and knowledge: Gresham Sykes's *The Society of Captives* (1958) and Donald Clemmer's *The Prison Community* originally published in 1940, was published in a second edition in 1958 including a new introduction by its author.

Both books are widely credited with establishing prison sociology as a theoretically significant sub-field within academic sociology. Over the next two decades the questions opened up by Clemmer and Sykes regarding the formation of inmate social organization would produce a substantial body of work linked to names like David Ward, Sheldon Messinger, Donald Cressey, John Irwin, and James Jacobs. These books, and the literature that grew up around them, also had a real influence on correctional management thinking and the broader governmental discourse about prisons in the

1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Sociology had been offering itself as a useful tool for improving prisons since the 1920s, but in the post-War era, New Deal style state governors were anxious to enlist social scientists in constructing penal regimes that would seem distinctively modern and progressive.

The very titles of both books, Clemmer's *Prison Community* and Sykes's *Society of Captives*, point to the central place that prison social order, especially inmate society occupied in prison sociology as a knowledge/power project. As the field developed this led to considerable debate as to whether the pathological features of inmate social order were a product of the structural deficits of prison life (e.g. severe deprivation of opportunities for pleasure, or the tensions inherent in the punishment/treatment split within prison governance), or on the contrary, driven more by inmates themselves and the culture they brought into the prison with them from the streets. The central measures were individual recidivism outcomes (naturally the central concern of 'rehabilitative' penology) and institutional events like disciplinary actions and the prison riots that swept prisons across the nation in the early 1950s and again in the late 1960s (DiIulio, 1987; Useem and Kimball, 1989, Bright; 1995).

However, from our present moment, deep into the development of the post-rehabilitative prison and the era of hyper-incarceration, it is the commonalities within prison sociology that stand out. In this regard Sykes and Clemmer are both highly representative of what comes after. In both cases the social life produced by inmates and staff in the interstices of the prison system became the central focus of study. The knowledge project depended on the ability of sociology to map this terrain (whether conceived as an autonomous social world or as a continuation of the urban society in which inmates operated prior to prison) and translate its languages and sign systems. The power project similarly presumed that governing prisons meant trying to shape the reproduction of inmate social order by insulating inmates as much as possible from the structural deficits of punishment. In short, prison sociology placed the social organization of inmates, 'the society of captives,' or 'the prison community,' at the center of where the problem of knowing the prison scientifically and governing the prison effectively came together.

In the 1990s the whole question of the prison social order appears distant from the concerns of both social science and prison management. That inmates have a social life, one that can change for better and for worse, must always be true, but whether that social life is an object invested with significance by managers seeking to maintain order and scientists seeking to produce the truth of the prison, is a contingent fact. If the work of Cressey and Sykes established the essential components of prison sociology as a knowledge/power project, John DiIulio's influential (1987) book, *Governing Prisons*, offers a counter-point, a discourse that is recognizably sociological, that is it operates on the terrain of a comprehensive relationship between prison and society, but one that offers a fundamentally different set of strategies for knowing and governing the prison.

In the remainder of this article I will revisit first Sykes and Clemmer in the late 1950s and then DiIulio in the late 1980s to capture what I have suggested may be two quite distinct power/knowledge projects and through them gain a better understanding of the discursive foundations of the warehouse prison system.

The social order of the prison as a subject of knowledge

The great tradition of studies of prison social organization in the United States that begins with Clemmer and Sykes has largely ceased in the last 20 years, precisely during the time of the great expansion of incarceration.⁴ In the introduction to his important new study of Rhode Island's prison system during this very period, Leo Carroll (1998), describes it as the first major study of a northern prison system since Jacobs's (1975) study of Stateville in the 1970s.⁵ The few contemporary studies he does cite are of southern systems (Martin and Eckland-Olson, 1987; Crouch and Marquart, 1989; Yackle, 1989; Colvin, 1992).

There is clearly less work being done in this field than there was in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, especially considering the growth of both prisons and social science over this time. But even the work that is being done now often differs in some key ways from the classic tradition of social organization of the prison studies. First, many current studies turn on signal events like riots or court orders. The classic studies self-consciously (and perhaps artifactually) situated themselves in the ordinary life of institutions and downplayed the role of historically specific features. If events took place, like the national wave of prison riots of 1952 that touched the New Jersey prison Sykes was studying, they provided opportunity for research, but they were not the main frames of the analysis.

Second, sociologists like Clemmer and Sykes were given privileged access to the prison including staff and inmates. Much of the research now is conducted from afar through journalism, official reports, and litigation discovery. One suspects that the position of the sociological researcher has been closed out by changes in both prison administration and inmate society. But whatever the reason, the new distance introduces important interpretive problems (which is not to accept that the 'ethnographies' conducted by prison sociologists before now were in some sense pure). Third, recent sociological work on prisons (e.g. Carroll, 1998) is drawn from several decades of work. This provides a historical perspective lacking in the classic studies but also suggests something of the difficulties of producing new sociological research. In effect these studies are the fruits of scholarly careers that may themselves be impossible to reproduce in the next generation.

