Business as Usual

Jarrod Shook

If I had known the truth, I would have stayed inside with my father that evening rather than going out to play with my friends. Instead, despite his protest that I hang around the house, I threw a tantrum and spent his last evening of freedom at the park, traversing the monkey bars and looking for frogs or insects like eight-year-olds are supposed to. It was not until I arrived home from school the following day that I would be able to understand his insistence that I hang about the apartment the prior evening, regretting my juvenile outburst.

I walked in the door to find an emptier apartment than I was used to. My father was not there and his girlfriend was crying on the couch. The apartment was cloudy with cigarette smoke and the blinds were shut tight, blocking out the sunrays that had followed me home from school that day. Normally, I would drop my backpack, hug my father, and then grab a snack from the fridge before plopping myself down in front of the television set to watch Arthur on PBS. Today, I was handed a tape-recorder and told that it was a message from my father. Not really comprehending the magnitude of the situation, I fumbled with the recorder and confusedly pressed play while the tearful woman in front of me attempted to brace me for the words that were about to be spoken. The tape kicked on and above the white noise of the recorder, my father's broken voice spoke to me from the sorrowful place he must have been in when he found out in the court room that day that he would not be coming home and never really got to say goodbye. "Dad's going to be away for a while son", his anguished voice spoke to me. "I want you to know that I love you very much and that I need you to be strong right now". I could not believe my ears. This really did not make any sense. "I know this is hard for you to understand, but I want you to know that you mean the world to me and that dad's going to be home as soon as he can". My heart sank to join my father's. The tears welled from behind my eyes and I began to heave. "I wanted to tell you face to face but I really didn't know how; just know that this isn't your fault. I love you very much". And with that the tape clicked off and I just sat there shaking. "*No*!" I said. "No! No! No! I want my dad!" There was just no way that it could possibly make any sense in my eight-year-old mind. Where was my father? Why was he gone? Why did I not stay in the apartment with him the night before? Does he not want me? What did I do?

And as I sat there distraught, wondering where my father was and why he was gone, he was being processed by authorities of a local detention

center where he would be detained pending a transfer to the Correctional Service of Canada's Millhaven Maximum Security Reception Unit for federal prisoners sentenced to two years or more.[1]

I can remember my first trip to prison, not many days after that traumatic tape recorder stopped playing. After a long trip on a crowded Greyhound to the prison capital of Canada – Kingston, Ontario – my father's former girlfriend and I signed in at the "Bridge House", a now closed homestead for low-income visitors of prisoners in the area. The next morning we hopped in a cab and made our way down to the notorious Millhaven Maximum Security Prison where my father was being held in the Reception Unit. The eerie drive up the roadway towards the prison and the ominous double-gate and barbed-wire fences that announce themselves at the entrance would always stick with me, conspicuous symbols of the tragedy that awaits one on the other side. I never forgot that, nor the tempered glass that separated my father and I as we sat there in the visiting room, confused about the system that was keeping us apart and the authority that made it so that the closest I could get to him was placing my hand to his, palm to palm, against the glass.

Artificial encounters like these would persist as he was transferred to prisons throughout the Ontario region for the duration of his eight years of incarceration – Collins Bay, Warksworth, Bath, and finally Pittsburgh minimum – as he cascaded down in security level. To be sure, the visitation privileges would become more relaxed, but our relationship became inverted. The closer he got to coming home, the further apart we became.

I cannot say for certain that I held an impression of 'the prison' at that time nor 'the system' that supported it, but I certainly resented *something*. As far as I could tell, *it* had stolen my father from me, reduced our relationship to a collect telephone call once every couple of weeks, a few letters a month and the occasional visit – absorbing part of my youth and institutionalising it with the prison's bureaucratic servility, hollowing out some of the spirit I had as a child. And so began my critical account of the prison.

