

**The Prisoner Society:  
Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison  
by Ben Crewe (2009)  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 519 pp.  
*Reviewed by Mohammad Jahirul Islam***

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Professor Ben Crewe's book *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation, and Social Life in an English Prison* is an excellent example of insightful criminology and penology scholarship, where the study of a particular prison illustrates how penal policy changes in late modern society are impacting life behind bars. Using ethnographic methods in a C-category medium-security prison in England, the book explores how power is exercised between prison authorities and prisoners within a complex institution, as well as how the latter adapt and engage in resistance. Managerialism in the late modern period is explored based on the thinking of earlier sociologist-criminologists who are considered to be the pioneers of contemporary prison sociology, such as David Garland, Loïc Wacquant, and Alison Liebling. This book examines the changing prison system through institutional politics, prison culture, and power mechanisms. Similar to the methodological basis of other classical ethnographies, this study was mainly conducted in a prison named HMP Wellingborough through observations, in-depth interviews and life history studies of various categories of prisoners, prison staff, prison medical staff (namely doctors and nurses), and other personnel such as counsellors and psychologists. The nuanced analysis of power, adaptation, and resistance within prisons through prison experiences and their early life stories has become an indispensable classic reading for researchers in prison sociology and anthropology as a whole, both in and beyond the United Kingdom.

The book is divided into a total of nine chapters, including a short concluding remarks chapter. The first three chapters mainly discuss the researcher's theoretical and historical framework. Each of the first three chapters contextualizes penal policies in England, its changes, and the historical issues of HMP Wellingborough. In doing so, each chapter critically analyzes the sociology of punishment and theoretical interpretations of prison published to date.

Chapters four through six are largely driven by Crewe's empirical data, with a focus on power, adaptation and resistance. Chapter 4 describes the superordination-subordination power mechanisms within prisons among prison authorities, specialized groups (especially psychologists and doctors), and prisoners. How different categories of prisoners take different

paths, strategies and methods of adaptation based on their socio-economic background, type of crimes and punishment, and social position and family backgrounds, is described and explained in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, Crewe examines resistance in authoritarian and subjugated total institutions such as prisons, where prisoners riot, strike or, in cases where serious overt resistance is limited, how they use alternative ways of covert resistance to survive, which extends earlier research undertaken by Crewe (2007). Chapters seven and eight describe the multi-faceted and multi-dimensional relationship between the prisoners and the drug business inside the prison and its internal mechanisms.

This book's most important strength and contribution is that it comprehensively reviews key academic debates and issues explored in prison sociology and the sociology of punishment, imprisonment (importation and deprivation model), structure versus agency, and individual versus society. As a doctoral researcher examining the change of penal governance in postcolonial countries such as Bangladesh, I found the way Crewe tackles prison literature that are classics in the field written by the likes of Clemmer, Sykes, Goffman, Carrabine, Wacquant, Sparks, Garland, and Liebling is immensely insightful. Considering power and resistance questions in prisons and how Indigenous subalternities act as influencers beyond age, class, and gender is another crucial aspect of my research topic. So, after reading this book, I also see the need to comprehensively examine power and resistance, negotiation, and strategic intervention in prison as it relates to class, gender, social status, race and ethnicity.

Another significant contribution of this book is Crewe's description of the methodology, which can solve any of the complex issues of earlier classical ethnography, especially the debates about subject choice, as well as gaining access and trust in prisons, which he describes in the appendix. In so doing, the reader can see how such research can be pragmatic and objective. He did not use information from official registers to avoid prejudicial adverse treatment of prisoners and never accepted the statements of prison authorities about prisoners at face value. Due to this, in terms of positionality, he developed trust and respected relationships with prisoners, guards and officials. According to him, "I also learned that the prison was a safe environment, that it was not necessary to clutch my bag tightly, and that the most valuable research tools were sincerity and respect" (p. 466). Drugs act as a significant barrier to rapport building and trust building in prison research. Prison authorities