Thus when we try to understand the social organization of prison under conditions of hyper-incarceration we are faced with a basic problem of

sociological knowledge production. We can obtain government statistics from the censuses about basic features of prison buildings, programs, employment, inmates, but not the kind of structures that Clemmer, Sykes, and their followers made visible. There are exceptions to this. Most remarkably in the work being done on women's prisons, a subject largely invisible during the heyday of prisons sociology. But the conditions of life in the vast expanse of male prisons in the US has become largely invisible even to the best informed Americans. This absence is further exacerbated by the dearth of published inmate writers (Chevigny, 1999). In earlier decades inmates and former inmates like Chester Himes (1952), Malcolm Braly (1976), Edward Bunker (1977) and Nathan Heard (1983) provided detailed portraits of life inside from the inmates' perspective.⁶ These offered a compelling if glancing portrait of prison life. Since the 1960s a series of politically inspired inmate writers like George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, and Jack Henry Abbott have described the prison in more systematic if more ideological terms.

These prison intellectuals were literally the tip of the iceberg of writing and reading that was going in the prisons of the 1950s and 1960s. Eric Cummins' (1994) insightful analysis of California's radical prison movement documents fantastic levels of both book borrowing and manuscript writing in San Quentin. In the 1950s that prison had a library with over 30,000 books, and prisoners without televisions, telephones, or much else made higher use of them than the free world by far. More amazing is the fact that thousands of manuscripts a year were being submitted to the San Quentin librarian for approval for outside circulation by the 1960s. With some exceptions (Rideau and Wikberg, 1992; Shankur, 1993; Chevigny, 1999) this source of insight into the experience of incarceration has also diminished. While the drying up of sociological and prison literary discourses need not arise from the same sources, they do point to a common problem, the disappearance of inmate social life as an object of knowledge outside the precincts of the prison.

The interest in inmate writers in the 1960s was partially driven by identification with the alienated and radicalized perspective of the prisoner among many touched by the New Left or the cultural politics around it. Not only has this mild bias in favor of listening to inmates been largely dissipated, but also it has been replaced by an inverse bias associated with the victims' rights movement that has successfully marked interest in inmate expression as morally perverse. But even if an audience was ready and waiting, the contemporary prison is no longer a manufactory of inmate discourse, either scientifically captured or expressed through inmate writers. Here I can only speculate, but it seems likely that both the prison and its incoming population are to blame. Our gigantic prison population is a sample of a less literate generation in the streets, poor kids failed even more miserably by their public school educations than the poor kids of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. At the same time the prison regime is now hostile to the production of inmate discourse. Laws enacted since the 1970s tend

to penalize inmate writers. For example the famous Son of Sam laws deprive inmates of the right to collect royalties from accounts of their crimes.

The de-coupling of prison management and sociology in the US has also been a two-way street. Sociologists (as well as scholars in criminology, political science, and economics) have been attracted to new objects of research. Three in particular have displaced the prison as a central site for research and theory building in the US. First, since the mid-1970s there has been increasing interest in the incarceration rate as a subject of research, and as an object of intervention. The lead here was initially taken by conservative scholars, like James Q. Wilson (1975) who pointed to the confluence of low incarceration rates and high crime rates in the late 1960s and early 1970s as evidence of a collapse of the deterrent and incapacitative capacity of the US penal system. Since the mid-1980s it has been scholars of a liberal or left bent that have increasingly made the incarceration rate a subject of alarm.

There are a variety of reasons internal to social science as academic fields for the attraction of incarceration rates as the prime target of study. As data, incarceration rates are readily integrated into quantitative analysis of other social variables. This kind of research generally has high prestige within academic fields. Moreover, the Government itself subsidizes this research by providing a large amount of readily accessible data on incarceration rates by state to the research community.⁷ In contrast, studies of the conditions and experience of imprisonment have been far scarcer on federal government supported research and in publications available from the major federal crime web-sites (NIJ, FBI). A possible exception has been the federal courts and their fact finding in prison condition cases. But interestingly that kind of fact finding has been less involved with social science, is generally less visible to the public (through media attention or directly), and is under enormous contemporary pressure for a rollback.

Second, sentencing research has emerged as a central concern for social scientists (Morris and Tonry, 1990). This began in the 1960s as an outgrowth of the growing dis-ease many liberal social scientists felt with the old rehabilitative penology and the role of science in it. The death of George Jackson, the prison activist and author of *Soledad Brother*, in a hail of bullets outside the 'adjustment center' in San Quentin prison in 1971, symbolized for many the racist and reactionary tendency of the correctional establishment. These liberals looked to sentencing as a way to set political limits to the reach of social science legitimated state power. Sentencing research has also appealed to the center and right of social science in its general move toward revalorizing rule systems and hierarchies. But whatever its motives, the turn toward sentencing as a sociological problem of punishment disinvested the prison and the inmate world within it as a focus for research.

The rise of sentencing research tracks the decline of the old treatment link between social science and prison management. The subject of the

older clinical and experimental science, one that has never entirely disappeared, was the complex connections between individual pathologies and social circumstances. The subject of the new research is the formal operation of sentencing systems either analyzed hypothetically or by analyzing large databases brought together by government. A powerful example of the latter is the United States Sentencing Commission, which rivals the aspirations of parole commissions in the old model to provide social science expertise to prison term setting. Expertise in the analysis and management of population flows has become central to academic departments of criminal justice as well as the administration of prisons (Feeley and Simon, 1992).