Now, at twenty-seven and as an adult, I am no longer "just visiting" and have become a prisoner myself. I will not use this as a forum to deny the fact that I too have a role to play in having found myself in this position, but I will state that I also consider myself to be one among many people in Canada who represent a particular political problem for the State and who have thus found themselves incarcerated, not merely for some inherent

immorality but, in part, due to structural inequalities in the system and for the fact that the particular political problem they represent (mine being as a problematic drug user[2]) has not found a politically profitable solution outside of incapacitation in the Canadian Carceral State. More humane and creative solutions are just not to be found in a context where to "commit sociology" is the object of ridicule in the upper echelons of state power.[3]

I call the prison a statist institution. That is, an extension of the states' power to enforce the current political order. In the Canadian state, Correctional Services Canada (CSC) is delegated the authority to carry out prison sentences to individuals sentenced to two years or more. As an extension of state power, I also call the brutality that occurs within the walls of CSC an extension of state brutality.

Brutality, you say, *in Canada*? I can faintly hear our neighbours south of the border and beyond reflexively estimating that perhaps for Canada that is a bit of an overstatement, at least comparatively. My experience and observations prove otherwise. Brutality is characteristic of, or like, a brute, being any animal other than a human being (Bunk and Wagnall, 1976). Brutality, then, is to act inhumanely. And while the contemporary perception of CSC is that inhumanity is a relic of the past, selected portions of my "field diary" (kept as a qualitative research method during my incarceration here at Collins Bay Institution, a Canadian medium security prison in Ontario) reveal that brutality, though perhaps displaying itself in a manner more subtle and somewhat less perceptible to the public than in the past, remains an indisputable reality of the prison.

As a caveat to my methodology, I will mirror the words of Gresham Sykes (1958, p. 63) who, in his classic sociological account of the prison in *The Society of Captives*, stated that, "it might be argued that there are as many prisons as there are prisoners". Nonetheless, I do not consider my experiences to be particularly unique or exceptional; if anything, my white skin pigment, as well as my willingness and ability to communicate, might actually make "my prison" somewhat less severe than it is for many others.

A review of Claire Cullhane's (1985) notable book, *Still Barred from Prison*,[4] which I was lucky to be able to find in the prison library as I was looking for reference material in this endeavour, compelled me to pause and reflect on whether or not to suggest that the federal penitentiaries of the 1970's, 1980's, or even of the 1990's when I would visit my father, is the federal prison system of 2014. There were, to be sure, rampant and overt

historical acts of systematic legalized violence imposed on prisoners at places like British Columbia Penitentiary (now closed), Dorchester, Matsqui, Kent, Archambault, Millhaven, and Stony Mountain, among others, yet much of the turmoil that ensued in those years was in fact followed by reforms of some kind. So in one sense the system has *evolved*, but so have its security techniques and technologies of control through surveillance and other static measures. That said, when faced with the prospect of reconciling the overt tradition of brutality in the past with what I see today as a more subtle and somewhat less perceptible dehumanizing form, in its reality and visible effects, I am satisfied to suggest that it is merely "business as usual".[5]

With this assertion in mind, I think it is important to make a "distinction between the 'states' prison system…and the individuals who serve in them in describing them as purposeful violent institutions" (Cullhane, 1985, p. 129). By this I mean it is not so much the people, but the hardware of the prison itself, the architecture, as well as the bureaucratic policies and practices that govern it – *the spirit of the prison* – that make it brutal.

For example, one of my first diary entries of any substance reads, "We are on lock-down. Someone was stabbed last night in the yard...not only that but another prisoner who obviously struggles with mental health issues came back from a surprise trip to court yesterday with a broken hand – self injury – a response to the anger he felt for being, in his terms, recharged for a crime he had already been convicted of". Three days later I would write, "Easter Sunday and we are still on lock-down. It appears this will be five straight days of cell time while the guards conduct their Spring search...here I sit filling what little space is left in this cell after my cell-mate makes use of his share". No sooner did that lock-down end that I would again write, "Another lock-down. In the last ten days there have been two stabbings and about seven days of lock up, and now here we go again. Apparently this is becoming the norm around here".