often seek information on drugs from researchers because of their position in the power structure. Because of this, researchers have to live in a kind of ethical dilemma, which can hinder research trust and relationships. He wrote, “as someone who we treated with the skepticism that we treat every outsider with, but who has earned our respect... I had some practical concerns about maintaining neutrality in such a binary environment” (p. 475). To address this, Professor Crewe worked outside his research category and social position, which can be emulated by new researchers. I firmly believe that this book is not only a model for rapport and trust building, but also about how to go about sample selection, interviewing, data management and analysis, while navigating ethical issues, which is of relevance to emerging and seasoned researchers alike.

The typology of power as it relates to prisoners is another contribution distinguishing Ben Crewe from other prison researchers. Among earlier researchers, Foucault (1977) worked with a threefold understanding of power (sovereign, disciplinary, and bio-political power). He illustrates how prison power levels shift from the body to the soul and become part of contemporary statistical exercises. Crewe pushes the envelope further by detailing how power is created, reproduced and transformed among prison administrators, prisoners, and other actors within prisons. An essential aspect of Ben Crewe’s scholarship is that he presents in a very objective manner the transition from authoritarian power structures to neo-paternalist ones, along with the late modern bureaucracy and its philosophy of domination and subjugation within the prison. Compare the two contexts in the following ways. The captives were given clearly defined restrictions under the authoritarian government, but were free to behave however they wished within those restrictions because oversight was exercised by personnel in the background, which encouraged excesses. On the other hand, coming out of Max Weberian paternalism and neo-paternalistic thinking, neo-paternalist power, in contrast, relies on prisoners interacting with the system based on rewards and (primary) release progress, and is sustained by individuals who are not easily accessible to prisoners. Instead of only punishing the inappropriate action, all behaviours are examined for any signs of potential involvement.

Similarly, Crewe contributes to our understanding of how the classification of prisoners is informed by resistance. As noted in Chapter 5, we see how those who seek to turn from their former criminal behaviour and

transform into better versions of themselves if they have the opportunity to do so in prison. Typically, young and short-sentenced prisoners are those characterized as ‘pragmatists’ who are primarily concerned with how to quickly get the sentence over with and submit themselves to the power mechanisms of prison. ‘Stoics’, on the other hand, are long-termers under punishment for prolonged periods who are aware of their cynical behaviour and accustomed to the unwelcome aspect of neo-paternalism. Moreover, those who have been deemed to be drug addicts with a history of several convictions and who identify as ‘retreatists’ typically see prison as a vacation from their outside lives, where they feel under the grip of drugs. From the point of view of rebellion and resistance, the most crucial class of prisoners in the prison are the ‘players’ who are aware of their power, which they exploit along with their masculinity for their gain. They are sometimes directly and outwardly opposed to the prison authorities and think that this will lead to prison reforms that will drive the prison to progress – actors which prison authorities have characterized as incorrigible or unruly (McCoy, 2009).

Although this prison ethnography examines the historical linkages with prison policies and strategies in the particular settings of HMP Wellingborough with attention paid to the minute details of prisoners’ power, adaptation and resistance, from my perspective, the book could have delved more deeply into how class, ethnicity and social position shapes the prison experience, which would help advance literatures on habitus (Bourdieu, 2018), structure-agency (Giddens, 2014) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013). Given that Crewe is affiliated with the University of Cambridge and the Prison Research Center, one also wonders whether similar work can be undertaken by novice prison researchers like me, in a postcolonial society where access to prisons, offices and data collection opportunities, not to mention ethics review hurdles, are significant.

Despite a couple of small criticisms, the many contributions of Ben Crewe’s book make it a classic ethnography in the sociology of punishment and prison studies, with the depth and breadth of analysis one would find in past classic ethnographies. As such, it is indispensable to researchers and students, as well as a must-read for prison ethnographers dealing with complex issues of prison research that make it challenging to conduct objective and impartial research in the late modern period.

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