A third object that is drawing sociology away from the prison is 'fear of crime.' In so far as crime is perceived as the problem for governmental intervention, the prison is almost inevitably part of the strategy. But in recent decades social scientists have helped define 'fear of crime' as a public problem all its own, with its own autonomous logics and solutions (Skogan, 1990). The prison is far from an inevitable focus once 'fear of crime' is defined as the chief problem for intervention. When fighting 'fear' rather than 'crime' government can target different populations, law-abiding citizens, land owners, families and employers, with different mechanisms, ones that involve more compliant people with more resources for self-management, and less certainty of failure. Sociology finds itself integral to the production of this kind of governmental effort. Note the recent popularity of surveys as tools of crime prevention and community policing.

In short, the relationship between sociological knowledge and the larger penal enterprise has not necessarily lessened, but it has been redistributed. A consequence of this redistribution has been to diminish the link between sociology and the prison, with the inmate social system as its primary hub. This trend is not universally true. Important topics ignored by classical prison sociology have begun to be considered by scholars in the 1990s, most notably women's imprisonment (Owen, 1998) and the history of southern penal regimes (Lichtenstein, 1996). Other things have become more visible, including the sentencing systems, the size of the prison population as a function of the overall population, and the fear of crime. All of these offer real opportunities for social science to be relevant to the governance of, and the critical public discussion of, imprisonment. However, they collectively make the place of inmate social order less salient to both.

The prison social order as an object of power

Prison sociology was part of an explosive growth in sociology during the 1960s as a crucial discourse of power for a state committed to governing through its capacities to manage the social (O'Malley and Palmer, 1996;

Rose, 1996; Simon, 1999; Stenson and Watt, 1999). The social, in the sense used here, is not the inevitable way of representing the collective conditions of the citizenry of a nation, but in fact an historically specific commitment to emphasizing certain comprehensive ways of imagining this life (Rose, 1996). In democracies like the US and the United Kingdom, the success of the social was as much about the capacity to mobilize votes along lines of what might be called 'social' identities (unions, students, veterans) as it was about the capacity to target governmental intervention along the same lines. Social science was crucial to both. As this phase reached its climax in the mid-1960s President Lyndon Johnson coined the phrase 'the Great Society' to define his vision of post-New Deal governance in his famous speech.⁸

Prison sociology was a small but not insignificant part of this larger relationship as it evolved over more than 50 years from the 1920s to the 1970s (Bright, 1995). During this period the stake of government in the prison grew from a source of patronage and occasional scandal, into a symbolically charged source of overall prestige comparable to universities and medical centers. Sociologists and their colleagues enjoyed increased access to research as their work became more vital to protecting this growing governmental investment in imprisonment. Donald Clemmer collected much of the data for *The Prison Community* while working as a sociologist of the 'Mental Health staff' at Menard Prison in Illinois, which later became known as the 'Classification Board'. In short, he was interviewing prisoners constantly as part of the official apparatus of knowledge collection and decision making of the prison. In the preface to the 1940 edition he notes that 'the materials which compose the book were gathered for the most part by the writer independently of his routine staff duties.' Of course he was primarily concerned about the impact of this role on his objectivity, but we may find more interesting simply how proximate he was able to get to the prison as a sociologist.

Sykes published *The Society of Captives* only 18 years later, but we can already see the marks of the reconfiguration of sociology's aspirations as a governmental discourse. In the 1930s it was a discipline whose relationship to government was primarily local and state, and focused on the management of deviant populations. By the 1950s sociology was becoming a national science with a relationship to the federal government (mediated by foundations) and concerned with the governance of society as a whole. In his introduction Sykes notes that sociology's interest in the prison is only partially a concern with how it affects the men who pass through it in terms of penal concerns like recidivism. Instead the prison is a site for general sociological analysis of social order. Of course, Sykes is particularly famous for drawing or highlighting the links between the prison social order and that of totalitarian societies. While this a reflection of the now distant cold war zeitgeist of 1958 it is also a statement about the aspirations of sociology as a science relevant to the federal government in its most classically sovereign prerogatives like national defense.

In an era when a system of total power has changed from a nightmare of what the future might be like to a reality experienced by millions, questions concerning the theory and practice of total power take on a new urgency. Do systems of total power contain inherent pathologies, in the sense that there are strains and tensions in the structure which must inevitably crack the monolithic concentration of power? Do types of resistance such as apathy, corruption, and the hard bedrock of informal ties which are present in every social system curtail the power of the rulers? Or is total power a juggernaut capable of crushing all opposition, a form of social order as viable as democratic modes?