Was this the authoritative standard of the prison?[6] Being locked in a cell smaller than your average sized bathroom for days on end, sometimes, as in my case at the time, double bunked[7] with another prisoner due to episodic incidents of violence in the institution? Or worse, facing this same scenario while at the same time struggling with a mental health condition, as was the case with the individual who broke his own hand because he could not cope with the emotional shock of the system? The normalization of such a toxic milieu[8] can be categorized as nothing less than brutal. And the institutional

search went even a step further than this. I would write about it after yet another lock-down occurred only weeks after the one prior, this time in response to a metal knee brace that went missing. I wrote:

> One aspect of the institutional search is the strip search. I find it especially humiliating; as if the sovereign is exacting an especially degrading punishment beyond the punitive deprivations and pains of imprisonment that are already implicit with the experience of incarceration...I find the procedure intrusive. I get anxious in the moments leading up to the spectacle and introvert myself at the moment of inspection. Everything just kind of deadens for the moment. I can't help but feel this 'turning off' is damaging.

I went back to my cell for another couple of solitary days and would write:

> There is something very unsettling about being deprived of social contact and confined to this small space. I actually just began to notice the neurosis that tends to emerge, a nervous energy that builds up; you begin to blurt out words and have involuntary body movements. This can't be good for the human spirit.

'Turning off', 'neurosis', and 'nervous energy' are a manufactured state of mind. One might ask why so much time and resources go into locking down an institution and searching for weapons that will only re-appear when the real threat to the 'safety and security' of the prison appears to the punishment being inflicted on the hearts and minds of prisoners. Is it any surprise, then, that under such conditions, prisoners at times become so paranoid and fearful, and feel the need to fashion weapons, sometimes to use against one another?

Fear and paranoia are woven within the very fabric of prison life. In one entry, I described this as I had experienced it:

> I wonder if being a conscious observer of reality doesn't come with its consequences. I certainly feel that it is true here in the prison where the additional bits of information that I perceive around me sometimes become corrupted in such a way to download as paranoia – the constant surveillance weighing heavily on the psyche...there is an expectation that

> their perception of me is pejorative…I notice also that sometimes there will be an exceptionally high correctional officer presence that seems to demonstrate power, or might. These expressions are found at other points in the complex too, for example the control desk in some of the prison's units sit four feet higher than ground level. This architectural design engineers a power relationship that maintains the superiority of the correctional officers, standing above the inmate…a full expression of the adversarial power imbalance that exists between *us* and *them*.

The relationship between keepers and the kept is a complex one, but it seems that each learns to play their specific role in the institution of prison,[9] whether in uniform or not. This became especially apparent to me on one occasion as I gathered some reference materials in the institutional library. I would often attend the library because it was one of the few places in the institution where I found meaningful human interaction. The librarian and I would often converse on an intellectual level, exchanging ideas and inspiring new ones, a place to feel human for a moment or two. On this particular day the security priorities of the prison superseded that. I had been working on an article that was somewhat critical of CSC, for which the librarian had been providing me reference material. That day, the librarian advised me that he had submitted a report to the Security Intelligence Officer (SIO) regarding my activities – "due diligence" on his part. On that day, I wrote "Now, maybe I was wrong for expecting more, for obviously this is a prison, but that element of surveillance really just struck a nerve with me and corrupted whatever was meaningful in the interactions that we had. I want to blame the librarian for this but I really can't…prison is artificial".

If you picture that there are, at any given time, countless prisoners in Canadian prisons walking around, in all probability, with a similar disposition, it should come as no surprise that rates of self-injury and violence remain particularly high within prison walls. In late July 2013, an altercation occurred in the prison, which resulted in one prisoner losing his life to such violence. My field diary entries during this time reflect to a great degree the brutal nature of this system. The day the incident occurred I wrote, "I guess you begin to get desensitized to these types of things in here. You cannot very well adopt a fearful attitude, mentally you have to survive, but complacency does not quite work so well either". The following day as we were locked in our cells, the guards were accompanying the kitchen

stewards as they fed us. When the guard reached my cell I inquired if everybody was okay. The guard replied that "he might not make it, they had to massage his heart the night before". The next day we were released onto a modified routine[10] in the unit and I noticed that the chaplains were making their way around. I wrote:

> The chaplain just came around to the units to inform us that the prisoner who was stabbed yesterday died. They killed him. I know we all committed crimes to get here; our hands aren't exactly clean, but no one deserves to die in prison. The prison commits murder no less than the individual who carries the blade. I know this is a bold statement but how many men and women will the state facilitate death for?