(Sykes, 1958: xvi)

Casting inmate society as the crucial medium for controlling the prison was a fateful choice for both prisons and prison sociology that opened some pathways of knowledge and closed others (DiIulio, 1987; Bright, 1995).⁹ First, treating prisons as natural experiments in social formation ignored the powerful role of state governments and state agents in selecting and maintaining prison populations (Simon, 2000). Of course, a good deal of internal debate within prison sociology concerned precisely how much weight to put on this autonomy, and how much instead to see prison as a continuation of conditions of life and rule in the spaces of the lower classes of society. But as functional narrative for prison managers, prison sociology created a fundamental blind spot as to the political construction of the prison population and to the political field in which prison managers operated (Bright, 1995; Scheingold, 1998). This has been exacerbated by the unprecedented politicization of penal policy during the same period (Beckett, 1997).

Second, the focus on inmate social organization distanced prison sociology from the power of legal discourse to define the prison and prisoner. The link between the prison and law has always been a complex one. The prison was celebrated by the republican revolutionaries of the 18th century who saw in its potential for visible and controllable punishments the completion of the law, and the repression of the monarchical excesses associated with corporal punishments on the scaffolds (Foucault, 1977; Ignatieff, 1978). Yet from the early 19th century the reliance on imprisonment created the problem of a prolonged dominance over the inmate outside of the formal terms of law. The prison then was simultaneously crucial to the practicality of law as a real machinery of government, and constantly producing surpluses of power that cannot be accounted for legally.

In the 19th century this potentially arbitrary surplus power was vested below the threshold of the most accountable political officers among the bureaucratic powers of prison managers and penitentiary experts (Foucault, 1977). Prison sociology offered a way to regularize this surplus by casting the norms and regularities of prison social life as the real 'law' of the prison. In that void between the moments of legislated tasks, prison

sociology could map a normative structure within which prudent management could exercise power that was flexible but accountable. The negative side of this, however, was to leave the most sociologically enlightened segments of the market of prison administrative agents terribly exposed when at the height of the social liberal state the courts intervened in prison administration in a big way. Neither did prison sociology live up to its potential to influence the shape of court-based reform.¹⁰

The broader history of the social liberal state in the US (Garth and Sterling, 1998), its successes and failures, the consequences for it of the Vietnam War, and its impact on every aspect of science and society has yet to be written, at least for the sub-topic of penology.¹¹ It is a dubious enterprise retroactively to read the parameters of prison sociology as a structural bind on the political flexibility of those shaping prisons. We would want to look carefully at the reasons why penal policy has come to seem simultaneously crucial for government and almost inevitably as a failure.

It is sufficient for our present purposes that whatever its validity as science, prison sociology in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as a political knowledge offered tremendous advantages at a moment when it seemed possible to govern through society as a structure of knowledge and a target of intervention. At the same time, prison sociology proved tremendously vulnerable to two of the biggest political challenges to the social liberal state after the 1970s, the rightward pull of state electorates and the juridification of almost every aspect of the peno-educational-welfare state (Simon, 2000). Elsewhere I have offered a very provisional sketch of this period (Simon, 2000). Instead of filling this out I want to turn to a contrast between the relationship between sociology and the government of the prison during the 1950s and 1960s, and that which has emerged during the 1980s and 1990s.

Knowing and governing the prison after prison sociology

If Sykes (1958) and Clemmer (1940 [1958]) can be taken as reflecting the ambitions of prison sociology at a moment when government at both the federal and state level sought to govern through 'society,' John DiIulio's (1987) book, *Governing Prisons*, provides the closest thing to a parallel for the post-1980 era. Clemmer and Sykes reflected on the conditions of maximum-security prisons in the midwest and northeast, in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the early stages of a national take-off in attention to prison as a social and governmental problem. DiIulio examined prison regimes in two western states and one midwestern one in the early 1980s when a distinctly post-social liberal approach to governing was making itself felt at the national and state levels, and in prison policy. His analysis, like that of Clemmer and Sykes can be read both as an analysis of prison

regimes at a distinct point in time and a programmatic statement on how to articulate knowledge and power into an effective penal regime.

The time is the crisis of peno-correctional modernism (Garland, 1990; Simon, 1993), during which major portions of those penal narratives (rehabilitation, education, integration) through which prison administration had represented itself for a century, virtually disappeared. DiIulio's program is one that lends itself to the dominance of political discourses that have flourished during the crisis of the social-liberal state, neo-liberalism, and neo-conservatism. Although as political rationalities these programs have distinctly different potentialities, within the contemporary penal politics they come together (O'Malley and Palmer, 1996). Clemmer and Sykes crystallized a model of the prison as a problem of governance, which by DiIulio's own account was still profoundly influencing prison administrators as late as the 1980s. DiIulio wrote at the end of the first decade of serious prison population growth, following a period of declining prison rates that saw the US imprisonment rate hit a nearly half-century low in 1972 before beginning to rise again (Maguire and Pastore, 1999). He envisioned the problem of the prison as a problem of management and governance, at a moment when a vast expansion of prisons as instruments of government was taking place.

Governing Prisons serves as both a trenchant critique of prison sociology as a governmental program for prisons, and as a window into the emerging frameworks through which the contemporary prison is being governed. The book signals the end of 'inmate society' as the appropriate platform for prison management. Although he examined empirical data from three states, DiIulio's research, which stays close to official recording of events inside the prison, is consistent with the closing off of social science knowledge to the prison, discussed earlier. DiIulio himself shrewdly notes that the kind of study Sykes and Clemmer did, one steeped in a close relationship to prison management, had been de-centered within sociology because of the influence of its left politics and its antipathy toward prisons and prison managers (1987: 20–1).¹²

DiIulio's subtle but sweeping critique of prison sociology operates at a number of levels. First, he vindicates the disciplinary identity of his own field of political science. Prison sociology placed its emphasis on informal and non-state processes. Inmate society provided an attractive subject for research precisely because it represented the informal side of the prison order. As a political scientist, DiIulio, would take the state and government as a primary topic. From this perspective Clemmer and Sykes were being no more than loyal disciplinarians in making inmate society the focus of their work.

A second level of critique is historical. In this regard DiIulio seems willing to acknowledge that inmate society may have indeed provided a realistic anchor for a civil order in prisons during the middle of the 20th century. In this version, Sykes (1958) plays a kind of owl of Minerva, describing the inmate social system as the medium through which to govern

at precisely the moment that demographic and cultural changes are poised forever to undermine it. From this perspective, DiIulio's emphasis on techniques of management, and his call for a reassertion of penal authority, albeit one held accountable through frequent audits, is a response to changes in the nature of inmate society that makes it an unreliable partner for prison management.

DiIulio's third level of critique is more direct and more genealogically significant. While acknowledging the powerful insights about prisons that prison sociology produced, DiIulio argues that prison sociology also closed off other avenues of vision within the prison and other models for knowledge and power in the governing of the prison. Most importantly, in seeking to write narratives about the prison in a certain kind of modern society, the great prison sociologists projected their case studies into general theories of the prison (1987: 3). By displacing the actual prisons as organs of state governments, into a national body, prison sociologists distorted the picture of the political field in which prisons existed and most notably limited the significance of variation in prison administration to their analysis.

The most influential lesson distilled from prison sociology, i.e. that prisons could only be run through accommodation of inmate hierarchies (DiIulio, 1987: 2–3), was arguably an artifact of ignoring the relative difference administration could make. Only by comparing different prison administrations would it be possible to draw even tentative conclusions about the potential to govern the prison without the negotiated assent of the governed. DiIulio also criticizes prison sociology for remaining at the level of dialog among theoretical positions anchored in independent case studies of particular prisons. This work was empirical but could not yield a rationalizing science of administration of the sort that DiIulio envisions as a more appropriate intellectual accomplice of prison government.¹³

This basic blind spot leads to two other defects that DiIulio attributes to prison sociology, its failure to create a normal science of prisons that could accumulate empirical findings and its 'defeatist' tone. While each case study might be empirically rigorous, DiIulio argued that the body of work did not produce testable generalizations. To the extent that its insights traveled, they were not well shaped to be useful to prison management. While he sees prison sociology starting off empathetically toward prison management, DiIulio charged prison sociology with something like betrayal of the state by promoting the message that 'nothing works' when it comes to autonomous prison government.

DiIulio deserves considerable credit for grasping the significance of prison sociology as a governmental program in a way sociologists themselves, even ones deeply critical of the tradition, were not able to thematize adequately. But the substance of his reading of sociology as a governmental rationality is more problematic. DiIulio's own substantive loyalties, to federalism for example, come into play here. The blindness of prison sociology to the specificity of state governments was part of constructing

prisons as an object for a nationalizing federal government. DiIulio's implicit charge of treason is one that places the prison as state agency in the role of betrayed sovereign. But this partially hides the struggle between national and state governments for control of the prison agenda in the 1960s and 1970s. From a national governmental perspective, state prisons came to be seen in the 1960s as institutional failures whose most significant products, ex-prisoners, were an important element in making the great urban centers less governable.¹⁴

Governing Prisons provides elements of a post-sociological knowledge power strategy, that is a way to organize the production of expert knowledge to serve the managerial needs of prison governors. DiIulio's knowledge program, which is to some important extent independent of his views on prison governance, claims three broad mandates. First, inmate society virtually disappears as a subject. *Governing Prisons* reverses the sociological privileging of the inmate culture as an object of knowledge. This is actually a series of reversals in the priorities established for knowledge collection and interpretation: staff over inmates, formally authorized acts of authority over informal arrangements, and formal definitions of behavior over less measurable ways of collecting knowledge.

Second, state government is brought back in. *Governing Prisons* draws on DiIulio's own comparative research of prisons in three different states. In exchange for concentrated research into one particular prison, he conducted three less intensive studies of prison administrations in different states with strategically chosen variation in management philosophy and practice. Both as a result of the focus above, and the necessities of doing multiple studies, DiIulio's research relied considerably more on the reading of programmatic statements, interviews with administrators, and analysis of officially recorded data.

Third, prison order is defined as a social good in its own right. Sykes claimed to be studying democracy in the laboratory of the prison. DiIulio has his own links to (and aspirations for) political theory, but his program emphasizes technocratic study of practices that make a difference (1987: 12). In that sense *Governing Prisons* is supposed to point the way toward something other than itself, something more grounded in active order producing research of the sort that DiIulio's mentor James Q. Wilson modeled a few years earlier with his justly famous 'Broken Windows' (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) article.