Later on that afternoon, I was documenting some thoughts about the prisoner who died, a person I had casually acquainted myself with on occasion. "He was a lifer", I wrote, "meaning that he himself had taken a life before. Does that make his life of any less value? The sad reality is that as a young black male serving a life sentence in prison, the words won't be making too much noise about his passing". I was interrupted as the mental health nurse began passing around a sheet of paper to each cell titled, "CBI Critical Incident Request Form". It was an appointment request sheet to see psychology pending any reactions to the events that had unfolded. It listed some signs that you might be affected by the incident, plus proposed different ways to manage those symptoms, such as: 1) stick to your routine, 2) exercise, 3) do not drink excessive caffeine, and 4) do not take your stress out on others. "I guess this is the easier, softer way of CSC", I wrote. I continued:

> This is all well and good for dealing with the residual psychological stress about the killing that took place, but how about creating a space where people aren't inclined to kill one another quite so easily? This means architectural changes, cultural change, and changes in the way CSC approaches intervening in the lives of those it assumes responsibility for. I don't really have the answers, but is this really working?

After that incident, surprisingly enough, it was "business as usual" as the institution resumed a 'normal routine'. I thought that odd in consideration

of the fact that we were locked down for nearly a week when a knee brace went missing.

As this event came to a close, CSC decided to shut down an entire security unit in the institution and turn it into a provisional Regional Treatment Center (RTC) due to the Conservative Government's hasty closure of Kingston Penitentiary.[11] This nearly caused a riot in the unit they were supposed to depopulate and take over. As a member of the Collins Bay Inmate Committee at the time, and a prisoner in that unit, I shared in the task of trying to find a way that, as a collective, we could resist that action while maintaining our integrity. We used media, politics and the legal apparatus, ultimately in defeat. During all of that turmoil I wrote, "I haven't felt like more of a human being in a long time. At least I am applying my heart and mind to something worthwhile and serving some useful purpose. Prison could mean death, but there is a death that can occur in prison that does not include death of the body: that is spiritual death". Looking back, it is pretty sad that the most alive I felt during my incarceration was during a time of near chaos when I had, in a sense, the most to lose. I think that this may speak to the way that the prison slowly destroys the spirit.

Following the turmoil of the RTC transfer decision, we were subjected to yet another institutional lockdown because there were a number of weapons seized in a search, and a threat that there might be a riot and hostage takings in security unit six. About the third day of the lockdown in my cell, I would write:

> I just started to feel so claustrophobic in the cell and overloaded with negative energy. I don't know where the thoughts were coming from but I kept thinking about suspension points in the cell and kind of laughing it off because the cells had been designed so I couldn't find a place to hang from. I know this is pretty morbid but it only ever occurs when I am on lock-down in the cell...It's not even like one wants to die, it's more like there is someone else in the cell kind of suggesting it; at which point you have to kind of negotiate with yourself and realise how ludicrous the idea really is...how could the desired effect of locking someone in a box be anything less than encouraging them to entertain self-destructive ideations?

I started this depiction of prison life by describing the dehumanizing spirit of the institution of prison that I encountered when I would visit my father

as a child and how this impression stuck with me. A few months ago I called my father. He told me he was dying, that he had lung cancer. He asked me to arrange for an Escorted Temporary Absence (ETA)[12] right away, which I did through an application with my Parole Officer (PO). A week after submitting that application, I spoke with my PO who frankly told me that policy requires her to confirm that he is dying "imminently" in order for me to be able to get approval to see him. I advised her that she could contact my father and speak to his doctors, which she agreed to do. The bureaucratic process ate up three precious weeks and it was not until my sister finally contacted the institution to advise my PO that my father was literally on his deathbed that the paper work seemed to be given any priority.

The next day I was strip searched, shackled, handcuffed, and stuffed into the diminutive steel enclosure of a CSC transfer van. I travelled approximately five hours to the Niagara Detention Center where I would be secured for the evening on the floor of the admissions bullpen, head resting next to a stainless steel toilet. My escorting officers[13] picked me up at 8:00am sharp the following day and drove me to the hospital where I was once again shackled down with leg irons and handcuffs. I arrived at the Hospital and went immediately to the sixth floor where my father's room was, the last one on the left. I was told I would have two hours. It was 8:30am. I shuffled into the room with a heavy heart and my gaze fixed upon my father lying there on the hospital bed with tubes running from his frail body. I stumbled a few more shackled steps forward and leaned in to see him. I grasped his hand and felt him squeeze. I told him I loved him. He slurred the words back. It was an indescribable hurt to be in that position, one you know only because it is too late. This would be the last two hours I ever got to spend with my father. The seconds on the clock were ticking by excruciatingly fast – I hated to look at that awful clock on the wall. Over an hour had passed, and in fact it was closer to two. The guard gave me a "five minute warning". The room cleared for a moment, I was alone with my father and I started to breakdown. I felt the world cruel that moment as I leaned in real close and told my dad, like I had a thousand times before, that I had to go, but this time I knew I would not be seeing him again. I wanted him to know how much I loved him. He told me not to worry, that he was coming with me. I leaned in and kissed my father. I fought hard to stand up, turn around, shuffle back out the door and down the hospital hallway in shackles, guards on either side, and head back to the prison, not sure if I

had ever really left. Three days later back at the prison I found out my father passed away.

Even though certain elements of the prison have changed over time, I am still not persuaded that it is anything other than a brutal, dehumanizing institution. The fact that this brutality has become more subtle and somewhat less perceptible to the public is, in my eyes, very deceiving, making this Canadian state institution quite insidious indeed – a vicious intervention in the lives of many, perhaps worthy of being abolished altogether.

ENDNOTES

[1] My father's sentence was eight years. Out of respect for him, I will not discuss the nature of the charges that led to his incarceration. However, I will state that various sanitized explanations for his absence were initially presented to me from caretakers.

[2] In characterizing myself as a "problematic drug user" I am suggesting that my crimes were motivated by addiction. I will adapt the words of Terry (2003, p. 96) here in stating that my 'criminal career' "stemmed from an inability to successfully support a [cocaine] habit without getting arrested".

[3] "Commit sociology" is the phraseology expressed by Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in an attempt to discredit the Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, Justin Trudeau, for suggesting that it was important to look at the root causes of the Boston Marathon bombings. Prime Minister Harper commented to media that, "this is not the time to commit sociology" and suggested that Mr. Trudeau was somehow trying to "rationalize" or "make excuses" for such activity (Fitzpatrick, 2013). This is consistent with conservative ideology that denies root cases from harms that are currently criminalized and instead charges the supposed wicked nature of the individual who needs to be punished into submission.

[4] As this paper was prepared for and delivered at the 15th International Conference on Penal Abolitionism (ICOPA 15), it seemed not only fitting but also necessary for inspiration and direction to consult one of the founding activists and champions of prisoners' rights in Canada, Claire Culhane, who has tirelessly devoted herself to the prison question through many years of activism. It must also be respectively recognized that Claire stood shoulder to shoulder with Dr. Ruth Morris, another foundational Canadian scholar and initiator of ICOPA 1, who worked towards, "a world where justice and mercy are one, and where there is a place for every human being – and that place is never a lonely, brutally isolated cell" (Morris, 1995, p. 3).

[5] Just as the title of this paper suggests, it really is "business as usual", but even I as an individual directly impacted by this experience instinctively felt the need to underrate this fact by reference to historical "reform" efforts. Perhaps this is evidence of the extent to which we here in our "liberal democracy" are inclined to hold a romantic view of government reform policies. In any case I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify my position, as well as Piché and Larsen (2010) for the assessment of major trends shaping the growth of carceral practices that they

provided, particularly the emphasis placed, borrowing from Cohen (1985), on the fact that historical efforts to "reform" have simply masked a carceral tendency to carry out "business as usual", thus "revealing the existence of an enduring 'master pattern' of social control" (Piché and Larsen, 2010, p. 396).