Governing Prisons can shed light on our present conjuncture in one further way. The regimes that DiIulio sketched out in the book, Texas's 'control model,' Michigan's 'responsibility model,' and California's 'consensual model' all offer in their own way responses to the breakdown of the governance strategies anchored in inmate society and thus in prison sociology (1987: 5). The essence of the Texas model, embraced by DiIulio, was the promulgation and strict administration of behavioral rules governing all aspects of inmate life. Michigan, in contrast, sought to encourage the formation of self-governing mentalities on the part of inmates by facilitat-

ing the accumulation of rights to property and personality linked to a rights orientation reflected in frequent recourse to grievance procedures. California, according to DiIulio, was a blend of these.

The regimes DiIulio studied may have been transformed by the huge increases in the prison populations of all three states in the more than a decade since *Governing Prisons* was published. Indeed they were changing even then. DiIulio sketches the transformation of the Texas model under the influence of the complex *Estelle v. Ruiz* case and the now 20-year history of federal court intervention there (indeed similar stories could be told about all three states in that regard). But whether or not these models remain current, they reflect important, and I would suspect enduring, features of the post-social moment in penality.

Both models reflect a logic that has been described as ‘responsibilization’ in other contexts (O’Malley and Palmer, 1996: 142–4). Governance strategies responsibilize when they invest choice and attach consequences to the individual subject (or other units, families, firms, communities). Texas and Michigan may have differed greatly in the kind of subjectivity they cultivated. George Beto, the Bentham of the Texas control model, mixed a Lutheran mandate of obedience to civil authority with a rational actor view of individual motivation toward sin (DiIulio, 1987: 178). The Michigan model embraced more of a neo-liberal subject of consumption who accumulates clothes, cassette tapes, and other tools for self-fashioning in order to create a personality, life style, and governable way of life in prison and hopefully outside of it. These models may have considerable antagonism, just as neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism often conflict, but they share a rejection of the sociological modernism that Sykes’s *Society of Captives* represents a high point of. This does not mean that they reject Sykes’s ideas about inmate cultures. Indeed, they are responses to the perceived un-governability of the current gang-dominated inmate society.

A closely related feature of these models is a preference for using rules to define appropriate behavior and enforce it. Once again we can see significant differences in how rules are used. In Texas, rule by rule means near absolute power to sanction behavior defined by staff as violative of rules (DiIulio, 1987: 124–5). In Michigan, rule by rule means a whole complex of relations that inmates engage in with staff over their rights and privileges. Thus, DiIulio provides as an example of Michigan’s seemingly dysfunctional bureaucracy a rule that inmates could have up to, but no more than, 30 cassette tapes in their cells. While such a high number may seem unenforceable, it is also an invitation to struggle and negotiation over the meaning of the rules.

This is not to argue that the variations DiIulio finds and studies do not exist. There were important differences between Texas and Michigan, especially in their basic attitude toward the punitive role and its moral foundations (1987: 177). The point here is that the common chords are those features most likely to be central to post-social strategies of governance. The revalorization of the individual and of rules both reflect a shift

away from the social as a nexus of governance generally, and the prison social order as a platform for governing prisons in particular.

It is neither fair to DiIulio, nor to his competitors among social science experts on prisons, to suggest that *Governing Prisons* is a unique approach or theoretically irreconcilable with competing approaches, including the Sykesian one he critiques. Indeed, the power of *Governing Prisons* comes from the clarity and genealogical self-consciousness with which DiIulio set his study against the tradition of prison sociology.¹⁵ But in framing a 'post-social' strategy for thinking about and governing prisons it is DiIulio's commonalities with other contemporary prison scholars that should be noted.

In their important study of prison riots, Bert Useem and Peter Kimball (1989) also point away from inmate society as the proper lens for focusing the control problems of contemporary prisons: 'It is not necessary to develop a special theory [or disorder] to deal with prison inmates—that they may react much as anyone else—and that insights based on their actions are more widely generalizable' (1989: 221).

Instead, like DiIulio, they see prison management and its failures as the more efficient source of knowledge about prison disorders, and the more useful lever for governing them. Both approaches would replace the complex system dynamics of a sociological model with a micro knowledge of the details of prison discipline and its effective maintenance.

Prison administrators who want, above all, not to have the name of their facility known as we know of Attica and New Mexico may think on this: in each case, the riot could have been confined to a single housing unit. At Attica, steel gates broke and there were no radios; at New Mexico, guards left the doors open and 'unbreakable' glass wasn't. Therein was the difference. Such failings arise in the context of systemic crisis we describe above.

(Useem and Kimball, 1989: 220)

This is not the place for an extended critique of post-social or post-modern prison theory, although entering its second decade it is approaching the right vintage for such a reading. This article addresses a tardier point, the formation of this post-social moment and its connection to the caesura of knowledge about the experience of imprisonment in the midst of America's unprecedented expansion of incarceration. In this light, however, we close by considering the 'super-max' or 'maxi-max' prison as one example of the prison governance regime that is operating in the discursive field described by *Governing Prisons*. Genealogically, the 'super-max' prison is a response to the same perceived problem of re-establishing control over prisons transformed by the demographic and cultural changes since the 1960s that informed post-social prison theory.¹⁶

The 'super-max' is a largely US-based prison model for holding highly dangerous inmates in a state of near isolation through the use of electronic surveillance, specially designed cell units and blocks, and rigidly organized

protocols for staff communication with inmates (King, 1999). The model seems to have been developed in the federal system starting with a new penitentiary at Marion in the late 1960s. During the 1980s and 1990s it has spread to many states as a solution to handling the growing population of inmates facing lengthy prison sentences and lifetime relationships with prison gangs. Although it is only in use on a small minority of overall US prison inmates, it seems to be establishing itself as a model for regime reform in less severe sectors of the system.

Like *Governing Prisons*, 'super-max' acknowledges the presence of inmate society but seeks to govern around rather than through it. The 'super-max' reduces prison social order to its lowest possible relevance by increasing the level of isolation of the inmate from both other inmates and the staff toward the theoretical limits points of total segregation. To the extent that the 'super-max' succeeds in breaking up dangerous solidarities within inmate society (gang affiliation), it does so by fragmenting that society into individual cells leading in a disturbingly high number of cases to psychosis.

Despite its superficial resemblance to the 19th-century penitentiary, the 'super-max' is not really a return to the individual as a locus of control. It operates not to transform the individual but to contain his 'toxic' behavioral properties at a reasonable fiscal, political, and legal cost. The forms of knowledge at work in the 'super-max' are not the disciplinary sciences of normalizing introspection, but the sciences of managing risk through rigorous external controls. The 'super-max' prison is a virtual temple to rule by rule. Far more than the traditional standards of American prisons, its routine activities are scripted and rendered as rule-specified behavior. Near total surveillance permits complete documentation of compliance. Notwithstanding that a number of these institutions have experienced breakdowns of official order in which gruesome acts of violence, completely outside the regime of rules, have been conducted by staff.¹⁷

The 'super-max' prison is often touted as a new technology of prisons around which a new kind of optimism may be coalescing. In fact, the benefits are aimed at the prison system itself rather than society. Although 'super-max' may become a more generalized penal practice, its primary role has been as a deterrent and incapacitation for those prisoners in the prison systems that managers perceive as most threatening to good order in the other prisons. The much celebrated technology of the 'super-max' is designed to protect the staff by containing these presumptively most dangerous inmates. There is no warrantee that this regime is well calculated to produce more docile ex-prisoners. Indeed, there is growing recognition that the inmates held for prolonged periods under 'super-max'-style regimes are at greater risk for behavioral abnormalities.

Prison sociology began in close association with the project of reforming inmates while in prison. The intense debates about internal versus external dynamics of prison social order bristled with implications for how best to target reformation programs.¹⁸ Prison sociology has been easily stigmatized

as out of touch with public opinion and values on crime (DiIulio, 1987). Prison sociology's primary focus on the secondary pathologies of the denial of freedom makes it appear to mistrust the public sense that the denial of freedom is appropriate. Its insistence that prisons be governed through that inmate society appears to put correctional staff and inmates on a common moral terrain. Ironically, the great danger of post-social prison theory is how quickly it is likely to become captive not to the public's desires but to those of prison managers. In making managerial art its central preoccupation, post-social prison theory is at risk of losing touch with what prisons are supposed to produce for society. They can thus contribute to the decoupling of prisons from social objectives as part of what has been called 'managerialism' (Bottoms, 1994) or the 'new penology' (Feeley and Simon, 1992).

Conclusion

To ask about the 'society of captives' in the era of hyper-incarceration, is really to raise two questions of priority interest. First, how has inmate society changed under conditions where prisons' populations have experienced extraordinary growth and prison management has undergone a wholesale rearrangement of mission and ideology? Second, how has the status of inmate 'society' or 'community' as an object of power and knowledge changed? This article has focused primarily on the second of these questions. The two questions are, however, deeply intertwined. The extent to which we collectively know or care much about inmate social life is a function, in part, of the extent to which inmate social life remains a central medium through which the prison is governed.

As a subject of both power and knowledge the prison has fundamentally changed. Most importantly inmate society, represented centrally in the discourses of both prison sociology and prison literature, seems to be disappearing from public view. The production of knowledge about inmate society grew in importance to the government of prisons by the 1920s. Illinois, for example, created the office of the 'state sociologist' in this period to oversee the outcome of parole releases from prison under the indeterminate sentencing law. A number of significant sociologists served as influential correctional administrators. Perhaps most famously, Donald Clemmer, himself served during the 1960s as the director of the District of Columbia's prison system and in 1964, President of the American Correctional Association. In the late 1960s, prison sociology, like the discipline more generally, increasingly identified with radical criticisms of social control institutions in the United States, yet it remained a largely loyal critique, and the prison itself, at a time of radical political organizing behind bars, seemed more than ever a pivotal institution for sociology to study.