[6] I arrived at Collins Bay Medium Security Institution in December 2012 following a period of incarceration at Millhaven Assessment Unit. I began to systematically record my experiences in a qualitative field-diary in March 2013. The data that informs the contents of this paper reflect observations recorded until December 2013. For reliability's sake, I believe it is worth mentioning that my conditions of confinement substantially changed in November 2013 when I was transferred within the institutions to "nine block", which is a responsibility-based living unit that houses approximately 96 prisoners on eight pods where prisoners are responsible to cook their own food on a budget they must keep for themselves of $35.00 per week. Of note, Collins Bay Institution is now officially a multi-level institution including maximum-, medium-, and minimum-security settings. As stated, even within the medium-security setting, there are gradations of security, including a higher medium-security setting called "four block", and as mentioned the lower medium-security setting of "nine block". In a word, serving time on "nine block", although subject to more supervision and scrutiny by the prison authorities, is considered by most to be more tolerable than in other settings. Therefore, to suggest that the normative standard of the prison in relation to conditions of confinement is accurately portrayed only by my experiences in the true medium-security settings would be misleading. It should be recognized, however, that the practice of housing various populations of prisoners in dissimilar conditions of confinement appears to be a coordinated strategy on the part of CSC to divide and conquer any efforts to challenge institutional authority by upsetting solidarity amongst prisoners as whole.

[7] The controversial practice of housing two prisoners in a cell designed for one. For a detailed qualitative account of this experience, see Shook (2013).

[8] The celebrated sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959, pp. 10-11) discusses "milieu" in *The Sociological Imagination*, stating that, "what we experience in various and specific milieu…is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand changes of many personal milieus we are required to look beyond them…To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieu. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination". In the sense that I have termed the milieu of the prison as "toxic", it is to recognize the deleterious impact of the daily minutiae of prison life, its structural source and as Mills describes, the "troubles" that "occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware…within the scope of his immediate milieu – the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity" (ibid, p. 8). The fact that such a "toxic milieu" becomes normalized in the prison is a clear example of its toxicity.

[9] Goffman (1961, p. 78) provides an excellent account of the character of such a relationship in his seminal text, *Asylums*, recognizing that "the obligation of

the staff to maintain certain humane standards of treatment for inmates presents problems in itself, but a further set of characteristic problems is found in the constant conflict between humane standards on one hand and institutional efficiency on the other". He also recognizes that "the staff is charged with meeting the hostility and demands of the inmates, and what it has to meet the inmates with, in general, is the rational perspective espoused by the institutions" (ibid, p. 83), and "each official goal lets loose a doctrine, with its own inquisitors, and its own *martyrs*" (ibid, p. 84, emphasis added).

[10] The standard procedure for "lock-down" is 24 hours a day lock-up in your cell. Under a modified routine, prisoners are locked on their unit with access to showers, telephone and common area access, but with no movement off the unit.

[11] See Harris (2013) and the *Collins Bay Inmate Committee Letter* at <http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/784960-collins-bay-inmate-committee-open-letter.html>.

[12] Under CSC policy (Commissioners Directives) and the legislation that governs CSC (the Corrections and Conditional Release Act) prisoners are entitled for certain reasons, be they legal, educational, medical, or compassionate, to apply for temporary absences from the prison. Depending on what level of security one is designated, these may be escorted or unescorted.

[13] The officers who escorted me were respectful of the fact that I was grieving at that time and simply followed the itinerary directed by CSC policy.

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Jarrod G. Shook is a 27 year-old prisoner at Collins Bay Institution in Kingston, Ontario. Jarrod credits the time he was able to spend attending university during a previous period of release under community supervision for cultivating in him both a political awareness and an intellectual curiosity. He has recently re-enrolled as a distance education student to complete his undergraduate degree in sociology, and intends to merge his academic training with his experiences in the Canadian penal system to advance a critical analysis as inspired by the Convict Criminology perspective.