This relationship has deteriorated from both ends. Many sociologists in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s gained access to prisons as participants in, or evaluators of, rehabilitative programs. Prison administrators did not universally share a commitment to that philosophy, but they widely recognized the centrality of rehabilitative mechanisms to the political narrative of corrections that New Deal-oriented state governments produced. Sociologists could be an effective part of organizing the production of what we might think of as the ‘truth effects’ of prison. Some prison officials saw sociology along with psychology and criminology as relevant advance credentials.

Since the 1980s the prison functions in a very different political narrative of state government, one in which gestures of popular vengeance and exclusionary social defense talk serve as central elements (Simon, 2000). Prison managers face their own rather severe challenges in producing truth effects of that sort, but they are clearly not tasks with which sociologists can help much. In such a context, the involvement of sociologists with prisons is virtually all political risk for prison administrators. With the shift in penology toward punishment and incapacitation, the social scientist has less of a reason to be inside the prison and perhaps less of a welcome. This does not mean an end to the rule of expert knowledges in the prison. There are certain features of contemporary penology that suggest a valorization of popular knowledge, but there is also a significant dependence on new kinds of expertise including risk prediction, accounting, systems engineering, and the like.

US prison sociology did not die from theoretical wounds delivered by DiIulio (1987) or anyone else. Indeed, that work has continued and been revitalized as the discussion of contemporary British prison sociology reflected in the other articles in this volume so well represents (see also Sparks, 1994; Sparks and Bottoms, 1995; Carrabine, 1998; Liebling, 1999). If we are to understand its transformation we need to explore the way that specific pathways of power and knowledge into and out of the prison have themselves been transformed. More urgently, we need to reconstitute sources of knowledge that can make prison social order more visible to a public whose infatuation with incarceration depends on deep ignorance as to its fundamental effects.

Notes

1. At mid-year 1998 it stood at 1,802,496, see Darrell K. Gilliard (1999) ‘Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 1998’ *Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin* March 1999, 1.
2. At 93 prisoners per 100,000 free residents, 1972 had the lowest US imprisonment rate since 1927.
3. Which is not to say that there has been no attention to prison regimes, see, for example, Owen (1998), but only that the emerging critical discourse on

- incarceration has had relatively little to say about transformations in the internal order of the prison.
4. This claim is limited to the United States (and may be overstated in any event). In contrast however, very significant work in this genre is being carried on in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and South Africa, just to identify the major English language literatures. The growing deficit between the US prison population increase and the US prison sociology decrease, to which this article is directed, may be solvable in part through greater engagement with these literatures.
 5. But see Silberman (1995) for a study drawn largely on New England.
 6. For studies of this genre see Franklin (1978) and Massey (1989).
 7. Needless to say, the assistant professor of sociology or criminology that decides to study life inside prisons is taking a big tenure risk compared to someone interested in analyzing incarceration rates and their determinants on their desktop computer.
 8. It is also no accident that he gave this speech in Ann Arbor at a great public university of the sort that typified that relationship between social knowledge and an activist state. Ironically it is also a university that a few years later would become a national symbol for the crisis of the liberal state as opposition to the war in Vietnam sent many students into the streets.
 9. Stanton Wheeler published an early and deep internal critique of prison sociology from this perspective in 1962. In many respects this present article is inspired by Wheeler's effort to think about what he termed 'the social sources of criminology' (Wheeler, 1962).
 10. It is only in Jacobs (1977) that prison sociology really begins to confront law as a force in shaping penal regimes.
 11. We may bemoan in the end how little influence sociology really had over some aspects of national government policy. Consider, for example, that the Soviet economy may have been closer to the model of the corrupt 'big house' prison than Sykes could possibly have known.
 12. In DiIulio's rise and fall narrative of the sociological prison, Clemmer is the one with the most empathy toward prison officials, Sykes moves sociology dangerously away from its loyalties to the prison, and the work of John Irwin, himself a prisoner in the 1950s, constitutes the full break between sociology and social control as it were.
 13. Charles Bright (1995) provides a very different but equally powerful illustration of how the sociological displacement of the prison into the national body rendered the larger nature of governmental strategies in prisons invisible, making appear incoherent and ineffective what was something else.
 14. By no coincidence, of course, these same cities were the major staging areas for the expansion of national power in the 1960s and the central voter pools for the national Democratic party.
 15. One might add as well the more contingent fact that DiIulio's social capital (the network of acknowledged mentors like James Q. Wilson and informants in the prison management world like George Beto) and his cultural

capital (his urban catholic conservative political roots) have served to make his approach influential and resonant in the 1980s and 1990s when even a President with impeccable New Left roots embraces school uniforms and a massive prison population.

16. Most specifically it is a response to two or perhaps three related problems: (1) the centrality of racially defined prison gangs to inmate social order; (2) the pressure of court orders for structural and procedural reforms and the threat of more; and (3) the threat posed by seemingly political offenders with connections to alleged 'terrorist' networks on the outside.
17. The best documented cases include two California 'super-max' prisons, Pelican Bay and Corcoran. See, *Madrid v. Gomez*, 889 F.Supp. 1146 (United States District Court, ND California 1995).
18. A good example is the work of Stanton Wheeler, which aimed at determining the precise circumstances under which prison culture could be expected to take hold. See, for example, Wheeler (1961a) and (1961b).

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